

LITTLE DEATHS - BRIEF OUTLINE

Inspector Simon Wise is the only person in the London mansion unaffected by Lady Fairhaven's murder. His colleague, Sergeant Murdoch, and the household's many servants are appalled and outraged that their Victorian society has become so violent and unpredictable that murder can reach even the upper classes. Her husband Sir Gregory and two small children appear to be in shock. But since the deaths of his beloved wife and daughter, Wise is numb to the world's unpredictability and unfairness. Instead, he mechanically orders Murdoch and the eager new constable, Benjamin Brown, to survey the crime scene. Several clues to the murder are noted, including the lack of an apparent break-in and a footprint in the garden.

Murdoch worries that his superior, whom he generally likes and respects, has lost his edge, but he also sees a possible opportunity for his own advancement by taking up the Inspector's slack. When he voices this concern to Superintendent Walker of the Metropolitan Police, Walker seems to encourage his aspirations. Walker has never liked Wise, viewing him as an upstart and an interloper, but in the past has found that his "outsider status" as a Jew can lend a valuable perspective in difficult-to-solve investigations. He has involved Wise in the Fairhaven case because the wealthy, powerful Jewish banker Nathaniel Rothschild may be implicated in the crime, as the last person (not counting servants) to have seen Lady F alive. However, if Wise has lost his passion for the hunt, Walker is ready to dump him.

Lady Fairhaven's autopsy reveals disturbing findings. Beneath her elegant gown, there are horrifying genital mutilations. Wise is enraged by this violation and resolves to bring the perpetrator to justice. His determination strengthens when, on a subsequent visit to the Fairhaven establishment to interview Sir Gregory, her young daughter innocently asks him to take a doll to her absent mother.

Wise meets with the banker Rothschild. He treats Wise to a disquisition on the essential outsider status of the Jew in British society, reinforcing Simon's feelings that he will never truly fit in, no matter what his achievements and sacrifices. Rothschild then claims to have chivalrously left Lady F at her door, and swears the servants will substantiate his story. Wise however realizes servants are easy to bribe and Rothschild could be lying.

Lady Fairhaven emerges as an unusual woman, one whom Wise does not particularly like. He sees her as an idle, upper-class dilettante, defying the strict moral codes of her day by indulging in a series of apparently indiscriminate flirtations with all comers from her footman James to the powerful Rothschild, and busying herself unnecessarily in the larger world, probably to no good end. As it happens, however, Henrietta, Rachel's independent-minded cousin who has been running the Wise household since Rachel's death, knew Lady F slightly from the Langham Place Circle women's meetings. She paints a very different portrait for Wise of Lady F as an advanced thinker and free spirit. At Henrietta's urging, to better understand the murder victim's habits and life, Inspector Wise interviews Lady F's dear friend, Lady Penelope Abbott. From Lady Abbott, Wise learns that Lady F was a suffragist and "feminist" who believed in women's rights and was determined not to be bound by the strictures of Victorian society. During their meeting, Wise notices an attraction toward Lady Penelope, which he quickly tries to suppress because of its inappropriate religious and class implications.

At Lady Penelope's suggestion, Wise also interviews a young doctor from an impeccably pedigreed Orange Irish family, Michael Talbot, whom Lady F had befriended and who, Lady Penelope speculated, might speak to her serious commitment to social causes. Dr. Talbot, who specializes in the treatment of diseases and deformities of childhood, is already known to Wise. At the suggestion of Dr. Baumgarten, the family physician who attended Rachel during her final childbirth, Wise consulted Dr. Talbot regarding his mentally retarded daughter Emily. Dr. Talbot has made several housecalls on the Wise family, and is acquainted with Wise's numerous children, especially his oldest, Rebecca. Dr. Talbot is grief-stricken at Lady F's loss, and outlines her critical fundraising role on the board of his newly founded Institute. It is clear Dr. Talbot saw Lady F as a kindred spirit and benefactress. During this interview, Talbot is interrupted by his spastic assistant Oliver Brantley, who also expresses inarticulate grief at the death of

Lady F. Talbot provides some brief background on Brantley, describing him as a loyal servant whom Talbot rescued from a degrading life on the streets.

Before the tragedies that beset his household, Wise's refuge from work was always his large, boisterous family. But for the past three years, even its warmth and good humor only make Wise wish to avoid it. In particular, he behaves in a harsh and rejecting manner toward Emily, whom Wise blames for the death of his wife during childbirth. He is worried about how his daughters are growing up, supervised only by a gentile servant Martha and the radical Miss Gelbstein. Sarah wants to be a scientist, or God forbid a police detective! Rebecca dreams of starting a school for handicapped children. Deborah seems to live in a fantasy world of books and music. Even Naomi, the youngest after Emily, is wilful and rebellious. Only Miriam conforms to Simon's ideal of what a good wife and mother should be. He puts all his hopes on his one son David, but David seems more interested in exploring far-off lands than in studying and becoming a scholar. Henrietta, with her feminist philosophy, grates on Wise's nerves, and seems to aid and abet his daughters' rebelliousness with her strident assertions of women's rights. Wise also frets about bringing his children up as observant Jews when he has pretty much turned his back on his religion as a result of his wife's death. Ironically, it is Martha, the maid, who encourages the family to strictly observe dietary and religious laws. Finally, Wise is increasingly plagued by nightmares of the horrors he witnessed during the Crimean War, where he volunteered as a foot soldier to prove his loyalty to England, and emerged as a sort of minor hero.

