

Praise for Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher series

'Independent, wealthy, spirited and possessed of an uninhibited style that makes everyone move out of her way and stand gawking for a full five minutes after she walks by—Phryne Fisher is a woman who gets what she wants and has the good sense to enjoy every minute of it!' —*Geelong Times*

'Phryne ... is a wonderful fantasy of how you could live your life if you had beauty, money, brains and superb self control' —*The Age*

'Fisher is a sexy, sassy and singularly modish character. Her 1920s Melbourne is racy, liberal and a city where crime occurs on its shadowy, largely unlit streets.' —*Canberra Times*

'The presence of the inimitable Phryne Fisher makes this mystery a delightful, glamorous romp of a novel—a literary glass of champagne with a hint of debauchery.' —*Armidale Express*

'Impressive as she may be, Phryne Fisher, her activities and her world are never cloying thanks to Greenwood's witty, slightly tongue-in-cheek prose. As usual, it's a delightfully frothy, indulgent escape with an underlying bite.' —*Otago Daily Times*

'Greenwood's strength lies in her ability to create characters that are wholly satisfying: the bad guys are bad, and the good guys are great.' —*Vogue*

'If you have not yet discovered this Melbourne author and her wonderful books featuring Phryne Fisher, I urge you to do so now ... In a word: delightful' —*Herald Sun*

'Elegant, fabulously wealthy and sharp as a tack, Phryne sleuths her way through these classical detective stories with customary panache ... Greenwood's character is irresistibly charming, and her stories benefit from research, worn lightly, into the Melbourne of the period' —*The Age*

'The astonishing thing is not that Phryne is so gloriously fleshed out with her lulu bob and taste for white peaches and green chartreuse, but that I had not already made her acquaintance.' —*Bendigo Advertiser*

MURDER ON A
MIDSUMMER
NIGHT

A Phryne Fisher
Mystery

Kerry Greenwood


ALLEN & UNWIN

CHAPTER ONE

*What if a little paine the passage have
That makes frail flesh to feare the bitter wave?*

Edmund Spenser
The Faerie Queene

It had been such an agreeable day until then.

The year, aware that it was very new and ought not to put itself forward, was beginning its career as 1929 modestly. There were mild blue skies. There were sweet breezes (in St Kilda they were scented with Turkish lolly and old beer, admittedly, but one could perceive that the year meant well) and cool water. Phryne Fisher had bathed early then plunged herself into a bracing shower. She had cleansed her admirable form with pine-scented soap and patted it dry with the fluffiest of towels. Her breakfast, prepared by that jewel of cooks, Mrs Butler, and served by the gem of the butlery profession, Mr Butler, had included homemade lemon butter for her toasted baguette and real coffee made from real coffee beans and not from a bottle with a man in a fez on the front.

Her household this sunny morning was disposed to be quietly industrious, from her two adopted daughters, Jane and Ruth, making a recipe file in the parlour to Dot mending stockings in the garden under the jasmine. Ember the black cat was hunting sparrows and Molly the black and white almost-sheepdog was guarding the kitchen door. It was not perhaps very likely that burglars would come in through the back door in broad daylight, but if they did, Molly was ready for them, and she was also within easy reach of a cook whose generosity with meat scraps was legendary in canine circles.

Mr Butler was updating the cellar book, one of his favourite occupations. He had the drinks tray ready for when Miss Phryne might call for *citron presse*, a jug of which reposed in the American Refrigerating Machine with the shaved ice, lemon slices and mint sprigs.

Phryne was making a list of invitees for her birthday party. She would be twenty-nine on the thirteenth of January. A serious age. Most of her contemporaries were long married and rearing children, husbands and tennis coaches in outer suburban happiness. She caught a glimpse of herself in the drawing room mirror as she reached for a Turkish cigarette and her lighter. A small young woman with a boyish figure, dressed in a house gown of scarlet and gold. Her hair was as black as a crow's feather and cut in a cap, just long enough to swing forward in two divinely modish wings. Her skin was pale and her mouth red and her eyes a strong shade of green.

