

Nick Aaron

The Desiderata Stone

A Blind Sleuth Mystery



ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

Daisy Hayes was a sculptress, and blind since birth. In 1964 a French priest came to visit her at the collective studio in north London where she worked. He was fascinated by the impaired artist and told her, “There’s this program at the Vatican Museums, where people like you get an opportunity to study archaeological artefacts by touch. Are you interested?” — “Of course, *mon Père!*”

In AD 64 a blind masseuse working at the baths in Rome overheard some important men preparing to set fire to the city and seize power. When they found out that she knew too much, they had her arrested and tried to eliminate her. She decided she had to leave a message revealing the plot, and did everything she could to save her hide.

So, as a Vatican intern 1900 years later, Daisy uncovered a mysterious message from antiquity: the Desiderata stone.

“Without using any mixed metaphors, Nick Aaron pushes the envelope further than ever before, but still manages to land on his feet quite elegantly. Dizzying!”

The Weekly Banner

This 78k novel is a stand-alone in the *Blind Sleuth* series:

1943	D for Daisy
1946	First Spring in Paris
1952	Honeymoon in Rio
1956	Cockett’s Last Cock-up
1964	The Desiderata Stone
1967	Blind Angel of Wrath
1984	The Nightlife of the Blind
1989	Daisy and Bernard
1992	The Desiderata Gold

And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

Genesis 2:19

Salute every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren which are with me greet you. All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

Philippians 4:22

CONTENTS

- I 1964: Doris Day goes to Rome**
- II AD 64: A hot summer night**
- III 1964: The Italian typewriter**
- IV AD 64: Two beggar girls of Rome**
- V 1964: The Desiderata stone**
- VI AD 64: Two masseuses at the baths**
- VII 1964: The Plautilla connection**
- VIII AD 64: The plot thickens**
- IX 1964: The Seneca hypothesis**
- X AD 64: The great fire**
- XI 1964: A Sunday quest**
- XII AD 64: Thrown to the lions**
- XIII 1964: Finding Desiderata**
- XIV AD 64: Finding the light**

I 1964: Doris Day goes to Rome

“Even today,” Daisy explained, “although we are preparing to go to the moon, blind people are still not allowed to touch the sculptures in museums.”

“Do you really believe we will go to the moon?”

“Oh ye of little faith, of course we will! Haven’t you heard about the last Apollo mission that was launched on the 28th of May?”

“But you are still not allowed to touch the sculptures...”

“Yes, exactly! But, get this: these days I never go to a museum or a gallery without a pair of surgical gloves, you know, those thin rubber ones, so that they can’t turn down my request without looking silly.”

“Oh, I see: so you *force* them to let you touch the sculptures!”

“Exactly.”

Father Boudry chortled amiably. The French Catholic priest—*l’Abbé Boudry*—spoke good English, albeit with an accent, but sometimes he and Daisy’s friend Beatrice lapsed into his mother-tongue, and a few times that afternoon Daisy had found herself speaking French without even noticing: she mastered it better than she thought. This made her feel quite sophisticated.

On the modelling stand right in front of her there was a clay head set up on a steel armature. This was the first time she made such a big piece: a life-size portrait of her best friend, Bee, who was sitting on a high stool within reach. Daisy was working hard, struggling; she palpated her friend’s face at arm’s length and probed her features with her fingertips. Her sitter shuddered, “This always gives me gooseflesh, Daise...”

“Just don’t move... I’m trying to get a clear understanding of the transition between these two edges... here... and here. Am I smudging you with clay?”

“I don’t know; I can’t see my own face. *Qu’en pensez-vous, mon Père?*”

“*Juste un peu,*” the man answered, “but nothing to be ashamed of, surely.”

He got up from his own stool and started walking around the two women. The blind sculptress had impressive dark glasses hiding her eyes, and her sitter, indeed, had comical smudges on her face. He scrutinized them both with great interest as Daisy kept probing Beatrice, and again he chuckled contentedly.

As he paced close to her, Daisy could smell him distinctly. He not only had his signature odour, like everyone else, based on breath, after-shave, and sweat propensity, but there was something different, that she associated with soldiers and police, even with mailmen and milk delivery boys. Uniforms; dry cleaners... Father Boudry was a man of the cloth, literally, you could smell it. And if you listened carefully, you could even hear his cassock swishing along his legs as he walked around.