As the Fairhaven investigation proceeds, Wise finds more and more to dislike about Sir Gregory. He appears to have been an inattentive husband and indifferent father wrapped in his own gentlemanly pleasures of hunting and gambling. Further, Wise learns that, in his role as MP, Sir Gregory voted against a bill to clean up the milk refinery responsible for the typhoid epidemic of 1873, in which Wise's daughter Leah died. Finally, Wise is able to catch Sir Gregory in a lie about his whereabouts on the night of Lady Fairhaven's death, discovering that he was with his mistress Arabella Bowdoin. Arabella, who has an illegitimate son by Sir Gregory, may have had her own motives for wishing his wife dead, with Lady F out of the way, Arabella might have a more secure foothold in Sir Gregory's affections. Her employer, the madam Kate Hamilton, attests to her capacity for violence.

Meanwhile, the corpse of an infant has been discovered in Whitechapel. Wise does not make much of the dead baby, spouting statistics to prove that this is not all that rare an occurrence in late Victorian England, especially if they are the offspring of poor unwed mothers. He knows that, given the rudimentary state of coroner autopsies, it is often difficult to determine with any accuracy whether such infants simply had died of natural causes or actually had been killed. Secretly he sympathizes with mothers so desperate that they would abandon or neglect their own offspring. Also, he has become almost obsessed with the Fairhaven case and has little energy to devote to other investigations. However, as additional dead babies make their appearance, with noticeable physical deformities, the childless Murdoch becomes convinced that these new dead infants are not mere cases of neglect, but are the result of an organized criminal activity that he is determined to uncover. He and Wise argue about whether the case deserves more than a perfunctory investigation. Once again Murdoch feels that Inspector Wise is belittling his abilities and insights. Murdoch takes these concerns to Superintendent Walker, who encourages him to act on his own to solve these new crimes as a way of engineering Wise's downfall.

In the midst of these developments, Dr. Talbot has begun to evince a more than friendly interest in Rebecca. He causes seemingly chance meetings to occur, during which he is romantic and fervent, but also manicky and disordered. Rebecca is overwhelmed by his attention, and sees him as a troubled but sensitive and dedicated soul. Also, Rebecca wants to go out in the world and accomplish something, and Dr. Talbot is the first educated man who seems genuinely interested in her aspirations and hopes. She wonders whether she is falling in love with him. Sarah's detached scientific eye finds Dr. Talbot more peculiar, but she does not want to spoil her sister's happiness. Henrietta is also not seduced by his blandishments, but her warnings to Wise go unheeded, as do Dr. Baumgarten's hints that there is something peculiar about Talbot's background. Wise respects Talbot as the ultimate Englishman as well as a man attempting to wrest order from genetic chaos, but since he cannot take quite seriously the idea of a courtship between the doctor and his daughter he is not too interested in examining a possible "dark side" to the good doctor.

During this period, Simon meets periodically with his mentor Matthew Turner, forced to retire from the force in 1867 because of injuries received during the Fenian bombing of Clerkenwell Prison, to discuss the Fairhaven case. Turner urges caution regarding Simon's fixation with Sir Gregory, but Simon is determined to punish this arrogant, callous aristocrat. As the investigation drags on, Superintendent Walker continues to pressure Wise to bring it to a conclusion and accuses him of protecting Rothschild because they are co-religionists.

Simon recognizes that he wants an excuse to continue his contact with Lady Penelope. On the pretext of getting more information about Lady F, he pays her several more visits, each time feeling himself both more intrigued and conflicted. In these encounters, he learns more about Lady F, including the motivation behind her sexual liaisons. He also begins to admire the independent nature of Lady Penelope and feels an increasing affinity for this upper-class, Anglican aristocrat.

Murdoch, meanwhile, is convinced that Simon has narrowed in on Sir Gregory because of spite and anger, and is overlooking other suspects. For example, James the footman was about to be fired for taking inappropriate liberties with his mistress. A dismissed maid, the tubercular Molly Reid, who was pregnant by the footman, resented her mistress allowing her to be turned out on the street. A former lover, the industrialist Frederick May, recently attempted to renew their acquaintance, only to be rebuffed by Lady F. Most importantly, Murdoch forces the footman James to confess to having seen Rothschild entering Lady F's morning room through the garden entrance after he had supposedly driven away in his coach. Murdoch voices these concerns to Superintendent Walker, who again calls Wise on the carpet for not solving the case more quickly, and for persecuting a member of the upper classes when other possible suspects exist.

