

Murder At St Marmaduke's
Chapter Three
Monday 4th November 1985: 10.30 – 11.30

Spiky Simmonds whistled as he bounded up the steps of Cheaprte Building, on his way to the fourth floor and Proctorpress Publishing Company. He'd finished his own round in double-quick time in order to get to this moment. Most of what he'd delivered had probably gone through the wrong doors; but then, his round consisted almost entirely of wrinklies, and one old person's post was very much like another's, as far as he could see.

He'd given Bill Johnson a good pasting in their duel, as expected; Fred Harris had called the contest off after five minutes to stop old Johnno 'taking too much punishment'. Two of the others had carried Johnno home, while two more had divided his round between them; apart from the prized Proctorpress envelope, of course.

Spiky chuckled at the thought of Bill Johnson standing preening himself in front of Sally Evans. The old fool would have looked ridiculous.

At the top of the stairs, he turned left into the Gents. *Just as well to check the ol' appearance.*

He spent several minutes with the gel pot he routinely carried in his post bag, fashioning his hair into an even sharper version of its trademark punky style. *Sweet*, he thought, flashing himself a grin in the mirror.

He opened the door to leave. 'Excuse me,' a voice said. 'I believe you have forgotten something.'
Bugger! The envelope.

Turning back, he snatched it from the washbasin. 'Thanks, geezer,' he said.

Halfway through the door, he stopped.

Very slowly, he turned round.

He scanned the washroom. Urinals - uninhabited.

Cubicles - doors all standing wide open - ditto.

'You are welcome,' the voice said, right beside his ear.

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Sally Evans sat at her desk and braced herself for the coming ordeal.

She'd heard the cheerful whistle ascending the stairs, a sure sign that a package from the post office was about to come her way; nobody but the postman, thrilled with the thought of coming to see her, ever sounded *that* happy in the building. From the bouncing rhythm of the footsteps, she could tell it wasn't Bill, whose plod - even when he was about to enter the office - was as unvarying as the cliched manuscripts her boss generally received.

No matter. That just meant there'd be a different grey-clad figure striding through the door any second, grinning like a maniac, making googly eyes at her and staring at her chest while pretending not to.

She'd heard the toilet door swing open and shut a few minutes before; now she heard it again.

Footsteps pounded across the hallway floor, and she shot backwards in her wheelie-chair as the office door detonated inwards. She only had time to register the expected uniform, topped by a headful of what appeared to be railing spikes, before something brown was hurled in her direction. Then the figure was gone, and she heard footsteps thundering down the stairs. The front door crashing into the wall sounded clearly, even as far up as she was. Then silence fell, all the deeper for the noisy entertainment that had preceded it.

Sally stared at the door, still vibrating from the force of its opening. The envelope had skidded with surprising accuracy onto her desk, through a small pile of paperwork, then off again and onto the floor beside her.

She picked it up, and wheeled her chair back to her desk. Then she got up and shut the door, checking for damage. A bit of plaster on the wall was dented where the handle had impacted it, but otherwise nothing was too badly amiss.

Next, she took off her overcoat, which she'd donned as protection against the expected leering.

Shrugging, she reseated herself. Whatever was going on, at least she'd been spared that for another day.

She opened the envelope and extracted a neatly-bound set of papers; another writer-in-hope's manuscript. Surprisingly thin; her trained eye estimated that, given the normal double-spacing and adequate margins, the whole would come to around 6,000 words, enough for two or three chapters only.

Sensible. The last effort from a wannabe that had come thudding onto her desk had amounted to 800 pages of total gibberish; far better to send in a portion, so her boss could dictate the inevitable rejection a lot sooner.

She laid aside the covering letter, and glanced at the manuscript's title. Ah, another murder mystery.

She busied herself with the paperwork that had been scattered by its odd arrival. She'd give the manuscript to Kevin later; he was currently doing battle with a love triangle between a Patagonian shepherdess, a prince of the Undongo tribe in East Venezuela and a merman from the planet Oolaxian, so there was no hurry.

