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Written by H. R. F. Keating

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H. R. F. KEATING

The Perfect Murder

The First Inspector Ghote Mystery

Preface by ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Collins 1964

Published in Penguin Books 1968

Published in Penguin Classics 2011

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Set in 11.25/14pt Dante MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN: 978-0-141-19447-9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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The Perfect Murder

H. R. F. KEATING was born at St Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex, in 1926. He went to Merchant Taylors, leaving early to work in the engineering department of the BBC. After a period of service in the army, which he describes as 'totally undistinguished', he went to Trinity College, Dublin, where he became a scholar in modern literature. He was also the crime fiction reviewer for *The Times* for fifteen years. His first novel about Inspector Ghote, *The Perfect Murder*, won the Crime Writers' Association's Gold Dagger and an Edgar Allen Poe Special Award. He lives in London with his wife, the actress Sheila Mitchell, and has three sons and a daughter.

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH is the author of several series of novels and is best known as the creator of 'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency' books.

I

It was called the Perfect Murder right from the start. First the Bombay papers plastered it all the way across their pages. And then it was taken up by papers all over India.

The Perfect Murder: Police at House.

The Perfect Murder: New Police Moves.

The Perfect Murder: Police Baffled.

Every time Inspector Ghote saw the words he felt the sweat spring up all along the top of his shoulders. It was as if every one of India's four hundred million people were looking at him, challenging him to break it. The Perfect Murder.

Each time he had to pull himself together and remind himself of the cold facts. It was nothing like four hundred million people. Most of them would never hear of the Perfect Murder however many times it made the headlines in Bombay or elsewhere. Many of them were unable to read; some of them had never even heard of Bombay.

But still people kept calling it the Perfect Murder. And, though Inspector Ghote repeated to himself again and again that all that the case required was the proper procedure tirelessly applied, each time he heard the words the long patch of sweat came up right across his skinny shoulders.

Arun Varde himself had called it the Perfect Murder the night he had sent for the police with such urgency.

‘The Perfect Murder,’ he stormed, ‘and in my house, the house of Lala Arun Varde. It must not be allowed. It shall not be allowed.’

Inspector Ghote knew what he meant. Arun Varde was a man of immense wealth, a lala, a man with vast influence in the highest quarters. A murder in his house was a murder indeed.

The inspector swallowed nervously. He had a feeling that he ought not to let such a person tread all over him, otherwise his chances of ever applying the proper procedure would be slight.

‘There are ten thousand murders in India every year, Mr Varde,’ he began.

He was not allowed to finish. Lala Arun Varde swung his huge bulk round to face him, to tower over him.

‘Ten thousand murders in India. What do I care about them? Are there ten thousand murders in my house? In the house of Lala Arun Varde? Are there one thousand? Are there a hundred only? Or fifty? Or ten? Or two? Are there two only?’

‘No, but –’

‘No. In my house there is one only. The Perfect Murder. They have dared to come into my house for that. Into my very house. They have come with their murderous knives, their guns, their pistols, their clubs, their cannons to strike me to the inmost middle of my heart.’

He came to a forcible halt for lack of air, sucked in a breath with a noise like the last great slurge of an elephant ingesting the entire contents of a river pool, and charged again.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘into my very house they have come. But do not think they will get away with it. Oh, the rotten, murdering, lying, robbing, fornicating devils, I will crush them. Blot them out, squeeze them to powder, crumble them to dust of dust.’

Looking at him as calmly as he could manage, Inspector

Ghote thought that crushing and crumbling would come only too easily to such a massy, rolling mountain of a man.

‘But, Mr Varde,’ he said, ‘the detection and apprehension –’
Lala Varde let loose an immense sob.

‘Oh,’ he moaned, ‘they have struck me to the heart. They have entered my fortress. They have dared to do it. They have defied me, spat on me, rubbed me in the dirt. They have come into the very middle of my home and have defiled it. I am lost, lost. Helpless, hopeless, handleless. Killed, murdered, dead.’

He flung himself down on a low couch, which groaned and buckled under the impact, and sat with his great pumpkin head lolling in abject dejection.

Inspector Ghote drew attention to himself with a neat little rat-tat of a cough.

