

# PARSON'S PLEASURE

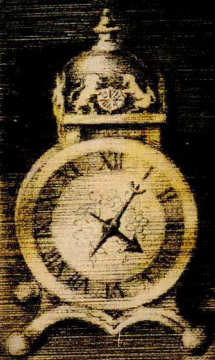
Mollie Hardwick

— Author of —

*Malice Domestic* and  
*Upstairs, Downstairs*

Romance, theft, and murder  
invade England's  
beautiful Cotswolds.

"An excellent, enjoyable read."  
*Booklist*



**PARSON'S**



**Mollie Hardwick**

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# **Praise for Mollie Hardwick and her previous mysteries**

## **Malice Domestic**

“A charming debut . . . [A] beguiling landscape of a sleepy little village.”

*The Baltimore Sun*

## **Uneaseful Death**

“As usual, Hardwick provides suitable literary repartee.”

*Booklist*

## **Perish in July**

“Hardwick again writes about believable characters coping not only with murder and other disasters but with a true-to-life marriage.”

*Publishers Weekly*

## **The Bandersbatch**

“A quintessential cozy.”

*The Denver Post*

*Also by Mollie Hardwick:*

MALICE DOMESTIC (A Doran Fairweather Mystery)\*  
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THE MERRYMAID  
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I REMEMBER LOVE  
MONDAY'S CHILD  
WILLOWWOOD  
LOVERS MEETING  
THE DUCHESS OF DUKE STREET  
UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

*\*Published by Fawcett Books*

All chapter headings are taken from *The Ingoldsby Legends: or, Mirth and Marvels*, by “Thomas Ingoldsby Esq.” (the Reverend Richard Harris Barham, 1788–1845).

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# Chapter 1

*Look at the Clock! do! look at the Clock!*

"Peace, perfect peace," Doran murmured, indolently reaching out from the cushioned garden hammock for the tall frosted glass of John Collins on the table beside her.

Rodney, prone in a long garden chair, half opened his eyes.

"Don't speak too soon."

As she carried the glass to her lips a wasp swooped purposefully down and sat on the rim. She put it down hastily and swiped at the wasp with a book. It appeared to think this some sort of game, dancing away and returning to the rim, where traces of sugar lingered. Rodney watched with amusement.

"Don't thwart it, poor thing—its one ambition is to experience a beautiful death."

"Not in my drink, it won't." A violent flourish with the book caught the wasp fair and square; it buzzed angrily off. Doran drank swiftly before it could return with friends. Rodney shut his eyes again.

"It's a natural law, you know," he mused. "If you say things like 'Peace, perfect peace' in the garden, wasps descend in cohorts. If you say them in the house—things like 'Isn't it quiet'—the television blows up. I knew a couple who were sitting by the fire in their flat, and there was a crash somewhere off-stage. The husband said merrily, 'Sounds like the bathroom ceiling falling in,' and the wife went to look—just in case—and it was."



"Fascinating. I must remember. Are you going to sleep, Rodney? If you are I'll finish your drink and get on with my book."

"Of course I'm not going to sleep. What, and miss the wonderful feeling of being on holiday? The first day of the hols. 'Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away,' though the hymn-writer didn't quite mean it like that. Well, they will be far away by Monday."

The Reverend Rodney Chelmarsh, vicar of St. Crispin's, Abbotsbourne, Kent, was beginning his annual month of freedom from parish and parishioners, and—a rare respite—from his thirteen-year-old daughter Helena, crippled by a progressive disease. Helena's character had been warped by the early loss of her mother and by formative years in the care of a nurse-companion who was now in Broadmoor, for a murder of which she had been declared not guilty by reason of insanity.

The nurse's obsessive devotion to the child was echoed in Helena's demanding possessiveness towards her young father and her jealous hatred of the girl he loved and would have married. Doran Fairweather, antiques dealer of Eastgate, the near-by resort, and Rodney's neighbour in Abbotsbourne, had tried very hard for her own sake and Rodney's to face the prospect of life in the same house as Helena, but she knew too well that it would have destroyed her, and her relationship with Rodney. And so their mutual love remained unratified, even unconsummated; a clergyman might not live in what would still, so near the end of the permissive twentieth century, be called sin.

He watched her, relaxed and graceful as a sleeping cat in her hammock, willow-slim and long-legged, just as tall as a woman should be. "*Amo, amas*, I love a lass," recited Rodney to himself (he had an irresistible propensity for quotation, often maddening to others) "As a cedar tall and slender, Sweet cowslip's grace is her nominative case, And she's of the feminine gender." Soft brown hair and eyes that were neither green nor grey nor brown, but jewels compounded

of all three; pale pearly skin just beginning to turn faintly gold with the sun. Her twenty-six years were hard to credit.

