

Murder off The Shelf

With finicky precision Vicki Sharp pressed the rubber date stamp onto the flyleaf of a Joanna Trollope novel. Among the neat columns of stampings on the page she noted, with a resigned shake of her head, the higgledy-piggledy efforts of Emily, the younger of her two assistants. Would the girl ever learn that neatness, like cleanliness, is next to godliness?

A single mother approaching forty, Vicki had run the small suburban library for twelve years with the iron hand of a guards' sergeant major. At this early hour the regiments of books, perfectly aligned on their shelves, glowed in the golden rays of the morning sun that slanted in through the high windows. The floor gleamed. Its polish scented the air and brushed the very books with lavender – a fragrance she loved.

The customer slid her last book under the poised date stamp. But Vicki's hand froze in mid air as a sudden clamour of angry male voices echoed from the far end of the library.

"Oh, no, not again, I'll bang their stupid heads together," she muttered as she strode towards the source of the noise. At the end of the rows of shelves she turned left into a secluded area lined with reference books on one side and magazines on the other.

One of the five reading tables had been thrust askew – evidently by the two elderly men grappling with each other. The object of their struggle was, just as she had suspected, that morning's Herald. Half the newspaper was in pieces on the floor. A tug of war was taking place over the rest of it.

"Barney . . . Colonel, stop that!"

Her ringing voice cut through the men's panting and grunting. Two red faces turned towards her. There could not have been more of a contrast. Barney - grimy, unshaven, his straggled grey hair pigtailed with an old elastic band. Colonel Pilchard - white-haired, primly-moustached, unbowed by his eighty-odd years - kitted out in khaki trousers and shirt with epaulettes, looking every inch the military officer.

They both started talking at the same time.

"Quiet," Vicki bawled. And then in a quieter tone, "Barney was here first. I saw him come in. We've only got the one morning newspaper and its first come, first served. You know the rules Colonel."

"I only asked him to let me have the business section, which he never reads," said the colonel, his voice rising. "I don't know why you let him in here. He's festered in that filthy T-shirt for at least a year. He stinks. He sleeps under the railway bridge for goodness sake. He's not fit to mix with decent people. He's rubbish."

"Don't you call me rubbish," shouted Barney, grabbing the colonel by the collar. Vicki thrust her tall, strong frame between the two old men. But Barney was not to be silenced. "He's nothing but a stuck-up, stingy old God botherer. The bastard's got pots of money. He can afford his own newspaper. But he'd never give a cent to a bloke, like me, who's down on his luck."

"I said, that's enough," shouted Vicki. "And I don't want that kind of language in my library. Now both of you behave or I'll call the police and have you thrown out. Just this once I am going to send out my assistant for a new paper. Barney can read it first, and if he wants to part with the business section – well, that's up to him."

"Colonel, why don't you read the bible meanwhile?" She nodded towards the library's most prized possession – a two-hundred-years-old, family bible. Bound between leather-covered wooden covers, and far too big for the shelves, it rested heavily on its own small table in the corner of the reading room. Colonel Pilchard loved to pore over its ancient pages and often startled other readers by reading out some of the Good Book's more doom-laden passages in a loud fire-and-brimstone voice.

The peace did not last long. Just three days later, another shouting match had Vicki dashing into the reading area. This time Barney was the aggrieved party.

"He won't give me yesterday's Evening Telegraph," he whined.

"But he's reading the Herald," said Vicki.

"The devious bugger's got the Telegraph hidden underneath it."

Vicki looked closely. "So he has. Now that's very naughty Colonel, you can't have two papers at the same time."

"But when that rubbish gets hold of the Telegraph he keeps it for hours while he does the chess problem. That's not fair . . ." The colonel's voice tailed off as his eye caught a movement behind Vicki. She turned. It was Emily, her assistant, bearing an armful of magazines. At nineteen Emily had the kind of figure that would look good in an old tarpaulin. But there was nothing tarpaulin-like about her outfit. She was perched on high-heeled sandals, her cream hipsters stretched tight as paint. Thin shoulder straps supported a filmy sepia top that barely hid the dark aureoles of her nipples.

Vicki rolled her eyes in exasperation. She had warned the wilful girl many times about her skimpy attire. "It's so unprofessional, my dear," she'd told her. "If the Director ever pays us a call and sees you dressed like that, we could be both out of a job." But today the girl had really gone over the top.

Her musings were interrupted by a thunderous voice. She turned to see the glowering colonel pointing a shaking finger at Emily like a vengeful Moses.

"The girl might as well be naked," he ranted. "The Lord's wrath shall descend on the fornicators. The sins of the flesh shall be punished in hell," he roared.

Emily's face crumpled in terror as she dropped the magazines and fled. The finger of God was then turned on Vicki. The colonel showed the whites of his eyes as his voice rose to a crescendo. "Why do you let that slut in here? Are you running a library or a brothel?"