'You don't look twenty-nine,' she told her reflection. 'You're lovely!'

She blew the mirrored Phryne a kiss and rang for a lemon drink.

Just as Mr Butler had borne in the tray with its icy jug, the front doorbell rang several times, sounding so abrupt in

the silent house that in the garden Dot jumped and pricked her finger, Jane dropped the paste on the carpet, and Mrs Butler lost control of an egg. It hit the tiled floor and smashed, where it was rapidly cleaned up by a grateful Molly. Ember swore as his sparrows flew off, chattering.

Mr Butler shimmered away and returned with the news that Miss Eliza was at the door 'with a . . . person'.

'Right,' sighed Phryne. Her sister, Eliza, had taken to social work like a natural, and sometimes brought her most mysterious cases to Phryne with all the smugness of an Irish terrier producing a dead rat. But she did love Eliza, really, so she stood up to receive her visitors.

Eliza was a plump, bouncing daughter of the aristocracy, a fervent Fabian socialist and a woman whose claim to the title of worst hats in the world could only be challenged by her soul mate, Lady Alice Harborough. Today's production was of rigid yellow straw, plonked straight down onto the wearer's head like a candle snuffer. Someone devoid of any artistic sensibilities or shame had secured a dried hydrangea to it with a bakelite pin.

Eliza ushered her guest into a soft corner of the sofa and dragged off the offending headpiece.

'Oof! It's hot outside. Thank you for seeing us, Phryne,' she said, wiping strands of her fine brown hair off her rosy face.

'Lemon drink?' asked Phryne. 'Or shall we make some tea?'

'Lemon,' said Eliza. 'Gosh, thanks, Mr Butler. Mrs Manifold?'

'Nothing,' said the woman on the sofa.

Phryne looked at her and found herself examined by shrewd parrot eyes in a wrinkled face. Mrs Manifold had long grey hair worn in a braid around her head, a loose brown dress made apparently of sacking, and sandals on her stockingless feet. Phryne searched for a fashion reference point and found the

Pre-Raphaelites, which seemed unlikely. She sipped her drink and endured Mrs Manifold's inspection.

'Phryne, Mrs Manifold has a son,' began Eliza.

'Had a son,' said Mrs Manifold in a flat, harsh voice.

'He was found drowned at St Kilda beach,' continued Eliza. 'Wearing an old army overcoat with his pockets full of stones and the police think it's suicide.'

'Impossible,' grated Mrs Manifold.

'So Mrs Manifold told them and told them and made such a fuss that the police finally ordered a coroner's inquest, so there was an autopsy,' Eliza went on, finishing her drink in a gulp and holding it out for a refill. 'Here is the report.'

'Eliza, this is scarcely my business,' protested Phryne, taking the document. 'The coroner will have to decide what happened to . . .' she read the name on the file, 'Augustine.'

'The coroner has decided,' said Mrs Manifold. 'He decided that my Augustine fell in by accident while he was drunk.'

'Death by Misadventure?'

'Yes, the fool.'

'I see here that when they . . . sorry . . . opened his stomach they found seven ounces of alcohol. Whisky, apparently.'

'And why should Augustine have whisky in his belly?' cried Mrs Manifold. 'He never drank but a glass of sherry at Christmas! And if he wanted to die, he wouldn't have tried to drown. He could swim like a fish! He's been murdered,' she declared in a fierce, heartbroken undertone. 'My son was murdered.'

'Tell me more about him, and how you know Eliza here, and you shall have a brandy and soda and maybe a few small sandwiches,' instructed Phryne. Mrs Manifold was haggard with hunger, and Mrs Butler's small sandwiches would slip easily past the lump in a grieving mother's throat. Phryne was impressed by the utter certainty of the bereaved woman. But

utter certainty in the matter of suicide was always suspect. Suicide, of all deaths, was the most unchancy and dangerous. And one which could render the survivors mad with guilt. 'If only he'd talked to me,' people would say. 'If only I'd dropped in on him that night . . .'