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Father Rawlings was striding around the front of the church, pointing out the empty places that had once held valuable objects: '...and here, there were the candlesticks that the Terrified Trappists of Teddington donated to us in 1580. Before my time, of course, but much admired over the years by all visitors to St Marmaduke's...'

Terrence Dawson watched, fascinated, as the vicar lifted his leg to make another transition over the body lying on the floor, its head swathed in a pool of blood. A couple of chairs stood beside it, the plastic, school-room type. As he stepped over, Father Rawlings grabbed one in each hand; then, on the other side, he deposited them neatly onto a stack to one side of the choir stalls.

It was as if the dead woman hadn't registered on his conscious; as if his legs were operating independently in order to keep him from falling over her.

'Are you taking notes, Constable?'

'Hmm?' Terrence tore his gaze away, bent his head and pretended to jot something down in his notebook. 'Erm - expensive, were they, these candles?'

He lifted his head again, and encountered a stare that would have had Sergeant Bulstrode asking for tips on technique. '*Candles?* What on earth are you on about, Constable? I'm talking about the *candlesticks*. Absolutely priceless. Been in the church since...'

'Since 1580; you said.' He felt himself reddening, and bent his head again quickly.

'And here - ' Father Rawlings was moving towards the back, stopping at a counter mid-way that held a small pile of leaflets - the box where money is posted for the *History of St Marmaduke's from its founding in 1473 BC* pamphlets has also been broken into. Absolutely disgraceful.'

The vicar gave a grimace. 'I suppose I shall have to ask those of the congregation who have bought one of the pamphlets to pay again. Printing costs don't meet themselves, you know. And whilst I'm about it, I really must get the date corrected. The earliest instance of a church here is actually 24 BC.'

Terrence did make a note this time. He supposed the fingerprint experts should be called in. No doubt the thief had worn gloves. But every avenue had to be explored. And the date of the candlesticks might be a help in tracking them down. Though they would probably have been made some years before that...

What the heck are you thinking? This is ridiculous!

'Father Rawlings,' he said.

'Yes, Constable?' The vicar was fussing around with the box, a cube of metal with a slot in its top and a door in its back. It had been levered out of its mounting in the cabinet, and the door hung open, limp and buckled.

'Could I ask you not to touch that, sir? *And*, by the way, do you know there's a dead body on your floor?'

Father Rawlings looked up and frowned. 'Oh yes, I'll need your help there, if you don't mind.'

'Help?'

'Yes.' The vicar was striding towards the front again. 'Your help to move her, of course. We can't have people cluttering up the place. I've Evensong at five o'clock - we need to make sure everything's clean and tidy by then.'

Terrence felt himself goggling.

'Hopefully, my wife will be here soon,' Father Rawlings continued. 'With a mop and bucket. Unhelpful of Miss Cartwright to bleed all over the floor like that. Not to mention that - that - ' He inclined his head towards what looked like the congealed remains of a pre-packed casserole near the body.

'But Father, there's a dead woman here! And unless the part of my training course that dealt with how to spot a suspicious death misled me, she's been murdered!'

'Oh, yes.' Father Rawlings treated the statement with the same air of matter-of-factness he might have given an enquiry for directions. 'That often happens when the ladies get together.'

'We generally store them in the crypt. You can give me a hand down with her if you would, when you've finished taking the description of our missing cross.'

*

The phone beside Ernie Bulstrode's elbow jangled into life. '*Dawson!*' he yelled in the direction of the kitchenette.

Damn!

He grabbed the receiver. 'Camtown Police Station,' he said, turning over another page of *Busty*. Korporal Karen smouldered up at him, wearing combat knickers and a tommy gun slung over her shoulder. He wondered how much damage her twin howitzers would cause if pointed in the wrong direction.

'Er, Sarge.'

'Oh, it's you, Dawson. Where the blue blazes are you? My bleedin' mug's been empty for hours.'

There was a sharp indrawing of breath at the other end of the phone. 'Listen, Sarge, this is important. There's been a murder.'

'You what!'

Ernie wrenched his attention away from Korporal Karen and his lack of refreshment, and onto the phone call. 'Say that again, Dawson.'

