

PRAISE FOR LEONIE SWANN

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‘A collection of delightfully batty characters, a disdainful tortoise, a wonderful plot and a guaranteed smile on every page’

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‘Quirky, hilarious and darkly twisty, Agnes Sharp and her wonderfully drawn friends are unforgettable characters’

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‘Utterly superb. It is as rich and enticing as a perfect cup of cocoa – sweet at first taste, but with something delightfully, deeply, deliciously dark within.’

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‘Swann’s mystery is different, delightful and deep’

Washington Post

By Leonie Swann

THE SHEEP DETECTIVE STORIES

Three Bags Full

Big Bad Wool

MISS SHARP INVESTIGATES

The Sunset Years of Agnes Sharp

Agnes Sharp and the Trip of a Lifetime



THREE BAGS FULL

LEONIE SWANN

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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*For M.,
without whom the whole story would never have come out.*

*The trail wound here and there as the sheep had willed in the
making of it.*

Stephen Crane, Tales of Adventure

DRAMATIS OVES

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

MAUDE	<i>Has a very good sense of smell and is proud of it.</i>
SIR RITCHFIELD	<i>The lead ram, not as young as he used to be, rather hard of hearing and has a poor memory, but his eyes are still good.</i>
MISS MAPLE	<i>The cleverest sheep in the flock, maybe the cleverest sheep in Glenkill, quite possibly the cleverest sheep in the whole world; has an enquiring mind, never gives up, sometimes feels a sense of responsibility.</i>
HEATHER	<i>A lively young sheep, doesn't always think before she speaks.</i>
CLOUD	<i>The woolliest sheep in the flock.</i>
MOPPLE THE WHALE	<i>The memory sheep: once he has seen something he never forgets it; a very stout Merino ram with round spiral horns, is almost always hungry.</i>
OTHELLO	<i>A black Hebridean four-horned ram with a mysterious past.</i>
ZORA	<i>A Blackface sheep, has a good head for heights, the only ewe with horns in George Glenn's flock.</i>
RAMESSES	<i>A young ram whose horns are still rather short.</i>
LANE	<i>The fastest sheep in the flock, a pragmatic thinker.</i>

SARA	<i>A mother ewe.</i>
A LAMB	<i>Who has seen something strange.</i>
MELMOTH	<i>Sir Ritchfield's twin brother, a legendary ram who disappeared.</i>
CORDELIA	<i>Likes unusual words.</i>
MAISIE	<i>A naïve young sheep.</i>
THE WINTER LAMB	<i>A difficult lamb, a troublemaker.</i>
WILLOW	<i>The second most silent sheep in the flock; no one minds that.</i>
GABRIEL'S RAM	<i>A very odd sheep.</i>
FOSCO	<i>Correctly thinks himself clever.</i>

FOREWORD

By A. J. FINN

Consider the sheep. We clone it for science. We count it for sleep. Mary had a little one for reasons unspecified. Its wool warms; its meat nourishes. A useful creature, if not especially charismatic.

But what if sheep were more than experiments, soporifics, and one-stop provision shops? What if – as Leonie Swann imagined in her miraculous debut novel, now lovingly reissued twenty years later – what if these animals could question, and suspect, and enquire? What if they could *detect*?

Three Bags Full, shorn to its skin, is the story of a flock in western Ireland – ‘a black four-horned Hebridean ram, a Mountain Blackface, a Merino, and the rest Cladoir with some Blackface crosses,’ we learn – who decide to investigate the death of their shepherd, impaled with a spade in the lush grass of his cliffside meadow. (The scene of the crime, unveiled on page one, cheerfully blends the pastoral and the forensic: ‘A single crow had settled on his woolly Norwegian sweater and was studying his internal arrangements with professional

interest. Beside the crow sat a very happy rabbit.’)

‘We owe old George . . . If a fierce dog took one of our lambs he always tried to find the culprit,’ declares Miss Maple, the cleverest sheep in the flock and quite possibly the world.

