

AWAY WITH
THE FAIRIES

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AWAY WITH THE FAIRIES

A Phryne Fisher
Mystery

Kerry Greenwood

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This book is dedicated to my dearest twin,
Jenny Pausacker.

With thanks as always to A.W.G., J.S.L.G.,
A.D.P., D.L.J.G., J.P. and S.T. They know who
they are . . . And to Jenny Darling, proprietor
of Wee Nooke.

The strong subject, notwithstanding the efforts against him, survives and acquires fresh vigour. The people again cherish their sovereign, and the plotters have wrought their own overthrow.

Hexagram 23: Po
The I Ching Book of Changes

CHAPTER ONE

In concealment of illumination, it is beneficial to be upright in difficulty.

Hexagram 36: Ming I
The I Ching Book of Changes

‘Drat,’ said Mercy Porter, balancing the tray on a concrete cherub as she tugged at the latch on the Garden Apartment gate. ‘Damn,’ she said aloud as her fingernail snagged and broke. She nudged the gate open with her knee, marking her white apron—clean on that morning, and she had to do her own washing—with moss. As there were really no other expletives she could use aloud without imminent danger of the sack, she bit her lip and steadied the tray.

There had to be something else she could do for a living in this modern year of 1928, she thought, stepping carefully along the paved path through a forest of brightly painted stone figures. I hate all this useless rubbish. Why fill up a garden with statues instead of plants? That gnome with the fishing rod is always out to ladder my stockings.

She avoided the fishing gnome, ascended three stone steps and knocked at the pink door of the Garden Apartment. That Miss Lavender always went crook if her tea was cold, and the delay in the kitchen while the cook had been telling the grocer's boy about her hay fever had made Mercy ten minutes late. The tea would be stewed if she didn't get it on the table quick smart, and then there'd be hell to pay.

The door remained shut. Mercy put the tray down on a convenient bird table and plied the fancy brass knocker in the shape of the Lincoln Imp hard enough to jar that demonic person's teeth out. The garden was silent and soggy on this wet, sullen morning. The blows of the knocker seemed to echo through the house.

The pink door swung open. Not like Miss Lavender not to lock her door. Mercy went in, tray first, kicking the door shut behind her, and turned sharp left into the sitting room of Wee Nooke. Miss Lavender had caused this name to be painted up over the door in letters of a pink which blushed for its presumption. The apartment, which had once been a gardener's shed before being extensively rebuilt, was overwhelmingly decorated and smelt, as always, of a potpourri of perfumes. Lavender, rose, almond blossom, talcum powder and a slight under-hint of gin. Mercy sneezed and wondered if hay fever was catching. Where was the old chook, anyway?

The tenant of the house was sitting at the table with her back to the maid.

'Miss Lavender?' asked Mercy. 'I've brought your breakfast. Nice hot tea,' she added encouragingly, pushing a music box with a fairy doll dressed in bright red gauze on top across the table and setting the tray down with a thump.

Miss Lavender did not move. She sat alarmingly still with her head bowed into her clasped hands as though she was

praying. When Mercy, who had seven breakfasts still to distribute, touched Miss Lavender's shoulder, she slid sideways with a peculiarly boneless wriggle and fell to the floor. Her face was perfectly blue (which clashed dreadfully with her pink garments) and she was, Mercy was sure, extremely dead.

Mercy made it to the door and screamed for help before she fainted.

Phryne Fisher had dined the night before with Jane and Ruth, her thirteen-year-old adoptive daughters, a couple of wharfies called Bert and Cec, a policeman called Hugh Collins, her maid and companion Dorothy (Dot) Williams, a small humble dog called Molly because she looked like one, and the cat, Ember. This had constituted a reasonably merry party. A huge and delicious dinner had been cooked by Mrs Butler and served by Mr Butler. Much champagne had been consumed and the matter of the robbery from the Dean's safe thoroughly thrashed out. Other stories from her trip to Sydney had not been told except in a severely edited form. She had distributed the presents—a wristwatch each for Hugh, Bert and Cec, a crocodile handbag for Dot, a book on anatomy for Jane and, for the sensible Ruth, *Plats Nouveaux* by the celebrated chef M Paul Reboux, which might have the double benefit of tickling Ruth's palate and improving her French. Phryne hoped that she would not find his disrespectful comments on champagne too inflammatory. Phryne had never meant to acquire daughters. But, since the rescue of Jane from a nasty destination and the removal of Ruth from domestic slavery, they had adorned her household. Though they had also introduced Molly. Her dependants and friends were all well and gratifyingly delighted that she had returned from Sydney and still loved them. And she did.