'There's been a murder, Sarge.'

Ernie clapped the hand that wasn't holding the phone onto his head. 'What the 'ell 'ave you done, Constable? I told you to go and find out what was going on; not to kill anybody.'

'No, Sarge!' The agitation in Dawson's voice increased. 'There's an old woman here, lying on the floor. Looks like she's been dead a while. The vicar doesn't seem bothered. Keeps wanting me to help move her down to the crypt.'

'Eh?'

'Yeah. Reckons he's got about five others stored down there.'

Ernie gripped the phone tighter. 'You listen to me, lad. I'm comin' over there. You tell that vicar fella nothing gets moved until I get there. You got that?'

'Yes, Sarge. Oh. Hang on.'

Ernie heard a stream of muffled dialogue for a moment, then Dawson said, 'Erm - he reckons the choir's coming in at four o'clock to practise. Says he needs to clear up before then.'

'Dawson!' Ernie could feel his pulse quicken. He'd been warned about getting too agitated; the doctor reckoned his blood pressure could only go so much higher before his arteries exploded. 'I couldn't give a tinker's goolies about the choir. Tell him they can practise up the bell tower or something!'

There was another stream of muffle. 'Erm - he reckons they've tried that; the acoustics aren't right, though.'

'Dawson!'

There was a loud clunk, as if the phone on the other end had just hit something very solid; the floor, for instance. This was replaced by a scrabbling noise.

'Erm - sorry about that, Sarge.'

Ernie controlled his patience. Just. 'You tell that vicar that his choir can go -'

No, he decided, I am going to lose my patience after all, and bugger the arteries.

*'They can go ***** so far as I'm concerned!'*

There was dead silence from the other end. Then Dawson said in a very small voice, 'Do you really want me to put it in so many words?'

Ernie felt rather better for his outburst; and nothing inside him appeared to have gone bang. 'Look, lad, from what I've heard of church choirs, I doubt they'd know an acoustic if they fell over a bucket of 'em. Nothing moves till I get there - right?'

He slammed the phone down, lifted his overcoat off its stand, and shrugged it on. As he left, he hung the 'closed' sign on the reception window. The great unwashed public could go solve their own problems for a while.

*

Kevin Proctor disengaged himself from the doings of the Patagonian shepherdess and her two male suitors. Or rather - her one male suitor and the merman from Oolaxian, about whom there seemed to be a slight confusion regarding sex. Of which he/she/it seemed to be getting rather a lot, mostly from various nubile females who fell under some alien hypnotic power it wielded; but occasionally from their boyfriends/husbands, when it took the fancy; and once, disturbingly, from a pet budgerigar belonging to one of them.

He sighed, suspecting that the search for a bestseller-list candidate would be going on a while longer.

He stretched, and got up from his desk. He'd go into the outer office and see if Sally had the coffee-maker on the go.

Hmm. Perhaps Sally would be susceptible to a little alien hypnotic influence? The merman's technique was described in minute detail between pages 46 and 53.

He shook himself mentally. Not a chance.

He opened the door to his office and passed into Sally's reception area. 'Hi, Sal,' he said.

She glanced up from a letter she was typing. 'Can I help you, Kevin? And it's Sally, if you don't mind.'

'And it's Kev, if you don't.' It was a game they'd been playing every day for the two years Proctorpress had been in existence. Sally insisting on the full version of her given name; and he insisting on the shortened version of his.

At least - he hoped it was a game. If she wasn't treating it as such, it might result in her finally upping sticks one day, and the thought of her loss gave him unpleasant sensations in areas where he'd rather be feeling pleasurable ones.

He strolled over to the coffee pot, which, as he'd expected, was full.

'Cup?'

'I will, please.'

He poured two, and brought one to her desk.

'Joseph's phoned in,' she said. 'Asked if he can take the day off. He seems to have had some trouble at the church he goes to.'

'Really? Well, there's nothing urgent, that'll be fine.'

'I said as much.'

Standing over her, he made sure to keep his gaze fixed unwaveringly on her face. He'd learnt early - and at the cost of great personal embarrassment - that letting it slip elsewhere brought wintry frosts into the office that froze the central heating pipes solid.

Not that it was a hardship looking at her face.

Concentrate on business, Kev.

'Anything interesting in the post?' He doubted there was, but it might keep his mind on other things. Or off other things.

Concentrate!

She indicated a small pile of correspondence at her elbow. 'Three letters; all from HL Danvers, all posted Saturday, all asking how you're getting on with her latest work of, and I quote, outstanding genius...'

He closed his eyes. The merman and the budgerigar were imprinted on the back of his eyelids.

'An invitation to the Aberystwyth Literary Festival to discuss the influence of 14th century Singapore novelists on fifteen-year-olds in comprehensive education...'

'?'

She quirked an eyebrow at him. He'd come to recognise it as her equivalent of a smile, and whenever she unbent herself to do it, he had a wild hope she might be softening towards him.

'Again - not a chance.'

'Sorry?'

'Oh, er... Nothing. Nothing. Just thinking that one through. Anything else?'

'Yes. This.' She handed him an A4 envelope.

He groaned. 'Oh no. Another HL Danvers, I take it?' The Patagonian shepherdess's creator had been submitting a manuscript a month for the last year. He was running out of polite ways to tell her, 'Your novel is interesting, but sadly it does not fit our list at the present time.'

'No, surprisingly not,' she said. 'Someone else; someone we've not heard from before.'

'Oh?' He raised his own eyebrows in surprise. Nobody but HL Danvers had submitted anything for months.

'Yes,' she went on. 'Very odd; it came by airmail.'

'Sorry?' He searched her face to check if she was serious. As her face always looked exactly that, it was impossible to tell.

'The postman seemed in rather a hurry. *And* he left the letters and invitation scattered over the stairs as he went.'

'Really?'

He took the envelope and the invitation from her. He'd leave the mystery of the 'airmail' remark for another time. Perhaps when he'd learnt to work out how to tell when she was joking.

Did she ever joke? He really didn't know.

Concentrate.

'Usual reply to the others?' he said.

'Just finishing it.' She indicated the letter in her typewriter. 'I'll sign for you; it'll be in the post this afternoon.'

'Cheers, Sal; you're a love.' That was another game. He dared just enough...

'Sally. And one day I'll be able to take you to court for that remark.'

He carried his coffee back into his office and closed the door. Her reply had been only at about three on the frost scale. Hope flickered again.

And one day, I'll be able to ask you out on a date.

He wondered if he ever would.

Oh, to hell with it. He slung the new manuscript on top of the Patagonian shepherdess, and began to read the invitation to Aberystwyth.

*

Joseph watched in astonished horror as Father Rawlings held Mabel Number Three's legs aloft and berated the policeman who was patiently trying to get him to drop them.

'My choir have every right to practise in peace! We have a very important Evensong tonight; it's the anniversary of the martyrdom of St Eric the Unfortunate, and they have to have the Te Deum in the correct order. On Friday evening, instead of "We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord", they sang "Thee God we, O praise; thee acknowledge Lord to be the we". That will never do!'

Clarissa Rawlings was standing by Joseph's side, the mop and bucket he'd carried to the church for her poised ready for action. 'Perhaps, darling, we should wait for the constable's superior to arrive,' she suggested.

Joseph had encountered mixed emotions when, after she'd taken her phone call, she'd announced that her husband wanted them at the church. Hot and bothered as he'd been with her presence so close on the sofa, he'd suddenly found that when it was removed, he began to hope it would return as quickly as possible. Becoming disappointed when he realised it wouldn't, he'd cheered up with the thought that at least he'd have the compensation of her company on the short walk to the church.

He'd been rather disgruntled, therefore, when they'd arrived and Clarissa had shaken the young policeman's hand in greeting. He'd felt she held on a fraction longer than necessary. Her smile had been a little too friendly as well.