He wondered if, just for once, he should lift her from the hammock and lay her on the warm grass and kiss her as such a girl should be kissed on such a summer day. The garden of Bell House, Doran's home, was ringed with trees, invisible from the lane; no faces peered from the windows, for Doran lived alone since the departure of her housekeeper. He thought, on the whole, he would.

He was half-way out of his chair when the sharp click of the lattice gate arrested him. It was opening—they had visitors. Rodney said several unecclesiastical words to himself, and subsided.

"Company," he told Doran, who made a face.

"Oh no! Who on earth . . . Howell. And Andrew. What have we ever done to deserve this?"

Howell Evans was Doran's partner in the small antique shop she owned in Eastgate, the seaside town some fifteen miles away. He was Welsh, slightly bent, more than slightly gay, a sharp dealer with large gaps in his knowledge but a wonderful head for figures. It was he who kept the business on its feet. His attitude towards Doran was a blend of criticism and grudging affection.

They advanced across the lawn, the short dark pit-pony of a Welshman and his boyfriend, the blond, almost colourless Andrew, who helped in the shop occasionally and roused very mixed feelings among the dealers who came to it. Doran, swinging her legs over the side of the hammock, viewed their approach without pleasure. She had been perfectly aware of Rodney's gaze and desires, which matched her own.

Once before Howell's sudden tactless arrival had spoiled their chance of what might have been a night spent together. Neither of them had forgotten that.

"I thought you were supposed to be in Wales?" was her uncordial greeting.

"Well we was," Howell said. "Did quite a bit of buying, didn't we. Plenty of old biddies up the north, foreigners you

know, come there from Lancs and Yorks, don't know much, so we went knocking and pulled a fair bit of nice stuff."

"You went round robbing old ladies: I see," said Doran. "Told them the usual story, I suppose—you'd pay them the earth for some worthless object, then picked out some nice things and got them thrown in for next to nothing."

"What else? You don't complain when the goods come into stock, gal."

"I suppose not. Anyway, what are you doing here?"

Howell's eyes were on the rustic table and the bottle of gin. "I'm properly parched." He licked his lips. "Aren't you, Andrew? We been drivin' three hours without a stop. You got drinks out, I see. Wouldn't mind a drop, if you can spare it."

"I'm sure there were plenty of places you could have stopped for tea. Oh well, sit down. There's a couple of chairs in the shed over there. You know Rodney Chelmarsh, don't you. Rodney, I don't think you've met Andrew Bynde."

Rodney smiled politely in response to Howell's curt nod and Andrew's waved fingers, and prepared to pour drinks. "I'll fetch some more glasses," he said.

"Oh, would you? In the kitchen cupboard. And bring some tonic—*plenty* of tonic," Doran added meaningly. "Howell has a long way to drive."

"That's all right," Howell said airily. "We take it in turns. Haven't you got no more proper chairs?" He eyed unfavourably the upright ones he had brought. "Loungin' ones, like those?"

"No," said Doran, who had. "And you're not having Rodney's, so just settle down—those will do while you're here." Which I trust won't be long, she added mentally. Howell was eyeing Rodney, who was coming towards them with a clutch of bottles and glasses, weighing up with a practised eye the spare slender figure, elegant height, and attractive features to which the dark-rimmed spectacles lent an intellectual air. One of these manly parsons the English went in for, thought Howell, who in his youth had been forced to attend a small and forbidding Bethesda administered by an

equally small and forbidding Nonconformist preacher, pale from a life down the mines. This parson was too healthy-looking by half for a man of the cloth, not to mention half-naked in them shorts and a sports shirt. Howell ventured a veiled reproach as Rodney set down the drinks.

"Proper tanned you are. Didn't find that in the pulpit, did you?"

"Well, no. I've got in quite a bit of tennis lately. Even the odd cricket match on a Sunday afternoon, with our second eleven. We've had a pretty good season, haven't we, Doran—three away wins and two home wins and a draw. No thanks to me, I'm an utter and absolute tailender."

"That's not true, and you know it," Doran said hotly. "You know you . . ."

Howell jealously thought he detected a gleam of admiration in Andrew's eyes, as they dwelt on Rodney. So, fancied butch types now, did he, even heteros. Well, it wouldn't do. Hastily he broke in.

"Reason we called on you, Doran, well, it's quite a story. Cheers, dears." He gulped his gin. "Thing is, we'd done Wales, filled the van, seen my old mam and a few of the boys, so we thought we'd head for the A5 and sort of down through the Midlands. North of Brum the roads got properly f . . ." He glanced at Rodney. "Properly fouled up with traffic, so we thought we'd branch off and sort of wander."

"Why not?" Doran suppressed a sigh; it was going to be a long tale.

