

Margery Allingham



Police at  
the Funeral



PENGUIN BOOKS

## POLICE AT THE FUNERAL

Margery Allingham took to writing naturally; in her family no other occupation was considered natural or indeed sane. Educated at the Perse School and Regent Street Polytechnic, she wrote her first novel while still in her teens. She began to leave a lasting mark on modern fiction in 1928 when, at the age of twenty-three, she wrote the first of her Albert Campion detective novels. Her early books, such as *The Crime at Black Dudley*, *Mystery Mile* and *Look to the Lady*, had to be written in spare time hard won from her film work. At that time her books were beloved by the few advanced spirits who enjoyed her gay and distinctive approach to the problems and pleasures of post-war youth. Since then her gentle detective and his strong-arm colleagues have become known and loved by young people of all ages all over the world. She also acquired a reputation as a more serious writer. In an *Observer* review of *The Fashion in Shrouds* Torquemada remarked that 'to Albert Campion has fallen the honour of being the first detective to feature in a story which is also by any standard a distinguished novel'. Her novels cover a broad field. They vary in treatment from the grave to the frankly satirical, yet each example contrives to conform to the basic rules of the good detective tale.

Margery Allingham was married to Philip Youngman Carter and lived for many years on the edge of the Essex Marshes. She died in 1966.



# *Police at the Funeral*

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MARGERY ALLINGHAM



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*To*

**MY SEVEN PATERNAL UNCLES**



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*This story, the characters in it, and the  
bridge in Grantchester Meadows, are  
figments of the author's imagination,  
and have no reference to real incident,  
living people, or topographical facts*

## CHAPTER I

### “ HERE LIES A BENEFACTOR ”

WHEN one man is following another, however discreet may be the pursuer or the pursued, the act does not often pass unnoticed in the streets of London.

There were at least four people who realised that Inspector Stanislaus Oates, only lately promoted to the Big Five, was being followed down High Holborn by the short, squat, shabby man who yet bore the elusive air of a forgotten culture about him.

The Inspector walked with his hands in the pockets of his raincoat, his collar turned up until it almost met the brim of his battered trilby. His shoulders were hunched, his feet were wet, and his very gait announced the dejection which he felt.

There was very little to show the casual passer-by that the square man, who might have been a bookmaker's tout, was following the Inspector. He himself would have been astounded to know that anyone had guessed that he was aware of the policeman's existence, but old Mrs. Carter, who sells flowers outside the Provincial Bank, recognised Mr. Oates and observed his trailer, and wondered what he was up to, aloud, to her daughter who was waiting for the “late extra” *Evening Standard* van, and getting her high-heeled shoes full of water from the stream which was sweeping down the gutter.

The Commissionaire standing on the steps of the big Anglo-American hotel saw the two men also, and congratulated himself that nothing much escaped him. Old Todd, last cabby in the rank before Staple Inn, also made a note of the spectacle as he sat staring listlessly over his

steel-rimmed glasses waiting for the evening rush, wondering if his one remaining brake would hold in this blasted rain.

And lastly, the Inspector himself was aware of the circumstance. One is not a policeman for twenty-five years without becoming peculiarly sensitive to the fact that one is not alone in one's promenading, and the silent companion at the discreet distance becomes as real as if he were at one's side.

To-day the Inspector was aware of it and took no notice of it. There were many people who might have considered that they had sufficient grievance against him to meditate an attack on Mr. Oates, but no one, so far as he knew, who would risk making such an attempt in broad daylight in the heart of the city. He squelched on, therefore, through the rain, lost in his own private depression. That lank, good-tempered man running to fat only at the stomach was oppressed by nothing more than a mild attack of dyspepsia coupled with the uncomfortable premonition that his luck was out and that something unpleasant was going to happen. His was not an imaginative nature, but a premonition is a premonition, and he had just joined the Big Five, so that his responsibilities, should anything difficult turn up, would be by no means decreased. Moreover, there was the rain, the dyspepsia which had sent him for the walk, and again the rain.

In the centre of the blinding storm which blew across the Viaduct he paused and upbraided himself. The vague presence behind him was his least irritant. Hang it! this rain was soaking him. He was out of the district of hotels, and thanks to the care of a grandmotherly government no public-house would be open for another hour and a half. His trouser legs were flapping clammily against his ankles, and in jerking up his raincoat collar he had spilt a small waterfall from his hat-brim down the back of his neck.

There were a thousand and one things he might have done. He could have taken a taxi back to the Yard or to some restaurant or hotel where he could have dried at leisure, but his mood was perverse, and he looked about him aggressively. The rawest constable on this beat, he reflected, must know of some shelter, some haven in this wilderness of offices where a man might dry, warm himself,

and perhaps smoke a forbidden pipe in pleasant if dusty privacy.

