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The Case of the ‘Hail Mary’ Celeste

Written by Malcolm Pryce

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The Case of the 'Hail Mary' Celeste

The Case Files of Jack Wenlock,
Railway Detective

MALCOLM PRYCE

B L O O M S B U R Y
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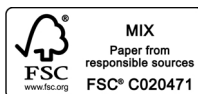
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There were twelve Gosling class special railway detectives created at the Weeping Cross Railway Servants' Orphanage between 1902 and 1914. By the time the railways were nationalised in 1948 only one was left: Jack Wenlock. This is his story.

Lightcliffe	Shot at dawn, 1917
Tumby Woodside	Stole money from dog, thrashed to death, 1921
Temple Combe	Died in the electric chair at Sing Sing, 1925
Conway Marsh	Crushed by elephant in Indochina, 1926
Kipling Coates	Lost in opium den, Shanghai, 1927
Mickle Trafford	Dragged from ship by a giant squid, 1928
Luton Hoo	Stabbed in the eye with a swordstick, 1929
Cadbury Holt	Missing, presumed eaten by a lion, 1930
Hucknall Byron	Sent to Gulag on Kolyma River, 1935
Cheadle Heath	Adulterer, blotted copybook, expelled, 1936
Amber Gate	Lost on the Hindenburg, 1937
Jack Wenlock	Fate unknown

Chapter 1

IT WAS TUESDAY the second of December 1947 when Jenny the Spiddler walked into my office: almost a month before they nationalised my mother. Some people will regard that as a fanciful turn of phrase, forgivable perhaps in someone who had worked his entire life on the railways. But I don't mean it that way. The Great Western Railway really was my mother. I was born in a specially constructed maternity engine shed at the Weeping Cross Railway Servants' Orphanage in 1914, the birth arranged in such a fashion that the first thing I saw upon opening my eyes in this world was a 4-6-0 Saint class locomotive. This was done in accordance with the ethological theories of Oskar Heinroth, who had shown that a greylag goose takes as its mother the first thing it sees on emerging from the egg, and it had been supposed that a human baby would be the same. My mother was engine number 2904 *Lady Godiva*. She had a domeless parallel boiler, raised Belpaire firebox and boiler pressure of 200 psi, although by the time I was born her boiler had been replaced with a superheated half-cone device. As for the flesh-and-blood mother who had her confinement in this engine shed, from whose loins I emerged but whose face I was specifically prevented from glimpsing, I know nothing. Every moment of my life thereafter was spent in the service of the Great Western Railway, or God's Wonderful Railway as we all

knew her. I was a Gosling class detective, that fabled cadre of detectives who trod the corridors of the GWR trains in the years 1925 to 1947. There were twelve of us in all and I am the last. No official record of us now exists, with the exception of this testament. I have decided to make my case files over to the national archive, as a gift to the people of this land, with the instructions that all files remain sealed until after my death. I am in good health and expect to live a long while yet, and hope that when the hour of my death comes Princess Elizabeth will be on the throne and the dark secrets contained within these pages will have lost their power to precipitate a Jacobin revolution in England.

She came at fifteen minutes past five. The door was half panelled with the top made of opaque glass and I could make out the shape of a girl through the glass. She knocked on the wooden bit. I said come in but she didn't so I walked over to open the door. She wore a plain cream mackintosh, tightly belted, ankle socks and a pancake hat. Her hair was worn in the style made popular by Veronica Lake. I stepped aside and she walked in and sat down without being invited.

'May I take your coat?'

'Then I'd have to give you my hat, wouldn't I?'

'Not if you didn't want to.'

'I'm not sure if I would be able to get it on again, it's not a very good one.'

The pancake hat was attached to the side of her head as if someone had thrown a pie at her and it had stuck.

'It looks rather fetching to me.'

'Well, it isn't. I knitted it myself. That wasn't the problem, it was the wool. We – that's me and Aunt Agatha – unravelled it

from a bed sock. That's OK too but you can still see the curl in the wool. It's very hard to get that out. The "Make Do and Mend" booklets never tell you how to do that.'

'I thought it was part of the style.'

'Shows you how much you know. Have you got any snipes?'

I took out a pack of Player's and reached it across. She took one out with slightly trembling fingers. I struck a Swan Vesta and held the flare up to the end of her cigarette. She drew in the smoke and avoided my gaze and then darted a quick look at me and away. She was trying hard to be nonchalant but you could see she wasn't used to having men light her cigarettes for her. She let out a slight choke. I lit one too and regarded her through the curling tendrils of smoke.

'I've never done this before,' she said, then added, 'I need to see a Railway Gosling.'

I smiled.

'This is where you say they don't exist.'

'I don't know if they exist – I've never seen one.'

'The people at the Anaglypta Mill told me you would deny it. They said Goslings are very shy. They said don't leave the office until he admits it.'

'How do you know you've come to the right office?'

She twisted in her chair and nodded towards a glass case in the corner containing a stuffed goose. 'I saw the goose through the glass in the door.'

'It could be from Lost Property.'

'Yes, I'm sure it could – left behind by the King of Timbuktu.'

She continued scanning the room. There wasn't much to look at. On my desk there was a telephone receiver, subscriber number Weeping Cross 723; a lamp, an ashtray, a pen and some

blotting paper. A copy of Chesterton's *History*. There were two framed pictures on the walls, and above the cold fireplace hung a map of the Great Western Railway. On top of the filing cabinet there was a photo of my mother, 4-6-0 Saint class locomotive, number 2904 *Lady Godiva*. There was also a hatstand, and behind the hatstand a small bookcase containing the Boy's Own Railway Gosling annuals, volumes 1 to 10, with the exception, of course, of the 1931 edition.

'Who's that?' She pointed at my mezzotint next to the door.

'A sixteenth-century Frenchman called Salomon de Caus. They imprisoned him in an insane asylum.'

'What did he do?'

'He said that one day men would use steam to turn wheels.'

'I don't believe that will ever happen.'

'Me neither.'

'You're funny. Do you carry a gun?'

'No.'

Disappointment flickered in her eyes. 'Well, can you fight?'

I stared at her for a brief moment and then looked towards the window. The panes were filmed over with soot and cracked. One was broken. The frames began to rattle and the air quivered. From afar came the sound of singing metal: rails quivering. This was followed by a soft wail, the sort a man might emit from a distant dungeon when on the rack. The walls began to hum; the glass in the windows rattled more fiercely. The approach always seemed slow at first, then the train arrived like a wrecking ball slamming into the side of a building. There were more wails, louder, with furious snorts and coughs. Gobbets of smoke puffed through the broken light, filling the room with the stench of sulphur. Then she was gone.

‘The 5.17 to Hereford,’ I said.

‘See, I knew you were a Gosling. I bet you can tell from the sound exactly what sort of train it was, can’t you?’

‘Yes, it’s a 4-6-0 Castle class, the one with a sloping throatplate in the firebox. You can tell because even after the modifications to the blastpipe and chimney, the steam superheating still falls short. Hence the characteristic double cough in the chuffs.’

She brought the knuckle of her index finger up to her mouth, and twisted her head slightly to one side as if needing to examine me from a different angle.

‘Castle class?’

I nodded.

‘Sure, but which one?’ She smiled impishly.

‘It was number 4070 *Godstow Castle*.’

‘Golly! You can tell all that just from the chuffing?’

I paused and let the slowly widening grin on my face answer her question. She burst into a smile. ‘You’re kidding, aren’t you?’

‘Of course.’

She laughed. It sounded like silver bells and was the loveliest laugh there had ever been in my office. I enjoyed the moment, although I didn’t laugh. The truth was, I hadn’t been kidding. It really was *Godstow Castle*. The double cough in the chuffs was a dead giveaway.

‘Why did you ask if I could fight?’

‘This case might be dangerous. I need a Gosling who can fight. I read all the Railway Gosling annuals when I was a little girl.’

‘All of them?’

‘Well, except the 1931. I know all about you. Every Gosling has fired a King class 4-6-0 from Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads.

The movement of the right arm with the shovel is the same as the punch to the ribs that breaks the heart of the prizefighter and makes him kiss the canvas like a sweetheart. Is that true?’

‘Yes, that’s true.’

‘The books also say you are practised in the secret art of Chinese temple boxing, like Fu Manchu. Is that true?’

‘I’m afraid that’s a secret. How old are you?’

‘As old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth. Guess what I do.’

‘I don’t think I could.’

‘I work in the Anaglypta Mill, I put the bubbles in.’

‘So you’re a spiddler.’

‘You don’t have to say it like that.’

‘I didn’t mean to offend. How do they get the bubbles in?’

‘You know I can’t tell you that. I’d lose my job. I’ve come about my aunt Agatha, in case you are wondering.’

‘I was beginning to.’

‘Couldn’t we . . . why don’t we go to the Lyons tea shop? I could tell you there.’

‘You can tell me about it here.’

She looked disappointed and frowned. ‘You’re no fun. Aunt Agatha saw a murder. It was in the adjacent carriage of a passing train. She was on the 4.50 to Brackhampton and fell asleep for a while. When she awoke there was another train passing them on the next line. For a while their speeds matched and they ran in parallel. Just then the blind in the adjacent compartment snapped up, and there it was: a man with his hands to the throat of a woman. He was throttling her. Then she went limp in his arms and the train speeded up and was gone.’

She gave me a look of triumph, then slipped off her chair and

walked over to the wall and the picture of Oskar Heinroth. It showed a portly man in an astrakhan coat and wearing a hom-burg running through a wide path in a birch forest. He was being chased by a low-flying goose, and you could tell from his gait that he was not used to running and probably had not done it for many years. He seemed to be laughing.

‘Who’s this? Your granddad?’

‘It’s just a picture.’

She walked over to the bookshelf and knelt down to read the spines. ‘You don’t have the 1931 either.’

‘No one does.’

She stood up and walked back to her chair. ‘You don’t seem very curious about my aunt Agatha. Don’t you want to know what happened next?’

‘I already know what happened next. She reported the murder to the police and they didn’t believe her. They said there was no murder, no one had been reported missing, and there was no corpse. In the absence of these things it would be very difficult to conduct a murder inquiry. They told her to go home, have a cup of tea and forget all about it. They probably also pointed out that the incident took place just after she had been asleep and so the likely explanation was she was still dreaming.’

She slipped back on to the chair and took another cigarette. Her hands trembled even more as she brought the cigarette up. ‘That’s exactly what happened. How did you know?’

‘It happens every month. We call them throttlers. Little old ladies who make up stories like that. I had ten case files cross my desk last year alone.’

‘Well, that shows you are not as smart as you think you are, doesn’t it? Because if that is true you must be the Gosling.’

I shrugged. 'If you say so. What did the murdered woman look like?'

'She was a nanny. With a perambulator and a little boy with her.'

'Your aunt saw all that?'

'Yes.'

'What did the boy do while his nanny was being strangled?'

'Is that important?'

'It could be the key that unlocks the whole case.'

'I'm not sure, I don't think she mentioned what he did. Anyway, that's not the best bit – you'll never guess what happened next.'

'What happened next?'

'Are you taking me to the Lyons tea shop?'

'I don't usually finish until 5.30.'

She looked at the clock above the door. It was 5.25. She stood up and dragged her chair over, climbed up and pulled open the hinged glass front of the clock and moved the big hand forward. Then she came back and sat on my desk. 'The best thing is this. When she came home from the police station that evening an ambulance turned up and took her away.'

'Which hospital did they take her to?'

'The ambulance was unmarked. This was a week ago. Then yesterday I received a letter from Saint Christina's Home for Lunatics, Mental Defectives and the Feeble-Minded. They had taken her there.'

'Did they tell you why?'

'No. I went to see her yesterday. They told me she was too unwell for a visit, but I could go tomorrow.' She reached into her bag and took out a tin of corned beef. 'I'll take her this. By

my reckoning this is definitely covered by the terms of carriage and conveyance, which means you are duty bound to help her. Can we go to the Lyons tea shop?’

‘Yes.’

Chapter 2

THERE WAS A sharp frost beginning to form as we left the office. It sparkled like powdered glass in the fog, shimmering around the streetlamps and muffling sound. As we walked across the station forecourt to the tram stop we passed a seal grey Morris 1000 parked in the place reserved for taxis. A young man sat inside wearing a trilby and a trench coat and resting a newspaper on the steering wheel. As we passed he tossed the newspaper aside and reached for the ignition key. Something about the manner in which he put away the newspaper made me think he had only been pretending to read. The tram clanged to a halt and Jenny jumped on the stairs at the back and climbed, running her hand along the curving white handrail. It wasn't really necessary to sit on the top deck, we were only going three stops, but I didn't mind. We jumped off outside the Astoria.

The Lyons tea shop was empty. Three waitresses stood and watched us walk in with an air that suggested they would have preferred the place to remain empty. We took a seat next to the window. I ordered an egg each, three slices of bread and butter and a pot of tea. Jenny asked for two glasses of dog soup, which turned out to be tap water. The waitress wrote down the order with a slight nod and then walked away. Jenny looked at me with suppressed excitement. She leaned forward and whispered. 'It's no good pretending any more, I saw it.'

‘Saw what?’

‘Your gun. On the tram, I saw it outlined in your pocket.’ She nodded towards my jacket. I slipped my hand inside and pulled out a metal container that looked like a fat cigarette holder. It might conceivably look like the outline of a gun to someone who had never seen one. I handed it to her. ‘Open it.’

She prised the hinged lid open and looked inside. It had a red velveteen lining in which rested a rectangle of something that looked like wood, but wasn’t.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s called Formica. It’s a modern luxury furnishing. It’s resistant to heat, abrasion and moisture and it’s printed with woodlike patterns using a rotogravure printing process.’

‘Looks just like wood.’

‘Yes.’

‘But it feels . . . all different, like . . . I don’t know . . . satin.’

‘The texture is very similar to satin. They use it in the sleeping cars of the Hiawatha trains on the Chicago, Milwaukee and St Paul Railroad. And on the *Queen Mary*. Although only in first class.’

‘What are you going to do with it?’

The tea arrived and Jenny poured while I paused to consider the answer. How much should I tell her? Normally I tended to keep my cards close to my chest, but there was something about her. She was very pretty, of course, but there was something else. Gaiety with a bit of mischief, in a nice way. She was impish.

Her gaze met mine. ‘Go on!’

‘You remember that picture in my office, of the man being chased by the goose? I said it was no one special, but that wasn’t

true. It was Oskar Heinroth. He was the man who invented the Gosling process. Or, at least, the theory behind it.'

She was about to lift the lid of the tea pot and give the leaves another stir. She stopped and her eyes sparkled.

'I suppose the theory would be rather boring for you,' I said.

'Not on your nelly! But . . . I thought the Gosling process was supposed to be top secret.'

'I'm not sure if it matters any more. The Goslings will be gone soon, I expect, once the railways are run by the common man.'

'Are you sure?'

'You'll notice they don't polish the engines any more. They are all black. In the old days we had eight men to every engine cleaning and polishing through the night. All the bright colours, shining brighter than the buttons on a sergeant major's tunic.'

'It's sad that they don't polish the engines, but this is what we fought the war for, isn't it?'

'Yes, I suppose it is.'

'All those people who died. They didn't lay down their lives so we could go back to being servants of the toffs, did they?'

'No, they didn't. And you mustn't think I dislike the common man. I happen to be one myself. I was raised in the Railway Servants' Orphanage. You probably pass it on your way to work. St Christopher's.'

'Yes, I know it.'

'Oskar Heinroth discovered something called "imprinting" which means when a greylag gosling emerges from its shell it will regard the first thing it sees as its mother, even if it's an umbrella stand.'

'But that's silly! How can a little goose think an umbrella stand is its mum? They don't look remotely similar.'

‘That’s the point. How does the goose know what his mother is supposed to look like when he comes out of the shell? He’s never seen her before. He just assumes the umbrella stand is his mum.’

Jenny giggled. ‘And a railway train was your mum?’

‘Yes.’

‘How exciting! Which one?’

‘2904 *Lady Godiva*. She’s a 4-6-0 Saint class locomotive.’

‘I was born in Aunt Agatha’s front room. I expect my real mother is a postcard of Skegness. Or a half-knitted bed sock.’ She looked glum at that thought and then immediately brightened as another occurred: ‘Do you . . . ever see her?’

‘No, I’m afraid she was withdrawn in 1933.’

A man walked in and strode past us to take a table near the other door opening on to Tanner’s Row. It was the chap who had been reading the newspaper in the car outside the station. I could see now that he was quite a young man, probably not quite turning twenty. His face was thin and long and the skin smooth and boyish, marked with bright red pimples and razor nicks. The coat was well worn without being shabby and it was slightly too big, which suggested it had been handed down. His trousers were a touch too short, the bottom of the turn-up not quite resting correctly on the black leather brogue. There was a look of mild hostility in his face: it was the look of a boy wishing to pass for a man, but self-conscious about it. I was pretty sure he had been following us.

‘So what does this have to do with your thingummy piece?’

‘My Formica?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oskar Heinroth left some money, £5,000, as a prize for the Goslings. I want to win it.’

‘What’s the prize for?’

‘For solving the greatest mystery in all the annals of railway lore. It happened in 1915—’

‘Oh, Jack!’

‘What?’

‘It was a special excursion train containing twenty-three nuns travelling from Swindon to Bristol Temple Meads. The nuns disappeared. Vanished into thin air. The train arrived at Bristol without them. They searched everywhere, all over the country, but not a trace of them was found. They’ve never been seen since.’

‘Oh . . . why, yes. The newspapers called it—’

‘The “Hail Mary” Celeste.’

‘You seem to know quite a bit about it.’

‘Of course I do. Everyone does.’

‘I thought it was just we Goslings.’

Jenny rolled her eyes as if I were being especially stupid. ‘There isn’t a person in the whole country who hasn’t heard of the “Hail Mary” Celeste.’

‘All the other Goslings tried, you see. They went off in search, but . . . they never came back.’

‘How many Goslings are there?’

‘There were twelve in all, born at the orphanage between 1902 and 1914. I’m the only one left.’

‘Are they all dead?’

‘Some are definitely dead, some are insane, some are missing and one . . . one . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Cheadle Heath is still around, I occasionally see him. But he’s not a Gosling now. He had to . . . he left.’

‘I see.’

‘He blotted our copybooks, you see.’

‘Oh no!’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he do?’

‘Actually, I would prefer not to talk about Cheadle.’

‘Did none of them find a trail?’

‘Some people think Cadbury Holt did. He’s officially listed as “missing, presumed eaten by a lion”. He went to Africa. He never came back, although Cheadle got a postcard from him. Cadbury was the editor of the missing 1931 Gosling annual, you see. Some people say he wrote about his adventures in that.’

‘So is that why no one has seen it?’

‘I expect so.’

‘Did they print it?’

‘As far as I know.’

‘In that case, you should talk to the printers. Do you know who printed them?’

‘A place called Master Humphrey’s Clock. They don’t have any copies. The chap promised to ring me if he ever gets one.’

‘No, but they might have the thingybob plates. They have to keep them in case they want to print some more.’

‘Thingybob plates?’

‘It doesn’t matter what the name is. My auntie wrote a book about ointment making so I’ve seen how they do it. The letters are all back to front, but you could read them with a mirror.’

Our eggs arrived and we ate in silence broken only by the click-clack of cutlery and, from outside, the hum of passing traffic. The waitress took the boy a pot of tea, but he made no attempt to drink it. Instead he took the newspaper out of his

pocket and held it in a way that suggested he was observing us from behind it. He ordered no food and I suspected he must have been on expenses, but not very big ones.

‘So what will you do with the money if you win the Heinroth Prize?’

‘I will use it to find my mother.’

Jenny looked up from her boiled egg and studied my face. ‘You mean, your real . . . I mean, your flesh and blood mother.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have any idea where she is?’

‘None at all. She delivered me, and then left on the number 27 bus never to be seen again.’

‘How do you know what bus she caught?’

‘Because I see her in my dreams.’

‘What does she look like?’

‘Her face is concealed by a headscarf, but you can tell she is young, perhaps no more than eighteen, and big with child. She’s scared, too. Or at least I sense she is. She always steps off the bus and stares up at the portico of the orphanage as if she has no business being there and she knows it.’ I paused and thought for a while. Then I said, ‘When I find her I will use the money to buy her a fitted kitchen. Do you know what they are?’

‘Yes, I’ve seen one in a magazine. I thought it was the cat’s kimono.’

‘I saw one at the Daily Mail Ideal Home exhibition.’

‘I’ve never been to London.’

‘Oh you should! It’s very gay. That’s where I got the Formica. I want to make the kitchen out of Formica.’

‘That sounds lovely. I wish I had a man who would do that for me.’

I called for the bill.

‘You know what I would do if I won £5,000?’ Jenny said.

I shook my head.

‘I would buy a Biro!’

It was my turn to look impressed.

‘I saw one in Barker & Stroud’s,’ she said. ‘It cost fifty shillings!’

‘By Jove! That sounds like rather a flash sort of pen. I should very much like to have a Biro myself.’

Jenny reached her hand across and rested it on mine. ‘You can share mine.’

I walked her back to the tram stop. She wouldn’t let me take her further and only allowed me that far after extracting a promise that I would go with her to visit her aunt Agatha the following evening. We arranged to meet at six outside the National Milk Bar. The parting was slightly awkward. We stood facing each other, saying how nice it had been. The thought crossed my mind that I should kiss her but that would have been extremely bold. I had never done such a thing with a client before. All the same, it felt that the hour we had just passed together had been too enjoyable to be strictly business. I was surprised to discover how quickly the time had flown. We shook hands and when the tram arrived Jenny said, ‘Abyssinia.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘ABYSSINIA!’

‘What about it? They’ve got a narrow gauge line from Addis Ababa to French Somaliland. Three foot three-eighth inches. I went on it once. I’ve still got the ticket.’

I stopped speaking and observed the look on her face. She

giggled and shook her head gently. Then the tram stopped with a shrill *ding*. Jenny jumped forward and kissed me on the cheek. Before I could react she had jumped aboard the tram which was already moving off with a *ding, ding, ding*. As it turned the corner she waved and shouted again, ‘Abyssinia.’

‘Abyssinia,’ I said.

I wandered back through the deserted streets to the railway station. Lamps still glimmered on the platforms and along the track but all else in the building was in darkness. The clock of St Bede’s chimed seven. I took out my key and entered the side entrance, not bothering to put on the lights, preferring to fumble my way in the dark to the wire cage lift. The hum as I ascended was soothing to my nerves. At the top, as was my habit, I paused on leaving the lift and stared through the window at the street outside. Across the way was the five-storey department store, Barker & Stroud’s. The building style was ornate, the sort they called neo-gothic. For many years the striking feature had not been the unnecessary crenulations and spires but a hand-painted advertisement for Lindt, the Swiss chocolatier. It was on the end wall and gave a fine prospect to passengers arriving from the north on platform 7. The painting was still there but had faded so much over the years that you would not be aware of it if you did not know where to look. I saw it every day: the ghost of a Swiss maid in an alpine meadow, holding a pail of milk. Moreover, I knew the girl who had posed for the painting: it was Magdalena from the orphanage.

I entered my office and picked up the post that had been left just inside the door. The message boy had been late today; I did hope everything was all right. Perhaps they would be getting rid of him, too, now the common man was going to take charge of

the railways. I took the small pile to the desk where I could read it under the lamp. The room was cold and I did not remove my coat. There was a note about my expenses, an inquiry concerning a stolen postal order and a note from Mr Lambert asking if I had made any progress with the mysterious death of Driver Groates. My eyes flicked to the folder lying in my in-tray. It had been there a while now, and so far I had been unable to penetrate the mystery. I had no particular desire to re-open it tonight. I suspected Mr Lambert merely enquired for form's sake so if anyone should look into the matter he could say that he had been following the case closely. There was nothing of great urgency. I cycled home to my lodgings on Devil's Curtsy, and said as I cycled, to no one in particular, 'Abyssinia!'

THE BOY'S OWN RAILWAY GOSLING ANNUAL

Vol.VII

1931

Price: 1/-

Replies to our readers' letters

C. P. RUPERT, HEREFORD—The reaction of the Thomas Cook clerk which you describe is called Exasperation. Rest assured, he did not refuse to sell you the ticket because you are a Jew, but simply because no such ticket exists. The railway line you claim to have found on your atlas linking Penzance with New York is almost certainly a submarine telegraphic cable.

J. ELDERFLOWER, EDGBASTON—The artery to which you refer is the carotid and has nothing to do with carrots.

DEIRDRE R., STENHOUSEMUIR—Yes, conceivably, if it were a very large boa constrictor and a very small hippo.

THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF RAILWAY GOSLING CADBURY HOLT – ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING NUNS!

An Audience with the Consul

‘What I don’t understand, Mr Holt,’ said the consul, ‘is why you don’t just buy a boy from the market like anybody else.’

‘It really is far less trouble for us,’ added the consul’s assistant, as he waved vaguely into the air with his pipe. ‘And you can obtain any predilection your heart desires . . .’

‘Clean, too,’ said the consul. ‘Fresh as you like.’

‘So long as you are willing to pay,’ added the pipe smoker. ‘Of course you get what you pay for. It’s no different to the markets back in England.’

I turned my gaze upon the pipe smoker, and fought hard to control the fury erupting within my breast. ‘I advise you, sir, to withdraw these infamous insinuations.’

‘My dear chap,’ he said.

‘No, I am not your dear chap. Withdraw your calumny or you will leave me no choice but to challenge you to a duel. These are not words I use lightly.’

‘I withdraw it on his behalf,’ said the consul with an air of weary resignation. ‘I can’t afford to lose another assistant.’

‘I withdraw the remark,’ said the pipe smoker. ‘All the same, I consider your plan as evidence that you are in need of the services of a good brain doctor. Even if you are a Railway Gosling, which I rather doubt.’

‘Yes,’ said the consul. ