



MURDER, SHE THOUGHT

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‘There’s been a murder!’

The news brings the jam making collective of the Women’s Institute to a breathless halt. Goopy strings of ruby-red conserve dangle from its spoons, forgotten. As one, each lined face and blue-rinsed head turns to the woman in the doorway. For a second, and only



a second, there is silence as the shock is processed through aging synapses. Then, the dam bursts. The questions burst out, each one eager to be heard so it can receive the first response. As it happens it is Mrs Moore-Manley whose strident tones penetrate the hubbub, her years serving behind the tea counter at the WRVS station in the local hospital stands her in good stead.

‘Where?’

A half dozen heads nod with the soberness of knowing this is the essential first question to be answered. Dorothy Fawcett-Shutt zeroes in on the bovine musculature of the other woman. She smiles at the attention and the intelligence of the question.

‘Little Screwing-in-the-Valley.’

More gasps and murmured surprise. Delicia Goody, the youngest of the gathering and little more than an apprentice jam-maker, coos with satisfaction like a love-struck dove.

‘That’s good news then. They haven’t had anything happen there for more than ten years.’

Her comment is immediately reinforced as others rattle off a chorus of little-known facts about the sleepy village.

‘...there were rumours of the death of a passing motorist but the ambulance reached him before we could be certain...’

‘... poor Agatha Pinchrod thought her husband had been killed but it turned out just to be a serious case of narcolepsy...’

‘... and the poisoning of General Cromwell was purely accidental and the first sign of his housekeeper’s dementia...’

As the village's short-comings are reviewed and concluded to be in dire need of some drama, the ladies fall silent as Dorothy Fawcett-Shutt holds up a gloved hand for their attention.

'The trouble is ladies, I'm afraid I must impart some bad news.'

Alicia Brixton-Pound stumbles and grabs hold of her friend Gabriella Hale-Harty to steady herself as the shock affects her infamous blood pressure. Only once a chair has been found and a glass of water provided for the pale-faced woman, does the announcement resume. By now, tension in the room is greater than Judgement Day at the Over Snoring Summer Fete. Dorothy casts her eye around the room to ensure everyone is listening, this isn't her first time at getting a big scoop like this.

'The thing is, we don't have anyone available to investigate. You know what that means?'

Mouths open, wide-eyed glances are shared and Alicia Brixton-Pound turns a recipe book into a fan to get more air. It is inevitable that Mrs Moore-Manley, upright and in command now, declares the worst possible state of affairs that can be imagined.

'It will be down to the police.'

There is a moment of funereal calm before the ladies offer solutions to offset this terrible calamity.

'What about Miss Pinkerton? Her track record is second to none.'

Dorothy Fawcett-Shutt shakes her head, voice shaking with emotion now.

'She's in Great Peeing-in-the-Gutter, solving the mystery of their vicar's death. There are a dozen suspects to investigate, she's going to be there for another week at least. And the detective inspector is that Schitt character, the one Penguin Books recruited from Munich.'

There are assorted shakes of perms and sets, strings of pearls wobble in disgust.

'Where's Hermaphroditus Moreau, our famous Luxembourg private detective?'





‘In Pompeii, investigating a juicy double murder amidst the volcanic ruins. His audience has quadrupled purely because of the location and the dashing Italian collection of suspects. We’ll never pull him away from there.’

With their A team unavailable it is down to Delicia Goody to suggest the next possible contender to rescue the situation.

‘We could always see if Father Walpole is available?’

Dorothy shakes her head sadly. ‘The Bishop has renounced him after the unfortunate outcomes when he investigated that murder in Soggy Bottoms. The poor man was defrocked.’

Millicent Moore-Manley, never one to pass up an opportunity to judge others and whose sister had been involved in the case, was less sympathetic.

‘The man got what he deserved. My poor Mabel will never be the same again. And she can’t get the stains out of her clothes either.’ She pauses as inspiration strikes. ‘What about His Lordship? He hasn’t dabbled in a while and he still has a loyal following, his books are even serialised on TV sometimes.’



The suggestion is shot down in flames, Dorothy says the words they all dread.

‘His last case, the murders in Lowered Crotch, was deemed to be predictable.’ There is a loud gasp. ‘Apparently everyone guessed who it was. Before he did. Lord Peter Quirky had been convinced it was the butler who’d done it. Sales plummeted.’

The ladies collectively sigh at the loss of a great mind and how it can dissolve so quickly into believing the validity of clichés and stereotypes.

‘So, what we are going to do?’ Millicent Moore-Manley isn’t one to be defeated. Her father had stood on the beach in 1939 with a shovel in his hand, ready to beat back the Nazis and she was her father’s daughter.

‘There is one option,’ replies Dorothy. She’s given this a great deal of thought and concluded that in such extreme circumstance, beggars can never be choosers. ‘There’s that young American girl, Nancy Whatshername? She’s got some experience, a decent sized audience plus her publishers are rich.’

It is Bella Windsor-Nott who summarises the feelings in the room with her usual frank and honest assessment of the idea.

‘But she’s American.’ It’s a declaration which prompts many to wrinkle their noses into the most intense display of horror any English woman can achieve.

And yet Dorothy perseveres. There is, after all, only one other option.

‘So, you want the police to investigate this murder, do you Bella?’

