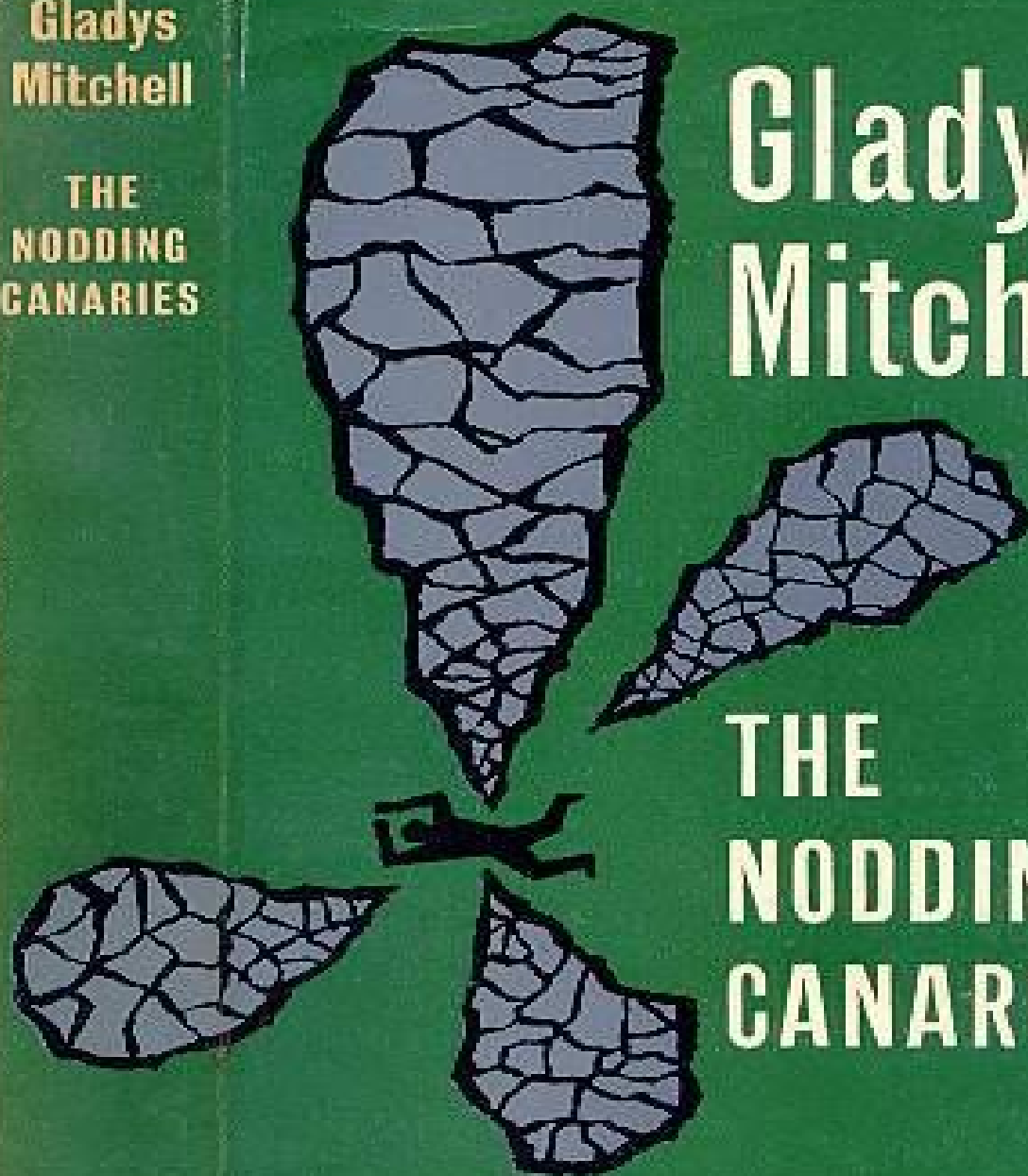


Gladys
Mitchell

THE
NODDING
CANARIES

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THE
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The Nodding Canaries

Bradley 34

Gladys Mitchell



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THE NODDING CANARIES

Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley is called upon by a schoolmistress friend, Alice Boorman, to extricate her from a situation in which she may have to face a charge of attempted murder. She has been shortlisted, with two others, for an important promotion, but, as a result of an expedition the three young women have planned just before the final interview for the post, the other two are rescued in the nick of time from some ancient flint-mines.

Dame Beatrice, certain that Miss Boorman is innocent, enters the arena, discovers a corpse and uncovers some unexpected facts. She also unearths what may be a most unusual motive for murder.

By the same author

dead man's morris
come away death
st peter's finger
printer's error
brazen tongues
hangman's curfew
when last i died
laurels are poison
the worsted viper
sunset over soho
my father sleeps
the rising of the moon
here comes a chopper
death and the maiden
the dancing druids
tom brown's body
groaning spinney
the devil's elbow
the echoing strangers
merlin's furlong f
aintley speaking
watson's choice
twelve horses and the hangman's noose
the twenty-third man
spotted hemlock t
he man who grew tomatoes
say it with flowers

**To all my friends at
Matthew Arnold School**

Ave atque Vale

CHAPTER ONE

S.O.S.

‘Days that in spite
Of darkness, by the light
Of a clear mind are day all night.’

Richard Crashaw

ODDING is so much a market town that the fact of its being also a Cathedral city can be, and very often is, overlooked. The Cathedral, imposing and beautiful, does not seem to be the heart of the city in the same way as is the Cathedral at Salisbury, for example. All the same, the Dean and Chapter have been able to maintain the tradition that no buses run on Sundays until after Early Service and that none are routed to pass the precincts during Matins. On the other hand, the Cathedral close ends, on the west, opposite what used to be the turkey market and on the east at a ferry.

There are two other markets in Nodding. The enormous space between St Hilary Godsend and the new City Hall is filled daily with lane after lane of stalls, each with its gaily-striped awning, and chaffering goes on all day long. On Saturday mornings the big cattle market is held on another considerable area of the city which lies between the castle and the new post-office. Beasts are brought from all parts of the county to be bought and sold, and the noise is considerable and lasts from early morning until noon. The pubs are allowed an extension on Saturdays.

The city itself, apart from the post-office, the huge modern town hall which flanks the market, and the one wide street which runs for a mile or so between the railway station and the bus station, retains its mediaeval character. The streets are narrow and some of them are cobbled. There is the wonderful flint-work of the old town hall (near the market); there is a fifteenth-century inn now dignified by the name of the *Gauntlet Hotel*, and, not far away, there is a magnificent thirteenth-century hall which was once the frater of a wealthy and powerful Benedictine monastery and which is now used for the annual music festival and the flower show. There are so many fourteenth and fifteenth-century churches in the city, built in the flourishing days of the wool trade, that some of them have been closed, and one has been de-consecrated and is now a museum. There is also the flint-faced Bethlehem, turned nowadays into the Evening Institute of Embroidery, but

once a mad-house for women. There are houses with upper floors of oak which slope alarmingly, and there are shops which have an entrance on one street and another entrance on the parallel street behind. There are stretches of the old city wall (although the gates are gone), watch-towers on the river and a fourteenth-century bridge. There is also The Wattle, just outside the Cathedral close, where the turkey market used to be held and the birds shepherded on their own tarred feet to London.

In a flat above a bookseller's shop just off The Wattle lived a schoolmistress. Her name was Alice Boorman and, unfashionably, (for the profession has taken enthusiastically to the lifting of the ban on married women), she was still a spinster. One would hesitate, however, before saddling her with the questionable title of old maid, for, although she was rigidly virtuous, she was also tough, athletic and in charge of the physical education of girls at the most modern of the Nodding City schools.

She lived alone, by preference, but was hospitably inclined, particularly with regard to two friends she had made at College, Kitty Trevelyan (by this time Mrs Rafe Vinnicombe and the mother of three) and Laura Gavin, (née Menzies), the mother of a determined individualist named Hamish, which onerous chore she combined with that of acting as secretary to a psychiatrist.

Other welcome visitors were the ex-Warden and the ex-Subwarden of Athelstan Hall, one of the hostels attached to the college. These visitors were, respectively, Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, Laura's employer, and young Mrs Jonathan Bradley, who had begun life as Deborah Cloud and had lectured to the First Year English groups before she married Dame Beatrice's nephew.

Kitty, who designed hair-styles to suit the spring and autumn collections of the *haute couture*, usually took a vacation at Whitsun, when Alice's school was closed for the week. Laura, unless the circumstances were out of the ordinary, could take a holiday whenever she chose, so by late May or early June the three usually had made plans to spend Whitsun week together. It was with considerable surprise, therefore, that, less than a month after this annual beano, Laura received a letter from Alice Boorman one Friday morning, begging her to return to Nodding and, if it was possible, to bring Dame Beatrice with her.

Laura, who was at breakfast with her employer in the Stone House, Wandless Parva in Hampshire, when she received the letter, handed it to Dame Beatrice with the comment:

'If I'd had this from old Kitty, I'd know what to think, but, coming, as it does, from young Alice, I should imagine she's deeply in the soup in some way or other,

and looks to us to extricate her. As she never, on principle, squeals unless she's at the point of extinction, I regard this letter as a very serious plea for succour. Do you think you can make it? There's nothing in the diary that won't wait, so far as I can see.'

Dame Beatrice read the letter. She nodded.

'Of course we must go,' she said. 'The very fact that Miss Boorman gives no indication whatever of the nature of her predicament makes me apprehensive on her behalf. Finish your breakfast and then order the car.'

They were on their way by ten o'clock and in Nodding in time for lunch at the *Gauntlet*. Alice Boorman, they knew, always had lunch at school because she coached games during the dinner-hour, so they made a very leisurely meal and then drove to the school to meet Alice at four o'clock, when the children were dismissed and she would be free.

'I'll oil in, shall I?' suggested Laura, as the first of the children appeared. 'I know where the games store is, and that's where she'll be, I've no doubt.'

By twenty minutes past four Alice was ready to go home. She said nothing about her letter until well after they had arrived at her flat. There she made tea and cut wafer-thin bread and butter (which Dame Beatrice dearly loved) and fed Laura and herself on baked beans and poached eggs on toast. Whatever was worrying her she put resolutely and characteristically into the background until the meal was over and cleared away. Then she and Laura went into the kitchen to wash up, leaving Dame Beatrice in the pleasant sitting-room.

'Well?' said Laura. 'What's biting the girlhood friend?'

'I'm in a spot, I think,' said Alice. 'It may mean the police.'

'Golly! What have you done? Embezzled the school fund?'

'Nothing so simple, Dog. I may be had up and charged with attempted murder.'

'Tried to slaughter a kid, do you mean? Doubtless most of 'em could do with it.'

'It isn't a girl. It's Staff. Two nearly dead in the hospital here.'

'You *have* been doing it!' Laura spoke lightly, but felt cold with fear. She was very fond of Alice. 'Hadn't we better sort it out in the hearing of Mrs Croc? It'll be tedious for you to recite the history twice.'

'Oh, Laura, I'm so glad she was able to come! It *is* good of her! She's my only hope.'

‘Faint not, nor fear,’ said Laura, with a heartiness she did not feel. ‘Incidentally,’ she added, ‘*have* you done whatever it is you’re supposed to have done?’

‘Oh, Dog, of course not!’ Alice looked horrified at the suggestion. ‘*Of course* I haven’t! But I can see it looks as though I might have, and I can’t see that there is anyone to give evidence that I didn’t. I so easily *could* have done it, you see. I have to admit that.’

They finished the chores in silence and then went back to the sitting-room.

‘Now,’ said Laura, stretching her long body in a comfortable armchair, ‘let’s have the dope, young Alice, straight from the horse’s mouth.’

‘You shouldn’t mix your metaphors,’ said Alice, ‘but this is what happened.’

‘Dope and horses aren’t a mixed metaphor nowadays.’

‘One moment,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘May I know, before you begin...’

‘She’s been trying to murder the Staff,’ said Laura. ‘Not all of them, of course. Just the two she didn’t much like.’

‘I see,’ said Dame Beatrice, gravely. ‘I should wish to take notes, Miss Boorman, if you do not object.’

‘I’d like you to write something down. It might give a glimmer, although I haven’t really much hope,’ said Alice.

‘Of course, she didn’t do it,’ said Laura. ‘So much even the meanest intelligence (my own) can grasp.’

‘So much I supposed. Now, Miss Boorman?’

‘It begins some time back,’ said Alice, ‘when three of us bought a caravan. It didn’t last long because, after we’d spent half-a-dozen week-ends and one whole Easter and one whole autumn half-term holiday in it, and then four weeks in Scotland the next summer, we decided that it was too cramped an existence. You see, whenever we had a holiday in the beastly caravan, it rained. Of course, we did go out in the rain – we had to – but it was quite a problem getting clothes dried and, anyway, not much fun *always* going out and getting wet, so we decided that the caravan had a jinx and we sold it.’

‘So far, I follow the plot,’ said Laura, knitting her brows, ‘but where does it get us?’

‘That’s only the beginning. Perhaps you remember, Dog, that I took a special one-year P.E. course, after we’d left College a year or two, to qualify myself to be put in charge of a gym., do you?’

‘Sure I remember. Didn’t I come to the passing-out display?’

‘That’s right. You did. It was after I’d finished there that I got the post at Fieldingstone, and then I got this one.’

‘All straightforward so far. What was the snag?’

‘Well, oddly enough, Pettinsalt and Betsy.’

‘What? The revered and (by old Kitty – remember?) the detested *gymnasiarch* of the dear old college? I can’t believe it. Why, Pettinsalt used to pronounce your name with awe, and Betsy used to bite holes in the trampoline in her ecstasy at your virtuosity.’

‘Don’t be silly, Dog. We didn’t have a trampoline in those days. No, what happened was that Pettinsalt and Betsy put their heads together, it seems, and decided to run me for Organiser of the area. It’s a pretty good job and it was advertised two months ago. I applied, backed by the two of them and my present head and because I’ve had County colours for netball and the half-mile – don’t go in for that sort of thing now, of course, on account of my age...’

‘Too old at twenty-nine,’ said Laura, shaking her head.

‘... so it was thought that I had some sort of chance, especially as I do Modern Dance as well.’

‘Her school gymnastics team have been on television, too,’ said Laura. Alice shook her head.

‘I don’t think that made any difference. The point is that, of course, I wasn’t the only candidate. There were two other people in the running.’

‘Aha! Two niggers in the wood-pile, eh?’

‘I wouldn’t have called them that. There was nothing hidden or suspicious about the matter. These Organisers’ jobs are sought after, naturally, and a whole bevy of people applied from all over the place. We were all interviewed and three of us were short-listed and had to attend another session in front of the small selection Committee. I heard privately that Pettinsalt moved heaven and earth to get a seat on that committee, but, as she was known to be an interested party, there was nothing doing. Actually, I was rather glad, because she and Betsy had already pulled a good many strings for me and I was a bit embarrassed about that. If I get anywhere, I want to do it under my own steam.’

‘Noble, independent, priggish and ungrateful,’ said Laura. ‘Still, don’t ever listen to destructive criticism. I never do. Carry on.’

‘Yes, well, as I said, three of us were called to this second interview and it was to be held at the unreasonable hour of eight-forty-five last Saturday evening. One of the girls had to come up from Devonshire for it and the other one was from Scotland, so, of course, I suggested that they should roll up at my flat on the Friday night or the Saturday morning and go to the interview from there.’

‘White of you. And did they come?’

‘I do so much wish they hadn’t, Dog, but, of course, they did, and that’s just the trouble. The one from Devonshire turned up at about ten o’clock on the Friday night and the Scottish girl took the night train from Edinburgh and rolled in early on the Saturday morning.’

‘Nice girls?’

‘Ever such decent souls. Very well qualified, too, and both with teaching experience in Grammar Schools, which I thought would clinch the issue for one of them. I hadn’t a hope it would be me.’

‘I don’t see why not. You can probably make rings round the pair of them.’

‘Not any longer. I’ve withdrawn my application. I felt I had to.’ Alice was in complete control of her voice, but her hands were clenched and she went white as she spoke. Laura looked away and asked,

‘Whatever happened?’

‘Miss Boorman is about to explain to us,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes,’ said Alice. ‘You see, I thought I ought to entertain them a bit, as they were staying with me, so I planned to show them as much of Nodding as we had time for. We went over the Cathedral and the castle, visited the cattle market – they liked that very much – and then the ordinary market, and had lunch at the *Gauntlet*. Then the girl from Devonshire mentioned Pigmy’s Ladder and asked whether there would be time to go there before the interview. Well, of course, there was plenty of time, and it seemed a good idea, so we went there in my car.’

‘The suggestion was made by one of the others, and not by you,’ said Dame Beatrice, noting down this fact.

‘We got there by half-past three,’ Alice continued. ‘It’s a prehistoric flint-mine, as you probably know. We were the only ones there and the man wanted to see whether some more people turned up before he opened the entrance to the main shaft, but we explained that we hadn’t much time, so he let them go down.’

‘Them? Not you?’

‘No. I went down once, on a Guiders’ outing, but I got claustrophobia in those narrow, low, little workings, so I certainly didn’t want to experience the same sort of feelings again, especially with the interview so near.’

Laura nodded.

‘I went once. I rather enjoyed crawling about down there and seeing other people’s ghostly hands, clutching candles, come eerily round corners. I felt quite Tom Sawyer,’ she said.

‘Well, I didn’t enjoy it a bit, the time I went, so, when we got out of the car, I bullied the man, as I said, into unlocking the place for the other two, and told them I wouldn’t be going down, and saw them down the ladder. I’d supplied them with small electric torches, as being more manageable than the candles you find at the bottom of the shaft, so, having told them they’d better not be more than a quarter of an hour or so, I went for a stroll across the heath.’

‘Breckland,’ said Laura. ‘And then?’

‘I gave them a quarter of an hour by my watch and then went back to collect them.’

‘The time being...?’

‘Four o’clock by then, near enough. The arrangement was that we should go back to my flat for a high tea and then titivate ourselves up for the interview. Well, I sat on the grass near the top of the shaft for another five minutes and then I went to the brink and yelled down. Nothing happened, so I went to the nearest grating – they’re supposed to be glassed in, but the glass is always getting broken – and yelled again. I tried two other gratings, including those with the antler picks at the bottom of the shaft, but I hadn’t much hope of my voice reaching the girls from there, as those workings are sealed off and the ordinary visitors can’t get into them.’

‘To make sure the general public don’t whip the antler picks for souvenirs,’ explained Laura.

‘And to limit the size of the workings to ensure that the general public doesn’t get lost down there,’ said Alice. ‘Anyway, I went back to the main shaft and yelled my head off, and the man came across from his hut and asked whether anything was the matter. It was then turned twenty-past four and I was beginning to get a bit fed-up at the way the time was going. We’d all got to get a bath, you see, and change our clothes, as well as having the meal in good time to give our tums a chance to settle before we went into the torture-chamber.’

‘So what did the man do?’

‘He helped me shout. Then he said that, although it was considered almost impossible for people to get lost in those parts of the workings which were open to the public, people sometimes panicked, got themselves stuck (not literally, of course) in one of the galleries and just felt they couldn’t continue. It was a sort of hysteria, he said, and, having felt as I did on the Guiders’ outing, I could well understand it. Anyway, he decided he’d better go down and look for them and get them to come up. I explained that I wouldn’t be any good at searching the galleries, but he said one person would be better than two, anyway, so he went down alone. He came up at once, and stood on the ladder with his head about two feet above the lip of the shaft.’

‘Did he have claustrophobia?’

‘No. He asked me to lie on my chest and try whether I could smell anything. Then he came right out so that I could get my head well over the hole, and I took in a breath and said that I thought there might be a slight smell, sickly and rather sweet, which I thought I recognised.’

‘Good heavens! Methane! Fire-damp, like in a coalmine! I should never had thought it! Of course, you can get it in any kind of mine, I suppose,’ said Laura, ‘and chalk’s rather good at producing it.’

‘You also get it on marshes,’ put in Dame Beatrice. ‘The only flaws in your guesswork, my dear Laura, are that methane is odourless and, as it is lighter than air, it would certainly have dispersed, as the shaft had then been wide open for...?’

‘Thirty-five minutes, by that time,’ said Alice. ‘The man advised me to get up quickly. I did, because the position I was in was not dignified. He told me to go with him to his hut, where there was a telephone, and be prepared to help him out with a message to the police. I was horrified. You see, I knew I’d recognised the smell, but I couldn’t put a name to it at first. Then suddenly it came to me. It was the smell of calor gas!’

‘Butane,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes, butane. I told the man I would go down, after all, but he put a policeman’s hold on me that I couldn’t break and told me, very kindly, that it would do the others no good and might cost me my life. So we telephoned the Nodding City Police and gave them the details, and they came and two of the slim ones put on breathing apparatus and went down. I wanted to stay, but when one of them came up with one of the girls and said it was touch and go whether both of them were dead, the Sergeant ordered me to go home before they brought the other one up.’

‘But how *could* calor gas get into the workings at Pigmy’s Ladder?’ demanded Laura.

‘That wasn’t my concern at the time. I had such a shock when I heard the news that I felt as though my brain had gone paralysed. How I drove home I don’t know. Of course I couldn’t eat anything. I’m on the telephone, so, after about an hour, during which I don’t remember what I did, I telephoned the police station to ask for news. There wasn’t anything they could tell me, except that the girls were in hospital, but, just before nine o’clock, the Superintendent came round and confirmed that they were not dead, although it was still touch and go. Then he asked me who they were, and all about them, but, of course, there wasn’t much I could tell him. I didn’t even know their complete home addresses, because my invitation had been given by word of mouth when we had been called back after the first interview for the Organiser’s job, and told we’d been short-listed and given the date of the Sub-Committee meeting, so I had just invited them out of the blue and given them my address.’

‘Well, if you knew as little as that about them, I don’t see what you’ve got to worry about,’ said Laura, bluntly. ‘It wasn’t even *your* suggestion that they should go to Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘Wait,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘The Superintendent was very kind and sympathetic,’ Alice continued. ‘He could see what a confused state my mind was in, I suppose. I told him he could get their full addresses from the Education Office, and I told him about the interview, so he took me along in his car and I was left alone in an ante-room while he went into the Committee Room. Of course, I knew I couldn’t face the interview, and I was very late for it, any way, and, after about twenty minutes, the Education Officer came out and said how sorry he was that such a dreadful accident should have happened, and that I was not to report at school on Monday, but go to bed and get as much rest as I could. That was ridiculous, of course. I couldn’t rest, I was too much upset. I went to the hospital on the Sunday, and I went to school, as usual, on the Monday.’

‘Best thing,’ said Laura, sympathetically. ‘Nothing like work to take your mind off things.’

‘That’s what I thought. But the police came again on the Tuesday evening. They called here. They were quite nice, but I felt rather worried, although I could answer their questions, of course.’

‘But that wasn’t the end of it?’ asked Laura. ‘They—?’

‘Last Wednesday. The girls are still hovering, and there’s a chance they’ll recover, but, yes, the police have questioned me again. I wasn’t asked very much, but I didn’t like the way I was asked it, and I didn’t like the interview I had with the girls’ fathers, who both wanted to know why I hadn’t gone down into the workings with their daughters. I began to see that things were going to be very awkward and difficult for me, and that I might be charged with attempted murder, so I panicked and sent for you both.’

‘I don’t call that panic; it was sheer commonsense,’ said Laura.

‘I was awfully glad I’d done it. The police turned up at school again this morning, and questioned me for an hour and a half. It wasn’t much fun.’

‘But what’s your connection with it all? I don’t get it. Why do they think you know anything more than you’ve said?’ demanded Laura.

‘I told you that I was one of three people on our Staff who bought the caravan.’

‘Yes, you did. Does that help?’

‘It’s helped the police,’ said Alice, grimly. ‘We did all the cooking by calor gas. Do you know anything about that?’

‘It comes in cylinders. So much I’m aware of, but very little more.’

‘Calor gas is butane in a liquid form,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘If you release it, it vaporises and can be lethal. As it is a gas heavier than air, it doesn’t rise as, for instance, methane would do. It stays near floor level for quite a long time – four days or so. It depends upon the amount of ventilation in the place where it’s released.’

‘And in Pigmy’s Ladder?’

‘The only ventilation is from the main shaft and from the broken glass in those grids which have been let into the ground so that people can see, from above, the old workings which, as I told you, you’re not allowed into,’ said Alice.

‘But, all that sort of nonsense aside, how does this affect you and your interests? I take it that these old workings are, in effect, mines?’ said Laura.

‘Yes, and, of course, you could get coal-damp – that’s to say, methane – forming, but you couldn’t get butane. Do you see what I mean?’

‘I think you attach too much importance to the fact that you used calor gas in your caravan,’ said Dame Beatrice, comfortingly.

‘Well, it’s obvious that I had a motive, of course, although motive doesn’t really mean much in a court of law, I believe,’ said Alice. ‘There are such things as means and opportunity, though, and I had both, you see.’

‘What motive could you possibly have? You didn’t even really know these girls,’ said Laura.

‘Why, of course I had a motive, Dog! There was this rather good job. Don’t you see that if I could eliminate the other candidates it was as good as mine?’

‘But you don’t think in that sort of way.’

‘That wouldn’t be known to the police.’

‘But people don’t store up cylinders of calor gas when they’ve sold a caravan, chump!’

‘There’s nothing to stop them. And my opportunity was obvious.’

‘What has been done about the flint-mines now?’ asked Dame Beatrice. ‘Are they closed to the public?’

‘Yes, or so I understand, but the shaft has been left open and other shafts – the original prehistoric ones – opened up to disperse the gas.’

‘So far, so good. There is, of course, an obvious conclusion to be drawn,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘I wish I could see one that would let me out.’

‘If I am right, you will be cleared completely.’

‘I wish I could see how!’

‘It is obvious that there is a dead body in those old workings. We must find it,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘A dead body?’

‘Such is my reasoned conclusion. But, whether suicide or murder has been committed, only time will show.’

Laura patted Alice on the back.

‘So cheer up, old scout,’ she said, in the robust voice of unadulterated relief.

‘Those girls will recover and all will be well. What a good thing they were good and fit.’

‘Their fitness would be of little avail against butane. It is an asphyxiating vapour. What we must be thankful for is that Miss Boorman did not wait longer before summoning help in finding her friends,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘How soon can we explore Pigmy’s Ladder?’ asked Laura, eager for action.

‘As soon as ever the butane is dispersed. But we shall not explore the workings until the police have located and brought up the body.’

‘There won’t be much point in exploring after that,’ said Laura, in a tone of disappointment. ‘All the detecting will be taken out of our hands.’

‘One never knows, child. Now, Miss Boorman, my dear, do please realise that there is no need for any more anxiety. I will leave Laura with you for tonight, as I think you will be glad of her company.’

‘What will *you* do, then?’ asked Laura.

‘I shall request the favour of being permitted the use of Miss Boorman’s telephone in order to engage a room at the *Gauntlet Hotel*. I have a Holmesian premonition that we are on the threshold of matters of interest.’

CHAPTER TWO

Pigmy’s Ladder

‘Knowledge he only sought, and so soon caught,
As if for him knowledge had rather sought;
Nor did more learning ever crowded lie
In such a short mortality.’

Abraham
Cowley

IN the following morning Dame Beatrice rang up the Nodding Police and asked to speak to the Superintendent. The Superintendent knew of her by repute, although he had never worked with her on a case, and he invited her to come to his office for a talk as soon as he learned of her interest in Alice Boorman and the accident which had taken place in the flint-mines.

Dame Beatrice was at the window of the larger lounge of the hotel to see the police car drive up, and by a quarter-past ten she was at the police station closeted with a large, plain-faced, slow-smiling man who introduced himself as William

Wyndham. He spoke in the pleasing cadences and inflections of the county and Dame Beatrice liked him.

After the formalities were concluded and Dame Beatrice had been given the only armchair, the Superintendent introduced the subject about which she had come to talk.

‘You say you know Miss Boorman, Dame Beatrice?’

‘Yes, I have known her for nearly ten years, since she first went to College.’

‘Really? We’ve been bothering her a good deal this last few days, I’m afraid, but it couldn’t be helped.’

‘May I ask what is her position in the matter?’

‘Not as sticky as it might have been if the other young women had died. Fortunately they’re going to recover. That seem certain now.’

‘What is Miss Boorman supposed to have done?’

‘Well, it look to us like attempted murder. She had means, motive and opportunity.’

‘Nothing would convince me of her guilt.’

‘I admit that we’ve been impressed by her manner, Dame Beatrice, but I’m afraid the thing add up too completely for us to exonerate her without a very full enquiry.’

‘You must do your duty, of course. I appreciate that, Superintendent. But before you go any further into the matter of Miss Boorman’s activities, I should like you to do me a favour.’

‘Anything that’s legal, of course, ma’am.’ The Superintendent’s small, intelligent eyes twinkled good-naturedly at her keen black ones.

‘As soon as it is safe to do so, I would like you to make a very thorough search of those flint-mines.’

‘Scheduled for the day after tomorrow. We’ve opened up all the old shafts we can find that have been excavated already by the local archaeological society and reckon that the vapour should be completely dispersed by then.’

‘What do you expect to find?’

‘Blessed is he that expecteth nothing,’ said the Superintendent, with a grin.

‘I will venture to prophesy one thing.’

‘I doubt whether, if she’s left the cylinder of calor gas down there, it will have her fingerprints on it.’ He was still grinning, but at Dame Beatrice’s next remark his face changed.

‘I think you will find the intended victim – or, rather, his or her body.’

‘Good God!’

‘Had it not occurred to you that the butane might have been released *before* those three girls arrived at Pigmy’s Ladder?’

‘Such an idea never crossed our minds, Dame Beatrice. You see, we thought we’d got the goods on Miss Boorman. There was that caravan she had...’

‘Oh, you found out about that?’

‘There isn’t much we haven’t found out – or so we thought. Then there was the fact that these three young women were the only visitors to the Ladder at that particular time on that particular day...’

‘But that, surely, is a point in Miss Boorman’s favour. She couldn’t have known there wouldn’t be witnesses. You cannot really imagine that she carried the cylinder of calor gas there on the off-chance that she would be able to use it.’

‘Well, apart from that, there’s the fact that she refused to go down into the galleries. Doesn’t that point to the fact that she knew it would be dangerous?’

‘But if you believe that she did not go down, how do you suggest that she released the butane without the others being aware that she had done so?’

The Superintendent stroked his chin.

‘We foresaw that difficulty, ma’am, and I believe she dropped it, leaking, down one of the other shafts. The glass is out of most of them.’

‘Then it should be visible to anybody peering down from the top. Is it so visible?’

‘Not so far, no, but it’s pretty dark down there. Then there’s the motive.’

‘Yes, this promotion to the post of Organiser. I do not see Miss Boorman asphyxiating her rivals in order to secure the post for herself. School-mistresses don’t, you know. They are odd, perhaps, in that respect.’

‘Well, we’re certainly not going to worry Miss Boorman again until the search has been made, ma’am. Perhaps you’d like to come along to see fair play.’ His eyes were twinkling and kindly again. Dame Beatrice rose to leave.

‘I should like it above all things,’ she said. ‘You know that I am staying at the *Gauntlet*? A telephone message will find me ready and waiting.’

The area around the prehistoric flint-mines had been cordoned off and put under guard. The Superintendent's party consisted of himself, Dame Beatrice, Laura, a Detective-Inspector, a Detective-Sergeant and the two young, slim constables who were to be the official searchers. These carried electric torches, which were not only much handier than lighted candles, but were a safety measure in case there was still butane not yet completely dispersed from the workings.

The Superintendent and his companions distributed themselves about the heath so that there was a watcher at each of the opened-up shafts. Laura strolled from one shaft to another and occasionally wandered further afield, identifying those shafts which had not been excavated. There were more than a hundred of these, some showing as bumps, others as hollows.

Laura wanted to be alone and on the move. She had infinite faith in Dame Beatrice, but she felt that, before Alice's innocence in the matter of the release of butane in the flint-mines could be established, her friend might be in for a difficult and unpleasant time with the police. Apart from the merely personal worry and inconvenience of this, it would not do Alice anything but harm professionally. For a teacher employed by a County education authority to be mixed up with the police was tantamount to professional suicide. So Laura tramped about, identifying and scowling at the filled-in shafts, and thought long and bitterly upon Alice's stroke of misfortune.

She was recalled at last by blasts from police whistles, blown at Dame Beatrice's request. Laura made for the sounds at the double, but her heart sank when the Superintendent stated that nothing had been found which threw any fresh light upon the matter in hand.

Laura looked despairingly at Dame Beatrice, but her employer's saurian smile was in evidence and she did not look in the least perturbed or anxious. She merely asked when the site would be thrown open to the public again.

'Ah, now, that,' said the Superintendent, 'is a matter I haven't made up my mind about yet. Anyway, we'll keep it cordoned off for a bit, just to make sure, although the men who went down feel sure that the gases are dispersed. Why, Dame Beatrice, did you fancy having a look for yourself? You're welcome, I'm sure.'

He spoke half-jestingly, but did not seem to be surprised when Dame Beatrice took him at his word and informed him that she would be very glad to avail herself of his offer and that she would go down on the following afternoon.

'I should like a police witness,' she added, 'to remain at the top of the main shaft, in case I find anything of interest.'

‘Including a dead body, ma’am?’

‘Including a dead body, Superintendent.’

‘Ah!’ He stroked his chin. ‘*Including* a dead body. That would seem to infer...’

‘Yes, it would, would it not? Did you ever read the book *Prehistoric Britain* by Jacquetta and Christopher Hawkes?’

‘Can’t say I’ve seen it, ma’am. It would contain something about Pigmy’s Ladder, perhaps?’

‘No, but it certainly contains some very interesting information about prehistoric flint-mines. I recommend it to your notice.’

The Superintendent stared at her fixedly.

‘Thank you, ma’am. I imagine you have some theory about these mines.’

‘It is hardly as concrete, even, as a theory. It is in the nature of a nebulous idea.’

‘And would this idea be obliging enough to communicate itself to me?’

‘You would think it fantastic, perhaps. Now may I take it that there will be no official obstruction to my plan to explore Pigmy’s Ladder tomorrow afternoon?’

‘None at all, Dame Beatrice. If you’ve no objection, I’d be interested to accompany you myself. You’re not very forthcoming, but I can tell you’ve some ideas beyond the finding of a dead body. I’ll stay at the top of the shaft, of course, and let you have a free hand. To tell the truth, I’d be most relieved if you *could* find something which would let Miss Boorman out. I’ve a respect for that young lady’s courage.’

On this happy note they drove back to the city and Dame Beatrice went into the hotel. Laura, who had fallen in love with Nodding, strolled into the Cathedral close and then walked round the cloisters and so into the massive Norman nave by way of the Prior’s Door. The splendid pillars, with their Doric sternness, the Norman arches, chevroned and uncompromisingly grim, the soldierly dignity and gloom, upheld and comforted her. She had been woefully disappointed when the police-search of the flint-mines had been abortive, and even Dame Beatrice’s superb self-confidence had not eased the sense of bitter frustration Laura had felt in the realisation that nothing had happened to release Alice Boorman from the burden of suspicion which had fallen on her; but now, in the calmness and majesty of the great Cathedral, that Ship of God, she found a feeling of tranquillity and safety. Alice was going to be all right. She knew it.

She passed out into the sunshine and walked, by way of The Wattle and the cobble-stoned Deanhill, to Alice's flat, to see Alice coming along the street after having garaged the little car in which she had come from school.

'Any luck?' asked Alice, when they met.

'There will be, tomorrow.' Laura spoke with certainty. 'How did school go?'

'I think people are beginning to avoid me – all except one or two.'

'What's the head's attitude?'

'Guarded. She's not the woman to be unfair, but, naturally, she's not keen on the sort of publicity the school has had over this affair.'

'Can you get me a visitor's admission card to the hospital?'

'I haven't got one.'

'Oh, well, I'll find some way of gate-crashing, then. Can we go in? I want my tea. The air of Breckland is stimulating to the appetite.'

'You can have kippers or sausages.'

'I'd like both, followed by a bag of crisps and an orange. It'll be just like the days of my youth.'

'And while I'm getting it ready and we're having it, you can tell me any news you've gathered.'

'There isn't any, at the moment, but, as I tell you, the fur will fly tomorrow afternoon.'

'Dame Beatrice has said so?'

'She's got one of her famous hunches. The Lestrangle Bradley shirt has been cast over the windmill on your behalf.'

'Oh, Dog, you *are* silly!' said Alice Boorman; but Laura was relieved to hear her laughter. As soon as she had gone off to school on the following morning, Laura strolled along to the *Gauntlet* to have a second and more leisurely breakfast with Dame Beatrice and to receive the orders of the day. They were simple and satisfactory.

'This morning we shall visit the Castle Museum,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I imagine that there will be plans and models there.'

'Of Pigmy's Ladder?'

'Yes. Some detailed knowledge of the extent of the workings will be valuable. Then, I am not averse to making the acquaintance of the curator, so, as soon as you

have finished breakfast, perhaps you would telephone him at the museum and find out at what time he will be prepared to receive us.'

'What reason do I give for wanting to see him?'

'Oh, the true one, I think. Tell him that I am interested in Pigmy's Ladder and have police permission to explore it as I represent the Home Office and am interested in the suggestion that an attempt has been made to commit murder by means of a release of butane down there. Go into no details.'

'Right. Do you mind if I have another cup of coffee?'

'Then, this afternoon, we go to Pigmy's Ladder again.' The appointment with the curator was made for eleven-thirty, 'after he's had his mid-morning snifter' as the graceless Laura translated it, and she and her employer arrived punctually at the entrance after they had climbed the steep ramp from the cobbled street below.

The castle was a tremendous tower-keep of the transitional Norman period and had been refaced, hideously, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in flat, pale-grey stone. It had been modernised, too, in some respects, when it ceased to be the County gaol and became a museum, so that the curator's office was a small, snug room on what was now the ground-floor of the building. This room was just inside, and to the right of, the main entrance.

The custodian of the turnstile through which visitors to the museum were admitted, showed Dame Beatrice and Laura in, and the curator, a tall, alert, grey-haired, blue-eyed man, pushed aside a plan of the workings at Pigmy's Ladder which he had been studying in anticipation of the visit, and rose to welcome them.

'I understand that you are interested in Pigmy's Ladder,' he added, indicating the plan.

'Immensely,' Dame Beatrice replied.

'Well, this shows the whole of the workings so far excavated.'

'Does it include those galleries to which the public are not admitted?'

'Yes. Here is the main shaft by which one gains admission to the workings and these dotted lines show where we have barred off various sections which contain those objects of interest, such as antler picks, blade-bone shovels and miners' lamps, which we left *in situ*. I can show you specimens, of course. We have some in the prehistoric room of the museum. Do you care to come along?'

'Laura, no doubt, will be most interested. I am fascinated by this plan and shall be glad of an opportunity to study it.'

So Laura went off to the prehistoric room, which proved to be part of what had been the Great Hall of the castle, and Dame Beatrice took out her notebook and made a quick but accurate sketch of the ancient workings. It was a simple task. From the main shaft seven galleries branched off and were open to the public for about thirty feet of their length. In the case of three of them, the end was barred by untouched walls of chalk, and the other four were sealed off by falls of boulder clay and sand. In no case did one gallery open into another, although three were of a dog's-leg pattern which would lend interest to their exploration.

Inset at the top right-hand corner of the plan was the section-drawing of a typical shaft. It showed a layer of sand, some three feet deep, at the surface; beneath this were five feet of boulder clay and then a layer of unwanted top-stone flints. Beneath this lay eleven or twelve feet of chalk, topping the so-called wall-stone flints. Another five feet of chalk covered the black, floor-stone flints which had been the objective of the little Neolithic men who had worked the mines some thirty-nine hundred years before. It was at this floor-stone level, therefore, that the galleries branched off at the foot of the main shaft.

It occurred to Dame Beatrice that exploration of all the galleries marked on the plan would be an undertaking of some magnitude and certainly could not be accomplished in a single afternoon. Having completed her copy of the plottings and marked the compass directions, she went in search of the curator and Laura and found them studying a model of the galleries. This was in a large show-case in the middle of the hall. She showed the curator her copy of the plan and asked permission to use it.

‘And there is something else,’ she said. ‘I shall be visiting the flint-mines this afternoon. I want to have the artificial barriers removed so that I may explore as much of the galleries as the archaeological society have excavated.’

‘That should not be difficult. The area has been under police control since those two young women were brought out, and the Superintendent rang me and told me that he was prepared to grant you facilities not available to the general public and asked me to co-operate. I am, as you may or may not know, president of the Nodding Archaeological Society. The best plan will be to open up one tunnel at a time, so that you do not get lost, I should think. Which of the galleries do you propose to tackle first? – or is it immaterial?’

‘It is not immaterial at all, but I cannot tell you which part I wish to take first until I get there.’

‘You cannot tell from the plan? You realise, I see, that there are two sets of blockings, our own and those from fallen rock.’ He studied the sketch-plan which she had made.

‘Yes.’ She paused, and then made up her mind. ‘I will not make a mystery of it. The fact is that I have a feeling that one of those artificial barriers has been removed and then replaced.’

‘Really? But that could only be done with the connivance and assistance of a member of the archaeological society, I imagine. What made you think of such a thing, I wonder?’

‘The accident to those two young women who were almost asphyxiated down there. You see, they could not possibly have been the intended victims.’

‘Victims? Good gracious me! I confess I do not pretend to understand you.’

‘How have the barriers been formed? – the artificial ones.’

‘Those barriers consist of thin walls of dry-stone and could be removed easily enough, I suppose, and rebuilt equally easily. I myself was present at all the excavations, as president of the Society, and it was at my instigation that the dry-stone walling was put up for the safety of the public, and to block off a discovery which caused much controversy.’

