

## 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 death of his beloved wife Rachel, Wise is numb to the world's unpredictability and unfairness. Instead, he mechanically orders Murdoch to survey the crime scene. Several clues to the murder are noted, including the fact that, although the room seems disordered and there are several partially obscured footprints in the garden, the lock on the door opening onto the garden was not forced, and nothing of value seems to be missing.

It is at this early point that we are first introduced to Simon's keen powers of observation. First Murdoch and later Sir Gregory conclude that the murder is the result of a botched burglary because of a certain disorder to the room (ie., overturned furniture, broken mirror etc.). But Simon sees beneath this surface disruption and is able to detect a "painterly" quality to the disorder. Coupled with the information that the servants heard nothing (no banging of furniture, no breaking of glass), he deduces that this is a "composition" of a burgled residence, and that Lady Fairhaven has been "composed" as a victim of a thief's attack. The controlled chaos of the room makes Simon feel uneasy, as he senses the illusion created by the murderer represents not so much an effort to throw the police off the track as an elaborate mockery of the investigation anticipated by the perpetrator. Despite himself, Simon is becoming somewhat interested in this case, not because of the victim, but because of the murderer. An avid technologist, Simon instructs Murdoch to obtain plaster of Paris casts of the footprints in the garden (an approach Murdoch scorns), and instructs his photographer, William Benjamin Brown, to take pictures of the crime scene. Since this latter approach is quite unorthodox, it is natural that Sir Gregory is revolted and demands it be discontinued. This leads to a volatile confrontation between Sir G and Simon, who take an instant disliking to each other.

Murdoch meanwhile worries that his superior, whom he likes and respects, has lost his edge, and he is determined to cover for him with Superintendent Walker of the Metropolitan Police, who calls Murdoch in for an off-the-record update on the case. 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 Fairhaven alive. If the solution to the case becomes nasty, then the Jewish inspector could be a convenient "fall guy" in Walker's eyes. Murdoch is determined to protect his Inspector Wise from this eventuality.

Lady Fairhaven's autopsy reveals disturbing findings. Beneath her elegant gown, there are horrifying genital mutilations. Wise is enraged by this violation, confirming as it

does his sense of the malevolence of the perpetrator, and resolves to bring the criminal 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. This simple request humanizes Lady Fairhaven in Simon's eyes, and makes him realize that, as well as being a member of the upper classes, she was also a wife and mother, just like his Rachel.

Wise meets with the banker Rothschild. Rothschild treats the inspector 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 Fairhaven at her door, and swears the servants will substantiate his story. Wise however knows servants are easy to bribe. His impression is that Rothschild is lying. This interview also serves to establish a relationship between the Rothschild and Fairhaven households. It also introduces Rothschild's wife, Anna, who is active in the movement to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, and who also has an interest in the prevention of child prostitution. In this scene Rothschild will drop some clues that he feels ambivalently about his wife's activities.

Initially, Wise does not form a particularly positive impression of the victim. He sees Lady Fairhaven as an idle, upper-class dilettante, leaving the raising of her children to servants, 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. To better understand the murder victim's habits and life, Inspector Wise interviews Lady Fairhaven's dear friend, Lady Penelope Abbott. From Lady Abbott, Wise learns that Lady Fairhaven 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, who has consulted him 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 appears 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 mentor. Talbot also refers to the crime as a burglary, and when Simon questions how he obtained this knowledge, the doctor affirms this is how the crime was referred to in all the newspapers.

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. He also comments on Lady F's kindnesses to Brantley, and Brantley's reciprocal devotion. In this interview, Simon recognizes but can't define a peculiar quality in Brantley's and Talbot's relationship. Murdoch sees Brantley as a grateful subordinate, and Talbot as the benevolent mentor, but Simon sense deeper and more complex undercurrents, a kind of intimacy between the two men (which in fact is based on Brantley knowing so many of Talbot's devastating secrets).

Historically, Wise's refuge from work has been his large, boisterous family, run since his wife's death by his oldest daughter Rebecca and their gentile servant Martha. But for the past three years, since Rachel's death, Simon has become increasingly withdrawn. He has been 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. He confides these troubling dreams only to Murdoch, who also served in the Crimea, another bond between the two men.