On the strength of this evidence, Wise reinterviews Rothschild, who admits to a sexual encounter with Lady F the night before her death, but insists he is innocent of her murder. Instead, he informs Wise that Sir Gregory is deeply in debt, but due to prenuptial agreements, could only access Lady Fairhaven's significant fortune upon her demise. He further discloses that Sir G had made an effort to raise money from Frederick May, who tried to use the proposed loan as a bargaining chip in return for Lady F's favors, a suggestion that infuriated Sir G. It is also rumored that Sir G has been involved in a failed race-track swindle as a way to make good on his debts. This last piece of news is especially upsetting to Wise, because he suspects that this scam involves corruption among detectives on the police force.

With the enthusiastic assistance of Constable Benjamin Brown, who longs to impress Inspector Wise, Murdoch makes inquiries at a Foundling Hospital for unwed mothers, where he learns of a "bent" midwife in the business of infant disposal. Later he tracks her down through a London boardman, Nicholas Prodger, who turns out to be living with the midwife in question. Catherine Martin, the midwife, has been depositing babies with Molly Reid, among others, for temporary care. Murdoch also discovers that she sometimes transacts business with Oliver Brantley who is willing to buy infants from her, especially infants with physical defects.

At the same time, Constable Brown, who following in Murdoch's footsteps evinces a decidedly independent streak, makes two important discoveries on his own. First, he tracks down the missing garden boy, Joseph Winkeep, who reveals he brought a note from Lady Fairhaven to Dr. Talbot the night before her murder. Later, Brown also is able to match the plaster of Paris imprint from Lady Fairhaven's garden with one of Arabella's shoes.

By this time, Murdoch believes he has exposed a genuine baby murder ring and takes his evidence to Superintendent Walker. At Walker's insistence, Wise consults with Dr. Talbot about the psychology of infanticide. Talbot discloses some of his views on eugenics in this conversation. As Murdoch becomes convinced Brantley is the ringleader of the baby killing scheme, he challenges Wise to confront Dr. Talbot about his assistant. Reassured by Dr. Talbot's ringing defense of Brantley, Wise discounts Murdoch's conclusions as premature and unfounded and forbids his Sergeant to further pursue this line of investigation without guidance from him. Undeterred, Murdoch returns to Dr. Talbot's office and challenges his story. Talbot equivocates, but simultaneously arranges for Brantley's flight. In the pursuit that follows, Brantley kills Murdoch and then commits suicide. Officialdom concludes that Brantley was responsible for the baby murders and considers the case closed.

Wise is devastated, feeling that his obsession with the Fairhaven case and his dismissal of Murdoch's needs to prove himself may have contributed to his sergeant's death. Even worse, Murdoch's death evokes the helpless loss of control he felt when Rachel died, because he suspects that even if he had handled the investigation better, he could not have prevented Murdoch's death with any certainty. Overwhelmed by the random evil of the universe, Wise briefly contemplates suicide. But first he seeks the counsel of his mentor Matthew Turner and Lady Penelope, revisiting not only his anguish at Murdoch's and Rachel's death, but also his feelings of fear and helplessness during the Crimean War. Each of these friends in his or her own way encourages him to fulfill his responsibilities and not give up. Supported by their compassion and caring, Wise decides he has an obligation to Murdoch to continue the baby deaths investigation. Something Murdoch said before he died makes Wise question whether Murdoch believed Brantley was really the primary culprit. Wise begins to review the evidence. He soon realizes he has ignored two important pieces of information linking the Fairhaven case to Talbot, and possibly to the baby deaths as well. These are the fact, disclosed by Lady Penelope, that Lady F was the mysterious A.B., who a few years ago conducted her own private undercover investigation into baby murder rings, ; as well as Constable Brown's discovery of the note that Lady F had sent Dr. Talbot demanding that he meet with her immediately. As additional dead babies appear, Wise begins to question whether, in fact, there may be a direct Talbot connection to both cases.

Before Wise can act on his suspicions, however, Dr. Talbot, feeling at the mercy of his own murderous impulses, seizes the initiative by abducting Rebecca and Emily. Having become increasingly disordered and desperate, Talbot has decided he must kill what he can never have (an innocent young woman with whom he could start a family) and what he has judged should not live (another deformed child). Unconsciously, he hopes this final bold act will result in his apprehension and death. Preparatory to killing Rebecca, however, Talbot attempts to explain himself to her, including the revelation that he killed Lady Fairhaven who through her acquaintance with Catherine Martin had stumbled across Talbot's role in the buying and disposal of crippled infants. Wise is galvanized into action, and is ultimately able to rescue both children as well as bring Talbot to justice.

In the denouement, Superintendent Walker explains to Matthew Turner that Talbot has been committed to an asylum for the criminally insane, although Sir Gregory is calling for a hanging. Wise consoles Rebecca, who is distraught that she could have loved such a monster, and meets again with Lady Penelope. Walking home on a foggy night, Wise reflects on what he has learned about good and evil, perfection and imperfection, outsiders and insiders and the need to fight the good fight regardless of outcome or reward. Reaching his darkened house, Inspector Wise hears Emily crying. Instinctively, he reaches to comfort her, realizing that at last he has made room for her in his heart.

