ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION
MINERVA McGONAGALL: SPINSTER DETECTIVE
BY THE REAL SNAPE

A Red Hen Adventures in FanFiction Edition

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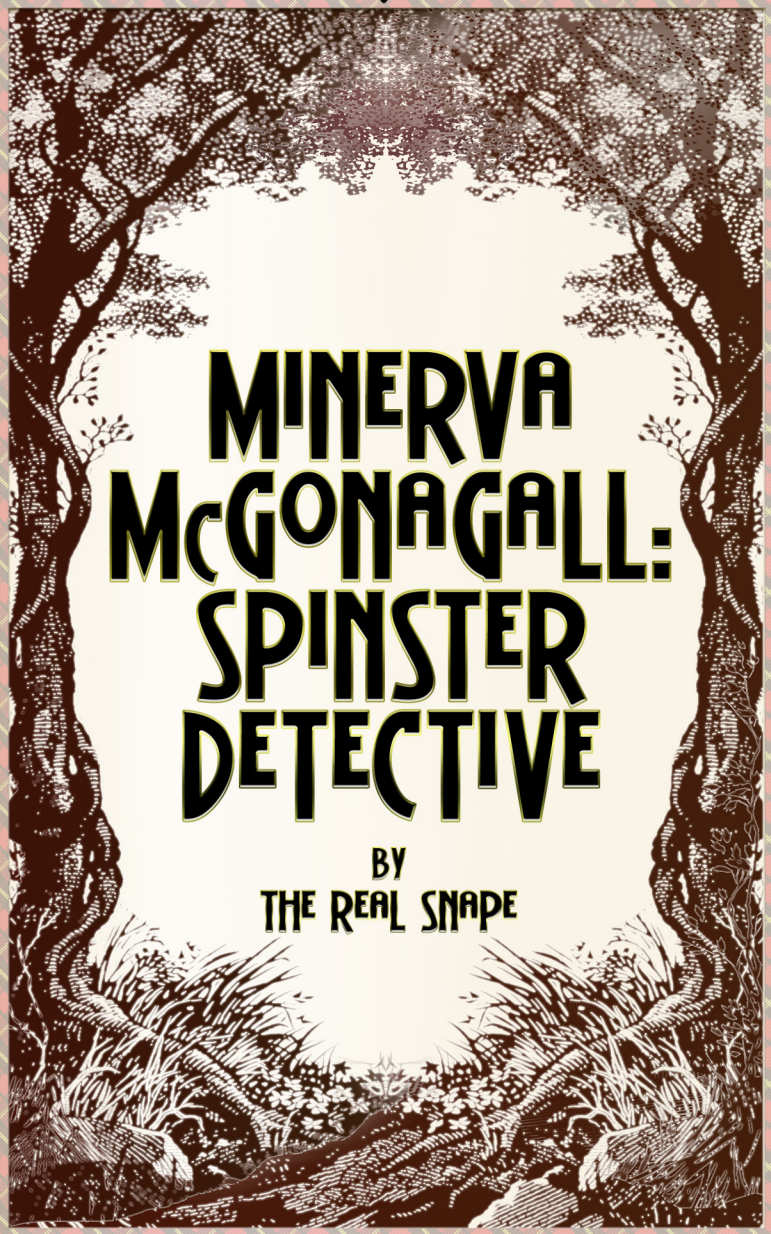

Minerva McGonagall: Spinster Detective

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Table of Contents

The case of the Missing Kittens
.pdf Page 4

The case of the Living Portrait
.pdf Page 24

The case of the Cat Show Corruption
.pdf Page 47

The case of the Business of Ferrets
.pdf Page 68

Minerva McGonagall: Spinster Detective

The Case of the Missing Kittens

Dear Professor Chambliss,

When Miss Skeeter informed me of the little party thrown in honour of your "Five Years in Fandom", I was more than willing to join in. We have collaborated so pleasantly during your three Minerva_Fests, and indeed, I am most touched you went through the trouble of organising them in the first place. Each edition has been most *satisfying*, as Severus would put it, and I'm deeply grateful.

Now, according to Madam Skeeter, you've expressed a wish for more Minerva McGonagall, Spinster Detective stories. I would be glad to oblige. But, as I've said before, there are drawbacks to being a real life Miss Marple. Miss Marple's caring author makes sure she runs into murders on a regular basis. I don't have a caring author; the sad consequence is I don't have another juicy mystery to tell you.

I could, of course, murder one of my colleagues, and Merlin knows I've been tempted on occasions. But such an action would necessarily turn me into a most unreliable author, for I would have to pretend

solving the crime I had committed myself. I would also have to fail — which would make me not just an unreliable author, but out of character as well — or I'd spend my remaining years in Azkaban.

And killing a colleague would be morally wrong. In the words of Hercule Poirot, I don't approve of murder.

There is one instance, though, where Amelia Bones and I collaborated to solve a small mystery. In terms of interest to the general public, it is very much on a par with Miss Marple's famous Case of the Missing Jar of Shrimps. And while she refers to that story frequently, she never actually tells it, knowing full well her readers prefer a meatier tale.

This, however, is the best I can do. I apologise for the complete lack of dead bodies in this story, and I can only hope you'll judge the good intentions, rather than the actual Case of the Missing Kittens.

It all started when Amelia Bones invited me for a good talk and drinks. She had sent me an Owl, and the very briefness of the message, as well as the sharp scratches of her quill, told me that she was most annoyed at something.

Therefore I was not surprised to be greeted with a heart-felt, "*Men!* What's wrong with them?" as I stepped out of her fireplace.

"Apart from everything?" I said with a smile. We'd had evenings like this before, and I knew there would be an excellent, if highly aggravating, story

to follow. And quite a bit of good Firewhisky.

Once we were settled comfortably in front of the fire, Amelia started on her tale. I'll leave out the expletives — I understand there is something like a maximum word-count on the stories one can post here — but here is the essence of what she told me.

Amelia had been asked to investigate a case of Muggle baiting. This in itself was an insult, for Amelia was already in a high position in her department. In fact, it was only two years later, in 1992, that she was promoted to Head of MLE. Muggle baiting is usually a simple matter, dealt with by the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office.

But what was worse, when she was sent down to investigate, the Minister himself, Cornelius Fudge, had explained that he was convinced there was no truth in the tale, and it was made clear that a report in which Amelia confirmed there was no case would be beneficial to her career. The threat was never made explicit, of course, but it was very clear.

"I don't hold with that," Amelia said. "If I had even the slightest doubt, I'd send in a report demanding a full investigation, and damn the consequences."

She would have done it, too; she was that kind of woman. But what annoyed her even more was that there was, in fact, no trace of Muggle baiting or any other kind of magical activity at all. "And yet there's *something*," she added. "That's why I need your help. Your advice."

I was surprised, since I had no experience with crime other than the minor misdemeanours of my students. But of course I was willing to listen.

"The first remarkable thing," said Amelia, "is that the letter that alerted us to the baiting was not only anonymous (that's common enough), but it was sent from Kent, while the baiting seems to take place in Surrey.

"It's the nature of the baiting I find particularly worrying. It seems kittens go missing on a regular basis from the house of, one presumes, a great cat-lover. The address in question is Wisteria Walk, Little Whinging, Surrey, and that's where I went to investigate."

The mention of this particular address gave me a nasty shock, and it showed. Amelia immediately asked what was wrong, and I found myself in the uncomfortable position of not being able to answer honestly.

The honest answer would have been, "That's where one of the members of The Order of the Phoenix lives; a Squib named Arabella Figg. Albus has asked her to keep an eye on Harry Potter who lives nearby."

But Potter's address was only available on the strictest need-to-know basis. The Minister knew, the Head of MLE knew (but Amelia wasn't Head then), and, of course, Albus knew. So did Hagrid and I, but Albus had never shared that particular tidbit with the Minister.

I felt most uncomfortable at deceiving my dearest friend, as well as somewhat apprehensive – Amelia Bones was the best Auror on the force, and her

interrogation skills were famous. There was, however, one way out, and I took it.

"Those kittens!" I said. "It sounds nasty. A very nasty sort of crime, be it Muggle baiting or not. One kitten missing – that can be an accident, or a child desperate to have a pet of its own. But several kittens going missing... what happens to them? It sounds like... "

I shivered, and it was not all play-acting. Amelia smiled apologetically. "I should have warned you," she said. "I should have known how a story about kittens would affect you."

It is well-known, I think, that I have a special affinity with cats. I nodded and begged Amelia to go on.

"Well," said Amelia, "I've been to Wisteria Walk. And to all the surrounding streets. It's the most depressingly Muggle suburb it's ever been my misfortune to visit. There is no sign of magical activity, no sign of witches or wizards living in the area, and, frankly, no earthly reason why any witch or wizard would *want* to live there.

"There's only one thing that struck me as incongruent. It's an area where everyone tries very hard to look not just respectable, but as close to upper-middle-class as they can get. Keeping up with the Joneses is very much the order of the day.

"Now, I noticed one elderly lady, she lives in Wisteria Walk itself, who doesn't try to keep up appearances. She's the kind of person who wears carpet slippers and a hairnet when she goes shopping, and

in that neighbourhood it's completely wrong. Either she's an exceedingly eccentric Muggle woman, or she's a Squib. And I rather think she's a Squib. It's just a feeling, you know. But I'm rarely wrong."

Which was true, more's the pity. Amelia was getting close. I did some very quick thinking.

"I see why you can't find Muggle baiting, then," I said. "Squibs don't bait Muggles. They don't have the magical skills, and they have to live like Muggles themselves. They'd be mad to litter their own doorsteps."

But the situation was worrying nonetheless. Reports of Muggle baiting in the area where Harry Potter lived. He was, at the time, about ten years old. More than old enough for involuntary, childish magic. Not old enough to bait Muggles, and a child raised by Muggles would be most unlikely to do so. Unless he hated the people he lived with. I had seen them the day we left him there, and I could not quite disregard this possibility.

But missing kittens? Possible cruelty to animals? Merlin forbid.

On the other hand, Harry had been hit by an Aveda Kedavra. He had survived with only a scar. Was it truly 'with only a scar'? Or was there other, invisible damage as well? Did one survive a Killing Curse without any form of mental damage? If one's parents were killed before one's eyes, as well? True, he had only been a baby at the time. But no-one could say for sure. Harry Potter was the first person ever to survive

a Killing Curse. There was no known information.

Someone would have to look into the case. Not Amelia on her own – I couldn't fully brief her. Nor could I do it on my own. Amelia might find out, and besides, I needed her help and information.

"But I agree with you it's worrying," I continued. "You said you wanted my advice. How can I help?"

"It's that old lady," Amelia said. "The Squib. A Mrs Figg. That's what it says on the letter box – A. Figg. And she wears a wedding ring. No trace of a man, though. Divorced, or, more likely, a widow. Well, I've seen Mrs Figg with her cats. Mind, one could argue that makes it all the more likely she's an eccentric Muggle with too many cats. There are quite a few of such cases. But I've heard her talk to her cats, and there's something odd there.

"Not the talking itself. Eccentric Muggle talking to her pets – perfect. But it's the way those cats respond – they really seem to listen. To understand. I'm thinking those cats might have a drop of Kneazle blood, but I can't say for sure. I've always been more of a dog-person."

"You want me to check out the cats?" I asked.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble? I know it's your summer holidays. But I'd like to be sure," said Amelia. "It could be Muggles taking those cats, but if they are part-Kneazle, there's the Statue of Secrecy to take into account. Or it could be witches or wizards, and then I want to know what the hell is going on."

"Won't that be a risk to your career?" I asked.

"No, not yet," said Amelia. "I can hand in a report saying there's no Muggle baiting and it's not a lie, either. There is not. There's either Muggles stealing what they think are cats, or there's magical folk involved with part-Kneazles. Once I know what's what, I can take appropriate action."

"I'll be glad to help," I said, "I would enjoy helping you, even." The whole thing was a god-send. I could keep an eye on what was going on. If Harry was involved in any way, I could inform Albus before anyone else knew of it. At that point, I'd have to take Amelia into my confidence, but I knew she could be trusted.

And, quite frankly, this whole business of the missing kittens did worry me. There was something very nasty in the very notion of *several* missing kittens. The Ministry, it seemed, would be pleased to hear no magical people were involved and would not inquire further. They didn't care about the kittens.

I did. And, for all her gruff ways, so did Amelia. I knew she saw things exactly as I did: a nasty deed is a nasty deed, regardless of who commits it.

"So you're willing to spend time on this?" asked Amelia. I nodded, and she smiled. "That's a deal, then," she said. "Let's set up a plan of action. But first, have a refill." And she filled up our tumblers.

I raised mine. "To the success of our investigation," I said.

"Bones and McGonagall, Girl Detectives," grinned

Amelia, raising her glass as well.

"We're not girls," I said. And *Bones and McGonagall*? I wasn't going to let that cheekiness pass. Sometimes Amelia needed reminding that I was her senior by fifteen years.

"And shouldn't it be a *McGonagall and Bones* Mystery?" I said and took a firm swig of whisky, trying to look as hard-boiled as a twenty-minute egg.

The next day found us in a small alley next to Arabella's house, at the time when, according to Amelia, Arabella was most likely to go out for her daily shopping. And, true enough, within ten minutes of us standing there, both in Muggle clothes, we heard the front door close and Arabella passed the alley. Amelia nodded – she had a string shopping bag in her hand.

I stood with my back to Arabella, lest she recognise my face. She didn't know Amelia by sight, so Amelia looked in her direction. She was smoking a cigarette, and I was holding a smoking one, so if Arabella would accidentally look into the alley she'd simply see two women having a cigarette break.

Once she had passed the alley, I went to the corner and looked at her from behind. There was a cat walking next to her, and Arabella seemed to be talking to it. I knew at once Amelia had been right. The cat looked up at its owner, not in the way of normal cats, checking that the person is still there,

but like a human being would when talking to someone one takes a walk with.

I retreated and nodded. "More than a touch of Kneazle blood," I said. "Now what? Do we check the place out?" I must admit that I thoroughly enjoyed this real life detective work, and I was eager to find clues.

Fortunately, Amelia was experienced at spotting them.

"By all means," she said. "Just look at this fence."

I looked.

The fence was impressive, indeed. It was brand new. Over the years the wood would bleach to a softer grey, but now it still had the original, deep brown colour. And it was high. At least ten inches above our heads, and we are both tall women. There was a door set into the fence. That, too, was new and remarkably sturdy. And it had an excellent Muggle lock.

Amelia looked at me. "Gringott's is nothing to it," she grinned. "And this woman is supposed to be a poor OAP."

"OAP"? I queried.

"Old Age Pensioner. People whose main source of income is their Government pension. They're poor. This fence is expensive."

Amelia was right. One had to look at this kind of discrepancies. Detectives in books did it automatically; I'd have to train myself to be as observant. Miss Marple spotted little things like fingernails that were bitten, not cut. I was still a long way off

from her level of expertise.

"Let's have a look," I said. "Do I give you a leg-up?"

"You go first," Amelia suggested. "You're thinner and lighter than I am. If it's interesting you give me a leg-up, but then I know what to look for." Amelia's confidence in my powers of observation was somewhat daunting.

But up I went, and I saw at once that the garden was as out-of-place as the fence. This wasn't the back garden of an OAP living in a terraced cottage. There was a small terrace near the back door, with a wooden table and two comfortable deck chairs. A large, green, plastic box – it had just about the right size for storing chair cushions. On each side of the terrace was a large flower pot, filled with annuals in various shades of purple. There was some grey-leafed stuff, too, and the overall effect was beautiful.

Then there was a small border, also stocked with purple and violet plants, with touches of white this time. The border separated the terrace from a small patch of grass. The grass was slightly longer than one would expect in such an impeccably-maintained garden. But cats like slightly longer grass – that part fitted in very well.

A path led from the terrace to a shed in the back. The path was lined with purple flowers – these, I could actually recognise. Nepeta. I have a fondness for Nepeta that is closely related to my Animagus form.

I took a good look at the shed. Again, it was a very

sturdy one, with a good lock on the door as well as a padlock. Built on to the shed, there was a ... was it a kitten's playground? A sort of conservatory, only not with glass, but with a sort of chicken wire. Open air, yet cats couldn't get out into the garden. They could get in from the shed; there were two cat flaps in the wall. A very neat, safe, outdoors playground, but the shed and its extension looked old. Well-maintained, but definitely older than the fence and the garden furniture. Only the padlock was brand new.

"Bloody hell, Minerva, get down and give a report, will you? You're not at the bloody theatre." Amelia sounded seriously out of breath, and she had every reason. Guiltily, I sprang to the ground.

"Might I share the Heavenly Vision, even if it's second-hand?" grunted Amelia.

"Heavenly Vision isn't such a bad way of putting it, actually," I chuckled. Then I looked more serious. "It doesn't fit, Amelia. None of it fits." I briefly described all I had seen in the garden. "It's all too expensive. If she just has this Muggle pension, how can she afford this? It looks like something from a commercial – from a gardening magazine."

The next question, of course, would be how Arabella could afford living in Wisteria Walk in the first place. I sincerely hoped Amelia wouldn't ask that, or, if she did, that the theory I was about to advance would satisfy her. For I couldn't tell her that Albus paid most of the rent; that he had asked her to move

to Wisteria Walk to keep an eye on Harry.

"Can she just be a good gardener?" Amelia asked. "Lots of British Muggles are. They're famous for it."

"That would explain that the garden looks well-maintained and that all her plants do well," I said. "But there's that terrace. Expensive stones. There's the teak table and chairs. Those flower urns cost a pretty penny. And the shed and that cat playground. This woman has spent some serious money on... I think it's called the 'hardware' of the garden.

"Give me a quick leg-up," Amelia said, and I was glad to have her expert second opinion on my observations. She looked at all I had described and descended. "You're right," she said. "Mind, it is possible that the lady simply spends every penny she has on her garden, and goes without other things to do so."

"You don't believe that." I said it as a statement with just a hint of a question.

"No, I don't," said Amelia honestly.

"Neither do I. And there's one more thing – I thought it a bit odd, but it now fits in with what we've seen. Kneazles are really expensive. Even half-breeds may cost a pretty penny if you have to buy them from a shop. Most people would get them from friends whose cat has had a litter, of course. But the thing is, this is a Squib – how many Wizarding friends does she have?"

Enough in the Order to get her a Kneazle-cat, of course. At first, I had assumed that was how Ara-

bella got them, and I obviously hadn't said anything to Amelia. But the cat-housing in the shed had given me an idea. An idea that could well explain where Arabella got the money for her garden. Albus paid most of her rent, and she had her pension to live on, but a profitable little trade in Kneazles could well have paid for the luxuries on display.

"If, and it's a very big *if*, but if Mrs Figg breeds Kneazles, then she might make enough to afford that garden. Did you get a good look at the shed?"

"Looked professional," Amelia nodded. "Not something you'd have for just one or two cats of your own. How do we find out whether they're Kneazles?"

"Smell 'em," I said. "The smell is unmistakable."

"Is it?" Amelia looked surprised. "Can't say I've ever noticed it."

"Sorry," I amended, "it's unmistakable when you have a cat's senses. Now, how do I get in?"

The fence was far too high to risk a jump. Then I remembered the little front garden. "There's a wheelie-bin in the front garden. We can pull that up."

We did. I climbed on top, Transfigured, and went into the garden to get a good sniff at the shed. Kneazles, beyond the shadow of a doubt. And I could hear the mewing of some very young ones. There were kittens there right now. We had better be quick with our detective work, or Arabella might have another kitten abduction on her hands.

I returned and examined the fence. Worst case

scenario, I'd have to Apparate, but I was afraid of attracting Muggle attention. But fortunately the door looked as if it could be opened from the inside – by a creature with opposing thumbs, that is.

I Transfigured back and looked through the small windows. The inside of the house was much more in line with Arabella's OAP status. It looked as if she had ensured that to casual visitors she'd be an innocent Muggle pensioner.

I stepped back into the alley and gave Amelia a full report. She, too, profited from the open door to have a good look at the interior. "Where do we go from here?" I asked. Amelia had been quite right, of course, when she called this case a *Bones and McGonagall* mystery. I was still very much an apprentice-detective.

Amelia suggested coffee at her place, and we went back to our Apparition spot, a small alleyway between Wisteria Walk and a street called Magnolia Road. It led to a children's playground, and we checked there was no-one in sight before we quickly Apparated to Amelia's house.

Once we had a mug of strong coffee each, we took stock of the situation. "Let's start with the working hypothesis that Mrs Figg makes her money breeding Kneazles," Amelia said. "It would explain both the garden and the fact that she has a few half-Kneazles herself.

"Now, some of the Kneazle kittens go missing.

There's two options here. The old lady is the victim of theft; she's afraid to report this directly, and since she's a Squib the Ministry might ignore it, or set up an inquiry into her little business on account of the Statute of Secrecy. It's not a very good place for a Wizarding business, right in the middle of this kind of Muggle area. So she has contacted a friend – in Kent – who made the complaint for her.

"Or else someone who feels ill-disposed towards her business – a disgruntled customer, say, or just someone who's jealous of her success – has reported the Muggle baiting, hoping that we'd find out about the business that way."

It was an admirable summary. "It sounds to me as if the next step should be Kent," I said, eager to contribute something as well. "Find out more about the person or persons who made the complaint."

"Exactly," Amelia said. "I have the letter here. No name, no letter head, but it was sent from the Canterbury Owl Office. I suggest we start there. Let's check for a good Apparition point."

We took the Purple Pages and looked up Canterbury. There were quite a few Wizarding places, of course. Most medieval towns have a fair share of magical dwellings. The recommended Apparition Point was a little, walled garden; a small public park along a street called Pound Lane. Unless there happened to be someone in the garden, one could appear without attracting attention. Better still, it

was at walking distance from the Owlery.

We left at once.

The little garden was quite charming, and we paused briefly to steady our stomachs after the Apparition. "We have to go to the right," said Amelia. "And then on our left there's the old town gate. We go through and then the shop is on our right hand. Pure Magick it is called."

"With *ck*," I sighed. I had seen the map, too. "Ridiculous affectation."

We left the garden. The street was lined with small cottages, a bit like Arabella's house. Here, too, there were wheelie-bins in the front gardens, and little alleys that led to back-entrances. I smiled as I remembered my successful breaking-and-entering of that morning. Well, not literally 'breaking', of course. Still, being a detective added to one's life experiences.

Amelia and I both expected a set-up like the Leaky Cauldron's: a place that only magical people could see. But, surprisingly, Pure Magick was a Muggle shop – visible to all the world, announcing its name in large white letters on a black shop front.

We went in, and all was explained. It was a shop for Muggles who are interested in witch-craft. *Wicca*, they call it. The place was full of crystals, semi-precious stones, amulets, beads – the kind of things that wouldn't do Muggles any good, or not the good they might have done in the hands

of a capable witch, but that wouldn't harm them, either. As was to be expected, there were references to Avalon all over the place.

"May I help you?"

The shop assistant – or owner? – had given us some time to browse among the assorted objects, a courtesy I appreciated.

"We're looking for something special," Amelia said.

"Something with owls, perhaps?" I added.

The woman nodded. "I see. *That* part of the shop." She looked around. "There's no one else – you can go right through." She pointed at a clear space in one of the walls.

We walked through the wall and found ourselves in what was, indeed, very much *that* part of the shop. A miniature Diagon Alley, choc-a-block with an amazing variety of magical merchandise.

Amelia started to make inquiries about Owl prices and delivery times, and within minutes she had managed to turn the conversation into a pleasant chat on the shop, Canterbury's magical places ("My friend and I are here on a short visit – such a lovely town to explore"), and the shop's background. Her interrogation skills were truly fabulous. The owner didn't even realise she was pumped for information.

We learnt that she and the woman in the front office were a couple. Amelia had figured that out at once – there is such a thing as a gaydar, as she explained to me once. Caroline, the woman in the Wicca part, was

a Muggle, and Mathilda, who ran the back-shop, a witch. "Together we manage to make a living, and it all works out very well," she told us.

Somehow Amelia brought the subject round to pets, and within minutes they were discussing cats and Kneazles. Mathilda and Caroline had a Kneazle, they said, and Amelia said she'd always wanted one, but where did one find a truly reliable breeder?

"We happen to know one," said Mathilda. "We've bought our own Kneazle from her. Mind, she doesn't come cheap, but it's totally worth it. Our little Buster is wonderful."

We carefully steered her back from Buster's marvellous qualities to the Kneazle breeder. "You won't just get one like that," Mathilda grinned. "She'll come and vet you. Wants to make sure the kittens go to good homes. Prepare yourselves for a pre-adoption visit." Clearly, she assumed Amelia and I were a couple. We didn't disabuse her.

The Kneazle breeder turned out to be Arabella, all right. I was relieved when Mathilda mentioned her first name. I had been very careful not to use Arabella's first name in front of Amelia, and it had been a strain – Amelia was too sharp by half.

Amelia carefully noted down the address. "Wisteria Walk, Little Whinging?" she exclaimed. "I've seen that address before – let me think." I admired her acting skills. It sounded perfectly natural.

Then Amelia told Mathilda she worked for the Min-

istry, and she had seen the address in connection with kittens – something to do with missing kittens. Was Mathilda quite sure this was a reliable address?

"I'm so glad you Ministry folk are looking into it," Mathilda exclaimed. "The poor dear was that worried. And she's such a lovely old lady. Shouldn't have worries like that. The first time she visited us she was so happy – we had a lovely, long chat, you know, and she told us she was ever so pleased with the success of her business, and she'd been lucky in her private life, too.

"Turned out the old dear has a 'gentleman friend', as she put it. All full of him, she was. She'd known him for years, and never thought much of him, but then he had helped her out with a few odd jobs around the house. And they had got along quite nicely, and then he brought her flowers and invited her for a drink in the pub. *'He's no oil painting,'* Mrs Figg said, *'but neither am I. And pretty is as pretty does.'* I tell you, those two are positively *courting*. Isn't that sweet, at their age?"

Mathilda was in her late twenties at most, and she seemed agog at the idea of anyone over sixty having a love life.

On Arabella's second visit, when she'd brought the kitten, she had told them about the abductions, as she called them. The gentleman friend had helped her with a sturdy padlock, but Arabella had still been very worried. Mathilda and Caroline had

advised her to contact the Ministry, but Arabella had been reluctant.

"She's a Squib, you see, and the Ministry really doesn't do much for Squibs. Shameful, if you ask me. Well, sorry, you work there, but I don't think it's right. And we felt that sorry for her, we decided to send a letter about Muggle baiting. So that someone would be looking into it. It won't get her into trouble, I hope?"