‘A murder has taken place, sahib,’ he said. ‘Very well. We will settle down to find out who is responsible. Just as we settle down to find out who killed all the other ten thousand people who are murdered every year.’

Lala Varde swung his head upwards and the inspector caught a glimpse of two sharp pig-eyes glinting.

‘And how many murderers do you find? Ten only?’

‘Nearly one third of murders reported result in convictions,’ said Inspector Ghote stiffly.

Lala Varde laughed.

He laughed till his huge belly shook like a great steam engine pumping in and out.

‘Oh, my poor Inspector,’ he said, ‘your police force is not very good.’

‘It will be good enough to find out who committed this murder,’ Inspector Ghote answered.

‘So that is why to my house they send an inspector only,’ Lala Varde countered.

Inspector Ghote smiled a little uneasily.

‘I am not in charge of the case officially, Mr Varde,’ he said. ‘This is a D.S.P. matter, definitely a D.S.P. matter.’

‘D.S.P. one, two, three,’ Lala Varde said. ‘What do I know of your D.S.P.s? All I see is inspector. A murder in my house and they send inspector.’

Inspector Ghote smiled again.

‘D.S.P. is Deputy Superintendent of Police,’ he said. ‘D.S.P. Samant is personally in charge of the case, personally.’

‘The Perfect Murder,’ Lala Varde said with a great, gusty sigh, ‘and a deputy only.’

Inspector Ghote did not succeed in smiling again.

He felt there was a due limit to the amount of such asperision. It had been overstepped.

‘Mr Varde,’ he said with an edge of anger in his voice, ‘I must remind you that this case is called the Perfect Murder for one reason only: the victim’s name is Perfect, Mr Perfect, your Parsi secretary.’

He looked firmly at the huge man in front of him.

‘There is no reason at all,’ he added, ‘why the crime should not be dealt with in a perfectly normal and easy manner. No reason at all.’

‘Reason treason,’ said Lala Varde. ‘It is not a normal murder. It is my murder. They did it to me. Ah, the dirty ravishers of their own mothers, they thought that, without Mr Perfect, Lala Varde would be no good. Well, let them see. I’ll show them, Perfect or no Perfect. They think I can’t follow the details of my own business. I know what they say. They say I owe all my success to a Parsi secretary. Let me tell them that Lala Varde had made his lakhs and crores of rupees before he had ever heard of any secretary mekretary.’

He looked round for enemies.

'Ah,' he said, 'they struck right to the heart. What am I to do without Mr Perfect? Am I a clerk that I should have to add this figure to that? Am I a poke-and-pry little old dry-as-dust of a lawyer to go looking at deeds and land registers all day with my nose pushed down into old papers peepers?'

He creased his pot belly suddenly forward and peered down at some huge imaginary tome like a whale aping a tortoise.

Inspector Ghote drew himself up to a position of attention. 'Mr Varde,' he said, 'if you know the names of the murderers, I must request you to give them to me without delay.'

Lala Varde stopped peering into his imaginary register.

He plunged up and jabbed a podgy forefinger in the direction of the inspector.

'You must request me to give you the names of the murderers? This is a fine way to catch a criminal. You go to a poor man who has worries of his own and you say: tell me who I am to catch. Am I to be a policeman only now? All the State taxes that I pay, are they to go for nothing? Am I to do all the work of the Police Department when I have finished my day at the office? Is chasing after dacoits to be a hobby for me?'

Inspector Ghote remained at attention.

'Sahib,' he said, 'do I understand that you consider the murder has business motives?'

'Business badness,' Lala Varde replied. 'What other motive could it have? Nobody is going to kill that long stick of a Parsi because he has ravished their daughter, are they? Do you think he has been stabbed by a jealous mistress, so thin that he is she would have to want to be embraced by a basket of wires?'

'Sahib.'

Inspector Ghote took a short step forward.

His mouth felt dry and the thought of his little house in Government Quarters, his wife and his child came unexpectedly into his head.

But Lala Varde stopped ranting and looked at him.

‘Sahib, you are making grave accusation. You must tell me the names of those you are accusing.’

Suddenly Lala Varde sat down again on the low couch against the wall.