But Phryne knew from her own experience that someone bent on death cannot be deflected, and it is cruel to try. Because she had tried, once.

Mr Butler brought in a tray of crustless ribbon sandwiches and distributed plates and napkins. Eating the first one taught Mrs Manifold how hungry she was, but she did not grab or gulp. She was not disconcerted by being served by a butler. Mrs Manifold had evidently been raised in rather different circumstances than the ones in which she now found herself. Dot came in and sat down, accepting a cool drink.

When Mrs Manifold had eaten most of the tidbits and absorbed the strong brandy and soda which Phryne had prescribed, there was colour in her face and her eyes were less weary.

'Now, tell me all about Augustine,' prompted Phryne.

'He was my only son,' said Mrs Manifold. 'My last baby. The girls have all grown up and married. But Augustine stayed with me. His father died ten years ago; poor man, he never did amount to much. He had a little junk shop, reclaimed copper, old wares. Dirty stuff. Augustine didn't object to getting his hands dirty, mind you! But when he took over the shop he said to me, We have to move in better circles, Mother, than these rag picker's gleanings and bits of old metal. There's good stuff to buy and sell and we need to make a good profit, so you can live as you deserve.' She sobbed briefly, her hand to her mouth. 'So he started with a cart, going round looking for old furniture to mend and resell. He had a lot of that colonial homemade stuff which is now so popular.'

‘Indeed,’ murmured Phryne, who could not understand the fashion for stuff knocked up by an amateur hand in the legendary Old Bark Hut. ‘Prices have been rocketing lately.’

‘But he was educated, my Augustine,’ said Mrs Manifold. ‘You only have to look at him. He wasn’t strong,’ she said with a sharp grieving sigh. ‘His poor chest wasn’t good. My mother said I’d never raise him. But I did.’

Phryne looked at the cabinet photograph which had been thrust into her hand. So this was Augustine. A weak, badly proportioned face, an absent chin, what might well have been watery blue eyes, a pouting mouth. A face only a mother could love, and this one evidently did. Phryne had lately been within a hair’s-breadth of assassination by a very pretty young man and had almost gone off prettiness in young men. Augustine must have had virtues. And he could never have used his physical beauty to get what he wanted.

‘I thought it was lucky when his chest kept him out of the war,’ sobbed Mrs Manifold.

Dot supplied her with more tea and a fresh handkerchief. Eliza took the photo.

‘I’ve met him,’ she told Phryne. ‘Not a word to say to a goose but a perfectly nice man. Valued those sapphires for Alice, and when she came to sell them to the city jeweller, she got exactly what he estimated. That’s when I met Mrs Manifold. And I never saw Augustine drink, and he didn’t go around with my ladies. They’d know,’ she added.

Phryne nodded. Eliza had a flourishing friendship with all of the ladies of light repute in St Kilda, and perforce had become acquainted with their clientele, if in a distant and disapproving way.

‘Of course he didn’t!’ Mrs Manifold had surfaced from her abyss of mourning at an inconvenient juncture. ‘My Augustine

wasn't interested in women. You're woman enough for me, Mother, he used to say. I never saw him ever look at a girl in that way. Mind you, he would have married, I expect. But not yet. Always working, my Augustine. He built that business from scratch, nearly. Got rid of the old metal. He was employing a man to do the carpentry and a girl to work in the shop, and he was always travelling. Buying, selling. It was a good business.'

'So he moved into paintings, then, and stamps, perhaps, small wares?' asked Phryne.

'Yes. I knew some artists once. In England. Before the War.'

'Ah,' said Phryne encouragingly.

'I was a model. No funny stuff,' she added hastily. 'I was a good girl. My sisters and I were all models. They called themselves a Brotherhood. Mr Hunt was my artist. Mr Morris was one of them. You've got some of his paper on your wall.'