I thought Mathilda should have considered that possibility before sending anonymous letters, but, as I said, she was very young. And clearly kind-hearted, but not a particularly sharp thinker. Her *faux pas* about the Ministry, too, showed she was someone who acts first and thinks later, if at all.

Amelia reassured her. "It would be useful, though," she added, "to know whether anyone tries to sell pure-bred Kneazles at lower prices. That would be a lead, you know. Have you heard of someone? While you were looking for your own Kneazle, perhaps?"

Mathilda had. "Not that we would go in for that sort of thing," she said virtuously. "But I know someone who did – only, he didn't buy the Kneazle. Didn't care for the contact person. Well, it would be a dodgy fellow, wouldn't it?"

We agreed that it would. Mathilda gave us their friend's address. To my delight, it was a second-hand bookshop, just a few streets away. "Front is Muggle books – Wizarding books in the back," Mathilda said. CHAUCER'S, it's called.

She gave us instructions, we bought some magical chocolate and two bottles of Butterbeer, ("Will do nicely for our lunch," Amelia told the girl), and set off.

"Not that we are going to lunch on a bench in the street," said Amelia as we walked down the High Street. "Look, there's a Cornish Pasty place. Let's eat there."

I hesitated briefly.

"Come *on*," Amelia urged. "You can browse the second hand bookshop later. Besides, we're on an investigation, not a bookshop spree."

We were, of course. But the thought of the bookshop was alluring. After our lunch – the pasties were a bit heavy on the onions, but otherwise quite tasty – we went to the shop. This time, I would take the lead.

The shop was a book lover's delight. Full of little nooks and crannies, and books everywhere. I turned to the owner. We could take a slightly more direct approach here.

"Mathilda mentioned your shop," I said, making sure there were no Muggle customers nearby. "Mathilda from Pure Magick. I'm looking for books on Kneazles."

The owner, a man in his early fifties, took me through to a separate part of the shop. I followed Amelia's example and started a little chat – on his delightful shop, on Kneazles, and how I'd always longed to have one.

He had an excellent book on 'Care of Kneazles', and

I examined it. Slowly, I steered our conversation towards the price of a pure-bred, and the possibilities to get one through other channels than a professional breeder.

"You want to be careful with that, Madam," the man said. "Dodgy folk, some of them. Mind, I see your point about prices. But there's safety, too."

I agreed that for a single woman safety was very important.

"Now, I've looked into affordable Kneazles too, once," the man told me. "Got a tip from someone, and I contacted the fellow. We met up, even. In Knockturn Alley – not a place where a lady like you would want to go. And I didn't take to the chap. Didn't take to him at all. Scrawny, dirty, smoking a foul little pipe. Had 'crook' written all over him. You don't want to do business with the likes of that Mundungus, and there's a fact."

I thanked him for his warning, bought the book, and retrieved Amelia from the Muggle Crime section. The lucky girl had had a far better chance to look around than I. Amelia paid for her pocket book, and we left.

"A lovely find," she told me. Amelia adored Muggle detectives. She had given me quite a taste for them, too. That's how I first came across the Miss Marple books.

I smiled at her enthusiasm and told her the case was all but solved. She stared at me with a look of blank surprise that was not entirely flattering.

"I may be as old-fashioned as Miss Marple in your eyes, but I do get results," I told her. I would have loved to look for one of Miss Marple's books in that shop, for there were several still missing from my collection, but duty had stopped me from browsing to my heart's content. "Let's go for a cup of decent coffee, and I'll tell you all about it."

We went back to the High Street. On our way to the bookshop I'd seen a coffee place called NERO. It had looked promising.

We went in and ordered a cappuccino for Amelia and an Americano for me. The owner asked us for our 'fidelity card'. "Erm..." I started. What was it? Did all Muggles have one? Walking around in Muggle England can be quite enchanting, but tricky, too.

But there was no danger. The owner gave us a little card with ten squares on it. "For each cup you get a stamp, and a full card will get you a free coffee," he said, putting a stamp in two of the squares.

I took the card, and Amelia smiled. "I know you're a frugal Scot, but surely ..." she said.

"Who knows?" I said. "I may return to Canterbury." And, in fact, I planned to. It was a lovely town, and it would be the very place for an outing with Poppy and Rolanda. Like me, they love second hand book shops, and from what I'd seen of Canterbury, it would be heaven on a plate to spend a day there. The place is teeming with book shops. With three of us wanting a decent coffee now and then, the card

might come in handy.

"The person behind those kitten thefts, for that's what they are," I told Amelia as we sat down in a quiet corner, "is Mundungus Fletcher. I know him through the Order. Albus insists it's useful to have him around, because of his dodgy contacts. He calls him a petty crook. But I can assure you there's nothing petty about it. The man's a thief, pure and simple. He is stealing those kittens, and he sells them on. And you know the worst thing?"

"Tell me," said Amelia, who looked suitably impressed.

"Remember that Mathilda said Arabella's gentleman friend was 'no oil painting'? I bet it's Mundungus Fletcher. He's ugly as sin, and he has a personal hygiene problem. Either Arabella is very much smitten, or he has cleaned himself up a bit to get at her – and at those kittens. And *now* what? We'll have to put a stop to it – but it will hurt poor Arabella like hell."

We looked at each other in dismay.

"You're right," Amelia said. "I'm sure you're right. And I can't put the Ministry on him. They would look into Arabella's little business, you know. If we truly want to help her, we'll have to do it by ourselves."

We decided to return to the little walled garden, for we couldn't do anything further in Canterbury. We would then each return home and think on the problem.

"I'll be off to the hardware shop, then," said Ara-

bella morosely. "You're sure you're all right here? Have another coffee if you want to. Mr Tibbles will keep you company."

I could hear her carpet slippers drag along the pavement as she walked past the window. She had taken it hard, no doubt about it.

"Poor Arabella," I said to Mr Tibbles. He looked back with a certain amount of reproach. He had seen Arabella's distress, and he was devoted to her.

"Well, what could we do? That damned Mundungus is stealing from her. It's a harsh thing to say, but he courts her just to steal from her. We can't let him continue."

Mr Tibbles agreed. He clearly was no great fan of Mundungus himself.

"I dare say you tried to warn her yourself," I continued.

Mr Tibbles nodded.

"She didn't believe you, of course. Sometimes you just need speech. What did she think it – that you were jealous?"

Mr Tibbles nodded again and heaved a deep sigh.

"We'll make sure you're out in the garden, tonight. Just be careful he can't catch you. If he did, he'd use you as a hostage. Keep between him and the door in the fence. If he makes for that escape route... "

Mr Tibbles looked a bit more cheerful, and quickly slid between the table legs.

"Exactly. Trip him up. That's the ticket."

Mr Tibbles nearly smiled, lifted his right paw,

and carefully studied his long, sharp nails. He licked his whiskers in delicate anticipation.

Mundungus was in for a hard time.

Lovely thought.

I would have to explain the difference between Grievous Bodily Harm and a minor correction to Mr Tibbles, though. Mundungus deserved punishment, but not permanent damage. That would be taking the law into our own hands in totally unacceptable ways.

While Mr Tibbles and I discussed crime and punishment, Arabella was getting a new padlock. It had been her idea, and it showed that the best of Magical detectives could overlook clues, too.

I had come to Arabella's place, not just with an explanation of the missing kitten problem, but with a solution as well. Amelia and I had worked diligently to 'frame' Mundungus, as the expression is. Amelia had a friend who was willing to serve as bait.

At first I had had my doubts about bringing in another person. Could the friend be trusted? Amelia's career should not suffer from this. But Amelia had quickly set my mind at rest.

"You know her," she had told me. "It's Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank. She has done a fair bit of substitute teaching at Hogwarts during Kettleburn's injuries. She's dead against messing about with animals and can be trusted absolutely. I will wait at her place as extra back up. If Mundungus manages to get the kitten out after all then I'll tackle him at Will's place.

And keep Will off his back. She can be a bit direct, Will can, when animal welfare is concerned."

This sounded like an excellent plan on many levels. It ensured back up, and Wilhelmina was, indeed, utterly reliable and a great animal lover. And while I might not have a gaydar as sharp as Amelia's, I could easily see that a night vigil in Wilhelmina's cottage would suit Amelia admirably.

The friend had contacted Mundungus about a Kneazle kitten, he had visited her to discuss terms, and they had settled on a delivery date.

Both Amelia and I supposed Mundungus would steal the kitten the night before. Why would he want to look after the kitten for several days? He'd steal the wee thing in the night and deliver her in the morning.

Amelia's friend had mentioned a preference for late afternoon or early evening delivery to make sure. Mundungus had been adamant: morning delivery it had to be. He didn't want to be burdened with the animal for a whole day.

We expected him to steal the kitten that very night, and I would be ready for him. It would be too dangerous to have Amelia present. Mundungus was bound to be arrested for some other crime at some point, and he was clever enough to understand that he could get both Amelia and Arabella into trouble by mentioning Amelia's involvement in the case.

For me, there were no such restrictions. I was an Order member visiting Arabella; Mundungus was an

Order member caught in an act of base betrayal. He would be mad to complain to Albus about my behaviour.

Amelia had not liked it one bit, of course. She had even gone as far as to ask, "Will you manage on your own?"

"You read too many Muggle detective novels," I told her. "True, in those books there's often a moment of extreme danger just before the end. But that's because an author needs a tension arc, so they have to invent a set of circumstances that lead to danger."

"It can happen," Amelia had grumbled.

"All right," I said, "give me a convincing storyline in which Mundungus Fletcher gets the better of me in a one-to-one duel." And I had struck up a duelling pose, the better to make Amelia imagine. She had to agree that the most obvious solution was also the right one: I would deal with Mundungus on my own.

Thoroughly.

I had told Arabella I would put up wards that would prevent Mundungus from using an *Alohomora*. He would use one to get into the shed, of course, and we'd have to wait until he did in order to catch him red-handed. That's when Arabella came up with the padlock idea, and it was brilliant in its simplicity.

"You won't even have to put up wards," she said, with a little crack in her voice. "You won't even need that, Minerva. Do you know what he did, the scumbag? He bought that padlock for me. I was that upset after the first abductions, I told him all about it. And

he *comforted* me and said he would *help*. And he bought the padlock and installed it, too. And now all he has to do is bring the bloody spare key. He must have had an extra spare key made. That's why I thought the abductions were done by wizards – because there were no traces of burglary, none. And you know why? Because *the toe rag installed the lock himself*. And he did the lock for the garden door, too."

So she would get a new padlock, and when Mundungus would show up, he'd try to open it with his old key, and we'd have our proof. And we could have known, Amelia and I; Mathilda had told us that Arabella's not-so-very-*beau* had helped her with a padlock.

When Arabella came home, we had tea. And then a small glass of sherry. And then bangers and mash. I could have done without those offerings, but keeping busy seemed to help Arabella.

"I'm glad you're here, however hard it is to accept," she said with simple dignity. "The least I can do is make sure you get some decent food. I know it isn't magical, but my Tom always said I made the best mash he'd ever had."

And true enough, the sausages were cooked to a turn, and the mashed potatoes, which I had greeted with some trepidation, since the Hogwarts mash tends to be a starchy affair, were the very essence of *comfort food*.

After our meal Arabella made some excellent coffee and we sat, she with knitting, I with a Muggle

newspaper, and waited for darkness.

When it was nearly dark, we took up our positions: Mr Tibbles in the garden, and Arabella and I in the kitchen. Not much later we saw the garden door move.

"He *oiled* the hinges regularly for me, the little shit," whispered Arabella.

Mundungus quietly made his way to the shed, rummaged in his pocket, and extracted a Muggle key.

And failed to unlock the padlock.

He stared at the key, as one does when an object that ought to function suddenly doesn't, and rummaged in his pocket once more. He took out various items, discarded them one by one, stared at the key, and tried again.

I stepped out, wand drawn.

"Freeze," I said. "Hands up, and turn slowly towards us. You're caught in the act."

In many Muggle detectives the investigator says "Freeze" or "Hands up" at some point. I've always wanted to say it myself.

Part of me was glad Amelia wasn't there, though. She would have thought it too funny for words, and I'd never have heard the last of it.

"What... What... " Mundungus was stunned. Not literally, of course. There was no need for anything as drastic as that, and it might have attracted attention. But he froze admirably.

"You're trying to steal a kitten, in order to deliver

it to..." and I gave the address of Amelia's friend. "We have full proof."

"You louse! You pile of bat droppings! You toe rag," said Arabella. She took care not to scream – no need to alert the neighbours. But the anger behind her words made my flesh creep. Mundungus looked most uncomfortable.

"Now, Figgy, sweetie, keep your 'airnet on," he tried.

"Sweetie?" said Arabella, in low, threatening tones, "You still dare call me 'sweetie'? I'll sweeten you all right." And she threw a tin of cat food at him.

It hit him straight on the temple, and he went down like a log. Arabella's aim was astonishing.

Mundungus came round very quickly, and struggled into a sitting position.

"Now listen carefully," I told him. "You'll clear off, you'll never, ever bother Arabella again, and you'll never tell anyone about her Kneazle business. Because if you do – any of it – you'll have to deal with Albus, and worse, you'll have to deal with me. And it will not be pretty. I'll find you, wherever you are, and I'll hex the living daylights out of you. Don't think for one minute that I won't. You're in the Order long enough to know my wartime record. I get things done, and I don't get caught when I do them."

In a wartime situation, actions such as I have committed can be justified, or rather, they can be necessary. I'd be most reluctant to commit an unlawful action in peace-time. But Mundungus,

who'd never done an honest day's work in his life, would be inclined to believe everyone capable of breaking the law. And he did know of some of my wartime missions.

He looked positively bilious.

"Out," I said.

He stumbled towards the door as fast as he could manage in his dazed state. He made it halfway when Mr Tibbles tripped him up. As neat an action as you could wish for. Again, Mundungus went down with a satisfying thud. The yelp he emitted next told me that Mr Tibbles must have scratched Mundungus's hand with his nails. By accident, of course. Could happen to any cat trying to avoid a falling human in the dark.

Mundungus got up again and made for the door. I briefly aimed my wand. He screamed, grasped his backside with both hands, screamed again, and ran away.

Arabella looked at me. "A boil," I told her. "He won't sit for at least a week. Just to make sure he remembers what I told him."

Arabella had been adamant she didn't want compensation payment. "He spends everything he earns, so in order to pay me he'd probably rob someone else. And besides, it would mean seeing him again, or at least being reminded of him again. I want a clean end to this. I want him out of my life. And I can afford to lose the money. It's the kittens I was afraid for," she had told me, and I had to agree. This was the best solution for her.

We both went inside, with a smug-looking Mr Tibbles on our heels.

"Well, that's it," Arabella said. "He's gone forever."

In the garden, she had been strong and completely in control. Now she looked as if all resilience had been punched out of her. Blast Mundungus!

"How on earth did you manage to hit him like that?" I asked, in an effort to cheer her up a bit. "A perfect hit. Was it a lucky strike?"

Arabella smiled, a very sad little smile. "A lucky strike is what it was. Mind, I've years of practice. We played darts every week."

I had no idea what she was talking about. It was a lucky strike with years of practice? And playing with darts? Darts were medieval; surely Muggles didn't use them anymore? I asked what she meant.

"But I thought you were half-Muggle?" she said, somewhat surprised. "I remember Albus mentioning it once in an Order meeting. Sorry, that's intrusive," she added.

"Not at all. And it's true. My father was a Muggle. A Presbyterian Minister."

"That explains it, then. Not the kind of man to take you to the pub. Darts is a Muggle pub game, you see. Tom and I used to play every week. He was such a lovely man, my Tom. 'You cook dinner every day, Bella, and a damn fine dinner, too,' he used to say. 'So on Friday, when I get my pay check, we eat out. You deserve it.' And every Friday he took me to The Bells and Motley, and we'd have a proper

dinner out. A pie, say, or chicken in a basket. With a pudding and everything. And then we'd play darts with our friends. Come, I'll show you."

She beckoned me up the stairs, and I followed her. I was both touched by her story and intrigued by what she wanted me to see. On the landing, Arabella turned on the light, and I saw a large wooden board on one of the walls. On the board there was a round disk, of a softer sort of wood, with segments in ever increasing circles in different colours. The centre was red.

We walked up to it, and I noticed the darts stuck in the round board. There were small holes in the wooden background, too, which explained its use. Wall-protection.

Arabella pulled them out and walked to the other end of the landing. "Come," she said, "I'll show you."

She made me stand behind her — "can't be too careful," she told me — and explained that Darts was about throwing the little darts in the coloured segments in order to gain as many points as possible.

She balanced a dart, aimed, and threw. It got stuck right next to the little red centre.

"When you hit the bull's eye, that's what we call it, it's a 'lucky strike'," she explained. "That's why I said hitting Mundungus was one. Of course, with a target that large it's easy."

"You practiced here?" I asked.

"Yes," said Arabella. She hesitated briefly, and had to blink a few times before she could look at me.

"No – not really. When Tom got ill... he died of cancer, more than ten years ago... well, one day he came home with this. Said we might like to practice. But he really bought it because he knew he'd soon be too ill to go to the pub. And he was, too. So he made me order take-away food on Fridays, for he said I still deserved a weekly break from cooking, more than ever. And we'd have a game together. 'See,' he said. 'We still have good times.'

"After he passed away, I couldn't even bear to look at it. But I couldn't take it down, either. I continued to order take-away on Fridays. He made me promise, you know. Wanted me to treat myself. So I always did. Still do. And now, occasionally, I play a game of darts. Just to keep in practice. I don't like going to the pub anymore. They're lovely, all our old friends, but it still hurts like hell. Being there all alone. Not hearing Tom say, 'That's my girl' after a very good strike.

Arabella looked at the darts board, blinking away tears she didn't want to show. "I thought," she said, and then had to swallow before she could go on.

"When Mundungus started to be all helpful and take me out to the pub, I thought that, perhaps, there might be more to life than take-away on Fridays and a solitary game of darts. It wouldn't be the same; it could never be the same. But I thought I'd have something. I was a fool, wasn't I?"

I had to take a deep breath myself before I could answer. "No," I said. "You're a very courageous woman.

And you deserve so much better than Mundungus."

I didn't want to leave Arabella like that, and suddenly I had an idea. "Do you think," I asked her, "that a woman who once was a reasonably good Chaser might learn to throw darts?"

Arabella looked at me. Slowly, she began to smile. "Those Quidditch hoops are a darn sight bigger than a darts board," she said. "But at least you can aim – we might give it a try. You know what – I'll fetch us a bottle of ale each. You might as well learn to do it the proper way. Meanwhile, you can have a go."

She handed me the darts.

"I should try for the red centre?" I asked.

"On your first attempt, you should try to hit the board, not the wooden backing. Mind, it's there for a reason," Arabella grinned.

By the time she returned, I had managed to hit the board three times (and missed twice). One of the darts was not too far from the centre. Arabella nodded with approval and collected the darts. Then she poured each of us a pint of ale, and we raised our glasses in silent acknowledgement of all that had happened that day.

Then Arabella threw her second dart of the evening, with expert precision. It hit the bull's eye with a resounding thud. She looked at me, and I knew we both thought the same.

Somewhere, someone was saying, "That's my girl".

Minerva McGonagall: Spinster Detective

The Case of the Living Portrait

"DAMN AND BLAST," said the Headmistress, and she poured herself a double Firewhisky at four o'clock in the afternoon.

You may frown at this, for neither the language nor the alcoholic excess are examples for the students. But there were good reasons.

I should know.

I am that Headmistress.

By now it is nine o'clock, and my many duties are done. I am alone at last and able to take a good look at the situation.

What I would like to do, at this point, is Apparate to Amelia Bones and have a long talk that would probably begin with me saying, "What is *wrong* with men?"

To which Amelia would answer, "Apart from everything?"

Not that we were man-haters. Amelia was a lesbian and I am a confirmed spinster, but that's because of who we are, or, in Amelia's case, of who she was, not because we hadn't met the 'right' man. Not even because there is no such thing as a 'right' man – we have both known quite a number of very

likeable ones. But occasionally one feels the need to vent one's irritations, and the dialogue I just described was our usual start to doing just that. Any career woman will understand what I mean.

There are other reasons I wish I could talk to Amelia right now. I could trust her completely, and solving mysteries was her daily work. Her advice would have been invaluable.

However, this is not to be. I will have to solve on my own the mystery that presented itself this afternoon. If what I think is true, it must remain an absolute secret. And I can't think of anyone who would not be tempted to break my confidence – either because they sincerely think it's for the best, or because they could make a great deal of money out of it.

For the subject of my investigation is Severus Snape, Potions Master, former Headmaster of Hogwarts, and Tragic and Misunderstood War Hero, as the Daily Prophet called him only last week.

Making money out of his situation is unethical. And I'm convinced it is not in his best interests to have 'his cover blown', as I believe the technical term is.

If I decide to publish these notes, it will be out of revenge. And revenge is a dish best eaten cold. Until I have fully made up my mind, I will therefore work alone.

Amelia would have been amused at the notion of me publishing a mystery story. She was the one who introduced me to Muggle detective novels. Amelia adored them. She was fascinated by the

technical equipment the Muggle police has at its disposal, and she loved the description of Muggle investigation teams and how they worked together. "The one amazes by its strangeness, the other by its very familiarity," she used to say. She particularly enjoyed books where the main investigations officer was a woman. It is easy to see why.

While I like the older police stories well enough, I grew less enamoured with them in later years. The criminals are now mostly of the serial killer variety. Their crimes are explained by their unhappy childhood, an argument I don't quite hold with. And the authors usually write several chapters from the killer's point of view. Often chillingly well done, but not at all the sort of thing I enjoy reading after a long working day.

Amelia used to tease me that my preferences reflected my life just as much as her female inspectors reflected hers. And she had a point, for my favourite paper sleuth, Miss Marple, is not unlike me.

We are both elderly spinsters and we both *like* living alone. I would not mind retiring to just such a cottage as Miss Marple lives in – albeit with less gardening and more books. On other subject than the delights of gardening, however, I often agree with her point of view, and I think we might have got along just fine.

For those of you who are not familiar with Agatha Christie's work, Miss Marple lives in a small vil-

lage and studies human nature, "which is much the same in a village as anywhere else," as she says herself. As a result, she is able to solve every mystery put before her. More often than not, however, she is hindered in her detective work by people who are convinced that she has led a very restricted life and therefore cannot possibly understand the situation.

You would be surprised how often I, too, have heard that the life of a schoolteacher, especially at a boarding school, must be very restricted.

It's complete and utter balderdash.

But if this restricted life of mine (in which I've fought in three wars, dealt with four Ministers of Magic, and manage an organisation with a large staff, a large budget, and extensive high-maintenance grounds and buildings), if this *very* restricted life of mine taught me one thing, it is that a day on which one doesn't have to listen to balderdash in some form or other is usually a day spent in blissful solitude.

Amelia often compared me to Miss Marple. "You were both born in the knife drawer – too sharp by half," she used to say. And, "your students would agree with me. You find your culprits exactly the way Miss Marple does: their deeds remind you of so-and-so."

I was sorry to see the Miss Marple series end. Amelia suggested I should write my own sequels. She even promised to buy them. But copyright would stop me from publishing, and if I were to invent my own elderly spinster, I'd have to invent the plot as

well. I couldn't see myself managing that.

This is different. I will write down the plot as it presents itself to me. As to publication – we'll see.

Unless Severus Snape comes up with some exceptionally good excuses and reasons, I may do just that.

The last line of the previous section may have surprised my readers. The whole point of Severus Snape, Tragic War Hero, is not just that his life was tragic, but that his death makes it impossible for the Wizarding world to tell him how they feel about him now.

Let me put you in full possession of the facts.

It all started when Harry Potter came to my office. In the past seven years, countless things have started with Harry and his friends coming to my office. "Why is it always you three?" I once asked. A rhetorical question; every teacher knows there always is one and it's usually the same. This time, Mr Potter came alone. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Potter sat down, inquired after my health, and blurted out that he had come about Professor Snape's portrait. He is nothing if not straightforward.

I sighed, inwardly, of course. I had given the matter much thought ever since the first time I entered the Headmaster's office after learning the story behind Severus Snape's death.

You will recall that portraits of former Heads may, if the Head in question wishes it, be placed in the office from the day of their resignation. But they

will change into Living Portraits only on the death of the subject. Most Heads sit for their portrait during their Headship. Some die in harness; their paintings are live ones from the moment they are placed on the wall. Albus Dumbledore is a case in point. Others hang silently for years, and then they suddenly wake up, often before the Owl announcing the subject's demise has reached the castle.

To return to Headmaster Snape, he did not leave a painting in a place where we could find it, and it seemed highly unlikely that he had sat for one. Had he lived, I doubted he would wish to be remembered for this particular year in his Hogwarts career.

When Potter made his request, I was perfectly aware that I had long passed the stage where I sincerely debated what was best. I was prevaricating. That had to come to an end, and Potter's visit was as good a reason as any.

The long and short of the matter was: Headmaster Snape had the right to have his portrait. I therefore agreed with Potter and told him so.

Potter then launched into a spirited argument as to why Professor Snape deserved his portrait. After several seconds, he realised that I had, in fact, agreed. He stopped in mid-sentence and stared.

"You agree?" he asked.

"Quite," I said.

"But, but... " he stuttered, "I thought everyone always *hated* Professor Snape. I thought no-one

would want his portrait here."

Potter was wrong. True, there were people whose dislike of Snape had been absolute and openly expressed. Sirius Black is one, Potter himself is another. For which he was not entirely to blame; Severus more than returned the feeling, and violent antipathy is often mutual. In Potter's case, the older should have been the wiser, as I had told Snape on numerous occasions.

But Snape's colleagues had not always disliked him. We had certainly misunderstood both his motives and his actions since the death of Albus Dumbledore, and some of us – I must include myself – continued to do so until Potter gave us the full facts.

In requesting Snape's portrait, Potter did the right thing. His one fault is that he tends to believe he's the only one willing and able to do the right thing. During the Battle I had to remind him that his teachers were rather good at magic. This time I let him figure it out for himself.

"That's great," he said finally. "That's marvellous. Do I order one? With whom? I'll pay for it, of course."

His tendency to believe he is the only one who does things is really remarkably persistent. On the one hand, his desperately unhappy childhood may well have taught him to stand up for himself, because no-one would do it for him.

On the other hand, as I have said, I don't quite hold with the 'unhappy childhood' argument. There

is much of his mother in Harry. She had the same tendency to want to make everything right — thoroughly laudable — and the same conviction that she and she alone could do so and knew how.

From everything Harry told about Snape, I've learnt that Lily did want to reform him. When she realised her friendship alone would not result in a personality transplant, they quarrelled, and she started on the reformation of James Potter. They became engaged the day after their last N.E.W.T. exam, and it is true that James never bullied Severus again. It is also true that, since they both left school, James never saw him again. Still, Lily felt she had succeeded in her project, and I know they were sincerely happy together.