‘Have you ever had cause to remove any of the dry-stone walling yourselves? – officially, so to speak?’

‘No, as it happens, we have not. We rather expected foreign *savants* to visit our mines after we had published our findings; however, as similar sites are known not only along the chalk belt from Sussex up to Norfolk, but also in southern Sweden, Sicily, Poland, Portugal, northern France and parts of Belgium, as well as in other parts of the world, nobody outside England seems to have bothered about Pigmy’s Ladder, especially as the famous Grimes Graves are comparatively near at hand.’

‘Just one more question, if you will. Would you know whether a barrier had been taken down and rebuilt? It would save me a great deal of time this afternoon if that could be established. You mentioned dry-stone walling. Would there be any means of deciding whether another hand had been at work on it after its original construction by order of your Society?’

‘I could not undertake to say, but I know the man who can help you if anybody can, and that’s the fellow who did the job for us. He’s from the Cotswolds and is an expert. He now works for the Council, so I can have him seconded to you, I am

perfectly sure. I'll get on to the Town Hall right away. In return...' he smiled apologetically at her... 'you might tell me what your *real* object is.'

'I expect to find a dead body walled up in Pigmy's Ladder.'

'A dead body –*walled up*? Good gracious me! It sounds like one of those horrid old-wives' tales about monasteries!'

'Oh, yes, it does, but I assure you that there is no connection. Tell me, does this dry-stone walling permit air to circulate?'

'Oh, certainly, otherwise, you see, we might get firedamp forming. The walls are so constructed that there is an air-space between every two or three stones.'

'Good. I thought that must be the case, but it is well to have it confirmed. That would account for the way the butane escaped from what I may call the lethal chamber and seeped into those workings which are open to the public. That is how the two young women were affected.'

'I will not make any mention of what you have just told me, Dame Beatrice, but, to satisfy my own curiosity, may I ask *why* you expect to find a dead body in one of the sealed-off galleries?'

'It is the only explanation that makes sense. My conclusion is that the butane was released in order that murder might be committed, and it seems to me certain that murder *has* been committed. Had I been on the spot when the two girls were brought to the surface, this third life might possibly have been saved, but after a lapse of several days that would have been impossible.'

'But how would the murderer have enticed his victim to such a place? And who could the murderer be? We're not like that in Nodding.'

'That is what (if I am right) we have to discover. By the way, I think it fair to inform you that the likeliest suspects are the members of your Society, or, possibly, their friends and relatives.'

'The archaeological society?'

'Consider the facts.'

'I see what you mean, of course. The murderer, if there *is* one, knew enough about the workings to know that it would not be a difficult matter to remove part of the dry-stone walling and replace it after he had committed his crime. All the same, a member of the public *could* have made such a discovery, I suppose.'

'By the way, are any of the members missing?'

‘Not so far as I know. Are you suggesting a situation of dog eats dog? That would be an intolerable thought.’ He looked at his watch. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll ring up the Town Hall, otherwise Kingston will have gone to lunch and I shan’t catch him to get him to lend Chipping to you.’

Dame Beatrice and Laura waited to receive the assurance that Chipping, the dry-stone expert from the Cotswolds, would be available at two-thirty that afternoon, and then went back to the *Gauntlet* for lunch.

As soon as lunch was over, George, Dame Beatrice’s admirable chauffeur, drove her and Laura to the Town Hall to pick up the knowledgeable Chipping and then the car set out for Pigmy’s Ladder, and Chipping, upon arrival at the flint-mines, went down with a powerful electric torch. He was escorted by a policeman and they were gone for an hour and a quarter, while Dame Beatrice sat in the car. George, and a couple of policemen from the guard-duty rota, stood at the top of the main shaft, and Laura poked about on the heath.

Chipping emerged, greasily chalky from wriggling along the narrow galleries and nodded at George and the policemen. George suggested that he should convey his findings to Dame Beatrice, so he went over to the car, which was parked near the warden’s hut at the entrance to the enclosure, and informed her that Number Five wall had been tampered with.

‘Her’s put back, but her ent put back right.’

Dame Beatrice produced her plan and the man marked Number Five with the pencil she gave him.

‘Now,’ she said, getting out of the car, ‘take me to the spot above ground which would be over this walling.’

He led the way, and Laura, who had been keeping within distance in order not to miss anything of interest, came galloping up. The man stopped, lay down on the heath and put his ear to the ground.

‘Her’s right below me here.’

‘How do you know? Did you pace it?’ asked Laura. The man rose stiffly to his feet.

‘No, mam. I guesses, and when I thinks I’m about there I lays down and listens.’

‘What for?’

‘To hear her breathing. They walls breathes because of the holes in ’em. Hear ‘em plain, you can, if you understands ’em.’

Laura found this difficult to believe, but she knew better than to question the word of *anaficionado*, so she said,

‘Really? That’s very interesting.’

‘Now,’ said Dame Beatrice briskly, ‘I want Number Five walling taken down. Can you manage it single-handed, Mr Chipping?’

‘Take me some time, mam, but it’s got to be done single-handed owing to the narrow tunnels and them being not much higher than a fox’s den.’

‘What length of time do you consider necessary? Would it be better to wait until tomorrow morning?’

‘That’s onnecessary. Number Five ent more nor four feet acrost. Say a couple of hours to clear her. I’ll have to bring every stone back to the main shaft, you see. No room to stack ’em otherwise.’

‘Would it help to have a couple of men behind you so that you could pass the stones back from one to another?’

‘Ah, that’s a very good idea. That ’ud save time, wouldn’t it?’ (It would also make certain that he was kept under supervision, Dame Beatrice thought).

The two policemen had no objection to assisting in the manner suggested, and Laura, who was determined to be included in the proceedings, volunteered to do the stacking at the bottom of the main shaft, which was very roughly circular and, at its widest, about fifteen feet across.

Thus shared, the labour took considerably less time than Chipping had estimated. Then the party, led by Laura, who was nearest the ladder, emerged, and Chipping, coming last, made his report. Dame Beatrice had warned him of what he might find, and he had found it.

‘That be Mr Breydon-Waters, as was as clever as a parson, and now as dead as a nail in his own coffin, mam. Knowing what you told me afore I went down, I didn’t touch un, but that’s who it is, all right, and three small cylinders of calor gas a-laying there beside him.’

‘I should wish to go down,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘How about it, Superintendent? You said that you would not obstruct me.’

The Superintendent tilted his hat to the back of his head.

‘I never really bargain for you being wholly right about the body being down there,’ he said. ‘But I’ll stick to what I said if you’ll agree to me going down with you. Ames,’ he added, turning to one of the constables, ‘get over to the hut and use

the chap's telephone to get on to our doctor and the rest of the mob. I reckon it's a suicide, but it doesn't do to take chances, so we'll photograph him and take prints from the cylinders, just to make sure.'

'A nice job you'll have, photographing him in they little old galleries,' said Chipping.

Dame Beatrice, taking back the powerful torch with which she had supplied Chipping, descended the almost vertical iron ladder backwards and disappeared from view. She was small, thin and agile enough to make fairly good time past the stacked drystone walling, now reduced to a number of rough blocks in the main opening, and she reached the body well ahead of the powerfully built Superintendent, who had followed her down the shaft.

The body was lying face-downwards and a very brief examination made it clear that the butane had been a subsidiary cause of death. The murderer had taken no chances. The victim had received a vicious blow on the back of the head. The wound had bled freely. The man's shirt – he was without a jacket – was stiff with blood and his hair was matted with it.

Dame Beatrice flashed her torch around the ghostly walls of chalk, rough with nodules of flint. By the side of the body, partly on a rough shelf of chalk and partly on the floor of the flint-mine, was a very primitive fertility shrine.

'Well, whatever interested you down here, it was hardly that,' she thought, glancing at the goddess but apostrophising the body, 'for you had almost crawled past it when you were struck down. What *were* you after, then, I wonder? – and who followed you into this eerie place in order to kill you?'

She flashed her torch again and then, finding room for the Superintendent to join her, for the dead man was lying at the foot of a seven-foot shaft, she made way for him to see the body. The Superintendent, using his own torch, made a cursory inspection and then grunted.

'How right you were, madam,' he said. 'It's murder. He'd been dragged forward clear of the wall, too. See the marks? The doctor'll have to see him in the mortuary, I reckon. He can't very well examine him down here.'

CHAPTER THREE

Nodding Acquaintances

‘Life’s night begins: let him never come back to us!
There would be doubt, hesitation and pain,
Forced praise on our part – the glimmer of twilight,
Never glad confident morning again!’

Robert
Browning

On adjournment of the inquest upon the remains of Oliver George Roskde Breydon-Waters followed the formal identification of the body, the report of how it had come to be found at Pigmy’s Ladder, and the medical evidence. Incidentally, there were no fingerprints on the cylinders.

‘One of life’s little ironies again,’ said Laura, commenting upon this last item as she and Dame Beatrice left the coroner’s court.

‘What is?’ asked Alice, who met them outside for lunch.

‘That what will settle the murder’s hash is that entirely unnecessary business of the calor gas. The other doctors and Mrs Croc. are agreed that a knock on the head killed this Breydon-Waters and that the calor gas was redundant, yet it was only the calor gas, with its unfortunate effect upon your two r-r-rivals, which brought Mrs Croc. and me galloping to the rescue. If the murderer hadn’t used the butane, the body could have remained safely entombed until the Judgment Day, so far as I can see.’

‘The man would have been missed and a search made.’

‘Yes, no doubt, but who was going to think of searching a walled-up bit of Pigmy’s Ladder?’

‘I see what you mean, Dog, but, as he was a member of the archaeological society, somebody would have thought of it sooner or later, don’t you think?’

‘Probably a good deal later,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘It was put about that he had gone to Palestine.’

‘I wonder who spread that report?’ said Laura. ‘If the police could find that out, they’d have their murderer, I should imagine.’

‘I suppose,’ said Alice, ‘that, now I’m cleared, you two will go back to Wandles Parva.’

‘By no means,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘My curiosity has been aroused by this unusual case and I should like to be on the spot to see what line the police are

going to take. There are points of great interest about this crime. The place in which the victim was killed, the use of butane, and the supposition, amounting almost to certainty, that the murderer is a member of the archaeological society, all combine to make up a fascinating problem of which I feel I must learn the solution.'

'Oh, good!' said Laura. 'I'll pop down to the vicarage and secure possession of my son to relieve Mrs Pierce of what must be, by now, an intolerable burden, and transfer myself to the *Gauntlet*. Hamish adores hotels and is apt to be rather less of a fiend in them than elsewhere.'

'I'd love to look after Hamish in my flat,' said Alice, 'but the landlord has a prejudice against dogs and children and, anyway, I haven't a third bed. You'll keep in touch with me, though, won't you? Apart from liking your company, I'm naturally rather interested in the case, too.'

'I bet you are,' Laura agreed. 'And you surely don't suppose I could live in the same town as you and *not* keep in touch, do you? Close touch, at that.'

'Fine. Well, today being Saturday and tomorrow Sunday, what about my coming down to Wandles with you? I could drive you there and back, and that would leave Dame Beatrice the use of her own car, with George to drive her about.'

This plan was adopted, and on Sunday evening, just in time for the hotel dinner, Laura and Alice, with the small Hamish, returned to Nodding. Hamish, who had slept during a considerable part of the journey, insisted upon being allowed to join the party at table, and rapidly and expertly consumed thick soup, a portion of *solebonne femme* and *atournedos* with French fried potatoes. He then demanded ice-cream and got it.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Alice, fascinated by the way the six-year-old cleared his plate. 'Is it really all right for him to have all that at this time of night?'

'Yes,' said Hamish, nodding vigorously, polishing off the last of the ice-cream and helping himself to an apple. 'It is really all right. I will soon be as big as Daddy. Bigger than Daddy,' he added, as an afterthought, 'and I won't ever clean my teeth.' He stared aggressively at his mother.

'All right,' said Laura, indifferently. 'Pity they should all drop out, because then you won't ever be able to eat steak again.'

Hamish thought deeply as he bit cleanly into the apple. 'I will clean my teeth whenever there is steak,' he stated. On the following morning Dame Beatrice paid another visit to the castle museum. Her object this time was to obtain a list of the names and addresses of the members of the Nodding and District Archaeological

Society. Upon her enquiring whether there was such a list, the attendant on duty at the turnstile, remembering her former visit and her reception by the curator, produced one and offered no objection when she copied the names and addresses into her notebook. She then returned to the hotel to study the information she had obtained.

There appeared to be fifteen full members still alive. The curator's name was Ronald Downing and he was, as she already knew, president of the society. His son Peter was also a member. The secretary was someone called David Gold. He had a son named Michael, who was a member too. Then there was Philip Carfrae, the treasurer, whose name was followed by that of a daughter. The other members were Terence Vindella, Francis Bell, Samuel Brent, James Chipping (the expert whom Dame Beatrice had already met and who was listed as an honorary member only), Harry Glover, Albert Sansfoy, William Streatley, Miss Priscilla Clarke and Mrs Constance Rambeau.

Dame Beatrice's next concern was to obtain a street map of Nodding in order to find out where these people lived. In the case of the two women, the address was Winstone Park, a caravan site which was not marked on the map and to which she would have to be directed. Albert Sansfoy, it proved later, also occupied a caravan, but the site was at the end of a road, and although the name of the road and a 'house' number gave no clue to the type of dwelling, it was easy enough to find where the Sansfoys lived.

Except in the cases of the curator and of the dead man, who, as she had learned at the inquest, had been a schoolmaster, there was nothing on the list to indicate the trade, profession or vocation of any of the members. She would have supposed them to be members of the professional classes, with a complement of artists, perhaps, except that she already knew that Brent and Chipping were employed as wage-earners at the museum and the Town Hall respectively. Judging from the map, Albert Sansfoy's home did not appear to be in the most fashionable part of the residential quarter, but that need have no particular significance. People lived where they could. She made up her mind to visit him first.

She had already suggested to the Superintendent that she should make some semi-official enquiries into Breydon-Waters' death in the flint-mines, and that enlightened and painstaking officer had agreed that she might obtain evidence other than that which would be gained by the police.

'There aren't many families who have nothing to hide from us,' he had said, out of the depths of a vast experience, 'and they're afraid of giving themselves away. A touch of tax-dodging, a bit missing out of the till, or a second little nest with a bird

in it, are quite enough to shut their mouths, even though they know we're after something quite different. So do you go right ahead, ma'am, and get what you can. You'll let us have anything which appertain, of course.'

'What about me?' asked Laura, when she was apprised of Dame Beatrice's plan to visit Albert Sansfoy. 'Do I go with you?'

'I would prefer to go alone, at any rate for the first time,' Dame Beatrice replied. 'Later on I may need you. Mr Breydon-Waters was a school-master, it appears, and, as Miss Boorman is a school-mistress and you yourself were trained for the profession, both of you may be extremely helpful at some future time.'

Laura gracefully accepted this ruling, and Dame Beatrice had George, the chauffeur, drive her to the Sansfoys' address. It lay in what was virtually a suburb of the city at the foot of a long, winding incline which ended on the caravan site. Here the Sansfoys lived in a small van, third along a line of others. It was a permanent camp, and each family had marked out an area of the rough grass, dug it up, and cultivated some of it, for flowers bloomed and there were small patches of potatoes and beans. The address of the site was that of the long, winding road down which Dame Beatrice had driven, and each caravan was numbered by having a metal label pegged on to the grass in front of it.

Beside the Sansfoys' home a young woman was playing at ball with a small child. Dame Beatrice enquired for Mr Albert Sansfoy and learned that the young woman was his wife.

'Bert's on duty. He's a bus driver,' she said. 'Did you want him specially?' She looked with polite but obvious curiosity at the Jaguar, at the impeccable George and at the elderly and startlingly-dressed visitor.

'I did want to see him, yes,' this visitor replied. 'It is about the archaeological society.'

'Come in, then, please. Maybe I can tell you what you want to know.'

'In order to avoid any semblance of entering your home under false pretences, I must tell you that I am working with the police.'

'Oh, yes? Well, Bert's got nothing to hide, I'm sure, and neither haven't I. It's about that gentleman that died in Pigmy's Ladder, I suppose?'

'It is, indeed.'

'The police have been here, of course, and they ask Bert and me a lot of questions, but we couldn't help them. They were very nosey about the gas we use for cooking.'

‘Calor gas?’

‘That’s right. But, as I tell ’em, everybody use it around the vans, not one more than another.’

‘What persuaded your husband to join the archaeological society?’ Dame Beatrice asked, after she had been ushered into the van. It appeared that his interest had been aroused by his history master when he was a boy at school.

‘Mr Timberley used to take the boys out and about,’ Mrs Sansfoy explained. ‘Old churches, which we have plenty of around here, and things Rooman and the castle museum. That take his boys everywhere, and explain it to them.’

‘Admirable. How long ago would this have been?’

‘My Bert, that’s twenty-seven this last March. He leave school at fifteen and a-half.’

‘And how long has he been a member of the society?’

‘Oo, since that leave school. Mr Timberley was a member and he recommend Bert to them and pay his first year’s subscription, and Bert, that never lose interest.’

‘But Mr Timberley himself is no longer a member, I notice. How is that?’

‘That move away north to be headmaster.’

‘Oh, yes, I see. One more question, if you will be so good. I am working with the police, as I told you. We have to discover who is responsible for Mr Breydon-Waters’ death. Have they asked your husband about any enmities, rivalries or quarrels among the members?’

‘They ask that very particular, but Bert didn’t know of anything. That wouldn’t, perhaps, though, unless it concern Sam Brent or Jimmy Chipping. The rest are different – school-teachers and bankers and such-like, and Mr Streatley with the money that cover the cost of digging and that.’

‘Has your husband expressed any opinions about Mr Breydon-Waters’ death?’

‘That was fairly knocked back about it. Can’t understand it at all. Can’t understand why anybody in the Society should have been in Pigmy’s Ladder at that time. There isn’t anything new to see there. There’s nothing that hasn’t been found out already, so Bert say.’

‘Can you tell me when I shall be able to find your husband at home?’

‘That’s on early mornings from tomorrow, so he knock off in the middle of the day and go on again after tea.’

‘Will you tell him to expect me at three o’clock tomorrow? I shall not take up much of his time.’

‘I’ll tell him,’ said Mrs Sansfoy, ‘but I doubt whether that listen. Head in the clouds except when he’s driving his bus.’

‘He had no personal reason for disliking Mr Breydon-Waters, I take it?’

Mrs Sansfoy looked at her.

‘I wouldn’t be the one to say so, even if he have,’ she said. ‘You’d better go for to ask him that yourself.’

Dame Beatrice nodded – and waited. There was a silence which was broken by the small child, who climbed up the steps into the caravan and demanded cake.

‘One thing I can say, and no particular harm done,’ said Mrs Sansfoy suddenly. ‘If Bert dislike Mr Breydon-Waters, there are others that dislike him more than Bert have.’

Dame Beatrice went off to talk to Sam Brent, the attendant at the Castle Museum. As she had already met Sam and weighed him up, she expected little from the interview, but Mrs Sansfoy had given her one extremely important lead and she was interested in following it up. It was that some, if not all, of the members of the Nodding Archaeological Society had had reasons for disliking the dead man. There was a clue here. People, in Dame Beatrice’s experience, were seldom disliked irrationally. She put this point of view to Brent.

‘Folks don’t dislike folks without a reason?’ said Sam. ‘Well, I don’t know so much about that, ma’am. I’m bound to say it don’t always seem to work out that way. My old woman seem to take dislikes I never account for.’

‘But in this particular case, Mr Brent?’

‘Ah, well, there I think you have me. He was not well liked, not Mr Breydon-Waters.’

‘For any particular reason?’

‘Nobody like little lords of creation.’

‘You mean that he was snobbish?’

‘Ah, very vainglorious that were.’

‘Had he any reason to feel himself superior to others?’

‘That I couldn’t say, ma’am. I’m not one to argue. What did you want to know?’

‘I want to know the names of those who disliked Mr Breydon-Waters. I gather that you yourself were among their number.’

‘Not sufficient to do him in.’

‘Had you any reason for disliking him, apart from his manner?’

‘Ah,’ said Brent, thoughtfully, ‘there I can’t see how to answer you. I have nothing against him, mind you, nothing at all, except the way he lord it. Besides, I don’t like people with fancy names.’

‘Do you call “Breydon-Waters” a fancy name?’

‘I do, that.’

‘What is wrong with it?’

‘Nobody need two names. That could be Breydon or that could be Waters. No reason for both.’

‘Possibly he had to accept the two names in order to inherit property. That sometimes happens, you know.’

‘To tell you the truth, ma’am, I often think neither was his proper name.’

‘That is a most intriguing suggestion. Do you base it on surmise or actual knowledge?’

‘Neither. I have time to *think* when I’m on this job. Sometimes this old museum is as quiet as quiet, and that’s when I do my thinking. Come you on over here.’

He led her along a passage and so to a small room hung with maps. They ranged from a very rare plan of Nodding in the sixteenth century to a modern six-inch Ordnance map of the city. Brent ignored both these and went up to a once-inch map.

‘You know the Norfolk Broads, ma’am?’

‘I know something of them, yes, but not as much as my secretary does.’

‘No matter. Look you here.’ His thick forefinger planted itself triumphantly on Great Yarmouth. ‘How do you read the words on this great piece of blue that run into Yarmouth, where the bloaters come from?’

‘Breydon Water. I take your point, but it may be nothing more than coincidence, you know. Take your own name, for example.’

‘Brent wouldn’t be a name on a map?’

‘Would it surprise you to know that a tributary of the Thames, partly canalised, ends at the county town of Middlesex and is called the Brent?’

Brent stared at her and then laughed.

‘You have me very neat there, ma’am, I’m bound to declare.’

‘Nevertheless,’ conceded Dame Beatrice, ‘on my side I am bound to admit that, to my mind, the likelihood that anybody would possess the name of Breydon-Waters is considerably less than the likelihood of your being called Brent, so I think you have established your point. But surely you had other reasons for disliking this murdered man?’

‘If I had, it was nothing I could put in words, ma’am. *Doctor Fell*, that about meet the case, I believe.’

Dame Beatrice went to his office in the museum to harry the curator. Ronald Downing received her courteously, but seemed surprised to see her.

‘Do I understand that Mr Breydon-Waters was an unpopular member of the archaeological society?’ she asked.

‘Unpopular? Well, I can hardly say that, but we are a mixed body, you will agree – very mixed. It is a good thing, that, I feel,’ Mr Downing replied. He remained frowning in thought.

‘Who killed Mr Breydon-Waters?’ Dame Beatrice suddenly demanded.

‘Really, Dame Beatrice! What an extraordinary question!’

‘Yes, yes. But who did? You must know.’

‘Well,’ said the curator, acknowledging *force majeure*, ‘I don’t really *know*, and to guess, of course, would be most unfair and possibly most misleading. This much I can say: he was a rather snobbish man, and that may have accounted for his lack of popularity. Then, again, I always had a feeling that he was a member of our Society for what he could get out of us.’

‘And that was?’

‘Goodness knows! In Wales they can mine gold, but here, in East Anglia, I don’t see what anybody can get – except flints. And worked flints may have archaeological value, but commercially they have very little worth unless you have enough of them to build a house or a church.’

‘People speak of a heart of flint.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that about him, Dame Beatrice. Breydon-Waters was rather a sentimental man, I should have thought.’

‘In what way sentimental? Over people?’

‘Oh, no. He was rather selfish where people were concerned, and often made rather unkind fun at their expense. I would say that his was the nostalgic type of sentimentality.’

‘Please explain what you mean by that.’

‘Well, he loved to return to sites we had excavated. He was very secretive about it, too. I found out only by accident. I realised that I had not sent him details of one of our excursions, so went to his lodgings to apologise and give him the information by word of mouth. But his landlady told me that he was out and had taken sandwiches and a thermos flask, as he expected to be “at the barrow, whatever that means, sir,” for most of the day. So I drove to the disc barrow we had excavated earlier in the season, and there he was.’

‘What was he doing?’

‘Nothing. He was seated on the grass just gazing at the barrow. He was not very pleased to see me, so I gave him my message and was preparing to leave when he altered completely, became very expansive and friendly and ended by asking me for a lift home. In the car he explained that he had an obsession which compelled him to re-visit sites he had helped to excavate. He also said one thing which has come startlingly, terribly true. He laughed and told me that he would probably die in one of our excavations.’

‘But your members were not the original excavators of Pigmy’s Ladder, were they?’

‘No, but we did a good deal of work there in 1951, the summer of the Festival. We opened up three more shafts and explored several galleries which earlier digs had left blocked up. The flint-miners used to dump the excavated chalk in the shafts they’d worked clean, you know.’

There seemed nothing more to be gained from the interview, so Dame Beatrice returned to the hotel for lunch and at three o’clock was driven back to the caravan home of Albert Sansfoy. She found the bus driver in placid enjoyment of a pipe and a deckchair in the strip marked out as his garden.

‘Ah, Mr Sansfoy,’ she said.

‘Best talk inside the van. Too many ears on elastic around here,’ said Albert. He was a large, sad young man with a small moustache and what appeared to be a perpetual frown. ‘You’ve come about Mr Breydon-Waters. You’re from the police.’ He helped her up the steps of the caravan by placing a hand in the small of her back. Mrs Sansfoy was washing dishes in the tiny galley or scullery. A small

cylinder of calor gas was on one of the seats in the living-room. Albert glanced at it indifferently and then moved it on to the floor.

‘I came to see you this morning,’ said Dame Beatrice, taking the seat he offered her, ‘and your wife thought that you might spare me a few minutes when you came off duty. We are checking on all the people who knew Mr Breydon-Waters in the hope of obtaining a pointer towards the reason for his death. We are particularly interested in those of his acquaintance who habitually use calor gas.’

‘Ah,’ said Albert, ‘that would bring in a very fair number of people, I reckon.’ He seemed to ignore the implication so far as he himself was concerned.

‘Splendid. This is going to be very helpful, I hope. Please tell me more. Do you mind if I write down your information.’

‘I don’t see how you remember it if you do not. Well, there’s me with my van and there’s Miss Clarke and Mrs Rambeau with theirs...’

‘Their permanent home?’

‘Yes, they live in it. Then Mr Breydon-Waters and his school-master friend Mr Vindella, they run a motor-cruiser berthed at Wroxham and use calor gas for cooking, same as we do; then Mr Bell have a sailing dinghy and that carry a small calor gas cooking stove for picnicking on the bank, and Mr Carfrae live in a houseboat most weekends. That’s moored at Heigham, back of the bridge and do not move. That use calor gas for cooking, too. Lastly, there’s Mr Downing himself that spend most of his holidays in a hired van and tour Scotland, towed.’

‘Thank you very much, Mr Sansfoy. You appear to have it off pat.’

Albert’s moody face relaxed. He almost smiled. Into his small eyes came a gleam of something resembling amusement.

‘When mother tell me you would be coming, I put two and two together and get ready,’ he said. ‘The gas didn’t kill Mr Breydon-Waters because he’d been bumped on the head first, so I hear, but that might have done, and I wasn’t intending to have you think I was the only interested party to use it. Spread the load, I reckon.’

‘True East Anglian shrewdness,’ said Dame Beatrice appreciatively. She had met this quality before. ‘Tell me, Mr Sansfoy, what you yourself thought of Mr Breydon-Waters.’

‘Stick my neck out far enough, might get my head knocked off.’ He would say no more; neither was it necessary that he should.

CHAPTER FOUR

Friends and Other Noddors

‘O differing Pair, yet sweetly thus agreeing,
What music from your happy discord rises...
This lesson teaching, which our souls may strike,
That harmonies may be in things unlike.’

Charles
Lamb

HE victim of the next interview was Mr Terence Vindella, who had the double distinction, if Albert Sansfoy’s evidence was correct, of having been friend to Breydon-Waters and co-owner of a cabin cruiser with him.

Vindella was a bachelor. He lived with his mother in a bungalow on the London road, about eight miles outside Nodding, and went to his work each day by car. The bungalow was on the telephone, and, in response to a call by Dame Beatrice, Mrs Vindella guaranteed that her son would be in ‘soon after six, as he stays for cricket.’ Dame Beatrice supposed that he would want a meal when he arrived home, and it was arranged that she should call at eight o’clock. She made no secret of her business with Vindella or of her connection with the police, but the mother seemed unperturbed.

‘That’s quite all right,’ she insisted upon repeating. ‘That’s quite all right, really it is.’

Thus reassured, Dame Beatrice turned up punctually and was admitted by a black-haired, blue-eyed man with a blue-black Irish jowl and a pleasant smile. He conducted her to the living-room of the small bungalow and presented his mother, a woman of about sixty.

‘Do sit down, please,’ said Mrs Vindella. ‘I’ve made the coffee. You *will* have a cup, won’t you? – and then I’ll leave you to talk to Terence.’

Terence was not loth to talk. As soon as he had closed the door behind his mother and the tray, he settled himself, gave an extra hitch to the knees of his trousers and looked eagerly at Dame Beatrice.

‘The police told me to expect you,’ he said. ‘They don’t seem to be getting anywhere. What do *you* think about poor old Bill Breydon?’

‘Bill Breydon?’

‘You can’t go through life calling a man Oliver Breydon-Waters.’

‘When you speak of going through life, how long does that mean? In other words, how long had you known Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘Since 1953, when I was appointed to my present job.’

‘And that is?’

‘Junior history master.’

‘And am I right in assuming that Mr Breydon-Waters was also a history specialist?’

‘Geography. Joined the Staff same term as I did. My senior is an old chap named Carthews.’

‘And you and Mr Breydon-Waters joined the archaeological society at the same time?’

‘More or less. You know what schools are like in these days, I suppose? One’s expected to show willing in all sorts of ways.’

‘You refer, of course, to out-of-school activities.’

‘Yes. I do the cricket with a man named Kent, and then, history being my subject, it was understood that I should join the archaeological society.’

‘Under pressure, as it were?’

‘I suppose I could have refused, but, somehow, one doesn’t – not with our Old Man. You haven’t met him, have you?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Oily old devil, but you find yourself knuckling under.’

‘On your boat you used calor gas for cooking, I take it?’

‘As I’ve already told the police, yes, of course we did. But it wasn’t the calor gas which did for old Bill. It was the knock on the head.’

‘Agreed. But the murderer did not know that – or so it is thought. Can you offer any explanation of the murder, Mr Vindella?’

‘No, I can’t, although I’m bound to say that Bill wasn’t a popular chap. I’m probably the only person who got on with him reasonably well.’

‘Can you explain that?’

‘Oh, I think so – both ways. He wasn’t popular because he was stand-offish and self-centred. When he wanted something he usually got it, and not always – in fact, not often – in a straightforward way. He was a dodgy little customer, actually. I got on with him because he was a yellow.’

‘A yellow? Cowardly?’

‘That’s it. Early on, I had a row with him, and at the end of it, instead of using the staff-room technique of ignoring him, I offered to paste him on the wall. He didn’t like that much. He caved in, and I had no more trouble.’

‘So you would scarcely call yours a perfect friendship?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. We got on pretty well after that. He was pretty good in boats, too.’

‘Had you acquired the cruiser before or after this *contretemps*?’

‘Oh, a long time after. We’ve only had the *Beri-Beria* couple of years.’

‘A curious name for a boat.’

‘Well, Bill wanted to call her the *Yellow Peril*, but I didn’t care much about that. As I said, he was yellow himself, and, as I’d quite got to like him, so long as he behaved himself, I didn’t want to be reminded all the time that there wasn’t really much there to admire – except his brains, of course.’

‘You rate physical courage very highly, Mr Vindella?’

‘I don’t think I’d say that, exactly. I just think men ought to have enough of it to stick up for themselves and take a hiding without hollering if it’s coming to them.’

‘And it would have come to fisticuffs if Mr Breydon-Waters had defied you?’

Vindella grinned disarmingly.

‘I doubt it,’ he said. ‘It would have meant the axe for me, you see, and I couldn’t afford to be chucked out on the strength of being a brawler. I’d have had trouble in getting another job.’

‘With the present shortage of teachers?’

Apparently no answer was needed. At any rate, Vindella produced none. He said, ‘I wish there was something I could tell you which would help. You see, having established this half-nelson on poor old Bill, I looked upon him as a sort of protégé, if you know what I mean.’

‘You didn’t really despise him?’

‘Not despise him – oh, no. He was a brainy sort of chap, as I said – tons brighter than I am – and we used to work our two subjects together. Social studies, we called it. Gave us more rope. Of course, neither of us got a smell of any Sixth-Form work, or even a cut at the G.C.E. “O” level lads, so we had to amuse ourselves as best we could. I’m not grouching. I’m Emergency Trained. Came out of the Fleet Air Arm and couldn’t settle to anything, so I thought I’d take a crack at teaching. Of course, we’re not a Grammar School, but we’re on the up-and-up all right. Boys stay until they’re seventeen, sometimes eighteen, and our exam. results are pretty good. We do well at games, too. Oh, the Old Man’s a slippery old so-and-so all right, but he gets there. The discipline’s pretty easy, too. There’s a tradition of steady work, with good jobs at the end of it, and, of course, the chaps like winning their inter-school matches. That helps a lot.’

‘Is your school near that at which a young friend of mine, Miss Boorman, teaches?’

‘Our opposite number. There was some idea of mixing the two schools, as we’re really all in the same building, but, so far, it’s come to nothing, thank goodness.’

‘So Miss Boorman could have known Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘I doubt very much whether she did. Our Old Man doesn’t encourage fraternisation. Thinks it takes our minds off our work and is a bad example to the boys.’

‘Is your head-master a married man?’

‘And a harried one. That’s why he makes himself a little tin god at school.’

This aspect of teacher-psychology was not new to Dame Beatrice. She nodded. Her next question puzzled Vindella.

‘Would you call Mr Breydon-Waters a secretive man?’ she asked.

‘Secretive? *The Cat Who Walked by Himself*? No, I don’t think that hits him off. He wasn’t the independent type, although I believe he’d been abroad quite a bit. That’s why he took the geography. He hadn’t been a teacher all his life. He was E.T., like me.’

‘Was he capable of carrying out some carefully thought-out plan without telling anyone what he proposed to do?’

‘I suppose we’re all capable of that sort of thing, old Bill more than most of us, perhaps.’

‘You said that he was a reliable person on a boat?’

‘In my experience, he certainly had a lot of know-how, but, of course, we never ran into anything hot. Just cruised the Ant and the Bure and messed about on the Broads with an occasional trip as far as Great Yarmouth. I couldn’t say what he would have been like in a tight place. Because a fellow doesn’t like a punch on the nose, it doesn’t follow that he’d go into a flap in a thunderstorm, though, does it? He once told me he’d cruised all round Greece.’ Dame Beatrice conceded the point.

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘Take the dentist’s chair, for example.’

Vindella grinned, exposing a front tooth which blatantly called for expert attention.

‘*Touché*,’ he said. ‘We all have an Achilles’ heel, I expect.’

‘Whose idea was it to purchase the cruiser?’

‘I don’t really know. We used to hire one at weekends and then it seemed a good idea to have our own.’

‘How did you discover that you both liked to spend your leisure on the rivers and the Broads?’

‘Oh, that’s an easy one. We did a school outing on one of the big launches and got talking about boats. It was a good outing. Combined history and geography was what we put on the official form, but actually we were brownd off with classroom work. The exams were over, the lads were restless, and it appeared to us that a jaunt was absolutely called for, so we picked a day when neither of us had a free period – very popular *that* made us, but we didn’t give a hoot who did our work, so long as we didn’t have to – and off we went by motorcoach to Wroxham, where the hired launch was waiting for us. There was nothing to do except see that the lads didn’t commit suicide, so we had a long, lazy day and spent most of it gassing.’

‘Now, Mr Vindella, I am going to ask you a leading question.’

‘Right.’

‘Who killed Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘Well, I didn’t, and that’s about all I can say.’

‘The people to whom I have spoken agree that he was not popular. Had he enemies?’

‘Not to my knowledge, and I think I should have known if he had.’

‘So the reason for his death by violence is a mystery to you?’

‘A complete mystery. I had the shock of my life when I heard about it.’

‘How long was he absent from school?’

‘Three days before Whit Week, the first time. Then we had the week’s holiday and he came back on the following Monday.’

‘Did he give any reason for his absence?’

‘Oh, he did the usual thing – rang up to say he was seedy. We’re allowed three days without having to send in a medical certificate.’

‘How did he spend the Whitsun holiday?’

‘I don’t really know. We didn’t spend it together. He said something about going over to Belgium, but I don’t know whether he went. I was absent myself for a couple of days after we were supposed to be back at school, and you only ask chaps about their holidays the first day you’re back. After that – well, you’ve forgotten all about holidays. Any school-master will tell you the same.’

‘You mentioned that Mr Breydon-Waters was absent from school for three days *the first time*. What about any other time?’

‘He had special leave of absence, and I knew nothing more until I heard that his body had been found.’

‘Is special leave of absence difficult to obtain?’

‘Well, you need a pretty good reason. His was to join a spectacular sort of dig in Palestine. He got old Gold and our president, Downing, to back up his application, and they got Streatley on to it, too. As he is a buddy of most of the Council, the required permission came through, and off he went.’

‘To Palestine?’

‘Well, it doesn’t seem very likely, as his body was found at Pigmy’s Ladder. What do you think?’

‘As you do. When did the two of you last use your cruiser?’

‘Just after Easter – the Tuesday after Easter Sunday – and dashed cold it was, too.’

‘But there are several weekends between Easter and Whitsun.’

Vindella looked at her, and there was a silence.

‘Well, quite,’ he said at last. ‘We just didn’t happen to use those weekends for the cruiser, that’s all.’

‘I see. Thank you, Mr Vindella.’

She went from him to the Castle Museum. Mr Downing received her civilly, but she had an impression that he was not very pleased to see her. However, he offered her a chair and asked what he could do for her.

‘I hope you are not having too tiring a time,’ he added, pointedly she thought.

‘Thank you, no. The case is most interesting. I will take up as little of your time as possible, but I have been given a most important bit of information which must be verified before I can get any further. I have just come from Mr Vindella, who shared a cabin cruiser with Mr Breydon-Waters, and he tells me that, shortly before his death, Mr Breydon-Waters had special leave of absence from his school duties to join an archaeological convention in Palestine. I had heard a rumour of this, and he confirmed it.’

‘Yes, the new Gerezin dig. I should like to have gone myself, but we were short-handed here and I had nobody at the time who was capable of taking charge.’

‘Quite.’

‘But that’s not the point, I imagine.’

‘No. The point is – did he go?’

‘Did he go?’

‘You have no information on the matter?’

‘None at all. I must confess that your question astounds me.’

‘I had hoped that, as president of the Nodding Society—’

‘Oh, I’m afraid our rather parochial efforts bear little relationship to an important archaeological affair such as the new site at Mount Gerezin is likely to turn out to be.’

‘From whom was the invitation likely to have come to Mr Breydon-Waters, I wonder?’

‘A man called Kimberley Green, I think. He’s very friendly with Gold, our secretary, who would be certain to know. But, really. An invitation to dig near Mount Gerezin and not to go! Incredible! I will ring up Gold at once. He is our chief librarian, you know.’

Nodding was a city of sufficient size and wealth to have a central and several branch libraries, and it was to one of the latter that Dame Beatrice was directed over the telephone.

David Gold was a handsome, distinguished-looking Jew with a thin brown face and large, melancholy eyes. He was in conference with the branch librarian, a girl

in her twenties, when Dame Beatrice arrived, but, as soon as he heard who his visitor was, he terminated his business with the promise to the librarian to 'look it up and let you know,' and turned her out of her sanctum in order to talk to Dame Beatrice.

She lost no time in coming to the point.

'I am trying to find out whether the late Mr Breydon-Waters accepted the invitation to join the dig at Mount Gerezin,' she said.

'Certainly he accepted it,' said Gold. 'Why should he not?'

'But did he actually go?'

'So far as I am aware, he went, yes.'

'How was he to travel?'

'By air, I presume, to Tel Aviv, and from there by car. But the man to contact about all this is Tom Green.'

'Would that be Mr Kimberley Green?'

'It would. I'll get him on the 'phone for you. Have you any *reason* to think that Breydon-Waters did not go to Palestine, though? He worked very hard to get the invitation, and some of us worked equally hard on his behalf to get him leave of absence from school.'

'So I have been told. I shall be greatly obliged if you will put me in touch with Mr Green. I presume that he is back in England?'

'He has never been out of it, to my knowledge. He makes all the travel arrangements and is responsible for the financial side of the dig, but he lives in London and hardly ever moves out of his flat.'

He put the call through and handed the receiver to Dame Beatrice, but she shook her head, so he did the talking.

'That you, Tom?... Oh, good... How are you?... Fine... Look, Tom, do you remember a fellow called Breydon-Waters?... Yes, Breydon-Waters... You don't *want* to remember him?... Really? No wonder you don't love him! He's dead, of course... Oh, didn't you know? It was in all the papers. Now, what I'm after is this: if he didn't go to the Gerezin dig, where *did* he go?... You've no idea? What reason did he give for not going?... Oh, I see. Well, thanks very much. Good-bye.'

'That sounded as though my surmise was correct,' said Dame Beatrice.

'It certainly was. Apparently Breydon-Waters decided that he didn't care for the idea of travelling by air and so turned down the offer. As Green had already

booked his passage and made all the arrangements to have him met at the other end and conducted to the dig, he wasn't very pleased about it. Odd that he didn't know the man had been murdered, though. I wonder what the police are doing about it? I heard a rumour that you're working with them. Is that so – or should I not ask?'

