

Murder At St Marmaduke's
Chapter Eight
Monday 4th November 1985: 17.20 – 18.00

'There's an aardvark in the pub (in the pub)

And it stole my pint and grub (pint and gru-u-u-ub)...

Hamish McStrapp - inevitably known to his friends as 'Jock' - meandered his beat down the corridor of the police mortuary, singing an aria from Chas Gonad's world-famous opera *Tutte Fan Frutti*. The acoustics were spot on in that particular stretch, and the tonal quality echoing from the walls blended with his own not-unmusical voice to create a veritable choir of McStrapps. Sometimes he wished he had a tape recorder handy to capture the sound.

He could only hope the mortuary's occupants appreciated his efforts. Though how well they could hear him through the drawers they were locked into nightly, he wasn't sure.

His was the early-evening shift; at midnight he would hang up his hat and his uniform jacket, and make his way home to Mrs McStrapp, who would no doubt have a tasty something lined up on the table for him.

That was the problem with the shift he was on. He started too early for dinner, and ended too late for supper. Lunchtime, consequently, was when he did his best work at the trencher, and he patted his ample stomach as he remembered the delicious steak pie swimming in gravy he'd enjoyed at one o'clock, followed by treacle pudding and custard at a quarter past.

Of course, Lizzie had also packed him a couple of sandwiches, a family-sized pork pie and an apple turnover for his eight-thirty break-time; but that was a heck of a while to wait. Fortunately, there was a confectionery machine not far off his beat, and he began to feel in his pocket for the loose change he always made sure he kept there.

'And it eats my curry for its tea

And never leaves a bit for me...'

He reached the mortuary doors and peered in through one of the small round windows set into them. As far as he could see, no-one was on duty, even though it was still a while before official closing-time. *Probably all at a seminar*, he thought. Working life was full of seminars nowadays. He'd had to attend one only a week before, teaching him how to walk down a corridor quietly enough not to disturb the occupants of the room he was passing.

'Am I being too noisy for ye?' he called through the window. 'Might sorry, lads and lassies.'

Chuckling to himself, he was just strolling on when a loud '*screeeeeeeeee*' from inside the room halted him in his tracks.

Puzzled, he returned to the window. He'd heard that sound before.

It was the noise of one of the less-than-well-oiled drawers sliding open - or shut.

He peered in again. He was sure he hadn't seen anybody...

He still couldn't. He tried the door. Locked. That proved there was nobody in residence.

Nobody on this side of the Great Divide, anyway.

He craned his head round, trying to take in the hard-to-see corners of the room.

Definitely nobody there. Though yes, he could see that one of the drawers was lying open when it decidedly shouldn't have been...

The door exploded outwards. Hamish, smacked squarely in the face, chest, knees and everything else, hurtled backwards with a grace that had eluded him since schooldays, landing against the wall opposite with a bone-shaking '*crunch*'.

The world turned briefly black, and then refocused into a wavy sort of normality; albeit one where stars appeared to have manifested themselves on the corridor ceiling rather than outside where they belonged.

'I'm so sorry,' somebody called.

There was something distinctly odd about the apology, and in his befuddled state it took him several seconds to work out what it was.

The ringing in his ears from where the wall had interrupted his flight was so loud, it was blocking out any other sound. And yet - he'd definitely heard the 'sorry', as clearly as if it had been shouted into his head.

Directly into his head.

His brain, which was executing a passable impersonation of a kettledrum, froze. Very slowly, he turned his head to one side, then to the other.

The first direction was fine. Except for the stars, which shifted in line with his vision, nothing and nobody was in sight.

In the other direction, however...

His eyes sprung wide. Something that looked from the back aspect like a little old woman was shuffling along the corridor away from him. It had on a lab technician's coat, and the limbs that poked out of it were wrinkled and pale; deathly white, in fact.

It had on no footwear. Apart, that was, from a small tag attached to a piece of string which looked as though it was flopping from one of the figure's toes...

'Hey!' he opened his mouth to call, then had a rethink and told himself very firmly to shut the hell up.

He stayed prone and watched as the figure continued its curious shuffle along the corridor. Eventually, it reached the corner he himself had turned several moments before, and vanished from sight.

