

## Death Invites You – Paul Halter

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*Dear Simon,*

*Drop any other plans you may have made for this evening and be here at 9 p.m. Formal dress required. VERY important dinner. Do not tell anyone, not even Valerie. Particularly Valerie.*

*Harold Vickers*

Such is the letter received by Simon Cunningham, a young, slightly pompous detective sergeant at Scotland Yard. Valerie is his fiancée and Harold Vickers is her father, a crime writer and master of locked room mysteries. On arriving at the Vickers home Simon is joined by Fred Springer, a journalist and crime fiction critic, who'd received a similar letter. Vickers wife Diane says she knows nothing of the invitation, but then her husband is renowned for his eccentricities and liable to have forgotten. When working on a new book, as he is now, he frequently locks himself away in his study for days on end and speaks to no one.

When they get no reply from Harold the three, with the Vickers butler, become alarmed and break down the study door. Inside they find Harold Vickers dead, shot through the head with a silenced pistol. His head and one hand are lying in pan of still boiling oil, and on the table is a freshly cooked meal, the roast chickens still steaming. At his feet a pair of gloves and by the locked and shuttered windows a small bowl of water.

Simon sends for his boss, Inspector Archibald Hurst, with whom he'd been earlier that evening, along with the amateur sleuth Dr Benjamin Twist. This may at first sight appear to be suicide, but as Simon is quick to point out, the blood on Harold's head is already dry. Harold Vickers has been dead for at least 24

hours. So who cooked the meal? How did they get all that food into the room unobserved? And how did they get out of the locked room between the time the guests arrived and the time the door was broken down?

Mental instability runs through the female line of the Vickers family, so could it have been Diane, a former actress and the daughter of a talented locksmith, who committed the crime? Maybe it was Valerie, or her sister Henrietta, already slightly mad and who blames her hated father for the death of her beloved grandfather. Then there's the other occupant of the house, Diane's brother Roger Sharpe, a professional conjurer who often helped Harold with his plots. He had good reason to hate the dead man. And then there's Harold himself; what was his involvement in all this? After all, the scene of his murder is exactly as described in the locked room mystery he was in the process of writing. As Twist observes: "I feel as though I'm living in a novel signed "Harold Vickers." What a pity the author never got around to providing a solution.

This is a very atmospheric and intriguing mystery with some nice set pieces. I particularly enjoyed the part where the police conduct a torch lit search for a possible ghost in a fog shrouded graveyard, only to discover...

Juicy red herrings and subtle misdirection combine to lead the reader in all directions. I should mention that at one point Halter does slip in a false statement. This is regrettable but it doesn't affect the reader's enjoyment, and you probably won't notice it at the time. So, pull up your chair, switch on the reading lamp (no other lights required save perhaps that from a roaring log fire), have your favourite drink close to hand and be prepared to be highly entertained.