'I am working with them in the sense that I am conducting an investigation into the circumstances of the death, but they are following their own line of country and I am acting independently. Anything I unearth which seems of importance I shall share with them, but there is no reciprocal arrangement.'

'How do you come to be associated with the affair?'

'I was brought into it to rescue a young friend of mine. Then I had what I have heard termed "a hunch." It seemed to me, following the accident to those two young women who imbibed a quantity of butane while they were exploring Pigmy's Ladder, that the butane must have been put there for a lethal purpose, and most likely had done its work, before the girls were upon the scene. This proved to be the case.' She went on to relate the story of Alice Boorman's anxious plea for help.

'Oh, I see. I wonder what your next step will be?'

'I shall interview the other members of your Society and find out all I can about Mr Breydon-Waters. This refusal of his to go to Palestine interests me very much.'

'You don't believe that the reason he gave to Tom Green was the true one?'

'No, I do not, and for this reason: there seems to be no doubt that he accepted the invitation when it was given him, and I find it difficult to credit that, when he accepted it, he was not informed that he would travel by air. However, I shall find out how long a leave of absence he had.'

'Oh, I can tell you that. He had a fortnight.'

'That seems to me fairly conclusive. He *must* have known he would need to fly. Why, then, did he change his mind about going?'

'It certainly would be interesting to know that, if the reason he gave was not the right one. I wish you luck in your researches. If there is anything I can do...'

'Thank you. As secretary of the Society, it is almost certain that you can help me.'

'There's one thing I can tell you which isn't, so far as I know, completely public property yet. Breydon-Waters was engaged to be married,' said Gold.

'Really?'

‘Yes, to another of our members, a girl named Clarke – Priscilla Clarke.’

‘Oh, she who shares a caravan with Mrs Rambeau?’

‘The same.’

‘Is there any reason why no announcement of the engagement has been made?’

‘I know of none... Oh, yes, of course I do. He had been engaged before and had jilted the girl, I believe.’

Dame Beatrice nodded. She was about to take her leave when she remembered the branch librarian.

‘The young woman who was here when I came in – is she also a member of the archaeological society?’

‘Yes, indeed, she is. That is Diana Carfrae, our treasurer’s daughter. Her father is my bank manager.’

‘I should like a word with her.’

‘I’ll call her in and then I’ll nip back to the Central Library, unless I can help you further.’

‘I can think of nothing more at present, unless you can tell me who killed Mr Breydon-Waters.’

Gold smiled mournfully and shook his head.

‘I can’t even hazard a guess,’ he said. ‘I didn’t kill him. He was not even an anti-Semite, and, if he had been, I still wouldn’t have lifted a finger against him.’

‘Do you use calor gas?’

‘I? No, I have never used it. I don’t think it would be a pointer to my guilt if I did use it. Far too many people do. There’s no clue there.’

‘Very true. But if one could find someone who had never had any use for it, but suddenly purchased it – what then?’

Gold laughed, without mirth. Then he went out and Diana Carfrae came in. She was a white-skinned, heavy-eyed girl with a naturally serious expression and large, rather ugly hands. Her voice was flat, but she seemed self-possessed and might (Dame Beatrice decided) be above the average in intelligence.

‘You wanted me?’ she asked. She seated herself in the swivel chair at the desk. It gave a horrid shriek of protest. ‘Wants oiling,’ she observed. ‘Sorry. What can I do for you, Dame Beatrice?’

‘I am not sure that you can do anything for me, Miss Carfrae. Can you tell me who killed Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘No,’ replied Diana, ‘I can’t. And, if I could, I wouldn’t. Oliver was a tick.’

‘Will you enlarge on that?’

‘He pinched Terry Vindella’s girl-friend.’

‘He...? Are we referring to English or to Italian customs?’

‘Oh, he stole her away, suborned her, alienated her affections.’

‘Ah, yes, I see. That explains something, the meaning of which, until now, I have had to guess. When did the exchange take place?’

‘I don’t know, exactly, but some time soon after Easter, I believe. Priscilla Clarke and Connie Rambeau stayed somewhere on the Broads, and the two men, being on the same school Staff, took them out in their cabin cruiser – at least, that’s Connie Rambeau’s story and it may be true. I don’t think there was more than an understanding between Terry and Priscilla before that – no definite engagement ring, I mean – but she told me some weeks ago that she had swapped horses and was going to marry Oliver. Personally, I thought she was a fool. Terry is worth six of him.’

‘Except in brain-power, I am informed.’

‘That’s as may be. Everybody likes Terry, anyway, and that’s more than I could ever say about Oliver.’

‘Had you yourself any specific reason for disliking him?’

‘No, except that he was too big for his boots and was such a supercilious little object. I know I’m only a junior librarian, but that’s no reason for treating me as though I were his lackey. The way he would come in here and demand that I fetch and carry books for him – well, I could have flung them at his head. I mean, I know it’s part of my job to get people the more expensive reference books out of my stockroom – we don’t keep the really precious ones on the open shelves – but people *could* ask civilly and decently for them and offer to carry the heavy ones, but not Oliver Breydon-Waters.’

‘Did you know that he had been invited to join an archaeological group in Palestine?’

‘I shouldn’t think there is any member of our Society who *didn’t* know. Brag, brag, brag!’

‘Did you know that, at the last moment, when all the arrangements had been made, he refused to go?’

‘What! He didn’t go? I can hardly believe it.’

‘I have it on the authority of Mr Gold, who had it over the telephone from the man who had made the arrangements, a Mr Green.’

‘*Well!*’

‘Instead, he remained in England and was murdered. Do you not think that was a very singular thing?’

‘You mean that if he’d gone to Palestine he’d still be alive?’

‘Your father, I understand, is also a member of the Society,’ said Dame Beatrice, ignoring the question.

‘Yes, he is, but I’m sure he knows no more than I do about Oliver’s death.’

‘Quite. Nevertheless, I should very much like him to grant me an interview. I am seeing all members of the Society in turn, if they agree.’

‘Because the murder took place at Pigmy’s Ladder, I suppose; but Pigmy’s Ladder is open to any member of the public who chooses to pay sixpence, you know.’

‘I appreciate that, of course, Miss Carfrae. When am I likely to find your father at home?’

‘Well, he usually doesn’t leave the bank before six, and if there’s a rush of work it would be later than that. Why don’t you go and see him in his office before the bank closes? I’ll ring him from here, if you like, and find out your best time to call. He’s always available to customers, so I don’t see why he shouldn’t be available to you.’

‘Thank you very much. That is an excellent suggestion,’ said Dame Beatrice gratefully. ‘It would save time and would prevent my having to bother him in the evening.’

‘There’s only one other thing,’ said Diana, in a hesitant way.

‘Yes?’ said Dame Beatrice, aware, from long experience of psychiatric disorders, that something of importance might be coming.

‘Well, I mean, you can’t really get much information from the papers but – where, exactly, in Pigmy’s Ladder, was Oliver found?’

‘You are familiar with the excavations?’

‘Well, more or less, I suppose. I know the plan of them inside out, anyhow.’

‘He was found, then, beyond the dry-stone walling which blocks off the end of Gallery Five.’

‘Gallery Five? I wonder – oh, well, it doesn’t matter, I suppose. What was he doing?’

‘That remains a mystery.’

‘I mean, why do you suppose he was there at all?’

‘Who can say? A boyish ambition to explore by himself?’

‘I knew Oliver fairly well for a bit,’ said Diana, still with marked hesitation. ‘Yes, quite fairly well, and, so far as I could tell, there was nothing boyish about him. I should say he’d been quite grown-up since he was about fifteen. He’d travelled quite a bit, according to something he said once, so I suppose that did it.’

‘I did say a boyish*ambition*.’

‘Oh, he was ambitious all right. More than once he told me to keep my eye on his progress, because not so far into the future he would be the talk of two continents.’

‘Which two continents?’

‘I took him to mean Europe and America.’

‘Did you gather what line he proposed to take in order to achieve this ambition?’

‘Not really. Vaguely I took him to mean that he had made, or was going to make, some wonderful archaeological discovery, but I’d nothing really to go on. It was simply surmise, because I couldn’t see any other line he could take. Being a junior master in a County Secondary School doesn’t usually lead to world fame, does it?’

‘But is it likely that a wonderful archaeological discovery could be made in Pigmy’s Ladder?’

Diana Carfrae gave her an odd look.

‘You didn’t know Oliver,’ she said. ‘He was always gagging. It used to infuriate people. I think he copied Mr Streatley, you see. Besides, he was quite mad.’

CHAPTER FIVE

Nodding Ladies

‘I beseech you a word: what is she in the white?’

A woman sometimes, an you saw her in the light.'

Shakespeare

HILIP CARFRAE had one important piece of information to offer. Breydon-Waters had closed his account at the bank.

'Drew out the lot, Dame Beatrice. He gave no reason, and, of course, he was completely entitled to do what he liked with his own. However, I was sufficiently interested to institute some private enquiries, but, so far as I can tell you, he did not open an account anywhere else in the city. All the big banks are represented in Nodding and I am personally acquainted with the managers, so I should have heard, I am sure, if he had gone to one or other of them.'

'Did he draw out any considerable sum?'

'Oh, no. He was a school-master, as you probably know, and lived pretty well hand to mouth. His mother has a little money of her own and she banks with me, but Breydon-Waters paid the household bills such as the rates, lighting and heating, repairs and decorations, and he took, for a man in his position, comparatively expensive holidays. He had also bought half-shares in a cabin cruiser. He was overdrawn at that point, but, as he was in steady employment, I did not object to that, although it took him some time to get out of the red.'

'Do you think he intended to leave the country?'

'You mean because he closed his account? That is quite a new idea to me. I had not formed any opinion except the one which turns out to have been wrong.'

'That he had intended to apply to another bank?'

'Exactly. After that, I thought no more of the matter. If he *did* intend to go abroad, he was not going to be overburdened with capital. His assets amounted to...' He opened the door and called to a cashier... 'Look up Mr Breydon-Waters' file, please, Mr Brooks.'

The file was brought. It showed that Breydon-Waters' assets had amounted to two hundred and five pounds sixteen shillings and eightpence.

'And it would not have been nearly as much as that, but for the fact that, as I happen to know, he had been lucky in his betting,' remarked Mr Carfrae. 'I should not,' he added, 'discuss the affairs of a customer who was still alive, of course, but, if these disclosures are of assistance in bringing a murderer to book, I feel I have no option.'

‘Thank you,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘You have no inkling as to the identity of the criminal, I take it?’

‘None at all. Waters was a bumptious, overbearing sort of young man and I had a particular reason for disliking him, but I certainly did not kill him and I have no idea who did.’

Dame Beatrice left the bank and went back to her hotel for lunch. At two she drove to Alice’s school. She was soon closeted with the headmistress.

‘I appreciate that you wish to interview Miss Clarke and Mrs Rambeau separately, and that this would be difficult out of school hours as they share a caravan,’ said Miss Knowles, ‘but... well, you quite understand that school time is school time, Dame Beatrice, I am sure.’

‘I am working with the police, you know,’ said Dame Beatrice meekly.

‘Oh, I see! In that case, let us consult the big timetable. Ah, yes, Miss Clarke is taking an English lesson with 3B. I will go and relieve her and send her to you down here. Mrs Rambeau is free next period, so, if you have finished with Miss Clarke by a quarter to three, you could see Mrs Rambeau from then until break at a quarter past.’

Priscilla Clarke was a good-looking, strident-voiced young woman on the right side of thirty by a small margin, Dame Beatrice deduced. She was on the defensive from the beginning of the interview until the end of it.

‘I am sorry to reintroduce the subject to your notice,’ Dame Beatrice began, ‘but...’

‘If it’s about Oliver, there’s nothing I can tell you... or anybody else,’ burst out Priscilla.

‘I am afraid it is about Mr Breydon-Waters, and it is a question which probably nobody but you can answer.’

‘I have no idea what he’d done to get himself killed.’

‘Nobody I have spoken to so far seems to have any idea of what he’d done. That is not what I want to ask you.’

‘It won’t be any good. The police have been on to me several times already. I’m sick and tired of being badgered. If I knew anything I should have told it long ago. The whole thing is a complete mystery to me. I knew almost nothing of Oliver’s background except that he was an only child and lived with his mother and helped to support her... at least, he *said* he did. He gave it as the reason why he would

not... why we could not get married for a year or two. She had an insurance coming along, he said, and then she would be independent and we could marry.'

'Yes, I see. My question is this: why did Mr Breydon-Waters not go to Palestine, when all the arrangements, including air travel, had been fixed up.'

'Not go to Palestine? You must be mistaken! He had made all the arrangements to go to Palestine, leave of absence and all.'

'I have it on very good authority that although he had applied for, and obtained, a fortnight's leave of absence from school to visit a site near Mount Gerezin, he did not leave England.'

Priscilla Clarke stared at her.

'He would have told me,' she said, her voice having become husky. 'Surely he would have told me?' The statement, as Dame Beatrice was quick to notice, had been changed into a rather pathetic question.

'When did you last see him?' she enquired gently.

'Alive?' The girl pursed her lips and shook her head. 'I don't remember.'

'You knew that he had been absent from school, though, did you not, for three days before the Whitsun holiday?'

'No, I didn't. We have nothing whatever to do with the boys' department, although we share the same building.'

'But out of school, surely...?'

Priscilla looked away. A slow flush took away her modest pretence to good looks, and she completed the havoc by scowling darkly in an attempt to fight back tears.

'We... hadn't been seeing much of one another for a week or two,' she managed to get out. 'Oliver hinted that he was very busy on some scheme he had for making a large sum of money, but I couldn't help wondering whether he was getting tired of me. You see, he had been... there had been an understanding between him and somebody else, and he broke it up and... and took me on. He wouldn't give me a ring, and have the engagement made public, because he said it would embarrass both of us if we had to wait for at least two years before getting married. He said people gossip so, and, of course, they do.'

'I think,' said Dame Beatrice, 'that I can guess who the other young woman was.'

'Has she told you?'

‘No, no, but her father told me that he had a particular reason for disliking Mr Breydon-Waters, and, putting two and two together, it seems to me that Miss Carfrae may be the person I mean.’

‘Well, yes, she is, and it was terribly awkward, all three of us being members of the same Society, because, although I don’t think she knew I had taken her place with Oliver,*heknew*, and, of course,*Iknew*, and I felt really terrible when I had to be friendly towards her and attend meetings and things where we sat together, and all the time I knew I was being a snake in the grass to her.’

‘Very difficult.’

‘And now, you see, I feel that I was in the same boat as Oliver had left*therin*, only, now that Oliver’s dead, I suppose that doesn’t matter any more.’

‘Did it ever occur to you that Mr Breydon-Waters’ appearance of neglect of you and lack of interest might have stemmed from some secret he was anxious to keep? – some plan which he wanted to carry out alone?’

‘No, it certainly didn’t. As I say, he’d already dropped Diana, so all I thought was that probably*I’d* had it, too. Do you really think he was up to something he didn’t want me to know about?’

‘It is one of the theories on which I am working, and, I must confess, I had hoped that you would be able to give it substance.’

‘I’m sorry, but it just never would have occurred to me. What sort of – what sort of thing did you have in mind?’

‘Something connected with archaeology. I do not propose to be more definite than that at the moment. Do you subscribe to an opinion expressed to me by another member of the Society, that Mr Breydon-Waters had an almost morbid preoccupation with sites which had already been excavated?’

‘Oh, dear, yes! And he would never let anybody go with him. The times I’ve heard Diana, when they were together, laugh in a fed-up sort of way and say it was another Saturday or Sunday she was being left out to grass. And it was just the same with me. Once I insisted upon meeting him on a Saturday afternoon, and all he did was to take me to a cricket match, and he wouldn’t say a word, either, throughout the entire game.’

‘How did you know that he liked to return to these excavated sites?’

‘Diana told me. She had it from her father and he had it from Ronald Downing, our president. That was when Oliver and Diana were still... well, close friends.’

‘It would seem that he was a most ardent archaeologist.’

‘Mostly for what he could get out of it. I saw his collection once, when I called at his home when he was out. He had been arranging it on the dining-room table. I’d met his mother in the town and she’d given me her key so that I could go in and wait for him.’

‘His collection? But I thought the finds were sent to museums or left *in situ*.’

‘We were allowed to keep bits of pottery, and so on, if they were redundant. All the same, it struck me that Oliver had... had...’

‘Interpreted the rules of the Society rather freely? That is a most valuable piece of evidence. Did Mr Breydon-Waters know that you had seen his collection?’

‘No fear! Knowing Oliver, I realised that he would be furious. After all, I reasoned that, if he’d wanted me to see it, he would have shown it to me himself, and, of course, when I spotted some of the things he’d got, I could see why he *hadn’t* shown it to me.’

‘This is very, very interesting and it immensely strengthens my theory. I must thank you very much for your information, Miss Clarke.’

‘Well, I’d better be getting back to relieve Miss Knowles of my class. Good-bye, Dame Beatrice. Glad I’m able to help a bit.’

She went out, leaving the door ajar, and Dame Beatrice was joined shortly by Miss Knowles. A bell rang, there was a general re-shuffle of classes and the sound of children’s voices, and after a short interval there was a tap at the head-teacher’s door.

‘You sent for me, Miss Knowles?’

‘Yes, Mrs Rambeau. Dame Beatrice would like a word with you. This is Mrs Rambeau, our French teacher... or, rather, I suppose I should say our teacher of French. Mrs Rambeau, this is Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, who is assisting the police in an enquiry into the death of Mr Breydon-Waters, who was on the Staff of the boys’ school here.’

‘Oh, yes?’ said Mrs Rambeau. She was a small, dark, plump woman wearing heavy lipstick and some eyeshadow. She was fashionably dressed. ‘My husband was French, Dame Beatrice, wherefore the name,’ she began chattily.

‘Sit down, Mrs Rambeau,’ said Miss Knowles, interrupting what promised to be a ready flow of speech, ‘and Dame Beatrice will tell you what she wants from you.’ She picked up some papers. ‘I shall be in the secretary’s office if anyone wants me.’

‘Very good, Miss Knowles,’ said Mrs Rambeau. She sighed, in a martyred fashion, as the door closed behind her headmistress.

‘Too, too deflating,’ she murmured. ‘I’ve often thought of asking for a transfer.’

‘I believe that you share a caravan with Miss Priscilla Clarke,’ said Dame Beatrice, ostentatiously consulting her notes.

‘Only as a temporary measure; an arrangement which happens to suit both of us at present.’

‘You knew that Miss Clarke had an understanding with Mr Breydon-Waters, of course?’

‘I had no use for Oliver. He was not a serious type where women were concerned. Of course he let Priscilla down with a thud. I could have told her, but you know what girls are like where men are concerned.’

‘In what way did he disappoint Miss Clarke?’ asked Dame Beatrice, who was anxious to know whether Mrs Rambeau’s explanation would coincide with what she had already heard from Priscilla.

‘After the first few weeks, he didn’t really want her any more.’

‘I understood that he shared a cabin cruiser with another member of the archaeological society, a Mr Vindella. Perhaps that took up a good deal of his time.’

‘He hadn’t been going on the river with Terry Vindella for weeks,’ stated Mrs Rambeau flatly. ‘I know that for a fact. What he did get up to I’ve no idea. Not that I care, of course. He meant nothing to me, except that his callous behaviour to Priscilla meant that I saw much more of her in the evenings that I had done while their understanding was on.’

It did not seem to Dame Beatrice that the conversation was likely to bear much fruit, and she decided to terminate it with what had become a stock question.

‘Have you any idea, Mrs Rambeau, who killed Mr Breydon-Waters?’

Mrs Rambeau studied the toe-caps of her smart, unpractical shoes.

‘I think so,’ she said at last, looking up, ‘but wild horses wouldn’t drag the name out of me. Oliver is no loss, but the person I’m thinking of would be.’

‘Even so, he has committed a very serious crime.’

‘If you call it a crime. I call it a sin, myself, and as such it’s none of my business.’

‘I wonder whether your guess is the same as my own?’

Constance Rambeau smiled guilefully.

‘You won’t trap me like that,’ she said. ‘And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a free period and a set of books to mark. I’ll let Miss Knowles know you’re through with me.’

Miss Knowles, upon returning to her sanctum, raised her eyebrows. Dame Beatrice leered reassuringly.

‘I am a little further forward,’ she said. ‘Do you think the headmaster would grant me a brief interview?’

‘I’ll ring through and ask him,’ said Miss Knowles obligingly. ‘His name’s Howardson.’

The headmaster responded warmly to the suggestion that he should receive Dame Beatrice and so Miss Knowles press-ganged a passing child into conducting her to his study. She found herself in the presence of a mild-looking man in his fifties who offered her a chair, which she took, and a cigarette, which she refused.

‘So you are assisting the police, Dame Beatrice,’ he observed, ‘and not, I believe, for the first time.’

‘I have worked with the police on several occasions; this time to interview friends and colleagues of Mr Breydon-Waters.’

‘A terrible affair, and bad for my school, of course. A most unhealthy interest has been taken by the boys.’

‘No doubt. One could expect nothing else. Has Mr Breydon-Waters been replaced?’

‘Not yet. I have had to allocate his classes to others. It has made a sad mess of the time-table but fortunately the top of the school is at its smallest numbers in the summer term because of the Christmas and Easter leavers.’

‘Mr Breydon-Waters taught the junior forms, though, did he not?’

‘Yes, yes, he did. But I have been able to combine the two Fifths for some things and so free a master to take on Breydon-Waters’ work. Your information comes, no doubt, from Vindella, who has very properly kept me in touch with police proceedings in so far as they affect him. A valuable teacher who should go far, but without the alertness and the ability to maintain discipline in the form-room which were such features of Breydon-Waters’ work.’

‘He is a sad loss to the school, then?’

‘The most promising of my younger men.’

‘You have formed no theories about the reason for his death?’

‘I am at a loss; entirely at a loss. Of one thing I am certain: nobody here had anything to gain from it.’

‘Was he popular?’

‘I would not say so. I do not care to have popular masters. It is a way of saying that they curry favour with the boys.’

‘I thought boys despised such an attitude.’

‘It depends.’

‘In any case, I meant that I wondered whether he was popular in the Staff-room.’

‘No. He was barely tolerated, I believe, except by Vindella, who liked him sufficiently to go shares in a cabin cruiser with him.’

‘My researches have unearthed the suspicion that they had had little to do with one another for some weeks before Mr Breydon-Waters’ death.’

‘Really? I do not concern myself with Staff friendships.’

‘What was your reaction to Mr Breydon-Waters’ successful attempt to obtain leave of absence to visit an archaeological site in Palestine?’

‘I was not at all willing to release him in the middle of term and with examinations pending, but he found influential support, so there it was.’

‘I take it that you know he did not go?’

‘Did not go? Whoever can have told you that?’

‘A Mr Green, who was in charge of the travel arrangements, told Mr Downing over the telephone at the Castle Museum. I was there at the time.’

‘But I fail to understand. Breydon-Waters was certainly absent from school that fortnight. I was expecting him back on the Monday following that expedition which Miss Boorman, on the girls’ side, made with two companions on the Saturday before his body was discovered in the ancient flint-mines. I understand that it is thought, by the police-surgeon and others, that he may have died on the Friday night or in the early hours of that same Saturday morning.’

‘That is so. I made a similar diagnosis myself. By the time I saw the body *rigor mortis* was a thing of the past and signs of putrefaction had begun to appear. The fact that the butane had not dispersed when the two young women went down argues that it cannot have been there very long.’

‘I cannot think what he was doing at Pigmy’s Ladder. Do you suppose his murderer had made an assignment to meet him there?’

‘I have not arrived at any supposition of that sort. The police, no doubt, are working along those lines. When I have concluded all the interviews which suggest themselves to me, I shall go and see the police officers in charge of the case and communicate my gleanings to them. So far, I must admit that these are sparse.’

‘Yet you have made some progress?’

‘In a general way, perhaps. I have established that in most quarters Mr Breydon-Waters was not popular and that two persons, in particular, had considerable reason to dislike him. Having met and conversed with these two, however, instinct or intuition forbids me to believe that either of them had any hand in his death.’

‘Indeed?’

‘I refer to Miss Diana Carfrae, whom, it appears, he jilted, and Mr Vindella, from whom he stole Miss Priscilla Clarke.’

‘Those things are always happening. They do not lead to murder, as a general rule. I scarcely know Miss Carfrae, but Vindella is much too indolent and easy-going to let such a thing as a lost fiancée prey upon his mind.’

‘He is an Irishman, of course.’

‘Yes, he is, by birth, an Irishman. He is not a Latin. Crimes of passion are rare in the British Isles.’

Her interview with the headmaster having proved almost fruitless, except for one piece of (possibly) confirmatory evidence, Dame Beatrice returned to the hotel. On the following morning she rang up Mrs Breydon-Waters, the dead man’s mother. It was an interview which she had avoided as long as she could, but it seemed to her that the time had come for it. However, it was in neither a cheerful nor a hopeful spirit that she set out for the street in which Mrs Breydon-Waters lived. The poor woman was certain to have been visited by the police and, apart from that, would be unlikely to relish being questioned about her son by a stranger.

Mrs Breydon-Waters, however, was unexpectedly pleased to see her. Dame Beatrice introduced herself by name and proffered her credentials.

‘But of course!’ said Mrs Breydon-Waters. ‘Do please come in, Dame Beatrice. I am in daily communication with Oliver and can tell you everything about him. He misses his home and me, but otherwise he is well and happy, and has made many friends on the other side. He still teaches, but he says that geography is no longer

his subject because, of course, it is all strange country over there. They have isobars, but nothing else. I mean that there is neither latitude nor longitude, no north or south pole, no equator or any isotherms. Is it not odd?’

‘Most singular. You say you can tell me everything about your son, but I am afraid I am concerned only with the things which affected him in *this* world.’

‘Oh, but he doesn’t mind about those any longer. He never puts his mind to them at all. The past, he tells me, is all over and done with. It has no importance for him now.’

‘May I ask how you know this?’

‘I have told you that I am in daily communication with him. If anything, we are closer now than when he was in the flesh.’

‘And how close were you then?’

Mrs Breydon-Waters stared gravely at a corner of the ceiling.

‘There he is,’ she said, pointing upwards, ‘but he’s in conversation with Marie Corelli and Julia Ward Howe, so he won’t worry about what I’m saying.’ She lowered her voice. ‘To tell you the truth, Dame Beatrice, we were not nearly as close as we are now. In fact, Oliver often kept things from me which I felt I should have been told.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, I discovered, by accident, that he was intending to marry, and, although I liked the girl well enough and was pleasant to her and even allowed her the run of the house, I felt that there was an obstacle in the way of the marriage, a serious obstacle.’

‘Really? What could that have been, I wonder?’

‘Myself. He had a duty to me. He could never have supported a wife *and* me on his salary. I wonder he had never thought of that!’

‘Who was the young woman you speak of?’

‘One of the school-mistresses, a Miss Clarke.’

‘And, before that, a Miss Carfrae, I am given to understand.’

‘Diana Carfrae? Oh, I don’t think that affair was serious.’

‘Miss Carfrae did, and so did her father.’

‘Dear me! How very unfortunate for them!’

‘May I ask a very personal question?’

‘Oh, certainly, Dame Beatrice.’

‘You said just now that your son could not have supported both you and a wife on his salary. May I be permitted to wonder whether – in short, are you – do you – can you manage now his salary is no more?’

‘I have my small savings, which I can live on for a bit, and then I am to get a good deal of money by selling some... some securities I hold.’

‘I see. But – forgive me for suggesting this – could you not have bulwarked yourself in exactly the same way if he had lived and married? You had no insurance? – forgive me!’

Mrs Breydon-Waters glanced at the ceiling again.

‘I must not go into details in his hearing,’ she said, ‘and I see that the ladies are just taking their leave of him. A quick answer is – no!’

‘Well, thank you for being so patient, Mrs Breydon-Waters,’ said Dame Beatrice, under the impression that she had gained all she could from the interview.

‘Wait!’ said Mrs Breydon-Waters in a whisper. ‘Don’t go. Oliver is talking to Nat Gould. I so wish he wouldn’t. You see, they have horse-racing there, just as we do here and I shouldn’t like Oliver to get himself involved in debt. He is such *anaughtyboy* where money is concerned. Why, do you know what he did about his current account at the bank not long before he passed over?’

She waited expectantly. Dame Beatrice did know, but judged it wise not to betray this fact.

‘At the bank?’ she queried.

‘At the bank.’ Mrs Breydon-Waters raised her voice. ‘Yes, Oliver,’ she said, again gazing up at the ceiling, ‘I know you can hear me, and I know, you see, what you did, and it was a very great shock to me. Yes, Oliver, when I went to the bank to see whether I could draw out any of your money to pay for your funeral, they told me that you hadn’t a single penny. You had drawn out all your money and closed your account. I think it was just too dreadful of you. Yes, you do well to look ashamed. What did you do with the money? Tell me that! What did you do with it, I say! If you were in debt you should have told me.’

An idea came into Dame Beatrice’s head. She took her leave of Mrs Breydon-Waters, whom she suspected of having embryo histrionic ability rather than of possessing an unhinged brain, and, back at the *Gauntlet*, she rang up the British Museum and asked to speak to Sir John St John John, who was thereupon put on

the line and who listened without interruption to what she had to say. At the end he said,

‘A mother-goddess? Most interesting.’ He volunteered nothing more.

CHAPTER SIX

The Magpie’s Mother

“‘Good God, why do you suppose I broil here year after year in this infernal sun?... I want money...’”

Helen
Simpson

IR JOHN, having listened with exemplary patience and, incidentally, with extreme interest, to what she had to say to him over the telephone, promised to visit Nodding at the invitation of the local archaeological society provided that they would give him a choice of at least three dates. He would deliver a lecture, with film, on some recent archaeological discoveries in the Near East, followed by a short talk on Neolithic flint implements, in accordance with Dame Beatrice’s request, and hoped that this would produce the result which she anticipated.

Dame Beatrice rang off and immediately rang up the curator’s office at the Castle Museum. Ronald Downing himself took the call and almost stammered with pleasure as he repeated her message.

‘Sir John willing to come here and lecture to us on some recent discoveries in the Near East? And with a piece of film? What tremendous luck!’

‘I thought you would be interested. He wants a choice of at least three dates, so, if you could contact your members fairly soon...’

‘Certainly, certainly. I cancelled our last meeting, with the full approval of David Gold, our secretary, and Philip Carfrae, our treasurer, because of Breydon-Waters’ death and because of a feeling, which I have reason to believe you share, that the murderer may be in our midst. Our next committee should be today week, but I will send out notices that we shall hold an Extraordinary General Meeting instead, and that the most important item on the agenda is to select dates on which as many members as possible would be free to come along to hear Sir John. It is wonderful

news, Dame Beatrice. I am most grateful to you for contacting him. If I had had the slightest idea that you knew him I should have been canvassing you long ago.'

'Yes, I was sure that you would like to have a visit from him, and, as I have put you and your members to all this tiresome questioning about Mr Breydon-Waters, I thought I ought to do a little in return.'

'It is wonderful, quite wonderful, dear lady.'

Dame Beatrice, feeling, not for the first time in what she sometimes thought of as her Jekyll and Hyde career, more than a bit of a hypocrite, rang off, but not before she had secured two promises from Downing. One was that he would make certain that the members agreed to her attending the next meeting of the Society; the other was that a room in the City Hall should be booked for the lecture so that the general public might attend if they wished to do so.

'Tickets?' Downing enquired.

'Certainly. People must pay for the privilege of hearing such an expert as Sir John.'

'An honorarium?'

'Most welcome, I am certain, and a graceful compliment to a man who has not mentioned a fee.'

'We do not want, of course, to make a profit, but the City Hall is expensive to hire.'

'I am sure your treasurer will work it out beautifully. After all, he is a bank manager.'

'Of course. Well, again a thousand thanks, Dame Beatrice. I shall send out my notices at once.'

Dame Beatrice returned to the house of the dead man's mother and found Mrs Breydon-Waters in a state of near-panic. Apparently she was not acting, after all.

'Oh, I'm so glad to see somebody I know,' she exclaimed, upon opening the door to Dame Beatrice. 'Do come in. It's Oliver. He's bothering to come back to me, and, you know, I don't want him back, I don't really!'

'It is nothing but a threat,' said Dame Beatrice, with the calmness of a practising psychiatrist confronted by a familiar state of affairs. 'It will blow over. Simply be firm.'

'But what can I say? I couldn't bear to tell the poor boy that he wouldn't be welcome, and yet, you know, life is so much less complicated for me since he

went. Men don't understand these things, but, you know, Dame Beatrice, there isn't the *work*, and there isn't the *cooking*, and there isn't the everlasting *worry*, if he's late home, thinking that he may have been run over, or run in, or – or run away with, even. You can't imagine how peaceful my existence is without him. If he had been *adaughter*, now, I'm sure it would all have been quite different. It's not that I didn't – that I don't – love Oliver, but – you see, he never knew his mother, and I'm sure that's made a great deal of difference.'

'Yes, yes, of course it would,' said Dame Beatrice, soothingly, outwardly ignoring what she regarded as a slip of the tongue. 'May I really come in? I think it is beginning to rain.'

'Oh, dear, how dreadful of me to keep you standing here! And I'm so grateful to you for calling.' She led the way into a room with a small fire. 'Communicating with Oliver always makes me feel *cold*,' she observed, and she shivered. 'Please sit down. I want to tell you what Oliver said to me immediately you had gone.'

'Yes?' said Dame Beatrice, seating herself in an armchair by the side of the fire. Her hostess took a seat opposite her.

'He told me to show you his collection.'

This was more than Dame Beatrice had hoped for. She had been prepared to ask to see the collection, the collection on behalf of which, she was practically certain, Breydon-Waters had died, but to be offered the opportunity to inspect it seemed almost too good to be true.

'Indeed?' she said. 'I shall be more than interested to see it, but perhaps not just yet.'

'Then why did you come? I thought you must have received the same message. What brought you back to this house?'

'I have come with an invitation for you.'

'Oliver has forbidden me to go jaunting so soon after his death.'

'This does not come under that heading. I have come to tell you that my friend Sir John St John John, known generally merely as Sir John, is coming to Nodding City Hall at some date in the near future to lecture on recent archaeological discoveries in the Near East.'

'It sounds most interesting. How Oliver would have loved it! He went to the Near East, you know, just before his death.'

'Indeed?'

‘Oh, yes. He received an invitation to visit the dig at a place called Mount something-or-other in Palestine.’

‘And he actually went there?’

‘Of course he went. He said it was the most marvellous chance for him. He was terribly anxious in case the Education Office would not agree to release him, but Mr Gold and others spoke up for him and permission was given. He went off so happy, so very happy. I am thankful to remember that I saw him once again before he died.’

‘Have you – do the police know this?’

‘Know what, Dame Beatrice?’

‘That you saw him again, after his leave of absence had expired?’

‘Oh, but it hadn’t quite expired, you know. The police came. They asked me when I had seen him last, so I told them that he had come in to tea on the Friday but that I had seen no more of him until I had to identify him...’ Her voice tailed off. Dame Beatrice nodded sympathetically.

‘What did he do when he had had his tea?’ she asked.

‘He went into the dining-room, as he always did on Friday evenings, to look over his collection. We used to have breakfast and dinner in the kitchen, you see, and tea in the drawing-room, so that Oliver could have his collection out on the big dining-table and on the sideboard. The dining-room was really his room, because I have the best bedroom and his was too small to house all his treasures.’

‘Yes, I see. I suppose he looked extremely well and was sunburnt when he returned from Palestine?’

‘I was so pleased to see him that I did not notice. He always had a very healthy, open-air colouring, of course.’

‘Did he stay up later than you on the day he came home?’

‘No. He said he was tired, but he seemed excited, I thought. At about ten o’clock he came into the drawing-room to bid me good night, and then went up to bed.’

‘Actually to go to bed, I suppose?’

‘Oh, I am sure of it, but, of course, I never go into his bedroom except to make the bed and to sweep and dust. He doesn’t – didn’t – like me to go in when he was there.’

‘Do you realise that he must have been killed either on that Friday night or early on the Saturday morning?’

‘So the police say.’

‘Had you any suspicion that he went out of this house that night?’

‘The police have asked me that. I had no suspicion of it at all.’

‘What about the Saturday morning?’

‘On Saturdays he often got up at some unearthly hour to take a boat out or go off for one of his lonely walks. I never asked him where he went. I have an electric kettle in my bedroom and make tea when I think I will, then I have a simple breakfast downstairs when I feel like it, and when I have washed up and tidied up, I do the weekend shopping. I still keep to that routine.’

‘Did you always have Saturday lunch alone?’

‘Well, I never had it with Oliver. Quite often I would meet a friend out shopping and we would go into the restaurant of one of the big stores and have the *table d’hôte* meal – you know, soup, followed by either fried fish or a meat dish, and then an ice or some light pudding. I still find it pleasant, although, since Oliver’s death, I can’t often find anybody to go out with.’

‘Why not?’ demanded Dame Beatrice, with peremptory directness. Mrs Breydon-Waters looked away.

‘There have been some rumours circulating,’ she said, ‘which have been hurtful to me.’

‘Such as?’

Mrs Breydon-Waters almost literally shied away from the question. Then she turned a resolute countenance towards the questioner.

‘I’ve been in prison,’ she said. ‘Oh, it was a long time ago, but people seem to have found out about it. Some folk are very unkind.’

Dame Beatrice studied her.

‘Tell me, Mrs Breydon-Waters,’ she said, ‘in what form your son returned to this house on that Friday night.’

‘In what form, Dame Beatrice? I certainly saw him and spoke to him.’

‘Did you? Well, was he flesh or spirit? Did you form any opinion about that?’

Mrs Breydon-Waters looked puzzled.

‘What difference could it make?’ she asked. ‘Whatever Oliver was *then*, he is certainly dead *now*.’

‘I put it to you that you did not see your son alive on that Friday night, and I suggest that you can hazard a guess at what he did with the money he withdrew from the bank.’

‘But I did see Oliver, Dame Beatrice, really I did. I saw him and I spoke to him, just as I told you.’

‘But you asked nothing about his visit to Palestine?’

‘He didn’t want me to ask him anything.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I always knew when he didn’t want me to talk.’

‘Did he have a meal?’

‘Oh, no, of course not! You can’t feed the spirits. Their food is quite different from ours.’

‘So you *did not* see him in the flesh on that Friday night!’

‘You make him sound like a prize pig,’ said Mrs Breydon-Waters resentfully. ‘You wouldn’t think him a pig if you saw his wonderful collection. I’ll show it to you, if you’ll come into the next room. Nobody has ever seen it except Oliver and myself.’

‘That, at least, is not true,’ thought Dame Beatrice, remembering what Priscilla Clarke had told her.

‘Your son’s collection of antiquities?’ she asked.

‘Exactly. You said you wouldn’t look at it just yet, but, now that you’re here, I think you must.’

The collection was laid out on the large table; some of it also covered an old-fashioned sideboard; a couple of bookcases had been pressed into service and so had a china-cabinet.

‘Dear me,’ said Dame Beatrice mildly, confronted with this possibly ill-gotten hoard. ‘Well, well, well!’

‘Yes, I must have it valued. Some of the things may be of gold, you see, and Oliver often told me that a museum would give large sums for some of the other things.’

Dame Beatrice inspected the collection in silence and without touching anything.

‘I suppose you realise,’ she said, when she had looked at everything, ‘that some of these exhibits must have been, in effect, stolen?’

‘Oh, nonsense, Dame Beatrice!’ Mrs Breydon-Waters spoke sharply. ‘They are just things Oliver picked up on the various archaeological expeditions he joined.’

‘Yes, that is what I mean.’

‘But, if he found them, surely he was entitled to keep them if he wished?’

‘I should doubt that very much, but we shall see.’

‘This Sir John – is he capable of valuing the collection?’

‘In terms of money?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I do not know. You could invite him to come and see it.’

‘Very well, I will. He will not be empowered, if you are correctly informed and Oliver had no real right to the objects – although I still contest that – he will not be empowered to make me give them up, will he?’

‘You must find that out. I have no idea, except that any objects of intrinsic value would come under the heading of treasure trove, I fancy. If they do, there is a legal aspect which would have to be faced.’

‘Oh, I see. But the law couldn’t punish me for inheriting, could it?’

‘As a receiver of stolen goods, you might – I am not versed in these matters – you might find yourself in a difficult position. Why did you go to prison?’

‘For stealing. Would they – they wouldn’t, surely, bring that up again after all this time? Why, it was over thirty years ago, and I’ve never been in that sort of trouble since, in spite of what my so-called friends are beginning to hint.’

Dame Beatrice thought that prison might be another of Mrs Breydon-Waters’ hallucinations, but she did not say so. All that she did say was,

‘If I may offer a suggestion, I would ask Sir John’s advice when you see him. He is a kindly as well as a knowledgeable man. He will be able to tell you exactly what to do about these objects.’

‘But suppose he wants me to sacrifice the collection to a museum! Where would my nest-egg come in? I am relying on the sale of these things to bring me the money I so badly need.’

Dame Beatrice nodded, not without sympathy, then suddenly asked,

‘But what would your son think of this summary disposal of his collection?’

‘I have not dared to ask him,’ Mrs Breydon-Waters replied. ‘I have been in communication with him on the other side, as I told you, but not to that extent. I

thought I would have the sale – an auction would be the best way, perhaps – and then let him know what I had done.’

Dame Beatrice sighed, but, out of consideration for her hostess’s feelings, almost inaudibly, and soon afterwards left the house for the *Gauntlet Hotel*. Here she gave Laura a lively account of her visit.