Slowly, he hauled himself to his feet, wincing with every movement. His mind had unfrozen itself and was now turning somersaults at a rate that would have made a professional gymnast green with envy. Unless he was very much mistaken, a dead body had just escaped from the mortuary, and was heading for the outside world...

How the braw bricht moonlicht nicht was he going to report *that* to Mr Thomas, his Head of Security?

But hold on - did he actually *need* to report it?

Strictly speaking, his job was to safeguard the premises and ensure that no criminal activity took place therein. Was an escaping dead body, technically, criminal activity?

Then he looked at the door that had met with him so forcefully. The top and middle hinges had been ripped from their moorings, the bottom one was bent to all buggery, the glass in the window had formed a mosaic on the floor, and the door itself was leaning at a drunken angle in his direction.

That, technically, was damage to the property. Something that fell within his purview.

Daingead!

Yes, he would have to report it.

But before he did, he was damn-well going to find that sweet machine, and the drinks one beside it. What he needed now was a large injection of Mars bars and sugary tea.

It was a shame the machine didn't do the Mars deep fried. But they were still good to dunk, even so.

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'Well, I'm off then, Sarge.'

Ernie Bulstrode flapped a hand in Terrence Dawson's direction. It was the nearest to a 'good night' he ever gave the lad; and would be for another - he made a mark in the five-year desk diary that lived under the counter along with three back-issues of *Busty* - 1,295 days. After that, the constable would have concluded his Keep-the-bugger-guessing Probationary Period, and would qualify as a copper to be taken notice of.

He waited a minute or so before climbing into his own overcoat. Locking up the enquiries area, he followed Dawson out into the street.

Something was up. He'd known it since the lad had come back from Charlie Meredith's office a short while ago. For a start, there was a suspicious bulge in Dawson's shirt-front. Not huge, and the lad obviously thought it wasn't noticeable; Ernie estimated three sheets of A4 at most. The frustration had been that there wouldn't be time to prise it from him and find out what the hell it was.

Short of simply ordering the constable to hand it over, of course. And Ernie Bulstrode was no way going to resort to the bloody obvious, aggravating as the alternative - not knowing - was.

He'd briefly contemplated ordering the lad to strip from the waist up. Much as that would have been in his power to do, though, it might have led to some awkward questions in Complaints Authority Land, a place he had not the slightest desire to visit.

Dawson's first action on returning to his post had been to casually - and again, obviously thinking Ernie wasn't taking notice - flip open the St Marmalade's file and study the topmost sheet. That, Ernie knew, was the one holding the names and addresses they'd gathered that morning.

Dawson had spent the remaining time before leaving staring at the map of the town pinned up beside the reception counter. Ernie had never taken anything approaching a maths degree, but he knew damn well that two and two made a bigger number than two, and he knew just as damn well what Dawson was thinking.

The top person on the list was Hettie Whatsit, the woman Makumbo insisted had committed the murder. It'd been that barking vicar's wife who'd supplied her address, along with those of the others who'd been present. (And their names. For some reason, the Makumbo lad had insisted on talking about them in numbers. Ernie couldn't help feeling sorry for the boy, but did wonder if he was a sight more off his meatloaf than the vicar.)

Ernie allowed his mind to dwell on the wife a moment. By 'eck, that church had been cold...

He snapped back to the present.

It was a pound to a pre-decimal penny that Dawson was on his way to the Hettie woman's place to have a quiet word or three. And mathematically speaking again, Dawson plus a material witness quite likely equalled a bloody disaster waiting to happen.

He could see the lad just down the road, heading in completely the wrong direction to be going homeward. Keeping a careful distance, he began to follow towards what was obviously going to be Diamond Crescent.

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Spiky Simmonds hurried along Policemorgue Avenue on his way to the Pig and Truncheon. As he went, he checked over his shoulder every few seconds to make sure no disembodied voices were following.

He was well aware that he looked a prat, but this evening, he couldn't give a toss about style and his reputation. If he saw anything remotely invisible behind him, he was going to run like buggery and stuff what anybody thought.

He'd have rather stayed in, keeping to his bedroom with a packet of Players and the Mills and Boon romance that nobody at the post office would ever be allowed to know was one of his secret vices. But his mum wanted the place clear for a seance; she'd been asked to call up Ivy Baxter's husband Wilf, and once that old sod had been in, the whole house had to be cleaned of dripping ectowhatsit afterwards.