Harry is very much a chip of the old block. I told him that I would order a painting from a reliable painter, who had experience with Living Portraits, had known Headmaster Snape (a rather important factor, since he'd have to paint from memory and a few snapshots), and who would be paid by Hogwarts and the Ministry.

Harry said "Yes, Professor" to all of these statements. When the matter of the painting was settled, we had tea.

A first meeting with a former student is always a bit uncharted territory. Both teacher and student have to get used to the new balance. But Harry and I parted most amiably. When he doesn't feel he has

to save the world, he's pleasant and well-mannered company, and I meant it when I said I looked forward to his return — for he had promised to attend the unveiling ceremony.

The little ceremony took place today.

After seven years in which seeing Potter in my office had meant trouble, I *did* look forward to his visit.

How the Universe must have laughed.

At first all went very well. The portrait hung on the wall, carefully veiled. We chatted briefly of this and that, and then I suggested Potter unveil it. He was the only one present — I had insisted on that, telling Potter, "It's what Professor Snape would have wanted."

The thought that he might, indeed, consider a chat with Potter preferable to a chat with me was quite entertaining.

When Potter had removed the veil, we both stared at Snape's face. The likeness was pitch-perfect from his black hair to the hint of an ironic smile on his face. It was a bust, and while a bust cannot really loom, there was the suggestion of looming. And of billowing robes.

Also, the portrait was as dead as a doornail.

Investigation was necessary, and I did not mean to investigate in Potter's presence. I told him Living Paintings always needed a bit of time.

Potter then mentioned that the eyes followed one through the room already. So do the eyes in good

Muggle paintings, but I was glad to agree with him. And, to give him his due, he may not have seen any good Muggle paintings unless his uncle and aunt took him to museums, which seems highly unlikely.

Potter and I had a small glass of mead together, and I could see that having a drink with his former Head of House did more to make him feel grown up than the two months of Auror training behind him. Then he left.

I started to investigate the portrait. I hoped there would be some oversight on the part of the painter.

There was not.

The painting was excellent, the spells were all in place, and the ritual had been completed. I was looking at a superb Living Portrait that was dead.

I checked everything again. You do, just as you look in every possible place when you've lost something, and then look *again*; knowing full well it will not be there.

And there we have the true starting point of my investigation, and the moment where I first thought of Miss Marple. "You will find that the most obvious conclusion is often the right one," she says on various occasions.

Some people would argue that it's not the fictional character but the author speaking. An author who wants to explain why there is, yet again, a novel in which the husband or wife did it. But I like to think that the author needs to explain this to her *younger* readers.

Women who have lived as long as Jane Marple and I know it's true. Young people don't. They think the most unlikely tale is the convincing one.

Amelia agreed with me when we compared notes on the subject. In my work, it's homework eaten by the kneazle. In hers it's Granny's funeral. In both cases, the obvious reason is the true one, and the clichés are merely boring. The only tale that truly stood out over the years involved an owl, a Thestral *and* a Mermaid, and it was exceedingly well told. I was sorry when the story ended.

So was the culprit.

If Sirius Black had done his homework with all the dedication he devoted to its neglect, he could have gone very far indeed.

In the Case of the Living Portrait, there was only one obvious conclusion. The Living Portrait was dead because the subject was alive.

At which point I swore, examined the facts, and had the whisky.

For the one undeniable fact that sprang to mind was this: Severus Snape's body had never been found.

"Dear, sweet God," I finally said. I hadn't meant it as a last test, but when the portrait didn't say, "No, just Severus," I knew it was dead, all right.

My first action clearly must be to re-examine all known facts.

A few hours after Potter killed Voldemort, he went

to see Shacklebolt and told him Snape was dead and a hero. His story was somewhat incoherent, understandable after everything he'd been through, but Shacklebolt grasped the salient facts at once.

"So Snape was on our side, and his body is in the Shrieking Shack?" he queried.

Potter confirmed this, and they set off at once to retrieve it. But it wasn't there.

Shacklebolt questioned Potter further, and it transpired that Potter had left the Shrieking Shack and Snape's body at the exact moment when Voldemort proclaimed the one-hour cease-fire. Shacklebolt then advanced the theory, a perfectly sensible one, we all thought, that during that hour one of the Death Eaters had found Snape. Believing him to be a fallen comrade-in-arms, he had acted according to his master's instructions and buried Snape.

In the following months, the Ministry made every possible effort to find that person, but no-one came forward. Shacklebolt then concluded that whoever had buried Snape had died later that day. During the second part of the Battle, there had been numerous casualties among the Death Eaters.

But is it possible to advance another theory? I now think it is.

After Voldemort had ordered his snake to bite Snape, he left him. Potter, Miss Granger, and Weasley entered the Shrieking Shack at once, but during the brief time it took them to get in, they couldn't actually see Snape.

Those few moments must have given Snape the time to do what he needed to do, and that can be summed up in two words: *Nagini Antidote*. He was arguably the most talented Potions Master of our time.

The brief conversation with Potter took place, and the trio left him. The cease-fire gave him ample opportunities for a quiet get-away.

The only question that remains is, *Why did Potter and his friends believe Snape had died?*

It seems to me that Snape wanted them to believe it. There are various defensive spells that make a person look dead; many a wizard survived battles by using just such a spell. To the casual examiner (and fighters of a victorious army who search a battlefield for survivors are casual in the extreme) the person seems dead, indeed.

Of course, no-one has thought of asking Potter whether he'd seen people die before. One doesn't; the answer is both painful and well-known.

However, it would have been very pertinent to ask Potter and his friends whether they had seen people die *in their beds*. After everything these three have been through, one sometimes tends to forget how very young they still are. It is perfectly possible, and even likely, that they never witnessed a death bed.

I have. I still remember my surprise when my father died. He had been terminally ill for some time, and looked as white and drawn as it was possible to look. And then he died, and I saw that after

the last heartbeat all blood stops circulating. Then I knew what the true waxen pallor of death looks like. And you can't fake it.

I've also seen men die in battle, and I know one doesn't observe this phenomenon. I don't mean it doesn't happen. Of course it does. But amidst the noise and the movement, and with the shock of seeing a friend fall, one simply doesn't notice.

Snape's complexion was never rosy to begin with, and he must have had the pallor of a badly wounded man. So those three children may well have been mistaken in declaring him dead. And the evidence of the Living Portrait shows that, in some way or another, Snape did get out and did manage to heal those wounds.

He is alive, he is somewhere.

And he clearly doesn't want to be found.

Tough luck.

I am going to find him, and there will be *words*. For my predominant feeling where Severus Snape is concerned is red-hot anger.

Don't get me wrong. I fully understand the need he had for secrecy. The only way to convince Voldemort of his allegiance was to be totally believable at all times. Whatever he did during his Headship, and he did some terrible things, was necessary to remain in Voldemort's confidence.

Albus knew exactly what he did when he asked Snape for a mercy killing. Everyone will understand

why he asked it for himself – a clean, quick death. But he also asked it so that the entire Order of the Phoenix, and the entire staff of Hogwarts, would see Snape as a true Death Eater. And he succeeded.

I did have moments of doubt, during that final year. There was the time when several students were involved in an attempt to steal the Sword of Gryffindor. Snape made them work in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid, and while it may have fooled the Carrows, we of the old guard knew it was no punishment at all.

And there was also the fact that all Order members remained alive. Both Voldemort and Snape were intelligent enough to realise that, as long as we were alive, we would lead a resistance. If I had been in Voldemort's shoes, eliminating the Order would have been among my first priorities.

But in the end, I couldn't fully believe Snape was on our side after all. You see, we were not just colleagues, he and I; we were very close friends for more than a decade. Oh, we were sharp and sarcastic enough on subjects such as House Points and the Quidditch Cup, and students' gossip will have it we *really, really hated each other*, bless their innocent hearts.

But we didn't. I would have trusted Snape with my life, and did on various Order missions. He felt the same – I thought. But at the end of the day, he seems to have doubted me. Mistrusted me. And underestimated me.

Part of my anger comes from this: that the person I thought was my closest male friend has betrayed that friendship.

Now, if I truly believed it was necessary to do so, I would try to forgive. Not forget – but at the very least try to *understand* why he did it.

But if one looks at the facts, the only possible conclusion is that it was bloody stupid and dangerous. Snape had prepared himself for an attack by Nagini. And as it turned out, he had been right that this was how Voldemort tried to kill him.

But what if he had been wrong? What if Voldemort had used an Aveda Kedavra – simply so that it would actually be his *wand*, not his snake, that would kill Severus? The whole matter of the Elder Wand, which was the reason for killing Severus in the first place, would have suggested a curse rather than a snake bite.

And *then* where would we have been? Who would have told Potter what he needed to know? When all is said and done, we won because of sheer, dumb luck. It is complete, insane, utter foolishness to have such a secret repose in just one person.

Longbottom told me after the battle that Potter had told him to kill Nagini – Potter wanted three people to be aware of the Horcruxes, and while he didn't have time to brief Longbottom fully, he told him the essential.

Potter is seventeen years old, he didn't finish his

schooling, and he has more common sense in his little finger than Severus Snape in his entire body.

I can see why Albus never told me – he was a loner by nature. And in the end he did tell Severus. Nearly too late – if that dark curse in his hand had killed him when it hit him, which might easily have happened, the world would be a very different place today.

But Albus was always very convinced that I was a good Deputy and a good second in command, and that was as much as a woman could be.

That Albus couldn't look past the fact that I'm a woman is understandable in one his age. For someone of his generation he really wasn't too old-fashioned, and he did much better than Cornelius Fudge, for instance, although Fudge is much younger. This inability to see a woman's capacities wasn't his most likeable characteristic, but he did have many good points. Besides, true friendship does not just mean liking someone for their good points, but also liking them despite their annoying traits.

Still, that Severus, who has known me so long and so well, has underestimated me to the point where he thought it unsafe to confide in me – I can't think of any excuse.

I hope for his sake that he can.

Now I've examined all known facts and applied logic to them. So far, so good. But at this point I can't procrastinate any longer. I'll have to investi-

gate and find new facts.

And where, on earth, does one start?

Minerva McGonagall, Girl Detective may sound dashing, but perhaps I shouldn't give up the day job just yet.

Where would Amelia start? Or Miss Marple?

They would examine the crime scene – only there isn't any, and if the Shrieking Shack had had things to tell us about Snape's whereabouts, Shacklebolt would have found them.

So let's be logical again. If Severus is still alive, has *continued* his life, then somewhere in his past there must be clues. For a *continuation* means there must be past evidence for what he is doing now.

He made preparations to stay alive long enough to tell Potter – hence the antidote. I know now he was prepared to die for our cause. But in the end he didn't remain in the Shrieking Shack to bleed to death. Which makes sense; the only reason to do that is a determined wish to end it all.

As things stand, it would seem that Snape had no wish to end it all, but he most certainly wished to continue his life far from the British Wizarding world. I can see his point, really. During his life an amazing number of people made no secret of the fact they disliked him. I once chided Arthur for inviting various Order members to one of Molly's meals at Grimmauld Place. "Come dine with us," he would say, "Molly is making meat balls tonight." Molly is an excellent cook, and quite a few of the

younger Order members angled for invitations. But Severus never got one.

"And it surprises you he isn't more congenial?" I asked Arthur, who hummed and hemmed and shuffled his feet, but he didn't change his behaviour.

In this post-war world people would be all over him like a bad rash; they would claim to have been a friend all along. I understand *perfectly* why Severus left.

But he must have made preparations. Perhaps I had best start, then, by examining his rooms at Hogwarts, and then his house at Spinner's End. A Muggle address, but his father was a Muggle.

That's interesting, come to think of it. If Snape had bought a Wizarding property, it would have been known at the Ministry. But can he have bought a Muggle house somewhere in a remote spot?

I'll have a good look at his Hogwarts rooms right now.

I'm beginning to realise there are downsides to being a real life Miss Marple. In her case, her caring author makes sure there are clues to find. I wish I had a caring author.

Snape's private study holds a collection of Potion-related books that, had he died and left them to Hogwarts Library, would have deserved a special bookcase, labelled THE SEVERUS SNAPE MEMORIAL COLLECTION. It also contains meticulous notes on the students in his house.

Other than that, I've detected that he was left-handed – the position of the quills on his desk told me

so. Unfortunately I knew this already, but the moment I looked at his desk and thought, *Yes, this is the desk of a left-handed man, and one who rarely makes mistakes in what he writes, for erasing material is in a drawer, not on the surface* was the highlight of my detection.

I've also found that he just might have had a tiny speck of sentimentality. During his last year as Head of House we made a bet — we often did, but we had great fun with this one. Snape especially, for he won. I paid my debt of honour in the form of a very fine bottle of Glenfarclas, and I found that he has kept the bottle of that last bet of ours. It was in a small wine rack that contained only one other bottle, and that one held a pleasant memory, too. It was a bottle of wine, a Château Coupe-Roses.

I well remember the occasion we first saw that wine. It was several years ago — when Gilderoy Lockhart was our DADA teacher. One morning, out of the blue, Gilderoy told us he used a nourishing cream to keep his complexion. The faces of Severus and Filius as they digested this bit of information along with their toast-and-marmalade were priceless. Pomona just laughed heartily, and Lockhart told her, with a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger look, that she could do with a bit of skincare herself, since "those ruddy cheeks won't get any less, you know." He then offered to mix her something and said that he might even use plants — he'd show her how, too.

Pomona didn't hex him, for which I admired her,

but said that if she wanted to change her complexion, she was certain her dear colleague Severus would be able to come up with just the thing. Severus said he would give the matter his undivided attention, and that was it.

But that Christmas Pomona got a bottle-shaped package and the gift label said, in Severus's neat writing, "Drink this bottle and your complexion will be perfectly even."

We all laughed as Pomona ripped open her gift. It was a bottle of red wine, and the label read, Château Coupe-Roses. Everyone agreed it was the most perfect Christmas gift of the year. Severus told us he had happened to come across the *Château* on his holiday in France, and he thought it was better than anything he could brew. And plant-based.

Other than those two bottles on the rack, his room contained just a bottle of Ogden's Old on a side table, with one tumbler. There used to be two tumblers, for I often dropped by for a night-cap. I admit that I felt a pang at the thought of Severus's loneliness as he poured himself his solitary glass.

Not that we could have continued the habit, of course; it would have been a dead give-away. But one can feel supported by one's friends without their physical presence. That *silly* man had been far more lonely than he needed to be.

Those two bottles on that rack.

I keep seeing them.

There is something about those two bottles that bothers me. I must go back and have another look.

Well, well, well.

It *was* a clue, and I feel quite smug for spotting it. At the same time, I feel confused. What I have discovered seems to alter everything.

So far I thought I was hunting down a man who didn't want to be found. By no-one, but certainly not by me. We did not part on amicable terms. He hexed a cursed snake at me, I jinxed a swarm of daggers back.

But now it seems as if Snape wants to be found – but *only* by me. The clue was in the bottles, and the only reason I paid any attention to them was that they held a memory that was special to us, but to nobody else.

What had bothered me, as I realised when I saw the wine rack again, was the dust. My bet-bottle had a layer on it that was more or less consistent with it being in the rack for over a year. But the Coupe-Roses bottle had hardly any dust at all – and that holiday had been in the summer of 1993.

So I examined it carefully – and the year on the label said 1996. He must have returned to that place last summer. A spot he just travelled past accidentally, as he told us when he gave Pomona her present.

If he had put it in the rack in the summer of 1997 and not touched it since, as he did with my bottle, they would both have had about the same amount of dust. They didn't – he kept the Coupe-Roses clean.

That was reason enough to check it for hidden spell-work, and I found an adhesive spell on the label. Muggles use glue. The label came off easily, and what do you think I found on the back?

Yes, it was a message to me. A clue. And here's the anti-climax: when it comes to its meaning, I'm clueless.

SING *Happy Birthday* TO THE WIND, MINERVE. 1998

I've spent three days looking at that message and the label and I'm not much further. Here's what I have deducted:

Severus wanted to leave me a clue to his present whereabouts. The message says 'happy birthday' and the year is this year. If we were given to singing for each other's birthday, which we most emphatically were not, since neither of us can carry a tune, I would have sung 'happy birthday' to him on January 9, 1998. At which time we were not on speaking terms.

My birthday, however, is October 4. That's in four weeks' time. Also, Severus took great care to write the words SING TO THE WIND MINERVE in capitals, and the rest in italics. So on October 4, I am supposed to sing to the wind.

Also, he misspelled my name. As we have established, Severus is a man who rarely makes mistakes in writing (that deduction of mine is useful after all!) so the word 'Minerve' rather than Minerva must have a meaning.

Now, I noticed that the wine is a Minervois. And

he went there at least twice. The Languedoc is not a very densely populated region, and overall it's less touristic than, for instance, the Provence. In this region a man could find a quiet spot for a bolting hole without much effort.

But if he truly wants me to find him, and the message suggests as much, then there must be other clues. Or this time he overestimates me – but I won't admit to that just yet.

I've made a search of his rooms for items to do with France and the Minervois region but found none. I think it's time to go to Spinner's End.

Singing to the wind on my birthday, indeed.

I don't even celebrate birthdays. Oh, I put the usual coffee time treat in the staff room. After all, I share other people's birthday treats, it would be miserly not to give one of my own. But they all know I think it nonsense to celebrate birthdays at my age.

Severus agreed. He never gave me a birthday present.

But at some point in the first week of October he would come up with a very special treat. A book I had coveted. A ticket to an exhibition I wanted to see – and he would have rearranged schedules to take over my duties that afternoon. It was always very special, and it was never for my birthday, of course – perish the thought. Severus would hand me whatever his special gift was, and he'd say, gruffly, "Because I value your friendship."

He really did make a lot of effort over the years to

show me how much he valued my friendship.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was quite surprised when I inquired about Spinner's End. I would have preferred not to mention my intention of going there, but he had the key.

Severus had kept his keys in the Headmaster's office, and after the battle Shacklebolt had taken them. He was still looking for the person who had allegedly buried Severus, and we had both decided it would be best to keep the keys at the Ministry while investigations were made concerning both his burial and his will.

By now Shacklebolt has given up on the burial, but not yet on the will, and indeed, these are no matters to rush.

I told him I had good reason to believe that a file with fairly important Hogwarts information was still at Spinner's End. I could re-assemble the information at the school, I told Shacklebolt, but it would save a great deal of time and money if the file were found.

He said he and his officers had found nothing that seemed of importance, but he offered to send someone. I told him I knew what I was looking for, and it would be more efficient if I were to go.

The news that Shacklebolt, with all his Auror experience and sharp intelligence, had found nothing was not cheering. On the one hand, the very fact that Severus had left his keys in the Headmaster's

office wasn't cheering: surely that meant that he had already taken away everything to do with the new life? Would I be able to find anything at all?

But on the other hand, Severus had left a message for me in his rooms. He must have hoped that I would go there myself. That I would spot the bottle of our last bet, because it held a special meaning for the two of us. And that I would be perspicacious enough to notice the dust, the year on the wine, the message.

Severus wants me to find him. He will have left clues at Spinner's End. I just have to be clever enough to spot them — that lack of dust was *very* subtle.

Whatever his reasons were for acting like he did, perhaps underestimating me was not one of them.

I'm back from Spinner's End, and there were, indeed, three clues. I think I may safely say that Severus did not underestimate me. They were quite hard to find, and I can see why Shacklebolt's Aurors didn't spot them.

Spinner's End is a very simple terraced workers' cottage, of the two-up, two-down type. One enters directly into the tiny sitting room, with a kitchen behind. Upstairs there are two bedrooms and an exceedingly simply shower, which may well have been a former closet converted to a bathroom in later years.

The sitting room held a sofa, an arm chair, a rickety table, and four walls of books. I understand why Severus couldn't take all his books with him — it would make it obvious that he has moved, not died.

But what a wrench this must have been for him.

I wonder whether he wants me to find him so that I can do something about his books. I've already considered the possibilities — we could ensure that a will turns up leaving the books to Hogwarts, in which case I would get my hands on them. We could make a selection of what to keep in the library and what to pass on. Much could be done that way.

If I were inclined to help him at all, which remains to be seen.

Do I mind that Severus might seek me out simply to get his books back? I've given the matter some thought. On the whole, I do not. First of all, it may not be the only reason he wants to contact me. And then, if I would find myself in exile with all my books lost to me, what would I do to get them back?

If I were living in some hidden spot, and I had to contact one person I could trust not to give me away, who would I choose? Amelia, had she lived. Or, before Albus's death, Severus. Without hesitation.

In such a situation, you choose a friend you trust with your life.

I doubt whether Severus still automatically considers me his friend after all that has happened. But it seems he does think of me as the one he can trust with his new life.

I carefully scanned the rows of books. Severus and I are both inveterate bookshelf-scanners. Whenever I visit someone, looking at what they have on their

shelves is about the first thing I want to do, and Severus is the same. We've often checked out each other's collections.

And in a little corner near the floor, half-hidden by the sofa, I found a Muggle book. It was on the fourth wall I checked. It always is. It wasn't the only Muggle work – Severus has an excellent collection of Muggle literature, and we've often borrowed books from each other. But this – a rather garish yellow paperback – stood out among the more traditional wizard bindings on that shelf.

It turned out to be a French restaurant guide from 1990, called GAULT-MILLAU. When I took it in my hands and let it fall open (there was a crack in the spine that showed it had been consulted in a precise spot quite often) it opened on the pages dealing with the Languedoc region.

Other than this, the room held no clues. The kitchen, however, did. In a cupboard I found twelve bottles of wines, all CHÂTEAU COUPE-ROSES, and the years ran chronologically from 1986 to 1996.

I proceeded upstairs. One of the two bedrooms must have been the spare one. There was a simple bed, a small, empty closet, and a chair. I wonder if anyone ever stayed there.

The other room was hardly more luxurious in its furnishings, but the bed was slightly bigger, and there was a reading light and a night-stand. On the night stand I found Rita Skeeter's biography of

Albus, a periodical on potions, and an anthology of poems by Robert Frost (this, rather poignantly, fell open at the page of *"The Road Not Taken"*).

Other than that there was nothing in the room, or so I thought at first. But then I noticed the things on the walls. There was a botanical drawing of a white lily. I had a strong feeling that it referred to Severus's past, rather than his future.

There also was a photograph in a very simple frame. It was a picture of a rock in the shape of a stele. It stands against a wall of grey stone – an old castle, or city wall, or some such – and in the top of the stele a bird is carved out. The result is a bird-shaped hole in the stone, through which one sees the sky.

The bird-shaped hole made me blink for a moment.

I knew Snape hadn't given his all in our final duel (I have *never* made the mistake of underestimating him) and I thought at the time that he was being 'chivalrous'. Make that: a stupid, stubborn, patronizing sod. And I thought – and still think – the Snape-shaped hole in the window was a ludicrously theatrical exit.

But of all the things one may call Severus Snape, 'coward' was, perhaps, not quite the *mot juste*. Even at the time I knew he was flying towards danger, not away from it.

And no, a swarm of daggers was *not* ludicrously theatrical. It was making a point. Some people are that thick-skulled one has to make one's points

quite forcefully.

The picture interested me, not just because of its artistic merit, but because I realised it was a Muggle one. Since the object was inanimate, this wasn't something I realised immediately, but when I did, I took it from the wall to examine it.

It was very small – postcard-sized. And when I removed the frame, I saw that it was, in fact, a postcard – but the description of the place had been removed. So if someone other than I would have checked, they would have found nothing.

I, however, was clearly expected to find something. And when I carried the card to the window to have better light, I did, indeed, notice an inscription on the stone. ALS CATHARS, it said.

It will not surprise you that after these finds I went to a Muggle bookshop (I was wearing Muggle clothes, since Spinner's End isn't exactly wizarding territory) and bought a map of the Languedoc as well as two guidebooks whose indexes showed a promising number of entries on Cathars.

My night stand is getting perilously crowded.

The books have been very useful, and my course of action is now clear. I think I've deciphered Severus's message.

My first step was to check the village of La Caunette on the map. It's the place mentioned on the wine bottles, and Severus clearly has been there often.

It's a tiny village, but the interesting thing is that its neighbouring village is called Minerve. There's a rather winding Muggle road connecting the two, but as the broom flies it's a very short distance. Did Severus wish me to go to the village of Minerve on my birthday? It seemed possible.

I checked both villages in the guide-books. In the first book La Caunette had one line about its 11th century church, in a section describing the far more touristic Minerve.

Minerve is listed among the most beautiful villages of France, it has various places of interest, and the guidebook mentioned a monument to the Cathars. Could this be the stele in the picture?

With the second guidebook I struck lucky. It contained a picture of the monument, and it was the stele.

This seemed to clinch matters. Clearly I was supposed to be in Minerve on my birthday. I had, however, no intention of singing to the wind. Although I once heard a Muggle song with a rather catchy tune that went, *"I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair"* and that might not be entirely inappropriate.

I realise that Severus must now live as a Muggle. Perhaps in Minerve, but La Caunette seems the better option. He wouldn't choose a tourist attraction. I've double-checked the region in a wizarding travelling guide, and the nearest wizarding establishment is at least 90 miles away, which would perfectly suit his purpose of disappearing from our

world. I have therefore decided to travel as a Muggle as well. That is to say, I plan to Apparate to a quiet spot, but I will to stay in a Muggle hotel.

And since I had Severus's Muggle hotel guide, I decided to use it – and then all became clear. For Minerve boasts a small hotel called Le Relais Chantovent.

Sing to the wind, Minerve.

I've booked a room for three nights starting October 3rd.

In one of the Miss Marple stories she has to travel to a niece's house to solve a murder. She says, "I put Clara [her maid] on board wages, I sent the silver to the bank, and I set off at once." I have always been fascinated by these glimpses of every day Muggle life, and the Miss Marple books are a goldmine of such details.

Of course I realise the information is dated; a present-day Miss Marple could no more afford a maid than I will be able to afford a House Elf on my retirement pension. But sending the silver to the bank – of course. That's what one does when one can't put up protective spells.

There is also a mention somewhere about a girl who "really is a very reliable maid, for she could be trusted to turn the mattresses every day, *except on Fridays, of course*". [My italics] Do Muggles turn their mattresses every day? Or did they in Miss Marple's time? How utterly amazing. On the rare occasions I make my own bed, without daily mattress-turning even though I *can* use a wand, I always wonder about those Fridays. Why not on Fridays? The author doesn't explain, so clearly it's obvious to Muggles.