It was very quiet in the large hall of the abandoned brewery, where a local artists’ collective had fitted out their communal studios. Most of the members had day jobs, but Daisy, who worked part-time as a

physiotherapist, was off-duty that afternoon.

"My dears," Father Boudry said, "I am reminded of our great Rodin. He was renowned for making his sitters pose uncomfortably close to him, within reach of his hands too, but whether his models ended up with clay smears on their face... or elsewhere, that I don't know, though with Rodin one might suppose *que si*."

"Yes, but obviously I *really* need to touch my sitter's features. That is why I have to be quite intimate with people if I want to do their portrait. But maybe this is a good thing, as I'm told that the result of my work is rather brutal and can be very confronting."

"Brutal, yes. I am also reminded of Daumier. You may not know his work, but he made sculptures too; portraits... caricatures, really."

"Well, it is not my intention to caricature people, but rather to render reality as I perceive it... Sighted people rarely stop to think about how we blind-since-birth might picture things in our minds: that is what I'm trying to show."

"A very worthy endeavour, I'm sure."

The priest now stopped in front of the modelling easel and eyed the work in progress and the sitter, alternatively. Daisy had let go of her friend's face and was kneading the clay head again. Beatrice said, "I don't like that look, *mon Père*."

"What look would that be?"

"You're laughing at my predicament; you think the joke is on me!"

She said this fondly; she'd known the priest all her life; a friend of the family... Anyway, as Father Boudry kept looking from her to the piece, and as he knitted his eyebrows satirically, Beatrice burst out into giggles, then snorted through that rather prominent nose of hers, and tried to stifle her merriment, hiding her mouth behind her hand. Very much aware of the fact that she was no beauty, she turned quite red with embarrassment.

"My dear girl, don't blush on account of *me*, I'm only a priest, and I know you have a beautiful soul."

"That's what everybody keeps telling me, so they don't have to mention my ugly mug!"

"What's going on here?" Daisy asked.

"Father Boudry thinks your efforts do not do me justice!"

"Well, I haven't finished yet."

"That's the right spirit, *ma chère Dési*," the French priest said. Now he stared at the artist for a while: she was quite pretty, with a shock of blonde curls on her head, half-long, probably natural. You didn't expect someone like her to have a perm, somehow. The woman reminded him vaguely of one Hollywood star or the other, although he would have been at a loss to say which one. Like most French, however, he adored *'Ollywood*.

People started to arrive: other artists from the collective and their hangers-on. They needed their day jobs to keep the kettle boiling, and became painters, sculptors, etchers or photographers only after office hours. They repaired to different corners of the echoing hall: the painting studio, the photo and etching labs with their attendant dark room and printing press, and finally the sculpture studio with its clay-stained modelling stands. Fellow-artists greeted Daisy and her sitter, and were introduced to the visitor. Then, sometime later, she decided to call it a day. She covered the clay portrait with damp rags and a sheet of plastic, before she and Beatrice went to a washbasin by the wall, the former to

wash her hands, the latter her face.

"Shall we go for an early dinner? There's a new Italian place in the neighbourhood; really nice; I'm inviting you both."

Using her cane, Daisy led the way out of the derelict brewery and into the streets of Tufnell Parc. She knew exactly where to find that new restaurant, and while they walked over in the mellow early summer evening, she explained that Italian restaurants had become all the rage in London, lately, because of hugely successful pictures like 'Roman Holiday', 'La Dolce Vita', or more recently 'The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone'.

"Did you attend projections of those films?"

"I certainly did! Didn't we, Bee?"

But when they entered the establishment, with its red and white checked table cloths and empty Chianti bottles set with dripping candles, the priest cheerfully pronounced all of it "completely bogus". However, after talking with the welcoming proprietor in rapid-fire Italian, he had to admit that the man, at least, was genuine. They were the first customers of the evening, and settled down with a bottle of the establishment's "best wine", served by the *padrone* himself. Father Boudry pronounced it "adequate".

"Obviously, as a Frenchman, you must be hard to please," Beatrice remarked.

