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Opening extract from

Arsenic for Tea: A Murder Most Unladylike Mystery

Written by

Robin Stevens

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1

Something dreadful has happened to Mr Curtis.

I am quite surprised to realize that I mind. If you had asked me this morning what I thought of him, I should have told you that Mr Curtis was not a nice man at all. But not even the nastiest person deserves this.

Of course, Daisy doesn't see it like that. To her, crimes are not real things to be upset about. She is only interested in the fact that something has *happened*, and she wants to understand what it means. So do I, of course – I wouldn't be a proper member of the Detective Society if I didn't – but no matter how hard I try, I can't *only* think like a detective.

The fact is, Daisy and I will both need to think like detectives again. You see, just now we overheard something quite awful; something that proves that what happened to Mr Curtis was not simply an accident, or a sudden illness. Someone did this to him, and that

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can only mean one thing: the Detective Society has a brand-new case to investigate.

Daisy has ordered me to write what we have found out so far in the Detective Society's casebook. She is always on about the importance of taking notes – and also very sure that *she* should not have to take them. Notes are up to me – I am the Society's Secretary, as well as its Vice-President, and Daisy is its President. Although I am just as good a detective as she is – I proved that during our first real case, the Murder of Miss Bell – I am a quite different sort of person to Daisy. I like thinking about things before I act, while Daisy always has to go rushing head over heels into things like a dog after a rabbit, and that doesn't leave much time for note-making. We are entirely different to look at, too: I am dark-haired and short and round, and Daisy is whippet-thin and tall, with glorious golden hair. But all the same, we are best friends, and an excellent crime-detecting partnership.

I think I had better hurry up and explain what has happened, and who Mr Curtis is.

I suppose it all began when I came to Daisy's house, Fallingford, for the Easter holidays and her birthday.

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2

Spring term at our school, Deepdean, had been quite safe and ordinary. That was surprising after everything that had happened there last year – I mean the murder, and then the awful business with the school nearly closing down. But the spring term was quite peaceful, without any hint of danger or death, and I was very glad. The most exciting case we had investigated recently was the Case of the Frog in Kitty's Bed.

I was expecting Fallingford to be just as calm. Fallingford, for this new casebook, is Daisy's house: a proper English country mansion, with wood-panelled walls and acres of sprawling grounds with a maze and even an enormous monkey puzzle tree in the middle of the front drive. At first I thought the tree was a fake, but then I investigated and it is quite real.

Honestly, Fallingford is just like a house in a book. It has its own woods and lake, four sets of stairs (Daisy

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thinks there must be a secret passageway too, only she has never discovered it) and a walled kitchen garden just as hidden as Mary Lennox's in the book. From the outside it is a great grand square of warm yellow stone that people have been busily adding to for hundreds of years; the inside is a magic box of rooms and staircases and corridors, all unfolding and leading into each other three ways at once. There are whole flocks of stuffed birds (most especially a stuffed owl on the first-floor landing), a grand piano, several Spanish chests and even a real suit of armour in the hall. Just like at Deepdean, everything is treated so carelessly, and is so old and battered, that it took me a while to realize how valuable all these things really are. Daisy's mother leaves her jewels about on her dressing table, the dogs are dried off after muddy walks with towels that were a wedding present to Daisy's grandmother from the King, and Daisy dog-ears the first-edition books in the library. Nothing is younger than Daisy's father, and it makes my family's glossy white wedding-cake compound in Hong Kong look as if it is only pretending to be real.

We arrived in the family car, driven by the chauffeur, O'Brian (who is also the gardener – unlike our family, the Wellses don't seem to have quite enough servants, and I wonder whether this also has something to do with the fading state of the house), on a sunny Saturday morning, the sixth of April. We came out of the light

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into the big dark hallway (stone-floored, with the suit of armour looming out at you alarmingly from the dimness), and Chapman, the Wellses' old butler, was there to greet us. He is white-haired and stooping, and he has been in the family so long that he is beginning to run down, just like the grandfather clock. The two dogs were there too – the little spaniel, Millie, bouncing around Daisy's knees, and the fat old yellow Labrador, Toast Dog, rocking back and forth on his stiff legs and making groaning noises as though he were ill. Chapman bent down to pick up Daisy's tuck box with a groan just like Toast Dog's (he really is very old – I kept worrying that he would seize up in the middle of something like a rusty toy) and said, 'Miss Daisy, it's good to have you home.'

Then Daisy's father came bounding out of the library. Lord Hastings (*Lord Hastings* is what Daisy's father is called, although his last name is Wells, like Daisy – apparently, when you are made a lord, you are given an extra name to show how important you are) has fat pink cheeks, a fat white moustache and a stomach that strains against his tweed jackets, but when he smiles, he looks just like Daisy.

'Daughter!' he shouted, holding out his arms. 'Daughter's friend! Do I know you?'

Daisy's father is very forgetful.

'Of course you know Hazel, Daddy,' said Daisy, sighing. 'She came for Christmas.'

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‘Hazel! Welcome, welcome. How are you? *Who* are you? You don’t look like Daisy’s friends usually do. Are you English?’

‘She’s from Hong Kong, Daddy,’ said Daisy. ‘She can’t help it.’

I squeezed my fingers tight around the handles of my travelling case and tried to keep smiling. I am so used to being at Deepdean now – and everyone there is so used to me – that I can sometimes forget that I’m different. But as soon as I leave school I remember all over again. The first time people see me they stare at me and sometimes say things under their breath. Usually they say them out loud. I know it is the way things are, but I wish I was not the only one of me – and I wish that the *me* I am did not seem like the wrong sort of *me* to be.

‘My name is Lord Hastings,’ said Lord Hastings, obviously trying to be helpful, ‘but you may call me Daisy’s father, because that is who I am.’

‘She knows, Daddy!’ said Daisy. ‘I told you, she’s been here before.’

‘Well, I’m terribly pleased you’re both here now,’ said her father. ‘Come through to the library.’ He was bouncing up and down on his toes, his cheeks all scrunched up above his moustache.

Daisy looked at him suspiciously. ‘If this is one of your tricks . . .’ she said.

‘Oh, come along, tiresome child.’ He put out his arm

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and Daisy, grinning, took it like a lady being escorted in to dinner.

Lord Hastings led her out of the hall and into the library. I followed on behind. It's warmer in there, and the shelves are lined with battered and well-read leather books. It is odd to compare it to my father's library, where everything matches, and is dusted twice daily by one of the valets. Fallingford really is as untidy as the inside of Daisy's head.

Lord Hastings motioned Daisy into a fat green chair, scattered with cushions. She sat gracefully – and there was a loud and very rude sound.

Lord Hastings roared with laughter. 'Isn't it good?' he cried. 'I saw it in the *Boy's Own Paper* and sent off for it at once.'

Daisy groaned. 'Daddy,' she said, 'you are an awful fool.'

'Oh, come now, Daisy dearest. It's an excellent joke. Sometimes I wonder whether you are a child at all.'

Daisy drew herself up to her full height. 'Really, Daddy,' she said, 'I shouldn't think there's room for *another* child in this house.' But she was grinning again, and Lord Hastings twinkled back.

'Now, come along, Hazel, I think we ought to go up to our room.'

And off we went.

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