‘She must be *non compos mentis*,’ said Laura. ‘Does she really think she is in touch with the Infinite?’

‘I could not form an opinion. What interests me a good deal more is that at some time, so she told me, she was in touch with the police, and I do not believe it, and I cannot understand why she asserts it.’

‘And is the collection really valuable?’

‘It is beyond my scope to pass an opinion. Sir John will tell us.’

‘Is he the next pawn on the chessboard?’

‘I should not choose so to describe a man of his eminence, but I am hoping that something will transpire from his visit.’ With this remark she left Laura and rang up the Superintendent. He replied that he would welcome a visit from her and fixed it for the following morning. Dame Beatrice reported her interview with Mrs Breydon-Waters and expressed doubts as to the truth of the statement that Breydon-Waters had been to his home on the Friday night.

‘I doubt it, too, ma’am,’ the Superintendent agreed. ‘We’ve made the closest enquiries, and none of the neighbours either saw or heard him. At this time of year, when the evenings are long and light, somebody would have been certain to see him, you’d think. After all, it’s a terrace house in a quiet road where the people may keep themselves to themselves, so to speak, but where we usually find they know as much about one another’s business and comings and goings as if they lived in a small village. Very parochial, those sort of roads are, especially since the war, when they all got to know each other on fire-watch nights and the A.R.P. jobs. What puzzle me is why she say he went home if that didn’t.’

‘She seems to find it difficult to distinguish between his terrestrial and his celestial person.’

‘Batty, is she? Well, that would be more in your department than mine. We have no reason to think that, if she’s lying, there’s anything criminal about it.’

‘Are you any nearer to reducing the number of suspects?’

‘I’m afraid not. What we need now are a few pennies from heaven. I don’t like to own to it, but we seem to have come to a dead end. Nobody appear to have had

any good reason for killing him. We've questioned everybody at his school and everybody down his road and the people at the moorings in Wroxham where he and Mr Vindella keep that motor-cruiser, but we can't get a line anywhere. Mr Vindella was a little sore at him over the young lady, but he pointed out that it's the young lady's own business whom she marry. Besides, school-masters don't murder each other because their girl-friends let them down. And another thing: I know you believe one of the members of that Society kill him, but I still think it need have no connection with the Society at all. The trouble about *that* is that we haven't found anybody except the school-masters and the Society who know him well enough to want to murder him.'

'Very true.'

'We even annoyed the headmaster by asking whether he had any wicked, spiteful boys on the books, but that didn't lead anywhere, either.'

'It is the *place* of death which makes me feel that the members of the Society must come first on the list of suspects. How does one entice a man to meet one in such a spot as Pigmy's Ladder at such an hour? – for there is no way of disproving the medical evidence. This young man died either late on the Friday night or very early on the Saturday morning, and, in either case, while it was still dark. What was the reason for such secrecy?'

'Ah, there it is, ma'am. If we knew that, we could pretty nearly name the killer, I have no doubt. I suppose they couldn't have been after buried treasure?'

'Of a kind, perhaps. Something which might look quite unattractive to us might well spell treasure to a keen and knowledgeable archaeologist.'

'Yes, I understand that, but what could be as attractive as all that? – and was it really enough to make *murder* an attractive proposition?'

'I can see the problem and at present I confess that I cannot resolve it. Let us return to our main point. It does not seem as though Mr Breydon-Waters did return home on that Friday night. What, then, disregarding her fixation upon the spirit world and its attendant irrelevancies, was his mother's reason for saying that he did return?'

'She would have to be in with the murderer, ma'am, as I see it.'

'Which need not indicate that she was an accomplice in the murder itself.'

'Wouldn't she have needed to be assured of the murder's intentions?'

'Not necessarily. I see the situation as something like this: the murderer promises Mrs Breydon-Waters some fairly substantial advantage – probably in terms of

money – if she will co-operate with him in some venture which he has at heart. This venture, we will assume, had something to do with archaeological discovery, presumably in connection with Pigmy's Ladder. Mrs Breydon-Waters' part in the plot was a small and restricted one – she is, as we are aware, a somewhat obtuse and stupid woman.'

'Her part, ma'am, you seem to mean, was to say that Breydon-Waters came home on that Friday night, when, in fact, he did not. But what was the point of that?'

'To confuse the issue in some way.'

'But it hasn't confused it, ma'am, except to delay us a little.'

'Possibly this delay fitted in with the murderer's plans.'

'I don't see how.'

'Neither do I, at present, Superintendent, but it is only a question of time before we find out.'

'What do you suggest that we do, then?'

'I suggest that you pursue your own line of enquiries in any way that suggests itself to you, and that I arrange for the visit of Sir John St John John to Nodding. He is going to lecture to the Society and, I hope, the general public, on archaeological discovery. It is an excuse to get him here so that we can pick his brains. He may have light to shed.'

'It's to be hoped so, ma'am. I think I shall tackle Mrs Breydon-Waters again and try to break her down over that Friday night visit from her son.'

'If my own enquiries reach the stage I hope for, there will be no need for that. I confess I feel sorry for the poor woman, and I absolve her, in my own mind, from having had any criminal intentions. She is short of money and somewhat short of mental stability, and that, I am certain, accounts for much.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Beri-Beri

'What d'ye think she had in her hold?

There was nutmegs in her and there was gold.'

Anon.

EFORE the date of Sir John's visit was settled, Ronald Downing convened an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Nodding Archaeological Society, ostensibly to discuss the arrangements for Sir John's lecture and the kind of hospitality which was to be accorded him, but actually, in addition, so that Dame Beatrice could question the members publicly and in front of witnesses.

So far, she had not interviewed five of the men. These were Francis Bell, Harry Glover, William Streatley and the two young members, Peter Downing and Michael Gold. Peter was at Stowe, with a year to go; Michael was in his last term at Winchester. These boys Dame Beatrice felt that she could safely ignore as possible murders. Neither was likely to have been in Nodding at the time of Breydon-Waters' death and, in any case, except for irrefutable evidence to the contrary, she was not prepared to connect boys of their type with murder.

Bell, Glover and Streatley came into the same category as all the other members; that is, they were possible suspects and she felt that it would be an advantage to put them on the same footing as those she had already interviewed.

Bell was an accountant and a bachelor. He had a flat just outside Nodding, made some excellent coffee for the visitor and answered her questions frankly but unhelpfully. He was a lazy member of the Society, he alleged, who rarely attended meetings and was interested in no archaeological evidence except that of ancient coins.

Dame Beatrice, remembering a certain set of velvet-lined cases in Breydon-Waters' collection, pigeon-holed this piece of information and soon afterwards took her leave and went to see Harry Glover.

Glover was employed as a clerk in the rating department of the Town Hall. He lived with a little daughter in an old cottage in a mean street near part of the city wall. Dame Beatrice had learned from Downing that he was divorced and had been granted the custody of the girl, as his wife's record of marital infidelity rendered her unfitted, in the opinion of the court, to bring up a child. It was a sad story, but Glover seemed cheerful enough as he welcomed her in and sent his daughter out with a message to a neighbour.

'It's about Breydon-Waters' death, I expect,' he said, when the child had gone. 'I've heard from one or two of the others that you've been round to our members asking questions. What do you want from me?'

'I want you to tell me who killed Mr Breydon-Waters.'

'I only wish I knew. I'd seek him out and shake him by the hand.'

‘I have gathered that Mr Breydon-Waters was not generally very popular.’

‘He was a wart,’ said Glover, without heat but with conviction.

‘In what particular way?’

‘He was a snob. Sucked up to Downing, Gold, Carfrae and Streatley – particularly Streatley – and had nothing but his pig’s snout up in the air for the rest of us. I don’t really know why I’ve kept up my membership. I’m not particularly interested.’

‘What caused you to join the Society in the first place?’

‘Oh, we had a master at school who was exceptionally keen.’

‘A Mr Timberley.’

‘Ah, you got his name from Bert Sansfoy.’

‘I did. I take it that you were in the same form.’

‘No, but Mr Timberley was the history specialist and talked to all the senior forms about the Society, I expect.’

‘You mentioned Mr Streatley. Was there any particular reason why Mr Breydon-Waters should have been particularly anxious to be his friend?’

‘Only that Streatley stinks of money. He’s of independent means. His father had big shares in a boot factory, and Streatley followed in his footsteps as a sleeping partner and pulls in the cash by the sack-load. It seems there’s money in boots and shoes.’

‘One would judge so, by the number of shops which offer them for sale. Is there nothing besides his general unpopularity to account for Mr Breydon-Waters’ death?’

‘I don’t know of anything. I suppose it couldn’t have been accidental?’

‘According to the medical evidence, with which, as a doctor, I concur, that would have been so unlikely that we feel justified in ruling it out.’

‘I see. Well, I’m sorry not to be more helpful, Dame Beatrice. Here’s Doreen back again. She doesn’t have an inkling what you’ve come about, of course.’

‘Quite.’ Dame Beatrice returned to the *Gauntlet*, rang up William Streatley and arranged an interview for the following day. Streatley declared himself delighted by the prospect of a visit from her, and cordially invited her to lunch.

He proved to be a man of about fifty, with an aquiline nose, stiff grey hair, a less grey toothbrush moustache and a high colour. The house was a small Queen Anne

domicile in a short, cobbled street in the most picturesque, because the oldest, part of the city. There were a fifteenth-century dwelling and two Jacobean houses in the same street, and the newest house in it had been erected in 1780.

Streatley's home was run by a butler-cum-valet, a cook, a kitchenmaid and a housemaid, and was quietly comfortable, unostentatious, and furnished, with loving care, according to its period. Dame Beatrice, appreciative of the house and of the hospitality she was offered, put off all mention of her business until after lunch; then Streatley himself introduced the subject as they sipped coffee.

'I don't know what you want me to tell you,' he said, 'and I don't know whether I can tell you anything useful, anyway.'

'Would you call yourself an active member of the Nodding Archaeological Society?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'An active member?' He smiled. 'I attend all the meetings and have been present at all the digs, but I've never accepted office, not even as an ordinary member of the committee.'

'What did you think of Mr Breydon-Waters?'

'To speak ill of the dead, I thought him in pretty poor taste.'

'Oh, really? That is extremely interesting, in the light of what others have told me. What did you dislike in him?'

'I always thought he kept some of our finds for himself.'

'Indeed? I happen to know that he was a collector of antiquities.'

'I thought I was right. Besides, there was that trouble in Greece a year or two back. I always thought Waters knew more about the disappearance of those engraved gems than he ever admitted. Have you, may I ask, seen this collection you mention?'

'I have given it a cursory inspection, but I am no expert and could not tell you with any degree of confidence or accuracy what is there.'

'Why, where did he keep it?'

'In a downstairs room at his mother's house.'

'I'd like to see it.'

'Sir John must see it first, I feel.'

'Oh, certainly, but you must admit that, as members of the Nodding Society, we have some rights in the matter.'

‘I do admit it. What I anticipate will happen is that the Society will accompany Sir John to view the collection after the conclusion of his lecture.’

‘Splendid.’

‘What I am a little concerned about is the position in which Mrs Breydon-Waters will find herself if some of the objects were, in fact, appropriated wrongly by her son. She speaks optimistically of selling the collection and using the proceeds to eke out her slender income. She seemed to have no idea that the pieces might not be hers to sell until I pointed that out.’

‘Oh, well, no doubt the Society can do something about that.’

‘You are promising for yourself, I feel, rather than for the Society as a whole.’

Streatley laughed.

‘That’s as may be,’ he said. ‘Fortunately, I am not a poor man, and, except for a couple of grand-nephews of tender age, I have no encumbrances or commitments.’

‘Talking of boys,’ said Dame Beatrice, after a slight pause, ‘can you tell me when Mr Downing’s son was last in Nodding?’

‘Young Peter? Oh, not for some time. Last Christmas he went to Chamonix for skiing and during the summer vac. he was prancing about Greenland on some sort of scientific expedition.’

‘And Mr Gold’s son?’

‘He’s still at school, too, and spends the holidays with his parents. Quite often they go over to Paris, otherwise they go to relations in Brighton.’

‘What about during term-time?’

‘The boy does not come home during term-time.’

‘Not even for the great Jewish feasts?’

‘No, not for any reason whatever. And if you are wondering whether either of those lads had anything to do with Waters’ death, you’re barking up the wrong tree, Dame Beatrice.’

‘I am not barking up trees; I am merely leaving no stone unturned. You are now the last of my suspects.’

‘Suspects?’ He smiled. ‘So you’ve “got a little list”?’

Dame Beatrice leered kindly at him and thanked him for his hospitality. When she left him she rang up Mrs Vindella.

‘Oh, I’m sure you can come along and see Terry again,’ said Mrs Vindella over the telephone. ‘He’ll be ever so pleased. He’s got a Schools Athletics Meeting tonight, but, if you’d like to call here at about nine, he’ll have had his dinner by then and you could have coffee together. Would that suit you?’

Dame Beatrice professed herself charmed by this arrangement and arrived at the house at the appointed time. As on her first visit, Vindella himself opened the door to her.

‘Well, well, well,’ he said. ‘To what do we owe the honour? Do come in, Dame Beatrice.’ He sounded slightly uneasy, she thought.

‘I am still trying to establish the reason for the death of Mr Breydon-Waters,’ she said. ‘Thank you, I will come in. Have you any secrets from your mother?’

‘Like that, is it? Well, there might be one or two, but, so far as poor old Bill is concerned, my conscience is as clear as a crystal sphere.’

‘I do not believe that I have ever seen a crystal sphere. Am I right in thinking that Mr Breydon-Waters offered to buy your half-share in the cabin cruiser you owned co-jointly with him?’

‘Well, what do you know!’

‘I do not know, but your idiom appears to confirm me in my opinion.’

‘I have no reason to fear my mother. Come right in. What,’ he added confidentially, as he closed the front door behind him, ‘has old Bill’s purchase to do with his death?’

‘Very little, most probably.’

Vindella showed her into the living-room of the small house.

‘Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, ma,’ he said. Mrs Vindella, stately and composed, extended a welcome.

‘How very nice of you to call again, Dame Beatrice. Now I hope that my naughty boy is going to be of real help. I take great interest in our local murder and am not at all sorry that a friendship I never cared for has come to an end. Terry knows I never liked Oliver – Bill, as Terry called him.’

‘Now, ma, be quiet,’ said her son, ‘or I shall ask Dame Beatrice to conduct this interview *in camera*. If you want to gather the gen, stop reminiscing, and stop moaning.’

‘You’re a dreadful boy,’ said his mother fondly. ‘Please don’t let me interrupt you, Dame Beatrice.’

‘Then stop doing it,’ muttered her son.

‘I have received the answer I expected,’ said Dame Beatrice to Mrs Vindella. ‘Your son tells me that he sold out his share of the motor-cruiser *Beri-Beri* some weeks ago to Mr Breydon-Waters. I had already guessed that this must have been the case, but am glad to have it confirmed.’

‘Yes, Terry sold his half of the boat when there was the trouble over Priscilla Clarke,’ said Mrs Vindella.

‘Now, ma, mind your own business!’

‘But, Terry, dear, you bought me a coffee service out of the proceeds! And that reminds me...’

She beamed with the goodwill of a hostess and sailed in stately fashion from the room.

‘Good old ma!’ said Vindella, real appreciation in his tones. ‘Why I had to get all hot under the collar when poor old Prissie transferred her affections to poor old Bill *Idon* ’tknow. Ma would talk the hind leg off a donkey and drop every brick in the Empire State Building – if it’s built of brick! – but she’s one of the best. What made you so sure I’d sold out my half-share in the *Beri-Beri*?’ he broke off to ask.

‘It was obvious that Mr Breydon-Waters had to hide during the fortnight that he was supposed to have spent in Palestine. Once I had heard that you and he had purchased a motor cruiser but had not used it since shortly after Easter, I put two and two together, particularly as I knew that he had drawn out just over two hundred pounds and closed his account at the bank.’

‘Yes, he paid me two hundred and ten. It was nothing like enough, but I was as sick as mud over the Priscilla business, so I let him get away with it.’

‘I should have thought you would have denied him anything you could, if you were so angry with him.’

‘It wasn’t him, it was her, the little twerp. My vanity was wounded, I suppose, to think she could prefer that wart to me. Anyway, I was sick of the boat and glad enough to be quit of it on any reasonable terms.’

‘Yes, I see. Did Mr Breydon-Waters give any reason for wishing to buy you out?’

‘Oh, he smirked a bit and said it seemed a pity to leave the boat to rot and nobody to use it and suggested that one of us should buy the other out. I told him I had no money to spare, which he knew was true because I’d dropped a packet at the races earlier on and was trying to cover up a bit, so he offered me a hundred and eighty for my half-share. I told him to go and fry himself, so he said, “It’s all very well,

but I can't go much higher, and it would put you straight and with a bit to spare." I stuck out for two hundred and forty and we came to an agreement for two hundred and ten. I'm bound to say that he paid up on the nail and I gave him a receipt for the money, and that was that.'

'But are you not paid by cheque? – for your teaching, I mean.'

'In Nodding, no. They give us a sort of chit thing and we go and cash it at the bank chosen by the Education Committee, which happens to be Wylie's. We don't come under the County scheme, so far as the lolly is concerned.'

'Oh, I see.'

At this point Mrs Vindella came in with the coffee and three miniature bottles of Tia Maria.

'Coffee, Dame Beatrice? Then a tiny sip of this. I do hope you like Tia Maria. It goes with coffee, I always think, and if we have our own individual bottles we can please ourselves, can't we?'

Dame Beatrice agreed that they could and poured herself out a liberal tot from the bottle assigned to her.

'Your son is being extremely helpful,' she said. 'The only thing now is for me to obtain permission from Mrs Breydon-Waters to inspect the *Beri-Beri*, and for Mr Vindella, if he will be so kind, to arrange to conduct me to the moorings and show me over the cruiser.'

'A pleasure,' said Vindella, 'any evening after school or on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday. If after school, let me know in advance, because of cricket and athletics and things.'

Mrs Breydon-Waters, appealed to over the telephone the following day, raised no objection to the proposed visit to the boat.

'Mr Streatley has offered to buy it from me,' she said. 'He is being very, very good. But nothing can be settled until the survey has been done. As he says, quite rightly, he may be a wealthy man, but he likes to know what he's buying. All the same, I know he's really doing it to help me out, now that I haven't Oliver's money to rely on.'

So a date was arranged for the following Saturday morning, as Vindella had explained that there was no school match on that day and that 'old Sippy' had agreed to supervise the athletics practice. Dame Beatrice and Laura picked him up in the Jaguar at ten o'clock in the morning and George drove them to Wroxham, where the *Beri-Beri* was moored.

‘What about a drink?’ asked Vindella, as the car crossed Wroxham Bridge.

‘King’s Head, George,’ said Laura. The car drew up in a parking space. ‘Drinks are on me.’ She led the way into the saloon bar. ‘Right! Dame B., what will you have?’

Dame Beatrice chose sherry, Vindella beer. Laura herself drank Scotch. The bar was well patronised and after a minute or two a man in a white sweater, navy-blue shorts and a yachting cap came over to their table, tankard in hand.

‘Well, well,’ he said heartily, addressing Vindella, ‘look who’s here! Haven’t seen you in months, old fellow. What’s been eating you? – Oh, oh, of course. Very sorry. Poor old Half-pint. Keep forgetting. Of course, you owned the *Beri-Beri* together, didn’t you? Terribly sorry to hear about this – er – his end. Police getting anywhere yet?’

Vindella introduced him to Dame Beatrice and then to Laura, who, against her will, asked him to sit with them. Dame Beatrice enquired of him the name of his boat and asked where he moored. He waved a hand.

‘Oh, this side the bridge, you know. Quieter. Waiting for my party to turn up, as a matter of fact. Going to Ludham. Fair ladies want to see the church there, goodness knows why.’

‘We should be interested to accompany you, if we may. I should rather say, to follow you, I expect. Mr Vindella and Mrs Gavin, between them, can easily handle the *Beri-Beris* far as Ludham, I am sure,’ said Dame Beatrice, becoming expansive.

Laura had to exercise care not to look dismayed. It was not that she doubted her capacity to handle a motor cruiser but that she had taken an instant dislike to the yachting cap and its owner. She knew Dame Beatrice well enough to realise, however, that there was always method in the apparent madness, so she rearranged her countenance and joined in the responses. She finished her drink, refused the invitation of their new acquaintance to partake of another round, and, promising to meet him later in the day, she and her party went off to the moorings to find the *Beri-Beri*.

The cruiser was moored in a small dyke with three other motor cruisers. She suffered little by comparison with them, for it was evident that she had not been neglected, although she lacked the final spit and polish of the other boats.

‘Not as young as she was,’ said Vindella, ‘but I wrote to them to fill her up, so we should be all right for a cruise as far as Ludham. We’ll have lunch on board, if you

like. There's nowhere to stop unless you'd like to go ashore at Horning. We could eat at the *Swan*, or there's a country club where I'm a member. That might be best.'

'Dame Beatrice will decide,' said Laura firmly, 'but I think I know the place you mean. It stands up fairly high on the far side of the road after you've passed the village. Many a good lunch and dinner have I consumed there.'

'We might have brought Hamish,' said Dame Beatrice. 'He would have enjoyed this.'

'He'll be doing fine with Alice. She's taking him to Blakeney. He'll have the time of his life there, and a jolly good lunch at the hotel.'

They went aboard the *Beri-Berito* look round. She was a bigger boat than Laura had imagined.

'Three-berth?' she said to Vindella. He nodded.

'Wish I could afford to buy her back,' he said, with real regret in his tone. Laura nodded.

'I know how you feel,' she said.

'How long do you suppose we shall wait for your friend?' Dame Beatrice asked Vindella.

'Barney? Depends upon how thirsty he is.'

'Then, if you will be good enough to remain on deck and look out for his boat, Laura and I will explore this one.'

'Right. May I ask what you expect to find?'

'I do not expect to find anything of importance, unless Mr Breydon-Waters left a diary here.'

'A diary? I don't know about that, but he was always writing up the log.'

'Excellent. We shall turn our attention to that. What does it look like?'

'Oh, a stiff-covered record book pinched from school. Black, and about a quarter of an inch thick. Probably find it in the locker under the forepeak.'

'Thank you. What is the name of your friend's boat?'

'The *Black-eyed Sailor*.'

'You will let us know when she passes?'

‘There’s no hurry. By the time old Barney has finished his drinks, he’ll have his work cut out to negotiate Wroxham bridge. Only hope he remembers to hoot. You come into it blind from that side, unless you keep very well over.’

The *Beri-Beri*, whatever her age and outward appearance, had been taken care of, and everything below deck was as neat and ship-shape as could be. She was a typical Broads cruiser with an entrance down four steps amidships. Her fore-cabin contained a narrow settee-berth on the port side with a small wardrobe at its head, and opposite this were a gas-cooker with oven, the sink, and some shelves and cup-boards. A small bulkhead, which stretched half-way across the cabin, screened off a wash-basin and W.C.

The cabin doors opened on to the well of the boat where, opposite the companion-way, was a seat with lockers under it. The steering was by wheel from the well. There were three small cylinders of calor gas stacked close by.

The after-cabin, used as a saloon, contained a wider bunk on the starboard side and another narrow one on the port side and between the two was a folding table. Drawers were fitted underneath the broad bunk and there was a small, squarish sideboard at its head. Altogether, said Laura approvingly, it was as snug and roomy and comfortable a little job as could be desired.

They set to work to ransack the drawers in search of the log, and found it in one of the lockers under the seat in the well. Laura climbed on to the foredeck to join Vindella, who was keeping a look-out for the *Black-eyed Sailor*, and they sat with their legs dangling over the side and shared Laura’s chocolate, while Dame Beatrice, seated on the lockers, perused the last entries in the log. The sun shone, the moored boats cast their reflections on the rippled waters, yachts and cruisers moved in constant procession down the Bure on their way to Wroxham Broad, Salhouse Broad and Horning, or further to Ranworth Broad and the confluence of the Bure and the Ant, or further still to South Walsham Broad along the Fleet Dyke or past St Benet’s Abbey ruins to Thurne Mouth. From there the waters flowed to Acle Bridge and Great Yarmouth.

The first entry in the log to engage the attention of Dame Beatrice was the reference to the sale of Vindella’s half-share.

‘*April 8th*. T.V. cheesed off about P.C. so this boat too hot to hold both of us, and have offered to buy him out.

‘*May 10th*. T. agreed to sell, but price stiff for me, although not excessive really. Must beat him down.

‘*May 20th*. Decided to buy at £210. Will clean me out, but cannot see anything else for it. Must have a base from which to work. Leave of absence granted, so stiffest fence crossed, but have not decided exactly how to proceed. Taking three days off to provision ship, then Whit Week, so no questions asked when I go back.

‘*June 12th*. In the clear. Have written to G. refusing air travel. Should like to go to Gerazin, but Minos was a priest-king and in his sign I shall make my name known for ever. Cash all right so far. Paid for May, and have cashed voucher.’

There followed daily entries. Many miles of water lay between Wroxham and Beccles, and it seemed that Breydon-Waters had made a fairly leisurely cruise. According to these entries he was in strange waters ‘where nobody is likely to know me’ as soon as he had left Great Yarmouth and passed through the navigable channel of Breydon Water. From this he was on his way to St Olave’s. Here he re-provisioned. There was a long list of stores.

The last entry but one in the log was dated June 22nd, three days, according to the computations of the police, before Breydon-Waters’ death.

‘*June 22nd*. All going well, except have uneasy feeling that am being followed and spied on. Nerves, most likely. P.L. not the most comfortable place on one’s own, but must not let things get me down. Work not hard, but have to make myself carry on after about the first couple of hours. Light evenings a great help, as can still cycle back to boat before dusk. Dread going aboard after dark, although this quite irrational. Beccles charming old place, but do not venture ashore much for fear of being recognised, although should be safe enough down here at this time of year. Weather remains wonderfully fine. Wouldn’t mind living here instead of Nodding. So peaceful and such nice old houses, but Mother would miss her friends and the shops she knows.’

The log ended:

‘*July 25th*. It must be done tonight and all put shipshape. Shall look forward to seeing their faces, especially R.D.’s, W.S.’s and T.V.’s.’

Dame Beatrice had made notes as she read. She had barely replaced the log in the locker when Vindella sang out,

‘*Black-eyed Sailor*, ahoy!’

He scrambled into the well and started the engine, and in a moment or two was backing the *Beri-Beri* from the dyke on to the River Bure. Dame Beatrice remained seated on the lockers and Laura on the starboard side of the tiny foredeck so that she did not block the helmsman’s view. The *Black-eyed Sailors* spotted them,

returned Vindella's hail, exchanged waves of the hand and the two craft chugged downstream for the great bend at Horning and passed out of history.

'Why on earth did you co-opt that crashing cad and his party?' Laura demanded when, at Horning, after lunch, they had detached themselves from the others and were waiting for George, to whom Laura had telephoned, to pick them up in the car and return them to Nodding. 'And I thought you wanted to visit Ludham church.'

'It has an interesting font,' said Dame Beatrice. 'As for the rest, it had been my intention to pump our new friend about Mr Breydon-Waters' doings at Wroxham during that fateful fortnight which he was to have spent in Palestine. Happily, the log-book I studied answered all the questions I might have asked, so that we have been able to enjoy a pleasure cruise instead of a business trip. That is all, dear child, except for one pertinent and interesting entry which may repay investigation.'

'Well, we've had a decent lunch, anyway,' said Laura. 'And there are worse places than these grounds in which to sit and wait for the car. Hope Vindella – I don't at all dislike him, by the way, and I don't believe he's the villain of the piece – gets the *Beri-Beriback* to Wroxham all right, as it seems to be one of Mrs Breydon-Waters' assets.'

'He will,' said Dame Beatrice, with well-placed confidence, 'and I must speak to him about the boat when opportunity offers.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

General Meeting Extraordinary

'This, however, is not making progress with my story.'

Emily
Brönte

HE circulating of the agenda of the Extraordinary General Meeting of the Nodding Archaeological Society had the effect of bringing all the members, except Peter Downing and Michael Gold, for whom term was not over, to a screened-off section of the Great Hall of the Castle Museum.

When certain matters concerning the running of the Society had been settled, Downing went to his office to bring Dame Beatrice and Laura into the meeting to discuss the arrangements for Sir John's visit.

'Sir John has offered us the last Thursday in this month or the first Thursday in July,' he said, when he had introduced Dame Beatrice to the Society (as such – she had already met the members individually). 'Has anybody any preference?'

Vindella and the two women teachers spoke at once and together. The first Thursday had been fixed for the inter-schools' sports day, the proceedings of which were unlikely to be over much before half-past six.

'And then there's the clearing up and chivvying the youngsters into changing and clearing off home,' added Vindella. 'It's the heck of a day for us. Even if it weren't, we'd never have time to get home for a meal and a bath and get along here by eight o'clock for the lecture, so, if it's all the same...'

It was all the same, he was assured. The meeting agreed that Sir John's offer of the last Thursday in June be accepted and the secretary was instructed to get the letter off without delay.

'What is Sir John going to talk to us about? Has he said?' enquired Gold, looking up from his scribbled notes.

'At my special request,' Dame Beatrice replied, 'after his film and commentary on recent work in the Near East, he is going to talk about excavations in chalk and limestone.'

'Pretty wide, isn't it?' asked Streatley.

'Intentionally so, I expect,' said Downing, raising his eyebrows as he looked at Dame Beatrice.

'It embraces everything from cave art to the Maiden Castle system of Iron Age defences,' she replied.

'With an incursion into Neolithic flint mines, I take it,' said Francis Bell. There was an uncomfortable silence until Bell added nervously, 'I was only going on what Dame Beatrice said just now – that it was at her special request that he had chosen his subject.'

'You are right, Mr Bell,' said the witch-like old lady. 'Neolithic flint-mines, including those well-known ones in Sussex, and then, of course, the East Anglian Grimes Graves and Pigmy's Ladder will be referred to in the course of the talk.'

'I don't see why,' said Constance Rambeau. 'I mean, I should have thought we'd all had enough of Pigmy's Ladder for the time being – or haven't the rest of you

been grilled by Dame Beatrice?’ She smiled disarmingly and Dame Beatrice leered beatifically in response. Downing forestalled a mass response to the question by gesturing, and then rose to his feet.

‘I think we may take it that Dame Beatrice has questioned every member in turn,’ he said. ‘The only exceptions are the two boys who are still at school and who can be shown to have been nowhere near Pigmy’s Ladder when Breydon-Waters met his death there. I think, too, that we should ask Mrs Rambeau to withdraw the word “grilled” as being offensive in itself and by no means an accurate description of the way in which Dame Beatrice has performed her task – not a pleasant one, I am sure – of questioning us. She is attached, in her capacity of consultant psychiatrist, to the Home Office and is working on this distressing case of the death of our fellow member, Oliver Breydon-Waters, at the request of the County Police. I therefore suggest that if the murderer can be found as a result of her efforts—’

‘Oh, very well! Very well! Withdraw!’ cried Mrs Rambeau theatrically. ‘Scratch it out of your minutes, Mr Secretary, for goodness sake! Dame Beatrice knows perfectly well that I only intended a joke! Really!’ She got up and rushed from the meeting.

‘Dear me!’ said Carfrae.

‘I’ll go after her. She can’t be feeling well,’ said his daughter.

‘No, I will,’ said Priscilla Clarke. Both immediately retired.

‘Good,’ said Vindella. He gazed around at the enormous and threatening bulk of the Norman architecture about him. ‘Now we can get down to brass-tacks. Much easier without the three lady members.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Downing.

‘I take it that, having settled Sir John’s date, and having been told the subject of the lecture, (although I should have thought we might have had some say about that), we’ve now reached Other Business on the agenda. And I want to say...’

‘You’re out of order,’ said Streatley. ‘We have to consider first what hospitality is to be offered Sir John. Has he given any indication of how long he can stay?’

‘He is to lunch with me at the *Gauntlet*,’ Dame Beatrice replied, in response to a glance from the president, ‘and then he has been invited to meet Mrs Breydon-Waters.’

‘Why?’ burst out Harry Glover. ‘Is it all part of the same put-up job?’

‘Yes, it is, Mr Glover,’ replied Dame Beatrice serenely. ‘Am I to take it that you object to my attempts to discover the identity of Mr Breydon-Waters’ murderer?’

Glover subsided, with an angry mutter, the gist of which was that he objected to the washing of dirty linen in public. To the general surprise, as was evident, Bert Sansfoy took up the cudgels.

‘I believe Mrs Waters is a decent old mawther, then,’ he said. ‘That isn’t right she should be mizzled about with. That can’t help what her boy was like.’

‘And what was her boy like?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘A dirty, thieving, little old bastard,’ said Sam Brent, without heat, as one stating a known fact.

‘Chapter and verse, Mr Brent?’

Brent caught his chief’s eye. Ronald Downing was registering strong disapproval.

‘No, I open my big mouth too wide,’ said Brent. ‘Think nawthen of it. Let’s get on with the meeting.’

‘Where were we, Mr Secretary?’ asked Downing.

‘Sir John is to lunch with Dame Beatrice at the *Gauntlet* and then he is invited to meet Mrs Breydon-Waters. Would that be in her own home?’

‘Yes, it would. It appears that Mr Breydon-Waters made a collection of objects which might interest Sir John. Mrs Breydon-Waters is most anxious to obtain Sir John’s opinion as to their intrinsic value. She proposes to sell the collection if it has any monetary worth.’

‘Monetary worth? Oh, it could hardly have that!’ exclaimed Vindella. ‘It would only consist of the odds and ends of flint implements and potsherds that we’ve all pocketed from time to time on the various digs – things which are so common that every little local museum has examples of them.’

‘For instance, Mr Vindella?’

‘Well, sling stones, scrapers, sickles, oyster-shell coinage, lance-heads, arrow-tips, fragments of “beaker” pottery and so forth. Haven’t we all taken bits and pieces from the sites we’ve excavated?’

‘By general agreement, of course,’ David Gold put in. ‘Always by general agreement, and only when, as Vindella says, the supply exceeds the demands of the museums.’

Dame Beatrice made rapid notes, and glanced across at Laura, who, at a table just outside the circle of the meeting, was also taking notes.

‘This is most helpful,’ she said. ‘Do you remember in what year the Society was founded, Mr Downing?’

‘In my predecessor’s second year as curator here. Carfrae will bear me out. It was when that fellow Branwick turned up a bronze spear-head on his farm out Gossett way. Do you remember the date, Carfrae?’

‘Now, of course I do. We can look up the first minute-book to confirm it for Dame Beatrice, but it would have been in ’37, I fancy. I was a founder member, to the best of my recollection. Anyway, I’ll look it up.’

‘You’ll need the key,’ said Gold. ‘Is it handy, Downing?’

‘Hanging in my office. You might just see how Mrs Rambeau is going on. Never been the same since her husband died,’ Downing added, in an aside to Dame Beatrice, as Gold went briskly out through the enormously heavy Norman archway which led to a modern passage and so to the curator’s office. ‘Very sudden and sad affair. Fell down a lift-shaft. It was never completely cleared up how it happened. She’s been nervy and on the jump ever since.’

Dame Beatrice made a slight sound which conveyed either an expression of sympathy or one of ironic doubt, according to the ear of each particular hearer, and Gold came back with the key, which he handed to Carfrae. It proved to unlock one of the exhibits in the form of a typical Georgian drawing-room which was built in the north-east corner of the Great Hall. On three sides it had wooden and glass screens so that visitors to the museum could peer in and look at the fireplace and the furnishings.

Carfrae disappeared into this *pseudo*-room and returned in a few moments with two heavy, leather-covered volumes, which he handed over to Gold.

‘Here we are,’ said the secretary, when he had flicked over the first few pages of one of them. ‘The Society was inaugurated in September, 1937. – So you were right. Was there any particular reason, Dame Beatrice...?’

‘I am not certain yet. Do those books contain records of all the transactions of the Society?’

‘This one contains the minutes of the various meetings up to 1940, when we disbanded because of the war, and then from our reformation up to the annual general meeting of last year. This one,’ he tapped the volume he had not opened, ‘contains brief accounts of our various activities, with lists of finds. It is the earliest of such records. We possess two other similar books, bringing our researches up to date.’

‘Most interesting. I should wish,’ said Dame Beatrice, turning to Downing, ‘to consult these records at some time in the very near future.’

‘Certainly, if the committee have no objection.’ He looked around him.

‘As long as they are not removed from here,’ put in Carfrae.

‘Agreed,’ said Dame Beatrice, at once. ‘I am most grateful. They may be of the utmost importance to me. I wonder whether I might have access to them tomorrow afternoon?’

‘With pleasure,’ Downing replied. ‘And, if you like, I can close the Georgian room and you can work in there. The candelabra all work by electricity, so you will have plenty of light. Now, gentlemen, is there any other business?’

‘Mrs Rambeau is going to be taken home by Miss Clarke,’ Gold remarked. ‘Miss Carfrae is seeing them off and locking up after them.’

‘We always lock the doors at night during our meetings,’ Downing explained. ‘We once found a tramp camping out in the Panorama Room and nowadays, unfortunately, there is always a chance of rowdies coming in and creating a disturbance if they see a light and the doors are unbolted.’

At this point Diana Carfrae returned to the meeting and asked brightly where it had got to.

‘It’s got to this,’ said Glover, ‘in my opinion: is Dame Beatrice prepared to tell us exactly how far she’s got in her enquiries?’

‘I agree with asking that, Mr Downing, sir,’ said Brent. ‘I take it we’ve wholly a right to know. We’ve answered a lot of questions and that seem as if we’re all under suspicion of bringing about Mr Waters’ untimely end, so I believe that’s only fair we should be told how we stand.’

There were slightly belligerent murmurs of assent. Dame Beatrice drew out a notebook from a capacious pocket in her skirt, surveyed her audience with an indulgent leer, and flipped over the pages.

‘I would not say that you are all under suspicion,’ she said. ‘What I *would* say is that my researches up-to-date have not given me a definite pointer to any one of you, or a complete alibi for anyone, either. The next thing I shall need to know, before I can eliminate any of you from the enquiry, is exactly where you were, and what you were doing, from Friday afternoon until Saturday midday, a fortnight ago last week-end.’

‘Police business, surely,’ growled the dry-stone expert, Chipping. Dame Beatrice nodded, slowly and rhythmically, and looked expectantly at him.

‘As you please, Mr Chipping,’ she said. ‘By the way, I shall require your services again, very shortly, at Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘For why, ma’am? Not as I won’t oblige you.’ He added the statement in great haste to the question and made a curious little gesture which Dame Beatrice recognised.

‘Do Cotswold people believe in the power of the evil eye?’ she asked. Chipping scowled and did not reply. ‘I will answer your question,’ she went on. ‘I need to have some more of that dry-stone walling removed.’ She paused, waiting for questions from the meeting. To her great satisfaction, none came. ‘So now,’ she went on briskly, ‘to my notes. I have made a little progress, but, as you will hear, it is not enough. Not nearly enough to be of help to the police, that is. For my own purposes, it is both interesting and valuable. Here it is.’

There was a slight stirring, shuffling and re-settling of her audience. Bert Sansfoy looked at his wristwatch.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Got to go. Early turn tomorrow, and mother, that don’t fare to be alone in the caravan after dusk fall. Good night, all.’

‘Good night,’ said a mechanical chorus of voices.

‘I’ll let you know if you’re bound for the lock-up tomorrow,’ said Chipping. ‘So long, Bert.’

‘You know, father,’ said Diana, ‘I ought to go, too. Mother won’t take the dog out on her own.’

‘The dog can stay for a bit. I daresay it won’t take Dame Beatrice long to tell us what we have to know,’ said her father, giving her a quelling, admonitory glance.

‘All right, then. But Mother will create,’ said Diana, settling back in her chair and taking out a cigarette.

‘Sorry, Diana,’ said Downing, with an apologetic smile. ‘No smoking in the museum.’

Diana thrust her case back into her handbag, raised her eyebrows and glanced amusedly around her at the vast, stone-flagged, heavily-walled room.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘The president’s word is law.’

‘It’s not my word. It’s the bye-law, my dear girl. You’d better tackle the Town Clerk about it,’ retorted Downing, a trifle testily. He, too, was longing for a cigarette. Diana shrugged her shoulders.

‘Can’t we begin?’ she said. Dame Beatrice, well-versed in the reactions of audiences, felt that this one was politely (on the whole) but definitely antagonistic. For one thing, the members were afraid of what she might be going to disclose; for another, they were tired of their chilly, grim, imperfectly lighted surroundings and, in the case of at least five of them, there was the agonising consciousness that time was slipping by and the pubs would close in less than an hour and a half.

‘Bert Sansfoy done the dirty,’ muttered Chipping to Brent. Both sighed, having a clear vision of Alfred, darts in hand, pint at the ready, in the public bar of the *Jack Cade*. Brent nodded.

‘Trust *him*!’ he said. Then, in the same low tone, ‘What’s she going to talk about now?’

‘Lawyer’s talk. Nawthen to go on, so her’ll try to get some more out of we.’

‘Nawthen more to get out of *me*. Told all I know.’

‘Same here, but not all I can guess, I reckon.’

Dame Beatrice looked at them and they were silent. There was an uneasy pause.

‘Well, now,’ she said, ‘it seems that Mr Breydon-Waters was not a popular member of the Society. He was considered to be snobbish, non-co-operative, unreliable and, in some respects, strange and somewhat irritating in his behaviour. He was a physical coward, a weather-cock and a picker-up of unconsidered trifles and of objects not so trifling. Would anyone care to enlarge on this unflattering description?’

‘No. That do be right enough, that do be,’ said Chipping, in the reassuring West Country burr that sounded oddly against the anxiously rising cadences of the East Anglian speech of Brent, and the educated accents of Downing, Gold and Streatley.