"Very pretty the country is, down there when you've got Brum behind you. Found some nice little pubs, didn't we, and let ourselves ease up for a change."

"You must have needed a rest after all that knocking," Doran said with a straight face.

"Yes, well. There wasn't much doing in the trade line, not in July, just tourists milling about and shops full of garbage, fakes, repro, *you* know. Then we . . ." There was a fractional pause. "We hit on a little place, nothing special but a good pub. Just happened we met a man one night, got talking, and he told us about this house."

“What house?”

“Where this man lived, that had this clock. Well, you know me and clocks.” Doran did; he was a clock man, they were his passion. For a fine clock he would travel any distance and pay any price, within reason.

Andrew, looking for once faintly animated, broke in. “Howell said—”

Howell shot him a darting glance, the equivalent of a kick on the ankle, and went on. “I had to have it, Doran. He parted easy after I offered him a fair price. I brought it to show you—couldn’t keep it to myself, and I didn’t know if you’d be at the shop next week.”

“I shan’t, I’m on holiday. All right, where is it?”

“In the van, locked up. Fetch it, Andrew.”

While Andrew was gone the three sat and looked at each other, lost for conversation. Doran was conscious of something strange, odd, hard to define, about the story she had just heard and the atmosphere Howell was exuding, as he busily lit a pungent American cigarette. In a few moments, she knew, it would be stubbed out, an offensive patch on the grass. Rodney was bored with Howell, disappointed that he no longer had Doran to himself, beginning to be apprehensive of the scene Helena might make when he went home, because it was almost their last evening before she left for the enforced holiday she resented having to take with her nurse. In the uncomfortable silence he said, “Anybody know it’s Lammas Day, the first of August? Known to the medievals as *Dies Mala*, because they thought it was unlucky. Also the Feast of Saints Faith, Hope, Charity and their mother Wisdom, all martyrs.”

Howell laughed and coughed through smoke. “So that’s what happened to ’em—I always wondered.”

Doran said, “Also the anniversary of Nelson’s defeat of the French fleet off Aboukir, the Glorious First of August. It wasn’t unlucky for *him*.”

“There’s no answer to that.” It was a bad sign when Rodney subsided into television cliché. This pointless conversation was ended by the re-appearance of Andrew, bearing a

large parcel which he put down on the grass, old brown paper with glimpses of newsprint beneath, firmly corded with tough string. Howell dropped on his knees beside it in a not inappropriate attitude of prayer, and began to cut the string with a clasp-knife of lethal appearance. Layer after layer of newspaper fell away, until at last they were looking at the core of the parcel. Howell was hardly breathing as he pulled away the last wrapping.

To Doran's eyes it was a superlative clock, and its price could only be guessed at, up among the tens of thousands of pounds. About thirty centimetres high, it was a bracket clock of brass, mellowly gleaming, its sheen dimmed by time and fortunately not heightened by modern cleaning. Its dome was softly rounded like that of St. Paul's, set about on four sides by a decoration centred by the royal arms, a lion and unicorn holding between them a shield engraved C.R. Between the front baluster pillars was engraved *Edwardus East Fecit 1666*.

Doran joined Howell on the grass. As yet she hardly dared to touch the delicate finial on the dome, pepperpot shaped, the flowers and leaves engraved within the dial, the little rounded feet. Silently Howell turned it round and showed the backplate, where more flowers grew and blew—roses, tiny thistles, wild convolvulus—and a small gardener with pail and hoe moved across the scene. Above him, Edwardus East had proudly, lovingly repeated his signature.

"It's a weight-driven alarm," Howell breathed, and with a touch set off a silver-golden chime like a fairy carillon, a lovely turbulence which stopped with a protesting whirr after the stroke of one.

"Needs repairing," Andrew volunteered. Howell was not listening, only searching Doran's face for a reaction which she was almost too stunned to express.

She sat back on her heels. "I don't know what to say. What a wonderful, marvellous thing." No point in asking if it were genuine; there are some antiques which cannot be faked any more than one could fake a living child. "Where in heaven's name did you get it? And how much did you pay for it?"

Howell rose and went back to his chair, still intent on the clock. "I told you, man in a little village. Getting rid of all his good stuff, wanted the money. And as for what I give him, it was out of my own bank. I'd never have drawn all that lot out of the kitty, Doran, you know that. I'll get it back, I've got a buyer lined up."

"Oh—who?"

Without answering, he said, "I've got to have it myself, first. Just for a bit, to get the feel of it. *You* know."

"He's going to take it to bed with him," put in Andrew, with a snort of mirth. "Poor look-out for me."

"Shut up. You do understand, don't you, Doran?"