'So I have,' said Phryne, enjoying again the mysterious complications of the William Morris design called Golden Lily, which gave her parlour its undersea greenish mystery. 'You were a model for one of the Pre-Raphaelites? How very interesting. I see now that your dress has a pattern, too—Daisy, is it?'

Mrs Manifold almost smiled, smoothing the russet garment over her bony knees. 'Daisy it is,' she agreed. 'We used to help with the embroidery when they were doing a new design. Tapestry, too. We were good with our needles. Difficult, those Morris designs. All curves and waves. And precise to a stitch! It was worth our life to be one thirty-second of an inch out.'

'Very hard on the eyes,' sympathised Eliza.

'But so beautiful,' said Phryne.

Mrs Manifold gave her a shrewd, appreciative look.

'Just so,' she answered. 'If you have to have the headache, better have it from making something ravishing. When Mr Hunt

didn't need us, we would all sit together and work on a big piece. We used to sing, sometimes. And Mr Morris insisted on regular breaks, and the factory had a tea room, and lots of windows and very good light. It was a lovely place to work and a lovely time, before we all married and went away from each other and all this sorrow landed on us. Deborah dead in France and her husband and baby with her; a stray shell landed on her house. Me, a widow in Melbourne. Might as well be at the ends of the earth. And Lizzie, well, Lizzie went down the wrong path and we never spoke of her. And I thought I was the lucky one. Until now.'

'Quite,' said Phryne.

'Sometimes when the artists couldn't pay us they gave us a painting. I brought a lot of them with me. Augustine was going to sell some of them.'

'Ah,' said Phryne. The Pre-Raphaelites were good solid artists. Definitely worth collecting. Outmoded now, but might easily come back into fashion. Phryne herself loved them, and might be putting in an offer for some of Mrs Manifold's store, though now was not the time to mention this. The widow was speaking of her son once more.

'But he was educated, Augustine was. His father wouldn't let him go to the university, said it was above our station—he was a fool—so Augustine read books. In Greek. And Latin. And he was selling coins and antiquities. And someone killed him,' she insisted, returning to her original point.

'How old was Augustine?' asked Phryne.

'Twenty-nine,' said Mrs Manifold.

Something decided Phryne.

'Very well,' she said. 'I will look into it. First, I wish I could tell you that I will find out what you want me to find. But I might not. I might not be able to solve this, or I might find

that Augustine killed himself. I can't skew the results. Do you agree?'

Mrs Manifold fixed Phryne with her savage eye.

'I know he didn't kill himself, so it doesn't matter. You look into it, and I'll pay you whatever you ask. I've got the shop and Augustine left me well off.'

'We shall see if I deserve any payment,' said Phryne, unaccountably depressed. 'I'll come around to the shop this afternoon. About three? Good. Eliza, can you look after Mrs Manifold? I'll see you later.'

Mr Butler escorted the visitors to the door and returned, looking grave and ushering Jane and Ruth before him.

'Yes, Mr Butler?' asked Phryne, expecting some important announcement or serious confession.

'Miss Jane wishes to apologise for spilling paste on the parlour carpet, Miss Fisher,' he said.

'It's only a carpet,' said Phryne, and laughed with relief. She hugged the culprit, admired the recipe file, and recommended that Mr Butler call the excellent Mrs Johnson, cleaning lady supreme, to come and remove the stain.

Phryne ascended the stairs to put on junk shop visiting clothes: a light summer suit in a mixed pattern which would be easily cleaned. She had never met a junk shop which didn't specialise in various forms of dust, from greasy oil-soaked dust to floating varnish dust to the fine oatmeal coloured powder of vellum, which stuck to all fabric and clung like a suitor.

Dot had chosen the suit and was now replacing Phryne's mended stockings in her drawer. She had also allotted the most mended for this afternoon's excursion. The other thing which junk shops had were a plethora of hosiery-destroying snags.

