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CAMPION'S LADY

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SWEET DANGER

TRAITOR'S PURSE

THE NEW FASHION IN SHROUDS

THE AMANDA BOOKS

3 FULL NOVELS 3

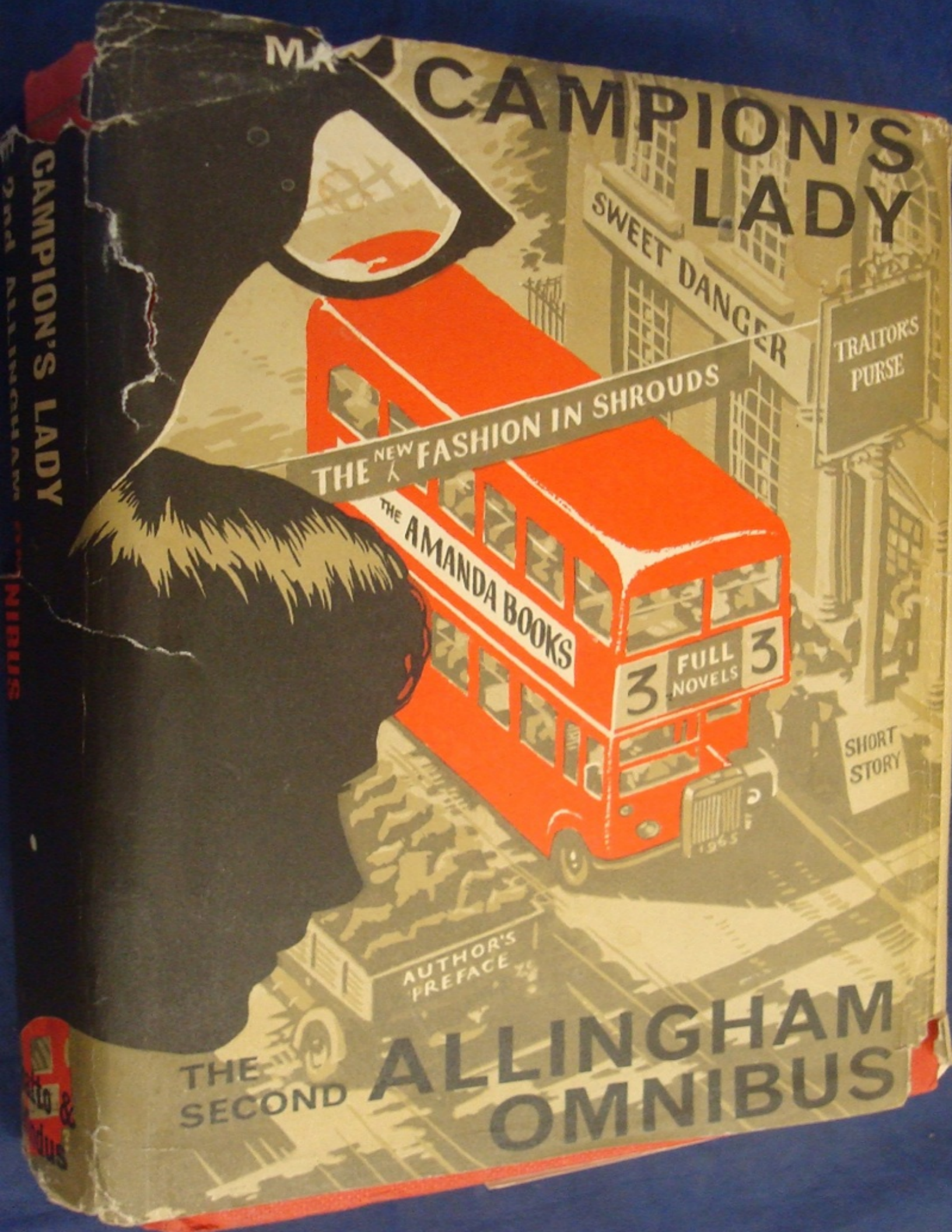
SHORT STORY

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE SECOND

ALLINGHAM OMNIBUS

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WORD IN SEASON

A Story for Christmas

Mr Campion sat in the armchair before the greying fire while Poins, the Red Setter, sat on the rug and sniffed dubiously at a holly berry which had fallen from the bough over the mantelshelf. They were both upset and preoccupied.

Amanda was stamping about upstairs, they could hear her heels sounding crisply on the oak boards. The scorch mark on the plaster between the ceiling beams remained in evidence of the evening's disaster. The flame had seared it when Mr Campion had driven a four inch nail through the new house-wiring in a poor if honest attempt to hang up a bunch of mistletoe under which to kiss his wife. The mistletoe lay in the waste-paper basket where he had thrown it after the lady amateur electrician had ceased to speak her mind and had stalked off to mend the fuses.

It was after half-past eleven o'clock on Christmas Eve and although the lights had come back, Amanda had not. In view of what she had said before she went, Poins wondered if she ever would and so, he feared, did Mr Campion.

His own dilemma was frightful. In the ordinary way he was worried enough on Christmas Eve but now, with Albert sitting there in misery as dumb as his own, the problem was ghastly.

Poins was an insular, over-sensitive dog as all good setters are, and a little more so than most because he was a mite over-good, and therefore prone to worry. Now, partly because he was so fond of Albert and Amanda, and partly because the terrible crack and the spurt of flame had stiffened every hair on his elegant body, he was in an agony of nerves and indecision. The question which was eating into his soul was the old one. *Should he speak?*

As has been known for centuries, all domestic animals have been granted the power of human speech during the hour before midnight on Christmas Eve. The reason why they so seldom avail themselves of this privilege is not quite so well understood. Yet it is not really so very remarkable. Man is not the only animal to have learned a thing or two over the years. Indeed all the others have discovered, rather more quickly than he, just how thunderingly unlucky talking can be.