‘No one had a right to stick a spade in him. That’s wolfish behaviour. That’s murder.’ The reference to dogs and wolves is important, as is the detail, dropped later on, that George was inclined to reciting stories for his shaggy audience – romances, mostly, ‘slim volumes printed on greyish paper in which the heroines were all called Pamela,’ though also ‘once from a detective story, which they didn’t understand.’ This background helps explain, succinctly and persuasively, not only the animals’ familiarity with the notion of homicide, but how their ethics have evolved.

The murder enquiry will span many days, involve many characters: we will meet a moody four-legged circus refugee, a detective cursed with an unlikely name, an enormous grey ram with a taste for Guinness. We will smell them, too – from the butcher who reeks of death to a ‘resinous ram smell’ to a cemetery redolent of earth and vegetation, *Three Bags Full* glories in the olfactory. And a premise that might have stalled at the sketch-show level instead proves remarkably flexible, resourceful, even resonant, as our woolly sleuths unravel a mystery that reveals much about the human soul. (Although the sheep doubt this exists.)

I first read this book nearly two decades ago, as a graduate student in literature; at the time, close text readings were my default mode, so I found myself studying the novel quite intently, even as I giggled at its jokes and tried unsuccessfully

to outrun its plot. I remember admiring how Swann had not only located the perfect tone for this story – innocent though knowing, witty yet ribald, fearful and poignant and dappled with dark – but managed to satisfy the demands of her detective plot even as she juggled two separate casts, ovine and human, and supplied them with information that could be mutually misunderstood.

In books as in life – mystery stories in particular – perspective and perception are inextricably fused: the former determines the latter, both physically and psychologically, and the latter can inform the former. If, for example, your perspective is that of a sheep grazing in a field, you might perceive a conversation as a human would not; and if, as a sheep, you perceive what appears to be a dancing wolf's ghost, it could force you to reassess the very nature of your investigation.

In *Three Bags Full*, the reader trots ahead of our sleuths from time to time – we twig early on to the double meaning of that succulent word 'grass' – while knowing less than, say, the severe local priest does. He himself won't discover the identity of a fragrant village newcomer until long after the sheep sniff it on her skin. And so on, to splendid effect. All the while, Swann rotates her perspective smoothly: now we're in the skull (sometimes horned) of a particular animal; now we're moving fast within the flock, like a stone skipping across water; we even peek inside a human head. And the author navigates the relationship between the species – one of which, don't forget, exploits and preys upon the other – in a way that's both effective and surprisingly affecting. I lost my appetite for lamb after reading this novel.

I also, much later, became a novelist myself, and so can appreciate anew what Swann has achieved in *Three Bags Full*. It's a marvel of tone, of narrative ingenuity – and the conclusion, to me, remains as inexpressibly moving as it was all those years ago. So now, at last, for the puns, which I've been chewing like cud throughout this foreword: *Three Bags Full* is ewe-nique and wool-done; it's flocking baa-rillicant; you ain't read mutton like it.

. . . Right: you've herd enough.¹

¹ (Sorry.)

1

OTHELLO BOLDLY GRAZES PAST

‘He was healthy yesterday,’ said Maude. Her ears twitched nervously.

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ pointed out Sir Ritchfield, the oldest ram in the flock. ‘He didn’t die of an illness. Spades are not an illness.’

The shepherd was lying in the green Irish grass beside the hay barn, not far from the path through the fields. He didn’t move. A single crow had settled on his woolly Norwegian sweater and was studying his internal arrangements with professional interest. Beside the crow sat a very happy rabbit. Rather farther off, close to the edge of the cliff, the sheep were holding a meeting.

They had kept calm that morning when they found their shepherd lying there so unusually cold and lifeless, and were extremely proud of it. In the first flush of alarm, naturally there had been a few frantic cries of, ‘Who’s going to bring us hay now?’ and, ‘A wolf! There’s a wolf about!’ But Miss Maple had

been quick to quell any panic. She explained that here on the greenest, richest pasture in all Ireland only idiots would eat hay in midsummer anyway, and even the most sophisticated wolves didn't drive spades through the bodies of their victims. For such a tool was undoubtedly sticking out of the shepherd's insides, which were now wet with dew.