‘Then there is the other side of the medal,’ Dame Beatrice went on. ‘He seems to have been a good and devoted son, an excellent teacher and a useful man in handling a boat. Can anyone add to that?’

‘Yes,’ said Gold. ‘He was an inexhaustible man on a dig, keen as a terrier.’

‘If the terrier ’ad buried a bone,’ put in Chipping, with the sly humour of his kind.

‘That brings me to my point,’ said Dame Beatrice, glancing at Downing as though to warn him that this was indeed the case. ‘It has been suggested that Mr Breydon-Waters had become a member of the Society chiefly for what he could get out of it. Is that the general impression?’

‘It isn’t mine,’ said Streatley, unnecessarily loudly. ‘I think Breydon-Waters was a dead keen archaeologist. He was as pleased as a child whenever we found anything interesting.’

‘I don’t quarrel with that view, as it stands,’ said Gold, ‘but I had the impression, at times, that not everything of interest went into the Society’s collection. Of course, I may be mistaken, but I thought, Streatley, that you were of the same opinion.’ So did the interested Dame Beatrice.

‘I had a similar impression,’ said Downing, ‘but I could never prove anything, and it is not my policy to probe. I cannot imagine myself challenging any member as to whether he or she had contributed every find to the general collection.’

‘Did you employ workmen on any of the sites?’ Dame Beatrice asked.

‘Never,’ said Carfrae. ‘Speaking as the treasurer, it wouldn’t have paid us. With but one exception,’ he inclined his head towards Streatley, who smiled, ‘we are anything but wealthy folk. We all have to earn a living and two of us have sons to educate. What we do, quite often, if we hit upon a site which has popular, as against scientific or historic, interest, is to enlist the help of volunteers. These work under our supervision, of course, but they work extremely well, especially the schoolboys and schoolgirls.’

‘Brought into action by Mr Vindella and Mrs Rambeau, no doubt.’

‘No, no. I suggested it, but they vetoed the idea, saying that five days a week were sufficient. They were not prepared to supervise their pupils on Saturdays and during school holidays.’

‘One could not help but sympathise,’ observed Streatley, with his lazy smile, ‘so we had the High School girls and the older boys from the Technical College. The boys brought their metalwork-master and a mistress at the High School brought her girls.’

‘A distinction and also a difference, I feel.’

‘Oh, yes. The girls were undoubtedly under the control of the mistress and the boys dominated, in no uncertain fashion, their instructor.’ He rose and sauntered out, with an apologetic wave of the hand to the chairman.

‘Is there anything else that any member would care to contribute?’ Dame Beatrice enquired. There was the briefest of pauses; then Downing, in the voice of one pronouncing a benediction, formally declared the meeting closed. Brent, Vindella, Bell, Chipping and Glover rose as one man and hastened away to find another kind of meeting legally open.

Dame Beatrice found herself alone with David Gold, Ronald Downing and Philip Carfrae. Diana had dashed off, presumably to comfort her mother and take the dog for a run, and Laura had slipped out at the same time.

‘Well, Dame Beatrice,’ said Downing, ‘did you really glean anything of value?’

Dame Beatrice cackled, and the three men glanced round the echoing hall in fear.

‘I have gained one piece of knowledge which may be useful,’ she said, ‘and that is that others besides yourselves, the members, were employed occasionally on the sites. I am also greatly obliged to you, the officers of the Society, for allowing me to have access to your records.’

‘I can’t see what you expect to gain from those,’ said Downing, ‘but you are very welcome to consult them, of course.’

‘I expect to obtain first-hand information about all your finds and I expect to be able to draw a map showing the various sites you have excavated. I am particularly anxious to find out whether any of you have dug in other parts of the world and in other parts of the British Isles.’

‘That’s interesting,’ said Gold. ‘Well, you’ll find plenty of that sort of information if you want it. Ready, Downing? Ready, Carfrae?’

‘Yes. You go on ahead with Dame Beatrice. I have a certain amount of locking up to do.’

‘Well,’ said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were back at the *Gauntlet*, ‘what’s the news along the Potomac?’

‘Nothing more than you yourself heard. In short, it seems to be that Sir John’s visit is fixed for Thursday week; that I am to have access (untrammelled, I trust) to all the Society’s records; that Mr Gold is prepared to give me any further information I ask for. By the way, though, Mr Downing took good care to get rid of me before he locked up for the night. However, to resume: it appears that, on occasion, the Society enlists the help of boys and girls from the Technical College and the high school and that the officers of the Society, notably Mr Downing and Mr Gold, have harboured suspicions that Mr Breydon Waters did not hand in every object he excavated, but they did not know how to prove this.’

‘His precious collection will prove it, I should think.’

‘They know something about that, of course, but I do not wish to refer to it again until after Sir John’s visit.’

‘And Sir John is going to talk about chalk and limestone, with special reference to flint-mines, especially local ones. May I come along to hear him?’

‘I will mention it to Mr Downing. I am sure there will be no objection to your presence. In fact, the public are to be invited, I believe.’

‘Good. What are you going to do between now and then?’

‘I am going to visit the other two candidates. In fact, I shall do that before I tackle the Society’s records.’

‘Alice’s pals? The gassed girls?’

‘Yes. I shall ask the Superintendent to obtain their home addresses from the Education Office.’

‘I knew they’d been discharged from hospital. The postponed interview is this Friday, but Alice says that both have withdrawn their application. They seem to think that the air of Nodding isn’t too healthy for them. I suppose that means that Alice is certain to get the job.’

‘It is to be hoped so.’

‘What’s your object in visiting them? It means a couple of fairly long journeys.’

‘I do not object to long journeys and George, fortunately, likes them. My object in visiting them is to find out whether they have any useful information to impart. I hardly expect that they have, but...’

‘Not to leave any stone unturned. I know. Do I accompany you?’

‘I should like that very much. What can you do with Hamish?’

‘Oh, Mrs Pierce will have him again, I feel certain. She’s always told me not to hesitate when I want to get rid of him. I’ll write to her at once. He likes it at the vicarage, although I expect he’ll kick a bit at leaving this hotel. He’s got a rave on the hall porter. Helps him with people’s luggage and opens the doors of cars. Gets tips, too, the monkey.’

‘Yes, he has a splendidly commercial mind, bless him!’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I had better ring up Mr Downing tomorrow and put off my visit to the Georgian Room to look at those records. They may mean a great deal more to me after Sir John has passed an opinion on Mr Breydon-Water’s collection of antiquities, and after the members of the Society have seen them.’

CHAPTER NINE

The Subterranean Canaries

‘Thy name affrights me, in whose sound is death.’

Shakespeare

Y Wednesday morning in the same week, Dame Beatrice had received replies from both the young teachers of physical education in response to her prepaid telegrams and she sent off immediately to state that she would be in Edinburgh on Saturday and in Ilfracombe on the following Tuesday. These second telegrams contained invitations to lunch in Edinburgh, and to dinner in Ilfracombe respectively. The hotels were contacted over the telephone by Laura, and rooms booked for the nights of Saturday and Sunday in Edinburgh, and for Tuesday in Ilfracombe. On the Wednesday Dame Beatrice proposed to return to Nodding and on Thursday to attend Sir John’s lecture.

She set off, Laura beside her, and the respectable and stolid George driving, immediately after an early breakfast. They went north by way of Kings Lynn, Spalding, Lincoln and Doncaster and spent the night with friends in York. The next day, after another early start, they covered one hundred and forty-five miles to Berwick, had a fairly late lunch at the *Kings Arms* and then pressed on, to reach Edinburgh in the early evening of Friday.

The Scottish teacher, whose name was Maxwell, arrived punctually at the hotel on the following day and proved to be a pleasant, freckled girl of about twenty-four. She and Laura took to one another at sight and the three had sherry and then went in to lunch.

It was not until the main course was finished that Dame Beatrice introduced the subject of Pigmy’s Ladder.

‘I should value your personal account of what happened when you went there with Miss Hooper and Miss Boorman,’ she said. ‘It is a lovely afternoon. Shall we find a seat in Princes’ Gardens?’

‘Yes, if we can,’ the girl replied. ‘There will be a good many people there on an afternoon like this.’

They were fortunate, however. Miss Maxwell sat between Dame Beatrice and Laura, so that both could hear the tale, and asked where she should begin.

‘Begin with your arrival at Miss Boorman’s flat,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and give all the relevant details.’

‘Very good. I travelled by the night train and reached Nodding Central station, after changing at Lincoln, on the Saturday morning at just after nine. I had

breakfast in the station restaurant. I had no difficulty in finding Miss Boorman's flat because she had given me a meal there after the first interview at which three of us were shortlisted – Miss Boorman, Miss Hooper from Devonshire and myself.

‘When Miss Boorman let me in, I found that Miss Hooper had already arrived, having got to Nodding on the previous night. They were having breakfast. I had a cup of coffee, but, of course, did not need anything else. Then Miss Boorman cleared away and she and Miss Hooper washed up and tidied the flat while I slept. I could not book a sleeping compartment on the journey down, and I felt tired.

‘I slept until about eleven and then Miss Boorman asked whether we'd like to see some of the historic buildings in the city. We visited the Cathedral first. It is very close to where Miss Boorman lives. Then we saw the castle but did not spend much time in the museum because we preferred to go up on to the battlements and down into the dungeons. I enjoyed the castle very much. After that we took a look at the cattle market, where they had some Aberdeen Angus cows, and then we visited the other market where there were striped awnings over the stalls – very gay and pretty and such a number of them – and we bought some fruit. There was no time for more before lunch, because the clock said a quarter to two.

‘We lunched at a fifteenth-century hotel called the *Gauntlet*, not far from Miss Boorman's flat, and I was wondering how we were going to spend the afternoon and early evening – the interview was called for a quarter to nine – when Miss Hooper asked about the old flint-mines called Pigmy's Ladder. That is not a place I shall forget in a hurry.’

‘I should say not,’ said Laura, who had listened attentively to the recital.

‘We now get to the hub of the wheel,’ said Dame Beatrice. She had been checking Miss Maxwell's account by referring to the notebook in which she had taken down the story as told by Miss Boorman. So far, the two exactly tallied.

‘Miss Boorman took us in her car,’ Miss Maxwell continued, ‘and we got there at about half-past three. Nobody was about, except the man in charge. He was in a wee hut and took our sixpences, but wanted us to wait and see whether others came along. Miss Boorman explained that we were short of time, and said that we must go down immediately, or not at all, so he came across to the main shaft with us and unlocked the cover.

‘Then Miss Boorman said she was not coming down because she had a dread of low ceilings and enclosed spaces, but would wait at the top for us. There was an iron ladder and Miss Boorman gave us a wee torch each, as being preferable to the

candles we would find at the foot of the shaft, and down we went. I went first and Miss Hooper followed as soon as I called out that I was at the bottom.

‘It was good fun and quite eerie. The roofs of the galleries were very low, but none of the passages seemed to be very long, although they were narrow. We separated and explored different ones, and I soon began to feel sleepy and rather sick. I thought I would go back into the open air, and I called to Miss Hooper, but got no answer, so I thought I should try the gallery she had taken. I did not want to leave her down there alone. I began to trail her along the gallery, and that is the last I remember until I woke up in hospital.’

‘Were you surprised that Miss Boorman did not go down?’

‘No, not at all. She said, when it was suggested, that she thought we would find Pigmy’s Ladder interesting, and, speaking for myself, I took it for granted that she had been there before and would probably wait in the car while we went down.’

‘Did she suggest any time limit for your explorations?’

‘Yes. She said she thought we’d see all that we wanted to in a quarter of an hour, and we agreed, because, of course, we knew we’d got to be back in time for a meal and to tidy up for the interview.’

‘Did nothing warn you that there was butane in the mines?’

‘No, nothing at all. As it happens, my sense of smell has always been defective. Luckily for me, it’s never been discovered at any of the medicals I’ve had to attend for my job, but I’m always gey canny about turning off gas taps.’

‘Quite. That makes one aspect of the matter quite clear. What would be your reaction if somebody suggested that you visit Pigmy’s Ladder again?’

‘I should like to go. I’ve read about the murder. It seems that we were near the dead man. I would be interested to see just where he lay.’

‘A not uncommon point of view.’

‘Nice kid,’ said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were on the way back to Nodding. ‘I wonder what the other one’s like?’

‘We shall know very soon, child.’

They spent the Sunday night in Harrogate, lunched next day in Lincoln and visited the County Museum. This was Laura’s choice, since the prospect of a visit to Breydon-Waters’ collection had fired her with a desire to be able to identify some, if not all, of the specimens he had amassed. They were in London in time for

dinner. This was at Dame Beatrice's Kensington house, to which Laura's husband, Detective Chief-Inspector Robert Gavin, of the C.I.D. had been invited.

'Nice to see you again,' said Laura, when they met. Gavin bowed.

'How's Nodding?' he asked.

'Its delightful mediaeval self, castle, Cathedral, markets and all.'

'And the Pigmy's Ladder case?' he asked of Dame Beatrice.

'We are still trying to find out whether our suspicions are justified.'

'You have definite suspicions, then?'

'Count me out,' said Laura. 'My suspicions are most indefinite. If it was a member of the Nodding Archaeological Society who did it, it might as well have been one as another. I can't see that there's a pin to choose between any two of them. Actually, I can't imagine any one of them as a murderer.'

'This was no ordinary murder,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and it was committed, in my opinion, for none of the usual motives. I hope I am not wrong.'

'If you are, we shall have to begin all over again,' said Laura. 'Suits me. I like Nodding. I want to get in some sailing later on.'

'The grass-widower gave a hollow groan,' said Gavin. 'Nothing I can do, I suppose, Dame B.?'

'You can listen while I give you a résumé of events and the conclusions I have drawn, if you will. Then you can give me your expert opinion as to whether those conclusions are justified.'

'I wouldn't presume to do that, Dame B. But let's have the gen, please. I'm enormously interested.'

'Be that as it may, here goes. We were drawn into the affair, as you probably know, by one Alice Boorman, a fellow-student of Laura's at Cartaret College.'

'*Analma mater* of teachers in training? I know. How Laura contrived to stay the course, I don't know.'

'It may have saved somebody's life,' said Laura, smugly. 'Actually, I didn't, but I meant well, didn't I, Mrs Croc.?'

'Let us take it as read, dear child.'

'Yes, well, back to Alice Boorman,' said Gavin. 'She got herself into some sort of mess, I believe. Accused of attempted murder, wasn't she?'

‘Not exactly accused,’ said Laura, ‘but things began to tend towards that. Anyhow, she appealed to Mrs Croc. and we immediately leapt into the fray.’

‘Let Dame B. do the talking,’ said Gavin. ‘It may be less picturesque, but it’s a lot meatier, if you don’t mind my saying so.’ He grinned with lazy amiability at his wife, who put out her tongue at him.

‘I knew that Alice Boorman could have had nothing to do with the accident to the two young teachers whom she accompanied to Pigmy’s Ladder, and I knew, too, that she would have had little difficulty in proving her innocence to the police. The real interest in the affair, therefore, was to discover why the butane had been released and who had released it. The first was not difficult to solve. It had been released in order that someone might die. As that person could not have been any of the three young women, since their decision to visit the flint-mines had been taken on the spur of the moment and had been communicated to nobody else, I concluded that another victim would be found, and this proved to be the case.’

‘And the murderer?’

‘Is a member of the Nodding Archaeological Society, I feel sure, although I have no proof of that yet. I have interviewed each member privately, with the exception of a couple of schoolboys whose alibis I shall check as a matter of course, but of whose complete innocence I am convinced, and I have attended a meeting of the Society at which all members except the boys in question were present.’

‘And what has come out?’

‘That nearly every member disliked the dead man.’

‘Not exactly helpful, that.’

‘There were degrees of dislike. One man did not so much dislike as despise him. Others almost reached the heights of hating him. These were personal feelings, and I do not believe that they were enough to account for his death.’

‘No. People in England very rarely kill because they hate. We’re not so pure-minded. Does anyone benefit financially by his death?’

‘His mother hopes to do so.’

‘His mother? Nobody else?’

‘Nobody else.’

‘Oh, Lord!’

‘Oh, I do not suspect the mother. I have met her twice and talked with her. She is slightly unbalanced but quite incapable of murder, although she tells me that she had a conviction for theft some years ago.’

‘Interesting,’ said Gavin, knitting his brows, ‘but surely of no importance in this particular instance?’

‘It has this much of importance: Oliver Breydon-Waters seems to have inherited his mother’s light-fingered propensity, and therein, I believe, lies the reason for his death.’

‘Because he stole something of importance?’

‘Rather to prevent him from stealing it.’

‘And to think,’ said Laura, ‘that I have been kept in the dark about all this.’

‘I expect that, like Watson, you’ve had all the clues and are just too cloth-headed to interpret them,’ said her husband.

‘Ho!’ said Laura, belligerently. ‘Mrs Croc. please give *him* all the clues and see whether he can do better.’

‘He *has* all the clues,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘with the exception of the most important of all. But you are equally at a disadvantage there. He has not met the people concerned, and neither, on the whole, have you.’

‘So go on,’ said Laura, challenging her husband. Gavin rubbed his jaw and glanced at Dame Beatrice.

‘I choose the most fanatical archaeologist in Nodding, but I can’t name him,’ he said.

‘Neither can I, at present,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘so you are at the stage I have reached, and I cannot get any farther until I have examined the records and transactions of the Nodding Society and Sir John has given his lecture and looked at Oliver Breydon-Waters’ partly ill-gotten collection of antiquities.’

‘Breydon-Waters?’ said Gavin. ‘Why does that name ring a bell?’

‘It is an invented name, as was pointed out to me in the first stages of the enquiry,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘Of course, it could be that Mrs Breydon-Waters changed her name when she came out of prison. It would have been a perfectly reasonable thing to do, particularly as her husband was dead and she had a child to support.’

‘What sort of woman is she? – apart from being slightly unbalanced.’

‘She lives partly in the spirit world with her son.’

‘Is she resentful about his death?’

‘I do not think “resentful” is the word. She has confessed that she would not want him back.’

‘Does she realise that he may have stolen some of the items in his collection?’

‘She must know that he has misappropriated finds from excavations in which he has taken part, but I doubt whether she realises that some of the properties may have been taken from antique shops and, possibly, from museums.’

‘What are you going to do next?’

‘As soon as Sir John has given his lecture and seen the collection, I shall consult the police. I have undertaken to share with them any facts I may come across. Then I have a considerable amount of work to do on the Society’s records, which may or may not help matters. The most immediate task, however, is to visit Miss Hooper, the young teacher who lives in Ilfracombe.’

‘An early start for Ilfracombe indicates an early bedtime, so far as I am concerned,’ said Laura, getting up. ‘Are you staying the night, Gavin?’ She addressed him invariably by his surname, urging that it was a baptismal name in its own right and was, in any case, a much more agreeable word than Robert. Robert, she averred, was a stodgy name, a policeman’s name, a suet-pudding of a name.

‘But I am a policeman,’ Gavin had pointed out at the beginning of their acquaintanceship.

‘I know, but there’s no need to over-emphasise the fact,’ Laura had retorted; so Gavin he remained, so far as she was concerned.

‘I will certainly stay the night, if Dame B. will have me,’ he replied, in answer to his wife’s question, ‘so, if you’re going to bed now, I suppose I’d better come too, although I don’t see any point in your going early, as you never seem to need more than three hours’ sleep.’

‘Ah, but I love my bed,’ said Laura, ‘so come on. What time breakfast, Mrs Croc.?’

‘Six,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘We leave at half-past seven.’

‘Breakfast at six does not appeal to me,’ said Gavin. ‘Celestine can give me mine at nine, then I shan’t be in anybody’s way.’

‘Very considerate of you, you lazy pig,’ said Laura. ‘Good night, Mrs Croc. dear. Sleep well.’

The early start was negotiated successfully. By one o'clock they were lunching in Frome and then they made a leisurely trip to Ilfracombe. Miss Hooper was to dine with them at half-past seven, so there was time for Laura to take a walk. She went by way of the cliff path towards Lynton and Lynmouth, and as she walked she turned over in her mind the evidence which Dame Beatrice had unearthed. She had seen every member of the Nodding Archaeological Society except the two boys, and it was clear that both Gavin and Dame Beatrice were convinced of the guilt of one of those older members.

Laura, tramping sturdily along, considered each in turn. There was Downing, the president, surely a keen archaeologist or he would not have accepted office; but she wondered whether he was keen enough on archaeology to have committed murder for the sake of preserving finds.

There were the other officers of the Society, Gold and Carfrae, but the same measure of doubt applied to them. The women she left out of her calculations. A woman was as capable as a man of poisoning the air with butane, but she was not, in Laura's opinion, nearly as likely to hit a man over the head with sufficient force to kill him.

She allowed her mind to rove over the humbler members, Sansfoy, Brent and Chipping, but decided that, although knocking a man on the head was probably within their scope, the use of the butane seemed somehow foreign to their natures.

Bell and Glover hardly seemed murderous types, although Laura had had enough experience of Dame Beatrice's detective work to realise that there is not a murderous type in any exact sense, so that left, if one excepted the schoolboys, Streatley and Vindella. It must be one or other of these, she thought. The difficulty was to decide which, for it seemed highly unlikely that two with such different backgrounds would have been in collusion to kill a fellow-member.

She brooded upon Vindella. First, he was an Irishman and, as such, might behave with ill-considered recklessness. Second, he had had a strong reason to dislike Breydon-Waters, apart from anything to do with archaeology. Third, he, at one time, had been sufficiently friendly with Waters to go shares with him in buying a cabin cruiser. It is notoriously easier, as de Quincey has pointed out, to murder a friend rather than an enemy or a chance acquaintance because he trusts himself with you in circumstances which might give a stranger pause.

Then there was Streatley, an assured and wealthy man, accustomed, because of his wealth, to get his way. In a case where wealth could not help him, he might be tempted to take the law into his own hands, Laura thought. Besides, with a wealthy man, there was always the threat of blackmail. True, nothing of the kind

had been suggested, but the victim of a blackmailer rarely allows his troubles to be broadcast, otherwise the threat would cease to have any effect. Streatley was clearly a name to be kept in mind.

There was another aspect, too. Streatley, she had learned from Dame Beatrice, had made a half-promise to buy Breydon-Waters' collection from the mother. It was possible that he had known of its existence and had killed Waters in order to obtain possession of it. Laura liked this theory so much that she turned it over in her mind during the rest of her walk and presented it to Dame Beatrice as soon as she got back to the hotel.

Dame Beatrice considered it gravely and pronounced judgment.

'It is possible,' she said, to Laura's gratification. 'There is nothing against it.'

'Had you thought of it yourself?'

'No.'

'Shall you work on it?'

'Certainly.'

'There! You usually laugh at my ideas, but, you see, I do get a good one occasionally. I had another one, too, while I was out.'

'The North Devon air appears to agree with you.'

'Do you want to hear what it is?'

'If you please.'

Laura launched into her theory that Waters had been blackmailing Streatley.

'And I take it that Streatley jibbed at continually paying out the hush-money,' she concluded, 'and got shut of Waters in the manner indicated. What do you say about that?'

'Nothing, except that I do not see how you can hold both these opinions at the same time.'

'Oh, but I don't. They are alternatives, that's all. Of the two, I prefer – no, I don't know that I do. Oh, well, we shall see. Wonder what Miss Hooper will have to tell us?'

Miss Hooper arrived at the hotel at seven in an attractive black dinner-gown and with an obviously recent hair-do. She was a trifle shy and very attractive, spoke with a slight drawl – a release, Dame Beatrice supposed, from the more incisive

speech necessary for her work – and, to Laura’s relief, proved to have an excellent appetite and to prefer a red to a white wine.

They took coffee in the lounge and she gave her account of the visit to Pigmy’s Ladder.

‘I reached Miss Boorman’s flat on the Friday evening,’ she said, ‘had a hot drink – I’d had dinner on the train – and was jolly glad to get to bed. I’d been on my feet all the morning at school, including a dinner-hour tennis coaching, and what with that and the train journey, which took ages and involved going into London and out again to Nodding, with a change from Paddington to Liverpool Street, I felt I’d had about enough for one day.

‘The other candidate, Miss Maxwell, arrived at about a quarter to ten. Miss Boorman had let me sleep on until nine, so we were still having breakfast. A bit later on we decided to go out and have a look at the city. It was very enjoyable and we had a jolly good lunch at one of the hotels, a very old, very interesting place, and then it was arranged that we would go in Miss Boorman’s little car to some flint-mines called Something or Other Pigmy.’

‘Pigmy’s Ladder,’ said Laura.

‘Yes, Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘You were the one who suggested going there, I take it,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh, no, I was not! I’d never heard of such a place. It was Miss Maxwell who wanted to go.’

Laura nudged Dame Beatrice.

‘Odd!’ she said, in a low tone. Dame Beatrice shrugged.

‘Why should it be odd?’ asked Miss Hooper. ‘It turned out to be a most important pre-historic thing, with a man in charge of it, and sixpence each to pay.’

‘It is a small point,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but Miss Maxwell, whom we have already interviewed, seemed to think that the visit to Pigmy’s Ladder was made *at your request*.’

‘Oh, I know what she means, I think. I did ask whether we had time to see something of the country round about Nodding, and Miss Boorman agreed that there would be time to have a run out in her car. But I couldn’t have suggested going to Pigmy’s Ladder, because, as I say, I didn’t know of it.’ She sounded anxious about this.

‘Quite,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Pray continue.’

‘Well, we got there, and there was a slight hold-up because the man wanted us to wait and see whether more people came before he opened up, but we explained that we couldn’t hang about, so he unlocked the trap-door which covers the main shaft, and Miss Maxwell and I went down with electric torches. Just as well, as it turned out. There was poison gas down there, the stuff they use on boats and in caravans, and if we’d used matches and candles we’d have been blown up, I suppose.’

‘Who went first?’

‘I did, I think. I can’t really remember. Does it matter?’

‘Not a great deal.’

‘When we got to the bottom of the ladder, and shone our torches around, we saw several little low tunnels branching out. As they seemed very narrow, we decided to explore different ones. I hadn’t gone far when I noticed a funny smell.’

‘Had you ever smelt calor gas?’

‘No.’

‘So you didn’t recognise the smell.’

‘No, but I soon realised I ought not to have been smelling it. The trouble was that I had chosen a particularly narrow tunnel and had to crawl out backwards or else go on probing and hope to find a turning. I thought this was the better idea, particularly as the passage did a sort of dog’s-leg turn, but I was overcome by the gas and don’t know another thing except what I’ve been told by the police and in a letter I had in hospital from Miss Boorman. Is it true that she was accused of trying to murder us so as to be sure of getting the Organiser job?’

‘It did not get as far as an accusation. Did Miss Boorman visit you in hospital as well as write a letter?’

‘Oh, yes, and brought us flowers and fruit and sweets. You know, whoever put the calor gas down there was horribly irresponsible as well as very wicked. Don’t you think so?’

‘You know,’ said Laura, when Miss Hooper had returned home and she and her employer were turning over in their minds what they had been hearing, ‘two things strike me about that girl.’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘She’s not altogether a reliable witness. She told us that Maxwell suggested visiting Pigmy’s Ladder, whereas Maxwell told us it was Hooper’s idea, and then she reversed the order in which they climbed down the main shaft.’

‘It is possible, of course, that Miss Maxwell is the unreliable witness.’

‘Maxwell is a Scotswoman, and whatever a Scotswoman is not, she *is* reliable.’

Dame Beatrice cackled, but knew better than to argue when Laura was riding the hobby-horse of praising her fellow-countrywomen.

‘These debatable points are of little real consequence,’ she said, in easy tones.

‘What was the other thing about her which aroused your special interest?’

‘You must have noticed it, too, and it ought to be a real help in eliminating some of the members of the Archaeological Society.’

‘You refer, no doubt, to her use of the words “horribly irresponsible.” I did notice them, but to me it was not a new thought.’

‘You disappoint me. I hoped it was. But it does eliminate most of them, wouldn’t you say?’

‘It is simpler to enumerate and name those whom it does not eliminate.’

‘Such as?’

‘Your turn first.’

‘Am I to display my ignorance of psychology?’

‘Not necessarily. You can sum up character as accurately as I can.’

‘Thank you for those kind words. Here goes, then: Vindella, Glover, Bell, Chipping and Mrs Rambeau.’

‘Most interesting. Pray elucidate.’

‘Take those I’ve left out, then, first. The officers of the Society *must* be responsible people. It seems to me that that goes without saying; otherwise they wouldn’t accept office, much less continue in it.’

‘I think that interpretation of the facts is questionable, but pray go on.’

‘Diana Carfrae seems sensible and level-headed enough.’

‘Her fiancé jilted her, remember, and has been murdered, but, again, I agree.’

‘Sansfoy is a bus driver, therefore, presumably, he has a sense of responsibility, or he wouldn’t hold his job very long.’

‘His sense of responsibility may apply to nothing but his work, of course.’

‘Brent is just an old stick-in-the-mud and, I’m positive, is completely harmless.’

‘We cannot be certain, but I feel as you do.’

‘Streatley is as rich as Croesus and very rich men, unless they’re bad men (and I’m sure Streatley isn’t), *must* have a sense of responsibility.’

‘They often also have a sense of Lord High Everything Else, though. Was not that one of your alternatives when you described to me your thoughts about him?’

‘Above the law; the rules don’t apply to me. That kind of thing? Yes, I suppose I did say that. And the blackmail business – I still rather cherish that thought. But, all the same, can you see Streatley as a murderer?’

‘I have not studied him sufficiently to say one thing or the other. I think his character might turn out to be considerably more complex than that of some others we have met.’

Triscilla Clarke I’m not sure about, but she’s a teacher...’

‘So is Constance Rambeau, whom I notice you retain on your list of suspects.’

‘Well, yes, but remember how she behaved at that meeting. She didn’t seem a very reliable type to me. Of course, mine are snap judgments. I haven’t seen nearly as much of these people as you have.’

‘I appreciate that. Now what about those of whom you entertain suspicions?’

‘Bell and Chipping are bachelors. That doesn’t seem to argue a sense of responsibility to the community. Vindella is also a bachelor.’

‘But did something to remedy this anti-social state.’

‘Until his girl was enticed away by Waters. But the enticement was his motive. Actually, I think Vindella is my suspect-in-chief.’

‘And what about Glover?’

‘Divorced,’ said Laura, with finality, ‘and therefore, to my mind, de-humanised.’

‘Surely very few people would agree with you?’

‘As to that, I suppose you are right. Anyway, I do think you might swop ideas. I’ve told you mine, and I don’t see why you shouldn’t tell me yours.’

‘You have named all the probable suspects, except for the wealthy Streatley, with the exception of three.’

‘Three?’

‘I would not except the officers of the Society, in the present state of the enquiry.’

‘Surely the officers of a society don’t murder the members?’

‘It would depend upon the circumstances. I am of Robert’s opinion. When we have found the most fanatical archaeologist, we have found the murderer.’

‘But who *is* the most fanatical archaeologist?’

‘I am hoping that the Society’s records may give me a pointer there.’

‘So you are *not* going to swop theories?’

‘Ask me that after Sir John’s visit.’

‘There’s a mystery there, too. Why are you having Sir John come to Nodding – apart from wanting him to edit Waters’ collection of junk?’

‘I want to take him on a secret tour of Pigmy’s Ladder, child – secret from the Society, I mean.’

‘But how *can* you keep it secret from the Society?’

‘From one member of the Society it will not be secret.’

‘Chipping, the dry-stone expert?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Can you trust him not to blab?’

‘I shall not approach him until the day following Sir John’s inspection of Mr Breydon-Waters’ collection. All he will be told is that Sir John has expressed a wish to have all the known parts of the workings opened up in order that he may inspect them.’

‘Won’t Chipping think it fishy?’

‘Nobody thinks anything fishy when it is demanded by a man of Sir John’s eminence, child.’

CHAPTER TEN

Antiques and Archives

‘Biting off a large quid of black twist, he said:

‘You did wrong, captain, to mix cheese with plums,

Captain Joshua Slocum

HANKS to an advertisement in the local paper, large and aggressive placards both inside and outside all three branches of the public library, a notice in the entrance of the Castle Museum and some spade-work done among the older pupils in the Nodding schools, Sir John had a suitably impressed and impressive audience.

He was a gifted speaker, and the film he showed of the work of excavation being carried on, and the fine 'stills' of the most important finds, held that audience for nearly two hours. The chairman (Downing, as president of the Society, was in the chair) then announced that the public lecture was over, but that Sir John was prepared to give a short talk about excavations in chalk and limestone country, with special reference to East Anglian flint-mines. The talk was of particular interest to the members of the Nodding Archaeological Society, but the public were welcome to stay and listen. There would be no visual illustrations except a 'still' showing a plan of Pigmy's Ladder.

Most of the audience filed out, but one or two stayed. These included Laura, Alice Boorman, Mrs Breydon-Waters and the wives of some of the married members of the Society. They closed in upon the platform and the lecturer projected the plan of Pigmy's Ladder upon the screen. He discoursed, briefly, as he had promised, upon the Neolithic Ages in pre-history and then drew his hearers' attention to the plan on the screen.

'This shows the area so far excavated by your Society and by earlier excavators,' he said. 'Now I have a theory that there is more to be found.'

'Surely there is,' put in Downing (for the meeting was now informal), 'for that can be proved by the numbers and numbers of pittings still to be seen on the surface of the heath.'

'Ah, but that is not quite what I meant,' said Sir John. 'I think further excavation might bring to light a find of the kind discovered at Grimes Graves. You will all know to what I refer, I have no doubt.'

'The statuette of a mother-goddess? Yes, we did find one,' said Gold. Sir John inclined his head.

'Why not?' he asked. 'The mines known as Pigmy's Ladder are not so very far removed from those of Grimes Graves.'

His audience was dumb. Then Gold spoke again.

'*So that was* what Breydon-Waters was after,' he said softly.

‘So that is why he obtained leave of absence from school under the pretence of going to Palestine,’ said Carfrae.

‘So that is why he was murdered,’ said Alice Boorman, under her breath.

It was too late, when the meeting was over, for Sir John to view Breydon-Waters’ collection that night, and it was arranged that he and Dame Beatrice should call at ten o’clock in the morning. The members of the Society would make their inspection in the evening, after finishing work.

Dame Beatrice had warned the visitor that he would probably find himself moving in the world of the spirits as soon as he crossed Mrs Breydon-Waters’ threshold, but in Oliver’s mother the business-woman had, for the time being, superceded the communicant with another sphere. She greeted Sir John, complimented him upon his lecture, and led the way to the dining-room.

‘I will leave you to form your opinion,’ she said. ‘I have shopping to do, and shall be back in about an hour.’

‘I shall be most interested,’ murmured Sir John. He opened the door for her, closed it behind her very quietly, walked to the dining-table and picked up a Scythian dagger.

‘Probably purchased,’ he said. ‘It’s a common type.’ His expert fingers roved over Bronze Age sling-stones, ‘beaker’ pottery and a few flint implements of Neolithic origin. There were two sickles, a knife and three rather fine lance-heads. Then he picked up a copper axe-head.’

‘Like those from Kish, near Babylon,’ he said.

‘Do you care for me to make an inventory?’ Dame Beatrice asked.

‘If it would interest you. I don’t need one for myself. I have played what the Boy Scouts call Kim’s Game far too often to need a written list of these things. I’ll call out the items as I go, shall I?’ suggested Sir John.

‘Please do. Are you prepared to value the collection?’

‘Oh, no. The majority of these things have no intrinsic value, and they seem more like a magpie’s hoard than an interesting exhibition. An eighteenth- or nineteenth-century collector might have garnered such things, but junk of this sort is meaningless heaped together in this way. Well, let’s see what else there is.

Aurignac-type statuette – he probably picked that up on a dig. We call them Aurignac, but they’ve been found here, too. Here’s a skull – looks mighty like those found at Alfriston – and here are a Neolithic miner’s antler pick – see how the tines are worn – and some perforated teeth – wolves’ teeth, I expect – which

made a necklace. Oyster shells (an early form of coinage) and quite a nice Bronze Age sword. Here's a brooch of the same period – am I going too fast?’

‘Oh, no, not at all,’ said Dame Beatrice, her yellow, claw-like fingers flying over a page of her notebook and inscribing, in her own particular brand of shorthand, the list he was giving her.

Sir John moved to the sideboard. ‘A good many of the specimens may have been picked up on archaeological sites,’ he said, ‘but some he may have purchased.’ He picked up a very fine Babylonian cylinder seal, laid it down and turned over a small collection of Greek coins. ‘Quite nice, you see. An Athenian ten-drachma piece of the fifth century B.C. with the Marathon owl on the reverse side; a silver coin from Naxos of slightly later date with the head of Dionysos on the obverse and a dubious-looking Silenos on the reverse. (I wonder where he bought that? There are not so very many about). Several pieces of the time of Alexander the Great; yes, yes; thousands of these in various places, and thousands more still to be found, no doubt. Ah, here is a pleasant version of Arethusa's head from Syracuse; fourth century, of course. Here's an earlier one; strange how fond the Greeks were of dolphins; the result of having so tremendously long a coastline and so many colonies overseas, no doubt.’

‘They are lovable creatures in themselves, and extremely decorative,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘There seem to be gold coins, too – at least, I should judge them to be gold.’

‘Yes, there are.’ He picked up an Iron Age piece. ‘British. Could have been picked up on the South Coast beach, probably in Sussex. They date from about 100B.C. to Julius Caesar's invasions. There was a fair amount of trade with the Empire long before the Claudian conquest, and a coinage was a necessary medium of exchange. The coins were made on the Roman model. But see here! These engraved gems of the seventh to the sixth century come from Greece; and here are some Cretan ivory seals and a Late Minoan vase. Then, these engravings on bone and this pendant, a relict of the Hyksos burials, are fairly surprising things to find in a private collection, and I should very much like to know how he obtained possession of this fifth-century bronze bowl and this Boeotian pot.’

‘What is this?’ asked Dame Beatrice, as Sir John moved across to a bookcase, the top of which held further archaeological finds.

‘That? Oh, dear, oh, dear! It is a tablet of Linear B script, Cretan, perhaps, or from one of the Argive cities; Tiryns, possibly.’

‘And the bronze battle axe?’

Sir John picked it up and balanced it in his hand.

‘I’ve seen one like this before,’ he said. ‘It resembled, as this does, the Early Bronze axes which we’ve found in Wessex, but it did not come from Wessex; it’s like one I’ve seen which came from an excavation made at Alacahuyuk. Still, perhaps we had better give him the benefit of the doubt. Well, that seems to be the lot, except for these two enamelled brooches of the early Iron Age.’

Dame Beatrice wrote the last hieroglyphics and then opened the drawers of the sideboard. They contained a jumbled collection of palaeolithic and neolithic flints. The cupboards offered nothing but the usual household articles. The small drawers of the bookcase contained some Bronze Age pins and a brooch. This ended the tally.

‘Of course,’ said Sir John, ‘Bronze Age finds can be picked up when ploughing is done, or a garden dug or when road-repairs are in operation. I will await Mrs Breydon-Waters’ return, but I must make it clear to her that it is not within my provenance to value this collection in the sense that she uses the words.’

‘She will be deeply disappointed. Tell me, Sir John, what you think about the means by which this collection was amassed. How much of it is stolen property?’

‘I hesitate to say, except in so far as objects picked up and retained by the finder during the course of an excavation may be described as stolen property. There is nothing here which cannot be matched in many museums in Europe and America. The American School has done much excellent work.’

‘Suppose that a purchaser could be found, no questions need be asked?’

‘I imagine not. Have you a purchaser in mind, then?’

‘Mr Streatley, the wealthy member of the Nodding Archaeological Society, might be interested.’

‘I see. I should like the Greek coins for my own collection, but since you think their source of origin may be doubtful...’ He smiled and picked up the Scythian dagger.

‘What does he really think?’ asked Laura while they waited for Sir John to break it to Mrs Breydon-Waters that he was not prepared to place a monetary value on the collection.

‘He does not commit himself, but I formed the impression that he feels dubious.’

‘Thinks the stuff was stolen? I’m not surprised.’

‘But he also thinks that there is very little of importance in the collection – nothing that cannot be matched elsewhere.’

‘So that, if B.W. did manage to help himself, there wouldn’t have been much of a stink? That accounts for his having been able to get away with it.’

‘Of course, some of the objects may have been purchased. It is not the only private collection of the kind.’

‘It depends upon the price that would have to be paid, doesn’t it? A school-master doesn’t earn all that much, and Breydon-Waters had bought a half-share in a cabin-cruiser and helped to keep his mother. I shouldn’t think he’d have had much money to spare to buy antiques.’

‘It would depend, as you point out, on the price. I may be able to find out a good deal more when I have studied the archives of the Society.’

She did this on the following day, closeted in the screened-off corner of the Great Hall of the Castle Museum which represented a room furnished according to the taste of the eighteenth century. She chose to sit at the one piece of furniture which was out of period, a writing-table of Regency date, because it looked more solid and workmanlike than a George II bureau, on cabriole legs ending in scroll toes, which occupied one corner of the screened-off area.

The Society’s records were contained in the four drawers of a secretaire-bookcase which housed on its shelves a collection of china. Downing saw her settled in, produced the necessary documents, wished her well and left her to it. She leered at the claw feet and gilt embellishments of the Regency table, pulled open the two drawers, which proved to contain the cleaner’s dusters and an empty cigarette carton respectively, and opened the earliest record of the Society’s transactions.