Every puppy, foal and kitten imbibes a deep mistrust of the favour with his mother's milk. Even calves, who are as silly as goats and by nature sentimental and impulsive, have learned their lesson by this time and almost never say a word. From the beginning it was not easy. A great deal of emotion needs to be stirred before the necessary power can be summoned, and the simple problem of what to *say* after a year's silence is daunting.

Poor Poins had been brought up on the tragic story of his famous ancestor, Rufus of Anjou. This Champion of Champions had possessed a master whom he adored, a landowning squire of pronounced political views. This godlike person had enjoyed nothing better in life than to sit of an evening, with a glass in his hand and his red friend at his feet, brooding on the sins of the Government of the day. For three parts of a dog's lifetime they had been ideally happy, but one sad Christmas it had occurred to Rufus to risk the traditional hazard and he studied for a year to discover just the right remark to please his hero most.

After listening very carefully to every word the man uttered during the whole of that time the great evening arrived, and they sat together as usual by the winter fire. Ten minutes after the clock struck eleven Rufus raised his head, looked his friend straight in the eyes and said distinctly: 'Ramsay MacDonald, be damned!'

The blow fell instantly. The man sprang to his feet, knocked over the decanter, tore off his collar, and sent at once for his own vet who gave orders which changed his beverage into milk and his temper into bitterness. Most cruel of all, he could never bear Rufus in his sight again.

Poins was not really afraid of any such reaction from Mr Campion who was not that kind of person but there

was a danger which he foresaw and it turned him cold.

The trouble was that Mr Lugg, who was Mr Champion's gentleman's gentleman and was, at the moment, minding the flat in London, had told him in so many words one evening, when they were in the kitchen together about a month before, that if he would only learn to talk they could go on television together.

Mr Lugg had seemed to think that Pains would find this gratifying and clearly had no idea at all of the effect of such a prospect upon his pet.

Pains saw quite a lot of television. Mr Lugg wallowed in it as in a soapsud bath and sometimes left it on, accidentally-on-purpose, for Pains if he was going to be left alone for any length of time. Pains did not mind because he knew that Lugg meant well. He even tried to like the thing out of sheer inbred courtesy, but one night he had looked in at the judging of the finals at Cruft's. No cloistered Victorian Miss suddenly confronted by a bathing beauty contest in Atlantic City could have reacted more violently than had Pains to that appalling programme. He sat alone before the screen, his eyes bulging and his neck hairs bristling as at an enemy. The idea of a gentleman having his feet examined, his tail measured, his teeth discussed, in public before a critical audience not only in a hall but in every sitting-room throughout the Kingdom, shook him to depths he did not know he possessed.

Ever since that night the prospect of appearing himself—uttering secret thoughts, being jollied along by hearty announcers—for the better entertainment of bored dogs the country over had haunted him so horribly that he trembled whenever he considered it.

As long as he was silent his privacy was secure but once he spoke, once the word got about that he could follow conversations, and take messages, and tell lies, then God knew what horrors of publicity must follow!

He glanced first at Mr Champion and then at the clock behind him. There was only twenty minutes to go. To Pains Mr Champion's pale face was unbearably sad. Once or twice the poor unhappy man glanced up at the ceiling, scratched his ear, shuffled his feet and sighed. There was now no sound whatever from the darkness above. Nothing; only coldness and emptiness. They were deserted utterly. Perhaps for ever.

Pains watched his owner's agony and with that sudden ecstatic sympathy, the great canine gift which the species has not yet been able to teach mankind, felt his unhappiness and bereavement far, far more than the sufferer himself. Recklessness seized the dog; he faced the fearful consequences with unswerving courage. Raising himself gracefully to his haunches, he laid a long, aristocratic paw upon the beloved knee. Then, summoning every vestige of nervous energy for the ultimate effort, he opened his mouth carefully:

'I love you,' he said clearly.

Mr Champion looked at him absently. His eyes were darker than usual and full of worry behind his spectacles. He put his hand on the beautiful flat head and caressed it gently.

'I know you do, old boy,' he said kindly but without thinking at all. 'I know you do.'

They were still there, Mr Champion lost in gloom and Pains dumb with gratitude at the reassurance, when Amanda came in.

She had changed into her new green cloth dressing-gown which complemented her hair. This was a different tone of Pains' own red but deeper and softer even, with the golden lights and the splendour of autumn in it.

She came over to them and sat down on the arm of Mr Champion's chair. Her heart-shaped face was faintly contrite.

'I take back everything except "cack-hand",' she said presently.

'I conceded "cack-hand".' Mr Champion spoke promptly. 'And so does my friend.'

He took her into the chair with him and Pains, who was speechless with relief and joy at the miraculous reunion so economically achieved, sat up and pushed his face into the green folds, swooning with happiness and gratitude at

the glorious Mercifulness of Life.

'I heard you two talking,' Amanda said. 'I don't know anybody else who would sit there making up a voice for the dog so that he could have someone else to talk to when his wife went off in a huff. I heard the two voices distinctly but not what you said. What did you talk about?'

'Oh, this and that, you know.' Mr. Campion too, seemed disposed to bury his face in the green cloth, which was warm and sweet smelling, so that his words were muffled. 'Seasonable pleasantries. We are both remarkably glad you have come back. Aren't we, Pains?'

Pains raised his head, goggled at them with adoring eyes, opened his brown lips—and was saved by the bell, as the clock behind them began to chime the hour.

[End of *Word in Season*, by Margery Allingham]