Doran glanced at Rodney for some sage comment, but he was inwardly collecting bits of Keats and stringing them together, half-aloud. "Buds and bells and stars without a name . . ."

"I understand that you wanted to show it to me, Howell. But not really how you came across such a rarity, just by accident. I mean, Tompions turn up, Knibbses turn up, but Edward Easts . . . I thought they were all in museums or America. And how could you possibly manage to pay for it, unless you've been keeping something from me and you're a closet millionaire? That I don't understand."

Howell's mouth was sulky. "Then I'm not going to say no more. I could've just taken it back to Eastgate, then you'd never have seen it, but I thought I'd give you the chance. Right. That's it." He had begun to wrap the clock up, swathing its beauty in dirty crumpled newspaper, and Doran felt an irrational impulse to snatch it from him and carry it to her own drawing room, half a century more modern, yet a more right and gracious setting for such a treasure than Howell's tarty cottage or the prosaic shop. And the little rooms at the back of Bell House were Stuart, it would like them . . . But it was gone, wrapped, hidden, Cinderella back in rags.

"Thanks for the drink," Howell was saying, apparently restored in temper. "I'll give you a bell Monday, right? Don't worry about us and the shop, we'll manage."

"I'm sure you will." One way or another.

Howell gave her arm a brisk pat, like someone reassuring a nervous dog. "And don't you worry about the price of the East. I'll get the top of the market for it and give you a nice profit, honest I will. Our books is lookin' pretty run down, you know, buckets of red and a rotten little bit of black, so you can't afford to turn your nose up, can you, like you done just now." He added, hurriedly, "Had to cut Vic Maidment in on it, more's the pity."

When they were gone and the lattice gate was shut behind them Rodney said, "Pardon my ignorance, but what was all that about? A beautiful clock, yes. Any more to it?"

"A lot. Not only beautiful, but extremely rare, by one of the greats, Edward East. His life covered most of the seventeenth century and he was clockmaker to Charles I and Charles II."

"Hence the C.R."

"Right. He lived to be ninety-something, so it must have been a healthy life. His work's very uncomplicated, usually—perfect proportions, but simple. That clock's very ornate for him, even a bit pretty-pretty, but it could have been a commission from someone who liked them that way."

"The royal ladies of pleasure? Busty Barbara, Pretty Witty Nell, Fussy Portsmouth?"

"Very possibly. But there's no doubt that it is by East. What I'd like to know is where it's been all this time, and how the hell anyone like Howell could have afforded it. I just don't understand."

"Could it be . . . would it be indelicate to suggest that all was not well with the transaction?"

"Oh, I know Howell's bent, I've caught him out several times, but only in quite minor things, and this is a very big one. His chum Victor Maidment's even benter, and a nasty bit of work. Howell just daren't have nicked anything as conspicuous as that, or bought it, knowing it was hot. We get lists of stolen property from the police all the time, and if that's on one of them he hasn't a remote chance of getting rid of it—and what's more, I should take the rap for it, as the shop-owner."



“Perhaps a grateful customer gave it him, in return for services rendered.”

“I dread to think what services. No, anyone who gave that away would be certifiable. All right in Good King Charles’s day, not now. So what’s the answer?”

Rodney shook his head. “I wish I knew, but you’re the expert. And speaking of time, I’ve got to go now. I promised to have supper with Helena.”

“Oh dear.” Doran had hoped against hope that he would spend the evening with her. Not a natural cook, she had painstakingly taught herself how to make the prawn soufflé Rodney particularly liked, and beside the fresh prawns in the fridge sat materials for a pretty salad and a bowl of equally fresh fruit marinading in wine, to be served in two halves of a melon, *très chic*. In what passed for her wine cellar lay a precious bottle of Pouligny Montrachet which somebody had brought her from France, waiting for its final chilling to perfection.

So much for optimism. Disappointment tinged her voice with bitterness as she said, “Just as you like.”

“It isn’t just as I like at all, and you know it. Do you think I don’t want to stay, and do you also think I don’t know what it would lead to, if I did? Sit down, I’m going to preach you a short sermon. If you imagine I get some kind of priggish enjoyment out of leading a life of celibacy and keeping you at arm’s length, you’re dead wrong. I don’t. It makes me feel a worm, sometimes, apart from anything else. If I may mention Keats, and I promise I won’t dwell on him, when his publisher asked him if he really meant anything so shocking in *The Eve of St. Agnes* as Porphyro actually getting into bed with Madeline, he answered tartly that a man might consider himself a eunuch who would leave a maid in such a situation.”

“I have read the *Letters*, thank you. And I’m not a maid, in case you’d forgotten.”

“Don’t interrupt. What I’m trying to say is that it’s not a matter of principle. I just don’t feel free to act as I want to,