London, like all great cities which have been built and rebuilt for upwards of a thousand years, has all sorts of odd corners, little forgotten patches of valuable land which still belong to the public, hidden though they are amid great stone masses of private property. Standing on the Viaduct, Stanislaus Oates cast his mind back over twenty years to the time when he himself had been a constable in London, raw from the provinces. Surely he had walked this dreary street on his way home from a Holborn beat; surely there had been some retreat where he had polished up the answers for the terrifying oral examination in the spring, or pencilled an absurdly glorified account of his doings to the trusting and lovely Marion still down in Dorset.

The buildings around him had changed, but the lie of the land was the same. Memory returned to him, patchily at first like a landscape seen through leaves, but suddenly he recollected a musty smell of warm sacks and hot water-pipes. And then it all came back to him—the dark passage-way with the shaft of light at the end, the red door in the wall with the bucket outside and the statue facing it.

Immediately his spirits rose considerably, and he set off, penetrating farther into the city until a sudden turning brought him face to face with a narrow archway squeezed in between two palatial wholesalers' doorways. The paving stones within the passage were worn narrow strips set crazily together, and on the whitewashed wall was a small battered notice half obliterated by dust and further obscured by the shadow, which stated simply: "*To the Tomb.*"

Down this alley Inspector Stanislaus Oates plunged without hesitation.

After some fifteen yards of tunnel he emerged into a little yard, the face of which had not altered since he had first known it, nor, for that matter, for the last hundred years. Here brown-black buildings rose steep on all four sides, framing a small patch of grey unfriendly sky. The reason for this peculiar airshaft in the very centre of an ancient block of buildings took up by far the larger half of the yard and consisted of a rectangle of sparse yellow grass

surrounded by railings, in the midst of which reposed the stone effigy of a man in doublet and hose. A tablet at the figure's feet announced to the curious :

*Sir Thomas Lillyput  
He bought this land  
His bones wherein to lie  
Disturb him not lest ye be stirred  
When ye shall come to die  
Lord Mayor of London, 1537,*

and underneath, in more modern script :

*Here lies a benefactor  
Let no one move his bones.*

The pious or perhaps superstitious magnates of a later London had so far respected Sir Thomas and his property that they had built their businesses around him and not directly above or beneath him.

The builder of the block above the passage, however, had utilised the yard as an entrance for coal since the strictly legal right-of-way was too narrow to admit of its use as a goods entrance, and the red door which the Inspector remembered on the right of the effigy led into the somewhat archaic heating arrangements of the ancient firm who occupied the east block.

The door was propped open by a bucket as it always had been. To the Inspector's livening eyes it appeared to be the same bucket, and he wondered if Old Foxie—the name came back to him with delightful familiarity—was still stoking. His depression was lifting at every step, and he advanced jauntily, restraining an absurd inclination to kick the pail as he passed into the semi-darkness of the furnace room.

"And this, if I mistake not, Watson, is our client," said a voice out of the gloom. "Good Heavens! The Force!"

After his first start of surprise the Inspector swung round to find himself facing a young man perched insecurely on a pile of débris in the warm murky shelter of the stove. A shaft of light from the furnace lit up the figure, throwing him into sharp relief.

The Inspector had a vision of a lank immaculate form surmounted by a pale face half obliterated by enormous horn-rimmed spectacles. The final note of incongruity was struck by an old-fashioned deerstalker cap set jauntily upon the top of the young man's head.

Chief Detective-Inspector Stanislaus Oates began to laugh. Ten minutes before he had felt that spontaneous mirth was permanently beyond him.

“Campion!” he said. “Who's after you now?”

The young man struggled down from his throne and held out his hand.

“I'm waiting for a client,” he explained airily. “I've been here half an hour already. What are you looking for?”

“Warmth and a little quiet,” said the other querulously. “This weather upsets my liver.”

He took off his raincoat, shook it peremptorily and spread it over Mr. Campion's late resting place. This performance he repeated with his hat, and edged as near to the boiler as he could without burning himself. His companion regarded him with a faintly amused expression on his slightly vacuous face.

“Quite the little cop, still, I see,” he said. “What's the idea? ‘Old Bobby revisits the scene of his first arrest’? ‘The sentimental journey of a Big Fifth’? I hate to seem inquisitive, Stanislaus, but I'm expecting a client, as I said before. In fact, when I heard your footsteps I thought you were the mysterious she, and I don't mind telling you my heart sank.”

The Inspector turned from the furnace and looked at his friend attentively. “Why the fancy dress?” he inquired.

Mr. Campion removed the monstrous tweed erection from his head and looked at it lovingly.

“I called in at Belloc's on my way down here,” he observed, “and I caught sight of it. They tell me they make one a year for a rural dean, who wears it for a local ratting gala. I had to have it. Just the thing in which to interview a romantic client, don't you think?”

The Inspector grinned. The warmth was beginning to percolate into his bones and his *bonhomie* was fast returning.

"What an extraordinary chap you are, Campion," he said. "I'm never surprised when you turn up in the most amazing places. I shouldn't have said there was half a dozen men in London who knew of this little hide-out. Yet the first time I call here in twenty years I find you sitting here in fancy dress. How do you do it?"