At home, Simon behaves in a harsh and rejecting manner toward Emily, whom he blames for Rachel's death during childbirth. In general, he is worried about how his daughters are growing up, absent the supervision of their loving and traditional mother. Sarah wants to be a scientist, or a police detective! Rebecca dreams of starting a school for handicapped children. Even Naomi, the youngest after Emily, is often willful 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 making something of himself in English society. 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. Zadok, Simon's aging father, is also an occasional presence in the family, although he lives in Manchester. Originally an itinerant peddler who was able eventually to set up a watch and jewelry store, he is a respectable member of the Manchester Jewish community. He agonizes about his son having chosen such an "unJewish" and low status career, and about his abandoning his faith.

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. Through careful sleuthing, Wise is able to catch Sir Gregory in a lie about his whereabouts on the night of Lady Fairhaven's death. Initially, Murdoch interrogates the doorman at Sir Gregory's club, who supports the baronet's story that he was there all night. However, Simon realizes from a chance remark of Dr. Baumgarten that in fact Sir G was climbing into a hansom and heading toward the Haymarket district at the very time he claimed to be at the club. He follows Sir Gregory, and observes a rendezvous with Arabella Bowdoin, a prostitute whom Sir Gregory has set up in a fancy brothel. He confronts the two of them, which directly violates Victorian convention of "two worlds" by exposing Sir Gregory's double life. Arabella takes her cues from Sir Gregory, who eventually admits he paid a visit to Arabella on the night in question.

Later Simon questions both Arabella and the brothel's madam, Kate Hamilton. More afraid of Sir Gregory than the police inspector (Kate alludes to Sir G's underworld connections), they admit little, and stick to the story Sir Gregory has proposed. Arabella 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, Kate Hamilton, attests to her capacity for violence. Simon is suspicious of Arabella and begins to investigate her background more closely. Why did she leave the military town to come to London? How did she meet Sir G? What kind of hold does she have over him? Later he follows Arabella, and manages to discover her secret, the aristocratic patrimony of her son little Reggie. Simon realizes the significance of this is that she may have been able to exert influence over Sir G to get rid of Lady Fairhaven, or to have plotted with him to dispose of her, in order to advance her son's interests.

Meanwhile, the corpse of an infant has been discovered in Whitechapel. Actually, this is not all that rare an occurrence in late Victorian England, where some statistics show approximately one such baby discovered daily, usually the detritus of poor unwed mothers, often servants in great households. This is the second body discovered that week. Wise does not make much of the dead baby, and in fact it is impossible to determine with any accuracy whether it simply died of natural causes or was killed. Secretly he sympathizes with mothers so desperate that they would abandon or neglect their own offspring. But, as additional dead babies make their appearance, with noticeable physical deformities, Superintendent Walker takes an interest in the case. He remembers an investigation a few years ago, carried out by one of his favorite sergeants, into a baby-murdering ring, in which gullible single women paid for their children to be reared in the countryside, only to have them expeditiously disposed of by an unscrupulous midwife. Walker is convinced that these new dead infants are not mere cases of neglect, but an organized criminal activity. He and Wise argue about whether the baby deaths are actually murders, or simply natural deaths or at worst acts of negligence. Once again Murdoch worries that Inspector Wise is not taking seriously enough his superior's instructions, and decides to do his own leg-work to solve these new crimes and thus protect Wise. After following a rather circumstantial trail of paid informants and unreliable witnesses, he triumphantly identifies as the criminal mastermind Oliver Brantley.

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. Lady Penelope is Dr. Talbot's confidante in matters of the heart and hints to Simon that something more than mere friendship is afoot between the two. She also observes Talbot as increasingly anxious and overwrought, and warns Simon that he is pushing himself very hard. Wise,

however, is abstracted and distant. He respects Talbot as an intelligent scientist attempting to wrest order from genetic chaos, and does not pay much attention to Lady Penelope's concerns. Also, he cannot take seriously the idea of a courtship between the doctor and his daughter.

During this period, Simon meets periodically with both his father and Dr. Baumgarten, two men whose opinions he respects. Their conversations cover both family and current social issues, but also include discussion of the Fairhaven case. Both men urge 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. As evidence mounts against Rothschild (as well as Sir Gregory), Simon must question his own motives. Superintendent Walker, an anti-semitic, would like nothing better than to have Rothschild identified as the culprit. Sir Gregory complains to Walker about Simon's persecution of him. In turn, Walker accuses Simon of favoring "his own people." Simon resists Walker's pressure, which he believes is both prejudiced and motivated by politics, but he is honest enough to admit that the evidence against Rothschild needs to be pursued.