Oh my! he'd thought a second later. *Surely I should not be experiencing such feelings? Should they not be more natural to Father Rawlings?*

The thoughts he was beginning to have regarding Clarissa Rawlings were frightening him. Even for thinking of her as 'Clarissa' Rawlings rather than 'Mrs', his mother would have had him locked in his bedroom and on his knees in prayer for a week.

'A good idea, Mrs Rawlings,' the policeman said. He looked thoroughly harassed. Joseph began to feel sorry for him; then he saw the smile he gave the vicar's wife, and the smile she gave him back, and the feeling was pounced on and pummelled into submission by another, far darker one.

At that moment, a heavy tread sounded in the porch, and a look of relief passed over the policeman's face.

'Is there a problem here?' the tread demanded, entering the church behind them.

Joseph looked round. A shorter, older, more rotund version of the policeman stared back at him; rather rudely, he thought.

'I'm Sergeant Bulstrode. I said, is there a problem here?'

Father Rawlings broke the ensuing short silence. 'Ah, Sergeant. I was just telling your constable...'

The sergeant transferred his attention to the action at the front. His eyes popped, and his face turned a colour Joseph could only assume that the word 'puce' had been especially invented for.

'Excuse me, sir.' The voice that came out of the puce was low and dangerous; like that of a very large dog whose bone had been picked up from in front of its eyes. 'Would you mind telling me why you're waving that lady's legs around like that? Most undignified, I'd say. Not to mention tampering with evidence.'

Joseph looked back towards Father Rawlings' battle with Mabel Number Three's prone form. He saw the vicar's face crease into a frown.

'Evidence, Sergeant? What do you mean? Miss Cartwright will have had nothing to do with this dreadful robbery, if that's what you're thinking. And it might be helpful if you officers were out looking for our valuable candlesticks instead of congregating in here like it was some kind of meeting place. Time is wasting, Sergeant. The tealeaves will be having it away on their toes as we speak.'

There was a splutter from beside Joseph. 'I'm so sorry, Sergeant,' Clarissa Rawlings said. 'We were watching an episode of The Bill last night.'

Joseph turned back to the sergeant. 'Excuse me, sir. I can help with regard to the murdered lady.'

The stare coming out of the popping eyes transferred itself back to him, only doubled in ferocity. It became the kind of stare you could only quail in front of, and Joseph duly quailed.

Before either he or the sergeant could speak further, however, the vicar cut in: 'Ah, yes; Joseph. Do you know that when you left earlier this morning you failed to lock up after you? And look - church property has been stolen and damaged. What were you thinking?'

For not the first time that morning, Joseph felt his jaw work up and down with no sound emerging. At the same time, as if he and the senior policeman had suddenly formed themselves into a ventriloquist act, the sergeant supplied the necessary words: 'Are you saying, vicar, that the death of that poor woman is of secondary importance to the theft of a couple of candles?'

'Candlesticks, Sergeant, candlesticks! Why is it that you officers seem obsessed by the candles we put in them? They only cost one pound from Woolworths. The candlesticks, on the other hand...'

'That's beside the point, sir...' the sergeant began to interrupt.

'Of course it isn't!' The vicar was not to be deflected, it seemed. 'We have any number of elderly congregants who are able to take Miss Cartwright's place. Why, Joseph here is himself replacing Mr Jenkins, whose head was beaten against the lectern a few months ago. Our missing items, however, are *invaluable!*'

Every bone in Joseph's legs seemed to vanish at the same instant, and he began to collapse. The next moment, Clarissa Rawlings' hand was under his arm, and then he felt a pillowy softness beneath his head.

It felt nice. Then he realised what the pillows were, and the rest of his bones vanished too.

'A man was beaten to death against the lectern?' The sergeant now sounded as if he was forcing out the words through teeth that were glued together. 'And you didn't think there was anything untoward about it? Didn't think to report it to us, for example?'

Father Rawlings was staring at him. 'Why - why should I? I mean - these elderly people have to go to glory sometime. Better here than anywhere else; at least they're nearer to God when they go. And it wasn't as if there was much blood involved. We hardly needed to spend anything on cleaning fluid. No need for a fuss at all, really.'