He'd never been scared of the dead bods his mum conjured up. The thing was, at least they said what they wanted to say *through* his mum. Their voices didn't jump out at you in the Gents without so much as a cough to let you know they were there.

Another check. Nothing. He passed an alleyway that separated a couple of buildings, and glanced down it, his heart thumping. The darkness from it leapt out at him like a panther, and not a hilarious pink one like in the film he'd watched the other night.

Thank God the lighting was good in this street. He supposed that here, being one of the areas the Filth had a presence, the council was bound to overlook the fact that electricity cost money; unlike in places they could actually use it - like the local dementia hospice, where twice a week staff, and volunteers like himself, had to pretend to residents that the war was still on and they'd all gone down the shelter to stay safe from bombs.

Another alleyway loomed. He made ready to run past it.

'Excuse me, young man,' a voice quavered from behind him. 'Could you possibly tell me the way to Diamond Crescent? I seem to be a little lost.'

Shit!

He'd been partway through an in-breath, and now it stuck in his throat, uncertain whether to continue down or come straight back up again.

How the hell had somebody managed to sneak up on him? He'd only looked...

The last alleyway. They must've come out of there!

These thoughts chased each other round his head, and called down to the sweat glands under his arms to let a flood commence. Then, another more reasonable one interrupted their game of Tag. There was something about this voice which wasn't quite the same as the other Voice; the one with a capital 'V'.

It was that of a little old lady. Not a bogey-monster invisible man.

The stuck breath exploded outward in a surge of relief. He turned.

Indeed, it was a little old lady, and she was lurching towards him with a curious kind of shuffling motion, like one of the extras from Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video.

Lots of old wrinklies had funny walks. So there was nothing weird about that.

The next thing he noticed was the white coat she was wearing. Like some kind of doctor; or maybe one of those bods who worked in a lab somewhere.

She might *be* one of either of them. So there was nothing weird about that, either.

She was almost up to him now. Lots of people came close to him on a daily basis. So there was *certainly* nothing weird about that.

She didn't have anything on her feet.

Wasn't there something just slightly weird about that?

She had a small tag attached to one of her toes.

That *was* a bit weird.

She reached him. He looked at her face.

At her left eye.

That was very - *Oh, shit!*

'I'm so sorry; I've been told to do this for someone called Bill Johnson,' she said.

Although her lips didn't actually move while she was saying it.

That was *really* - *Oh, shit, shit, SHIT!*

He tried to scream as she dragged him into the alleyway, but by then her hand was clamped over his mouth.

*

'Please make haste, Father Rawlings,' Joseph said.

He was watching as the vicar made a leisurely circuit of the outside of his car, shining a torch over every inch of it as if the street lighting wasn't adequate enough to show that, yes, it was still the same one he'd had that morning, and yes, it still had the requisite number of tyres.

With each of those inches, Father Rawlings bent to examine something in minute detail, tutting as he picked a pebble from a tyre tread or buffed a headlight with a cloth he'd already spent an age searching for in the boot.

'Please, Father Rawlings!'

The vicar opened the bonnet, and began peering at the complexities of the engine. 'One must attend to the safety aspects of motoring,' he said. 'It wouldn't do to have an accident on our way to rescuing my wife.'

'If you do not hurry, sir, there may be no your wife to rescue!'

Father Rawlings straightened. 'We have plenty of time, Joseph,' he said in a maddeningly reasonable voice. 'Clarissa cannot possibly reach Miss Foster's house for another twenty minutes or so. It's only a fifteen minute drive.'

He bent back to his task. 'Now - which one is the dipstick again?'

Having watched *Only Fools And Horses* a few evenings previously, an answer sprang to Joseph's mind that he only just managed not to articulate. Instead, he asked, 'But supposing Clariss - Mrs Rawlings - has taken the bus?'

'Then that will be even better. The bus will take at least another half-hour. The route is so tortuous, it has to call at the same stop in Spiral Street three times before the driver can find his way out.'

His study of the engine over, the vicar closed the bonnet and bobbed below roof level on the other side of the car. His voice, when he spoke again, came as a disconcerting reminder of the bodyless one in church that morning.

'You really must not worry so, Joseph.'

He reappeared, somewhat in the manner of a periscope emerging from the sea to spy enemy ships on the horizon. 'Anyway,' he said, thoroughly wiping what looked like perfectly clean hands with the buffing cloth, 'I've completed my inspection, and I think we'll be safe to proceed. Do jump in.'