‘Inspector sahib,’ he said, ‘I am an old man. I have had a long life. Many enemies I have made. Always in business it is the same: it is each man for himself only. How can I tell which of them has done this to me? All my affairs are in ruin. All the facts and figures were in that man’s head. And look at his head now. Broken to pieces. Inspector, what am I to do? Inspector sahib, come and sit here beside me and tell me as a friend what I am to do now.’

Inspector Ghote lowered himself till he just touched the edge of the couch.

‘Well, sahib,’ he said, ‘a police officer cannot advise a private citizen about his business affairs.’

‘No one can advise me any more,’ said Lala Varde.

He shook his head mournfully. His fat chins rolled past each other. Smoothly working, fluidly soft parts of some mysterious machine.

‘No one can advise me. No one can tell me what will pay and what will bring ruin. No one will know what to leave aside and what to take up to the finish. Ruined. Ruined. My cars I will have to sell. My sons I will no longer be able to support. My poor Dilip, what good will he be if he has to earn all he needs by himself only? Who will employ him to read mystery books all day? What will he do when he loses all his social position? What else does he care for?’

Inspector Ghote bobbed forward till he came into the fat old man's vision.

'Mr Dilip Varde?' he said. 'He is your elder son? Is he at present in the house? It would be necessary for me to take his evidence.'

Lala Arun Varde ignored him.

Instead he rocked from side to side in all-absorbing misery.

'And my Prem,' he said, 'he will have to leave college without his B.A. He will never go to study abroad, never come back to his father's house M.A. and America-returned.'

Suddenly he jerked his lolling head up.

'No,' he said. 'No, no, no. Wasting his father's money going to foreign countries, eating beef, forgetting his family, making love to white women. Never. Never. Never. I have told him so. I have told him so, Inspector sahib.'

He put his arm round Inspector Ghote's shoulders.

'This younger generation,' he went on, 'all they think of is to spend the money their fathers have earned. Never once do they think of taking their place beside the father, of working to keep him when he is old and too weak to fight the sharks that are infesting the business world, the dirty, lying, murdering thieves.'

'Ah, yes,' Inspector Ghote said quickly. 'You were saying, Lala Varde sahib, that you had reason to believe the murder of Mr Perfect was instigated by business rivals.'

'Ho,' said Lala Varde, 'you are a better fellow than you look, Inspector. You can see into the heart of things. Yes, you are right. They sent goondas by night to kill him.'

'I see,' the inspector said with renewing eagerness, 'and where is it such robbers would have made their entry?'

Lala Varde shook his head.

'How can I tell?' he said. 'I am a poor, ruined old man only.'

‘In each case of housebreaking,’ the inspector said, ‘it is essential carefully to examine all traces which the thief or thieves may have left.’

He thought of his cherished copy of Gross’s *Criminal Investigation*, adapted from the German by John Adam, sometime Crown Prosecutor, Madras, and by J. Collyer Adam, sometime Public Prosecutor, Madras. He could see the exact place in his little office where the dark blue, cloth-bound volume reposed, the place of honour on top of his filing cabinet. He could see the very page he was referring to, with the patch at the left-hand bottom corner where the paper through much turning by sweaty finger and thumb had gone partially transparent.

Lala Varde heard the garnered wisdom in silence.

The inspector jumped to his feet.

‘First it would be necessary to conduct an examination of the entire premises,’ he said.

Lala Varde did not move. His chins creased themselves more deeply as his head sank despondently forward.

Inspector Ghote waited.

The fan in the middle of the ceiling clacked monotonously. The inspector coughed.

‘Perhaps, sahib, if you are exhausted after this terrible happening, a servant could show me the house?’

‘Servants.’

Lala Varde rose like a great black whale shooting to the surface of some calm sea.

‘Servants. When you need them, what do they do? They hide. At the moment when a poor man needs all the help he can get, his servants at the first breath of disaster fly away.’

He strode to the doorway. An enraged elephant, trunk extended like a battering ram forcing its way through the jungle.

‘Bearer, bearer,’ he bellowed.

From the far distance Inspector Ghote detected a clamour of incomprehensible jabbering voices.

‘Bearer, bearer, bring whisky. Quickly, quickly.’

Lala Varde’s voice boomed and echoed round the big house. But no one came.

‘Bearer. Whisky for the inspector sahib. How can he catch murderers and lying fornicators with not a drop of whisky to strengthen his courage and invigorate his brain?’