But I digress. As Miss Marple made her preparations for travel, so did I. To Poppy Pomfrey I mentioned feeling a bit drawn and tired. I told Pomona how I hated the idea of birthday celebrations, this year more than ever, with the losses of the battle such a short time behind us. (That is true; I wouldn't dream of using those who fell as a mere excuse.) And, last but not least, I told Filius how pleased I am with the way he does the Deputy work, and that I have complete confidence in him. True also.

Then I waited for the right moment. One evening before the staff went in to dinner I was talking to Pomona when Poppy passed by. I included her in the conversation, and mentioned how very tired I felt.

"You should have a little break," said Poppy. "You didn't get any holiday at all, what with the reconstruction work."

"Excellent idea," seconded Pomona. "Why don't you go away for your birthday? Solve two problems in a single wand-flick." She then explained to Poppy how I hated the birthday idea.

"Do you think Filius might... " I hesitated.

"Of course," said Pomona; she called him to our little group, and the matter was arranged within minutes. I told them I might go to a Muggle hotel, so as not to run into old students, or worse, parents

who'd want to consult me on their off-spring.

They all thought it a marvellous idea, and Filius felt quite confident about taking over for a few days. That was the staff sorted out.

I packed a small travel bag, put in these notes and copies of my clues, and locked the originals in a highly-warded cupboard.

I then Apparated to a spot just outside the village of Minerve, waited until the queasiness of long-distance Apparition had passed, and looked for the hotel. It was fairly easy to find.

When I arrived at the hotel, the owner looked up the reservation and told me that 'everything was in order, and the bill for my room all paid, of course.'

I had not paid anything at all. Nor had I told anyone at Hogwarts about Relais Chantovent. However, it didn't take a Miss Marple to solve the mystery.

Severus!

Damn him.

I had planned *words* for our first meeting, and now the first of those words would have to be 'thanks'.

So I went to my room and, quite determinedly, I did what tourists do: I refreshed myself after the journey, I changed, and I took my guide book out of my suitcase. I felt certain that Severus would contact me at the hotel, and I felt equally certain it would do him all the good in the world not to find me there. Let him wait.

I selected clothes he would not associate with me,

so that he wouldn't spot me easily in the street. A navy turtleneck, a quilted jacket, and especially a pair of blue jeans are completely inconspicuous and quite unlike anything he has ever seen me in. And I put my hair in a braid. I *never* let my hair down during the day, and I haven't worn braids since I was sixteen. That detail, more than anything, will make him look straight past the elderly jeans-clad Muggle woman clutching her Baedeker.

I set off to explore the village, a very pretty one, indeed. I strolled through the quaint old streets, I went to see the monument Als Cathars, which is touching and beautiful in its very simplicity, and I visited the museum dedicated to the life and death of the Cathars. It was a sobering experience to learn more of these people.

Before I started to investigate Severus's clues, I had never heard of them. But the tiny museum I visited really brought to life those Cathars, who called themselves Christians; yet Christians burned them at the stake.

When I left the museum, I almost regretted not having brought a camera. The village street was truly beautiful, and a small boy — why wasn't he in school on a weekday, I wondered — took pictures with a Muggle camera and a complete disregard for composition. Colin Creevey would have done better.

Colin Creevey, who had called himself a wizard; yet wizards had killed him.

The Wizarding world still both celebrates its victory and commemorates its losses with the words *"Never again."* I now hear the *Never Again* for the third time in my life. And the more I learn of history, the more I know it's *always*.

It was only when I saw a patisserie advertising 'hot chocolate' that I realised how cold I was. Cold to the bone, on a mellow October day in a sunny French street.

I went in, ordered a cup, and treated myself to a slice of *tarte aux pommes* as well. It was, after all, almost my birthday.

Had I stayed at Hogwarts, there would inevitably have been people – kind people, such as Aurora or Poppy, people one doesn't want to *snub* – who would say something along the lines of 'it's truly a *free* world now that You-Know-Who is dead – such a wonderful day.'

But I've heard the *never again* too often. Much better to sit in a French pâtisserie and munch a slice of apple pie that strikes just the right balance between sweet and tart.

A few days away from the Wizarding world, at this very moment, was exactly what I had craved.

Without knowing it.

Looking out over the beautiful landscape I began to understand that, once again, in the week of my birthday Severus has given me a very special treat.

Because he still values my friendship?

When I returned to the hotel, the owner handed me an envelope which, he told me, had been delivered in my absence. I took it to my room and studied it.

It was a plain white envelope, addressed to *Madame McGonagall*. It contained a letter on Muggle paper, written with what I think is called a ballpoint.

It was a long letter, and that pleased me. It meant that Severus had written it beforehand, and that he had not come to the hotel to meet me but merely to leave this message.

When I found out he had paid for my room, I felt that he was trying to dictate the terms of our meeting. But with this letter he surrendered himself to my decision. The choice between responding and ignoring him would be mine, and mine alone.

Here is what it said.

Dear Minerva,

Every time I dusted that bottle of Château Coupe-roses, I hoped that one day you would go to my rooms. That you would go there not to clear them out, but to see whether I had left a message for you.

I trusted that if you did, you would spot the bottle of our last bet, and you'd notice the incongruous dust-free bottle.

Yes, I'm still alive.

Obviously.

Years ago, when I realised Albus had been right that at some point we would have to fight the Dark Lord again, I

bought a small house in the village of La Caunette.

I knew I'd have but a small chance to survive the second fight. I also knew that if we would win, my position in our world would be... ambiguous. I might be condemned as a war criminal and sent to Azkaban. While there would be a certain poetic justice in being sent down for what I didn't do, whereas in 1981 I stayed out despite of what I did, I was unwilling to risk it.

So I bought myself a little bolt-hole.

Recently, to be precise shortly before Albus died, I was made to realise there was a second possibility: that I might be considered some sort of hero. I also learned it would be necessary for me to stay alive until Potter had received some vital intelligence. If a man must do everything he can to stay alive long enough, there's a serious risk he'll stay alive, period.

That was when I started preparing for my disappearance in earnest. I removed all traces of my Muggle life — the deeds of my house, my Muggle bank statements, and all correspondence — to La Caunette. All I left behind was the Gault-Millau and the postcard.

I knew you'd never be able to resist a proper scan of my bookshelves.

Now you are here. It fills me with the hope that you may want to listen to what I have to say. Then again, you might just want to kick my arse up and down the street. It's a chance I must take. If the worst comes to the worst, I can

defend myself better than I did in that duel. Even against such a Gryffindor extravaganza as fifty daggers.

But then, if you had truly duelled to kill, I would have ended up as Snape Tartare and you wouldn't be here reading my letter.

You probably think I was an idiot not to trust you. You may think I betrayed our friendship as well, but there you will be able to come up with a logical reason. When it comes to not taking you into my confidence, things are different.

What if the Dark Lord had used an Aveda Kedavra?

Disaster, that's what.

Would you have had the chance to go to my room? To find the dusted bottle? To go to Spinner's End?

Most likely not.

If you had, you would have found one thing more than you did now. You would have found a key. To my house in La Caunette. There, you would have found two wills, one for my Muggle and one for my Wizarding goods. All of which I've left to you. And you would have found a letter with full information.

Too little, too late.

It wasn't because I didn't trust you. It wasn't because I underestimated you. Please — I'm not that much of an idiot.

It was because I knew you're a better person than I. There was no point in telling you just that I was still on our side. That would merely have been a needless risk. What I should

have done is tell you all. Ensure back up. But I was afraid that if I did...

When Albus told me what I had to do for the greater good, I nearly refused. And I don't mean killing him. What would you have done? Would you have tried to stop me?

If we would ever truly duel to kill, I wouldn't want to bet as much as a Butterbeer on the outcome. Leave alone the future of the Wizarding world.

I hope you will allow me to explain and apologise in person. At the bottom of this letter you'll find my full address. I'll be at home all day tomorrow.

If you decide not to come, I hope you will still accept the little gift of the hotel room. It's not a birthday gift, of course. This year especially you wouldn't want to celebrate.

But I thought you'd like a few days away. Please allow me to offer you that – because I value your friendship.

Severus

I will go, of course. I will listen.

I'd made that decision quite some time ago. Was it when I saw that lonely tumbler? When I struggled with that cryptic message and knew Severus never doubted I would find the answer? Or when I was reminded of my not-for-your-birthday presents?

I don't know. But I do want to hear what he has to say for himself.

Mind, I'm not sure about that 'better person'

argument. I'm not saying I'm not a better person – I have done things in my life that I now deeply regret, and they've enabled me to relate to Severus's regrets, but I've never screwed up so dramatically as he did when he joined the Death Eaters.

Severus writes that what he should have done is tell me all. Indeed, so he should. *But I was afraid that if I did...*, he says. I think he was afraid that if he had told me all about the way Harry Potter would be led as a lamb to the slaughter, I would have tried to stop him.

And I might have done just that. With the benefit of hindsight, it's very easy to say that everything ended well, that Potter had to go through his ordeal. Given the results, Potter would be the first to admit that the walk towards what he thought was death was a price he was willing to pay. Not a small price – never that. But, given the final result, it was worth it.

But at the time, I might well have said that no Greater Good is worth the ruthless killing of an innocent and very courageous young man. If we had stood by and had done nothing to prevent that murder, if we had used Potter as a blood sacrifice for our own sake – then how would we have differed from *them?*

The eternal problem of every war, of course. What is, in fact, the difference between 'us' and 'them'? A cynic would say 'us' is the side that wins.

I don't think I could have used Potter as wand-fodder. Not even as final weapon.

If I am correct in my surmise, Severus's reason-

ing contains a hint of 'she's a woman, they are the gentle sex, she wouldn't be ruthless enough'. Unconsciously, perhaps, but still there.

Severus admits he's uncertain of the outcome of a real duel — he doesn't underestimate me there. Of course he doesn't. He's a survivor; he wouldn't be alive today if he couldn't assess a risk.

But what he very much *doesn't* admit, and probably doesn't even *consider* is the possibility that I might have been right.

He doesn't seem to doubt that stopping me would have been the correct action — that I would *have* to be stopped because I simply *couldn't* be right.

Men. As I used to say to Amelia, sometimes... but you know that already.

But this time, when we meet, I'll think before I speak. This time I'll listen. After all, one does not just love one's friends for their good points.

And I think he'll listen, too. It may be an interesting birthday, tomorrow. In terms of truly meaningful events, perhaps the most interesting since the day I actually was born.

Not that I'm sentimental enough to consider an eventual rekindling of our friendship as a birthday gift. Silly nonsense. But I did — and I do — value that friendship.

And that, dear imaginary reader, is the end of my investigation. Now that I have Severus's full address and will meet him tomorrow, my Miss Marple activities have come to an end. I think I acquitted myself

with reasonable honour. It's really too bad I can't publish The Case of the Living Portrait. But who knows? Miss Marple solved at least twenty crimes. Perhaps one day Minerva McGonagall, Spinster Detective, will get another case, and then I *will* turn it into a book.

Minerva McGonagall: Spinster Detective

The Case of the Cat Show Corruption

Argus Filch was grumpy, irritated, and bad-humoured.

As I write this line, I realise that readers of this tale would probably think he must have been having a good day, then. Where's the story in a grumpy Filch?

Not that I have any readers, of course. These notes are not written with publication in mind – there is a market for mystery stories, but editors do expect a certain body count in the manuscripts submitted to them. In the few little mysteries I have solved, bodies were sadly lacking. In the only case where I had a corpse in chapter one, it sprang to life again in chapter two. Most disappointing. For readers, I mean. The body in question was quite happy that it was alive. So was I, eventually.

But if I had readers, I would point out to them that Argus Filch was grumpy and bad-humoured after a Board Meeting, and he loves Board Meeting Days. He is the only one at Hogwarts who does. They make him feel important, a result of Albus's excellent people skills. Albus always asked Argus to prepare the Board Room – clean it, set out cups

and saucers, and align the chairs and such. Argus took great pride in this job and in the fact that he, rather than the House Elves, was deemed trustworthy enough to do it. "Me and the Headmaster have everything ready," he used to assure me.

When I became Headmistress, I naturally kept this arrangement. Argus does an excellent job, and there was no reason for change. Therefore, the day after a Board Meeting we get the closest thing to a cheerful, smiling Argus Filch that one can expect to see in this life.

But after last week's Board Meeting Argus was very much out of sorts. When several days of grumpiness had passed, I felt the problem needed addressing. I therefore started my day with a few necessary tasks, then I did a few not very urgent ones, then I had coffee, and then I had reached the stage where further procrastination would enter the realm of neglecting one's duties. So I set off to listen to what I expected to be a long rant on How the Whole World is Against the Working Class Man.

The story I heard left me gasping in surprise. A crime has been committed against Argus – or rather, against Mrs Norris. Perhaps 'crime' is not the correct legal term. Perhaps I ought to use the words *misdemeanour* or *unlawful action*. But whatever the correct word may be, I think what was done to Mrs Norris was a very *wicked* deed.

An investigation, therefore, is in order.

I have by now some little experience in detective

work, so my first action was to take out a small, leather-covered notebook for my notes on the case. Scrivenshaft's has an excellent range, and I always order a dozen in different colours at the start of the school year – they are uncommonly handy for other things than crimes as well.

I will now outline the basic information in The Case of the Cat Show Corruption. Yes, that title is rather ludicrously alliterative, but right now I don't have a better one. As a working title it will do.

Here is what Argus told me, in a slightly more coherent and chronological order.

Board Meeting Day had passed without a hitch, as usual, and Argus had done his normal duties. He had not noticed anything strange during the day.

He had assumed that Mrs Norris, too, has spent her usual Board Meeting Day – not at Argus's heels, where she likes to be, for Madam Muriel Prewett, one of our oldest, most venerable [and most annoying – my opinion, not Argus's] members, is allergic to cats. Mrs Norris therefore spends Board Meeting Day either roaming the grounds in fair weather, or on foul days curled up on a hearth rug in Argus's rooms.

However, when Argus went to look for her at the end of the day, he couldn't find her. He checked every likely spot in the castle and the grounds. He then went to the gates to check whether she had gone into Hogsmeade. This would have been most

unusual, but by then Argus was at his wits' end. A condition he tends to reach fairly quickly, true, but he was right that Mrs Norris seldom goes off alone.

Near the gates he heard her mewling. He called, she mewled louder, and he rushed towards the sound, and found her tied to an Elder tree. And someone had *shaved* her – there were two large, bald patches on her skin. It had been done carefully, and she hadn't come to any further harm. By the time Argus found her, she had already made quite some progress in biting through the rope that tied her; another hour at the most and she would have been able to set herself free.

Now, this might sound like the kind of thing a student would do. Mrs Norris is not uniformly popular, and students often do have *completely* misguided ideas on what is an acceptable prank and what is not.

But this week's Meeting was the one at the end of the Summer Term, and the vacation had already begun. Therefore, my first words were, "But who can have done this? It can't have been a student."

It was then that Argus made his startling revelations.

It appears that on his days off he likes to visit Muggle Cat Shows. For years he just went as a spectator and enjoyed the sight of beautiful cats and the company of fellow cat-lovers. But six years ago he came into a tiny inheritance – left to him by an aunt 'because he is a poor, helpless Squib'.

In Argus's own words, he weren't poor or helpless. He were underpaid, but he weren't some poor

beggar. He were going enjoy the money, in a way the old besom would proper hate. He were going to join a Muggle Cat show – as a competitor.

Since, according to Argus, the old aunt disliked both cats and Muggles, this seemed a suitable revenge. Argus bought himself a cheap Muggle suit and some stationery and entered Mrs Norris in the Household Pet category.

"And she won, the little beauty!" he said – and now I know what a real smile looks like on Argus's face.

This first Cat Show had been a small village affair. Argus didn't know how Mrs Norris would like it, and he is one of the few Squibs who live completely in the Wizarding world. He was concerned about his own ability to perform in a Muggle event as well.

But both Argus and Mrs Norris took to their new parts with panache, and after that first show they went from strength to strength. This year, Argus has entered Mrs Norris for what seems to be the most prestigious event of all: the Supreme Cat Show. This show is held annually in November, and Mrs Norris has been entered in the Supreme Household Pet category.

In order to compete, she needed a winning certificate from another show, and the two of them had achieved that as early as March. Argus had planned to enter another show this month as well, one he and Mrs Norris both love and attend annually. This show took place two days ago, but Mrs Norris, with her shaven skin, was obviously in no position to participate.

And now Argus is convinced someone has 'nobbled' Mrs Norris.

To be more precise: he is convinced Lucius Malfoy has nobbled Mrs Norris.

It was at this point in his narrative that I gasped in surprise. I don't know what struck me as more outrageous, the idea that Lucius Malfoy participated in Muggle Cat Shows, or that his pet was entered in the Household category rather than a pedigree one. The idea of Lucius 'nobbling' an animal was actually the least unbelievable of the three.

But, unlikely as it may seem, Argus's story does stand up to scrutiny.

First of all, the cat that won the show is the property of Stan Shunpike. Stan Shunpike is the driver of the Knight Bus, and I was sincerely pleased when he applied for that job shortly after leaving Hogwarts. I recommended him at the Ministry, for I knew he would enjoy driving the bus and do it well enough. I also knew there was little else he was suited to. There was no problem with the boy's magic; he's not a borderline Squib at all – it's just that he was and is singularly stupid. The most taxing part for him would be to give people the correct amount of change.

During the Voldemort period Stan was sent to Azkaban. This was an act of gross injustice on two counts. First, he had not done enough to deserve Azkaban. And, second, it was perfectly clear that he barely understood what had happened and that he

had merely done what others told him.

Argus and Stan have always got on well, ever since Stan's Hogwarts days. Stan often felt 'the stupid one' in a class full of brighter children. Unfortunately, that's exactly what he was. Hogwarts selects its students on magical ability, and while the very clever ones usually manage to find their way, the very stupid ones have a difficult time of it. Had he been a Squib, his parents might have managed to find him a Muggle Special Needs school, where he could have learned at his own speed.

As it stood, we teachers all tried to make the best of things. It was Filius who had come up with the idea to let Stan help Argus occasionally. It was a task he could do well, and it made him feel valued.

And while none of us ever openly admitted it, Argus, too, benefited from being with a wizard boy whom he could mentor, since poor Stan was clueless on just about anything.

Argus told me that during the last weeks of his stay in Azkaban Stan met Draco Malfoy. A friendship had sprung up. The way Argus told it, the idea was not as unlikely as it seems.

"Stan were friendly to Draco," he explained. "Stan doesn't judge people. Mind you, Professor, I think that's mostly because he hasn't got no brains to be judgmental with.

"There's a lot of talk on how Draco is a criminal and should 'ave known better. Well, on the one hand, he

should. He did wicked and wrong things. But his parents brought 'im up to believe all that Pureblood stuff. And it seems to me that we mostly whine that kids don't respect their parents' ideas. And now that we have a kid as did respect them, we whine again. I'm not saying Malfoy was right. I'm saying I can see how he got in with the Death Eaters – being the sort of kid as admires his father. And then it exploded in his face.

"Now, Stan wouldn't have thinkety thoughts like that. He were friendly, and Draco were friendly back. And then, when the Malfoys were released from prison, Stan got invited to the Manor. In a proper tizz he were about that. I helped him clean hisself up. And told him which fork to use. And what a napkin is for. After all, I've seen more of the world than young Stan.

"Being with Draco was all right – they liked each other. But Stan was scared stiff of Mr and Mrs Malfoy. But in the end it were all right. You see, Mrs Malfoy has always had cats. Long-haired Persians. Pedigree, of course. You won't find no half-blood things in that household. But while they were in prison, the Ministry used the Manor. So when they got home the house were filthy, the garden were a mess, and the cat were up the spout.

"She had her kittens that night. And Stan, he loves cats, Stan does, he helped with the delivery. One kitten were still-born. The other was all right – but useless in a household that breeds pedigrees, of course.

"Stan told how he loved cats, and how his own cat

had died when he were in Azkaban. Cried when he told that story. And Mrs Malfoy said, would he like the kitten. Stan said yes, and everyone was pleased as punch. Draco and Stan are still friendly and he eats at the Manor from time to time – because they all love cats. And they're really nice, Stan says.

"Well, Professor, the whole point with Stan is that he is so easily taken in by bad friends. That's how he got into Azkaban in the first place.

"I say they gave him that kitten so that they could enter it in Muggle shows. Not for the prize money, that ain't nothing, but because Muggles take bets on anything. I know; I read Muggle papers sometimes. Last time they had a Royal baby, they even took bets on the name of the little nipper. *Jason* some people betted on, but it weren't that, of course. I remember the name: Harry. Like our Harry.

"Anyhow, I dare say Lucius Malfoy wants to make a lot of money betting on the results of the Supreme Cat Show. And he needs to get his cat in. So he nobbled Mrs Norris to keep her out of last week's show – now his cat is qualified, and if Mrs Norris had competed, she would have won.

"And I know he'll try to get at her again before November. Or maybe he didn't just shave her – maybe there's spells as stop her fur from growing back. Do you think he might have done that, Professor? He's a right bastard. Sorry for speaking plainly, but he is."

I immediately promised Argus I'd set up an appoint-

ment for him with Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, which reassured him fully. He knows Professor Grubbly-Plank from her spells as a teacher here, and he knows she's an exceedingly capable woman who will have Mrs Norris all right again in no time.

And I promised Argus I would set up a full investigation, as well. I think that Lucius has got away with far too much already – Shacklebolt is the best Minister we've had in decades, but I don't agree with *everything* he does. Reconciliation is all very well, but there are times when retribution is in order.

If I find that Lucius Malfoy has nobbled Mrs Norris, I have no intention of letting him get away with it.

Tying her to a tree, indeed!

So, let us examine the current list of suspects.

Lucius Malfoy had the opportunity, for he is on the Hogwarts Board again as a result of one of the Ministry's many Reconciliation projects. He had been at Hogwarts that day.

If Argus's theory is correct, Lucius also has a handy scapegoat in case things go wrong – a very Malfoy thing to have. As crimes go, this is in character.

The one thing that still baffles me is motive. For I really cannot believe that whatever bets are made on the results of a cat show would offer sufficient financial inducement for Lucius Malfoy. He needs money for the restoration of the Manor, true. But I have a strong feeling this would not even get him

enough to restore the front door.

On the other hand, there's Stan Shunpike. He has a motive, if he is fanatical about his cat winning the contest. Argus claims the lad would never do such a thing, but Argus is prejudiced in his favour.

But Stan Shunpike most assuredly is *not* on the Hogwarts Board; he had no opportunity.

Unless he took a day off from work and went to the Castle, of course. This must be checked.

I have asked Argus whether he could think of any other suspects, and he told me the only one "what fair hates Mrs Norris, 'cos she never wins when we compete" is a Mrs Cavendish. Her cat has not qualified for the Supreme Cat Show – in fact, if Stan hadn't entered his cat, Mrs Norris's absence would probably have meant a winner's certificate for Mrs Cavendish.

But Mrs Cavendish is a Muggle – she would not be able to find Hogwarts, nor could she enter it.

It seems the culprit must be found in the Wizarding world, and despite the lack of convincing motives, Lucius Malfoy is a suspect.

I do want to have more information on Stan and Mrs Cavendish, though.

In the past two days, I made some progress in my investigations.

Stan Shunpike was on duty on Board Meeting Day, from 9 AM until 6 PM. The Department for Magical Transport confirmed this. The information was

easy to obtain; I have spent more than half a century teaching young witches and wizards, and the convenient result is that the Wizarding world is full of people who are in the habit of answering when I ask a question. Some still haven't lost the habit of blushing when the answer is, "I don't know, Professor".

As to Mrs Cavendish, Argus told me there is another Cat Show coming up. Normally Mrs Cavendish does not go there. She is a snob, according to Argus, and this show does not attract 'her kind of people'. But now that her cat hasn't qualified for the Supreme Show yet, there's every chance that she will attend.

Therefore, so will I. I have donned a Muggle outfit, Argus has checked that it's the kind of thing Muggle ladies wear to such an event, and I'm all ready for Apparition. Argus will not come with me. He was perfectly willing to show me around, and he could have given me valuable background information. But we have decided it's too great a risk. If, in some mysterious way, Mrs Cavendish is involved, she will not expect to see Argus at today's show – so she must not see him.

What a thoroughly disagreeable woman this Mrs Cavendish is!

I managed to locate her fairly quickly at the Cat Show – Argus has a certain pithy way of describing people. "Dresses as if she's the Muggle Queen, only the Queen knows how to smile, and Mrs Cavendish looks like she's pissing vinegar," he told me, and

true enough, there was a lady in a sedate pastel-coloured suit, complete with court shoes and a pearl necklace. And with a facial expression that fully justified the last part of Argus's description.

Several people greeted her – but she barely nodded, except to one or two people whose style of dress clearly exuded wealth. And she used the word 'common' in almost every other sentence, and very loudly, too. The stands were common, the tea was common, and her fellow competitors were common.

I was sorely tempted to say that of all things common this kind of behaviour takes the biscuit. But I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, so I restrained myself.

Arguably the only thing more common than calling things 'common' is making disparaging remarks to one's partner in public. It's why I have never been able to warm to Molly Weasley, fellow Order member though she is. The things she says to Arthur – in the presence of others, and sometimes even in the presence of their children!

The reason I mention this is that Mrs Cavendish is the Muggle equivalent of Molly in the way she treats her husband. From what I gathered, Mr Cavendish – I might have to call him 'Professor' Cavendish, even – is a lecturer at a Muggle university. His subject is Medieval History.

I overheard Mrs Cavendish talk to a friend in the tea tent, and she complained that 'poor' Lionel never made it to a proper university like Oxford or Cam-

bridge; that he spends all his time with his 'musty old books', and that his own books are 'so boring they're musty and old from the moment they're printed, aren't they, darling?' Followed by the kind of tinkling laugh that reminded me of Dolores Umbridge.

I warmed to Professor Cavendish at once. (I don't know if this is his title, but he deserves respect, if only for not murdering that woman.) His subject interests me, and I love old books. And he looked attractive – in an ugly way. Tall, thin, with sharp features – not conventionally handsome, but an intelligent face.

Now that I think of it, he vaguely reminded me of Severus Snape. That's why I liked his face. Severus lives in France these days, and I usually spend part of the holiday with him. We have been very good friends for many years now.

He will enjoy the story of this investigation, and he will enjoy it even more if I fail – he always claims I'm not a proper detective, since I can only detect things when people intentionally leave clues for me, as he did when he wanted me to find his little bolting hole in France.

Severus's claim is completely unjustified, of course. I did solve a mystery where no-one left clues, as I often point out to him. Severus's reaction is that in that case the culprit was Mundungus Fletcher, and whenever a petty crime is committed, going after Mundungus almost guarantees success. A reasoning that shows that one can take the man

out of Slytherin, but one can't take Slytherin out of the man. I will succeed in solving this case, and I shall look forward to some quiet gloating.