Vicki glared at him before turning on her heel to follow Emily. She found the girl in the washroom - her face tear-streaked with mascara. Vicki put her arms round the sob-wracked shoulders.

"There, there, my dear. Don't let that nasty old man get under your skin. Just keep away from him. Now why don't you go back to your flat and take the rest of the day off - and come back tomorrow, in something a little more . . ."

“Biblical?” smiled Emily wryly.

An uneasy truce settled over the reading area during the next couple of weeks – Barney sitting close to the entrance, and the colonel at the far end near his beloved bible.

Then, on a tranquil Tuesday morning, the peace was shattered by an event that launched the little library into the newspaper headlines.

Vicki had been helping an elderly customer make a search for a book on crochet when she caught a glimpse of Barney entering the reading area. About three minutes later he came rushing out.

“We must get a doctor, ma’am. There’s something wrong with the colonel. I can’t wake him.”

Vicki followed him back into the reading area where she saw the colonel slumped over his table, face down on his newspaper. A trickle of blood from his nose was slowly spreading over the crossword puzzle. Vicki shook him gently by the shoulder but there was no response. She felt in vain for a pulse in his neck. She rushed to the phone.

The doctor peered at the dead man’s face. The bloody nose puzzled him. There was no sign of injury. A cerebral haemorrhage perhaps? He pressed gently on the back of the head – then abruptly straightened up. He turned to Vicki. “Miss Sharp, will you please lock the library doors. No one is to leave, and nothing is to be touched until the police get here,” he snapped, dialling a number on his mobile.

“Now, Miss Sharp,” said Detective Chief Inspector Calland, “you’re saying that the old tramp physically attacked the colonel just two weeks ago.”

“Well, yes,” replied Vicki. “But he *was* provoked. Colonel Pilchard has – had – a vicious tongue.”

“And you say that apart from the victim nobody else entered the reading area before Barney.”

“No, I said I didn’t *see* anyone enter. I can’t see the library’s main entrance from the desk. Someone slipping in along the

children's section would be visible only briefly as they crossed the short space into the reading area."

"So you saw only the old lady, three schoolkids and your two assistants."

"And Barney," added Vicki.

"Yes, and Barney," growled the detective as he strode back to the reading area where he found the police pathologist closing his medical bag.

"It was a blow to the back of the head," reported the pathologist. "An indented fracture. Something heavy, blunt and - fatal. The nose bleed was a result of his face hitting the table."

The detective turned to his sergeant who had just returned from taping-off the grounds.

"Did you hear that, Sergeant? Well, there's no sign of a weapon like that in here. Better call for a couple of constables to make a thorough search of the library and the grounds."

The sergeant scanned the room. Her eyes lighted on the bible lying on its little table. She walked across and bent over the huge volume examining the cover minutely. She donned her latex gloves before turning it over. It weighed even more than she had expected.

Her boss raised his eyebrows.

"A book? Now there's a thought. Any sign of hair or blood?"
"Nothing, Sir."

"Bag it all the same. Now what have you done with our prime suspect?"

"On his way to the station, Sir."

It was a cold day but, in the back of a squad car, Barney was sweating.

"It was the old vagrant, Sir, beyond a shadow of doubt," reported DCI Calland to his superintendent.

"But it's been over a month, Calland. Why haven't we arrested him?"

"The old bugger's sticking to his story, Sir. He says the victim, was dead when he got there. We gave him a right grilling, but he won't budge."

"Couldn't someone have got in unseen by the library staff?"

"In theory, yes. But where's your motive? The colonel was an unpleasant old sod. But murder? I don't buy it. Until we look at Barney. Now that's a different story. Barney hated him. Had come to blows with him. And, guess what? The old rascal's got form."

"What for?"

"Possession of marihuana and . . . assault!"

The superintendent frowned for a long moment as he studied the perambulations of a spider on the ceiling.

"What about the forensic?"

"Yes, well, it *was* the book. They found some tiny white flakes embedded into the leather. It was dandruff. We've just got the DNA report. And it matches the victim."

"Prints?"

"Dozens, Sir. Smudged. We got partials for all three staff members and plenty for the colonel."

"None for Barney?"

"None for Barney."

Barney had just opened the Morning Herald when a steaming cup of coffee was set down in front of him. He immediately recognised the sturdy wrist with its gold-bangles. He looked up at Vicki Sharp.

"Why thank you ma'am, that's most welcome."

"You deserve it Barney. You've had a very stressful time."

“You’re right ma’am. That cop tried hard to pin the murder on me. Look, I’m not sorry to see the back of hoity-toity Colonel Pilchard. But who on earth would want to kill him?”

Vicki reached across and placed her hand gently on Barney’s grubby fist. Her eyes, brown and bright, stared into his for what seemed minutes. Her words, when they finally came, were like an icy finger sliding between the old man’s shoulder blades.

“Barney, I’m sorry you had to go through all this. But nobody . . . nobody, calls my daughter a whore.”

Al Todd