Miss Maple was the cleverest sheep in all Glennkill. Some even claimed that she was the cleverest sheep in the world. But no one could prove it. There was in fact an annual Smartest Sheep in Glennkill contest, but Maple's extraordinary intelligence showed in the very fact that she did not take part in such competitions. The winner, after being crowned with a wreath of shamrock (which it was then allowed to eat), spent several days touring the pubs of the neighbouring villages and was constantly expected to perform the trick that had erroneously won it the title, eyes streaming as it blinked through clouds of tobacco smoke, with the customers pouring Guinness down its throat until it couldn't stand up properly. Furthermore, from then on the winning sheep's shepherd held it responsible for each and every prank played out at pasture, since the cleverest animal was always going to be the prime suspect.

George Glenn would never again hold any sheep responsible for anything. He lay impaled on the ground beside the path while his sheep wondered what to do next. They were standing on the cliffs between the watery-blue sky and the sky-blue sea, where they couldn't smell the blood, and they did feel responsible.

'He wasn't a specially good shepherd,' said Heather, who was still not much more than a lamb and still bore George a grudge

for docking her beautiful lamb's tail at the end of last winter.

'Exactly!' That was Cloud, the woolliest and most magnificent sheep ever seen. 'He didn't appreciate our work. Norwegian sheep do it better, he said! Norwegian sheep give more wool! He had sweaters made from foreign wool sent from Norway – it's a disgrace! What other shepherd would insult his own flock like that?'

There ensued a discussion of some length between Heather, Cloud and Mopple the Whale. Mopple the Whale insisted that you judged a shepherd's merits by the quantity and quality of the fodder he provided, and in this respect there was nothing, nothing whatsoever, to be said against George Glenn. Finally they agreed that a good shepherd was one who never docked the lambs' tails; didn't keep a sheepdog; provided good fodder and plenty of it, particularly bread and sugar, but healthy things too like green stuff; concentrated feed and mangelwurzels (for they were all very sensible sheep); and who clothed himself entirely in the products of his own flock, for instance an all-in-one suit made of spun sheep's wool, which would look really good, almost as if he were a sheep himself. Of course it was obvious to them all that no such perfect being was to be found anywhere in the world, but it was a nice idea all the same. They sighed a little and were about to scatter, pleased to think that they had cleared up all outstanding questions.

So far, however, Miss Maple had taken no part in the discussion. Now she said, 'Don't you want to know what he died of?'

Sir Ritchfield looked at her in surprise. 'He died of that spade. You wouldn't have survived it either, a heavy iron thing

like that driven right through you. No wonder he's dead.' Ritchfield shuddered slightly.

'And where did the spade come from?'

'Someone stuck it in him.' As far as Sir Ritchfield was concerned, that was the end of the matter, but Othello, the only black sheep in the flock, suddenly began taking an interest in the problem.

'It can only have been a human who did it – or a very large monkey.' Othello had spent his youth in Dublin Zoo and never missed an opportunity to mention it.

'A human.' Maple nodded, satisfied. 'I think we ought to find out what kind of human. We owe old George that. If a fierce dog took one of our lambs he always tried to find the culprit. Anyway, he was our shepherd. No one had a right to stick a spade in him. That's wolfish behaviour. That's murder.'

Now the sheep were feeling alarmed. The wind had changed, and the smell of fresh blood was drifting towards the sea.

'And when we've found the person who stuck the spade in,' said Heather nervously, 'then what?'

'Justice!' bleated Othello.

'Justice!' bleated the other sheep. And so it was decided that George Glenn's sheep themselves would solve the wicked murder of their only shepherd.

First Miss Maple went over to examine the body. She did it reluctantly. In the summer sun of Ireland, George had already begun to smell bad enough to send a shudder down any sheep's spine.

She started by circling the shepherd at a respectful distance.

The crow cawed and fluttered away on black wings. Maple ventured closer, inspected the spade, sniffed George's clothes and face. Finally – as the rest of the flock, huddling together at a safe distance, held their breath – she even stuck her nose in the wound and rooted around. At least, that was what it looked like from where the others stood. She came back to them with blood on her muzzle.

'Well?' asked Mopple, unable to stand the suspense any longer. Mopple never could stand strain of any kind for long.