But to return to Professor Cavendish, first impressions are not entirely reliable. A few minutes later Cavendish took his leave of the ladies because he had to meet an acquaintance. "Another old book?" complained his wife. "You spend far too much on them! Really, if I didn't stop you half the time... "

This, however, was an occasion where the Professor wouldn't let anything stop him, he said cheerfully. "I've had a longing for a Malleus Maleficarum for years, and this is too good a chance to miss."

Ghastly book, that MALLEUS. And not just a ghastly book, but one that caused untold sufferings. Torture, death, the Statute of Secrecy – that book was at the bottom of so much misery.

But, of course, the fact that Cavendish wanted to buy it didn't mean he believes every word. His interest might have been purely scholarly, and I didn't condemn him outright. The presence of a MALLEUS at a Muggle cat show, however, seemed highly suspicious. I therefore decided to shadow the man.

The result was above expectations.

For whom did Cavendish seek out? None other than Lucius Malfoy. There he stood, on the edge of the show ground, in a very sleek Muggle outfit, his hair in a ponytail – every inch the mildly-eccentric Muggle aristocrat.

I disappeared at once. The risk of Lucius recogniz-

ing me was far too great. And I had what I wanted: an astonishing amount of information.

There is a link between Lucius Malfoy and Muggle cat shows.

There *is* a link between Lucius Malfoy and the one Muggle who might harm Mrs Norris.

And while the MALLEUS hardly qualifies as a book on witchcraft, there is a very feeble link between witchcraft and the Cavendishes.

I cannot ignore Lucius Malfoy as a suspect any longer. My first task tomorrow will be to find out everything there is to find about his movements on Board Meeting Day.

I will start by interviewing Augusta Longbottom. She is razor-sharp and very observant. And she's fanatically opposed to having Lucius on the Board – she watches him like a hawk.

Or rather, like a vulture – I must admit I can't resist the pun.

I may have been a bit hasty when I decided to go and interview Augusta. What will I tell her? What I want to know is easy enough: what did Lucius do, and was he in sight of others at all times? But I can't just go to Augusta and blurt out these questions. I'm not an Auror, and this isn't a formal investigation.

And Augusta loves a good rumour. What if Lucius Malfoy is innocent after all? Nothing has changed about his lack of a good motive. If I go around

asking questions about him, people – Augusta especially – will gossip. He would be accused unjustly, and I would make a fool of myself. I ought to mind the first part more, but in all honesty I'm more concerned about the second.

Now, how would my great detective example, Miss Jane Marple, deal with this?

She would go and have an innocent chat, that's what she would do. And her 'cover', if that is the term, would be that she looks like a vague elderly dear who is chatty by nature and just a bit lonely.

Unfortunately, Augusta knows me only too well. The only word in that description she would fully agree with is 'elderly', since I am the older by three months. In a moment of youthful foolishness, during my year as a Prefect, I've once advanced those three months as an argument as to why I was wise enough to see that a certain prank would land Gussie in trouble. She did not listen – when did Gussie ever listen to words of wisdom? – And she pulled it off after all. Naturally, she has never allowed me to forget it and frequently tells me that 'at my advanced age' I may well be unable to do or understand things.

Now, what kind of excuse could I use to approach Augusta? Not Neville – he is doing perfectly well. It was an excellent decision to make him Head of Gryffindor.

A school-related issue? But Augusta knows there's nothing urgent to discuss after the last Board Meeting, even if she didn't take any notes on account of her hand.

That's it! Her hand! She had sprained a wrist — her wand-arm, too. It was bandaged, and I shall drop by as a Concerned Friend. If need be, I shall be a Ministering Angel, even.

Perfect. Off I go. Minerva McGonagall, Spinster Detective, has found a way yet again.

Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Severus.

The plot thickens. My visit to Augusta has brought all sorts of new information. The Concerned Friend ploy worked like a Charm — considerably better than Augusta's Charms ever worked, I might add. There was no need for her to be quite so surprised that I have it in me to be a concerned friend, but she never doubted my motive for visiting her.

We spoke briefly of the arm, exchanged some useful background information on Muriel Prewett's attitude during the last Board Meeting. Yes, one might call that 'gossip'. But it was useful information, and besides, any gossiping I did was for a good cause.

And then I mentioned Lucius. Augusta's dislike for him proved ideal for my purpose. She immediately started to complain that Lucius took no interest at all in Hogwarts.

This was completely untrue, and Augusta based it on the fact that he did not join the Board when they went to inspect Pomona's new walled herb garden. I had not even noticed that Lucius stayed behind; I was busy talking to Muriel Prewett. And

later, when we were in the grounds, I spent my time guiding Mrs Creevey.

On the one hand, it is one of the better Post-War notions to have parents of Muggleborn children on the Board. They do trust their children to our care. And no-one has greater rights to a Board seat than Mrs Creevey, who had the great courage to let Dennis stay on at Hogwarts, even after Colin's death.

On the other hand, though, it is a great responsibility for us — getting them a suitable form of magical transport, and ensuring no harm comes to them at the Castle. I'll never forget the terrifying moment when one of the stairs moved suddenly and Mrs Creevey didn't notice. A student — everyone at Hogwarts — watches the stairs when they mount them; it's automatic. When Kingsley and I did a risk assessment beforehand, we never even thought of those moving stairs. All went well, thank heavens, but I nearly had a heart failure in the process.

Therefore I had all my attention on Mrs Creevey, but Augusta had noticed that Lucius stayed behind.

"Well, he's not a very outdoorsy sort of person," I said. "And Pomona dislikes him cordially and openly; in staying away he spared us all the tension and barbed remarks his present would have caused."

"Exactly. Pomona is always so spot-on when she criticizes him. I had looked forward to those remarks. And he can be outdoorsy if he wants to — I saw him cross the lawn. I dare say he took himself

off to The Three Broomsticks for a quickie."

"You saw him go towards the gate?" I asked. I wanted to be quite certain of the facts. A detective must never assume nor put words in people's mouths. "Surely not to go to Rosmerta's? Quite frankly, the sherry we serve you before lunch is of better quality. As Lucius well knows – he drinks enough of it."

Augusta grinned. "Aye, he can put it away. And stay perfectly in control, too. He's a bastard, but he's what my father would have called 'a real gentleman', too. Not that Papa ever managed to look beyond the ability to put away drink, fight a duel, and wear dress robes elegantly, more's the pity."

"Quite," I said quickly. I wasn't interested in a repeat of the long story of how Augusta married her poor-but-pureblood Frank despite violent opposition of her family, and how that proves she is completely unprejudiced.

Augusta was without prejudice on exactly one occasion, and no-one has ever been able to repeat the experiment. Every true scientist knows what this means.

"But that Lucius was making off towards the gates. Maybe the quickie he wanted didn't come from a bottle?" said Augusta. She positively cackled over this idea, and in the cause of a greater good I may have cackled a bit as well.

"Mind, there's one thing to say for the man, he's not a groper like his father," added Augusta. "Abraxas was dreadful. And that's the kind of fella

my father wanted me to marry, can you imagine?"

I was in for the Romance of the Century after all. The details about Abraxas at the Summer Hunt Ball of 1946 were fun, though. And we had a good laugh about my own Groping Abraxas story. Unlike a good wine, but much like Augusta herself, Abraxas had not improved with age, and when I started teaching in 1956 he was already a member of the Board.

New teachers are introduced to the Board Members during the Board lunch, and Abraxas didn't miss a moment. A very smooth groper he was – just a touch, highly satisfying to him, no doubt, but not something for which you could actually call him to order. Not without being seen as 'prudish' or 'hysterical'. The first time even I wondered whether it was groping or an accident.

The second time I knew.

And had my wand ready.

The sparks hit him squarely on the toes of his elegant boots, and he yelped. Albus noticed and asked him what was wrong.

"I'm afraid it's my fault, Sir," I said demurely. "Mr Malfoy touched me accidentally, and I got startled."

"You had better be careful with that," sneered Abraxus. "Professor Dumbledore wouldn't want a Member of the Board to get injured by a junior teacher, now, would he?"

"Indeed, I would not," agreed Albus. "I would hate to see a badly injured member. Or, Merlin forbid, a

permanently incapacitated *member*. And that might so easily happen, for when my young teachers get startled, I tend to get startled, too. Now it was your toes. Who knows where *my* wand might hit you?"

Augusta loved the story. She has always admired Albus, and this certainly was one of his better moments. We chatted some more, but I got no other information — that is to say, nothing pertaining to the Case of the Cat Show Corruption. There were, of course, other interesting matters we discussed.

After an hour or so I took my leave. "Do you need anything — from Hogsmeade, say?" I asked as I gathered my things. "It won't be easy to Apparate with that arm of yours. How did you even manage to get to the meeting, you poor dear?" I added for good measure. Every inch the concerned friend.

"I took the Knight Bus," said Augusta. "And I must say young Shunpike did a fairly decent job. None of that crazy driving, and he offered his arm to help me in and out. Not that I needed that. I'm still young enough to manage with one arm. Truly, dear, it's incredibly kind of you to come and see me, but someone *my age* isn't helpless because of a sprain, you know."

I ignored the at-your-advanced-age remark. "You took the Knight Bus?" I said. "I'm glad to hear Stan did well. I once recommended him for that job. Keeps him quite busy, and he likes travelling up and down the country. Where did he go next?"

"Nowhere," said Augusta. "I was the only passenger, and he said he'd take his coffee break at Rosmerta's, now that it was quiet. I liked that too in the lad. Shows a proper concern for his employer's interests, to take a break when it fits in with work, not when he's 'entitled'."

And that bit of information puts Stan Shunpike right on the spot, and with a bit of free time in which to commit the deed.

And I now also know that Lucius Malfoy was seen near the gates, or at least, going in the direction of the gates. To Rosmerta's? I doubt it.

Still, I think a visit to The Three Broomsticks is in order.

"Morning, Headmistress, that's a rare treat for you," said Rosmerta as I entered. It was very perceptive of her; strolling through Hogsmeade on a midweek morning is a pleasure I cannot often indulge in during term time. Sitting down for a leisurely coffee is an even rarer treat.

I had timed my arrival carefully, and there was no-one else in the pub. I inquired after Rosmerta's vacation plans, and we chatted a bit on the delights of Dublin, where she wants to spend a few days.

I had planned to bring the subject to chance meetings with former students during one's vacation, a thing that happens to Rosmerta almost as frequently as to me. From there I hoped to introduce Stan Shunpike into the conversation.

But I was lucky. Rosmerta herself brought him up. "Did you see Stan Shunpike last week?" she asked. "He was here – or was it the week before that? Time flies, doesn't it?"

I agreed that time did, and added that I hadn't seen Mr Shunpike. Had he been around, then? Rosmerta said that he had, and he had set out to visit me. What a pity I had missed him!

I mentioned the Board Meeting as the only day on which he might, indeed, not have been able to see me, had he come to Hogwarts. A bit of quick thinking on Rosmerta's part, and she agreed that Board Meeting Day it had been, "for he came here on account of how Mrs Longbottom needed the Knight Bus. Had hurt her arm, Stan said. Nothing serious, I hope? Stan said it was her wand-arm, and for an elderly lady that's a very bad thing."

Rosmerta looked as if she fully expected a decline into tottering old age for Augusta. Since Augusta is three months younger than I am, I was tempted to correct her. But my investigation was more important than a discussion on age and its consequences. I assured her that Augusta was doing very well and asked after young Shunpike.

"He's doing very well for himself, that I'll give him," said Rosmerta. "Enjoys his job, and he seems to make a pretty Knut with it, too, for he left me quite a tip."

This surprised me. Driver of the Knight Bus is not a highly-paid job. "Did he, now," I said.

"Oh, yes. Left eleven Sickles. That is to say, he had to pay six Sickles, he put down a Galleon, and he didn't wait for change. Mundungus Fletcher was surprised, too. Said I shouldn't expect such generosity from *him*. And I sure didn't, that Mundungus is as mean as they make them."

"Mundungus?" I asked sharply. Mundungus on the spot and in some sort of connection with Stan Shunpike? This clearly called for clarification.

"Yes, Mundungus was there when Stan entered. They talked for a bit – there wasn't anyone else, it was still fairly early. Stan said how he liked his job and told about Mrs Longbottom and her arm. He was ever so nice about her. Defended her, even. Because Mundungus called her an old besom – but a spunky old besom, he added, and he said that Dawlish still shakes like an aspen when he hears her name.

"But Stan would have none of it. 'Mrs Longbottom is a real lady,' he said, 'and she spoke kindly to me. More than you can say for some.' And he's right, the poor chump, there are still people who won't talk to him because he's done time in Azkaban. But things weren't always what they seemed in those days, were they, Professor?"

The last bit sounded somewhat plaintive, and I knew Rosmerta was not just thinking of Stan Shunpike. She herself had been the victim of an Imperius curse once. I assured her that things were certainly not always what they seemed and asked whether

Stan said why he left such a large tip – had he been lucky with something?

"I don't know – I was in the cellar for a few minutes, stacking away some crates of beer. When I got back here, Mundungus was alone. Said Stan had left in the direction of Hogwarts and the money was on the counter. I wasn't too best pleased to find Mundungus alone – that man would steal the drink from your glass, and I only went down because Stan was there. He's an honest lad, Stan is.

"But it seems that for once I haven't been fair on Mundungus. He could have nicked that Galleon and left the right amount on the counter, and I'd never have known. But he didn't."

After that we chatted some more, I drank my coffee, and left.

I must admit that my first reaction upon hearing that Mundungus had been in Hogwarts on Board Meeting Day was 'oh, damn'. As Severus Snape so aptly put it, *whenever a petty crime is committed, going after Mundungus almost guarantees success.* And while I certainly hope to succeed in solving this case, having Mundungus as the culprit once again will mean some highly sardonic smiles from Severus.

Lucius Malfoy, now, that would have been a feather in my cap.

But facts are facts. Mundungus had been on the spot. Also, Rosmerta had not been there when Stan left. The story of his going in the direction of Hogwarts

depends entirely on the testimony of Mundungus.

And Rosmerta is right: it is highly surprising that Mundungus didn't nick that Galleon. The most in-character course of action for him would be to pocket it and say that Stan had left without paying. Mundungus would be the first to point out that Stan had done time before.

The way I see it, there are two possible explanations. The first: for whatever reason, Stan tipped very generously. He then left to resume his duties on the Knight Bus, and Mundungus planted the false information that he wanted to go to Hogwarts – so that, should an investigation happen, there would be witnesses who could put Stan on the spot. Mundungus didn't touch the money because a large tip would be remembered.

The other possibility is that Stan paid for his coffee and left a small, sensible tip. Mundungus took that money and put down a Galleon for the reason described above, and then started to spread the rumour that Stan had left for Hogwarts.

If the second possibility is true, and if Mundungus is guilty of nobbling Mrs Norris, then he must be very eager to blame someone else. Mundungus and his money are not easily parted.

But, as I said, years ago Mundungus and I crossed wands in a matter of what is technically called 'petty crime', but what I call 'a wicked deed'. It is to that occasion that Severus Snape refers occasionally. For various

reasons Mundungus could not be brought to justice then, but I like to think I put the fear of God into him where further misdemeanours were concerned.

If someone paid him to nobble Mrs Norris on what the Muggle police would call 'my beat', I can see why he would want a scapegoat badly enough to spend eleven Sickles on it.

But who would pay Mundungus to nobble Mrs Norris? Stan has a motive – but would he have enough money to make it worth Mundungus's while? If that is the case, Mundungus might rather enjoy pocketing Stan's money and then using him as scapegoat. It's exactly the kind of thing that man would do.

Could Lucius have paid Mundungus? Certainly. Paying someone like Mundungus to do the dirty work is entirely in character.

But then, paying Mundungus would diminish his profits – and I still do not believe that Lucius could make enough money from entering a cat in a Muggle competition to make it worth his while. Also, if Stan Shunpike is now a personal friend of Draco and his parents, framing him would be a very stupid move. Lucius wouldn't like it at all.

Of course, Mundungus may not *know* about the friendship.

Or could Mundungus work for someone else entirely? Is there a small, a very small possibility that he knows the Cavendishes? Mrs Cavendish has a motive I can readily believe in: a fanatical desire to see

her cat win. Worse, on quite a number of occasions she has lost from Argus Filch. Anyone as snobbish as Mrs Cavendish would dislike that even more. I can see her pay Mundungus out of sheer spite and venom.

But how can they have met? I think it's time to talk to Lucius. But I cannot approach him outright, either. I need an excuse. Something along the lines of Miss Marple's fluffy-old-lady act.

Lucius Malfoy will arrive at Hogwarts in a few minutes, so I have just enough time to get into my part. I think I've come up with a very believable approach.

Once again I could not use Miss Marple's highly effective doddering old lady act. But I had come to realise that the essence is not the old lady. It's the prejudices and ill-conceived notions people have. Miss Marple played with those, and I followed her example.

I made a mental list of the more common delusions regarding spinster school teachers, and very soon I found a perfectly suitable one.

You would be amazed how often it has been suggested (and, in the case of some singularly unpleasant mothers, actually said) that a teacher's pupils are a wonderful compensation for missing out on motherhood. I well remember the many occasions where mothers told me they 'simply *knew* I would look after the dears as if they were my own children'. I've never actually said, "No, I don't. I teach them manners." But the temptation was strong.

My plan of action where Lucius is concerned plays on exactly this notion of 'motherly devotion'. I will inform him that I know about the friendship between Stan and the Malfoys – I will have heard it on the Wizarding grapevine. A very fruitful one, and Lucius will not doubt it.

I will then inform him of the connection between Stan and Mundungus, as observed by Rosmerta. I will remind him that Stan was in my House once, that I'm still very concerned about him, especially after the problems he's had in the Voldemort years, and that this liaison between poor, innocent Stan and wily Mundungus worries me very much.

I will ask Lucius to talk to Stan – give him advice. If necessary I will tell him Stan would sooner listen to a man he looks up to than to his old teacher. I may even use the words 'man of the world'. Oh, I'll be all motherly concern.

And then I will observe his reactions.

One of the things people tend to *forget* when it comes to schoolteachers, and especially Deputy Heads and Headmistresses, who have to manage large numbers of adult staff as well, is that we are exceedingly good at spotting lies.

Believe me, after more than half a century in which both students and staff have tried every possible excuse under the sun, I know the difference between a lie, a half-truth, and true innocence.

Lucius clearly felt ill at ease.

He looked at the hearth rug with discomfort.

He looked at the tea with distaste – though it was an excellent, fragrant Earl Grey, the blend he is very partial to.

And he looked at his spoon with the guilt-ridden expression of someone who has taken sugar on day one of their diet.

That, more than anything, convinced me of the absolute truth of what he told me.

Never, ever believe people who look straight into your eyes with a pleasant, open expression. If they give you a firm handshake as well, it's worse.

The story Lucius told me was one he would much rather not tell – because it was the absolute truth.

Lucius was selling out. "Not everything – not the manor, Merlin forbid," he hastened to tell me. "But there were damages from the time... from the last months of that time," he said, and I nodded my understanding of which time he meant.

"And then the Ministry used it for several years. They were too busy to bother with maintenance – or to care. I don't hold with all of the Ministry's new Muggle notions, but in the Muggle world, the government does seem to realise that places like this are part of the nation's heritage. It's a notion singularly lacking in our powers-that-be.

"The roof needs repairs. The roof always does, and the costs are crippling. There's a spot of dry rot in

the rafters – that needs addressing very soon. And the garden needs work or there will not be a garden left. A design by Capability Brown, you know. Surprising, really, that the Muggles never realised just what sort of talent made him so capable. "

"He was one of us?" I asked in spite of myself. Completely beside the point of my investigation, but I've always been an admirer of his work.

"Borderline Squib, from what I gather of my great-grandfather's notes. Very intelligent, great vision, a keen eye for Transfiguration – and not much strength behind his spells. At our place the old man had to step in and do most of the work. On Brown's instructions, of course – the vision was his. But that's what a lot of wizards resented: having to do what they saw as 'manual labour' themselves. In the Muggle world Brown could just ask for an army of gardeners and workers. But I digress.

"Since we've returned to the Manor, I find myself in need of quite considerable sums. Unfortunately, most of my income goes to the Ministry – reconciliation payments, they call it. That situation will last for several years to come, and given the alternatives, we did get off lucky; I'm fully aware of that.

"However, I do not wish to be the Malfoy who loses the estate. So I have taken the only course open to me: I've sold off some of our artefacts. To Muggles. They pay more, and the Ministry stays out of it. Even with the little I've sold I've diminished Draco's

inheritance, but it was the only option left.

"I have used Fletcher to make the initial contacts. Fletcher has done this sort of thing for years, you know. Whenever something was too hot to handle in the Wizarding world, he flogged it to Muggles.

"Once the contact was firmly established and an opening offer was made, I took over myself and dealt with the final negotiations and the transfer of the goods.

"Fletcher probably knows Stan and Draco are friends. Neither one of them makes a secret of it, and they occasionally go to the Leaky Cauldron for a pint.

"You're right to worry about that connection, Professor. Fletcher is a little... an unspeakable little crook, and Stan *can* be influenced quite easily. If Fletcher has thought of a way to steal objects from the Manor, he may well want to use Stan. It's exactly the sort of thing he would do.

"Is there a way of stopping this without my... business dealings... being discussed in any way? You see, I... I didn't tell either Narcissa or Draco. They would hate the idea. Draco might want to try to prevent it. Draco's sense of family obligation has landed him in terrible problems before. And Narcissa would be worried to death that Draco would try something. She... she should not worry about Draco again."

"Let me see," I said, nodding understandingly. I needed a few moments to compose my thoughts after this surprising story.

The salient facts were these: Mundungus knew

Cavendish, since he set up the book transaction between Cavendish and Lucius. And while doing so, he may well have met Mrs Cavendish, too. And Mrs Cavendish is the only one who truly has a completely convincing motive for nobbling Mrs Norris.

Also, whenever Lucius spoke about Stan, there was sincere warmth in his voice. He liked the lad for what he had done for Draco. True, there had been more than a touch of the 'my faithful servant' attititude in Lucius's tone when he mentioned the boy, but for my designs that wasn't a bad thing. If Lucius would feel that *noblesse oblige*, I could make him my ally. And a very useful ally, too.

Too bad this has turned out to be another 'Mundungus Did It' case, though. After Augusta's evidence, I had had high hopes of Lucius as a culprit. Now *that* would have been one for the books. Instead, he had been...

"Sorry, what did you say?" asked Lucius. "Something about a *herring*?"

Oh, dear. That's what comes from being alone quite often – one sometimes whispers to oneself.

There was nothing to be done about it. I told Lucius the whole story – I had planned to do that, anyhow. But now that I knew him to be not guilty, I included that I had thought of him as a possible culprit. With a very weak motive, true, but with an astonishing number of opportunities and connections to the case. Finally, at his request, I explained the Muggle detective notion of a *red herring*.

"I see," said Lucius, grinning at my discomfiture. "Well, I absolutely refuse to end up as 'the red herring'. If I must play a part in this investigation, it will be as a second-in-command, at least. Do they have a word for that?"

"Side-kick," I told him.

"As in, I'm at your side to kick the living daylights out of Fletcher?" he suggested.

"We'll have to think about a suitable way to deal with Mundungus, but it will be very useful if he believes that either of us might do just that," I said.

We both agreed to bring Argus Filch in on our discussion – we would pool our information and set up a plan. I therefore went to fetch Argus and brought him up to date with the latest facts. Once we were all sitting in my study with a fresh supply of tea, we went down to business.

"I knew Stan had participated in a Muggle Cat show," said Lucius. "It would seem that he had heard about them from you, Mr Filch."

"Aye," said Argus. "The lad takes me there, usually. With the Knight Bus. I send an Owl to his digs, and he picks me up, seeing as how ..."

Seeing as how Argus couldn't use a wand to summon the Bus. Lucius and I both nodded.

"Mind, I always paid for it," said Argus. "Stan offered to take me for free. He's kind-hearted, Stan is, and that's what gets him into trouble. I had to explain that giving free rides to his friends were

the same thing as stealing from his boss. But that's how he knew about cat shows, all right."

"Draco helped him complete the registration form," Lucius told us. "Stan didn't want to ask you, Mr Filch, since he was afraid that you would disapprove. Of having two magical people at a Muggle event, I mean."

Poor Argus looked extraordinarily pleased at being called 'magical'.

"Now, the first meeting between Professor Cavendish and Fletcher took place in March, and that was at a cat show, too," said Lucius. "I think it may well have been the show where you won, Mr Filch."

"And Mundungus must have recognized me. He probably heard what Mrs Cavendish had to say about us winning, and that weren't pretty, I'm sure," said Argus. "And then the little shit – sorry, Professor – Mundungus realised that he could go to Hogwarts and nobble Mrs Norris, and Mrs Cavendish couldn't. And he set it up."

"Quite," Lucius agreed. "This means that we'll need to deal with Mrs Cavendish. I suggest I take care of that side of things. Mrs Cavendish is the most frightful snob – she was positively gushing when we met. Said she would love to see me at her house. Well, she'll have that pleasure – and I will make it perfectly clear that I know what she's been up to. And that any further attempt will result in public exposure. *Very* public exposure. That should stop her."

We agreed this was the best solution. I would not

have minded exposing Mrs Cavendish then and there, but that would lead to a great number of difficulties – we would have to give evidence of the nobbling to whatever authority exists in the world of cat shows, and the evidence involved two wizards and the most secret magical residence of Britain.

"Now, about Mundungus," I said. "We can't expose him to the Muggle Cat Show authorities – for the same reasons, and besides, exposure wouldn't be a punishment for him. And unfortunately shaving a cat is not a deed that will bring him before the Wizengamot. If we could prove that he had endangered the Statute of Secrecy – but we can't. Not without explaining why he was at a Muggle event to begin with. What *can* we do to make him pay – surely there must be something?"

"He fair hates honest work," said Argus.

"Argus, my dear fellow, what an excellent idea," said Lucius. I noticed it was 'Argus' now – who would have thought it? Lucius really took to his fellow-conspirators part with the greatest possible gusto.

"I will summon Fletcher – he'll be pleased to come, he'll think I have another commission. And I'll tell him I know what he did to Mrs Norris. I'll tell Fletcher how excessively displeased I am with his behaviour. And I'll suggest that spending – say – a week or two working for Mr Filch might be just the sort of atonement I'd like to see. I'll get him to understand that only the most glowing of reports

from Mr Filch will stop me from performing... quite a different type of atonement on him."

"Will stop *us*." I corrected Lucius.

"Us?" he asked, looking somewhat surprised.