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 her commitment to sexual independence that is behind her numerous liaisons; her work on behalf of prostitutes; and her general desire to help the downtrodden. He also begins to admire the independent, spirited nature of Lady Penelope and feels an increasing affinity for this upper-class, Anglican aristocrat.

Simon visits William Brown's studio to pick up the Fairhaven crime scene photographs. He discovers Brown photographing semi-nude little girls, and learns that the photographer supports himself by doing portraits of society children. He discovers that Brown also supplies child pornography to interested parties, including Rothschild, who considers himself something of a connoisseur. In studying the enlargements of the Fairhaven photograph, Simon notices that an umbrella in the stand appears to have the monogram R not F. This clue directs him back to the banker.

Meanwhile Murdoch, worried that Inspector Wise is overlooking a suspect in the Fairhaven case, conducts a series of interviews with individuals who are unlikely perpetrators at best. However, each of these interviews reveals important information. For example, James the footman was about to be fired for taking inappropriate liberties with his mistress, but in fact Lady Fairhaven intervened on his behalf and saved his job. However, in this interview, James does confess to Rothschild's having returned the following day to claim his umbrella and to having seen Rothschild entering Lady F's morning room through the garden entrance after he had supposedly driven away in his carriage. A dismissed maid, the tubercular Molly Reid, who was pregnant by Sir Gregory, resented her mistress allowing her to be turned out on the street. Again, it turns

out that Lady F attempted unsuccessfully to help her subsequently. Molly also discloses that, if one wants to dispose of an unwanted child, no questions asked, Catherine Martin is the midwife to contact.

With the photographic evidence of the umbrella in hand, Wise reinterviews Rothschild. Simon recognizes that while he personally loathes Sir Gregory, in some respects Simon is the epitome of everything to which Simon aspires – the perfectly assimilated and highly successful Jew. Nevertheless he is too good a detective not to pursue the discrepancies in Rothschild's story. He forces him to admit to a sexual encounter with Lady F the night before her death, but Rothschild insists he is innocent of her murder. Instead, he informs Wise that Sir Gregory is deeply in debt, but due to prenuptial agreements, can only access Lady Fairhaven's significant fortune upon her demise. He further discloses that Sir G has become involved in various underworld schemes, including plotting an elaborate race-track scam as a way to make good on his debts. This last piece of news is especially upsetting to Wise, because he suspects, correctly, that this scam involves corruption among detectives on the police force.

Pursuing Sir Gregory's criminal connections leads Simon deeper and deeper into a dangerous criminal world in the Holy Land (St. Giles). At one point he is attacked and severely beaten by henchmen of the swindlers who do not want their scheme exposed. Simon defends himself ably and shows himself to be bold and courageous. Simon is repeatedly warned off this aspect of the investigation by Superintendent Walker (who is protecting himself and other officers on the take), and ends up having to keep his suspicions of the race-track swindle to himself.

Simon learns from a chance remark by one of the thugs that Sir Gregory is more successful at blackmailing Rothschild than he is at pulling together the race track swindle. The lack of success of this scheme points back to the ongoing possibility of Sir Gregory murdering Lady Fairhaven to obtain her inheritance. It also points to an underhanded connection between Sir Gregory and Rothschild. When Simon confronts Sir G with the information about blackmail, he admits to the activity and reveals that Rothschild is a pedophile. He has it on good authority from Arabella that Kate Hamilton keeps Rothschild supplied with fresh young things. Although Rothschild regards himself as a connoisseur and aficionado of the asexual child body, one of these girls later committed suicide, although it is unclear whether this had anything to do with Rothschild rather than her generally miserable circumstances. A later conversation with Rothschild confirms Sir Gregory's accusations. While child prostitution was not in itself uncommon, for a Jew, and for someone whose wife is actively involved in the anti-child prostitution movement, if this information were to become public knowledge it would be a devastating social and economic blow.

Meanwhile Simon has become increasingly disturbed by the dead babies. He is made uneasy by their unusual placement (a very public one), which is inconsistent both with desperate mothers and with a baby-murder ring, neither of which wishes discovery. Wise consults with Dr. Talbot about the psychology of infanticide. The latter discloses (in veiled form) some of his views on eugenics. When Simon raises his concerns to

Murdoch, the latter is unwilling to let go of his theory of a murder-for-profit scheme. Following information provided by Molly Reid, he tracks down Catherine Martin, the “bent” midwife, to a Foundling Hospital for unwed mothers. When he confronts her, he learns that she sometimes transacts business with Oliver Brantley who is willing to buy infants from her, especially infants with physical defects. Murdoch becomes convinced Brantley is the ring’s mastermind, and takes his suspicions back to the inspector.