The Nodding group, it seemed, was an off-shoot of the important and well-known Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society. Why it had broken away from the parent body was not apparent, but the discovery that it had done so cleared up a point which had puzzled Dame Beatrice ever since she had examined the list of the Nodding members. There was a marked absence of the nobility and the Church, both, usually, keen supporters of the more erudite activities of their areas.

The Society had begun its activities in 1937 and had suspended them from 1940 until 1949, when Downing, according to a volume devoted entirely to copied-up letters, had been instrumental in re-forming the group under the title of *The Nodding and District Archaeological and Antiquarian Society*. An examination of the *Transactions* made it clear that the title was no misnomer, for the Society certainly had not confined itself entirely to digging up the past in the literal sense,

but had given considerable attention to such matters as church brasses and wall-paintings, tapestries, seventeenth-century silver-ware, (scarce after the beginning of the Civil War), chantry chapels, sixteenth-century bills and wills, church bells and the fifteenth-century account rolls of neighbouring priories.

Dame Beatrice flipped through the painstaking articles devoted to these and gave her attention to the records concerned with archaeology as she understood it; that is to say, the records of actual excavations in which the Society had taken part and the names of the members who had played an active part in these.

To her surprise, it appeared that the work had not been confined, in England, to East Anglia. The group had visited excavations, with the consent of the Sussex Archaeological Society, at Lewes, the Trundle, Newhaven, Falmer and Pevensey and had inspected the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Early Iron Age objects housed in the Lewes museum. Dame Beatrice could not help wondering whether the museum had been the poorer after the Nodding excursion when she noted that Breydon-Waters had been present at the later digs and had also been a member of the visiting party.

As she perused the records a remark made by Streatley came back to her.

‘Besides, there was that trouble in Greece a year or two back. I always thought Waters knew more about the disappearance of those engraved gems than he ever admitted.’

Dame Beatrice turned up the list which she had taken down from Sir John’s dictation. There was definite mention of Greek engraved gems, and she returned to the archives. The Society had made one expedition to Greece, had visited some of the islands and had spent a week in Athens. There was no mention of any ‘trouble,’ but that was not surprising, she thought. Suspicion is not proof.

She worked on systematically, making an occasional note and referring, from time to time, to Sir John’s list. There was no suggestion that the Society had ever visited Crete or the Near East, so there was no clue as to how Breydon-Waters had obtained a Babylonian cylinder seal, Cretan ivory, a tablet of Linear ‘B’ or a bronze axe which, according to Sir John, was not of British workmanship, unless he had obtained them elsewhere. The copper axe from Kish she scarcely considered important until later.

She read, with great care, the lists of members and noted that of the post-war foundation members only four remained. These were Downing, Brent, Streatley and Sansfoy. Gold had joined in 1950, the year in which he had become the city librarian, Carfrae in 1951 and the others between 1952 and 1958. Breydon-Waters

had joined in 1953 and therefore, it was interesting to note, had not been present when Pigmy's ladder had been re-excavated in the Festival Year of 1951.

There seemed little more to be gained from the documents unless further clues to the mystery of Breydon-Waters' death should direct attention to them again. Dame Beatrice put them back, unlocked the door which had been fastened to keep out the public, drew back the curtains which had shrouded her from its view, switched off the electricity which illuminated the chandeliers and went to Downing's office to return the key.

'Any luck, Dame Beatrice?' he asked, when he had hung it up.

'It is too soon to tell,' she replied, 'but I do not feel that the time has been wasted. I shall go to Pigmy's Ladder again tomorrow, unless my visit to the Superintendent makes it unnecessary.'

She rang up the police station as soon as she got back to the hotel and arranged to meet the Superintendent on the following morning at ten. They talked in his office – or, rather, Dame Beatrice talked while he smoked his pipe, grunted occasionally and occasionally met her eyes with his non-committal but intelligent gaze.

'Well,' he said, when she had done, 'I didn't guarantee to do so, Dame Beatrice, but I'll tell you how far we've got. We've traced the dead man's history to pretty far back; it seems his mother gassed herself, so he certainly wasn't Mrs Breydon-Waters' son. You seemed to have reached the same point from a different angle.'

'A slip of the tongue, as I have said, put me on the track, but that was as far as I have got. What caused Mrs Breydon-Waters to adopt the boy, I wonder?'

'Difficult to say. Maybe she had lost her own little one or couldn't have one. They both changed their names. Wonder why they chose to call themselves Breydon-Waters? Very odd, that. It's too much like a name on a map.'

'So Brent pointed out to me near the beginning of this enquiry. It would be interesting to know whether she has ever been in prison.'

'Prison? Oh, yes, she gave it as a reason for her friends' cooling off, you said, but there's no prison record. In any case, ma'am, why should they suddenly pretend that she'd been in prison?'

'Of course they did not. If, indeed, they have cooled off, I suspect it would be because they believe she knows more about her son's – Mr Breydon-Waters' – death than she has said.'

‘That’s about the size of it. I’ve kept out of her way a bit lately. I’ll go and talk to her again. So far, she’s been tearful (which is natural) but not very helpful. She declare he had no enemies and insist that he wasn’t killed for what he possessed.’

‘Did she mean his collection of antiques?’

‘Well, she didn’t mention it, but I guess that’s what she intend me to think. If it had been a different kind of murder, she’d be first on my list of suspects, but, as it is, she come pretty low down on it.’

‘Yet there is something interesting about the collection which I am certain has a bearing on the case.’

‘In what way, ma’am, would you say?’

‘I cannot say at present. I have been studying the records of the Nodding Archaeological Society, but I did not find them particularly helpful. Only one small item of interest emerged. Mr Breydon-Waters had not joined the Society when the most recent excavation of Pigmy’s Ladder was carried out.’

‘I don’t see the significance of that, ma’am.’

‘I think it may have led him to attempt a little private work there on his own.’

‘If that’s so, ma’am, it would knock on the head any theory that he was lured there. *Wehad* wondered whether he’d been in the habit of meeting a girl out there on the heath and whether they’d found a way of getting into the workings of Pigmy’s Ladder after the chap that looks after it had gone off duty.’

‘Yes? Quite feasible, if you could prove that he *could* have got the trapdoor open, but I understood that it was always padlocked.’

‘There are ways and means, ma’am.’

‘Love laughs at locksmiths?’

‘No, ma’am—just that you can obtain admission to all sorts of places in and about Nodding if you’re a member of the Society.’

‘Oh, yes, of course. You think, then, that some relative or friend of the girl he was meeting followed him there on that Friday night and killed him?’

‘Stranger things have happened. We know he jilt one girl and take up with another, and that the second one had given up Mr Vindella to get engaged to Breydon-Waters.’

‘True enough, Superintendent. It is a tenable theory, but, somehow, I do not believe it is the right one. Still, time will show.’

‘What line are you yourself going to follow, ma’am?’

‘The line which next presents itself, and I hope to give it inspiration to do so tomorrow night.’

‘I don’t take you, ma’am. You’re not thinking of holding a séance in Pigmy’s Ladder, are you?’ He laughed good-humouredly. ‘Although, from what I can make out, you’d be in good company if you took that poor woman with you.’

‘Mrs Breydon-Waters? No, I am not concerned with the world of spirits. This is strictly material, I am afraid, and I shall need your help over it. I want a thorough search made of the Castle Museum.’

‘The museum? Why? What should we be looking for?’

‘I cannot tell you, except that it may be something which once formed part of Mr Breydon-Waters’ collection.’

‘I can’t see...’

‘And at the moment I shall not explain. I may be completely wrong. If I am, no harm will have been done.’

‘It will be a pretty big undertaking, you know.’

‘I realise that, of course. I shall go over the various rooms myself tomorrow morning and then perhaps I can suggest the most likely places to search.’

‘And you want that we should help?’

‘Yes. Two or three of you will be enough, and I shall bring my secretary, who can help under my supervision.’

‘You’d better have Sergeant Cairns and a police cadet named Billings. They can be trusted not to break or drop anything and to put the stuff back in the right places. I’ll come along myself. What about Mr Downing, though? Won’t he have to be told?’

‘As a member of the archaeological society, he is still technically on the list of suspects, so I think we will keep him in the dark. It will not be beyond the ingenuity of the police force to discover a way of entering the castle by night, I take it?’

‘Oh, we can get in all right. The lock doesn’t exist that Cairns can’t manipulate.’

‘Splendid. Let us embark on the search tomorrow night. I may have a little more information by then, although I doubt it.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Moonshine Without Wall

‘Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so;
And, being done, thus Wall away doth go.’

Shakespeare

AME BEATRICE went back to the *Gauntlet* for lunch.

‘You’ve been a long time,’ said Laura.

‘Long time,’ said Hamish. ‘Time to go to the Zoo.’

‘You shall go for a ride in the car this afternoon,’ Dame Beatrice promised him.

‘I shall go for a long, long ride with George and nobody else.’

‘Wishful thinking,’ said Laura. ‘Do you want thick soup or clear?’

‘Both ones. I want both ones,’ he added clearly to a passing waiter.

‘Very good, sir,’ said the waiter. Hamish was delighted.

‘I am “sir,” like Daddy. Can the waiter come in the car?’

‘He goes to bed in the afternoon to rest his feet,’ said Laura. The waiter brought soup in a covered cup, whisked off the lid and poured the soup on to a plate. Hamish beamed at him, seized a spoon and set to.

‘Peace for a bit,’ said Laura. ‘Why the excursion?’

‘We are to re-visit Pigmy’s Ladder. I want to interrogate the custodian.’

‘I should have thought you’d have done that ages ago.’

‘*Mea culpa.*’

‘I bet you had your reasons, all the same.’

‘Well, it was better to give the police the opportunity to question him first, I felt.’

‘*Did they* question him?’

‘I have no idea. I confide in the Superintendent but, very properly, he does not confide in me. However, there may yet be startling and unexpected developments. How do you feel about a near-midnight visit to the Castle Museum?’

‘Whatever for?’

‘A treasure hunt. I think the missing clue is hidden there somewhere.’

‘So far as I’m concerned, you babble,’ said Laura, removing thick soup from her son’s face. ‘Meat or chicken, Hamish?’

‘Two chops, bloody,’ said Hamish, who had heard this order given. A man at the next table fell into unsuitable laughter. Hamish laughed, too, well pleased with the effect of his words. ‘Two bloody chops,’ he said winningly.

‘We say “under-done” or “rare”, sir, in the trade,’ said the waiter.

‘They say “under-done” or “rare” in the trade,’ Hamish informed the man at the next table. The waiter put his order in front of him and served him with vegetables. Laura and Dame Beatrice ordered for themselves and there was again a chance of conversation.

‘I do not mean the Ancient Greek engraved gems mentioned by Mr Streatley. They are among the Breydon-Waters’ collection,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but appear to have no special significance.’

‘Of course, Streatley may have been mistaken in thinking he’d pinched them,’ Laura suggested.

‘Indeed, he may. However, I sent off a cable to the British School of Archaeology in Athens, giving the dates of the Nodding Society’s visit to Greece and asking for confidential information. I see no reason why Mr Streatley should have made the remark about the gems unless he believed it to have some substance, unless—’

‘May have wanted to be just plain nasty, perhaps.’

‘That has to be allowed for, certainly, although, since Breydon-Waters was dead when the remark was made, plain nastiness seems redundant.’

‘Well, yes, it does,’ said Laura. She turned to Hamish. ‘Pudding, big boy?’

‘I’ll read,’ said Hamish, seizing the menu. ‘Show me pudding.’

‘Down here,’ said Dame Beatrice, turning the menu the right way up. Hamish perused the list, pretending to read.

‘Trifle, with much more cream.’ He attracted the head waiter’s attention. ‘Tell my waiter trifle, with much more cream.’

The head waiter bowed and withdrew. The waiter came up. Hamish repeated his request.

‘Very good, sir. And madam?’

‘She’s going in the car and she might be sick.’

‘Be quiet,’ said Laura, who had never been sick in her life. ‘You’re disgusting.’

‘Yes, I am disgusting,’ Hamish agreed pleasantly. ‘I am disgusting when I’m sick.’

‘*Be quiet,*’ said the exasperated Laura.

‘I will be quiet in the kitchen,’ said her son, slipping from his chair and taking the waiter’s hand. ‘I like the kitchen. The cook gives me a big cigar.’

‘More wishful thinking,’ muttered Laura, as Hamish, briskly chatting, led the waiter away. ‘Do you think he’s quite normal?’

‘Oh, no. He is abnormal in every respect,’ said Dame Beatrice, to whom the questions had been addressed. ‘He is abnormally clever and abnormally friendly. Why do you worry about him?’

‘I don’t, really. Well, we’ve got rid of him for a bit. What have you to tell me that would be unsuited to his ears?’

‘Nothing. When I have spoken to the custodian at Pigmy’s Ladder I shall explore the galleries.’

‘What shall we do with Hamish while we’re at Pigmy’s Ladder? I don’t want him tumbling down the main shaft.’

‘We shall leave him with George, who will probably take him for a ride in the car. They get on well together.’

They concluded their lunch, the waiter returned Hamish to them and very shortly afterwards they were on their way to Pigmy’s Ladder with Hamish seated beside George at the toy steering wheel which George had fitted up for him and which was the joy of his heart. They stopped at the entrance of the lane which led to the flint-mines and Laura and Dame Beatrice got out of the car. It was a perfect summer afternoon and both were glad to walk the three-quarters of a mile to the custodian’s hut.

Several cars were parked along the lane and Laura remarked that they would not have a chance to do any detective work in Pigmy’s Ladder that day.

‘One never knows,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Most of these people are here for a picnic on the heath, I daresay, and Pigmy’s Ladder has not yet been re-opened to the public’

The custodian was expecting them, for he had been informed by telephone that they would be coming and that they had the blessing of the police. He greeted them in a reserved and austere manner and invited them into the hut.

‘Now, ma’am,’ he said, when they were seated, ‘what can I do for you?’

‘You can answer some questions, if you will,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘About the body that was found here a week or two back? I know nought about that. The police have been here two or three times, but I have to tell ’em the same thing. I don’t know ought about it.’

‘At the risk of being tedious, there are questions I must put to you, however, and these questions are likely to be a repetition of what the police have already asked.’

‘I see, ma’am. Do you go ahead, then.’

‘Did you know Mr Breydon-Waters by name?’

‘Why, yes, I did. He used to come here a goodish bit. Members of the Nodding Society don’t need to pay.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Supposed to come out of their subscription or something.’

‘Then their treasurer would know how many times Mr Breydon-Waters came here, would he not?’

‘So I suppose.’

‘Did you ever go into the galleries with Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘No, I never did. That prefer to go by himself. If there were other visitors, that wait until they depart away.’

‘How often do you yourself enter the workings?’

‘Once every six months, to make sure that’s safe.’

‘When are you due to go down again?’

‘I went down the beginning of March. I don’t reckon to go down again until beginning of September.’

‘I wish you would break your rule and go down today while I am here.’

‘For why?’

‘I do not propose to bias you by telling you the reason. I would like your inspection to be as minute as possible; even more so than usual, if you will be so good. Do you use an electric torch?’

‘I do. More convenient and handy than a candle or a lantern. Powerful, that torch is. See here.’

He turned and picked it up. Dame Beatrice took it and switched it on and off.

‘Yes, indeed,’ she said. The custodian, who had stood up to get the torch, walked to the door.

‘Nothing but picnicking parties,’ he observed. ‘If I go down now, would you ladies take care of the hut and refuse the money if anybody wish to go down? That’s closed to sightseers, by police orders.’

He left them and was gone for half an hour. When he came back he asked,

‘Did you guess what I’d find down there this time, ma’am?’

‘Yes, I thought it might have happened by now,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘What action can be taken?’

‘I’d better telephone Mr Downing at the museum and get a direction, I reckon.’

‘Not Mr Downing,’ said Dame Beatrice firmly. ‘We must go to a higher authority. I will contact Sir John St John John. Say nothing of this to anybody until he has given an opinion. It will be a police matter again, I am perfectly sure.’

‘You think this connect with Mr Breydon-Waters’ death?’

‘I have little doubt of it.’

‘But what’s happened?’ demanded Laura.

‘Let us go down and you shall see.’

‘I’ve got no authority to let anybody go down, ma’am,’ protested the custodian.

‘You have my authority.’

‘Very good. I’ll have to have it in writing. This here is Office of Works property, now under police control, and my orders are—’

‘For once, the Home Office, to which I am accredited, must take precedence even of the Office of Works. As for the police – here.’ She scribbled busily and removed the loose-leaf sheet from her notebook.

‘I only had a message,’ said the custodian. Dame Beatrice nodded; then she and Laura left the hut and walked over the heath to the main shaft. Laura went down first and Dame Beatrice nimbly followed.

‘Which way?’ asked Laura, flashing her torch around to light up the entrances to the galleries.

‘To your left.’

Laura, who was tall and sturdy, crouched very low and progressed slowly along the narrow passage. The torchlight gleamed on glistening chalk walls and the

uneven roof of the gallery. After a bit she said, her voice sounding oddly in the confined space,

‘It seems a long way.’

‘That is the point,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘It is further than anyone has been, except for two members of the Nodding Archaeological society, and now ourselves and the man from the hut.’

‘*So that was* what Breydon-Waters found and wanted to keep!’ exclaimed Laura. She had reached the foot of another shaft. It was not nearly as wide as the one by which they had descended into the workings, but it was wide enough to house an interesting collection of objects which, taken together, formed a primitive shrine.

A lump of clay had been fashioned into a small shelf, or bracket, and on it was a crude chalk statuette representing a pregnant woman. On the floor in front of her were nine antler picks in groups of three, three little heaps of Neolithic flint arrow-heads and three thigh-bones in the form of a triangle.

‘Well, I’m dashed! Is this where the body was found?’ Laura asked.

‘More when we are in the open air,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Voices carry along these galleries and up the shafts.’

When they were up on the heath again they found the custodian waiting for them at the top.

‘Well, ma’am, was it what you suspected?’ he demanded.

‘Certainly, I was not much surprised at what I found. But some more of the dry-stone walling has been removed. Where can it have gone?’

‘*Search me!* But you’re right enough there. It’s gone, all right.’

‘It must be found, but it must not be touched.’

‘Be all over fingerprints, I daresay. Not much use to the police. Hundreds and hundreds of people go down in these old mines since they’ve been uncovered.’

‘I was not thinking in terms of fingerprints, but of location. At what time do you go off duty?’

‘Six in summer – that’s May to September – and four o’clock in March, April and October. After the end of October to beginning of March I don’t come nigh the place; that’s all bolted and barred and left secure, so nobody can’t come at it.’

‘Are there any keys besides your own?’

‘Mr Downing, that have a key, and there’s another in the new City Hall, but the keys aren’t any use in the winter, when all’s shut up and secure. Only the Office of Works man can open her up then.’

‘I am not thinking about the winter. Now the disappearance of that dry-stone walling is very interesting and important. These stones must be found. They are surely somewhere in this neighbourhood unless they have been removed by lorry. That, of course, is a possibility we must not overlook.’

‘It must have been done at night, after I knock off, ma’am.’

‘Of course it was. Apart from any other fact, nobody would be foolish enough to take down dry-stone walling while the public were about and could witness what he was doing.’

‘I want one thing clear, ma’am. You don’t think I know anything of it? Because I wholly declare that isn’t so.’

‘Very well. Do you know anything about Mr Breydon-Waters’ activities when he visited the mines?’

‘That sit at the top of the main shaft and brood, or else that tramp about and poke the ground with a shooting stick.’

‘One more question. Did you see Mr Breydon-Waters here about a week, a fortnight or, possibly, three weeks before his body was found?’

‘No, that I did not.’

‘You are quite sure?’

‘Certain sure.’

‘Thank you. If you can find the stones, it will be to your advantage.’ With this, she and Laura returned to where they had left the car, to find George giving Hamish a lesson. The bonnet of the car was up, Hamish was being held up so that he could see the engine, and George was expounding its mysteries.

‘Carburettor, valves, feed, oil-sump, choke, back axle, steering-column, exhaust, carburettor, valves, feed, oil-sump, choke, back axle, steering-column, exhaust, I know everything now,’ said Hamish rapidly, as George put him down, ‘and I went for a ride, too.’

‘Are you going to tell me what I wanted to know?’ asked Laura, when the party were settled in the car and George was driving back to Nodding. ‘About the statuette and the rest of it, I mean, and where the body was found.’

‘The body was found farther into the workings than where you saw the shrine. I thought at first that Mr Breydon-Waters had crawled past the goddess, but the police discovered that the body had been dragged clear of the wall so that it could be rebuilt.’

‘You mean that, whatever his reason for going there, it was or was not to steal the shrine?’

‘At the moment it is impossible to say. He may even have gone to smash it. Part has certainly gone.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Laura.

‘Perhaps he went to plant something, child.’

‘Oh, to salt the dig, you mean?’

‘It is within the bounds of possibility.’

‘But with what?’

‘That is what we have to find out.’

‘What about this dry-stone walling which seems to have disappeared?’

‘Indeed, yes, what about it?’

‘*You tell me*. I’m completely foxed. I suppose it has something to do with the case, but I’m dashed if I can see *what* it has to do with it.’

‘Somebody has been to the flint-mines since the body was discovered. That, of course, is obvious. The question is – who!’

‘The murderer!’

‘Perhaps, and, again, perhaps not. However, I shall proceed upon the assumption that it was the murderer.’

‘Motive?’

‘Ah!’

‘Meaning you don’t know?’

‘Exactly so.’

‘Dash it, Mrs Croc,’ said Laura, aggrieved, ‘*you ought to* know. I believe you do. I believe you’re stalling.’

‘That could be so,’ was the amiable rejoinder of Dame Beatrice. ‘The thoughts of youth, we have been told, are long, long thoughts. My experience of life invites

me to doubt it, but there is no doubt that the thoughts of old age are nebulous, transient and fleeting. I, of course, am old.'

Laura made a rude noise.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Treasure Hunt

'Still nursing the unconquerable hope,
Still clutching the inviolable shade...'

Matthew
Arnold

HE police were as helpful as the Superintendent had promised, and the search-party found no difficulty in gaining entrance to the museum. To the Highland and superstitious blood of Laura Gavin (née Menzies) there was something eerily fearsome in penetrating the fastness by night which even the strip lighting, switched on at once by the Superintendent, did little to dispel.

It was not so bad in the modernised entrance hall and along the passage, but, once in the ancient interior of the Norman castle, through which the searchers had to pass in order to begin work, Laura felt a tendency to glance backwards over her shoulder as the grim walls, lacking their former first floor and so rising starkly to the roof beneath the battlements, seemed to close round her and hold her prisoner.

Dame Beatrice, alive to this uneasiness on the part of her henchwoman, issued brisk instructions.

'There is a great deal of ground to cover, so we will take the likeliest place first, and that is the Ceramics Room. We shall take one wall each.'

She had abstracted the curator's keys from their place on a hook in his office, and, with great despatch, tried one after another in the locks of the glass doors of the enormous china cabinets which lined the walls.

Laura glanced round the comfortably modernised Ceramics Room and the search began. Dame Beatrice assumed responsibility for the case devoted entirely to teapots, the Superintendent opted for a collection of pottery which dated from the Bronze Age to the sixteenth century, the constable who had acted as picklock, and

the police cadet with him, took the north wall, whose cases housed glass vessels of various countries and periods, and Laura was left to examine a massive collection of china sauce-boats and soup tureens.

The operation proved abortive. Nothing at all had been hidden anywhere in the Ceramics Room. Dame Beatrice locked up the cases very thoughtfully, and then led the way to the Panorama Gallery.

This was another modernised room, longer and narrower than the Ceramics Room. There were seats placed back-to-back down the centre; the walls and deep cases were devoted to panoramic scenes showing the various types of countryside to be found in East Anglia. Thus one exhibit showed, against a painted background, the flora and fauna of the Breckland of Norfolk; others gave impressions of the Essex marshes, the pastoral scenery of part of Suffolk, a creek fed by slow rivers, part of the Norfolk Broads, the salt marshes of the north coast abutting on to the Wash and the dreary mudflats and rich bird-life of the tidal Breydon Water as it runs into the sea at Great Yarmouth. Dame Beatrice unlocked nothing at all in this room.

‘If there are objects as small as engraved gems here, they are most likely hidden among all this sand and earth,’ said Dame Beatrice, indicating the realistic displays. ‘Let us inspect the exhibits, but, apart from that, there is nothing we can do. We cannot wreck the room for something which is not necessarily essential to our purpose.’

The closest inspection again revealed nothing. It began to look as though Streatley had been mistaken in thinking that engraved gems had been purloined by Breydon-Waters. Laura voiced this thought.

‘Streatley has led us up the garden,’ she said. ‘How would Breydon-Waters have got away with snitching things from a Greek dig, anyway?’

‘I confess that I do not know, child. I also have an open mind with regard to the truth, or otherwise, of Mr Streatley’s disclosures. Of course, he did not accuse Mr Breydon-Waters, in so many words, of stealing the gems.’

‘Cagey, eh?’ muttered Laura. ‘Well, where do we look next?’

‘At the stuffed birds and animals.’

‘Particularly at their glassy eyes, I take it.’

‘No, not particularly. Whoever hid whatever it is we are looking for – if indeed anything has been hidden at all – would never have had either time or opportunity to perform such an operation in taxidermy, even if he had possessed the necessary skill.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ said Laura. ‘I’ve looked long and earnestly, from time to time, at the specimens here, and I note that many are captioned, such as: *Presented to the museum by R. T. Tiddly-Push, Esq., October 1910*. You know the kind of thing.’

‘Yes, certainly, I do. How does it help us?’

‘Well, all we have to do is to search for the most recent presentations and goggle closely at them.’

‘I see.’

Laura glanced suspiciously at her employer, whose dry tone suggested irony, and pursued her point.

‘If you’re not looking for something, you don’t usually see it. Isn’t that true?’

‘That is a dangerous generalisation. In my own case, I have found the opposite to be equally applicable. It is the thing I am looking for which seems to have the faculty of keeping out of sight. But carry out your scheme, by all means.’

The stuffed animals and birds were housed in cases along a wide passageway. They were placed down the middle of it (so that the public could walk all round them) and also against both walls.

‘I know!’ said Laura, coming up to Dame Beatrice at the end of the first five minutes of intense scrutiny.

‘Yes?’

‘The pelican’s beak.’

Dame Beatrice looked at her admiringly.

‘Well, well,’ she said, not mitigating her glance.

‘Do unlock the case he’s in. It’s over here,’ said Laura, and led the way. ‘See? You could put a whole jewel-case in that bird’s pouch. Think of *The Man who Stole the Pelican* –or did you never read it?’

‘Yes, I read it, child. Very well, I will unlock the case, and I hope that you will not be disappointed.’

‘Not me. Don’t forget I once had an ancestor who had the Gift. I’m sure I’m right. My idea about the eyes was pretty dud, but this is different.’

Dame Beatrice called to the Superintendent, who was distastefully surveying a stuffed and mangy vixen and her cubs in a far corner of the passage. He came over to her at once.

‘Here,’ said Dame Beatrice, indicating the pelican, ‘we have a task for *(a)* your forensic experts and *(b)* another for Sir John.’

The Superintendent peered into the deep pouch which the glassy-eyed pelican displayed for his inspection. He looked doubtful and somewhat disappointed.

‘That look like some sort of chopper,’ he said, ‘but that hasn’t a handle.’

‘With or without a handle, it is a chopper, as you say, Superintendent. Moreover, it appears to me, from a cursory examination and in a poor light (the pouch of the pelican being very much in shadow), to be made of copper,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘As such, it may be of primary importance. Mr Breydon-Waters’ collection contains another and a similar copper axe-head. Sir John must see this.’

‘So this is what we’ve been looking for, ma’am?’

‘I think it probable and I would like your people to examine it.’

‘What do you expect ’em to find?’

‘If I am right, either traces of chalk from Pigmy’s Ladder, or bloodstains, or both.’

‘That do be so? Then I’ll get the museum people here to prepare some samples from all levels of Pigmy’s Ladder and we’ll call in the Yard. What’s your theory, ma’am?’

‘Let us obtain the facts first, Superintendent, and then I will tell you.’

‘Fair enough. Just you leave it to me, then, ma’am. You expect to find the murderer’s fingerprints on the chopper, I take it?’

‘I have no theories to offer you about that, and, although I think there may be prints, I prefer not to suggest whose they might be.’

‘Never mind. That will be tested. There’s none more thorough than us here at Nodding. Do you reckon to continue the search, ma’am?’

‘We must leave nothing to chance.’ They searched until early morning, but nothing else was found which seemed to be out of place. The Superintendent carefully impounded the pelican, beak, chopper and all, rearranged the contents of the glass case so that no gap was noticeable, and then he locked up the castle and the party separated to go to their various refuges.

‘Well,’ said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were covering the short distance between the Castle Museum and the *Gauntlet*, ‘what do you think now?’

‘It is no longer what I think, but what I know, child. I know why Mr Breydon-Waters crawled towards the statuette of the goddess before he was killed, and I know that there will be no fingerprints on the copper axe-head. However, I thought

it better, at this stage, not to offer to the Superintendent these apparently doubtful points.'

Dame Beatrice paid two calls later on in the morning. The first one was on Downing, and this at almost as soon as the Castle Museum opened at nine. She had only one question to put to him.

'Are any members of the Archaeological Society able to obtain access to your exhibits, in order, we will say, to handle them for purposes of study?'

'Oh, yes, Dame Beatrice, certainly. We offer them every facility.'

'They apply to you, of course, for a key?'

'Oh, no. We look upon them as fully accredited and responsible persons, so each has access to a full set of keys kept on a hook in Brent's little cubby-hole.'

'So Brent would know, every time the keys are borrowed?'

'I should hardly like to swear to that. Of course, members are *supposed* to sign a book which is kept on a shelf, with pencil attached, if they borrow the keys, but you know what people are!'

'Should I be allowed to see the book, if I asked for it?'

'Certainly, but if you are thinking that poor, misguided Breydon-Waters ever stole anything from here to add to that pathetic collection of his, which I saw, in company with other members, soon after Sir John had inspected it, I can assure you that nothing could be further from the truth.'

'You are sure that you would know if anything had gone from the museum?'

'Oh, I most certainly think so, but Breydon-Waters...'

'I am not thinking of Mr Breydon-Waters.'

'But – well, really, Dame Beatrice, you both intrigue and alarm me. Have you really any reason to believe that something important is missing from our collection? If so, what?'

'That is for you to say. A telephone message to the *Gauntlet Hotel*...'

'Of course, of course.'

'And, as Mr Brent is also a member of your Society, I should be grateful for his opinion also.'

'Yes, yes, and any of the other attendants?'

'No, nobody else. What concerns me, concerns members of the Society only.'

At this point there came a tapping at the door. It opened to admit Brent.

‘Mr Downing, sir,’ he began, ‘I have to report...’

‘You’ve been very quick and observant, Brent,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but not a word. Mr Downing will see for himself. This is a police matter and we must have completely independent testimony, so, not a syllable, unless you are careless of your personal well-being. You may write on this piece of paper the nature of your report whilst Mr Downing makes his rounds.’

Bewildered, Brent sat down to write. Equally bewildered, Downing went out of the room. He returned before his henchman had signed a short and patient scrawl.

‘The pelican,’ said Downing, ‘has been abstracted and the case rearranged to cover the gap. I am glad you warned me that something was missing.’

Dame Beatrice picked up Brent’s communication and handed it over. Downing nodded.

‘Can you explain why the bird should have been removed?’ Dame Beatrice asked. The men looked at one another and each shook his head.

‘Beat me why anyone want an ugly customer like him,’ said Brent.

‘I should imagine that the thing is a practical joke,’ said Downing, ‘and, one imagines, a pointless one.’

‘No joke,’ said Dame Beatrice, making the third person to shake a head, ‘but perhaps you would care to know that I can now remove both your names from my list of suspects.’ She leered hideously at them, bade them good morning and thanked them very much for their co-operation.

She went straight from them to the *Gauntlet*, telephoned George, who had chosen a less exalted hostelry, ordered him to get the car from the garage, and was soon being driven to Mrs Breydon-Waters’ house. She found Mrs Breydon-Waters at home and was received with an almost stunning degree of affability.

‘Oh, Dame Beatrice! Oh, dear me, this is a lovely surprise! Do come in! I’ve got dear Mr Streatley here, and – do you know what? You’ll never guess! Sir John was quite wrong, you know, quite, quite wrong. Mr Streatley, whom dear, dear Oliver *always* asserted was the only real, true, *dedicated* archaeologist of the lot of them – except for himself, of course – has come round to value the collection for me and, dear Dame Beatrice, *to buy it!* Isn’t it *wonderful?*’

‘What a pleasant surprise for you,’ said Dame Beatrice, stepping over the threshold. ‘I congratulate you most sincerely.’ She advanced just far enough to allow her hostess to close the front door.

‘Indeed, yes. I mean, I congratulate myself. Is the bargain quite concluded? Yes, it is. I have the cheque, and Mr Streatley is sending for the collection this afternoon. I really ought to give Mr Streatley an inventory, I suppose, as there are such a number of *small* things – arrow-heads and oyster-shells, you know – but I am afraid that my knowledge is insufficient to allow me to name and date the objects. What would *you* do?’

‘I would ask *me* to obtain a copy of Sir John’s inventory, which I could readily obtain in the course of about a week, and send that on to him, unless he would prefer to leave the collection where it is until the list arrives. It would really be more business-like that way.’

‘Then we must have it like that. But the cheque, Dame Beatrice. Should I return it, *pro. tem.*?’

‘Why not leave the decision to Mr Streatley?’

‘Oh, of course. You have such a practical mind.’

The summer sunshine fell full on a coloured photograph of (as Dame Beatrice rightly surmised) Oliver Breydon-Waters. It showed the bright blue of his eyes and the angelic gold of his sleek, close-cut hair. It also demonstrated that he had inherited a weak chin and had grown a small silky moustache. The body she had seen had had a cleanshaven face, but this, she thought, was a point of no importance.

‘What would Mr Breydon-Waters think *now* about your selling his collection?’ she asked.

‘Oliver? Oh, I am out of touch at the moment, but I am sure he will agree when I see him and tell him all about it. He thinks I don’t understand money matters, so he went off in rather a huff, but I expect him back quite soon. Do come in and meet dear Mr Streatley.’

‘I am pressed for time, if you’ll excuse me. I came only to hear whether there was any more news and to ask you to forgive me if I ask two very personal and embarrassing questions which I can hardly put to you in front of a third party. They concern arrest and subsequent imprisonment.’

‘Oh, well, that was not true about me. I have never been arrested. I was feeling upset when I said that.’

‘And your son?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. In France, or it may have been Greece. He stole some silly thing or other from the Louvre, or somewhere. Not anything important, you know – and, of course, he gave it back when they asked him for it.’

‘Where his fingerprints taken, do you know?’

‘Oh, what does it matter? Yes, they were, as a matter of fact. He was most indignant about it. And he *is not* my son.’

‘You allowed that fact to escape from you once before.’

‘I adopted him when his mother committed suicide. That is to say that, as his father was a widower, I adopted them both. I had known them for years. Oliver’s poor mother was my best friend.’

‘I see.’

‘I did not marry the father, neither did we live together in the vulgar sense. He did not offer marriage and I have my principles of respectability.’

‘They lodged with you, then, the father and son?’

‘Yes.’

‘In France?’

‘No. All over the place. His father worked at an airport, so we had lots of cheap travel. Then Oliver’s father died in the Middle East and I came back to England for good. Oliver would not come with me. Then he got into this paltry little bit of trouble abroad and when they let him out of prison he was a changed boy. He sought me out and asked me to have him back. He said he would never get put into prison again and that he had given his name in France as Breydon-Waters and thought it a fine-sounding name. So we both changed our names by deed-poll and we have lived since as mother and son. I have nothing to reproach myself with, nothing at all, but I’m not really sorry he’s gone. He was always very lordly, once he got over his fright, and had no time for me except in so far as I got his meals and made his bed and kept his collection dusted.’

‘You kept the collection dusted? Then you would notice if anything was missing. Do you—?’

‘Missing?’ Mrs Breydon-Waters shook her head. ‘Nothing that I can think of. Is it important?’

Dame Beatrice shook her head and was about to speak when the dining-room door opened and Streatley put out his head.

‘I’m afraid I must go now,’ he said. ‘I’ll send round this afternoon, then. Oh, good-morning, Dame Beatrice!’

‘Dame Beatrice – I see you know one another – thinks she can provide me with a list, so that you can check by it, you know,’ said Mrs Breydon-Waters.

‘Oh, that’s all right. Send it up to me, if you like, when you get it, but there’s really no need. I’ve been looking over the stuff for the umpteenth time, so I don’t think you’ll be able to deceive me.’ He laughed genially. ‘Are you going my way, Dame Beatrice? May I offer you a lift?’

‘Thank you, I have my car outside,’ They went out of the house.

‘Any more news about Breydon-Waters?’ asked Streatley.

‘Progress is slow, but there may be developments shortly.’

‘You should be in the police force! Isn’t that a stock answer to awkward questions?’

‘Yours was not an awkward question. All my suspects have a right to protect their interests.’

Streatley laughed again; then he said, in a sober tone,

‘I’ve turned the whole thing over in my mind dozens and dozens of times, and, honestly, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree. It *can* have been one of us.’

‘Well, we are working through the list of members and today my list of suspects became shorter.’

‘That’s fine. That’s the style. You’ll see. We shall all be exonerated by next August Bank Holiday. Do you care to bet on it?’

‘I rarely bet, and never on certainties.’

‘No, it was unsporting of me to suggest a bet. I’m sure I should have won. I apologise.’ He stepped forward to open the door of her car, but George was there to forestall him, so he raised his hat and went back to his own vehicle.

‘The hotel, George. I’m late for lunch,’ said Dame Beatrice. As soon as they arrived at the *Gauntlet*, however, she went straight to the hotel telephone and rang up Mrs Breydon-Waters.

‘I was mistaken in thinking that anything has vanished from the collection,’ she said firmly. ‘Please think no more about it. I wondered whether your son might have sold some of the items, but, if he did, he had a perfect right to do so if they were his own, and, after all, Mr Streatley is buying only what he has seen *since your son’s death*. He has no claim on anything which disappeared before that.’

‘Oh, I’m so glad you think so, Dame Beatrice. You see...’

Dame Beatrice rang off. Laura, at lunch, was perturbed.

‘You’ve been chasing about all the morning and haven’t had a wink of sleep all night,’ she said accusingly.

‘I shall take a nap this afternoon,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘And how is Hamish?’

‘Hamish waited hours and hours and *hours*,’ said Hamish in an aggrieved tone, ‘and I’m hungry.’

‘Who looked after you last night?’

‘The chambermaid. She read me a lovely story, all about bears. They ate all the little girls, and all the boys except me.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Nodding Killer

‘... that I was to be prosecuted in a criminal court ostensibly for measles, but really for having owned a watch, and attempted the reintroduction of machinery.’

Samuel
Butler

ND now,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘for Sir John. He must see what the pelican had in its beak and then pass an expert’s opinion on other related matters.’

The Superintendent had already tested the axe-head for fingerprints, but without success. What pleased him, however, was the discovery by his forensic experts of measurable quantities of human blood which had coagulated at the haft end.

‘Looks like the weapon, ma’am,’ he said. ‘It’s never turned up, although we’ve looked everywhere we can think of. Had you thought of the weapon being in the Castle Museum all this time?’

‘No, I had not, Superintendent. Neither do I believe this to be the weapon. My hope, in having the museum searched, was to find out what *we have* found out, namely, the reason why Mr Breydon-Waters was murdered.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘And I had better not commit myself to an explanation until Sir John has studied this exhibit.’

Sir John’s reaction to his inspection of the axe-head was one of mild surprise.

‘The other axes of this type which I have seen and handled,’ he said, ‘came from Babylonia. At about 3000 b.c. the royal palace at Kish was abandoned as a dwelling-place for the living and was then used to house the dead. It became, in fact, a cemetery. A number of these copper axes have been found in the graves there. The particular specimens I have seen are in the Field Museum, Chicago, and I had no idea that the museum here possessed one. Very interesting. I should like to trace its history after it left the cemetery.’

‘As I am convinced that, in the first place, it was stolen property, I fear that such a history would be difficult to come by. The Superintendent of Police here is inclined to think that it is the weapon which killed a member of the archaeological society, Mr Breydon-Waters, but I am not at all convinced of that, although the medical evidence is not entirely on my side. The axe-head could have inflicted the wound we saw, but I have a strong feeling that it did not. For one thing (and the Superintendent himself admits this), one would have expected hairs matted in with the dried blood, but there are none. No, I think that we have to look somewhere else for the weapon.’

‘But where, Dame Beatrice? In Pigmy’s Ladder, do you mean?’

‘It is the most likely place. Do you care to come with me to visit the flint-mines, not necessarily to search for the weapon but to solve a small problem?’

‘Forensic or archaeological?’

‘Oh, archaeological, with, as the members of a certain B.B.C. panel would say, forensic connections.’

‘It sounds most interesting. Let us visit the flint-mines by all means.’

George drove the two of them to Pigmy’s Ladder and this time the custodian made no difficulty about allowing them to descend the main shaft. Dame Beatrice had told Sir John about the removal of the stones which had formed the protective wall in Gallery Five, but had given him no other information. He flashed his torch over the goddess and the phallic symbols and clicked his tongue.

‘Oh, dear,’ he said. ‘What a pity. The phallus has either been removed or broken and these rather pitiful symbols substituted.’

‘Ah,’ said Dame Beatrice in sepulchral tones, ‘that is what I have been hoping you would say. My further hope is that, from the point of view of this case of murder, the latter is the truth, although I imagine that I shock you by saying so.’

‘Not at all. Let us look around. If the thing has indeed been broken, but not removed from the mines, we should be able, I think, to identify the fragments.’