Inspector Ghote coughed.

‘Excuse me, Lala Varde sahib,’ he said, ‘but I have no permit for alcoholic liquor drinking. An inspector of police cannot defy the prohibition law.’

‘Whisky. Whisky. Bring whisky.’

Lala Varde’s voice rolled out into the darkness of the house.

But it drew no response, and at last he turned away and walked in the direction of the couch, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

The distant clamour which the inspector had long ago noticed became more distinct. Voices were now distinguishable, intermingled with a steady rattling of iron against iron.

‘Locked.’ ‘Locked, sahib.’ ‘Gate locked, master.’ In English, in Hindi, in Mahratti the clamour conveyed its message at last.

‘A gate is locked, Mr Varde,’ Inspector Ghote said.

‘Gate, gate. What gate is this?’

Inspector Ghote smiled a little.

‘There is perhaps some gate between the servants’ quarters and the rest of the house,’ he said. ‘Perhaps from the days when the house was built for an Englishman? It is a very sensible precaution to lock such a gate at night: there are many burglaries in the city.’

‘Gate hate. Locking knocking. What nonsense are you

talking?’ Lala Varde shouted. ‘How am I to have a drink of orange juice only if I wake in the middle of the night with all the servants locked out by a gate? Besides, there is no gate.’

‘There is certainly some disturbance,’ Inspector Ghote observed. ‘I will go and see what is happening.’

He turned to the doorway.

‘No. Stay where you are.’

Lala Varde’s shout rang through the room with totally unexpected ferocity.

The inspector looked at him: he smiled with haste.

‘Ah, no, Inspector sahib,’ he said. ‘Do not be disturbing yourself. No doubt there is some little domestic matter. I would see to it myself. Sit down, Inspector. Take a rest. You should keep your energies for the tracking down of the murderer.’

As he spoke he waddled aimlessly about the room, making vague placatory gestures. But with the last words he turned and faced the inspector. He was standing squarely in front of the open doorway.

Bland, huge, and obscurely menacing.

Inspector Ghote did not hesitate. He took one quick look at the great, ominous figure in front of him, and then slipped quickly past and out of the open doorway. It did not take him more than a minute to find the cause of the multi-lingual clamour he had heard in the distance.

There was indeed a gate.

In a narrow archway leading from the body of the house out to the low range of buildings that constituted the servants' quarters a heavy, though deeply rusted, iron gate had been locked into place. Beyond it all the servants of the household were gathered in an excited phalanx.

'Ah, you have found the source of the trouble, Inspector.'

Lala Varde's fruity voice came from behind him.

He turned. The big, fat old man was serene and unconcerned.

'Yes, sahib,' the inspector said. 'But do I understand then that it is not customary for this gate to be locked?'

'Sometimes yes, sometimes no,' Lala Varde answered. 'But do not let it worry you, Inspector. I shall conduct you round the house myself.'

He looked over the inspector's bony shoulders at the servants, now reduced from clamouring to buzzing.

'Well,' he said, 'have you no beds to go to? Is this the middle

of the day that you are all talking there as if you were standing waiting for a wedding procession to pass by?’

Sheepishly the servants began turning away from the rusted iron gate. Inspector Ghote looked at them anxiously.

‘Is there no other way into the house for them?’ he asked.

‘Would they have stood there like pye dogs when I was calling and calling for whisky if there was a way to get to me?’ replied Lala Varde.

Unanswerably.

‘Then I think I can leave questioning them till a later time,’ Inspector Ghote said. ‘But first I must put a constable to guard this gate.’

‘Questioning pestioning,’ Lala Varde said. ‘Let me give you some advice, Inspector. Straight from the heart. Do not bother yourself with servants. Goondas it is who did the Perfect Murder. Goondas sent by those violators of their own sisters, the business community of Bombay.’

Inspector Ghote drew himself up.

‘Lala Varde sahib,’ he said. ‘I would advise you not to make possibly slanderous statements about a respected section of the community. If your secretary was murdered by goondas, we shall easily enough find evidence of attempted break-in when we inspect the house.’

‘Break-in fake-in. How should they break into my house? All the latest American-imported grilles have I installed. Each window has one, best grade steel. You would not find it so easy to break into my house, Inspector sahib.’