She loved them even more this morning because the girls were at school, Dot had gone for a bracing early walk, the animals were in the kitchen (the butcher's boy had just called) and Hugh, Bert and Cec had gone home to their several virtuous couches. Therefore Phryne was breakfasting alone, which was the way she felt breakfast ought to be taken. Phryne had never woken up wondering who or where she was, though in her Apache French phase she had been a little in the dark about who was reposing beside her. She felt that the day should not be bounced in on with rude energy, but carefully and delicately seduced into being, and children and animals were sadly impervious to reason on this matter.

She sipped another sip of aromatic coffee, forked in her last mouthful of perfectly prepared *omelette aux fines herbes*, and prepared for the exquisite pleasure of lighting the first gasper of the day.

She had just fixed the cigarette in its long ivory holder and raised the lighter to ignite it when the doorbell rang.

'Damn,' said Phryne. She lit the cigarette anyway. But at least she was now properly awake, and the day, though soggy, appeared to have been aired. Who could be at the door? Too early for the post. A delivery? They usually went to the kitchen door. A visitor? No one knew that she was back as yet. An announcement would soon appear in social notes in *Table Talk*, of course, along the lines of 'The Hon. Miss Phryne Fisher has returned from her sojourn in Sydney to the delight of all her many admirers'. Then, no doubt, she would have callers.

Phryne avoided the undesirables by warning Mr Butler in advance that she was never at home to bores. He seemed to have a remarkable ability to weed them out at the door. When taxed with this, he replied magisterially that years of work at a

gentleman's club had given him a certain facility. Phryne could only smile and approve.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr Butler was admitting someone, taking their coat and umbrella and ushering them into the small parlour. Phryne blew a smoke ring and waited. Mr Butler appeared.

'Detective Inspector Robinson, Miss Fisher,' he announced, in tones more fitting to the breaking of news of the tragic death of a near relative.

'I wonder how he knew I was back? Please clear away, Mr B, and bring me some more coffee and some tea for the Detective Inspector. I'll ask him if he'd like some breakfast,' she added. 'You know how he likes Mrs B's cuisine.'

'Yes, Miss Fisher,' said Mr Butler, bowing a little at this appreciation of Mrs Butler's skill. He carried the detritus of the feast out to the kitchen while Phryne went to find her favourite policeman.

He was sitting on a cane chair, staring into the depths of a bowl of irises as though it might contain the answer to the question which was dragging his brows together. He was an unmemorable, subfusc man, with mid brown hair and mid brown eyes. Phryne had learned early in their acquaintance that if she looked away from Jack Robinson, she could not envisage his face. It was a very useful attribute for a policeman, and she supposed that his wife had some mnemonic which recalled him to mind. Or possibly he was tattooed with his name and address. Phryne tore her mind away from an indelicate speculation on where this information might be placed, and coughed to announce her presence. Robinson looked up from the irises. They had obviously not been informative. He looked stricken.

'Jack, dear, how very nice to see you!' she exclaimed,

putting out both hands to draw him to his feet. 'Do come in and have some tea. Or perhaps some breakfast?'

'Just tea, thank you,' he answered. Phryne was wearing a cherry red dressing gown and a Spanish shawl of far too many colours. Robinson had always admired her adamant refusal to wear pastels. The Spanish shawl, embroidered in red and blue and gold, dazzled his eye and provided a nice splotch of colour in the sea-green, sea-blue decor. Phryne herself looked well. Her holiday had agreed with her, it seemed. She looked even more like a Dutch doll than usual: pink cheeks, bright green eyes, shiny black hair cut in a cap.

'You're looking fine, Miss Fisher,' he said with an effort. 'Decided not to stay in the city by the bay, then?'