Campion unbuttoned the flaps of the deerstalker meditatively. "The amiable Lugg put me up to it," he said. "He's still with me, you know—bull pup and *femme-de-chambre* combined. I was looking for some suitable spot to interview a young lady who has been so grossly misinformed that she believes I'm a private detective."

The Inspector knocked out his pipe against the boiler.

"Funny how these ideas get about," he said. "What do you call yourself these days?"

Campion looked at him reprovingly. "Deputy Adventurer," he said. "I thought of that the other day. I think it sums me up perfectly."

The Inspector shook his head gravely. "No more Chalices?" he said. "You put the wind up me last time. You'll get into trouble one of these days."

The young man beamed. "Your idea of trouble must be very advanced," he murmured.

The Inspector did not smile. "That's what I mean by trouble," he remarked, pointing through the open doorway to the railed-in patch of grass. "There'll probably be no one to write 'Here Lies a Benefactor' at your feet, though. What is it this time? A scandal in High Life? Or are you out to crush the spy system?"

"Neither," said Mr. Campion regretfully. "You find me here, Stanislaus, indulging in a silly childish desire to impress. And, incidentally, to get my own back. I'm meeting a lady here—I've told you that about six times. You needn't go. I don't know her. In fact, I think you might add to the tone of the interview. I say, couldn't you go out and borrow a helmet from one of your boys on point duty? Then she'll know I'm telling the truth when I introduce you."

Mr. Oates became alarmed. "If you've got some silly woman coming here, don't you tell her who I am," he said warningly. "What's the idea, anyhow?"

Mr. Campion produced a sheet of thick grey notepaper from his inside pocket.

“Here’s a lawyer’s letter,” he said. “I like to think it cost him personally six-and-eightpence. Go on—read it. I’ll help you with the long words.”

The Inspector took the paper and read the letter to himself, forming each word separately with his lips and emitting an intermittent rumble as he half spoke the phrases.

2, Soul’s Court, Queen’s Rd.,  
Cambridge.

My Dear Campion,

*I have always imagined it more likely that you would eventually come to consult me in a professional capacity than I you. However, the Gods of Chance were always capricious as a woman—and of course it is a woman for whose sweet silly (in the Saxon sense) sake here I am craving your services.*

*You wrote me such an amusing piece of trivia when I announced my engagement that I feel sure you have forgotten the incident completely. Still, it is for my fiancée, Joyce Blount, that I now write you.*

*As perhaps I told you, she is at present—poor child—employing herself as a species of professional daughter-cum-companion in the house of her great-aunt, a prodigious old Hecuba, widow of the late lamented Doctor Faraday, of “Gnats” (circa 1880). They are an elderly family of quite ridiculous proportions and hers is an invidious task.*

*This, then, is the thesis. At the moment Joyce is quite absurdly worried by the disappearance of her uncle, Andrew Seeley, one of the household, who has been absent for about a week. I know the man, a veritable type, and a sponger, as are most of the family, I am afraid. It seems to me to be most probable that he won a few pounds on a horse (this somewhat second-hand sport was a favourite of his, I know) and has taken the week off from his Aunt Faraday’s iron discipline.*

*However, Joyce is as obstinate as she is delectable, and since she has determined to come to Town to-morrow (Thursday, the tenth), to consult some suitable specialist in the matter, I felt the least I could do would be to*



give her your name and address and then write to warn you.

*She has a very romantic nature, I am afraid, and hers is a dull life. If you could give her at least the thrill of seeing the sleuth himself, perhaps even sleuthing, you would be rendering your eternal debtor he who begs always to remain, my dear fellow,*

*Your devoted,  
Marcus Featherstone.*

*P.S.—Were I only in London—εἴθε γενοίμην—I should be absurdly tempted to spy upon the interview.*

*P.P.S.—Gordon, whom you may remember, has at last gone to uphold the British Raj in India, as, of course, he will. Henderson writes me that he has “gone into drains,” whatever that may mean. It sounds typical.*

The Inspector folded the letter carefully and returned it to Campion.

“I don’t think I should cotton to that chap myself,” he observed. “Nice enough, I have no doubt,” he went on hastily. “But if you’re set up in a witness box with a chap like that chivvyng you he makes you look a fool without getting the case on any further. He thinks he knows everything, and so he does pretty nearly—about books and dead languages—but has he the faintest idea of the mental process which resulted in the accused marrying the plaintiff in 1927 in Chiswick, when he had already married the first witness in 1903? Not on your life.”

Mr. Campion nodded. “I think you’re right,” he said. “Although Marcus is a very good solicitor. But cases in Cambridge are usually very *refeened*, I believe. I wish that girl would turn up if she’s coming. I gave Lugg explicit instructions to send her here the moment she arrived at Bottle Street. I thought this would provide a peep at the underworld which would be at once clean, safe and edifying. The kind of girl Marcus can have persuaded to marry him must be mentally stunted. Besides, her trouble seems to be absurd. She’s lost a very unpleasant uncle—why worry to look for him? My idea is to sit up on this convenient structure,