It’s a clever strategy. By directing the criticism at the woman who has poured so much cold water on this idea, it places her in the line of fire for challenging the alternative. Every well-maintained, pink foundationed face turns to stare at the woman who had been Queen of the May at the Prickly Bottom Fete on four successive occasions. She turns red with embarrassment and shakes her head in defeat.

And so it transpires that Nancy Whatshername is whisked, with the speed of a vehicle known to reach sixty miles an hour going downhill, to Little Screwing-in-the-Valley.

As the name suggests, the collection of thatched cottages with its pub that has no Sky TV and steadfastly refuses to serve food, sits

between steep-sided escarpments. A narrow river winds its way lazily through the community, one that takes its lead from the movement of water. Everything is slow. There are places and objects which have even found grace in stopping completely.



Nancy, accompanied by Dorothy, who's there to provide local colour and integrity, steps out of the car and looks around her. Dorothy joins her and asks the inevitable question that must be posed upon arrival. 'What do you think?'

It gives the young American girl, clothed in dungarees and with her flame-red hair tied back in a ponytail, a chance to assess the location and provide important exposition. She observes the valley location, the meandering river, the inaction of the village's inhabitants and comments that, 'It sure is quiet here.'



It's a reaction which causes Dorothy to roll her eyes. She hates America already.

As they stride along the street, admiring the cottages with the gardens a-buzz with bees flitting from colourful displays of flowering flora, they encounter a local. She pushes an aging bicycle which has a basket filled with cut flowers. The woman is equally as ancient as the bicycle but not as rusty. She squints over half-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses at the newcomers. When she speaks it is with an accent which demands inclusion of the words 'Ooh, arrh.'

'I be going to the church, my dear.' The r sound is rolled until its completely circular. 'It be my turn to put these flowers on the altar, do you see? So if'n you be wanting any information, you'll need to walk alongside me, like. That way you get plenty of that there local colour, that's so important these days. Ooh, arrh.'

The woman is Mrs Keene-Trollope, which she points out is a highly inappropriate name for a woman who's been happily married most of her life.

'We're investigating the murder,' says Nancy, eager to get down to business. She's young and American and so doubly impatient.



The news halts the old woman in the middle of the street. Thankfully it's not a busy thoroughfare and local citizens regularly conduct lengthy conversations without the threat of interruption by any vehicles.

‘Ooh, arrh, my dear.’

Dorothy worries the colourful eccentricity of this old woman might be starting to pall for the readers already and frowns at her to signal the need to cut it back. The old woman nods slightly and continues.

‘I’m afraid you’re mistaken. But there ‘avn’t been no murders committed ‘ereabouts. If there ‘ad, I’d ‘ave known. Apart from doing the church flowers, I’m also the local police commissioner. Our crime rate is significantly below the local average and I can tell you, it’s got us worried. We ‘aven’t had a tourist visit Little Screwing-in-the-Valley for years now. We even staged one of those Murder Mystery nights at the pub but nobody came.’

That halts Nancy in her tracks. So much so Dorothy cannons into her.

‘But there is a murder. I got a phone call from my friend Donna Denis-Wheatley. She lives here, at the Old Vicarage.’

‘Oh, I knows ‘er. She’s the writer, isn’t she? Ooh arrh.’ That latter part provokes a sharp intake of breath and a shoulder shrug of an apology. ‘No, she might ‘ave been trying to do some marketing for the village. You see, what ‘appened, was this. ‘er neighbour, Mr Browne-Butt, ‘as Type 2 diabetes you see? Poor dear, ‘e’s a martyr to it, so ‘e is. Well, poor old sod, went into a diabetic coma. ‘e’d had a Mars bar with his elevenses and then another one with ‘is lunch. Said ‘e forgot but I say ‘e’s just a greedy old bugger. Donna found ‘im passed out in his garden.’



‘So he’s not dead?’ Nancy asks so she can clarify the fact for anyone who’d skipped over those details.

‘No, ‘e’s right as rain now. They gave ‘im one of them injections and ‘e was up and about chasing nurses, as I ‘eard it.’

‘What do we do now?’ Nancy asks, showing her inexperience and need to defer to someone who knows how to react to the unexpected in a murder mystery. Dorothy wastes no time.

‘Wait a minute, Mrs Keene-Trollope, but are you sure those Mars bars were chosen by old Mr Browne-Butt? Is it possible they were placed there to tempt him? To get him to lapse into a coma? By delaying the call to the ambulance, the coma could have led to his death. Then we would have a murder on our hands!’

Rheumy eyes peered at her through tortoiseshell glasses, they held sympathy and the early stages of cataracts.

‘Let it go, my dear. No good flogging dead ‘orses.’

Dorothy’s eyes lit up but the other woman merely shook her head.

‘That be just a saying, there ain’t no actual dead ‘orses.’

A dejected, miserable and utterly frustrated middle-aged woman and sulky American teenager got back into their car and returned to the expectant faces of the Women’s Institute. Jam had been bottled by now, labels written and tops screwed on. They would be ready for the next fete at Groping-by-the-Sea in a few weeks’ time. It looked like it would be the only event that would provoke any excitement.



Publishers and the entire population of the land of Whodunnit would have to wait even longer for a murder to be committed. And when it did, they’d be ready to launch into action once more.