"I would not dream of doing anything illegal," I told him. "But Mundungus finds it particularly hard to believe that there are people who live within the law of their own free will. We have crossed wands before, Mundungus and I, and on that occasion I have reminded him of my war record, and I've assured him that if he gave his victim any further trouble, I'd know where to find him. He'll remember that occasion. It may well be why he wanted poor Stan as a scapegoat."

"I see," said Lucius. "I had wondered about that bit with the over-large tip. So unlike Fletcher. You must have made quite an impression."

"He couldn't sit for a week," I said.

Both men smiled. "That's all right then," said Argus. "He'll be scared stiff of Mr Malfoy, and if that wears off at some point, I'll remind him that I haven't told you yet, Professor, but that I just might. With Mr Malfoy to back up my story. That'll keep him busy for a week or two. The boiler needs cleaning. And the gutters. Nice job for him – he can fly up on a broom."

"And you can supervise on the lawn," I said. "In a deck chair."

Argus positively beamed at the thought.

"I will drop by occasionally," said Lucius. "For a chat with you, Argus. A very visible chat. Fletcher

must know that I take a... continued interest in your welfare – and that of Mrs Norris. You may even have more visitors – young Stan would be most eager to share the story of his triumph with you – if you allow me to tell him you're in on the Cat Show Secret? Draco and Stan will come for lunch this Sunday, and I know he'd be most relieved to hear you know all and are not angry with him or Fifinella.

Fifinella? Stan Shunpike had called his cat *Fifinella?* How utterly amazing.

"Fifinella?" asked Argus. "Where in Merlin's name... "

"My wife's idea," said Lucius. "It was she who gave Stan the kitten. She said it looked like a Fifinella, and Stan was rather enamoured of the name."

"I see," said Argus. "Ladies can be a bit whimsical in their notions, sometimes."

"I can see you are a man of the world, Argus," said Lucius. And with those words he bowed his way out of my study and out of this story.

And now I finally have a perfect title. THE CASE OF THE RED HERRING.

Unfortunately, it would give far too much of the plot away.

And it would upset Lucius.

Hmmm...

No. Whatever his many faults, he has been a true ally in this case. This story will remain THE CASE OF THE CAT SHOW CORRUPTION.

Minerva McGonagall: Spinster Detective

The Case of the Business of Ferrets

"I HOPE YOU WON'T be too disappointed by the meagre entertainments of La Caunette, after this wild swirl of society events," said Severus as we withdrew to the sitting area. We had just finished dinner – a very good one, for Severus is an accomplished cook who knows how to make the most of the produce of the French countryside.

I had arrived late that afternoon for my annual summer holiday visit. I had unpacked and refreshed myself while Severus put the final touches to the meal, and we had spent a leisurely few hours eating and chatting. Among other things I had told him I had attended a birthday party for Elphias Doge and a lunch with the Weasley family. Hardly a *swirl* of society events, but to Severus, who still relishes the total absence of any social life, it might seem so.

"I love staying in La Caunette, and you know it," I said. "I'm not a social butterfly who needs daily 'entertainments'. But I admit the Weasley lunch was lovely, even though Sybill was present."

"Sybill? At a Weasley family gathering?" asked Severus with understandable surprise. I had been surprised to see her there myself.

"Sybill. Annoying as ever. Fortunately there were

enough people present to dilute her ramblings somewhat. And it made me enjoy her retirement all the more. Like a cold," I said.

"Like a cold? I don't understand."

"Well, you know what it's like: only when you have a cold do you fully appreciate the pleasure of breathing normally through your nose. You don't appreciate that at all when you're well. It's the same with Sybill. When she was around, she was most annoying. Even though in the last few years she taught so few classes that she was hardly a professional bother any more, the mere sight of her still set my teeth on edge. This meeting made me feel the full bliss of her retirement. And other than that it was a lovely party."

"Still, you must tell me all about Annoying Sybill," grinned Severus. "I'll get us both a nightcap."

"Severus!" I said, sternly. "Are you turning into a gossip?"

"Perish the thought," he said, pouring two glasses of Calvados. "I'm merely turning into the kind of good friend who will let you talk freely of a problem. So that you can get it off your chest and feel the better for it. As your host, I should provide a spiritual digestive just as much as an alcoholic one." And he put my glass on a side table with one of his elegant little bows. Severus Snape, a Slytherin and a gentleman.

"Very well, then," I said. "I'll tell you the whole business. Don't blame me if you get nightmares."

And that, with the benefit of hindsight, was the starting point of The Business of Ferrets.

Before I launch into Sybill's narrative, I must explain about the Weasley's holiday arrangements. They have everything to do with this case.

For years, with the children growing up and the school fees and everything, Molly and Arthur didn't have any holiday arrangements to speak of. Except for that one occasion when they all went to Egypt after winning a prize in the lottery. Many people thought it foolish of them to spend so much on a vacation when they were perpetually stretched for money. But all the young Weasleys still speak of that glorious time, and I think the memory their parents gave them was worth more than new schoolbooks and expensive clothes.

But now that all the children have left home, things are much easier for Molly and Arthur. And once again they have managed to come up with the very thing that will create wonderful memories for their little tribe. They have bought an old farmhouse in Wiltshire near Stonehenge.

The whole family helped with the restoration, and every summer Arthur and Molly go down for a month. All their children visit them, some for just a few days, others for longer. Occasionally grandchildren stay while their parents go off on a few days together. And there is usually one week when everyone is present. The whole scheme works wonderfully well.

The lunch to which I was invited was one in the

week where everyone was present. Molly had set up two large tables in the garden, one for us older people, and one for the youngsters. It was a very informal affair, with gingham table clothes and cheerful blue Cornishware. Molly served large plates of cold ham and cold chicken, salads, bread rolls, and pitchers of cider, ale, and lemonade. It was just the sort of thing they will remember later. Granny's summer lunches.

The only thing I would personally consider a downside of that idyllic spot, is that Sybill has bought a small property that is less than a ten minutes' walk away – my little old-lady's bolt-hole, as she coyly refers to it, expecting her listeners to object to the 'old' part. It was the attraction of Stonehenge that drew her to the area, of course.

But Molly assured me Sybill was a very pleasant neighbour. The young girls especially were very taken with her, and they loved the small tea parties to which Sybill occasionally invited them. I could readily believe it – at Hogwarts, too, there were always several girls who had crushes on Sybill. They admired her prophecies, her highly unusual classroom, and her... well, I suppose one could call it 'artistic looks'.

On more than one occasion I have had to tell a girl that imitation is not always the sincerest form of flattery.

So Sybill, too, was invited to the family gathering. And for the first half hour after her arrival, she managed to make herself the centre of attention. To

give her her due, she did have a story to tell.

It seemed that her geriatric bolt-hole had been burgled. Sybill had been off on a walk in the countryside, or, as she put it, "a spiritual path of meditation and contemplation which one so needs to restore the tranquillity of the Inner Eye".

Upon her return, the mere physical eye had not noticed anything amiss, until she stepped into her kitchen to make tea. There she saw that her freshly-baked shortbread, which she'd left cooling on a rack, had gone missing. Someone had taken more than half of it – but not all, funnily enough.

At first Sybill thought one of the Weasley children had been very naughty. A not entirely inconceivable idea.

But then she found that something else was missing, too. It was a *highly spiritual object* as Sybill called it, a framed drawing she had made herself.

Sybill's doodle seemed to have been a Mandala. No surprise there. She had used the colours of all four elements, "to unite the powers of Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water in a magical allegiance of protection." And the need for this so-called magical allegiance was explained as well. Not that some good protective wards wouldn't have worked better.

Sybill had added the wordings of her "two strongest, most important predictions. Folded into the design of the Mandala, protected by its sacred form, unreadable to the uninitiated."

Well, hardly unreadable. Young Rose told me later that "Auntie Sybill really, really is a Seer, never mind what Mummy says, because she *did* predict that Uncle Harry was the Chosen One, and it was all in the Mandala that has been stolen. And another prediction, too. About a Servant and a Master." But Rose had not managed to find out the exact wording of that one. "Everyone knows the prediction about Uncle Harry, of course. So I really, really wanted to read the other one, and I would have cracked it, if only it weren't gone."

She would, too. A very clever little girl. She may not see eye to eye with Hermione where Sybill's predictions are concerned, but she is very much a chip of the old block. It will be a pleasure to have her at Hogwarts in a few years' time.

Anyhow, the Mandala and the shortbread had both gone. And the truly interesting part was that the thieves had signed their crime. On the wire rack Sybill had found a little scrap of parchment with the inscription *The ScAvengers were here!*.

"And then Sybill kept prattling about the ScAvengers, and how the Dark Arts must be involved, for they only attack the Great Heroes of the Resistance, of which she is one. Or so she claims. But Harry soon put a stop to that, thank heavens," I told Severus, and took another sip of my Calva.

"The scavengers? Who are they, and why does it involve the Dark Arts? And *Potter*?" asked Severus.

I should have realized that he knew nothing about

the ScAvengers. He doesn't read the Daily Prophet, other than the articles I send him occasionally.

"The ScAvengers," I corrected, and explained how they write their name. "They're this year's Summer Craze. It isn't important – some pranksters, I dare say. But the Prophet makes much of it.

"So far there have been three burglaries, and the pattern is always the same. They steal food and what one might call a *souvenir*.

"The first victim was Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron. One morning he found that half a fruitcake was missing – a left-over from Elphias's birthday bash, actually. There was this same note that the ScAvengers had been there. He didn't think much of it – a childish prank, he assumed. But then he noticed that a picture was taken as well. It was a framed picture of Harry, taken when Ron and he gave a party at the Leaky to celebrate passing the Auror Entrance Exam.

"Tom was proud of that picture. You know how he tells everyone that Harry first entered the Wizarding World through his pub?"

"I certainly know. *Young Harry Potter Claimed His Inheritance Right Here In My Pub*. If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times," said Severus. "Everyone who goes to the Leaky was subjected to it at some point. And now you're telling me his customers couldn't have a quiet pint without Potter glaring at them? If these ScAvengers put an end to that nonsense, I like them already."

"Quite," I said. Where Harry is concerned, Severus has a chip on his shoulder the size of a house, and there's no point in arguing.

"The second case was more serious. Food-wise it was just the better part of a batch of flapjacks, but the burglary was at the Weasleys' house, and their clock was stolen. You remember the clock? The one with the family names on it that told Molly and Arthur where everyone was? Now, that clock was valuable.

"And Sybill is the third one. But they seem back to taking just food and a souvenir."

"I see," said Severus. "And your idea is it's a series of pranks? Perhaps a group of young wizards who dare each other?"

"Exactly," I said. "I think it's some sort of secret society – a teenage one, you know. They call themselves the ScAvengers, and new members have to steal food for the group, as well as a souvenir. To prove that they didn't just buy the food, but actually broke in somewhere."

"And now they do realize the clock's value, but they can't return it, or it would land them in a pretty pickle," said Severus, quick on the uptake as ever. "You should investigate, you know. The Case of the Cake Criminals. Only, that would make a second alliteration with C's. The Case of the Ferocious Food Frauds, perhaps?"

I glared at him. I have solved only one case that has a – much regretted – alliteration in the title, and Severus knows perfectly well why I couldn't

call it The Case of the Red Herring. He disagrees, of course, and thinks it would have done Lucius all the good in the world. Ever since I told him the tale, he gleefully refers to his old ally as *Kipper Malfoy*.

"If they had continued with valuable objects like the clock, I would expect Mundungus to be behind it. And you know you wouldn't enjoy another detective story where Mundungus has dunnit.

"But this group of youngsters? They are very wrong, of course. But I can see how it happened. What they are doing here is just one step up from a kitchen raid at Hogwarts in their eyes. I have wondered, briefly, whether we shouldn't be sterner on those. Because in a way they are right: it *is* just one small step up. Technically, a kitchen raid is theft, too.

"On second thoughts, however, I do still think a kitchen raid is the kind of prank most of us have played – it's harmless fun, it's a bonding activity. Remember that time we went down for a snack and heard those Hufflepuffs?"

"I certainly do," said Severus. "And I still think the way you Transfigured and slid under the cupboard, in one smooth move, is one of the neatest actions I've ever seen. My leap into that storage room was much more undignified."

"But you could stand up straight," I said morosely. That kitchen floor had been cold, the space under the cupboard too low for comfort, and Pomona's little colony of badgers had selected and prepared their food

at leisure. They could afford to: I heard some excellent, whispered protective wards, and a very good muffled *Silencio*. Never underestimate badgers. They're not slow; they're well-prepared and methodical.

"But I see your point about the pranksters," Severus said. "They do feel it's just a small step up. They truly don't realize the enormous invasion of privacy that is a burglary. And the clock was clearly a mistake. Someone wanted to do something very impressive, and now they don't know how to solve it."

"If I find out that a group of Hogwarts students is behind it," I said, "the difference between a kitchen raid and burglary will be made perfectly clear. But I'm not going to spend my precious holiday chasing them.

"Of course, you might take up the case yourself, you know. You would be good at detecting. And you could always ask me for advice."

Now it was Severus's turn to glare. "I dare say I might manage on my own," he said. "I could do a halfway decent Sherlock Holmes, I think. And you'd make a lovely Watsonette."

Severus may be more fortunate in his looks, but he is every bit as conceited as Hercule Poirot, and that's the fictional detective he should emulate. He could pull off the French, too. It's a shame no-one in their right mind will mistake him for a *hairdresser*.

In the end we spent a pleasurable few minutes listing possible other suspects. Severus suggested Rita Skeeter — if the story won't come to the reporter, the

reporter must make the story. I suggested Augusta Longbottom — a glutton, and she may well think that Neville has lived in Harry's shadow for long enough and that removing Harry's portrait from public places would change this. These are both delusional notions, but, as her long-suffering former prefect knows, common sense is not Augusta's strongest point. And she always was a complete madcap.

We had a good laugh over it before we retired.

The next morning Severus was quiet and thoughtful. More so than usual. I was about to ask him whether there was anything bothering him, but he must have read my face before I could utter the words, for he at once made an effort to be more genial.

Severus and I have known each other for long enough to bear with the other's moods, so when he asked me about my plans for the day I told him I would take a stroll in the village, and then perhaps spend some time in the garden with a book. That way he could offer to join me or remain alone, as he wished.

After all, we had spoken extensively of the Wizarding world the night before. While Severus's exile was his own choice, and mostly to his liking, it would be quite understandable that all these stories of people he used to know would turn him silent and pensive. Not so much because he missed anyone, but because there was so little to miss. When had Severus ever been a part of friendly, informal gatherings?

Perhaps the only time he truly felt part of a group of friends was during those few years when, as a very young man, he had embraced Voldemort's ideas wholeheartedly. I remember that once, at a Grimmauld Place meeting, Sirius made a scathing remark about his brother Regulus, and Severus nearly bit his head off. Albus calmed them down, as always. The reason I have remembered this particular quarrel was the look in Severus's eyes when he said, gruffly, by way of explanation, "Reg and I were friends, once."

If Severus wanted some privacy that morning, he should have it. I had a lovely little stroll in the village, and when I returned I wrote a thank-you note to Molly Weasley. I had left for France the day after her luncheon party, and I hadn't had time yet. Very remiss of me, of course, and I felt bad about my neglect.

I asked Severus whether it would bother him to have his owl carry the letter. Severus had bought Socrates when we had resumed our friendship, in order to correspond with me. He said it wouldn't be a problem at all, since the owl could hardly give information on its owner and his whereabouts.

So I sent off the letter, we had a light lunch, and Severus joined me with a book of his own. I could see that he felt more cheerful than that morning, and by the time we had a pre-dinner drink he was quite his old self.

The next day was uneventful but very pleasant.

But on the third morning of my stay with Severus, his owl returned with a letter that changed the entire course of my holiday.

"Pleasant news?" asked Severus as I perused Molly's note over breakfast.

"They're all very well," I said. "It seems that Ginny and Bill have left with their families, and Molly feels quite bereaved with only Charlie and his partner and Percy and Ron with their offspring to look after."

We threw each other an understanding look. *Only* Charlie, Paul, and Percy's and Ron's tribes. Sweet Merlin.

There was some trivial information on the children — how Bill and Fleur would go to France to visit Fleur's parents, and Harry and Ginny would take Teddy Lupin along on their family trip on a long boat. Harry liked doing Muggle things during his holidays. And he thought his children should learn to appreciate the Muggles and their world, too, but he was clever enough to turn these lessons into adventures rather than sermons.

The whole group had set off for Diagon Alley, so that the women could get most of the Hogwarts shopping done before the August rush. Sensible of them, I thought.

Naturally, these domestic details wouldn't interest Severus. But the last part of the letter made me exclaim.

"The ScAvengers have been busy again," I told

him. "This time it's Florean Fortescue's."

"Food-wise one can't fault their taste," he said. "What did they take this time? One of those ghastly Italian harbour paintings – if Florean still has those?"

I confirmed the presence of the paintings. Of all of them, for that was not what the thieves had taken. "You know Florean always had a picture of his place, with the awning down and a full terrace?"

Severus said he remembered and wondered why anyone who had made the choice to go to Florean's would need a reminder on the wall that they were, indeed, at Florean's.

I quite agreed with him. "But these days," I told him, "the picture serves another purpose: it shows that Harry Potter is an old customer."

"Merlin forbid!" exclaimed Severus. "Is all of the Wizarding world infested with Potter's image? What's Florean's claim to fame?"

"Harry stayed a few days in Diagon Alley one August. At the start of the Lupin Year, if I remember correctly. During those days he spent quite a lot of time at Florean's. He *was* only fourteen, and Florean fed him an unlimited supply of sundaes. And helped him with his homework, or so he claims. It's quite possible, too. Florean had an 'Outstanding' for Magical History. One of the very few students who stayed awake often enough to achieve such results. And Harry could use all the help he could get with that subject."

"With most subjects," said Severus. "But that's

beside the point."

It was. Trust Severus to make the remark, regardless. He really can be annoying sometimes. "Do you want to hear the rest of the details?" I asked pointedly. He nodded.

"The ScAvengers have left their usual note. The picture is gone, frame and all. And they seem to have had quite a lot of ice cream. They probably used the cardboard goblets for take-away customers. It seems they also used one of his ice scoops to fill the goblets, and they left it on the draining board, well-rinsed."

"This news," said Severus, "is ominous." And he gave his croissant the kind of glare that, once upon a time, would have wilted an entire classroom.

Then he looked up and said, "Minerva... " He stared at his croissant again. I waited.

"Minerva," he continued, "I think there is a case to investigate here. A more serious one than your previous successes, I'm afraid. I've been thinking about it for some time now. May I present the facts, as I see them?"

I nodded and poured us both a fresh cup of coffee. I must admit that I was very curious. Severus had told me once that he would make a better side-kick than Kipper Malfoy, and that perhaps one day we would investigate a case together. Was he trying to turn this matter into more than it actually was? Yet Severus wouldn't use the word *serious* lightly where crime was involved.

"The way I see it," Severus began, "we now have

four ScAvenger burglaries. In all four cases, food was taken, and in all four cases, it was cakes or sweets. Not proper mealtime food, I mean. But the kind of snacks that fit in very well with the notion of a childish prank. So does the ScAvenger note, and it explains why they call themselves the *scavengers*: it's what they do. They scavenge.

"There is, however, another explanation that might be possible. The thieves may steal food because they need it — because they can't buy it."

"But why didn't they take it all, then?" I asked. "They left some of the shortbread. And they didn't take all the food in the Leaky Cauldron either. If they are that desperate, surely they would take all and save some to eat later?"

"Quite," said Severus. "That is odd, and it's a problem we'll have to discuss further. But here's the second part. In three out of four cases, the stolen object has a reference to Potter. And remember that the ScAvengers very much stress the 'avenger' part of their name, too.

"Now, what kind of people could you think of who might have difficulties buying food, and who might want to avenge something by removing Potter artefacts from display?"

I stared at Severus in dismay.

"Oh, sweet Merlin, no," I finally said. It was clear what he meant. Death-Eaters.

"And the stealing of food would mean they are still on the Ministry's Wanted list and can't buy

from shops for that reason," I said.

"That's what I thought," said Severus. "They could go to Muggle shops, of course. But... "

"Most of them are quite unfamiliar with the Muggle world," I finished his sentence. We often knew what the other one was thinking.

Often.

But not always.

For his next remark rendered me speechless for longer than I have ever been.

"Minerva," Severus said, "you may think I'm crazy. Maybe I am. But... believe me, I've really given this much thought and... are you absolutely certain that Peter Pettigrew is dead?"

"Pettigrew? Peter Pettigrew? You think *Peter Pettigrew* is behind this?" I said finally. It seemed outrageous — impossible. "But... he died at Malfoy Manor. Harry saw it. And Ron. And others, probably."

"On the first occasion of his death, a whole crowd of wizards and Muggles saw it," said Severus. "Did Potter tell you the way he died?"

"No," I said. "I read he was dead — that Harry had seen it. It was on the Death Lists. You know Shacklebolt ordered the compilation of those lists. To make sure who was dead and who was missing. To establish which Death Eaters might still be alive and hiding. Pettigrew's name was on the list — witnesses of his death were Harry Potter and Ron Wea-

sley. But surely... he died at Malfoy Manor. Weren't you there? There must have been others – Death Eaters... And even if... surely he wouldn't show up *now* to steal cakes and Potter artefacts?"

"I was knocked sideways by the thought myself," said Severus. "You noticed – the first morning you were here. I didn't want to talk about it then. I thought it was insane – the result of a nightmare, induced by too much food and talk of the Wizarding world. Remember you said not to blame you if your story gave me nightmares? I didn't mean to. I thought it was silly, and I was annoyed at how the silliness affected me.

"But if there is even the smallest possibility that I'm right... "

"What makes you think he might be alive?" I asked. The idea seemed preposterous.

"I'll give you my reasoning in a moment," said Severus. "But if I am right, do you agree that we need to investigate the matter?"

"Yes," I said, without hesitation. "If he's alive, there is a case – a serious one. But before we start hexing from the hip, we had better take a good look at the situation."

"Of course," said Severus, and I could see he was relieved I didn't dismiss his ideas outright. As if I would ever dismiss Severus Snape's opinions on crime or the Dark Arts.

"I know I'm a good spy," Severus continued. "But – this may surprise you – I've never set up an

independent investigation of my own. I've always worked on specific missions. And there was never much doubt who did it, in those days. You have done detective work. Where do we start?"

"We establish the facts, to see whether there is a case in the first place" I said. "Do you have a notebook we can use?"

Severus fetched a Muggle notebook and a ballpoint. "Will this do?" he asked.

I nodded, opened the book, wrote *The ScAvengers* at the top of the first page, and underlined the words. Severus smiled. "Very methodical," he said.

"And now, facts," I said. "The first thing we must establish is whether there is a chance that Pettigrew is still alive. Do you realize this is my second case where the corpse may spring to life in the early chapters?"

We briefly smiled at each other. Not because we didn't think the situation serious enough – it's just that after so many years in the Order together we had our own way of working. *Fighting the Dark Arts with Dark Humour* Albus had once called it.

"That will be a wonderful addition to your entry in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century," said Severus. "In addition to her ground-breaking work in Transfiguration and her Headship of Hogwarts, Professor Minerva McGonagall changed the British Detective Novel forever. " He grinned.

"Is there a special name for your sort of cases?" he asked. "It's always better to be specific, as we've told

our students endlessly. I know the 'hard-boiled' and the 'thriller' but is there a word for what you do? Or is this Agatha Christie of yours a stand-alone?"

"She's not, and it's called a *cosy mystery*," I said. Reluctantly, for I knew Severus would have a field day with that one. And sure enough, a delighted grin spread over his face.

"A cosy mystery? How utterly enchanting. I'm honoured to be the side-kick in a *cosy mystery*. I'll endeavour to give satisfaction. "

"We'll give it a try," I said. "Whatever doubts I may have about your capacity for cosiness, I will set them aside. I trust you'll take to your new part with panache. How about a fresh pot of coffee to start with?"

Severus nodded and fetched the coffee. And a plate of delectable *madeleines*. "See?" he said. "I can out-cosy Kipper Malfoy any day."

And, strengthened by coffee and madeleines, we set to work in earnest. The Death of Peter Pettigrew – Severus Snape's testimony I wrote.

The Death of Peter Pettigrew – Severus Snape's testimony

I went to Malfoy Manor in the early hours of 28th March, 1998. I had received an urgent summons from Voldemort. Upon my arrival, I learned that this had to do with the capture and subsequent escape of Potter and various others. Voldemort wanted me to take certain measures regarding valuable objects at Hogwarts – that part of our discussion is not relevant for this case.

Before we started our conversation – held in private at Voldemort's insistence – he informed me that Pettigrew had died. I will render the conversation as precisely as possible.

Voldemort said, "You will be interested to hear that your faithful servant is no more."

"Pettigrew is dead?" I asked. "How did that happen, My Lord?"

[Voldemort had ordered Pettigrew to act as my servant at one point – hence his use of that word. I wanted to find out whether Potter had killed him after all. Potter had once, rather grandly, spared Pettigrew's life. I was curious to know his present state of mind – had he been involved in Pettigrew's death?]

It was Bellatrix Lestrange who answered. "The unworthy rat betrayed Our Master!" she screamed. "He helped Potter! So he died a traitor's death. The silver hand Our Master so graciously gave him has strangled him. The Master's Hand punished the traitor!"

I looked at Voldemort, and he nodded. "Pettigrew was foolish," he said. "And unworthy. Unlike you, my dear Severus."

He then gave me a sign to follow him, and we had our further discussion. Pettigrew's death was spoken of no more, but I learned later that Potter and Weasley were present when it happened. They escaped from the dungeon and rescued Hermione Granger, who had been tortured upstairs.

It is important to note that at the time of Pettigrew's alleged death, Potter and Weasley were greatly dis-

tressed by Miss Granger's screams. Their only interest was to save her.

This leads to the following facts:

Pettigrew died by his own hand.

The two witnesses saw him fall down. His face was purple, his eyes protruded, and he looked like someone who was strangled. The witnesses reported this to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

It is not certain that Weasley and Potter ever actually witnessed a strangulation before or are familiar with the death struggle of a strangled person.

For some time after that — reports vary from several minutes to nearly half an hour — no-one entered the cellar as a fight was going on upstairs, during which Potter and company managed to escape. Then Greyback was sent down to check on the other prisoners. He reported that they were gone as well and that Pettigrew was dead. Voldemort told him to dispose of the body.

This means there was some time in which Pettigrew could Transfigure an object to look like his dead body — a dead rat or mouse, brought for the purpose, suggests itself— and could disappear in his Animagus form.