'He's dead,' replied Miss Maple. She didn't seem to want to say any more just now. Then she looked back at the path.

'We have to be prepared. Sooner or later humans are going to turn up here. We must watch what they do. And we'd better not all stand around in a crowd. It looks suspicious. We ought to act naturally.'

'But we *are* acting naturally,' objected Maude. 'George is dead. Murdered. Should we be grazing right beside him where the grass is still sprinkled with his blood?'

'Yes, that's exactly what we ought to be doing.' The black figure of Othello came between them. His nostrils contracted as he saw the horrified faces of the others. 'Don't worry, I'll do it. I spent my youth near the carnivores' enclosure. A little more blood won't kill me.'

At that moment Heather thought what a particularly bold ram Othello was. She decided to graze near him more often in future – though not until George had been taken away and fresh summer rain had washed the meadow clean, of course.

Miss Maple decided who would keep watch where. Sir Ritchfield, whose eyesight was still good in spite of his advanced

age, was stationed on the hill. You could see across the hedges to the paved road from there. Mopple the Whale had poor eyes but a good memory. He stood beside Ritchfield to remember everything the old ram saw. Heather and Cloud were to watch the path that ran through the meadow: Heather took up her post by the gate nearest to the village, Cloud stood where the path disappeared into a dip in the ground. Zora, a Blackface sheep who had a good head for heights, stationed herself on a narrow rocky ledge at the top of the cliff to keep watch on the beach below. Zora claimed to have a wild mountain sheep in her ancestry, and when you saw how confidently she moved above the abyss you could almost believe it.

Othello disappeared into the shadow of the dolmen, near the place where George lay pinned to the ground by the spade. Miss Maple did not keep watch herself. She stood by the water trough, trying to wash the traces of blood off her nose.

The rest of the sheep acted naturally.

A little later Tom O'Malley, no longer entirely sober, came along the footpath from Golagh to Glennkill to favour the local pub with his custom. The fresh air did him good: the green grass, the blue sky. Gulls pursued their prey, calling, wheeling in the air so fast that it made his head spin. George's sheep were grazing peacefully. Picturesque. Like a travel brochure. One sheep had ventured particularly far out and was enthroned like a small white lion on the cliff itself.

'Hey there, little sheep,' said Tom, 'don't you take a tumble, now. It'd be a shame for a pretty thing like you to fall.'

The sheep looked at him with disdain, and he suddenly felt

stupid. Stupid and drunk. But that was all a thing of the past now. He'd make something of himself. In the tourism line. That was it, the future of Glennkill lay in the tourist trade. He must go and talk it over with the boyos in the pub.

But first he wanted to take a closer look at the fine black ram. Four horns. Unusual, that. George's sheep were something special.

However, the black ram wouldn't let him close enough and easily avoided Tom's hand without even moving much.

Then Tom saw the spade.

A good spade. He could do with a spade like that. He decided to consider it his spade in future. For now he'd hide it under the dolmen and come back to fetch it after dark. He didn't much like the idea of going to the dolmen by night. People told tales about it. But he was a modern man, and this was an excellent spade. When he grasped the handle, his foot struck something soft.

It was a long time since Tom O'Malley had attracted such an attentive audience in the Mad Boar as he did that afternoon.

Soon afterwards, Heather saw a small group of humans running along the path from the village. She bleated: a short bleat, a long bleat, another short bleat, and Othello emerged rather reluctantly from under the dolmen.

The group was led by a very thin man whom the sheep didn't know. They looked hard at him. The leader of the flock is always important.

Behind him came the butcher. The sheep held their breath. Even the scent of him was enough to make any sheep go weak at

the knees. The butcher smelled of death. Of screams, pain and blood. Even the dogs were afraid of him.

The sheep hated the butcher. And they loved Gabriel, who came right behind him, a small man with a shaggy beard and a slouch hat, walking fast to keep up with the mountain of flesh just ahead. They knew why they hated the butcher. They didn't know why they loved Gabriel, but he was irresistible. His dogs could do the most amazing tricks. He won the sheepdog trials in Gorey every year. It was said he could talk to the animals, but that wasn't true. At least, the sheep didn't understand it when Gabriel spoke Gaelic. But they felt touched, flattered and finally seduced into trotting trustfully up to him when he passed their meadow on his way along the path through the fields.