'Too fast,' said Phryne, fanning herself with a corner of the shawl. 'Too busy and too, too hot. I have decided that I don't like the tropics. Come along,' she said, leading the detective out of the front room and into her own parlour, cool as the inside of a seashell. The table bore a fresh pot of coffee and a Chelsea teapot shaped like a thatched cottage with matching milk jug, sugar basin and cups and saucers. Phryne loved this set because the cups were big enough for a reasonable amount of coffee, and Mrs Butler doted on the design.

It seemed to affect Jack Robinson. He winced.

'Whatever is the matter, Jack, dear?' asked Phryne. 'Rheumatism or aesthetic twinges?'

'Probably the latter, Miss Fisher. Not that I'm saying anything against your teapot, though, if it's got tea in it. I'm parched.'

'It certainly has. But say the word and I'll have it transferred into my new Art Moderne silver pot—perfectly bare, just a shape.'

'No, no, please. It's real pretty and that sugar basin in

the shape of a haystack is nice. It's just that I've been out to a suspicious death this morning and I'm a bit sensitive on . . . er . . .'

'Porcelain which is just too, too cunning for words?' asked Phryne, pouring.

'Er . . .'

'Overdosed on what the Americans call "cute"?'

'Just that. You never saw such stuff. Thanks.' The room was silent except for the soft, soothing noise of a policeman absorbing tea. Phryne was intrigued. Jack Robinson had a habit of quoting Shakespeare, who he considered a good working poet with a word for every situation, but she had never suspected him of being at all precious. And that Chelsea set was worth a small fortune. It was one of the few things that Phryne had retained from her childhood. The only reason her father hadn't sold it in his indigent days had been that Phryne herself had hidden one of the cups, delighted by the country scene on the side and the fluted edging. Then her father had succeeded to the title, acquired a large fortune (his grandfather had married an American heiress) and had given the set to Phryne with a fine generous flourish. She had restored the missing cup, which tripled its value. Who was Jack Robinson to object to her Chelsea china?

The third draught seemed to have restored some life to the wasted frame of this unappreciative officer of the law. He set the empty cup down gently into its parent saucer. Phryne was slightly mollified.

'Now, if you'll not object to my pipe . . .' he hinted. Phryne waved a pink-tipped finger. Her cigarette holder described a perfect ellipse.

'Light up, and I'm warning you, Jack, dear, if you don't tell me what this is all about fairly soon, I'll self-combust.'

‘Heard of an authoress called Marcella Lavender? Also known as Rosebud Peachblossom?’

Phryne stifled a giggle. ‘No, never. I’m sure I’d remember the name if I’d ever heard it before,’ she told Robinson. ‘What does she write?’

‘Books for kids,’ said Robinson. ‘Fairies. You know. Little naked flying creatures.’

‘Usually seen over rather good botanical drawings. Yes, I know the kind of thing. I had a flower fairy alphabet when I was small, but I grew out of it rather quickly. A is for Appleblossom, B is for Buttercup . . .’ Jack Robinson was nodding his head gloomily. ‘That was one of hers?’

‘Yes. She did masses of them. And her cottage is crammed with pictures of fairies—no, you really have to see it, Phryne. You won’t believe it.’

Phryne noted that Jack had relaxed enough to call her Phryne, which was all to the good.

‘And . . .’ she prompted.

‘Well, the cook’s assistant took her her breakfast this morning and found the door unlocked and the authoress dead as a doornail. Just keeled over at the table.’

‘Oh? And what makes this a suspicious death?’

‘Nothing in the dying of it. Police surgeon says she died of respiratory failure consequent on possible thrombosis of the pulmonary artery. She was as blue as a cornflower,’ added Jack Robinson, waxing unexpectedly poetic. ‘With pink splotches.’

‘Oh.’

‘But he’ll know more after the autopsy. Thing is, you see, she’d been to see us. Getting threatening letters. Someone threw a brick through her window. Felt she was being followed. Last week she was almost run down by a car. Just managed to jump

out of the way in time. No damage except a fright and a pair of ruined stockings. No description of the car and no witnesses. Nothing much we could do.'

'So you thought she was a dotty old lady,' said Phryne gently.

'Yes, well, yes. We get a lot of complaints from people who have a few kangaroos loose in the top paddock.' Jack's stubby finger circled near his ear.

