

# OVER MY DEAD BODY

By Pat Baker

*Lady G is sitting on a straight-backed chair embroidering. Lord G is standing, rocking too and fro, in front of the fire. Daphnia is sitting on the sofa, sulkily gazing out of the window*

**DAPHNIA** But daddy! I simply must have a new gown for my engagement party, I simply must! I must be the 'belle of the ball' and none of my old gowns will do.

**LORD G** Young lady, do you think that you will ever receive your inheritance from me if you squander all my money before I die? No, no. Thrift m'girl, thrift. That's how I came to be one of the richest men in England y'know, thrift!

**DAPHNIA** But what use is being the richest man if you don't spend any of it? And it could be years yet before you die! I need the money now while I'm still young enough to enjoy it. And there is no way Roger and I can ever marry before I get my inheritance.

**LORD G** Can't think why you should want to marry him anyway. Doesn't seem to me like the 'marrying' kind. You'd do better to find yourself a real man!

**DAPHNIA** Daddy, what on earth do you mean? I love Roger and he loves me! And we'll be married one day, whether you like it or not!

**LADY G** The child's right you know dear. Why can't you give us both our inheritances so we can enjoy the money while you're still alive?

**LORD G** Over my dead body! I don't want to be around to watch the two of you throw away my hard-earned cash! Now, the subject is closed, I don't want to hear another word about it. Is that perfectly clear?

**BOTH** But that's not fair!

**LORD G** (*Angrily*) No more I tell you! Now, I'm going to my study to check those bills cook brought me earlier. They seem far too high to me. Does she really need to spend all that money on food?

**LADY G** We have to eat dear. Or would you rather we stopped doing that as well? Heaven knows, we hardly go out any more. We never get invited anywhere because you insist on insulting everyone about the way they spend their money. It's a good job they don't tax us on the air we breathe or you'd have us cut back on that as well!

**LORD G** Don't be facetious dear, it doesn't become you. Now, I'm going to my study and then I shall go into the library for a nice quiet smoke of my pipe. And I don't want to be disturbed for anything!

**DAPHNIA** But what about my new dress, daddy, please!

**LORD G** What's wrong with the one you wore for Cynthia's 'coming out' party? That was a pretty dress. You've never worn it since.

**LADY G** Oh, darling, the poor girl has... well... filled out since then. It's far too small.



**LORD G** Well, let it out then! And if she cuts down on what she's eating we can save some money into the bargain. Now, there's an end to it! (*Exit*)

**LADY G** I'm sorry dear, I did try. But it's no use trying to work on father when he's in that mood.

**DAPHNIA** Oh, it's not your fault mummy. It's just so mean of daddy not to let me have an allowance like all the other girls. I wouldn't need to trouble him at all then for new clothes.

**LADY G** I'll tell you what. You stay here and I'll go and have a quiet chat with him. See if I don't change his mind for him!

**DAPHNIA** Why? What on earth could you say that could possibly make him change his mind?

**LADY G** Never you mind. Just wait and see. I'm going to tell his lordship a few home truths that he should have been told a long time ago. I'll settle this once and for all. (*Exit*)

*Curt enters.*

**DAPHNIA** How many times must you be told Curt? You must knock before you enter; I could have been doing something... well, quite private you know.

**CURT** Ah! But I know that Mr. Courtney isn't here yet, because I've just come to announce his arrival.

**DAPHNIA** Oh, is Roger here? Do send him in Curt.

**CURT** Very good, milady. Though I'm not sure I'd want any daughter of mine associating with a man like that!

**DAPHNIA** How dare you speak out like that! It is none of your business who I see and don't see! Such impertinence. Now show Mr. Courtney in at once.

**CURT** Forgive me milady. You are quite right. It is none of my business. I was forgetting myself for a moment. Oh, by the way, do you happen to know where the old grouch... begging your pardon milady, where his lordship is?

**DAPHNIA** He'll be in his study, or the library, but he doesn't wish to be disturbed. Is there anything I can help you with Curt?

**CURT** Oh, I'm sure there is milady, one day. But right now I'm more concerned about my salary, or lack of it!

**DAPHNIA** Oh, really Curt. You're surely not going to ask daddy for a rise! (*Laughing*) why that's too ridiculous, too ridiculous!

**CURT** Not a rise milady, no. You see, I've been in the employ of this family for twenty-two years now, since just before you were born. (*To audience*) Use your imaginations will you, this is difficult enough... and the last rise I had was twenty years ago, just after you were born. I'm not going to ask for a rise; I would just like to be paid!