I finished my notes and looked at Severus. "But he died by Voldemort's hand," I said. "Voldemort put a spell on Pettigrew's hand — are you saying his spell didn't work properly?" It seemed unlikely. Voldemort, despicable though he was, was a very powerful wizard. I don't think it would be impossible to break

a spell he had cast, but it would take time. A man who is being strangled does not have time. Unless...

"Was the existence of this spell known to others?" I asked. "Did Pettigrew know?"

"We didn't," said Severus. "None of us knew, and everyone was impressed. It is a very difficult form of Dark Magic. I still remember the look on Narcissa's face. The way she looked at Draco — she was terrified that he might be under some sort of spell, too. But I'm certain Pettigrew knew."

"Do you know that for a fact?" I asked him. During my previous cases, I've learned that people often tell you something is a fact when it actually is only hearsay or surmise. Rosmerta, for instance, once described as a fact something she was told by Mundungus Fletcher. One can't get more unreliable than that.

"It's not a fact, no. But it makes sense," said Severus. "Put yourself in Voldemort's shoes. You never really trust anyone. To you, people are just instruments. In Pettigrew you have an instrument that is useful, for he is a very capable wizard. But you know he has betrayed people before. So you put a spell on his hand.

"And the reason you tell him about this spell is that he'll be useful for longer when he knows. If he doesn't know, he may decide to betray you and then he dies. This stops the betrayal — good — but the downside is, you now have a dead servant. If you tell him in advance, it will not just stop him from betraying you, it will stop him from even thinking

about it. He will remain useful for much longer."

It was a reasoning that chilled me to the core. Not because of the callousness and the complete disregard for human life. Not even because it was so clearly a psychopath's view, a view that objectifies people.

What shocked me was the ease with which Severus put himself in Voldemort's shoes. Everyone knows that the point of a spy is to gather information, and that he must work with despicable people to do so. But this was the first time I fully realised that Severus had not just *worked* for Voldemort – he had spent years getting under his skin, seeing the world through his eyes, living in that distorted mind. If I had had to do that, would I ever feel clean again? Or would I always feel tainted by the psychopath's view? It is an experience that sets one apart from other people. No wonder Severus craved the loneliness of La Caunette.

Severus saw how shocked I was, but he attributed it merely to the Pettigrew story. For him, getting under Voldemort's skin was really just part of the job. "You agree with me, then?" he asked. "That Pettigrew was capable enough to work out a counter-spell? That's the one part that kept me wondering. He was good, I know that. But was he good enough? You had him as a student; what do you think?"

I nodded. Pettigrew had been a very good student. Not the kind that has flashes of brilliant insight, but he had a very logical mind and was good at

working things out. And he thought before he acted. Give him a year and he could work out a way to counter the spell and test it without Voldemort realising what was going on.

All this, of course, meant that Severus might well be right about Pettigrew being alive. Everything fitted. I remembered the case of Mrs Norris's attacker – there everything fitted with Lucius being guilty, except for that one, very important part: motive. Unfortunately, in Pettigrew's case, even the lack of a motive fitted.

"You're right, it fits. The death was a high-risk performance that demanded a great deal of determination," I said. "The determination to keep strangling oneself – against the urge to draw breath. But we know Pettigrew has determination. It's how he staged his death the first time. And living as a rat for a decade demanded determination, as well.

"And somehow the lack of a motive fits, too. For ten years no-one thought Pettigrew could possibly betray Potter. No-one could think of a reason. Now we know he was Voldemort's man. And he seems to have been Voldemort's man with the same dedication he once gave his Hogwarts friends. He betrayed them. Did he betray Voldemort in the end?"

"And he did lie low for over a decade before," Severus nodded. "It all does fit in. We may still be wrong – I may still be wrong. But it's possible."

I thought for a moment. "What I suggest," I finally

said, "is that we take a break here. Go someplace. So that we can both have a good think on whether the burglaries fit in as well. Then we can compare notes. That way we don't influence each other. If we both reach the same conclusions... well, we'll see what to do next, then."

Severus agreed with the plan at once. I left the choice of our destination to him, since he knew the region very well. And he knows me. Whenever we go on an outing, Severus finds not just the sort of place I like visiting, but one that suits my mood exactly.

He didn't disappoint me this time, either. He took us to an old abbey — the Abbaye de Fontfroide — and it was the perfect spot, peaceful and quiet. We were practically the only visitors, and the soothing lines of the Cistercian architecture that I love so much worked their usual magic. We sat on a bench in the cloister for at least an hour, each working out our own thoughts.

There are a great many dear friends in my life that I can talk with and laugh with — and sometimes even cry with — but Severus is the one with whom I can be quiet for hours. I am still very glad I solved the Case of the Living Portrait.

In the end we Apparated back to La Caunette, with a stop at a local supermarket to pick up a ready-cooked meal. Neither Severus nor I felt inclined to cook.

While the meal took care of itself, I fetched us both a drink, and then we sat down on the little terrace. We lifted our glasses to each other.

"Your turn," said Severus.

"I've gone over the things you've said," I started, "and I'm afraid I haven't found any facts that belie the theory that Pettigrew is alive. So far, everything fits.

"Then I've gone over the four ScAvenger burglaries. To see how they fit in. There's one thing that does strike me as odd — we've spoken about it before. The fact that not all the food is taken, and that it's only snacks. The nature of the food still points towards teenage pranksters for me.

"Mind, I can understand the need for prepared food — that makes sense. Pettigrew may not live in a place with cooking facilities. And in the case of Florean's, he might not have found anything other than ice-cream. But surely the Leaky and Sybill's and Molly's houses had other food he could have taken? Does he have a particularly sweet tooth?"

"I don't really know," Severus replied. "Voldemort assigned him to me as my servant. I knew that wasn't the real reason, but I also knew both Pettigrew and I were supposed to take our lead from Voldemort and keep up appearances. So I told Pettigrew what food he had to buy and prepare, and he did. His taste didn't matter."

"I see," I said. "We must keep looking for clues in this direction, then. So far it's a piece that doesn't quite fit. It may be unimportant — but perhaps it's not.

"The other thing that seems odd is the clock. It's

a Weasley family clock. True, Harry Potter is part of the Weasley family now, but the clock is about Molly, Arthur and their children. And it's not a Potter artefact on public display. Come to think of it, the mandala wasn't on *public* display, either. But it definitely was a Potter artefact. "

"You're right, that's odd," said Severus. "Perhaps I am wrong after all." He sounded relieved. Noticing my mild surprise – his comments after the Cat Show case had led me to believe he actually had been a bit jealous that it was Lucius, not him, who had been my side-kick – he smiled somewhat wistfully.

"I may have joked at the notion of 'cosy' mysteries, but I would have enjoyed going over the details of a case like Kipper Malfoy's. Serving as a sparring partner and co-sleuth – while sitting at home and contributing ideas. But this is different. This is about Death Eaters. And it may force me to come out of hiding. Believe me, I'd love to be wrong," he said, and I silently cursed myself for not realising the problem at once. Especially the part about Severus's hiding place – for La Caunette was just that.

"What was Sybill's object again?" Severus continued. "A Mandala?"

"Yes – that is to say, her version of it. Mandalas do not usually carry text, but this one had two of her prophecies. Her strongest ones, she called them, but 'the only true ones' would have been a better expression. They... Damn!"

I stared at him in dismay.

"Rose told me about them. Remember? She said one of them was about Harry being the Chosen one, and she hadn't quite cracked the other, but it was about a *Servant* and his *Master*. I don't know whether Albus told you... "

It seemed unlikely that Albus would not have told Severus, but one never knew. Albus did play his cards very close to his chest.

"He did," said Severus. "That second prophecy refers to Pettigrew himself. And it was a true one. It happened just like Sybill said. Of course, it was only after the fact that one had any idea of what it was about. But that's the whole thing about those Seers, isn't it? By the time a thing has happened, one doesn't need a prophecy anymore, and when it hasn't happened yet, the prophecy is too damn vague to be of any use."

"My thoughts exactly," I said. With Sybill's retirement, Divination had finally disappeared from the Hogwarts curriculum. We currently have a visiting Professor from Beauxbatons, who teaches French. It is going very well, and I do not think I'll encounter many difficulties in making the position a permanent one. I set more store by speaking languages than by speaking in tongues.

"But *revenons à nos moutons*, said Severus. "Or rather, to our little rat. The prophecy was about him. Mind, it only dealt with the events that took

place that night — the night Black and Pettigrew both returned. I don't see how it could say anything about his current or future plans. But there is a connection between Pettigrew and Sybill's mandala."

"There is," I confirmed. "It may not fit completely. But it... it doesn't *unfit*. I know that's not a word, but you get my point."

Severus nodded. "That leaves only the clock. How do we set about that?"

"We'll need to interrogate people," I said. "Find more facts. But preferably without alerting anyone to what we're up to."

"Definitely without that," said Severus. "Now, who would be a good source of information? The Weasley family suggests itself, but which one? Who knows most about Pettigrew?"

"About the clock, you mean," I corrected him. "That's what we need to find out."

"Yes, but any Weasley can tell that. I'm thinking Pettigrew lived in their household as a pet. Which one might know most about him?"

"Severus, you're a genius," I exclaimed. "It completely slipped my mind, but he did! We must definitely interrogate a Weasley — it'll give us lots of information. Let me think. The last few years Pettigrew lived there, he was Ron's pet. He went straight from there to Voldemort. I think I should go and do the interview — there's no need for you to come out of hiding yet. We can discuss everything

when I get back."

"Excellent," said Severus. "But what excuse will you use? You can't say you've taken up DE hunting in your holidays. Or that you're Minerva McGonagall, Spinster Detective, on a secret case. And while you might bring up the clock burglary casually, I can't see how you could throw in a casual, 'So, Ron, tell me all about your former pet, Peter Pettigrew."

"One needs a pretext, of course," I said. "That's how I always operate — and so does Miss Marple. I've told you about the technique."

"Yes, but you're not a harmless, nattering old lady," Severus countered. "That's completely out of character."

"It isn't about the harmless old lady," I told him. "It's about prejudices and how to use them. Remember how I used 'spinster schoolteacher who sees students as substitute children' in the Cat Show case? Let me think about this. I'll find a way."

I sat silently for some time. I wanted to ask specific, detailed information about Pettigrew. Why would a spinster schoolmarm want that? In the middle of her precious holidays? What do schoolmarms do in their holidays? They take educational trips. To see places of historic interest, Baedeker in hand.

Not entirely untrue, but a dead end where Pettigrew fact-finding was concerned. What else do they do? The difficulty is, to most students schoolteachers do not have a life. Their idea of leisure is marking papers. They are only ever interested in

their subject.

True, Ron Weasley left school a long time ago, and he may now realise that I am not stored on an empty shelf in my classroom at the end of the day. But what would he expect me to do in my holidays, other than the small educational trip? Read about Transfiguration, probably.

Wait ...

That was it!

I looked at Severus, positively beaming. "I've found it," I said, and I must confess that I couldn't quite hide my pride. "I'm writing an article about the various forms of Animagi. Or better still, a book. Hermione might look out for an article and wonder why it isn't in TRANSFIGURATION TODAY at some point. A book can take years. And for that book of mine, I want to hear all about Peter Pettigrew, the Animagus who lived in his form for over a decade."

Softly, almost soundlessly, Severus applauded. "Perfection. You *are* brilliant at this detective work. It's all about the prejudice, you're so right. Not a vague, nattering old lady, but a scholarly old biddy with a pet subject. The way to go."

So it was. I sent Ron Weasley an Owl at once, to the Wiltshire address. We got a reply two days later, and luck was on my side. Ron and Hermione had taken their children on a trip to Paris, and Molly had forwarded my Owl to their hotel.

Hermione wants the kids to see the city and become

familiar with another culture, wrote Ron. *I think they're still a bit young for it, but anyhow, that's where we are, and the children like it so far. I've put my foot down about not more than two museums during our trip. Hermione is a wonderful guide, who really makes things interesting, but she can go on a bit sometimes.*

But tomorrow they'll go to the Carnavalet in the morning — about the history of Paris, I gather. I won't mind giving it a miss, and Hermione won't mind my not going if it's to help you. Do have lunch with us afterwards — she'd hate to miss your visit completely.

When I returned from my trip to Paris, Severus had a bottle of chilled rosé ready. "You've had a solid, Parisian lunch," he said, "so I've just made a cold supper. And I've done some spell-work on that ballpoint. It works like a Quick Quill now; it will take notes while you tell me about your trip."

He clearly took his side-kick part very seriously. The Quick Quill was inspired, of course — just what we needed. And the 'cold supper' was *omelettes froides de légumes en terrine*, a dish that takes half a day to prepare. I'd practically kill for it.

I sighed with pleasure. "If anything could make me feel better, this would," I said. "But I'm afraid the news from Ron is not good. Let me tell you first. I don't want to spoil my dinner with it."

We sat down with a preliminary glass of rosé and I launched into my tale.

"First the worst bit. The clock does have a link with Harry."

"What!" exclaimed Severus. "But you said... "

"I did. It used to be just the Weasleys – Arthur, Molly, and their children. But Ron told me how, about a year after the war, Molly and Arthur had it changed to include dials for their grandchildren. Hermione's idea, Ron told me, was that Molly wanted the clock to be about new life, as well. You see, as it stood, it was the children, but with Fred's dial hanging limply. It was a permanent reminder of their loss. Molly couldn't bear to throw it out, but she couldn't bear to remove Fred's dial, either. So she added the new life. That explanation does make sense – Hermione's ideas usually do.

"He, Ron, I mean, was a bit in two minds about it. On the one hand, he understands why Molly did it. "It's sweet, really, and we all appreciate Mum's feelings," he said. "But the thing is – she... well... she's great, but she can be a bit... interfering. I know Harry and Hermione feel... well... monitored, sometimes. I mean – we're the parents, not Mum."

Severus nodded. "So, basically, there was a clock that would indicate when Potter's children are in danger, and that clock is now gone. You're right. That's bad."

"On the plus side, Pettigrew didn't have a sweet tooth. I inquired into his eating habits – told Ron I wanted to find out whether as an Animagus he

would eat the same sort of things he'd eat as a human. They got him special feed for rodents, of course. But he had a strong preference for anything savoury. Cheese. Sausage. Olives. It was entertaining to see him clutch an olive in his little paws and nibble, said Ron. He would not refuse a piece of cake, but he just loved anything savoury."

"So the snacks remain a piece that doesn't fit," said Severus.

"I've also asked about his relationships with the various family members. To... to see who might be most at risk, really," I continued. Severus nodded again, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing. We were reaching the point where we had to prevent an attack – and I could only hope that was what we would end up doing, rather than solving a murder that had been committed despite our efforts.

"Pettigrew came into the household as Charlie's pet," I told Severus. "It seemed he liked Charlie, who is, of course, a natural with animals. During a summer holiday Charlie went to stay with a friend, and Bill was asked to look after Scabbers – that's what Pettigrew the rat was called. But Bill neglected his duties. Ron found out and fed Scabbers instead. And then Arthur found out, and he was absolutely livid. Ron said it was one of the few times he whacked one of his boys.

"Arthur made it painfully clear to Bill that neglecting an animal in one's care is an utterly despicable

thing to do. Bill was punished, and Ron was made responsible for the rat. At the end of that summer, the children all returned to Hogwarts, and Ron and Ginny were the only ones left behind. It was the twins' first year. Charlie, who noticed how much Ron hated staying home alone with just a younger sister for company, gave him Scabbers.

"Ron told me Scabbers didn't seem to like the twins much. They called him a 'big, fat, lazy rat'. Scabbers would do things like leave his droppings on their possessions. Or nibble the pages of their books. But he really disliked Bill. They thought he remembered what had happened, and Arthur used it for years as a further lesson in how dreadful it is to neglect an animal.

"Ron also told me Scabbers defended him once. He bit Gregory Goyle when Goyle and his friends were bullying Ron. And he told me something else, too — Pettigrew faked his own death again, at Hogwarts. Ron thought Hermione's Kneazle had killed Scabbers. They had found bloodstains on a sheet. Ron and Hermione even fell out over it. In the end, they realised it had been a fake."

"So, methodically speaking — for we are agreed that it does look strongly as if Pettigrew is alive?" asked Severus. I agreed. Severus then started to list the possibilities, checking that the Quick Quill ballpoint did its job.

"Methodically speaking, then, we have:

Molly and Arthur — but Arthur spoke up for Scabbers and defended him, so to speak.

Charlie — Scabbers likes him. And he and Paul have no children.

Bill — strong dislike. And they do have a child, you told me.

Percival? He has children, but is there any indication Pettigrew hates him?"

There wasn't, and I told him so. "And Pettigrew liked Ginny — Ginny played with him in the year she and Ron were at home together." I said. "George is still single."

So Pettigrew might want to attack Bill's child. But the removal of Potter artefacts pointed towards a hatred of Harry — understandable in Pettigrew's case. Only, Harry's children were Ginny's, too. I put these points before Severus.

"I've thought about that, today. After all, Weasley knows about Pettigrew during his undercover years, so to speak, but I lived in the same house with him during the Voldemort period. Unfortunately, we never spoke much. I treated him every inch like a servant. That was what Voldemort expected me to do. And Pettigrew pretended it was an assignment he resented. He needed to hide the fact that he was there as Voldemort's spy, of course.

"But I did drop the occasional derogatory remark about Order members. So that Pettigrew would have the right sort of thing to report. And on one occasion

he did speak up for someone. I was surprised at the time, but your story of Ron being good to him and Pettigrew defending him by biting Goyle was quite revealing. It seems he has some sense of loyalty."

I noticed that Severus used the present tense in speaking about Pettigrew. It confirmed that we both thought the same thing — he was alive and behind the ScAvenger business.

"I once said something about Lupin. Called him a scrofulous mongrel," Severus continued. "and Pettigrew got angry. I've tried to recall his exact words, and I think I managed."

I didn't doubt it. Severus has an excellent retentive memory, and his ability to remember conversations verbatim is astonishing. Severus then started to repeat Pettigrew's words, and he even sounded a bit like him. Slightly whinging.

"Remus is OK; don't you call him a mongrel. He can't help being a werewolf. But he's OK. He tried to defend you, you know. Told Black and Potter to stop the bullying. It was all Black and Potter — you know it was. Remus just went along. He'd never had friends, you see. And they were his friends."

"I told him they had all been despicable bullies and that there was no excuse. And that both he and Lupin had been as bad as the others. He claimed again that it was Black and Potter mostly, that Lupin went along because he'd never had friends. I asked him what his, Pettigrew's, excuse had been. This is

what he told me.

"At first, I wanted to be like them. And they accepted me, and it was great. But then I began to understand that they weren't really my friends. I wasn't their equal. I was the clown. The stupid one. The hanger-on. The one who was there to make wonderful Black and Potter look even better. Called me 'Wormtail', they did."

"Black was the worst. He sent you to the Shrieking Shack, remember? Remus was devastated when he found out. And Potter wasn't concerned about you — he just wanted to do the noble, Gryffindor thing and save his enemy. Because it would make him look good.

"Black even tried to blame me. Told Dumbledore I'd suggested it. I had not! Dumbledore didn't believe Black. But it made Remus doubt. Remus really had been my friend, and because of Black he ended up doubting me.

"Well, I got back at them. At both of them. Potter wanted to be a big hero — and he ended up being a big, dead hero.

"And Black tried to frame me — so I framed him."

I stared at him. "So you're telling me Pettigrew ended up hating James and Sirius, and he took revenge?"

"Yes, and there is worse. On one occasion Pettigrew said something about Harry Potter, and I reminded him Potter had saved his life. He said that Potter was just like his father, just like James. Wanted to look like a big hero. Saving people all over the place, but really despising them. And Potter would end like his father: a big, dead hero, because one day he'd fall into a trap, too."

We both knew what Severus meant. If Pettigrew would attack one of the Weasley grandchildren – Victoire, possibly, which would mean revenge on Bill, as well – Harry would come to the rescue. Would walk into the trap.

We then talked until past midnight about what to do next. With singularly little result.

The best thing would be to ferret out Pettigrew's hiding place. However, this was simply not possible. As a rat he could hide anywhere. Once can't check the entire British rodent population.

The second best thing would be to catch him red-handed at his next attempt – but there was no saying where that would be.

The third idea was to lay a trap for him. But how? We needed to make sure that the place was accessible, contained food and a Potter artefact, and, the most difficult part, we had to make sure he'd go there on a specific date.

In the end, Severus said he'd try to come up with something. A detective he might not be, but he knew how to lay a trap and plan ahead. He mentioned that Elphias Doge's birthday party had been the occasion for Pettigrew's first burglary. His reasoning was that Pettigrew had chosen the night after the party because of the large number of guests – each and every one of whom could be a suspect for stealing the Potter picture. Later on, Pettigrew

seemed to have grown more confident, as there were no guests at Sybill's.

This made me sit up straight. "Wait a minute," I said. "There's one more thing the burglaries have in common – three of them do, at least. On three occasions, the Weasley tribe was near-by. They all went to Elphias's party. He's an old friend of the family.

"They were all staying at Arthur and Molly's place when Sybill was burgled, too. And you remember that letter Molly sent me? She wrote that Fleur, Hermione, and Ginny and their families all went to Diagon Alley to do the Hogwarts shopping ahead of the end-of-August rush. Before they would set off on their individual holidays. The affair at Florean's shop was during that time.

"I don't know about the burglary the Burrow, but… "

We looked at each other. "That's the most vital one – the one that removed the clock which could warn them," said Severus. "A sufficient reason to deviate from the pattern. For a pattern it is. And that will help us. We need to create an occasion where the Weasley tribe can be invited –with a possibility to stay the night. Preferably in a public place, with plenty of food. And there must be a Potter artefact."

"And we'd better not wait too long," I added. "At some point, Pettigrew may get tired of the ScAvenger act and strike for real. This is one case where I don't want to end up investigating a genuine abduction – or worse."

"True," said Severus. "Now, for this so-called social

occasion. We couldn't set up anything here — in France, I mean?"

"It would be difficult," I said. "Make that impossible. The Weasleys are on their various holidays, and what could I possibly invent to make them all go through the expense and bother of the trip? It would take something on the scale of a wedding to make people travel that far — a real once-in-a-lifetime event. So it will have to be in September. Hogsmeade suggests itself. School will have started by then, and I can't be away for too long."

"I've an idea," said Severus. "What about your birthday? We'd have to wait until October 4th, which is unfortunate, but we must hope that Pettigrew won't strike before that date. You could give a big birthday party and invite all the Weasleys. It would be a perfect occasion."

"Except for one thing," I said, sternly. "I *never* celebrate my birthday. It's a well-known fact. It would be utterly out-of-character for me to give a party. I can't think of anything I'd like less."

"True, it would be thought odd. Unless — it wouldn't happen to be a crown year, would it? That might be a reason."

"I'll be 87 this year," I said, with some considerable relief. Pomona and Poppy have told me for years that birthdays can be fun. And for years I've agreed with them, pointing out that the 'fun' is in celebrating exactly as one wishes. *But you don't celebrate,*

they would argue. *Let me leave it alone, then,* I would answer, feeling as miserly as Ebenezer Scrooge himself, but refusing to give in. I knew they would love my change of heart and throw themselves wholeheartedly in the preparations. As would Filius, who is a very perceptive man and has never put any pressure on me, but who does love a good party.

They would have surprises.

They might have songs, even.

The mind boggles.

Severus smiled. "I can see that this would have to be a last resort," he said. "Is there anything else we can think of?"

"Hermione's birthday is in September," I said. "But I don't see how we can contrive to make her give a big party in Hogsmeade with all Weasley children present."

"How many are at Hogwarts right now?" Severus asked.

"So far, only Victoire, the eldest girl of Bill and Fleur. Next year, there will be a second one, Dominique, I think, and if I remember correctly Percy's eldest girl will start as well. But this coming September, Victoire is the only one — and Teddy Lupin, who is almost a member of the tribe. He's Harry's godson, you see, and he very often stays with Harry and Ginny. But he's not on the Weasley clock."

"It might be feasible to get Victoire to Hermione's birthday party, if it was in Hogsmeade," said Severus. "But I don't see how we can arrange it without taking her into

our confidence. And that would mean she'd tell Ron and Harry, and we'd have the whole tribe in a panic."

"Not necessarily," I countered. I felt there was much merit in this notion of Hermione's birthday. It is mid-September, if my memory serves me right, and for all sorts of reasons it would be so much more suitable than my own. Because, for instance... Well, it would just be much better.

"We would have to confide in those three," I explained. "Harry, Ron, and Hermione, I mean. But they know how to keep secrets; they can play their cards as close to their chest as Albus, almost." I sighed. For six years, that particular ability had been the blight of my existence. *Why is it always you three?* I had asked them once. But in this case, it might work to our advantage.

On the other hand, an enforced collaboration between Potter and Severus might turn this case into the least cosy mystery in the history of cosies.

We discussed the matter for some time, Severus listing arguments in favour of my birthday, I promoting Hermione's, but with lessening ardour, for I began to see that monitoring the Potter/Snape collaboration might arguably be the one thing worse than having a birthday party.

In the end, we decided to give it a good night's sleep. And the next morning, Argus Filch came to the rescue.

Whenever I am away from Hogwarts during my holidays, Argus monitors my Owls and sends on those he thinks important. So far, his judgment has never failed him. And on this occasion, too, I could clearly see why he had decided to send on Neville Longbottom's Owl – even though Argus could not possibly know just how much it was manna from heaven.

I must begin by explaining that Neville Longbottom, who had always had a marked ability for Herbology, started his career by helping out Pomona Sprout in the year after the battle. Much damage had been done to the conservatories, and Pomona, who had sustained a back injury during the fight, was badly in need of help. In the end, Neville stayed on for two years, and then he decided to take a degree in Herbology. He had assisted Pomona with lessons as well, and he had discussed with both of us the possibility of a teaching position at Hogwarts. We were both more than agreeable, and when Neville returned four years later, with a first, too, he had been given the position of assistant teacher.

It was a part-time position, which suited everyone. Pomona was not ready to retire fully yet, but she enjoyed a lightening of her teaching duties. And Neville used his free time to prepare a PhD, which he had nearly completed when the summer holidays started.

He now wrote to me saying that the thesis was finished, and, moreover, would be printed as a book – aimed at a rather larger audience than is usual for

such works. He was modest about it, Neville invariably is, but it was clear to me that he had managed to write a truly seminal work.

Neville would obtain his PhD early in September, and two days special leave had already been arranged before the holidays. But the publisher wanted to present the book at a separate little gathering.

Neville wanted this to take place at the Hog's Head. Ever since the year of the Battle, he has been very close to Aberforth, and Neville is nothing if not loyal to his friends.

He wanted it to be a small gathering, with just his closest friends present. Since these would include Harry Potter, it would still make The Daily Prophet, and the publisher was more than ready to fall in with his wishes.

