

I met the old couple in their home. Dunston and Cleo Flinders were homebodies, and right now, they were not merely unwilling to go out, they were afraid to. Dunston – Dunty to his friends and family – had received a death threat in the mail only a few days before. And then, this morning, a strange package.

“Of course we called the police,” Cleo assured me. “But they weren’t able to do anything last time so we don’t have much confidence in them.”

“Last time?” I asked.

The old man cleared his throat. “I’m not sure how much Mayhew told you on the phone.”

Mayhew was the family butler. He’d called me that morning and arranged for me to come talk to his employers about a murder threat, but he hadn’t given me any details.

“He told me damned little,” I said. “You’ve received other death threats in the past?”

“Not me. My brother. The late Waldrous Flinders. He was murdered, horribly, in this very house. Six months ago.”

“Seven,” Cleo butted in.

“Six and a half. Someone sent him a series of letters, telling him that he would soon die. And then, the package. Very like the gift I received by post this morning.”

“I’d hardly call it a gift,” snorted Cleo.

“Well, for lack of a better word – ”

“What was in the package?” I asked. I sipped my tea from a frail china cup. I don’t really like tea, but it’s what they’d offered me, and it was cold and snowing outside.

“A gray toupee.” Said Dunty. “Sounds like a joke, doesn’t it?”

“It’s certainly strange. You say your brother also got a gray toupee in the mail? Or was it a different color?”

“Gray. A very nice one. The police took it. They still have it.”

“That’s the cops for you. Always taking folks’ stuff and never returning it. Do gray toupees have any particular significance for you?”

“Of course not. Not for me. But my brother reacted with great fear when he unwrapped his package and discovered what it was. However, he refused to talk about it. Right up to the end, he kept mum.”

There was something peculiarly English about this old couple, though I was sure that at least Dunty had been born and raised right here in Quartz Quarry, Colorado. Maybe he’d been educated in Britain, I didn’t know. What I did know was that he was the son of Benji “Flinty” Flinders, a dirt poor, hard-scrabble miner who had come west to join the forty-niners in California. He intended to strike it rich in California, but he’d stopped in Colorado first and had struck pay dirt in our own humble gold fields. He was filthy rich in no time. He’d built the rambling granite mansion whose great room I was presently sitting in.

“How was your brother killed?”

Dunty cleared his throat again. “A knife. A large kukri. Are you familiar with that

type of knife?"

"I think so. The Gurkhas use them in India."

"Correct. Waldrous and I always had an interest in exotic and primitive weapons. I have quite a trophy room full of them."

"Oh? And did the murder weapon come from this trophy room?"

"No. the killer brought his own. He came in through my brother's bedroom window, even though there was a bodyguard on duty, and cut the poor fellows head clean off."

"Don't be brutal," said Cleo.

"That's how it happened. This detective needs to know how things happened."

"True enough," I said. "Your brother never revealed to you, or anyone, why someone would want to murder him, or what the gray toupee meant to him?"

"No. It is still a mystery."

The old couple looked like something out of the nineteenth century, right down to their clothes. Dunty, a shock of white hair sprinkled with red sprouting above his liver-spotted forehead, wore an old-fashioned velvet jacket with frogs around the button holes. I think they're called frogs. The way Cleo rustled every time she moved, she must have been wearing starched petticoats under her gray satin dress. Her luxuriant hair was black, but she wasn't the first owner.

The great room we were in was just as outdated, with its antique furniture and the roaring fire in the ornate stone fireplace. I felt like it was 1856 instead of 1956.

"The police did nothing," said Cleo. "Nothing. I hope you'll be more efficient and useful, Mr. — ?"

"Hatchett. Axel Hatchett. Call me Axe. I'll do everything I can, Mrs. Flinders. I won't let your husband be murdered. But I would suggest he hire some type of bodyguard."

"Already been done, sir," Said Dunty. "Dirk Drebber is on the job. He was Waldrous' bodyguard, and I rehired him as soon as I received the first threat."

"Maybe you should have hired someone else."

"No. It was not Dirk's fault that my brother was killed. The killer shot Dirk in the neck, through a broken pane in the window, with a dart from a blow gun. The dart was poisoned. It temporarily paralyzed Dirk. By the time he recovered, Waldrous' head had been severed from his neck."

"Don't be coarse, Dunty," said Cleo.

"The fellow needs to know how things were, Cleo. Anyway, Dirk will keep his eye out for poisoned darts this time."

"Sure, I'm always watching out for poisoned darts myself, and unexpected boomerangs...."

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