**DAPHNIA** What on earth do you mean Curt?

**CURT** Well milady, I haven't been paid for six months now. I wasn't too worried at first. I thought it might be worth having if it was saved up for a couple of months. But now I'm down to the last of my savings and I need to start collecting my salary again. I'm sure you understand milady.

**DAPHNIA** Well, yes of course. I'd really no idea. I don't think I'll be able to help you with that one Curt. Maybe you should go and see daddy after all.

*Enter Roger, annoyed at being kept waiting*

**ROGER** What's going on in here? Am I to be kept waiting out there like a common tradesman? Really Curt, I don't know what's come over you lately; you've been acting very strange. Maybe His Lordship should stop paying you for a while and see if that doesn't make you buck up your ideas and mend your ways!

**CURT** You're too kind sir! Maybe I'll just run along there now and suggest that to him myself!

**DAPHNIA** OK. That will be all Curt. *(He bows and exits)* Oh, Roger darling! *(They embrace)*

**ROGER** And where is the old skinflint?

**DAPHNIA** I do wish you wouldn't call daddy names like that darling. Maybe if you showed him just a little more respect, he'd be kinder to us with his money.

**ROGER** Well, I think it's a darned bad show, leaving you penniless like this.

**DAPHNIA** Roger, why can't we be married now?

**ROGER** Daph old girl, you know I haven't a bean in the entire world. If I am to keep you in the manner to which you ought to become accustomed, you'll have to have plenty of lolly! I can't keep us both on what I earn as a writer you know. My, I can barely support myself!

**DAPHNIA** That's because you're always out drinking with your chums, and going off for weekend shooting parties. If you didn't spend so much time with them we'd soon have enough money to be able to get married. You could support us both.

**ROGER** I say! Steady on old girl! That's quite out of the question. You can't start dictating to me you know. How I choose to spend my meagre earnings is my affair and you shouldn't go bothering your pretty little head about it. No, no, Daph. If we're to be married then we must persuade the old goat to cough up with your inheritance, and soon. And I think I know just the right buttons to push!

**DAPHNIA** But it's useless darling. Mummy and I have been arguing with him all day about money. Now Curt has gone to see him about his salary, and... oh dear... *(She begins to weep)* I don't know what I'm going to do. I love you Roger and I want us to be married now!

**ROGER** Now, now. Don't go upsetting yourself. I'll go and see him now. I'll have it out with him once and for all. *(Plucking up courage)* I will, I'll go now! *(He exits then enters again immediately)* By the way, where is he?

**DAPHNIA** *(Surprised at his boldness)* He's in the library, I think, or maybe the study.

*Roger exits, Cook enters*

**DAPHNIA** Oh, Cook, what can I do? It's a terrible thing to wish one's own father dead, but I'm only human and I'm afraid that if I don't get my inheritance soon, I shall lose Roger. I must think of something positive to get some money out of father.

**COOK** Losing Mr. Courtney may not be a bad thing dear! You know, your father wasn't always so mean with 'is money. Time was when 'e'd give you anything you asked for and then some. Mind you, 'e 'ad a lot of people askin' 'im for money in them days.

**DAPHNIA** Well, that's interesting! Maybe I'll just go and remind him of that! It's all very well being generous with other people, but generosity should begin at home! (*Exit*)

*Enter Curt*

**COOK** Well, I don't know what I'm going to do and that's for sure. I'm at my wits end I am. I've 'ad to pay them butcher's bills meself 'cos 'e won't cough up. An' now I ain't got no money left for our little Billy's new shoes. I've just been to see 'im an 'E sez I spend too much on food and the likes but I don't see 'im goin' 'ungry so I don't.

**CURT** Now come on cook, it can't be that bad. You know I'll help if I can. You really shouldn't let him upset you. And you shouldn't be paying his bills for him! Anyway, how is little Billy? How old is he now? He must be getting quite grown up.

**COOK** 'E'll be twenty-one next birthday, so 'e will. 'E's jes ten months younger than the mistress. You remember, I was expectin' soon after I come 'ere an' you managed to persuade 'is Lordship to keep me on after little Billy was born. Ever so kind 'e was. Treated me like one of 'is own 'e did.