‘Well, Dot dear, we have a suicide to investigate and a junk shop to visit. Would you come with me? You know how I value your domestic knowledge.’

‘Yes, Miss, if you like,’ said Dot. ‘But I don’t know anything about paintings and things.’

‘No, but you know the difference between an old piece of cloth and a new one,’ said Phryne. ‘And you know a flat iron from a potato masher, which I don’t. Here’s the young man,’ she said, handing over the photograph.

‘Never make the cinema his career,’ considered Dot. ‘But it’s not a bad face.’

‘No,’ agreed Phryne. ‘And he loved his mother and swore he would never leave her.’

‘Oh,’ said Dot. Her education in the stranger byways of love had been startlingly augmented by employment in Miss Fisher’s household. ‘You think he was . . .’

‘Maybe. But perhaps he never found a girl to equal his mother,’ Phryne commented. ‘Now there’s a strong-minded woman. She says he wouldn’t have killed himself.’

‘People always say that,’ said Dot, picking up strewn garments. Phryne always marvelled at the way they just fell limp into her hands and then threw themselves into perfect folds.

‘Yes, but she made a good point. He was found drowned, in an overcoat with pockets full of stones. But he could swim like a fish, she said. If you can swim you wouldn’t choose drowning.’

‘Why not?’ asked Dot, who considered water an alien element to be entered only at the very edge and then only up to the knees.

‘Because when you learn to swim, sooner or later you get in above your head and swim for the surface and take one breath of water before you get out, and it hurts, Dot, like you

wouldn't believe. Plus you spend the next hour choking and throwing up and feeling as though someone has beaten you across the ribs with a rubber hose. Those who say drowning is a nice peaceful death are lying.'

'And no one has come back to tell us that it is true,' declared Dot.

Phryne chuckled. 'Exactly. Mrs Manifold is right in saying that anyone who can swim would not try drowning as a suicide method. There are so many others—hanging, shooting, throat cutting, poisoning . . .'

'Miss!' objected Dot, hugging her armful of scarlet and gold cloth.

'Well, well, not to offend your sensibilities, Dot dear, I will just say that there are a thousand exits for those determined on self-slaughter.'

'It's a mortal sin,' said Dot, shivering.

'To Catholics, yes. I didn't ask about Augustine's religion. Even so, Dot, some Catholics have killed themselves. And some coroners have brought in Death by Misadventure or Suicide While the Balance of the Mind is Disturbed so that they can be buried in sacred ground.'

'But they have to be mad,' said Dot. 'Don't they? To want to die?'

Phryne looked at her companion fondly. Dot had been starved and badly treated and at her wits' end, and her response had been to consider homicide, not suicide. Of all suicidal subjects, Dot was the most unlikely. And a stalwart fellow traveller for this journey, which might prove harrowing.

Why had she agreed to accept the task? Perhaps because of Mrs Manifold's unrelenting belief. Or perhaps—was it that Augustine was the same age as Phryne? Or was she remembering a suicide she had tried to prevent, a long time ago?

Dot called her attention to the state of her shoes, and Phryne shelved the matter for later consideration.

‘Lunch,’ she said. ‘Then a little research on some artists, and then ho for the relics.’



Two soldiers surveyed the landscape. There was not a lot to survey. It was limestone, picked out in a sickly yellow, with sandstone outcrops.

‘When we first came here, Vern,’ growled Curly, reaching for his tobacco pouch, ‘I thought it was the driest desert, worse than back o’ Bourke, worse than the great Artesian, dry as a lizard’s gullet.’

‘And now?’ asked his companion, pushing an enquiring horse’s nose gently aside. ‘Give over, Ginge. We’ll find some water soon.’

‘Now I reckon it’s worse,’ said the first, lighting his cigarette with a sulphurous fume. ‘It’s a flat, stony, waterless vision of hell, that’s what it is.’

‘Too right,’ said Vern.