It was Sir John’s trained eye which identified not only the crumbled chalk on one of the dry-stone walls but also the bloodstained flint which had killed Breydon-Waters, this at the end of an hour’s careful exploration of the galleries.

Having given him lunch at the *Gauntlet* and seen him off on his journey back to London, Dame Beatrice rang up the Superintendent, who said that he would welcome a visit from her. At half-past three she was shown into his office.

‘No prints on the axe-head, ma’am, as you know, so, although we’re most grateful, we’re not very much in advance of what we were. But you say you’ve got something more for us,’ he said.

‘As a result of a conversation I had with Sir John St John John, I understand that it is inside the bounds of probability that this particular axe-head could have been found in Pigmy’s Ladder, because, on the evidence of geological experts, that is where it has almost certainly lain.’

‘That would tie up with the murder, of course, ma’am, but it doesn’t give us a clue as to the identity of the murderer or to the motive for the murder.’

‘Your first argument I accept, *pro. tem.*, although I can make a shrewd guess as to the identity of the murderer. The motive, I am convinced, is that the murderer was determined to spoil Mr Breydon-Waters’ little game, if I may be permitted so blatant a colloquialism.’

‘His little game?’

‘The axe-head had at some time been placed in Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘Yes, if the experts say so.’

‘It could not have been placed there by the people who made and owned such axes.’

‘It seem not, ma’am.’

‘So we are faced with these questions: what was the axe doing in Pigmy’s Ladder in the first place? – and why did it get into the pelican’s beak in the Castle Museum in the second place?’

‘Sound as if somebody was nuts.’

‘If, by that, you imply that the murderer is mentally afflicted, that, in the everyday sense of the words, is not the case. He has his wits about him...’

‘And has led us a rare dance, I’ll admit, ma’am. That’s true enough. If you hadn’t had that hunch about searching the museum, I doubt whether the axe-head wouldn’t have lain hidden for a good many years. How often do they clean those cases, I wonder?’

‘I have no idea, but, apparently, the murderer had reason to believe that the axe would not be discovered until the trail had grown cold.’

‘You talk as though you were convinced the murderer is a man, not a woman, ma’am, and there’s no doubt it was what we think of as a man’s crime.’

‘I not only think that the murderer was a man, but I think I could name him.’

‘We have our own suspicions, ma’am, of course, but we can’t prove anything, and the party I have in mind could make a sight of trouble if we hadn’t – if we slipped up anywhere.’

‘I agree, so we will name no names for the present, but I will say this about the murderer: I think he is a nervous man and one who is not without a conscience. I will add that his morality is not of religious, but of, in a sense, artistic origin.’

‘Then I’m not at all sure we’re talking of the same man, ma’am.’

‘He has a passion for the truth.’

‘I thought truth had to do with religion.’

‘What is truth, Superintendent? It has been thought to be a many-sided mountain with numberless paths, all different, all leading to the summit. It has been thought to be a prism, reflecting rainbow light, and it is the contention of scientists that a fusion of the colours in a prism would result in blinding white, such as the angels know. There is religious truth, artistic truth, scientific truth and psychological truth.’

‘We certainly do seem to see through a glass darkly, ma’am.’

‘In this case, certainly, you and I may not see face to face, as Saint Paul put it, but I have a strong inclination to believe that we see eye to eye, and, at the moment, I have a feeling of sympathy with the murderer.’

‘Then I don’t agree as to us seeing eye to eye,’ said the Superintendent. ‘I don’t agree with murder. Never shall.’

‘Wisdom probably will be justified of her children, and you are one of them, I feel. What line do you now propose to follow?’

‘Well, he’s got no alibi for the Friday night-Saturday morning in which we’re interested, ma’am, but, after all, if a man live alone, as you might say, and declare he spent a quiet evening with his books and went to bed at his usual time, there’s no point in calling him a liar unless you can prove it, and, to be perfectly honest, we can’t.’

‘There are his servants, of course.’

‘We’ve tried them, but they’re as dumb as oysters. Declare that, once dinner is over, they reckon to see no more of him until the following morning, when his man take him up his early tea.’

‘Have you considered the possibility that the servants have been bribed?’

‘Yes, ma’am, but I don’t think that’s the case. I think they’re telling the truth, and, the gentleman being what he is, I don’t honestly believe he’d put servants in that sort of position.’

‘I agree.’

‘So his alibi is neither here nor there, as you might say. I don’t think it will be much good, but that look as though I’d better see him again.’

But before the Superintendent could carry out his intention, there came the event which, in his own words, broke open the whole case. This was nothing less than the violent death of Mrs Breydon-Waters, whose body was discovered by the milkman early on the following morning, half inside and half outside her own front door. It looked as though she had tried to obtain help, but had died before she could reach the front gate.

The milkman summoned the man next door and brought him on to the scene. This neighbour used his authority to prevent the removal of the body into the sitting-room and sent for the police. The Superintendent was soon upon the scene with the police surgeon and the usual squad of photographer, fingerprint expert and uniformed constables, supplemented by the small crowd which invariably appears to rise out of the ground, like the warriors of the dragon’s teeth, on these occasions. After the preliminaries had been completed, the body was removed to the mortuary for further examination and Dame Beatrice was informed of what had happened.

She had already made the acquaintance of the police surgeon and they went into conference as soon as she arrived at the mortuary. Then she was shown the pitiful and, to be frank, the unbeautiful remains of Mrs Breydon-Waters. She examined them. The police surgeon waited until she looked up at him. Then he said,

‘Looks like a case of irritant poisoning to me.’

‘I agree.’ They went into medical details of, to the layman, a repellent character.

‘There is corrosion of the lips and the inside of the mouth, and there has been vomiting of a dark colour.’

‘Yes, quite. I’ve collected enough of the material for an analysis. Looks like one of the organic acids. I’ll plump for oxalic, otherwise salts of lemon. Wonder what makes them choose stuff like that? Must be devilish nasty. Burns the throat and stomach like hell. Don’t they realise what it’s going to do to the tissues?’

‘It is cheap, of course,’ Dame Beatrice suggested.

‘Drunk for a penny; dead drunk for twopence? – yes.’

‘But there is *no proof* that this was suicide.’

‘You couldn’t drink oxalic acid by accident!’

‘Surely.’

‘You think so?’

‘I think of Epsom salts. The one has been known to be mistaken for the other. Nevertheless, far from this being an accidental death, or even suicide. I believe it to be a simple case of murder.’

‘Simple?’ This query came from the Superintendent. ‘In what way simple, Dame Beatrice?’

‘Because, it seems to me, the motive is clear.’

‘That means she knew that an axe-head from her son’s collection was missing, and she knew that the murderer had it?’

‘I do not believe she did know that, at the time. The trouble is that the murderer may have *thought* she did. I am certain she knew later that it was missing, and I have evidence that this knowledge came as an afterthought.’

‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘I asked her, in private, whether anything was missing, but her memory failed her. I wanted her to name the copper axe-head, but she could not, at the time, call it to mind. Later on, I am certain she did remember it, for she rang me up on the telephone.’

‘And the murderer tapped the line?’

‘Possibly so. I cut her off before she could get the information to me, so, of course, I could not swear on oath that she was about to tell me she had remembered the axe-head, but I fear now that my action in ringing off was in vain.’

‘Not so easy for an amateur to tap a telephone line, though, ma’am.’

‘That is why I accept the theory somewhat sceptically, Superintendent. In my opinion, it is far more likely that the murderer was actually present when she made the call.’

‘What cause you to think that, then?’

‘Her death and the manner of it, for one thing, and my doubts about the tapping of the telephone. Then, I know that the murderer has been a frequent visitor since her son’s death. He has been studying the collection of antiquities with a view to purchase. Indeed, by this time, the transaction will have gone through.’

‘You’ve hinted several times that you know the motive for the murder of Mr Breydon-Waters, ma’am. Do you care to state it in so many words?’

‘As I am now certain, beyond any shadow of doubt, of the identity of the murderer, I see no reason to withhold my theory about the motive. As I have hinted before, Mr Breydon-Waters died because he tried to fake archaeological evidence. He was determined to plant, and then to “find,” a copper axe-head from Kish where no such axe-head could be; that is, in the flint-mines of Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘But what could he hope to gain by that, ma’am?’

‘Notoriety, or, in his own mind, fame.’

‘But Sir John spot what that axe-head was at once. Sir John did not begin to be taken in.’

‘Mr Breydon-Waters may have pinned his faith to the knowledge that archaeological evidence has been faked successfully in the past. One thinks of the Piltdown skull, for example.’

‘But they rumble that one in the end, ma’am.’

‘Yes, but not for some considerable time.’

‘And you intend to tell me that to put a bit of old copper like that in Pigmy’s Ladder was to risk being murdered? That do seem properly strange.’

‘Our man is evidently a purist.’

‘We can’t tell a jury that, ma’am.’

‘No, of course not.’

‘Apart from motive, we’ve not been able to show opportunity, and, unless we can prove without doubt that the bit of flint was the weapon he use (and you think so) even the means is uncertain. It mean an exhumation and nobody like that very much, unless we can show it’s essential.’

‘You will have to pursue your enquiries into the death of Mrs Breydon-Waters, where the means is known and the opportunity, I daresay, can be shown.’

‘Juries like to hear about a sound motive, ma’am, whatever the lawyers say. I know it isn’t necessary to show motive, but it make the prosecution’s case a good bit stronger.’

‘Yes, I am aware of that, and I perceive your difficulty. It is necessary to go into the reason for Mr Breydon-Waters’ death in order to show a motive for the death of his foster-mother. Never mind. We must rely upon Counsel to cross that particular fence for us. Meanwhile, on, Stanley, on!’

‘It make it easier to hit on a line to follow now that we know the identity of Mr Breydon-Waters’ murderer. I suppose there’s no doubt about that, ma’am?’

‘No doubt at all. Mr Streatley is our man, although I think he had an accomplice. He covered his tracks, to begin with (I refer to the murder of Mr Breydon-Waters), more by luck than judgment, but there is a trail like a flare-path to connect him with what has happened. It is interesting, too, that he was the person to accuse Mr Breydon-Waters of theft. I believe my suspicions of him hardened from that time onwards.’

‘We shall try to trace purchase of the salts of lemon, ma’am, but that won’t be too easy. It’s deadly, it’s true, but people buy it for cleaning, pretty free, and no doubt that give a false name if he buy it for a wicked purpose.’

‘Yes, but, in my experience, more women than men ask for oxalic acid for cleaning purposes. I wonder whether he needed to make one or more purchases? It is supplied to the public in very small quantities and he may have decided that one purchase might not be sufficient to serve his purpose. I wonder how much knowledge of poisons he has?’

‘We shall circularise all the local chemists, but not all of them insist upon making an entry in the poisons book for salts of lemon, although they are supposed to ask the purpose for which the stuff is required. We shall make headway over this second case. I agree with you there, ma’am. Oh, well, I’d best be getting on. You’ll let me know at once if anything else comes to you?’

‘Of course, Superintendent.’

She did not see, at the moment, that anything was likely to come to her until more concrete evidence was available, and this would need to be sought and found by the police. She went back to the *Gauntlet* and spent an hour in amusing Hamish and another half-hour in giving him his tea. Laura, upon Dame Beatrice's having offered to act as baby-sitter, had gone to meet Alice from school. She had promised to be back by half-past six in time to dress herself and Hamish for dinner. The latter had fought a stern battle in favour of staying up for this meal and a compromise had been reached. He stayed up every third night and Laura did not make this conditional upon good behaviour. Third nights were third nights, with no strings attached.

‘Auntie Alice,’ said Hamish, setting down his tea-cup carefully, ‘rang up.’

‘Indeed? To ask your mother to meet her?’

‘No. The meet was all set.’

‘The meeting had already been arranged.’

‘Yes. Mummy said “Golly! Don’t leave until I get there. Promise!”’

‘And what did you deduce from that?’

‘I don’t have to say golly.’

‘It is not, indeed, an elegant expression.’

‘No. So, when Mummy said it, I knew she was surprised.’

‘Yes?’

Hamish helped himself to a slice of cake and cut it carefully and exactly into four pieces.

‘I call them Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,’ he said.

‘Very pious.’

‘Which is littlest?’

‘Mark, I believe.’

‘I eat him first. I know a boy called Mark. What’s Mark?’

‘Short for Marcus.’

Hamish laughed loudly, and choked on the last piece of Mark. Dame Beatrice patted him gently.

‘You said Marcus!’ cried Hamish, recovering the use of his vocal cords. He tried the word experimentally. ‘Marcus! Marcus!’ Then he added, ‘After Auntie Alice

made the funny noise on the telephone, Mummy said, “I’d never thought of such a thing. Anyway, I’ll be right over, the moment Mrs Croc comes in. Why does she call you that”?”

‘Because, in her informed opinion, I am physically saurian in type.’

‘Saurian? What’s saurian?’

‘Like a crocodile.’

‘Oh, I see.’ He sat with Matthew poised in mid-air and studied Dame Beatrice closely. He shook his head.

‘No,’ he said decidedly. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Not enough teeth,’ said Hamish.

Laura returned, with Alice in tow, at six. She explained that they had had tea in the restaurant opposite the Cathedral. She left Alice in charge of Hamish and took Dame Beatrice into the bar of the hotel. This, at opening time, was empty except for the barman, who was polishing glasses. Laura ordered sherry for Dame Beatrice and a whisky sour for herself and chose a table as far from the bar as she could contrive.

‘Old Alice,’ she said, ‘is worried about you.’

‘I do not deserve or require that she should be.’

‘That’s what you think, but you haven’t seen the letter.’

‘No, I suppose I have not.’

‘One of the best threatening missives I have ever studied.’

‘I had no idea that you were an authority on threatening letters.’

‘Refrain from jesting. I’ve brought it with me. Here, read it, and tell me what you think.’

Dame Beatrice took a pink but grubby envelope and extracted from it a piece of pale-blue note-paper patterned at the top, as Laura expressed it, with the vine and grapes in gold. It was excessively and abominably perfumed and Dame Beatrice sniffed very delicately at it.

‘Hardly *Chanel*,’ she observed. She opened it. It was short and to the point, and was written in roughly-printed capitals and in violet ink.

‘Tell that b. Dame to lay off, or else she’ll get hurt.’

(Signed) Pew and Gang.'

'Dear me!' remarked Dame Beatrice, folding up the missive and putting it back into the envelope. 'The semi-literate almost always write "of" when they mean "off," and the refinements of correct punctuation appear to be unknown to them.'

'So you don't think it comes from a yob?'

'I know from whom it comes.'

'I suppose the police ought to see it.'

'Yes, undoubtedly. I must have no secrets from the Superintendent.'

'Shall you tell him you know where it comes from?'

'There will be no need. He will guess.'

'Got that far, have you? Well, what do I say to comfort young Alice?'

'Tell her on no account to allow herself to be kidnapped.'

Laura grinned.

'Who's the nigger in the woodpile?' she asked.

'Streatley, dear child.'

'I had a hunch that he was. I don't like over-rich men. They think they've bought the earth, let alone everybody who dwells on it.'

'Far too general a statement.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, I do.'

'And what about Streatley?'

'Unpredictable. One thing is certain, however. He is certain to have discovered by this time that the pelican has been removed from its case, therefore the threatening letter, therefore we return the pelican and make him think deeply.'

'What made him attempt to hide the axe-head like that? If it had been mine, I'd have cleaned it up and put it back among the other things in the collection.'

'He could not be sure, at first, whether Mrs Breydon-Waters would notice that it had disappeared and reappeared, I suppose. If it re-appeared – which it could do only *after* the death of Mr Breydon-Waters – he would have been the first (perhaps the only) person to be suspected of having put it there. He has been a fairly frequent visitor to that house since he offered to purchase the collection.'

‘But Mrs Breydon-Waters didn’t strike you as the type who would go to the police about a thing like that, did she?’

‘No, child; I do not believe she would have done anything more than to remark upon the return of the axe-head and leave it at that. She might even have said – possibly even believed – that her son’s ghost had returned it. The point is that there are two of these axe-heads.’

‘Did she really believe all that stuff about spirits and things?’

‘I have no idea, and, unfortunately, there will be no opportunity now of finding out.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Neighbourly Noddors

‘In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society...’

George
Eliot

HE inquest on the body of Mrs Breydon-Waters produced no particularly startling facts except a statement from a chemist that she used Epsom salts. Neighbours could testify that she had been alive and well up to six o’clock in the evening, because she had been tending the front garden of her house up to that hour and had paused to rest and chat at frequent intervals, bemoaning the fact that she had no help with the gardening now that she had lost her son.

At six she had knocked off, remarking to the man next door that she was dying for a cup of tea but that she still had to water the plants in the back garden. After that, nobody had seen her until the milkman had found her dead body on his early morning delivery.

Her most frequent visitor, since the death of her adopted son, made an unsensational appearance at the enquiry. He admitted that he had called upon her on the day of her death, but submitted that he had stayed barely a quarter of an hour and had taken his departure at three in the afternoon. This statement was upheld by one of the neighbours who had recognised his expensive car in the street

and who had been sufficiently interested to note the times of his arrival and departure.

There seemed to be nothing in all this to indicate whether Mrs Breydon-Waters had died by accident, suicide, or by the hand of a murderer. Her demeanour and conversation, however, seemed to rule out any suggestion of suicide. The medical evidence was unhelpful. That she had taken a lethal dose of salts of lemon was not arguable, but, beyond that fact, there was nothing except for a poisoned bottle of Epsom salts discovered by the police.

Laura and Dame Beatrice had both attended the inquest. Laura was disgusted, Dame Beatrice philosophical, about the outcome.

‘Open verdict my foot!’ said the former, belligerently, after they had left the courtroom. ‘She was murdered all right. There can’t be any doubt about that. What do you think?’

‘As you do, child, but where is the proof? You see, whoever the *deus ex machina* may have been, the dose must have been self-administered. Nobody could have forced her to drink salts of lemon.’

‘That’s all very well, but whoever killed Breydon-Waters killed her, say what you like. It sticks out a mile. She knew something...’

‘Or the murderer thought she did? Possibly, but, at the moment, there seems to be nothing we can do about it.’

‘Then where do we go from here?’

‘Time will show.’

‘You always say that. The trouble is that you always seem to be right.’

‘Then why worry?’

‘Oh, all right, but I simply can’t see anything coming out of this inquest.’

‘One never knows. Patience is an essential virtue in these matters.’

‘I loathe being patient. I want to get on and do things. What did you think of the way Streatley gave his evidence?’

‘I thought it was admirably done. He is a very clever man.’

‘You do think he did it, then?’

‘Well, there can be little doubt that he knows more than he has said, but one cannot go further than that at this stage, I feel.’

‘I feel I don’t like him.’

‘A sentiment which approximates to my own, but something more is needed than a vague feeling of dislike, and we shall get it in time.’

‘Do you really think so? I used to have that sort of faith when I was young.’

Dame Beatrice regarded her affectionately.

‘We must work on those neighbours,’ she said. ‘The man struck me as an intelligent, non-suggestible soul.’

‘Then we shan’t be able to suggest anything to him, shall we?’

‘At any rate, he will tell us the truth, and truth, do not forget, is a many-splendoured thing. Besides, we may be able to jog his memory.’

‘More than the coroner did?’

‘Oh, I hope so, child, I hope so. We have more to go on, you see.’

‘Nothing but suspicion. So far as I can see, we haven’t a ha’porth of proof.’

‘Have no fear. The truth will out and we shall get at something, although what that something is I should not venture to prophesy at this stage.’

They called upon the neighbour on the following morning, after Dame Beatrice had engaged the Superintendent on the telephone.

‘Take any steps you think best, ma’am,’ had been the burden of his reply. ‘I’d give a lot to get this Breydon-Waters business cleared up. Of course there’s some connection between the two deaths. I have no doubt whatever about that. What I am beginning to wonder now is whether the lady killed Breydon-Waters and then committed suicide. Stranger things than that have happened, you know. We’re pursuing our own enquiries, of course, but they need not interfere with yours. In fact, two quite separate lines might be a very good thing. You’ll keep in touch with us, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course, but you can discard the suicide theory, you know. I am sure that Mr Pursey’s evidence disposed of that.’

She and Laura went to call on Mrs Breydon-Waters’ neighbour, the Mr Pursey in question. He was a retired bank-clerk and was doing some leisurely work in his front garden when they arrived. Dame Beatrice produced her credentials and begged the favour of a few minutes’ conversation.

‘Oh, yes, I saw you in court,’ said the neighbour. ‘Come in, please.’

The front door was open and he directed them into a small sitting-room. Dame Beatrice came to the point at once.

‘Unofficially and off the record, Mr Pursey,’ she said, ‘what did you make of the Breydon-Waters?’

‘Both of them, you mean? Not very much that will help you, I’m afraid. They were always quiet neighbours and easy to get on with. We didn’t ever get to know them intimately, of course, but we always passed the time of day and my wife took in parcels for them, and Mrs Breydon-Waters would get us in a bit of food when we’d been on holiday, but, apart from that, there was really nothing. One never dreamt that such awful things would happen to them. There seemed nothing in their lives that wasn’t as open as the day.’

‘Tell me, did you ever hear them quarrelling? – with one another, I mean.’

‘Quarrelling? Oh, dear me, no. We did think perhaps the young fellow might have spared his mother – I still think of her as his mother, although I know now that she was not – that he might have spared her a bit more of his time; but, there! I suppose all young men have it in them to be a bit selfish where older people are concerned, especially when the older person is an adoring mother or, as in this case, foster-mother.’

‘Do you know what he did with his time when he was not at home?’

‘I believe he shared a boat with some other young man. Mrs Breydon-Waters mentioned it once, saying how glad she was that both of them could swim.’

‘Did this other young man ever come to the house? Did they ever meet next door?’

‘Not to my knowledge. I don’t think I ever saw him. Then, so Mrs Breydon-Waters once told my wife, he – Oliver – was greatly interested in archaeology and belonged to the Society here which was formed. Of course, it’s all quite a cult nowadays, thanks to Animal, Vegetable, Mineral and Sir Mortimer Wheeler, and so forth. Everybody likes to think he knows something about it, even the man in the street. It’s a very sad thing that young Breydon-Waters was so keen on it, as he met his death in those flint-mines.’

‘Yes, now that brings me to something which, no doubt, the police have already asked you. Does anything come to your mind about the Friday night of his death? As you read, I expect, in the papers, it is certain that he was killed either very late on the Friday night or very early on the Saturday morning.’

Pursey shook his iron-grey head.

‘It was news to me when the Superintendent informed me that he was supposed to have come home that night. I knew nothing of it, and I should have thought we’d have known.’

‘Why so?’

‘He carried no latch-key.’

‘Really? How was that?’

‘His mother told my wife that he had lost two latchkeys and that she was so much afraid of somebody picking one up and gaining entrance, in order to steal, that she had begged him not to carry another key, promising always to be at home to let him in.’

‘And he agreed? It seems odd if he did, lost keys or no lost keys. Young men usually expect a wide degree of independence in these matters.’

‘Well, he must have agreed, but I feel sure the situation irritated him, because he always hammered so heavily on the door-knocker and would also impatiently peal at the bell. That makes me almost certain that he did not come home that night.’

‘Did you know that he was supposed to have gone to Palestine?’

‘Oh, yes. His mother told my wife, over the back garden fence, when she was cutting some roses for the house. She asked her if she might knock on our party wall if she felt nervous while her son was away. He certainly went away and, to the best of my belief, did not return at all.’

‘We suspected that he did not. Did Mrs Breydon-Waters remain indoors in the evenings?’

‘So far as I know, she never went out after she had had her tea, except into the garden. My wife told her that she was welcome to come and sit in our house during the evenings if she felt lonely, but she said that, as long as she knew she could knock on the wall, she would be all right alone.’

‘One more thing, Mr Pursey, if you will be so good. How soon after Mr Breydon-Waters’ death did Mr Streatley, whom you saw and heard at the inquest, begin his visits to Mrs Breydon-Waters for the purpose of studying Mr Breydon-Waters’ collection of antiquities?’

But on this point Pursey was unable to commit himself.

‘All I know is that he must have called at least twice before I knew that he did visit her,’ he said. ‘I knew nothing about the collection of antiquities, either, until we saw it being loaded into Mr Streatley’s car. Mrs Breydon-Waters never mentioned the collection, and I don’t think I have spoken more than a dozen words to Oliver ever since they came to live here. He was a very self-sufficient, rather arrogant young man, and I was not prepared to be snubbed by him.’

‘Did you – I know this is a leading question, but I’m sure you won’t allow that to influence you – did you ever think that Mrs Breydon-Waters had suicidal tendencies?’

‘Oh, dear me, no. She was quite a cheerful sort of woman until Oliver’s tragic death, and, even then, she soon perked up.’

‘Yet she was not, in every respect, a well-balanced woman, surely?’

‘I did not know that. In what sense do you mean? She always appeared perfectly normal to me.’

‘You have never heard of her preoccupation with the spirit world?’

‘Oh, that! Many middle-aged and rather lonely women take an interest in the spirit world. I should call that perfectly natural, especially after Oliver was killed. She may have thought she could learn the name of his murderer.’

‘Did you ever hear rumours to the effect that there was some talk at the time of her son’s death which was directed against her?’

‘My wife would be far more likely to hear rumours of that sort than I should. I will call her.’

He did so, and a small, plain woman with large grey eyes and a certain air of timidity came in. Dame Beatrice and she were introduced and Dame Beatrice repeated the question.

‘Talk against her?’ said Mrs Pursey. ‘I am quite sure I never heard any. Of course, we were all terribly shocked and upset when we heard that Oliver had been killed, and there was lots of head-wagging and gossip and speculation, as you’d naturally expect, but I’m sure there was nothing wicked or malicious, was there, Oswald?’

‘I heard nothing of the sort, my dear, but, as you do most of the shopping and go into Yarmouth on the bus, on Thursdays, with some of the other ladies, and are a member of the W.V.S., I think that if there had been any unpleasant talk it would have come your way.’

‘Well, it didn’t. Of course, we wondered how she would manage, as we understood that the son’s money was their biggest source of income, but I’m sure we were far too sorry to be horrid about her.’

‘Tell me about the visits of Mr Streatley, the man who bought Mr Breydon-Waters’ collection of antiquities.’

‘Well, there,’ said Mrs Pursey, with an arch smile, ‘I’m afraid *wedid* rather speculate about matters, and there were quite a few of us who wondered whether

perhaps he had come to – well, court her, you know, when he took away all that stuff and made her so grateful to him. It always seems to me a strange thing, but it's true – you can read it in the papers in lots of these horrible murder cases – that some people seem to want to share in the notoriety and general fuss, and we could not help wondering whether Mr Streatley might be one of them.'

'Did you know him by sight, or in any way at all, *before* he visited Mrs Breydon-Waters?'

'I'd heard of him as a very wealthy man, because he used to bank with my husband before my husband retired, didn't he, Oswald?'

'Yes,' said Mr Pursey, 'he did, but I saw so very little of him that I hardly recognised him when he came here. A servant used to do any business usually – cash any cheques and so forth – and, of course, it is some time since I retired.'

'But you did see him sometimes, Oswald, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes, when he came in to see the manager, but I had really forgotten what he looked like. I never did any business with him personally, you see.'

'And now, Mrs Pursey, about the death of Mrs Breydon-Waters. Will you tell me everything you remember about it? Go back to the last visitor she had, so far as you know.'

'The last visitor she had? Well, I suppose that would have been Mr Streatley, wouldn't it?'

'Would it? Can you remember? This might be exceptionally important. Mr Streatley admitted in court that he had called on her that day, and your husband confirms that. Now, was there anybody else?'

Mrs Pursey looked at her husband for help, but it was plain that he had none to give, for he merely shook his head and said that, so far as he knew, Streatley was the only one, except for the tradesmen.

'Not even Oliver's fiancée came that day, but I thought, all along, that she was very remiss,' said Mrs Pursey. 'Almost heartless, but I suppose she was terribly upset by what had happened to him.'

'Ah, yes, of course. Mr Breydon-Waters was engaged to be married,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I heard about that. When did his fiancée pay her last visit?'

The Purseys shook their heads.

'Not since Oliver's death. I don't know whether she went to the funeral,' said Mrs Pursey, 'She certainly didn't go to Mrs Breydon-Waters' funeral, because Oswald

and I went to that, and she certainly wasn't there. I think I should have felt bound to go to his mother's funeral if I had been engaged to him, but one never knows, nowadays, what people think is the right thing to do. I suppose that, once Oliver was dead, and in that awful way, she cut her connection with the family.'

'She never came to see Mrs Breydon-Waters at all after the son's death, do you mean? Never once?'

'Not to my knowledge. What do you say, Oswald?'

'So far as I am aware, she did not come near her. It seems a little strange.'

'As I say, I suppose the fact that it was murder put her off,' said Mrs Pursey, 'although if *you* had been murdered when I was engaged to you, dear...'

Mr Pursey looked horrified and Dame Beatrice said,

'Possibly her father advised her against attending, thinking that it might be too much for her. Now, Mrs Pursey, can you tell me anything more about Mrs Breydon-Waters between the time of her son's death and her own?'

'Nothing helpful, I'm afraid, Dame Beatrice. Do you mean – you can't mean that her death was not accidental? I thought the verdict at the inquest really meant that it was all rather a puzzle, but must have been caused by her own act, even if it wasn't suicide.'

'You may be right, of course, but in view of the son's death we are making a very thorough investigation.'

'Of course. Very proper, I'm sure,' said Pursey. 'I am sorry that neither my wife nor I can be more helpful. I am afraid you have gained very little from your visit.'

'Thank you both very much for your co-operation,' said Dame Beatrice, rising to go. 'If anything else should occur to you, however unimportant, I should be grateful if you would telephone either the Nodding police station or the *Gauntle* hotel.'

'Well, we drew a blank there all right,' said Laura, when they were in the car.

'Not entirely, child, I feel.'

'I can't see that we gained anything very concrete.'

'No, impressions and atmosphere can hardly be called that.' She would say no more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Trail of a Murderer

‘But there were so many hillocks and banks to climb and pass that at length I began to be weary, and told her we must halt and retrace our steps.’

Emily
Brönte

‘E’VE found the stones that were missing from Pigmy’s Ladder, ma’am,’ said the Superintendent, speaking over the telephone, ‘but I can’t see how it’s going to help us. He must have shifted them by lorry and we can check on that easily enough, but it’s a minor offence – even if it’s an offence at all – compared with two murders. If it’s whom we think, the trouble is that he’s an influential type who could make things very awkward for us if we put a foot wrong.’

‘Yes, I appreciate that. I suppose you will trace the lorry, though, in case something more should come of moving the stones. Someone else may have done it, you know – the accomplice, I mean.’

‘I don’t want to spend my men’s time on something that may not pay off, but I reckon we’d better just satisfy ourselves, although he probably did the job through one of the firms he’s got his money in, and, if that’s so, we may find it hard to get the people to talk. Might be more than the driver’s job’s worth to spill the beans.’

‘There’s nothing to learn from the stones themselves, then?’

‘Perhaps you care to come and look at them. They’re stacked in Jameson’s building yard, but he say he know nothing about them and I believe him.’

‘When did they arrive?’

‘He doesn’t know. Seem that have a whole lot of crazy paving stacked in the yard and until we go poking around he didn’t know he’d got these other stones.’

‘Oh, I see. Not that it’s very important. How about the other case?’

‘We haven’t traced the purchase of the salts of lemon. Could have been got anywhere. The gentleman we speak of have two cars and often go out in them. That don’t always take the chauffeur, either; quite often drive himself.’

‘What about Mrs Breydon-Waters’ neighbours? Can they say anything more about the particular visitor we are discussing? I got very little out of them myself.’

‘Keep themselves to themselves, and, apart from that, you won’t get Norfolk people to talk if they don’t intend to.’

Dame Beatrice had one more person to contact for information. She met Vindella on his way to the nets for an after-school cricket practice, and, having obtained the headmaster’s consent to this manoeuvre, asked him for his friend Barney’s address. Barney, of the yachting-cap and the unquenchable thirst, lived in Wroxham within easy reach of his motor-cruiser, the *Black-Eyed Sailor*, and Dame Beatrice called at his bungalow early that same evening on the off-chance of finding him at home, for he was not on the telephone and so she could not contact him and propose a visit.

She was fortunate enough to find him in. It was a beautiful and very warm evening and he was in a long chair in his back garden, a tankard of brown ale on a small table beside him, a pipe in his mouth and a terrier at his feet. His wife, who had answered the front-door bell, announced Dame Beatrice.

‘Hullo-allo-allo!’ boomed Barney, scrambling out of his chair and kicking the dog out of his way. ‘And to what am I indebted?’

‘The fact that you are almost my last hope, Mr Trundle,’ replied Dame Beatrice, who had obtained Barney’s surname from Vindella.

‘Fine, fine! Anything you wish.’ He picked up the tankard and took a refreshing draught. ‘Have this chair.’

Mrs Trundle, a platinum blonde with a large bosom and slender hips, had brought another chair, however, and Dame Beatrice, preferring to sit upright, accepted this one.

‘Secrets?’ she asked her husband.

‘No idea, Petsy.’ He looked at Dame Beatrice before he resumed his semi-recumbent position. Dame Beatrice shook her head.

‘I shall be grateful for all the co-operation I can get,’ she said.

‘Hoick yourself a chair, then, Petsy,’ said the husband, making no attempt to perform this service for her, ‘and let’s get cracking. If it’s anything to do with boats, you’ve come to the right shop.’

‘It is to do with murder.’

‘Fine, fine! Atta-baby!’

‘You were acquainted with the late Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘Bill to his buddies, of which he had precious few, I believe. I was acquainted with him, yes. I did~~not~~“do” him. Not on your nelly! No, no. Not guilty, me lud.’

Dame Beatrice disregarded the negative assertions and confined herself to the one which was completely positive.

‘How many times did you see him after last Easter Monday?’

‘How many times?’ He scratched his head with the end of his pipe-stem. ‘Blest if I know. Petsy?’

Mrs Trundle pursed a scarlet mouth.

‘Couldn’t possibly say, Barney. Half-a-dozen, at least. Perhaps a lot more. I wouldn’t notice. I didn’t like him much. Definitely not my type.’

‘Just as well for you, my girl,’ said Barney, with a manly guffaw. ‘Nobody comes playing around~~my~~little bit of extra homework!’

‘Oh, Barney!’ said Mrs Trundle, pouting and looking roguish. ‘The things you say!’

Dame Beatrice returned to the point at issue.

‘Were these occasions at week-ends only?’

‘Come to think of it, no,’ said Trundle. ‘And that’s a bit odd when you do come to think of it. He was a poor bloody school-teacher, wasn’t he? Where would he get the time?’

‘There was the Whitsun holiday, I suppose,’ suggested Petsy.

‘Yes, that’s right enough, but I seem to remember seeing him after that.’

Dame Beatrice said nothing. She waited while he searched his memory. His face cleared. At the same instant his wife exclaimed,

‘Of course! That night we thought somebody was pinching his cruiser, and it was him all the time!’

‘Just what I was thinking, old girl! A lovely moonlight night. We were coming home from the *Red Lion*, I remember. It was just on closing time, because we’d stayed to the bitter end – it was bitter I was drinking that night! – and watched the end of the darts match between old Tubby Mousehold’s team and the Holt’s Farm lads. It’s all coming back to me now. I bellowed out, “What the hell are you doing, moving that cruiser?” Bill Waters shoved his head up and said, “It’s quite all right, Barney, old son, it’s only me.” So I said, “Well, if you’re changing moorings, look out for yourself. You haven’t any lights.” He said, “Nobody can stop me changing

my moorings after dark. This isn't a hired craft." And, with that, he backed away and turned the *Beri-Berito* shoot the bridge. That's right, Petsy, isn't it?"

'That's right, Barney.' Mrs Trundle turned to Dame Beatrice. 'I'm a square if I can see how it helps, though.'

'And you never saw him again?'

'Never. The next thing we heard, he was dead.'

It was, taken all in all, as much information as Dame Beatrice had expected to get.

'Did you know that Mr Vindella had sold his half-share in the *Beri-Beri*?' she asked. Husband and wife exchanged nods.

'We thought they'd had a row,' said Petsy, whose baptismal name Dame Beatrice was fated never to learn.

'So it wasn't a row,' said Barney. 'Just as well, considering what happened later. It would have looked more than a bit fishy for Vindella otherwise.'

Dame Beatrice nodded.

'I do not believe there was an overt breach,' she said, 'in terms of a verbal quarrel, but there was certainly some tension on the one side and some disapprobation on the other when the young woman who had been engaged to Mr Vindella transferred her affections to Mr Breydon-Waters.'

'Well, she must have needed her head looked at,' said Petsy, not mincing her words nor disguising her own disapprobation. 'Terry Vindella is *aman*, but poor old Bill was just a rat.'

'Come, now, don't be hard on the poor bloke,' said Barney. 'People can't help their physique.' He emphasized his own by stretching his arms sideways and exhibiting a massive and hairy chest. 'It sounds like a motive all right, though, if the girl gave old Terry the air.'

'I don't believe Terry would murder anybody,' protested Mrs Trundle shrilly, 'because of a girl. He might kill somebody in fair fight, but Bill wasn't killed in fair fight.'

'There's no such thing as fair fight, old girl,' said her husband. 'All's fair in love and war, you know.'

'But this wasn't love *or* war, Barney. It was just plain stupid murder. And I don't dig murder, not if it was ever so.'

'*Dig*?' said Dame Beatrice. 'I wonder! Did you ever visit Grimes Graves, Mrs Trundle?'

‘I’ve never heard of them, Dame Beatrice.’

‘I’ll tell you who *had* heard of them,’ said Barney suddenly, ‘and that’s Crikey, who came with us on the *Black-eyed Sailor* to look at. Ludham Church. Remember, Petsy? Remember, Dame Beatrice?’

‘The name conveys nothing to me,’ Dame Beatrice confessed. ‘Have you her address?’

‘Not me! Daren’t keep an address book with the names and telephone numbers of fair ladies in it! Petsy may have that address, but not me.’

‘Buck Romeo!’ said his lady, giving him a playful slap. ‘As it happens, I *do* have it, and as I was going to ’phone her up, anyway, Dame Beatrice, to ask for a knitting-pattern back, you could help yourself to as much of the call as you liked. Let’s go, shall us?’

They went into the bungalow together. Everything, as Dame Beatrice had noted already, was in apple-pie order and completely bare of books, although half-a-dozen glossy magazines were arranged neatly on an occasional table. The telephone was in the hall and was upholstered by the agency of a pink silk doll. Mrs Trundle removed this and rang up her friend.

‘And here’s somebody else who wants a tiny natter,’ she concluded. ‘You’ll remember Dame Beatrice, who followed us up towards Ludham the other Saturday? Well, she’s interested in Grimes Graves and things, and wants you to tell her a thing or two about them. Here she is.’

She handed the receiver to Dame Beatrice and took a seat on the monks’ bench-cum-umbrella-stand in the hall.

‘I hope you *do* remember me,’ said Dame Beatrice. The telephone clacked encouragingly. ‘Oh, good. I am told that you are interested in archaeology. Were you ever a member of the Nodding Archaeological Society?... Oh, your brother was? Then you will remember the 1951 dig at Pigmy’s Ladder, perhaps.’

By the time the brief but satisfactory conversation was concluded, Dame Beatrice had learned Crikey’s brother’s name and had recognised it from the records of the Society’s transactions to which she had been allowed access. She had also received an invitation to visit Crikey at home, which she countered by inviting her to dinner that evening at the *Red Lion*.

Crikey (Miss Carol Timberley in formal parlance) met her in the saloon lounge and accepted a White Lady with a polite squeak of pleasure and they sat together on a settee under the window. There followed some small-talk while they took

stock of one another, and then Dame Beatrice turned the conversation on to the 1951 celebrations.

‘You took part in these, Miss Timberley?’

‘Well, not quite to say “took part,” you know, Dame Beatrice, but we went to Norwich once or twice and stood about to watch the pageant, especially the dancers. They were very good, I thought, and it must have been very tiring. They danced all round the town, you know. Then there was Parson Woodforde on horseback – oh, and all sorts of people.’

‘Indeed?’

‘And then, although we only had time for one or two, my brother and I both being attached to schools, he as a teacher and I in the school meals service, there were the outings.’

‘Outings?’

‘Grimes Graves was one of them. Ever so exciting, and everything organised from the City Hall. So wonderfully cheap, too. And then, when it was all over, my brother was terribly excited because the Nodding Archaeological Society had decided to dig at Pigmy’s Ladder all over again.’

‘As an epilogue?’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘As the ultimate or, possibly, the penultimate part of the Festival of Britain?’

‘Part of the festival is right, I suppose. Anyway, Dick was thrilled.’

‘What do you remember of the dig?’

‘Nothing much. I was rather scared. I’d never make a pot-holer, or anything like that, and, anyway, I was afraid of doing something wrong.’

‘I wish, Miss Timberley, that I could get in touch with your brother.’

‘Nothing easier, Dame Beatrice. Let me give you the telephone number of his school. He’ll be tickled pink to get in touch with you, I’m sure.’

The school to which Mr Timberley had been appointed was in Yorkshire, between Harrogate and Ripon. In the morning, at a quarter-to-ten (by which time, according to Laura, who had parked Hamish on the vicar’s wife at Wandles Parva and returned post-haste to Nodding, the morning assembly would be over and the headmaster busy with correspondence and therefore in handy proximity to his telephone), Dame Beatrice rang him up, stated her business and requested an interview.