**CURT** Yes, he always seemed to have a special 'fondness' for little Billy as I remember. He seemed to enjoy having the little fellow around. Until you moved out that is. I mean, you had every comfort here, why did you go to live with your sister? I never did understand that, and it wasn't my place to pry.

**COOK** It was 'er Ladyship! Never took to me that one! Said I was a bad girl 'cos o' me getting' meself into trouble like, out of wedlock. When little Billy an' the mistress started runnin' round together, 'er ladyship told me to start lookin' fer another job. Said she didn't want 'er daughter growin' up with riff-raff like my Billy. Then, 'is Lordship says that I could stay workin' 'ere so long as I found somewhere else to live an' that little Billy didn't come playin' with the mistress no more. Such a shame (*whimsically*) they was like brother an' sister they was.

**CURT** Yes... (*Pensive*) looks a lot like her... father... doesn't she?

**COOK** What's that supposed to mean? Well... never mind all that now. What am I goin' to do about me money. 'E owes me, in more ways than one. An' I'm the one to make sure 'e pays! I'd go to 'er Ladyship but she 'ain't got two words to say to me. So, I'll just 'ave to go to 'im! 'E should 'ave finished checking through them bills what I left 'im.

**CURT** Well, I hope you have more luck than I did! Be careful cook, he's a mean old man and that's a fact! Don't let him take advantage of you!

**COOK** Again? Not likely! *(She exits followed shortly by Curt)*

*There is a short pause... lights go out... commotion off stage as people call to each other... what's happened?... the lights have fused... I'll see to it... where are you Roger... etc. Lights come back on and everyone enters, all except Lord G. Everyone is trying to talk at once*

**ROGER** Dashed funny thing that. Someone had pulled the main switch. Are you all right, Daph?

**LADY G** *(Unperturbed)* Well dear, I'm afraid I couldn't find your father. He wasn't in the library or the study. Can't think where he could have taken himself off to. Not to worry, I'll speak to him later.

**CURT** Perhaps His Lordship has gone for a stroll around the grounds ma'am

**ROGER** Well dash it, he's never around when a chap wants to speak to him. Inconsiderate I call it.

**DAPHNIA** Well, I'm sure I heard a noise from the drawing room just before the lights went out. Maybe he's in there. I'll pop along and take a look. *(Exit)*

**CURT** A word if I may ma'am. It's about my salary, or lack of it.

**LADY G** Not now Curt, I've bigger fish to fry. Cook, what are you doing up here? You have no business being in this part of the house.

**COOK** Well, I'm very sorry, I'm sure ma'am. But I needed a private word with 'is Lordship...er... about the bills what need payin'... you see ma'am, me money seems to be dryin' up... an' I'm getting' desperate ma'am. An' who knows what a desperate woman might do... or say?

**LADY G** Well why on earth didn't you say if you had money problems girl? You should have come to me. Now, come along and we'll see what we can do.

*Loud scream from Daphnia is heard off stage, she runs in but cannot speak initially*

**ROGER** Daph, are you all right? What's happened? My God, you look as if you've seen a ghost!

**LADY G** } What is it darling?

**COOK** } What is it darlin'? *(They glare at each other)*

**CURT** A glass of water milady?

**COOK** A large brandy, more like. *(Curt hands Cook a brandy, she quickly downs it)* Now, one for the little princess.

**DAPHNIA** *(gulps down the brandy – much to the astonishment of the others)* I say, thanks awfully, I needed that. But you'll never believe what's happened. It's daddy, he's... dead!

**ROGER** *(Gleefully)* Really?

**LADY G** Too bad, too bad. Oh dear.

**CURT** Bang goes another six months pay!

**DAPHNIA** I... I think he's been... stabbed? He looked awful! Oh it's too horrid!

**CURT** I'll go and take a look ma'am, make sure he really is dead. Wouldn't put anything past that sly old fox.

**COOK** Shall I go with you? I mean... he was like a... father... to me, you know.

**CURT** Don't distress yourself. Everything will be all right now. Where did you find the stiff...? I mean the body milady?

**DAPHNIA** In the study (*he exits*)

**LADY G** Well isn't that odd. Er... I mean, he wasn't there when I went to look for him.

**ROGER** Well of course, I couldn't find him, as you know. But then, I didn't look in the study.

*Curt enters*

**CURT** I'm afraid ma'am; His Lordship really is dead. Strangled by the looks of him. Should I telephone the police ma'am?

**LADY G** Do we have to bring the police in? After all, the old fool is dead now. Can't we just bury him in the garden? I'm sure he'd be good for the roses.