At the same time, Murdoch, at Inspector Wise’s insistence, has been attempting to match the plaster of Paris imprint obtained from the Fairhaven garden. Murdoch is mistrustful of these new-fangled ideas, but Inspector Wise is always interested in evidence to be obtained from the latest investigative technologies. Finally, Murdoch is able to match the plaster casting with one of Arabella’s shoes. This evidence suggests Arabella’s complicity in the murder, and Simon is quick to confront both Arabella and Sir Gregory with this new information.

Simon also makes a puzzling and disturbing discovery on his own. He has not forgotten hearing from the testimony of the Fairhaven servants that the garden boy had disappeared on the day Lady Fairhaven’s body was found. Simon also remembers learning that the boy had a harsh master, and he might have fled his beatings. Still, Simon doesn’t like coincidences. Taking his family out to the country on a rare Sunday off, he makes a detour (much to the children’s dismay) to track down the missing garden boy, Joseph Winkeep, who reveals he left a message from Lady Fairhaven for Dr. Talbot with Brantley the night before her murder. Simon is troubled that Dr. Talbot neglected to mention this important piece of evidence, but speculates that the doctor never saw the note, it having been intercepted by Brantley. Simon then reviews Brantley’s almost obsessive infatuation with Lady Fairhaven as a possible motive for murder.

Wise and Murdoch go to Talbot’s Institute, intending to confront Brantley. However, as Brantley is not in, they must be content with interrogating Dr. Talbot, who vociferously denies the possibility that Brantley could be the culprit in either the baby deaths or Lady Fairhaven’s murder. He mocks their effort to seemingly tie every crime in London to his unfortunate servant. He also denies ever receiving a communication from Lady Fairhaven on the night preceding her death. Reassured by Dr. Talbot’s ringing defense of Brantley, Wise decides to trust his word as a gentleman to keep Brantley in informal custody until the policemen return to talk with him the next day. Murdoch, however, suspects that the doctor will take some action to protect Brantley and he and Wise quarrel over the possibility of staking out the Institute and bringing in Brantley for questioning that night. Simon forbids his Sergeant to further pursue the investigation that evening. In defiance of this order, Murdoch returns on his own to the Institute and confronts Talbot again, who first equivocates, then engineers 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, since he is beginning to wonder if he has misinterpreted the significance of both the Fairhaven and baby deaths crimes. He meticulously reviews the existing evidence in both cases, including the Fairhaven crime scene photographs. He

observes that Lady F's bookshelves, while consisting primarily of innocuous contemporary romances, also hold a bound volume of the London Times for a certain period in the year 1867. Intrigued, he researches the dates, and notices the expose of a bent midwife and a baby murder ring by a correspondent A.B. The editor of the Times, who did not know the identity of A.B., informs him that this same investigative journalist was hard at work on the heels of another baby murder scheme, this time involving an eminent physician, but that he had not heard from his source in several weeks. Additional sleuthing leads to the discovery that in fact Lady F was the mysterious A.B. Simon begins to put the pieces together. Perhaps Lady Fairhaven had discovered something about Dr. Talbot in connection with the baby deaths, and had summonsed him late that evening to confront him. Perhaps in fact Talbot had received the note and had gone to the Fairhaven mansion with the intention to commit murder. Wise begins to question whether, in fact, the two cases are interconnected, with Talbot, not Brantley, as the common link.

For a brief twenty-four hour period, Simon is too shocked and disappointed in himself to take action, during which time yet another infant is killed and left at the Whitechapel police station. Out of guilt, Wise briefly contemplates suicide, but instead decides he must not lose any more time and arrest Talbot. However, he is too late. Before Wise can act on his suspicions, Dr. Talbot 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). Preparatory to killing Rebecca, Talbot attempts to explain himself to her. Wise is galvanized into action, and, by placing himself in the killer's shoes, is able to deduce where Talbot has taken them. At great personal risk, and in defiance of Walker's orders, he is able to rescue both children as well as peaceably apprehend Talbot.

In the denouement, Wise suffers a relapse of the illness that has been plaguing him. Superintendent Walker comes to explain 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 ever thought she loved such a monster. He in turn is comforted by Lady Penelope, who also accepts blame for not detecting Dr. Talbot's true nature. Walking home on a foggy night, Wise reflects on what he has learned about good and evil, perfection and imperfection, 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.