"Oh well, in France we always say: 'As long as you're in good company.'"

Daisy raised her glass and shot back: "In Britain we say, 'As long as there's alcohol in the plonk!'"

"Ah, my dear *Dési*, I can't tell you how happy I am to have made your acquaintance at last, and how impressed I am. My darling Beatrice had not exaggerated her praise of you. The fearless way you go out into the world with that white cane of yours, and the assurance with which you navigate the streets!"

"Oh, but I know Tufnell Park like the back of my hand."

"And then the way you throw yourself into your art. It is quite marvellous!"

"Though you doubt whether my efforts do poor Beatrice justice, am I right? Well, I can assure you that I *love* Bee's face, no matter what other people may say. At least she has *readable* features, when I touch them, with clear volumes and edges."

"Ah, but that is not the issue here... You see, as soon as you start 'rendering' someone's *face*, then you are confronting them with their sense of self, their identity, maybe even their very soul! Therefore the process of rendering reality as you *perceive* it suddenly becomes... rather brutal."

"I see, yes; I guess you're right."

"You know, you could learn a lot from the classics of antiquity... My advice would be: go to Rome and study them."

"You mean the sculptures?"

"Yes, the Roman sculptures and the copies of the Greeks... There's this program, organized every summer at the Vatican Museums by an Irish priest, Father Cadogan, a good friend of mine, where blind people get an opportunity to study archaeological artefacts by touch. Would you be interested?"

"Of course, *mon Père*! So they're not only allowed to touch the sculptures, but are even *encouraged* to do so?"

"That's right, and I don't think they're required to wear those rubber gloves you were talking about."

"But surely this is only open for Catholics?"

"Oh, you're not one of us then, are you? Well, it doesn't matter, I guess... this is not a religious event." And after a moment's reflection he added, "They may expect you to attend Mass once in a while, if that is all right."

"Yes, but would it be all right with Father Cadogan, too?"

"We wouldn't tell him... just promise not to partake in the Holy Communion, is all I'm asking."

"Nor in any other sacrament; I get it."

So that summer, just like that, Daisy ended up in Rome for a fortnight's holiday. That busybody Boudry had been true to his word, but now Daisy was wondering if it had been such a good idea after all, to set off on such a daunting venture on the basis of such a flimsy invitation. It had all gone so fast. She'd taken two weeks off from work, and her husband Richard, who was a pilot with BOAC, had arranged a flight over the phone from Sydney, in Australia, where he happened to be at that moment. It was the first time she went abroad without an escort: Bee would have liked to come along, but Father Cadogan had vetoed the idea, as Daisy would be part of a group. Fair enough.

The trip had been all right, she'd taken a taxi to London Airport, and Richard had made sure that a stewardess would be there to help her through customs and bring her to the aircraft. At Fiumicino, the airport of Rome, Father Cadogan had come to pick her up personally. So far so good.

Then she and the other participants had been taken to a meeting room somewhere within the depths of the Vatican Museums. The only thing Daisy knew for the moment, was that the museums were a huge maze of galleries and corridors, and that they had been taken to a part of the complex that was not even open to the public, but was used by visiting scholars and researchers.

Once they were all gathered in this room, Daisy could hear the conversations of half a dozen people around her, speaking Irish English and sounding very youthful. She expected that most of them would be blind, and as she listened more carefully, she was able to ascertain that this must indeed be the case, although there was no telling if they were totally blind or not. None of them spoke to her, as she had just joined them, a late arrival, a newcomer, and the only non-Irish member of the group. *They* had all travelled together from Dublin. And as they couldn't see her, how could they even think of making an effort to include her in their conversations?

So right there and then she suddenly realized that this was going to be much more difficult than she had foreseen. For the first time since leaving school she became aware of the fact that she was no longer used to being with other blind people. At the 'Anne Sullivan', her old boarding school for blind girls, it had been second nature, automatic, for many years. You knew you couldn't rely on your friends for assistance because they were just as blind as you, and you learned to rely on yourself only. But since then she'd lived exclusively among the sighted and had come to take the convenience of seeing the world through the eyes of others for granted. Wistfully she thought back to that afternoon and evening with Bee and Father Boudry: how relaxed and easy-going all three of