Now the humans had almost reached the corpse. The sheep forgot about looking natural for a moment and craned their necks to see. The thin man leading the humans stopped several lamb's leaps away from George, as if rooted to the ground. His tall figure swayed for a moment like a branch in the wind, but his eyes were fixed, sharp as pins, on the spot where the spade stuck out of George's guts.

Gabriel and the butcher stopped a little way from the body too. The butcher looked at the ground for a moment. Gabriel took his hands out of his trouser pockets. The thin man removed his cap.

Othello boldly grazed his way past them.

Then, puffing and panting, her face scarlet and her red hair all untidy, Lilly came along the path, too, and with her a cloud of artificial lilac perfume. When she saw George she uttered a small, sharp scream. The sheep looked at her calmly. Lilly

sometimes came to their meadow in the evening and uttered those short, sharp screams at the least little thing. When she trod in a pile of sheep droppings. When her skirt caught on the hedge. When George said something she didn't like. The sheep were used to it. George and Lilly often disappeared to spend a little time inside the shepherd's caravan. Lilly's peculiar little shrieks didn't bother them any more.

But then the wind suddenly carried a pitiful, long-drawn-out sound across the meadow. Mopple and Cloud lost their nerve and galloped up the hill, where they felt ashamed of themselves and tried to look natural again.

Lilly fell to her knees right beside the body, ignoring the grass, which was wet with last night's rain. She was the person making this dreadful noise. Like a couple of confused insects, her hands wandered over the Norwegian sweater and George's jacket and tugged at his collar.

The butcher was suddenly beside her, pulling her roughly back by her arm. The sheep held their breath. The butcher had moved as quickly as a cat. Now he said something. Lilly looked at him with tears in her eyes. She moved her lips, but not a sound was heard in the meadow. The butcher said something in reply. Then he took Lilly's sleeve and drew her aside. The thin man immediately began talking to Gabriel.

Othello looked round for help. If the ram stayed close to Gabriel, he would miss whatever was going on between the butcher and Lilly – and vice versa. None of the sheep wanted to get close to the body or the butcher, which both smelled of death. They preferred to concentrate on the job of looking natural.

Miss Maple came trotting over from the water trough and took over observation of the butcher. There was still a suspicious red mark on her nose, but as she had been rolling in the mud she now just looked like a very dirty sheep.

‘. . . ridiculous fuss,’ the butcher was just saying to Lilly. ‘And never mind making a spectacle of yourself. You’ve got other worries now, sweetheart, believe you me.’ He had taken her chin in his sausage-like fingers and raised her head slightly so that she had to look straight into his eyes.

‘Why would anyone suspect me?’ she asked, trying to get her head free. ‘George and I got along fine.’

The butcher still held her chin in a firm grip. ‘Got along fine. So you did. That’ll be enough for them. And who else got along fine with George? Wait for his Last Will and Testament, then we’ll see just how fine you two got along. I don’t suppose that cosmetics stuff earns you a fortune, and you won’t get rich sleeping around in this dump either. So you be nice to old Ham and you won’t need to worry about this mess any more.’

Gabriel said something. Ham turned abruptly and marched back to the others, leaving Lilly where she was. She drew her shawl more closely round her shoulders, trembling. For a moment she looked as if she was going to burst into tears. Maple knew how she felt. Being touched by the butcher – it must be like having death grab you by the ear.

The four humans were exchanging words again, but the sheep were too far away to catch anything. There was a pointed, awkward silence. Gabriel turned and strolled back in the direction of the village, with the thin man close on his heels. Lilly seemed to think for a moment and then hurried off after the two men.

Ham took no notice of the others. He went right up to George. Slowly, he raised one of his great butcher's paws until it was hovering directly above the body like a fat blue bottle. With his fingers he traced two lines above George in the air. A long one from George's head to his stomach and a shorter one from shoulder to shoulder. When Gabriel called him again, he went off in the direction of the village.

