

LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER

by Roald Dahl

Roald Dahl was born in Wales in 1916 from Norwegian parents and educated at an English public school. At the age of eighteen he joined the Shell Oil Company. He worked in an office in London for four years and then in Africa for a year. When the Second World War broke out he enlisted in the Royal Air Force. His experience as a fighter pilot in the R.A.F includes campaigns in Libya, Syria, Greece, Egypt and Iraq. After being seriously wounded during one of those campaigns he was transferred to Washington where he became an Assistant Air Attaché. It was there that he started writing short stories based on his wartime experiences. (cf. *"Someone Like You"* and *"Yesterday Was Beautiful"*). Since then he has written several books of short stories in which suspense and imagination are the main ingredients. He has also written many children's books (*Matilda*, for example), a novel (*My Uncle Oswald*) and a sort of autobiography in two volumes (*Boy* and *Going Solo*). Roald Dahl's talent is so wide that he addresses a large reading public. He knows how to create surprise. He excels in black humor and the strange atmosphere of his stories fascinates the reader but can also make him feel uneasy. It is clearly the case here in his famous *"Lamb to the slaughter"*.

The scene takes place at **Mr. and Mrs. Maloney's** house at about five p.m.. After Mr. Maloney has come back from work, he breaks some bad news to his wife¹, who, in spite of everything, offers to get the supper ready. However, when her husband tells her that she shouldn't bother, she hits him on the back of the head with the frozen leg of mutton she has brought from the cellar. But Mrs. Maloney has not lost control of herself. She quickly thinks of getting rid of the murder weapon by putting it in the oven to cook. Then she tidies her face upstairs before going to the grocers, thus creating an alibi. It is only after she has seen to everything that she phones the police. At this stage, we realize that Mrs. Maloney knows most of the policemen at the police station, whose number she knew as well, which means that she was used to calling her husband who probably worked there². There is no other reason why she should use that number.

So we understand why **Jack Noonan** tries to comfort the wife of one of his colleagues by suggesting she go to either her sisters or his wife's and get a rest. He addresses her kindly. However, she declines every offer he makes. In the policeman's opinion, the murderer has hit Patrick Maloney on the back of his head *"with a heavy blunt instrument"*. Moreover, he thinks that the murderer is a man: he uses the pronoun *"he"*. But the reader knows that Mrs. Maloney is the murderer and indeed the description of the murder weapon corresponds to that of the frozen leg of lamb, which could be considered *"a heavy blunt instrument"*. Then, the police search the house for three hours: from six (after Mary Maloney phones them) to nine (when Mrs. Maloney finally proposes them the leg of lamb for supper).

The story gets evidently **ironic** when Mrs. Maloney puts the leg of Lamb in the oven to cook and then suggests to the policemen that they eat it, as they are hungry. The policemen are actually eating the murder weapon! One of them even says that it might be *"right under their very noses"*, which is perfectly true!

But the whole story is also fraught with suspense. Of course, the reader knows who is the murderer right from the beginning. But what is left unknown is whether the police will find enough clues to realize that Mrs. Maloney is guilty of the crime. As a matter of fact, the story reads like this:

- a. **Climax:** Mrs. Maloney hits her husband with the frozen leg of lamb.
- b. **Anticlimax:** She puts the leg of lamb to cook in the oven.
- c. **Denouement:** As soon as Mrs. Maloney puts the meat in the oven, the reader knows that the police will never find the murder weapon.

Of course, there is suspense because we could have imagined another **ending**. First, Mrs. Maloney could have been found out when Jack Noonan *"discovered a small patch of congealed blood"* on the dead man's head. This patch could have been a clue for the police when Mrs. Maloney mentioned the meat cooking in the oven. Besides, the policemen could have thought of the leg as being the actual weapon from its very shape and size when Mrs. Maloney put it on the kitchen table. However, only the reader can guess this, not the policemen because they would never have imagined a leg of lamb as a weapon and their colleague's wife as a murderer!

But the title wraps it all. Roald Dahl has been playing with words and symbols throughout the story. To put it in a nutshell, the lamb, symbol of innocence, is used as a murder weapon. What is more, the lamb is also an explicit *religious* symbol, and, here, instead of being sacrificed on the altar of the Jewish Passover or metaphorically in the person of Jesus Christ, it becomes a substitute for the knife of the slaughterer!

¹ Mr. Maloney may have told his wife that he was going to leave her because he was in love with someone else. This might be confirmed by the fact that he will give her some money for her to survive (she does not work). At any rate, this is Alfred Hitchcock's read in his famous TV series *"Alfred Hitchcock Presents"*.

² Here again, the movie makes this quiet clear.