**DAPHNIA** Mummy! How could you? Poor daddy is lying there... dead. And you... you...

**ROGER** On a more practical note, if you'll forgive me Lady Grabbit, if we hide the body, we won't be able to make a claim on the will. Don't you see, no body, no will. No will, no money

**LADY G** Oh! I hadn't thought of that. Curt, you're absolutely right. Call Scotland Yard at once. And then you may as well call the solicitor's office. We should get the ball rolling as soon as possible, don't you agree? Now, what is it they always say in those detective novels? 'don't touch anything' yes and 'nobody must leave the house'. Well, of course, they'll suspect one of us won't they? How tiresome.

**DAPHNIA** What I don't understand is, why did all the lights go out?

**LADY G** I don't know my dear, but it's always so much more dramatic when all the lights go out just before the body is discovered, don't you think?

*Curt enters with Policeman*

**CURT** Begging your pardon ma'am... Inspector Foot, Scotland Yard

**ROGER** I say, you were rather quick old boy!

**INSPECTOR** Poetic licence sir. Now then, nobody must touch anything. And nobody must leave the house until I have all the facts. Is that quite clear? (*Nods all round*) May I then see the er... deceased ma'am?

**LADY G** Certainly inspector, this way. My, aren't you the handsome devil? Are you married inspector? *(This as they exit)*

**DAPHNIA** Roger, darling, does this mean we'll be able to get married at last? Oh, how wonderful! Of course, it's absolutely horrid that daddy had to go and get himself killed like that, but, whoever did it has really done us a favour, haven't they? Any idea who it could have been?

**ROGER** Curt of course, it's always the butler isn't it? Well, your father did owe him a lot of money you know.

*Curt has been standing in the corner pouring himself a large brandy. He now turns on Roger*

**CURT** I'm not so sure sir. Yes, the butler is always suspected, but then it turns out to be the avaricious, prospective son-in-law, who may not be all that he seems!

**ROGER** Well! How dare you? I've a good mind to... to... knock your block off!

**COOK** You'll 'ave to get past me first young man! I'll not 'ave Curt interfered with by you or no one else. Now, no one would blame 'er Ladyship if she was the one what done for 'im, after all as 'e's put 'er through.

*Lady G overhears this as she enters*

**LADY G** Really? And who do you think was the cause of all that he's put me through? No, I'm inclined to think someone became just a little too greedy for their own good, and when he wouldn't succumb to their demands, they killed him. Now, who might that have been, Cook?

**COOK** I 'ope you're not tryin' to say I had somethin' to do with it! That man was special to me, 'e was! I couldn't 'ave 'urt an 'air on 'is 'ead!

*Enter inspector*

**LADY G** Now inspector, what do you think? I do hope you can solve this nasty problem quickly. I feel a short holiday would be in order, for my nerves you understand. Especially as I'll be able to afford a holiday now! What do you say Daphnia?

**INSPECTOR** Well, as to cause of death, ma'am, I can't rightly be sure until the doctor has finished his examination of the body. However, my thoughts, for what they are worth, are these... A casual look at the deceased can lead me to reach only one conclusion. You see ma'am, and I hope you don't think I'm being too brutal, when I find a body with a gunshot wound, two stab wounds, a scarf tied very tightly around the neck, and traces of arsenic on the lips, there's only one thing I can think...

**LADY G** I say inspector, you don't think it could have been suicide do you? Oh my God, poor man! I knew he was worried about money but I didn't think he was that desperate!

**INSPECTOR** Well ma'am, I haven't ruled that out yet, but I'm more inclined to think that your late husband was... murdered! *(Gasps of mock horror)*

**ROGER** I say old man. That's a bit rash isn't it? I mean, have you any proof? You can't go around saying people have been murdered, you know, unless you have some kind of evidence.

**INSPECTOR** I am indebted to you for bringing that to my attention sir. I'm sure we'll know more when the doctor has finished examining the body. In the meantime, I must ask everyone to remain in the building... yes that means you lot as well. You are all suspects and as such, will remain in my custody until this little matter is solved to my satisfaction. Now, cook, do you think you could arrange something to eat for these people while I continue to make my notes. Ladies and gentlemen, I may require your assistance in solving this little matter. So, while you have your supper, I'll prepare some notes showing my preliminary findings. Come on you lot!

*All exit arguing and complaining about 'the indignity' etc. of being a suspect*