Mr Timberley, who had already been apprised by his sister of the probability of such a request, gave his home address and the meeting was arranged for the following Tuesday evening. The Monday, therefore, found Dame Beatrice and Laura at the *Old Swan* in Harrogate and by six o'clock the next evening they were at Mr Timberley's front door. He opened it and introduced himself.

He was a grey-haired, pleasant-faced, tall man, obviously some years older than his sister, with a gentle voice and an air of scholarly calm. He ushered them into a homely, slightly untidy living-room, where his wife was doing some mending and a boy of about fifteen was doing his homework.

'Push off into my den, Lance, will you?' said Mr Timberley. 'You'll find some biscuits in a tin on my desk.'

'Your son?' asked Laura, when the lad had gathered up his books and departed. Mr Timberley smiled and shook his head.

'Both my boys are grown up and married,' he replied. 'No, this is one of my chaps from school. He's pretty sure to get his G.C.E. next year, but he's one of a family of eight and there's nowhere at home where he can get a bit of peace, so I have him here for a couple of hours each evening. He's company for Betsy if I'm out at a meeting, and, anyway, he's a decent lad and merits a chance to do well. And now, Dame Beatrice, you want to talk about Pigmy's Ladder, I believe.'

'You knew that a Mr Breydon-Waters was found dead some weeks ago in the workings?'

'Oh, yes. My sister sends me the local paper, so I keep abreast of the news.'

'Were you acquainted with Mr Breydon-Waters?'

'No. He must have joined the Society after I left Nodding.'

'Did you know a Mr Streatley?'

'Our millionaire member? Oh, yes.'

'You and he were among the 1951 excavators of Pigmy's Ladder, then?'

'Oh, yes. So were Downing, Gold and Carfrae, who, I believe, are the present officers of the Society, and so were two of my old boys, Albert Sansfoy and Harry Glover.'

'I have been in touch with all of them.'

'But Streatley is the man who interests you, I take it. I know very little about him. We didn't meet at any point except as members of the Society.'

'What kind of person did you take him to be?'

‘He struck me as quite a decent sort, but, as I say, I had very little to do with him.’

‘To what extent, if at all, did he finance the excavations?’

‘Pretty heavily, as I happen to know. When Carfrae had influenza at one time and we had the annual audit, Downing asked me to step in and see to the books, and it was then that I learnt how much of Streatley’s money had gone to bolster us up.’

‘You would call him, then, a keen archaeologist?’

‘Well, I think he must have been, to support us in that style.’

‘Did he ever go abroad to dig, do you know?’

‘Oh, yes. He went to many and various places, I believe; to Greece, of course, several times, and once each, at least, to Palestine, to Syria, to the Upper Nile and to Denmark.’

‘I understand that the dead man, Mr Breydon-Waters, was invited to join a very recent expedition to Mount Gerezin, but did not go.’

‘Really? I know nothing about that.’

‘It was at the end of the fortnight which he was supposed to have spent in Palestine that his body was found in the flint-mines.’

‘It all sounds fantastic to me. How can I help?’

‘By telling me why Mr Breydon-Waters was murdered.’

Timberley looked at her; then he filled his pipe. His wife, Dame Beatrice noted, looked at him anxiously.

‘It’s all right, Betsy,’ he said, apparently interpreting her glance. ‘I’ve nothing to hide, as you know, and I can’t possibly answer the question. I have never so much as spoken to this man Breydon-Waters. It is some years since I left Nodding.’

‘Ah, but you have returned there several times,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes, of course I have. I have friends there, and I have been to see my sister, who has become an acquaintance of yours, it seems.’

‘What does it mean – to salt a dig, Mr Timberley?’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Timberley. ‘So that was it!’

‘What was what, Mr Timberley?’

‘Streatley, you know. He used to pull our legs.’

‘Expound. This appears to conform with a nebulous theory I hold.’

‘Well, it was done partly as a joke, I suppose, but also to keep us interested and on our toes. He had a smallish but very fine collection of Roman and pre-Roman objects, purchased on his travels or obtained through advertising, and occasionally, on a dig, he would affect to find one of them and offer it for our inspection. Sometimes he would so arrange it that one of us did the finding, and then came the grand inquisition. It irritated some people so much that he gave up the practice in the end. Personally, I thought it good fun and it certainly added interest. I myself extended my reading and my visits to museums pretty considerably on the strength of it. A school-master, of all people, I suppose, doesn’t want to be caught out if he can help it. The profession, I’m afraid, tends to build up one’s rather touchy vanity in certain respects.’

‘I should not think that you yourself were either touchy or vain, Mr Timberley.’

Timberley laughed.

‘You’d be surprised,’ he said.

‘I think, Dick, you’d better tell Dame Beatrice why Mr Streatley really gave up those stupid practical jokes of his.’

‘But they weren’t stupid, Betsy, and they *did* keep us on our toes. The trouble was...’

‘The trouble was that they began to break up the Society.’

‘Oh, I don’t know whether we can go as far as to say that. People – some people – got a bit restive, I know, but—’

‘Which people?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘Well, Downing himself didn’t like it much, for one; Gold thought it was undignified and childish, and Carfrae, it’s true, threatened to give up office and resign from the Society if Streatley didn’t give up his little jokes.’

‘Did he make this statement publicly?’

‘No, in private to one or two of us.’

‘So Dick did what Mr Downing ought to have done,’ said Mrs Timberley, ‘and brought up the subject at the Annual General Meeting and tried to get it thrashed out.’

‘And was it thrashed out?’

‘No,’ said Timberley, ‘it was not. Everybody dodged expressing an opinion except one or two who openly fawned on Streatley. They were afraid of offending him and losing the financial backing, I suppose.’

‘And this Annual General Meeting was held after the 1951 dig at Pigmy’s Ladder, I take it?’

‘Yes. We dug in July and the A.G.M. was in the following September.’

‘And Mr Streatley “salted” Pigmy’s Ladder?’

‘Well, he denied it, but some of the others thought that he put a shrine, complete with phallic symbols and a fertility goddess, in it. He was thought to have taken the idea from the one which had been found in Grimes Graves.’

‘But some of your people believed that the shrine was genuine?’

‘I myself thought so. You see, in all the other cases, the cuckoo in the nest, so to speak, was obvious, if you kept your wits about you, and your reading, and so forth, up to date, because it was always something which had no right to be there. For example, faience beads might turn up almost anywhere in Europe because we know they were exported and we can pretty well map the routes; but a copper axe from Kish is most unlikely to be dug up anywhere but in the palace-turned-cemetery at Kish, so if you find it, as the Society did, in a long barrow in Gloucestershire, you can be pretty sure it’s been planted there by a modern hand – by Streatley, in fact.’

‘What made you choose a copper axe from Kish as your example, Mr Timberley?’

‘Because, as I say, I was told that they found one in the long barrow at Upton Hover, where it was quite incongruous. All Streatley’s “plantings” were incongruous, if you knew your stuff.’

‘Are you aware that the police believe that a similar axe – possibly that identical axe – was connected in some way with Mr Breydon-Waters’ death?’

‘Good gracious! Is that really so?’

‘Yes, it is so. Tell me more about those practical jokes. What happened to the objects after they had been “found” and identified?’

‘Oh, Streatley used to give them to the finders.’

‘Who found the copper axe-head in Gloucestershire?’

‘I have no idea. It was found after I had left. I did find the Pigmy’s Ladder shrine, though.’

‘Were you offered it as a present?’

‘No, I was not.’

‘How was that?’

‘It was hardly the kind of thing you would want in a private house, so I suppose Streatley took it away and destroyed it. Rather a pity. If it *was* a fake it was beautifully done.’

‘I should have crowned him with it,’ said Mrs Timberley indignantly. ‘I can’t bear to think of him trying to make decent people look fools.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t make decent people look fools, dear.’

Dame Beatrice said nothing, but her brilliant black eyes twinkled with intense interest.

‘I hate him for being able to deceive you, Dick,’ stated Mrs Timberley, with passion.

‘I had a hunch at the time – and it’s grown stronger over the years – that he didn’t deceive me, dear. And he did deny that he’d placed it there, you know.’

Dame Beatrice then added her quota.

‘I presume that you can draw and sketch, Mr Timberley?’

‘More or less. Most teachers can. It’s part of our stock-in-trade.’

‘Then I wish you would procure a sheet of unlined paper and draft out a representation of this shrine as you first saw it.’

‘Willingly – although I can’t see—’

‘Are you able, clearly, in your mind, to differentiate it from the one which was discovered in Grimes Graves?’

‘I have never seen the shrine which was discovered in Grimes Graves; I have read about it, but that is all. Now for this drawing.’

He went out and then re-appeared with a sheet of drawing paper and a stick of charcoal. He sat at the table, closed his eyes for nearly a quarter of a minute and then began to sketch rapidly. He had soon done.

‘Ah!’ said Dame Beatrice, taking the finished sketch. There was the goddess, but in place of the little heaps of arrow-heads stood an unmistakable phallus. ‘So that was what you saw, and it isn’t there now.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Croesus and Other Noddors

‘There is a way which seemeth right unto a man,
but the end thereof are the ways of death.’

Book of
Proverbs

‘Isn’t there now?’ said Timberley. ‘Well, but I didn’t think it would be, if people thought we’d found a fake in the dig. I don’t suppose it’s even mentioned in the annals, is it?’

‘No, it is not. I have had access to all the Society’s documents, and there is certainly no word of such a shrine. Let me show you what it looks like now.’

She picked up his stick of charcoal – or, rather, one of the pieces into which it had broken – and sketched clearly, although on a smaller scale than that of his drawing because there was not a great deal of space left on the paper, what she had come upon in Pigmy’s Ladder.

‘So the shrine we uncovered *was* genuine,’ said Timberley. ‘That’s what you mean, isn’t it? But what on earth has been going on since?’

‘That is what I have to find out, but I believe you have put the end of the string firmly into my hand.’

‘Then I hope you’ll find your way out of the maze all right.’

‘Having slain the Minotaur?’

Upon this classical note they parted.

‘What did you make of him?’ asked Laura, when they were in the car and were heading for Harrogate.

‘Perspicuous, honest, well-balanced, kindly, courageous and the possessor of a sense of humour, child.’

‘Sounds like God’s gift to an undeserving universe.’

‘I do not quibble with your postulation.’

‘What are we going to do now?’

‘We are going to talk to Mr Downing, Mr Gold and Mr Carfrae. But, first, to dine.’

The dining-room at the *Old Swan* was exceptionally large. It held, at that time of year, the usual complement of coach-party visitors and the equally usual Old Guard of residents. The menu, however, was long and the waiting was adequate.

Laura enjoyed her meal. Dame Beatrice ate because, without food, life becomes precarious. She waited until Laura was ready for coffee.

‘In the lounge?’ asked Laura.

‘It seems inevitable, dear child.’

‘You know,’ said Laura, when they were seated in the lounge, ‘the whole thing gets more Paul Jennings each day.’

‘Yes, indeed, oddlier and oddlier. Yet we have but to follow the gleam.’

‘Dashed if I see any gleam. Back to Nodding tomorrow, I suppose?’

Ronald Downing, David Gold and Philip Carfrae were interviewed separately on the following day, Downing in his office at the Castle Museum, Gold at the central library and Carfrae in his own home, this at his own request. At each interview Dame Beatrice produced the drawings and at each interview she asked the same questions.

‘Mr Timberley, who used to belong to your Society, claims that he saw this shrine when you re-excavated Pigmy’s Ladder in 1951. Have you any comment to make?’

‘Yes, of course I have, Dame Beatrice,’ said Downing, her first consultant. ‘I was delighted when we first uncovered the shrine, but so many members who had been taken in, to their chagrin, on previous occasions were so certain that it was a practical joke on Streatley’s part that I gave in and pronounced it a fake.’

‘Exactly in what way did the other members convince you?’

‘They pointed out that it approximated in all respects to the shrine previously unearthed in Grimes Graves and that it was unlikely that there would be two so close together.’

‘Yes, I see, although I don’t admit the argument.’

‘It seemed more than probable that they were right, so I gave in. Anyhow, we certainly made no photographic or other record of it. Streatley, I must say, took it extremely well. The only stipulation he made was that we should neither remove nor destroy it and, so long as he would agree to having it walled in, we agreed. You see, he gave the Society a good deal of very welcome financial help and we did not propose to seem ungrateful.’

Dame Beatrice passed on to David Gold.

‘I did not see how we could have the good luck to discover a genuine shrine, like the one at Grimes Graves,’ he said, ‘and therefore I accepted the general ruling

rather gratefully. You see, the shrine which was discovered at Grimes Graves seems to be out of the ordinary. So far as I can make out, it was a sort of prayer for bigger and better flints. Money couldn't breed' – he smiled – 'according to the English mediaeval communities, and therefore the Jewish moneylenders who demanded interest were the children of Satan. The Neolithic forebears – or were they? – of those same communities had far more modern ideas. Not only money, but flints, could breed, and the shrine was an invocation to them to do so.'

'Thank you, Mr Gold. Left to yourself, however, you would have supposed the shrine to be genuine?'

'Well, yes, except for what I said just now about luck, of which our Society does not have very much. After all, the Neolithic man who superintended the mining at Grimes Graves most probably superintended it here. Breckland is not so very large. I saw no reason, really, why it should not have been genuine.'

'If the shrine was genuine, why should Mr Streatley have taken it so lightly when the Society thought that it was a fake?'

'There seems to be no reason, except that, in many ways, he is a remarkably easy-going man. It seems, then, that, after all, it was the real thing.'

Carfrae took a different view.

'Of course it was a fake,' he said. 'It was the spit and image of the one found at Grimes Graves. Some half-wit – I name no names – had put it there to confound us and make us a laughing-stock. It had been done before, and some of us were slow to see the joke.'

'But now it is thought that it *was* genuine. Sir John saw what remains of it a short while ago and accepted it. Incidentally, the one thing I noticed, when I studied the records and transactions of the Society, was the absence of photographs. Were any of your finds photographed?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'They would have been if we had thought them worth it, but, as a matter of fact, we didn't seem to find anything much that the original excavators hadn't found.'

'Except the shrine.'

'Well, Downing persuaded us not to photograph it. He said it would make us a laughing-stock to the Norfolk and Norwich people, and, rather naturally, we weren't at all anxious for that.'

'Of course not.' Dame Beatrice then thanked Carfrae and returned to the *Gauntlet*, rang up the City Hall and asked for Chipping. It was arranged that she should meet him on the following day when his work was over. The encounter took place in the

Mayor's Parlour, which Chipping was deputed to clean. The interview was extremely short.

'Mr Chipping,' said Dame Beatrice, 'why did you remove the walling in Pigmy's Ladder?'

'The walling? Oh, that!' said Chipping. 'Ay, I removed her. They walled him up, you see, and if nobody removed her, nobody wouldn't never know what I knows.'

'Ever know what? What do you know, Mr Chipping?'

'Ever know how much Satan finds for idle hands to do, which is what I reckon I knows now.'

'I understand you, but wasn't it a case of locking the stable door after the steed was stolen?'

'Might make you think the steed *was* stolen and hadn't just bolted away.'

'You do not care to enlarge upon that observation?'

'Why should I? I reckon you understands. I reckon you've worked her out, same as I done.'

'But what would be the motive? It wasn't a simple murder for the sake of ridding the world of Mr Breydon-Waters, was it?'

Chipping gave her a side-glance which would have done credit to Weyland the Smith.

'Some is born murderers,' he said, 'and some becomes murderers, and some has murder thrust upon 'em.'

With this oracular pronouncement he at once did justice to his education and terminated the interview. Dame Beatrice rang up the Superintendent and then went to see Streatley. He was at home and received her in the same gracious fashion as before.

'Do sit down, Dame Beatrice,' he said, when his manservant had shown her in. Dame Beatrice sat down, refused a cigarette and unequivocally stated her business.

'I am interested in the shrine which was discovered in Pigmy's Ladder very close to the spot where we found the body of Mr Breydon-Waters.'

'Yes? Some of my colleagues thought it an obvious fake, of course. It isn't difficult to carve a mother-goddess and a phallic symbol out of chalk. I could do it myself.'

'And did you?'

Streatley tapped the ash from his cigarette.

‘No, of course not,’ he said. ‘I thought at first it was genuine, but I soon changed my mind.’

‘What made you come to the conclusion that someone who lived well after the Neolithic or even Bronze Ages had carved it?’

Streatley met her eyes and smiled slightly.

‘I happened to know who had done it. I found out.’

‘Yes?’

‘Never mind. It doesn’t matter now. Oh, well! As you will. It was Breydon-Waters, of unhappy memory.’

‘How do you chance to know that?’

‘He was always hanging round the dig. Whenever we opened anything up he would go back, don’t you know, and sit and gaze at it, even after we’d replaced soil, turf and all.’

‘Yes, I have heard it was a habit of his to re-visit archaeological sites, but I cannot see why, on the strength of that alone, you should assume that he carved the goddess and the other fertility symbols.’

‘I did not assume it. I knew it. You see...’ He paused, drew on his cigarette, took it from his lips and inspected its glowing end and then repeated his last two words. Dame Beatrice waited patiently, although she could guess what was coming. ‘I lent him a flash-light photograph, which I had not had permission to take, of a similar, but genuine, shrine.’

‘The one from Grimes Graves, perhaps.’

‘Perhaps, and perhaps not. As I was not an accredited member of the team of which I speak, whether Grimes Graves comes into it or not had better be left an open question.’

‘You were very friendly with Mr Breydon-Waters at the time, I take it?’

‘Not friendly exactly, no, but I certainly didn’t realise at the time what a little so-and-so he was.’

‘Did he ask you for the photograph, or did you offer it?’

‘I can’t really remember. It was at the end of the A.G.M. of 1950, when we had just arranged to make the re-dig of Pigmy’s Ladder our Festival project for the following year that I promised him the picture. I remember that perfectly well. But

whether the suggestion that I should lend it came from him or from myself has gone completely from my mind. Why, does it matter?’

‘No, no; it is a very small point, of course. Apart from the fact that he is believed to have appropriated objects which should have been the property of the Society, had you any personal reason for disliking Mr Breydon-Waters?’

‘Look here,’ said Streatley, with another slight smile, ‘are you... is this a police interrogation, or what? You’re not suggesting that I had anything to do with the poor young devil’s death, are you? What on earth object could I have had?’

‘A fair question. You have acquired the whole of his collection of antiquities, I believe?’

Streatley stared at her.

‘It’s not a thing I care to stress,’ he said, ‘but I am a very rich man and I have my own ways of sharing my money with people who are not as fortunate as I am. I purchased that junk to help Mrs Breydon-Waters, who, I was given to understand, was left rather badly off.’

‘You call it junk? All of it?’

‘From my point of view, yes. In other words, anything I purchase which I don’t really want comes under that heading, so far as I am concerned.’

‘You obtained an inventory, of course.’

‘Not from Mrs Breydon-Waters. She would not have known enough about the stuff to make one. I made a list of my own after I had collected the stuff and brought it home. May I ask why you’re interested?’

His manner and tone remained urbane, but Dame Beatrice detected an undercurrent in the last question which had been absent even from his query about a police interrogation.

‘I am interested,’ Dame Beatrice replied, ‘because I have a list of my own, compiled for me by no less an authority than Sir John St John John, who recently lectured on various archaeological discoveries, and I would like, if you will agree, to check the list he gave me against your own.’

‘I can’t see why, but it shall be as you choose.’ He stubbed out his cigarette.

‘Excuse me one moment.’ He went out of the room and was gone for almost five minutes. He returned, carrying a loose-leaf notebook. ‘Here we are. Perhaps you would like to check your list against the loot as well,’ he said.

Dame Beatrice was more than interested in this suggestion. She leered delightedly at him.

‘Excellent!’ she said. ‘And, as a slight return, I will tell you, after we have completed the checking, the object of these apparently impertinent enquiries.’

‘A bargain. Right. Here we are, then.’

The lists were identical in every particular, except that, as was to be expected, the objects were put down in a different order. When the checking had been done, Streatley took Dame Beatrice into his library. Here the collection was housed in glass-topped cases down the middle of the room. Dame Beatrice carried her own list and read out each item so that Streatley could point it out to her. A copper axe-head, twin to the one found in the pelican’s beak in the Castle Museum, was housed about half-way down the room, flanked and surrounded by three polished stone celts, a bronze axe-head from a British grave and a couple of Palaeolithic hammers. Dame Beatrice read on until the list came to an end.

‘And now – our bargain,’ said Streatley.

‘I had come to the conclusion that the weapon which the murderer intended to be used to kill Mr Breydon-Waters came from his own collection. That is all.’

‘And didn’t it?’

‘You have the answer to that, surely. Your inventory tallies with mine.’

‘Like hell it does!’ said Streatley vigorously. ‘One of us must be wrong. You mean that the police have the weapon – let us call it the possible or alleged weapon – in their possession, don’t you? You will have to tell me what it was.’

Dame Beatrice told him what the police had in their possession. He went back to the case of celts and axe-heads and stared thoughtfully at it. Then he looked at her and shrugged his shoulders.

‘You and the police have been barking up the wrong tree,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘A chap like Breydon-Waters would never have been able to get hold of *two* of these things from Kish. As for blood on a stone—’

‘Possibly not,’ Dame Beatrice agreed. ‘In that case, we have to discover where the second axe came from.’

Streatley digested this ambiguous remark and finally he said,

‘By the second axe, do you mean this one, which was included in the stuff I bought from Mrs Breydon-Waters, or do you mean the one you found?’

‘It hardly matters. By the way, I have been to see a Mr Timberley.’

‘Timberley? Timberley? Oh, yes, I know. Used to be one of our members. A school-master, as I recollect it. That’s right. Rather flummoxed our worthy committee by wishing a couple of his grubby little boys on us.’

‘Mr Sansfoy and Mr Glover.’

‘Oh, yes. Rather surprisingly, they’ve stuck to the Society, Sansfoy particularly.’

‘Had you yourself any objection to Mr Timberley’s nominees?’

‘Good heavens, no! The more the merrier, provided they were keen. As a matter of fact, those sort of types prove to be jolly good at the actual digging. They all have back gardens, and so forth, which they cultivate, so they’re handy blokes with a spade. No, the fellow who wanted them blackballed was Breydon-Waters. Rather a cheek, considering they were full members before he even came to Nodding and joined.’

‘It has sometimes seemed to me curious that a man like yourself did not think it better worthwhile to join the big County association rather than the less well-known Nodding Society.’

‘As to that, I expect you know the Latin tag, “Better be first in a little Iberian town than second in Rome,” don’t you?’

‘I see. Yes, there is that aspect, of course. I wish you would tell me something else about yourself, Mr Streatley.’

‘Readily. I cannot have too much publicity. I revel in it, Dame Beatrice. Fire away.’

‘I told you, a few moments ago, that I had been to see Mr Timberley.’

‘Yes. Had you any particular reason? You didn’t imagine that *he*’d bumped off Breydon-Waters, did you? Came back dramatically to Nodding to avenge the slights offered to Glover and Bert Sansfoy?’

‘So far as my visit to Mr Timberley was concerned, I may say that the whole thing was fortuitous. You see, one of the mysteries connected with this case was the fact that Mr Breydon-Waters stayed in East Anglia when everybody who knew him thought he was spending a fortnight digging in Palestine. Well, I have discovered that he spent that fortnight on the motor cruiser he had once shared with Mr Vindella, whose half-share he bought. The next thing I found out was that he took the boat down to the Suffolk border and did some work at Pigmy’s Ladder from there. What I should like somebody to tell me is how his murderer came to realise that he was doing it.’

‘It sounds to me as though the two of them were in it together.’

‘And the partner, for some reason, killed him?’

‘Well, it all sounds very hush-hush, so it is easy enough to believe that they quarrelled, isn’t it? But what can have been the object of so much secrecy? They could scarcely have hoped to find anything of value in Pigmy’s Ladder, particularly as two lots of archaeologists had already had a go there.’

‘You can make no helpful suggestions, then?’

‘None at all, I’m afraid. Were there any signs of a struggle?’

‘None at all, so far as I am aware. There was the blow on the head and the leaking cylinders of calor gas.’

‘Oh, yes, the calor gas. Rather an original touch, didn’t you think?’

‘Quite foolish,’ said Dame Beatrice, with finality. ‘Foolish, and, of course, unnecessary.’

‘Unnecessary? Yes, I can see that, of course. You mean that the weapon had already done its work. But one couldn’t be sure of that, I suppose.’

‘Most killers are inexperienced. It adds to their charm.’

‘Charm?’

‘Why, certainly. You see, most killers – I speak now of what I may call private killers, not those people who kill in order to steal, or to avoid detection when they are in the act of stealing – are amateurs.’

‘Amateurs?’

‘Certainly. They blaze such an obvious trail that they are bound to be found in the end.’

‘An obvious trail? But this particular killer has not been found. My guess is that he will never be found.’

‘But he *has* been found, Mr Streatley. All we want now is proof of his guilt.’

‘Then I can’t see why you say he has been found. If you’ve no proof of his identity...’

‘I did not say that. I said we have no proof of his guilt.’

‘But surely that comes to the same thing?’

‘Does it?’ asked Dame Beatrice. ‘I should hardly think so, you know.’

‘Look here,’ said Streatley equably, ‘you came here with some specific object in mind. Are you suggesting that I know who caused the death of this miserable little Breydon-Waters? That is the most utter nonsense I have ever heard.’

‘It was rather nonsensical of you to tell me that you lent Mr Breydon-Waters a flashlight photograph in 1950 when I know perfectly well that he did not come to live in Nodding until well after the 1951 excavation of Pigmy’s Ladder.’

‘I did not say that he was living in Nodding when I gave him the photograph,’ said Streatley. ‘I think we’d better go into a huddle with some of the founder members about all this, and get a few things cleared up.’

‘The suggestion comes from you,’ said Dame Beatrice.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Referred to Knossos

‘And he said, “Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall break down their stone wall.”’

Book of Nehemiah

OW,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘for this round-table conference.’

Present, apart from herself, were Laura, Gavin, Alice Boorman, the Superintendent, Chipping, Gold, Downing, Carfrae, Vindella and Streatley. Of these, nobody appeared entirely at ease except Dame Beatrice, Laura, Streatley and the Superintendent. The last-named opened the proceedings by announcing,

‘Dame Beatrice have some points to put to us, and some questions to ask, with reference to the deaths of Mr and Mrs Breydon-Waters.’

‘You make them sound like a married couple, Superintendent,’ said Streatley, at ease in an armchair with his arms behind his head.

‘Whatever they were, they certainly weren’t that,’ said Vindella, with a nervous laugh.

‘No, they were not that,’ Dame Beatrice agreed. ‘Now, Mr Vindella, I must put to you a possibly embarrassing and very personal question. It has been said by most of the people to whom I have spoken, that the late Mr Breydon-Waters was a conceited and snobbish young man.’

‘He were, too an’ all,’ said Chipping. ‘Mind if I has a smoke, sir?’ They were seated in the Superintendent’s office. The Superintendent waved a large hand in the direction of Dame Beatrice.

‘By all means, Mr Chipping,’ she said. ‘Now, granting, as I do, that this description of Mr Breydon-Waters is correct, I have wondered for some time what reason Miss Priscilla Clarke could have had for transferring her affections from you to him. Can you enlighten me?’

Vindella lit a cigarette.

‘I suppose a woman has the right to change her mind,’ he said. ‘I can’t see anything more in it than that.’

‘Yes, but she usually has a reason for exercising that right,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Breydon-Waters,’ put in Carfrae, filling a pipe so that he did not need to meet anybody’s eye, ‘was a damned young scoundrel. I suppose you all know that he jilted my girl Diana.’

Nobody had any remark to make about this, and, after a pause, Vindella said,

‘Priscilla thought me a fool and a playboy, I think. She did not put it that way. She simply said that she found she’d made a mistake. I’m not prepared to say she was wrong. After all, there’s no doubt old B.W. was the hell of a lot brainier than I am.’

‘He was a better archaeologist, certainly,’ said Streatley, smiling at Vindella, ‘even if his collection consisted largely of misappropriated objects.’

‘Some may have been purchased; some undoubtedly were stolen,’ said Downing. ‘I hear that you bought the lot, Streatley. I rather wonder you cared to do that, as the source of origin was so doubtful.’

‘The source of origin isn’t doubtful,’ retorted Streatley. ‘I have identified (partly with the help of Sir John St John John, I freely confess) every single bit of the stuff. You mean the source of supply, I imagine.’

‘Have it your own way. Obviously you knew what I meant,’ said Downing.

‘Of course I did. Don’t get hot under the collar. It’s unnecessary. As for any doubts on my part, there the stuff was. It was impossible to return the ill-gotten pieces, even if one could identify the owners, so, chiefly to help the poor woman financially, if I may be allowed to bestow so much credit for charitable feelings upon myself, I thought I would make an offer for them, an offer, I venture to tell you, which was accepted with considerable gratitude.’

‘I am sure it was,’ said Dame Beatrice before the fermenting president of the Society could speak. ‘Now, as you have all been told, I understand, we are holding this conference in order to conclude our investigation into the deaths of Mrs and Mr Breydon-Waters. We are certain that Mr Breydon-Waters, for some little time before his death, had been engaged in some secret, if not some nefarious activities. These activities were concerned and connected with the ancient flint-mines called Pigmy’s Ladder. For a fortnight of the time I have under review he was supposed to have been in Palestine, but on the evidence of his own log-book, apart from other sources of information, we know he did not go.’

‘He must have felt that his enterprises in Pigmy’s Ladder were extremely important if he turned down the chance of digging in Palestine,’ said Gold. ‘I feel personally angry with him still, when I remember how hard I worked to get him the necessary leave of absence from school.’

‘You weren’t the only one,’ said Downing, frowning a little. ‘I helped, and so did Streatley.’

‘Mr Breydon-Waters may or may not have completed whatever he set out to do in Pigmy’s Ladder,’ went on Dame Beatrice, ‘but he was killed almost at the end of his period of leave and therefore I assume that his task was near enough to completion. Be that as it may, he was killed by being struck on the head. We thought for a time that a primitive copper axe had been used, but this soon seemed to some of us a most extraordinary choice of weapon, if a choice it was. My own theory, which is subscribed to by the police, is that the copper axe was not the weapon. The weapon was found in Pigmy’s Ladder by Mr Chipping, and by him replaced there.’

‘I never told you nothen of that,’ said Chipping. ‘All I done...’

‘Was to put back some dry-stone walling so that the body and the weapon were sealed off from human sight. Don’t deny it, because it is a fact. For some time I did not connect you with the death of Mr Breydon-Waters, but I failed to understand...’

‘Not you!’ said Chipping. ‘You understood all right. Me and you have understood one another all along, I reckon. It wouldn’t have done for a poor man of my sort to take myself along to the police and tell ’em as the young chap were knocked over the head and laid dead and cold in Pigmy’s Ladder, would it?’

‘Don’t be such a fool, Chipping,’ said the Superintendent. ‘Nobody would suspect *you* of murdering Mr Breydon-Waters.’

‘I would,’ said Gold, quietly. ‘Remember the copper axe we found in a long barrow in the Cotswolds, Chipping?’

‘I do that.’

‘Who put it there?’

‘I reckon Mr Streatley done that.’

‘Who found it?’

‘Me and Mr Timberley. Leastways, I found it and he told me what it was and why it shouldn’t a-been there.’

‘Correct. What happened to the axe after that?’ asked Streatley.

‘You give it...’

‘Well?’

Chipping looked at the surrounding faces.

‘All right,’ he said, with a countryman’s dignity, ‘you give it to me.’

‘And do you know where it was found?’ asked Dame Beatrice, before Streatley could get in with his next question. Chipping shook his head.

‘When did you lose it?’ Streatley enquired. Chipping’s face cleared.

‘You mean as that little old bastard sneaked it off of me?’ he said. ‘Then serve him right if somebody knocked him over the yead wi’ it. That’s what I say, the thieven magpie!’

‘Do you?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘You might, if the copper axe-head had been the weapon used to kill Mr Breydon-Waters, but it was not, as you and I very well know.’

‘Now, Chipping, keep quiet!’ said Streatley.

‘Too late, Mr Streatley,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘By the way, when you write another threatening letter, remember that the illiterate do not understand the correct use of punctuation and are unlikely to use the name of a character from *Treasure Island* as an alias.’

Streatley laughed.

‘I don’t know how you hit on me as the author of that letter from Pew and Gang,’ he said, ‘but it was intended only as a joke.’

‘Quite so. It did not perturb me and we may dismiss it from the case. You know, there is one person who has not been invited to attend this conference, but who really ought to be here.’

‘Then why isn’t he?’ the Superintendent mildly enquired.

‘She. I refer to Mrs Constance Rambeau. I did not ask her to attend for two reasons. First, I decided that it would be an unpleasant experience for her and, secondly, she would have needed leave of absence from school.’

‘Oh, I see. Why do you think she ought to be here?’

‘Because she might be able to substantiate the accusation which I propose to make. Do you remember how she rushed out of the Extraordinary General Meeting? She could not bear to stay in the room, knowing what she knew or had guessed. You were not there, Superintendent, or you would appreciate what I say.’

Streatley sat up with a jerk.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘if you’re accusing somebody, say so, and let us have an end of this cat and mouse business.’

‘I am accusing *you*,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I feel that you were fully responsible for Mr Breydon-Waters’ death, although you did not kill him. The hand which dealt the fatal blow was that of Mr Chipping here. What do you say to that, Chipping?’

Chipping fixed his small, alert eyes on hers and nodded gloomily.

‘Right enough, I reckon,’ he admitted, ‘but I never meant him should croak. That old flint were a murderin’ old object, so it were. I only gived him a tap on the yead and there it were.’

‘But why did you feel the impulse to give him a tap on the head?’ Dame Beatrice enquired. ‘What *was* he up to in Pigmy’s Ladder?’

Chipping looked at Streatley. Streatley studied his fingernails for a full minute while the others waited. Then he lifted his head, shrugged his shoulders and said,

‘You can’t prove anything, you know. I’d advise you, Chipping, to take back that confession.’

‘It’s a bit late for that, sir,’ said the Superintendent. ‘We’ve got the stone he used. Perhaps you’ll be good enough to explain the appearance of the cylinders of calor gas which were found in the flint-mines near the body.’

‘I know nothing of cylinders of calor gas, Superintendent. As to what Breydon-Waters was doing in the flint-mines which was of such importance to him that he missed the chance of the Mount Gerezin dig in order to devote time to it, well, you

and Dame Beatrice seem good at guessing-games, so guess that one. I say that the charges you are bringing against Chipping and myself are entirely without foundation. Chipping, I put it to you that you've been tricked into admitting that you killed Breydon-Waters. Take it back. Leave the onus of proof to the police and stop acting like a fool.'

'That I shan't,' said Chipping sturdily. 'I never meant to do more nor stun him, like you told me to...'

'Shut up, blast you! What the devil are you talking about? Don't be a fool, man! They can't prove a thing!'

'William Aloysius Streatley,' said the Superintendent, 'and James Chipping, I am charging you jointly with the wilful murder of Oliver Breydon-Waters and I warn you that anything you say now will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence.'

'Right,' said Streatley. 'Then I'll say this: Breydon-Waters wasn't stealing the shrine. He was smashing it. That's why I wanted to kill him.'

'What made you so certain it was all engineered by Streatley?' Laura asked.

'I was not at all certain until he bought the collection from Mrs Breydon-Waters. I realised then either that there was something in it which he badly wanted or that he was making such restitution as lay in his power for the loss of her son.'

'But neither of those reasons would necessarily mean that he had murdered him.'

'No, but they set me thinking. You see, from the very beginning I felt sure that one of the members of the Nodding Archaeological Society must be responsible and, at first, there seemed to be a very wide choice of suspects. As there was no doubt that the knock on the head, and not the butane, had killed Mr Breydon-Waters, I declined to suspect the women. It was not a woman's crime. Then, when Mrs Rambeau left the Extraordinary General Meeting in such tempestuous style I felt that there was something more behind her action than a fit of sudden and (as I saw it) unnecessary ill-temper.'

'So light began to dawn?'

'Not immediately, I think, but I pondered long upon the characters and commitments of the various men members, because, when a woman of Mrs Rambeau's age and experience behaves in that sort of emotional way, there is almost certainly a man somewhere in the picture.'

'And most of the possibles were married and, because their jobs depended on it, thoroughly respectable?'

‘So it seemed to me. Of the bachelors, only two, psychologically speaking, were possible suspects, Mr Vindella, who is Irish and impulsive but also indolent and good-natured, and Mr Streatley, who is wealthy enough to ignore what other people think of him.’

‘You mean that Mrs Rambeau was his mistress?’

‘Let us say his Egeria. It sounds better. She is an intelligent woman and she was left alone a good deal after Miss Clarke became engaged to Mr Vindella and then to Mr Breydon-Waters. She has been extremely careful, but, at a suggestion from me, the police found out that she had been spending time with Mr Streatley both at his house and at various riverside hotels.’

‘She can’t have any use for him now, but I still don’t see why he wanted to kill Breydon-Waters.’

‘Simply it was that Breydon-Waters found the shrine of the Mother-Goddess, decided that it was genuine, (as, of course, it was), made up his mind to steal it, but only succeeded in breaking the chalk phallus. Then he proposed to erect another and a very different shrine, that of the double axes of the Cretans. He chose a setting which had no possible basis of probability, to wit, Pigmy’s Ladder, but he had high hopes, apparently, that the spoof would come off. He suffered from a form of slight mental derangement, I would say, although he was not of the same type as his foster-mother.’

‘But how did Streatley find out his intentions?’

‘Very simply. Chipping was the god outside the machine.’

‘In other words, the dry-stone wall expert. I begin to obtain a glimmering.’

‘Of course you do,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘The whole affair has been bizarre, entertaining and ludicrous, if one regards it in the round. The pity is that it has also its tragic side.’

‘I don’t see anything particularly tragic in the deaths of the Breydon-Waters. One was a tick and the other was mad.’

‘I meant that a long sentence of imprisonment will deprive the world of a devoted archaeologist for all that time. Mr Streatley *is* a devoted archaeologist, you know. He killed in defence of his faith, I feel.’

‘I’m glad it wasn’t a hanging matter for either him or Chipping, anyway, and I suppose they’ll have the good sense to behave themselves and get a bit chopped off the sentence. Odd to think that but for Alice they would have got away with everything. What is your complete reconstruction of what happened?’

‘Breydon-Waters must have heard about the shrine at some time and was determined to see it for himself. He took Chipping into his confidence to some extent because, when he had dismantled the bit of wall which hid the shrine from the view of the general public, he knew that it had to be rebuilt. Although he could take it down, given time and no disturbance, he doubted whether he could replace it satisfactorily. He had to await his opportunity because what he had set himself to do could be done only at night.’

‘And Chipping, you think, blew the gaff.’

‘Chipping, like other members of the Society, disliked and distrusted Breydon-Waters.’

‘But I should have thought he would have approached one of the officers of the Society – Downing or Gold, probably.’

‘Streatley was easier to approach, I fancy. He has a pleasant, easy manner and is, as he has fully demonstrated, a law unto himself. Having heard the story – or as much of it as Chipping knew, for I doubt very much whether Chipping realised that Breydon-Waters had any intentions beyond stealing the shrine – Streatley became highly suspicious of Breydon-Waters’ application for leave of absence, but he backed it up and made arrangements to have him closely watched, with the result which we know. Chipping had orders to help him as had already been arranged, and then was to stun him so that the butane which was dropped from the shaft above, as we thought at our first visit, could do its work, but the butane, of course, was not to be dropped until Chipping and Streatley, between them, had rebuilt the wall. What Chipping felt about this part of the business when it was first proposed, I have no idea, but there can be no doubt of his anxiety to wall up the body when he realised – he’s been a soldier, like most of his contemporaries – that he’d hit Breydon-Waters too hard and killed him. I do not imagine for an instant that he confessed to Streatley what he had done, for, otherwise, the butane would not have been dropped.’

‘And when Streatley heard that, by the findings at the inquest, not he but Chipping had actually done the deed?’

‘Streatley is a gentleman. He swore Chipping to silence, promised to keep his own counsel and sat back to watch us at work.’

‘What makes you think Breydon-Waters intended to fake the shrine of the double axes?’

‘The entry in the log of the *Beri-Beri* which read: *Minos was a priest-king and in his sign I shall make my name known for ever*. That, and the discovery that two

identical axe-heads could have been in Breydon-Waters' possession quite decided me.'

'I've seen photographs of the excavations at Knossos, though, and I thought the double axes were engraved on stone pillars. I don't remember any metal ones, and the two you mention didn't even come from Crete but from Babylonia.'

'I think Breydon-Waters intended to improve upon the Cretan model.'

'Who put the blood-stained axe-head into the pelican's beak?'

'Oh, Streatley. He thought it was what Chipping had used and that he'd better hide it in the museum. It was what Chipping had been ordered to use, you see – a sort of symbolic action. Much study of primitive religions makes symbolism extremely attractive to certain minds. They even see symbols where none exist, and twist their arguments to fit their theories.'

'No names, no pack-drill,' said Laura. 'What about the body's having been dragged past the shrine?'

'To get it clear of where they wanted to re-build the wall.'

'Oh, of course. Are the police doing anything more about the death of Mrs Breydon-Waters?'

'No. The open verdict at the inquest settled that. The death could have been accidental, you see, and there is no proof at all that it was not.'

'So Streatley gets away with that one, if he did poison her?'

'Time, as always, will show, but I have a theory that not Streatley but Breydon-Waters himself doctored that bottle of Epsom salts. After all, who more likely than her adopted son to know that Mrs Breydon-Waters took the stuff? It was a new bottle, you see, and he was dead before she used it. After all, she was a very real obstacle in the way of his marriage. She had always very selfishly opposed it.'