With a sigh of relief, Joseph opened the passenger door.

'*Oi, you!*' a cry came from behind him. '*Makumbo!*'

That sounded very much like an enemy ship. Joseph froze, one foot already in the passenger well.

If I count to ten, the thought came unbidden into his mind, *I wonder if this nightmare will become a happy dream instead?*

A happy dream involving tea followed the thought; but as that concerned the object of his current anxiety, another involving Hettie Number One, Mabel Number Cartwright and hat-based pointy objects chased it from the scene before he'd even counted past zero.

He turned to the source of the cry. The inspector who'd interviewed him that morning was advancing on him, a look on his face which instantly gave Joseph no hope that this was a courtesy call.

That supposition was confirmed when, seconds later, the inspector reached him, grabbed the lapels of Joseph's coat, and, it seemed, began to try to ram them up Joseph's nose.

'I wanna bloody word with you, Makumbo!' The inspector's speech was a muddled slur, and Joseph smelt the staleness of what he assumed was beer on the breath accompanying the sentence. The stink was so appalling, he ducked his head in the hope his lapels might fit.

'Excuse me,' the vicar's voice came from the other side of the car. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'You stay outta this, Your Reverence!'

The policeman's arm came up under Joseph's chin and began to thrust his head back towards the car roof. Oddly, at this moment Joseph found three statements battling in his head for the right to be spoken first.

One: *Mr Inspector, Father Rawlings' wife is in great danger, and if you delay us further it may be too late.*

Two: *Please, my head is not meant to be at this angle; would you kindly release me so that I can breathe?*

And three: *Surely you mean 'Reverence'?*

Due to the angle worried about in statement number two, not even the relatively snappy number three had room to manoeuvre past his windpipe. Also due to the angle worried about in statement number two, Joseph began seeing twinkly lights in front of his eyes, and a certain encroaching darkness behind them.

Due to the delay worried about in statement number one, and the fact that the vicar didn't seem to be taking any action beyond his mild verbal protest, some part of Joseph that he hadn't been aware of before kicked in.

And kicked out.

The kick was extremely accurate, not to mention forceful. There was a satisfying 'oomph' noise from the inspector as he curled into a ball at Joseph's feet.

Joseph stepped to one side, massaging his throat and trying to get his breath circulating back to where it was needed.

'I say, Joseph,' Father Rawlings said. 'Do you think that was wise?'

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St Andrew peered out at the church's interior; empty, quiet and plunged into gloom now all the corpse-removing and fingerprint-dusting was over. Swathes of gaily-coloured tape still smothered every surface, giving off an ethereal glow that relieved the darkness a little. But frankly, the church was not the jolliest of places once the lights were extinguished.

Normally, once that happened, he and James would settle into bickering about the events of the day, even if their sole topic was what kind of spider it was currently spinning a web over the pair of them. But given his fellow effigy's enforced untalkative phase, that enjoyment was denied him. He'd tried striking up a conversation with James's gargoyle girlfriend, but all she did was throw an explosive 'Men!' back at him, so he'd quickly decided that that was a no-go.

He sighed. There was no prospect of the scheduled Evensong taking place to relieve the monotony, either. The police had made it quite clear the church wasn't to be used until they'd finished investigating.

That made it *perscena non grata* as far as any more plot development went.

What on earth was that supposed to mean?

'James?' he said.

'Mmm?'

'Do you wonder why we're here?'

'Mm mmm?'

Andrew repeated his question.

'Mm mm mm mm mm mm?'

'I want to know,' Andrew said, 'because we don't seem to have done much these last few chapters; and we're unlikely to do much in the next few either.'

There was silence for a moment. Then: 'Mm mm?'

'Oh.' Andrew paused, confused. 'Did I say chapters? I meant, hours.'

'Mm.'

'I mean - what's it all about? Existence? Us? Two lumps of stone carved into a bigger lump of stone? In short - why are we here?'

'Hmm,' James said. 'Mmm. Mm mm mm mm mmmmmm. Mmm mm.'

Andrew sighed again, not one hundred percent convinced. 'Perhaps you're right. Maybe we'll have something really important to do later on, which'll make it worth while our having appeared at all. We can but hope.'