Later, three policemen came to take photos. They brought a highly perfumed woman journalist with them. She took photos, too, far more photos than the policemen. She even went to the edge of the cliffs and photographed Zora on her rocky ledge, and later she took pictures of Ritchfield and Mopple grazing in front of the dolmen. The sheep were used to the occasional attention of tourists with backpacks, but all this press interest soon made them uncomfortable. Mopple was the first to lose his nerve; he ran uphill, bleating loudly. His panic infected the others, even Miss Maple and Othello. Within a few minutes they were all huddled together on the hill, feeling slightly ashamed of themselves.

The policemen took no notice of the sheep. They pulled the spade out of George, wrapped both him and it in large plastic bags, crawled about on the ground a little more and then disappeared into a white car. Not long after that it began to rain. Soon the meadow looked as if nothing had happened.

The sheep decided to go into the hay barn. They all went together, because just now, so soon after George's death, the barn seemed to them a little gloomy and sinister. Only Miss Maple stayed outside in the rain a little longer, letting it wash

the mud off her, and in the end it washed off the last small bloodstain too.

When she went into the barn, the sheep had gathered around Othello and were bombarding him with questions, but the ram was biding his time. Heather bleated in alarm,

‘How could you stand it, being so close to the butcher? I’d have died of fright. I almost did die of fright just watching him come down the path!’

Miss Maple rolled her eyes. But you had to give the black ram credit: he seemed unimpressed by the admiration of his flock. Sounding very matter of fact, he turned to Miss Maple.

‘The butcher spoke first. “Swine,” that’s what he said.’

The sheep looked at each other in amazement. No pig had ever set trotter on their pasture! The butcher’s remarks made no sense. But Othello was very sure of himself.

‘He smelled very angry. And frightened. But mostly angry. The thin man was afraid of him. Gabriel wasn’t.’ Othello seemed to be reflecting on Gabriel’s fearlessness for a moment. Then he continued.

‘Lilly didn’t say anything sensible. Just “Oh, George.” And “Why now?” and “Why are you doing this to me?” Perhaps she didn’t realise he was dead. Then the butcher pulled her away by her arm. “No one’s to touch him,” he said. So then she said quite quietly, “Please, I only want a moment alone with him.” None of the others said a word, only the butcher. “If anyone had that right it’d be Kate.” He sounded nasty, and then he hauled her away.’

The sheep nodded. They themselves had had a good view of it all. Suspicion instantly turned against the butcher, simply because every single sheep of the flock thought him capable of

piercing a living being with a spade. But Miss Maple shook her head impatiently, and Othello went on.

‘The moment the butcher was far enough off, the thin man began talking to Gabriel. He smelled funny, of whiskey and Guinness, but not as if he’d been drinking. More on his body and his clothes. Specially his hands.’

‘He dunnit!’ bleated Ramesses, a very young ram with a lively imagination. ‘He poured whiskey over his hands because he couldn’t stand the smell of the blood any more.’

‘Maybe,’ said Miss Maple, hesitantly.

Maude, who had the best sense of smell in the whole flock, shook her head. ‘Human beings don’t scent blood the way we do. They can’t really scent anything at all.’

‘We don’t know whether the murderer had bloodstained hands or not,’ said Miss Maple. ‘We don’t know anything much.’ She looked enquiringly at Othello.

‘Then the thin man told Gabriel, very quietly, “He still had so much he was going to do, his head was full of crazy plans. I don’t suppose anything will come of them now, do you?” He spoke very fast, so fast that I couldn’t remember it all at one go. He kept on talking about George’s plans. I think he wanted to worm something out of Gabriel. But Gabriel didn’t reply.’

Othello put his head thoughtfully on one side. ‘I’d say the thin man annoyed him. That’s why Gabriel called the butcher back. When the butcher came closer the thin man immediately stopped talking. Then they all started up again at the same time. Lilly said, “Someone ought to tell his wife.” Gabriel said, “Someone ought to fetch the police.” And the

butcher said, "I'll stay with him till they come." Then the thin man said, quickly, "No one's staying here alone." The other men stared at the butcher the way you stare another ram down before a duel. The butcher went very red in the face. But then he nodded.'