Augusta Longbottom, however, had other ideas. They involved the Leaky, a party tent, and a guest list of over a hundred people.

Neville wrote to say that he didn't want to inconvenience Hogwarts further with additional leave of absence, and if only I would confirm that Saturday 8th September would be convenient for the staff, he would inform Augusta that everything was settled.

Augusta Longbottom has been on the Hogwarts Board of Directors for years, and a very active board member she is. Argus knows exactly how I feel about her activities, even though I have obviously never used the word 'meddling' in his presence. Hence his forwarding of the letter.

I saw at once that Neville's book launch was the perfect event for our trap. Much better than Hermione's birthday which would involve all the awkwardness of a Severus/Harry alliance, and certainly much better than a birthday party for me.

Severus agreed at once that this was an occasion made in heaven. I was faintly surprised at his immediate enthusiasm — his opinions on Longbottom when the latter was still his student had been strong. And misjudged, to my mind. I know I have a sharp tongue myself, and there have been occasions where I later regretted a remark to a student, judging it a discouragement rather the correction I had intended. But Severus sometimes paralyzed students with his sarcasm. They were that terrified they were simply beyond learning anything.

I know that later on, in his La Caunette years, when he no longer needed to teach for a living, he agreed with me. His inability to suffer fools gladly made him not precisely unsuitable for a teaching position, but definitely unsuitable for teaching young children. He always did wonders with his N.E.W.T. students, though.

"I've had occasion to observe Longbottom during my year as Headmaster," Severus said. "I was favourably impressed. I know he'll agree to help if you put the situation to him, and he'll be a useful ally. We'll have to tell him, I think?"

"If we want to make sure he invites the right people, yes," I said. "He might not invite Bill and Fleur otherwise. Just Ron, Harry, and Hermione. Also, we'll need a Potter artefact in the Hogs Head. Aberforth doesn't have one."

"Aberforth is the salt of the earth," said Severus. "But where telling Longbottom is concerned... I was just hesitating because... from what you just told me, it's his big day. This book, I mean. His achievement. And here we are, risking to mess it up with... well... with a Death Eater hunt."

I was touched. Severus had thought of something I had completely overlooked myself in my eagerness to get rid of the dreaded birthday party. But he was absolutely right: Neville would agree to help at once, because he is that sort of person, but he also deserved his day in the sun without any DE associations. After everything he has suffered because of them, and he has suffered more than most people, there should not be a cloud on this, his special day.

It showed uncommon kindness and insight on Severus's sight, and he would not thank me for saying so.

So we simply discussed the possibility of hiding our plans from Neville. I could ask him, as a special favour, to invite Bill and Fleur. If necessary I could invent a reason, but as Neville's Headmistress, I might not even be obliged to give one.

And it seemed most likely that Pettigrew would make his move after the party. That had been the

pattern before – the middle of the night, when everyone in the house was asleep, or an empty house, as in Sybill's case. The Hog's Head was rarely empty during the day, so he would go for the night. Neville need not know a thing. Severus and I could stay behind and guard the place.

Aberforth would have to be in our confidence. But Aberforth was taciturn by nature, and Severus trusted him. Severus pointed out that, as a worst-case scenario, Pettigrew might manage to kill one of us, might even manage to injure another, and escape in rat-shape. That would still leave two people aware of the danger. We did not underestimate Pettigrew's abilities, but the chance that he would be able to kill all three of us seemed strictly hypothetical – we are all quite good at magic.

I was glad to note that on this occasion, Severus had no intention whatsoever of playing a lone hand. It was that tendency of his that had caused a long coldness between us. This time, clearly, it would be different.

It was with some hesitation that I then brought up the subject of Severus's own participation. I knew how much he valued the peace and quiet he had finally found in La Caunette, and if truth be told, I'd sooner ask Neville to join Aberforth and myself, however much I agreed with Severus that he deserved his day in the sun, than ask Severus to come out of hiding.

But, as I soon found out, I had underestimated

Severus's ability to think of everything.

"I wouldn't dream of accompanying you," he said. "You will be accompanied by a Monsieur Dupont – a Frenchman with an English mother, hence his fluency in the language. I am a dab hand at brewing potions, you know."

I saw what he meant at once. "But will the Polyjuice be ready in time?" I asked. Of course, Severus had thought of that, too.

"I always have a decent quantity ready," he told me. "Ever since your first visit. Just in case you... well, just in case."

Just in case I needed him.

I gave him a quick smile, which was about as much gratefulness as he could handle.

"Where did you find Monsieur Dupont?" I asked him.

"At the local hairdresser's," Severus replied. "It seemed a good place to collect a few locks of hair."

I carefully kept a poker face, but I was delighted. There was a hairdresser in this story, after all. Severus Poirot, Master Detective. It was too good to be true.

We quickly drew up the rest of our plans. I would discuss things with Aberforth. Aberforth would have to come up with some sort of Potter artefact, and we would spread the news of it being there. He wouldn't like it, but he would see the necessity.

I would write to Neville, confirm 8th September, and ask him whether Bill and Fleur were on the guest list, explaining that it would be rather convenient for me if they were.

And Severus would arrive in good time for the party. We both felt that the set-up was too good for Pettigrew to resist. All the vital Weasleys present. Lots of food to be had. A Potter artefact. And, best of all, the possibility to check out the Hog's Head. If we were right, and Pettigrew was considering Victoire to lure Harry into a trap, he'd want to check out a place that had a hidden corridor to the castle – well, not exactly hidden since the mass-evacuation of the battle, but it would still be very useful for a rat.

After that, we decided to make the most of what was left of my holiday.

When I got back to Hogwarts, the first thing I did after unpacking my bags was to go through my in-tray. As I had hoped, there was a letter from Neville, thanking me for my cooperation and confirming that he had invited Bill and Fleur. They had both accepted.

Then I went to see Aberforth. 8th September was approaching quickly, and he needed to be informed. Also, there was the matter of the Potter artefact.

While we were sitting in his living room, with two glasses of Firewhisky and the bottle ready on the table, I thought once again how similar Aberforth and Albus really were. True, Albus could elevate small talk to an art if it suited him, and, as Aberforth said when we were both laying out the

dead after the Battle, amidst the screams and tears of their bereft families, "I always knew I had no small talk, and now I know I have no big talk, either."

But he has the same capacity for listening that Albus had. Listening closely, without interruptions, and then grasping all the salient facts.

"Bit about the food is strange," was Aberforth's first remark after I had finished my tale. "Prefers savoury – can't go to a shop for anything – still only takes sweet things, and not all the food. Would have been child's play to shrink it."

"That's true," I said. "It's the one thing Pierre and I can't fit in." I had told Aberforth what he needed to know about Monsieur Pierre Dupont, my good friend from France, who had been so very helpful working out the details of this case.

"Makes it sound like a prank after all," said Aberforth. "But I see your point. Can't very well wait until we've found a corpse to make sure."

I noticed the use of 'we'. That was Aberforth at his best. Neither small talk nor big – just the immediate acceptance that he was in on this, that it was now his fight, too.

"Now, about the Potter artefact," I said. "You wouldn't happen…"

"No. Stupid nonsense. Potter's a decent chap. Doesn't like to see his face plastered all over Wizarding Britain. People should think about how he feels, not about their own glory. But that's people

for you. Give me goats any day."

He paused for a moment, and refilled our glasses. For Aberforth, it had been a long speech.

"Was an article once, though. Few months after the Battle. Skeeter woman wrote it. About the Hog's Head and Potter meeting his friends here. For that so-called "Dumbledore's Army". *The Other Dumbledore*, she called it. Quoted me at length. Never said a word to her, mind."

We agreed that I would get the article from The Daily Prophet's ledgers, on the pretence that Aberforth wanted it for his pub, and that I would make sure the news spread around. Several of my former students work for the Prophet, so getting the article would be easy. And I could arrange to meet whomever would get it for me at The Leaky Cauldron. I would just have to mention Aberforth's desire to have it during a moment when Tom was at our table. Tom spreads news faster than any paper could.

All seemed in readiness for the night of 8th September. Monsieur Dupont would arrive in the early hours of the 8th, I told Aberforth. He probably wouldn't need a bed, as he planned to leave as quickly as possible afterwards, but if necessary he'd stay in one of the Hog's Head's guest rooms.

The day of 8th September duly arrived, and Neville's book launch was an outstanding success. While it has no immediate bearing on this case, there was

one surprising event my readers may find interesting.

The launch started as these things do, with a very enthusiastic encomium from Neville's publisher. His praise was both exuberant and well-deserved. I have not read the book myself yet, but Pomona has read the first draft, and she has assured me it is a work that should be one of the Hogwarts set books for N.E.W.T. level Herbology. That was the short version – her full report on the book's excellence took three hours.

Then Neville made a very good speech himself. He was brief, with a few warm words for Pomona, his mentor, for Augusta, who had taught him never to give up, and for his mother, whom he thanked for passing on her well-known gift for gardening. I freely admit that I had to swallow a few times when Neville included Alice in his achievements.

He ended on a touch of humour – said he also wanted to thank his good friends Harry, Hermione, and Ron, for listening to his whinging while he wrote the book. Even if they made him pay for a round whenever he mentioned the M-word.

When Neville said "M-word", everyone looked up in shocked surprise, of course. But all was made clear. Neville explained that, since his generous publisher paid for today's drinks, he now felt free to tell them that they really should read the chapter on the Mimbulus Mimbeltonia, for the Mimbulus Mimbeltonia was a most interesting plant, and he, Neville, couldn't understand how people could ever

get tired of hearing about it. He ended his speech with a toast "to the Mimbulus Mimbeltonia".

Amidst general laughter, Neville gave the first copies of the book to his Gran and Pomona, and after that everyone had a lovely time chatting and catching up with each other. I made a point of talking to Bill and Fleur and of making sure Neville saw me do it – I had, after all, asked him to invite them.

It was easy to find a topic for conversation, for everyone mentioned the one, big surprise: Augusta attended the gathering in her trade-mark green robes, red bag at her arm, but... with a new, very fetching velvet hat. Black, with a green band and just one small feather.

We all wondered how that particular miracle had come to pass, and the end Neville told me he had 'told his Gran that a new hat was in order, and she quite agreed with him'. A feat that puts much more than just one feather in Neville's cap, in my opinion.

When the party broke up, I pretended to leave for Hogwarts but returned when everyone else had left. Aberforth and I covered the remaining food but left it clearly in sight on the counter. We checked that the article about Potter was still in its frame on the wall and fetched Monsieur Dupont from his upstairs room, where he had awaited the end of the festivities.

And then we settled down to wait. Severus and Aberforth stood behind the counter, ready to duck and hide at the slightest sounds, and I sat on one

of the tables, in cat-shape. As Severus had pointed out, "a cat on the premises is useful when it comes to dealing with a rat."

Aberforth had grunted that a ferret wouldn't come amiss, either. "A *furet*? Very true. But we will be the *furets*, if necessary, *Monsieur* Dumbledore," said Monsieur Dupont, fully in character. He had even gone as far as to inquire what the correct word would be for a group of *furets*.

"A business," said Aberforth. "And call me Abe. Don't care for *Monsieur* Dumbledore."

"We will be a Business of Ferrets, then, Abe," smiled Monsieur Dupont, adding that he was called Pierre.

I could see that the title for this case had been decided then and there. THE BUSINESS OF FERRETS it would be.

After that little exchange we remained silent and waited as the autumn evening turned into night.

It must have been around midnight when we heard sounds on the first floor. Severus and I had checked out the place very carefully earlier that evening, and we were almost as familiar with its lay-out as Aberforth. The sounds were those of the portrait in the sitting room, Ariana's portrait, opening slowly.

Silently, Severus and Aberforth moved from behind the bar to the main area. Whoever had entered the place would come down the rickety wooden staircase behind the bar. It was surprising that Pettigrew, if it was Pettigrew, would come from

the corridor to Hogwarts, rather than from outside. Surprising and worrying.

Had he been present, in rat-shape, during the afternoon? Had he managed to sneak upstairs, in the heat of the party, and used the corridor already? If so – what about Victoire? Was Pettigrew *returning* from whatever he planned to do – and what would we find at Hogwarts?

We did not have to wait long for an answer. There were footsteps on the staircase – two pair of them. Very soft and muffled, as if the intruders had taken off their shoes.

And sure enough we saw two pairs of legs. Clad in socks and blue jeans. And far too skinny to be Pettigrew's.

Students!

Severus quickly threw a wordless camouflage spell and withdrew into the furthest shadows, and I jumped silently off the table I had been sitting on and hid underneath. Students might recognize my Animagus form – I use it in class, and it is always a moment when everyone pays attention.

Aberforth struck the pose of a publican who unexpectedly hears intruders in his house, and very convincing he was.

And then the students were fully visible.

I almost gasped.

Victoire Weasley and Teddy Lupin!

The very last ones we wanted to see here.

Aberforth, like the experienced fighter he was,

instantly did the right thing. He drew his wand and threw a *Petrificus Totalus*. The miscreants went down like logs. He then cast a *Mufflatio* around them, so that we could speak freely.

"There," said Aberforth. "Nothing odd about a man petrifying an intruder. Headmistress won't cut up roughly with me for doing that to students – not when I thought there was danger."

"Nor will the parents; I'll see to that," I said, having Transfigured back as soon as the children went down. "Quick thinking, Abe. Now what shall we do?"

"Pettigrew may still come in," said Severus. "This may just be a coincidence."

"True," I said, "but... "

There was no need to spell it out. All along we had told each other that, while everything fitted the Pettigrew scenario (except for that one detail of the sweet snacks), everything still fitted the Teenage Prank case, too. Was this the solution of the mystery? Could we take the risk?

"If Pettigrew shows up, " I said, "he'll most likely come from outside. And while he will probably slip in as a rat, for convenience sake he'll Transfigure as soon as he sees the coast is clear. Rats don't have opposing thumbs."

"At which point I can Petrify him," said Severus. His camouflage spell was outstanding – Pettigrew wouldn't be able to spot him.

"Meanwhile," Severus continued, "Aberforth can

Levitate these two upstairs and undo the Petrificus. He'll then question him – as he would, had he found them by accident. That way we'll know what their story is, and Minerva can listen in."

"Aye," said Aberforth. "She'll be comfy enough under the sofa."

Given the proverbial lack of cleanliness in the Hog's Head, that seemed highly debatable. But I've fought in three wars, and I've known worse. We fell in with Severus's suggestion readily enough, and Aberforth and I Levitated the students to the sitting room. I took up my position under the sofa, and Aberforth broke the spell.

"And what do you think you're doing?" he shouted, as soon as Teddy and Victoire had struggled to an upright position. "Sneaking out at night? Up to no good, you are." And he Accio'ed their wands.

"We... we... we... " stammered Teddy.

"We were... we were just.... " added Victoire.

"Just what, exactly?" thundered Aberforth.

"Doing a kitchen raid," said Teddy, with the look of someone who thinks he sees a small ray of light at the end of a tunnel.

"Kitchen raid?" said Aberforth. "This is Hogwarts' kitchen? This is where all those Elves cook dinner for a few hundred people? Fancy that. And I never noticed a thing. Must be my old age."

"Yes... No... Well... Yes... " said Victoire. She took a deep breath and confessed, "Neville's – Professor

Longbottom, I mean — his party. For the book. We've heard all about it. From our parents."

"And from Harry," said Teddy, as if that justified their situation. "And we thought... "

"You thought you'd come here and steal my food," said Aberforth. He said it in a perfectly calm voice, but with such a well-pitched inflexion that the two children suddenly fully realized that what they had been doing was, in fact, stealing. Not a prank at all, but theft. Something to be ashamed of.

And ashamed they were.

I was, once again, strongly aware of the resemblance between the Dumbledore brothers. In exactly such a tone Albus had made generations of miscreants aware of their deeds, whenever a prank crossed the line to a serious misdemeanour.

Albus would then assume the students' mistake had been a genuine one. That they had truly not realized how unfunny their so-called prank had been, and that, now that they had a more grown-up insight, they were sorry and would never do it again. For they were not, of course, the kind of people who would intentionally commit a despicable deed.

Albus's skills in achieving a true learning moment for the students had been honed in decades of teaching, but the way Aberforth spoke and looked at the now very red-faced children showed the innate talent that clearly ran in the Dumbledore family.

"Did you take anything from me?" asked Aberforth.

"No, we didn't. Truly we didn't," said Teddy.

"We didn't have time," added Victoire. "We came for the party food and... " she stopped suddenly. And for the picture of Harry, of course.

"Good," said Aberforth, and paused briefly. "Only I'll have to check that. Can't really trust you, can I? Get up."

The two children scrambled to their feet. They were positively puce by now, realizing they were the kind of people whose word one cannot trust.

"Accio," said Aberforth, with a disdainful flick of his wand. I could not see what came out of their pockets, but I heard the crackling of a piece of parchment.

"Is this note a private one, or does it have to do with you being here?" asked Aberforth.

I could practically hear Teddy swallow, and then I heard him say, "It has to do with us being here. Sir." Clearly Aberforth's lesson was working.

I heard further crackling as Aberforth unfolded the note. *"The ScAvengers were here,"* he read out loud. "The ScAvengers? You two are behind that business? Best tell me all, then."

I heaved a deep but noiseless sigh. The Scavengers! A teenage prank, after all. I must admit that my first reaction was to be right royally pissed off. There are no other words for it. All that work, all that anxiety we had suffered, our fears that we would be too late, that we would end up investigating a real crime, perhaps even a murder. And it was a teenage prank after all.

As I had said from the beginning.

Damn Severus!

My only consolation was that Severus, standing at the bottom of the staircase, listening with all his might, would feel as bad as I did. If only I could throw him the look he so very much deserved. It would be a Look with a capital L, as soon as I would have the chance, I promised myself.

"Come on," said Aberforth. "Out with it." And the children began their tale.

"It was just a joke," said Victoire.

"Or we thought it was," added Teddy.

"Like a kitchen raid, you know, Sir," said Victoire. "The first one was after Elphias Doge's birthday party at the Leaky. We all went there. All the Weasleys, I mean. And Teddy, of course. And we were hungry and we felt like a bit of fruit cake and we went down together."

"And then we took the cake," Teddy continued, "and we looked around a bit. And we saw that picture of Harry. And he hates those pictures, really, he does. He hates that everyone always goes on about the Battle and him being The Chosen One. He doesn't want to talk about it."

"But everyone always does," Victoire added. "Not just to Uncle Harry. To us, too, all the time. And we hate it. I mean, I know it was very important, and that everyone was very brave, and that we live in a safe world because of them. We *know* that, Sir,

really we do. But... "

"You don't want to hear about it all the time." Teddy had taken up the story again. They reminded me of the Weasley Twin cross-talk act I had heard so often during their Hogwarts years, and I realized how strong the bond between these two must be.

"I mean," Teddy continued, "It's not ... I don't know how to explain, but... You see, my parents *died* in that battle. That's a big thing. And then people go and say things like, 'how dare you climb that tree – that's dangerous, and your parents *died* to make the world a safe place.'

"And that's just it, see? They died for a *big* thing. For *freedom*. It wasn't about me climbing a tree or flying a broom."

"And I get the same," said Victoire. "Like, 'your Uncle *died* to keep you all safe'. And I know it's terrible that he died, and that Granny never really got over it, because Mum says it's the very worst thing in the world to lose a child. But my Uncle Fred didn't die to stop me from pulling pranks, I don't think!"

She was absolutely right there. Fred Weasley might have died of shame, had the Art of Pranking died out with the next generation. As to this whole ScAvengers thing, he would have held their coats and cheered them on.

"And then we took the picture. And we left the note." Teddy's turn again. "I said we were scavenging, and then Victoire said, no, we were Avenging

Harry. And Uncle Fred and my parents and everyone who... who... well, Harry didn't fight to get his portrait on Tom's wall."

I began to feel a warm sympathy for these children. They couldn't quite put it the way they wanted to, not yet, but they objected to both the use of war heroes for people's personal glory, and the abuse of their sacrifice for unworthy things.

I remember an occasion during the year Remus Lupin held the DADA post. He informed me that Harry had sneaked out of the castle, despite orders to the contrary, to go out on Hogsmeade Saturday. And he, Remus, had brought up the topic of Harry's parents and their sacrifice when berating him.

Remus was seriously concerned whether he had done the right thing. "James would have approved of Harry," he said. "Normally, he would have been all for it. I mean, if it was just those guardians of Harry not signing the note, and him getting out regardless, James would have approved. Hell, he would have given him the... never mind... he would have been fine with it. But now... "

I had to suppress a smile. And at the same time, I had to swallow. That 'never mind' of Remus – what was it that James would have given him? Something to do with the Marauders, something Remus had nearly given away. But a Marauder doesn't grass. For one brief moment, I saw young Mr Lupin and Mr Potter.

Remus was right: James would have approved of

Harry sneaking out. In normal circumstances. But in normal circumstances Harry would have grown up with his parents and...

The waste of it all. The sheer, bloody waste.

But Remus had been right, too, in bringing up James and Lily when he did, and I told him so. For the circumstances weren't normal: there was a killer out there, and Harry didn't risk a mere detention, he risked the very life his parents had died for.

And I have to admit that, on this occasion, I felt those two children were right. Bringing up the death of relatives for no better reason than tree-climbing, forbidden broom-flying and other childish pranks is emotional blackmail, nothing less.

I happen to think that blackmail is more despicable than theft.

Meanwhile the Teddy and Victoire cross-talk had gone on to the subject of the clock. It was as I had thought as soon as I heard who was behind the ScAvenger business: they had taken the clock because it might give away Victoire. True, there was no spot saying *up to no good* on that clock. I suspect Arthur's influence there. A clock to warn for danger, yes. One to warn for pranks – no. Arthur has strong and occasionally quite unorthodox ideas about what freedom means, especially where his children are concerned.

But the children had not taken the risk and removed the clock. It was in the Weasley's attic,

they explained, in an old trunk, safely wrapped in a sheet. They had justified that particular theft to themselves not just by the risk for Victoire, but because Harry hated the clock. Or rather, the monitoring of his children that was the result.

Of course they used the word 'hated' the way teenagers do: for everything from mashed swedes to the Voldemort years. But keeping in mind what Ron had told me about his and Harry's feelings on that clock, Victoire and Teddy were probably right.

I decided then and there to take up the subject of the clock's whereabouts with Arthur, not with Molly. Arthur would deal with it in the right way.

Meanwhile the children had reached the end of their story.

"Well," said Aberforth. "I'll say this for you: I can see your point about those things you took and how Harry feels about them. But they must be returned. If you had realized it was theft, you wouldn't have taken them."

The spitting image of Albus.

Victoire and Teddy nodded as if their heads would fall off.

"You two go back and you never say a word about being here. I'll deal with it. Make sure those things get returned. With the help of Headmistress McGonagall – I'll have to tell her."

A wail rose up. "No, Sir, please, no. Not McGonagall, Sir, please. She'll ground us, like, forever. Please, Sir."

"That's Headmistress McGonagall to you," said

Aberforth, sternly. "And she may surprise you yet. Just leave it all to me. We're old friends, the Headmistress and I."

I could not see his face from where I was hiding, but I'm certain a conspirational wink was thrown in.

"Now, one more thing before you go," said Aberforth. I saw his feet turn around. "Accio pitcher and plate!" he called. I heard the faint whiff of things floating through the air.

"Here's a plate of cold ham and some pumpkin juice," he said. "You'll need something to build up your strength, after this adventure."

No mean feat to Accio those things up a winding staircase without spilling. People often think of Aberforth as less powerful, but they forget he is less powerful only when compared to Albus, not to the average witch or wizard.

"Give me your word of honour you'll stay quiet about all this," he continued. The children both promised.

"Now off you go. And if you get caught at the other end, remember your word," Aberforth told them.

"We will, Sir."

"We never went here."

"We went to raid the Hogwarts kitchen."

"And then we went to the Room of Requirement to eat the things. Which we'll do, Sir."

"So that's why we were caught on the way from the Room to our dorm, see?"

An excellent, on-the-spot fabrication of lies. There

is more than a hint of the Weasley Twins in those two, and I will watch them sharply from now on.

Teddy and Victoire left, and Aberforth put the portrait back behind them. Silently, we both descended the staircase. Severus was waiting for us at the bottom, and I am pleased to say that, when I looked at him, he actually stared at the ground.

"Not our most glorious moment," he said.

I continued to Look.

"Not my most glorious moment," he amended.

"The less said about it, the better," I said, and there was a hint of eagerness in his nod.

We took our leave of Aberforth and went behind the back of his pub — a safe place for Severus to Disapparate, well out of sight.

"In the end, of course, it's a good thing Pettigrew wasn't involved," I said.

"So it is," said Severus. "All these years I was convinced he was dead. It was just... The case against it..."

"The case against it was a believable one," I agreed. "So believable that we didn't pay enough attention to the one element that didn't fit — the snacks. We both thought it was odd, but we felt there was no time to go into it. What if it had been Pettigrew, and what if he had struck again, and quickly?"

I didn't like admitting it, but it hadn't been just Severus who was at fault — I had accepted his ideas readily, and I had been as convinced as he was that there was something serious going on.

"I assume," said Severus, casually, "that people will not want to read a case as insipid as this one."

So much for being my faithful side-kick.

So much for out-cosying Kipper Malfoy.

I had admitted that I, too, had thought there *was* a case to investigate. And I had already shown my willingness to let bygones be bygones. In fact, I think my restraint on the subject was verging on the saintly.

But there are limits.

"I can't see Flourish and Botts rushing in to print it, true," I told Severus.

He nodded. "The plot just isn't good enough," he said, for all the world like a man who has published several Cases himself.

I let him believe in his good fortune for a few seconds.

Then I mentioned that there were, however, other ways of publication. "It's really too bad that a detective story starring 'Monsieur Dupont' won't sell anywhere," I said. "But I promise you this, my friend, if this story finds an audience, I will do full justice to the cosiest side-kick a spinster could have."

And on that pleasing prospect the case of if Minerva McGonagall and the Business of Ferrets came to an end.

FINIS

Colophon:

The layout and formatting of this document was done in Adobe InDesign. Interior decorations are composed of commercial clip art from Getty Images and Anagord's Plaid Tartain textures. Other images were produced in the DAZ Studio and postworked in Photoshop. Cover was created in Adobe Photoshop. Red Hen Logo is adapted from Commercial clip art from Aridi Computer Graphics.

Fonts used are: the Journal family, from Emigré foundary for body text. Titling and headings are set in BattleLines from Blambot. Drop caps are St Nicholas Demo from Fontcraft Scriptorium. P22's Michaelangelo and Edward Hopper and Bill's DECOrations were also used in this project.

Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book.

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