'Away, in fact,' said Phryne, 'with the fairies?'

Jack grimaced at the comment. 'Persecution complex, that's what they call it. Lots of people have it. And they're dead convincing.'

'Until you let them talk some more,' said Phryne, addressing the flower-filled grate. She did not want to look at Robinson, who would never forgive himself if he broke down in front of a woman. 'Then it comes out, whatever it is. I was on a train once with a perfectly charming old gentleman who was telling me all about the genealogy of the local gentry and I thought he was quite sane until he informed me that he was the illegitimate son of Queen Victoria and thus the rightful ruler of England. I had to call him 'Your Majesty' for five stations until I could manage to transfer into a Ladies Only carriage. Nice man, though. He conferred an earldom on my first-born son.'

'You're right,' said Robinson. 'And even though she was real irritating, she wasn't insane. I took her through the story several times. She showed me the notes. She might have written 'em herself, of course.'

'How did she come to see you, Jack? Poison pen letters aren't your usual fare.'

'No, well, she was a distant relative of the Chief, and he put her onto me. I did what I should have done,' said Robinson

miserably. 'I sent a constable around to examine the house, I told the foot patrol to walk past and see that all was well twice a night, I told her to call me if she got any more notes, and I told her she wasn't in any real danger. I can hear my own voice saying it. "These poison pen writers sound nasty but they never actually hurt anyone," I said.'

'But it's true,' said Phryne. 'They usually don't.'

'Not true this time,' said Jack Robinson, puffing at his pipe.

'But she died of a pulmonary thrombosis,' said Phryne.

'Maybe,' said Robinson. 'Maybe she was frightened to death. You should have seen her face.'

'No, I shouldn't, not so soon after breakfast. What do you want me to do, Jack?'

'Come with me and have a look at her apartment. I never saw a place so . . . so . . . feminine. I reckon you'd get a lot more out of it than I have.'

'Being female,' agreed Phryne.

'I'm not feeling too good about this,' said Robinson, in case Phryne hadn't noticed. 'I did all the required things, of course, but I really never took her seriously. I never believed her. Now she's dead . . .'

'You're feeling guilty,' diagnosed Phryne.

'I did what I could,' said Robinson stubbornly. 'I couldn't have done any more. Not with no witnesses. But I feel like I owe it to the old chook to at least take a close look at her death. Might be nothing in it. Probably isn't. But . . .'

Phryne decided that Robinson in his present mood could occupy the next couple of hours in going round and round in logical circles. Phryne had other things to do. Arrange some parties. Visit a dressmaker. Find out when her lover Lin Chung was expected home from his silk-buying trip to Shanghai.

His last letter had mentioned the name of the ship *SS Gold Mountain*. Odd name for a ship. Phryne wondered if it had lost something in the translation. This would involve a visit to that alarming old woman, Lin Chung's grandmother. The matriarch of the Lin family lived in a house on Little Bourke Street and, although she accepted the relationship as inevitable, she approved of Phryne in the same way she approved of cholera morbis. Interviews with her were always testing.

Mrs Lin could wait. Phryne poured the detective another cup.

'I'll just get dressed,' she said, patting him lightly in passing. 'What sort of day is it?'

'Wet but not cold,' said Jack Robinson, already reviving under Phryne's influence. He watched, with affection, the red robe and Spanish shawl flick past him on their way up the stairs and he drank the tea.

CHAPTER TWO

Concealment of illumination in a basket is beneficial if correct.

Hexagram 36: Ming I
The I Ching Book of Changes

The landlady greeted Phryne at the wrought iron gate in a roughcast wall which would have kept out an invading army. She held out a distracted hand which had a small, pink feathered bundle in it, then almost dropped the dead bird in an attempt to transfer it to her other hand so that she could take Phryne's.

'The Hon. Miss Fisher, this is Mrs Needham,' said Jack Robinson. 'I'll take that, Mrs Needham. Miss Lavender's bird, was it?'

'Yes, poor little thing, as soon as his mistress went away he must have just piped a little song and then he died. He was on the floor with her. Well, they know, don't they?' said Mrs Needham, fixing Phryne with the meaningful look of the true believer. 'Animals always know, don't they?'