‘An officer of the C.I.D. does not break into the houses of private citizens,’ Inspector Ghote said.

He squared his thin shoulders and set off round the house, leaving Lala Varde to follow or not as he pleased.

Starting at the massive front door he made a systematic tour

in a clockwise direction, swiftly noting the details of each room he came to in his notebook. Quite soon it became clear that his task was going to be easier than he had thought. The main part of the house was built in a rough square facing inwards to a big courtyard. The majority of the dozens of rooms looked on to this compound. Here there were hundreds of windows – large and small, tall and squat, square and occasionally even round – on the walls facing the outer world there was hardly an aperture and, without exception, each was protected by a steel grille of American manufacture.

Inspector Ghote grasped each grille firmly as he came to it and gave it a sharp jerk. None of them budged the least bit. Not content with this, he looked carefully at the surrounding woodwork in search of tell-tale scratches or other marks. He found nothing. As often as not a thin layer of city dust lay undisturbed on the sill.

In a much shorter time than he had expected he was back at the big front door, the only one to the house, leaving aside the iron-barred gate leading to the servants' quarters. He examined the door itself carefully, but remembering how long it had taken Lala Varde to admit him when he had first arrived, and the sound of three heavy bolts being dragged back one after the other, he was in no doubt that there was no way in here.

Next he sent one of his constables from the small squad waiting patiently near the door to guard the iron gate and two more to make a complete circuit of the outside of the house.

'Watch carefully for any sign of anything unusual and report at the double to Head Constable Sen,' he said.

'At the double,' shouted his burly head constable in dutiful imitation.

The two constables trotted off and returned in a few minutes with the air of men who had found it easy to complete a task in

an unexceptionable manner. They reported that the outer walls right the way round the house were high and smooth. There was not even a water-pipe or a near-by tree to make it possible to reach the distant roof.

Inspector Ghote turned to the hovering Lala Varde.

‘Well, sahib,’ he said, ‘of course I must make my official report, but I can tell you now that no goonda could have got into this house. The outer windows are still securely fastened, the door is thick and was treble-bolted, the walls are high. There is no question of break-in.’

‘These American grilles are excellent,’ Lala Varde agreed. ‘But expensive, Inspector sahib, expensive.’

He dug the inspector in the ribs.

Painfully.

‘Mr Varde,’ Ghote said, ‘if no entry was effected to the house and if the servants were locked on the far side of that gate, there is only one conclusion that remains.’

Lala Varde’s eyes twinkled paternally.

‘Excellent, Inspector. Excellent.’

‘Mr Varde, I must ask you to furnish me with a list of the names of every member of your household.’

‘My household, Inspector?’

‘Yes, sahib. If the murder was not committed by an intruder or by a servant, then the members of your household come under grave suspicion. It is essential that I should be furnished with a list of them immediately.’

‘But, Inspector sahib, you do not understand. It was not a member of my household that committed the Perfect Murder. It was a goonda. This is a crime of revenge, Inspector. A business rival is behind it.’

Inspector Ghote’s eyes widened.

‘But, sahib, it was impossible for a goonda to enter the house.’

There was a feverishly forlorn note in his declaration.

And, as he had expected, his words were entirely ignored.

‘No,’ Lala Varde went plangently on, ‘if you want a list, Inspector, it is a list of my most dangerous business rivals I would give you. My secretary would – That is to say, I shall give it to you myself, personally.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said Inspector Ghote, ‘I shall have to interview all members of the household. I should like to begin quite soon, if convenient. But I think that now the medical men will have finished examining the body, and so I had better make my own inspection. I would have liked to have done it before. It is most important to obtain evidence as quickly as possible. You say Mr Perfect was attacked in this room over here?’

He made his way towards the still closed door of a room near the front door but facing the inner courtyard.

‘Yes,’ said Lala Verde, ‘it was in there that the Perfect Murder took place. But if you want to see the victim you are going the wrong way.’

Inspector Ghote wheeled round.

His face expressed simple amazement.

‘The body has been moved?’ he said. ‘But express instructions were issued that nothing was to be touched. That is fundamental procedure. It is in Gross’s *Criminal Investigation*. The position of a body must always be photographed.’

‘Body, Inspector?’ said Lala Verde. ‘But there is no body. Who ever said Mr Perfect is dead only?’