Miss Maple started to collect questions. She told all the sheep to say what they didn't understand and what they'd like to know. Maple stood in the middle of the flock with Mopple the Whale beside her. When she thought a question was worth remembering, she looked at Mopple and nodded, and the stout ram memorised the question. Once Mopple had memorised something he never forgot it.

'Why did they take photographs of us?' asked Maude.

'Why did it rain?' asked Cloud.

'Why did George come to the meadow in the night?' asked Heather. Maple nodded at Mopple. Heather glanced proudly at Othello.

'Why did the butcher come here?' asked Maude.

'What does the butcher want from Lilly?' asked Othello. Miss Maple nodded.

'What's a Last Will and Testament?' asked Lane, and Miss Maple nodded again.

'When will we be able to graze where George was lying again?' asked Cloud.

'Are they going to drive pigs into our pasture?' asked Maude.

'Why use a spade? The murderer could have pushed him off the cliffs,' said Zora. Miss Maple nodded.

'What about the wolf?' asked Sara. 'Will he be a danger to

the lambs – or us?’ Miss Maple hesitated for a moment, but she gave Mopple no sign.

‘Why doesn’t someone murder the butcher?’ asked Cloud. Several sheep bleated approvingly, but Miss Maple didn’t nod.

‘How long had he been lying in the meadow?’ asked Mopple the Whale. Miss Maple nodded at him, and Mopple beamed.

A lamb trotted forward. He had no name yet. The sheep were given names only when they had lived through their first winter. ‘Will George’s ghost come back?’ asked the lamb shyly.

Cloud leaned soothingly down to him and let him snuggle up to her thick fleece. ‘No, little one, George’s ghost won’t come back. Human beings don’t have souls. No soul, no ghost. Simple.’

‘How can you say that?’ protested Mopple. ‘We don’t know whether humans have souls or not.’

‘Every lamb knows that your soul is in your sense of smell. And human beings don’t have very good noses.’ Maude herself had an excellent sense of smell.

‘So you’d only see a very small ghost. Nothing to be afraid of.’ Othello leaned down to the lamb, too, amused.

‘But I’ve seen it already!’ bleated the lamb. ‘It was very big, much bigger than me, and I have a very good sense of smell. It was shaggy and it danced. At first I thought it was a wolf’s ghost, but now George is dead I know it must have been his. I was so scared, I thought this morning I must have been dreaming.’

Miss Maple looked keenly at the lamb. ‘How do you know George was dead by then?’

‘I saw him.’

‘You saw George dead and didn’t tell us?’

‘No, it wasn’t like that.’ The lamb sniffed. ‘I saw the spade. But George must have been lying underneath it, mustn’t he?’ The lamb looked thoughtful. ‘Or do you think he fell on top of the spade later?’

There was nothing more to get out of the lamb, who had slipped out of the barn in the night and couldn’t say why. In the moonlight, he had seen the spade and the shaggy wolf’s ghost, but he couldn’t describe it in any more detail. He had been so scared that he had instantly fallen asleep from fright.

Now silence reigned. The sheep huddled closer together. The lamb buried his head deep in Cloud’s fleece, while the others stared at the ground. Miss Maple sighed.

‘Two questions for Mopple. Who is the wolf’s ghost? And where’s Tess?’

The sheep looked at each other. Where indeed was Tessy, George’s old sheepdog, his most faithful companion, the one real love of his life, the gentlest sheepdog who had ever herded them?

When the others had gone to sleep, Miss Maple quietly added another question to the list. She had told Ramesses that she didn’t know whether the murderer had bloodstained hands. The fact was, she didn’t even know whether the murderer had hands at all. She thought George’s face had looked peaceful, smelling slightly of Guinness and tea, his clothes were smoky, he was holding a couple of flowers in his fingers. That had struck her as a little strange, because George wasn’t normally much interested in flowers. He had more time for vegetables.

But she had found something else, and it had made her push the bloodstained Norwegian sweater up a little way with her nose. There, on George's pale stomach, slightly above the place where the spade had gone in, was the print of a sheep's hoof – a single hoof print, just the one.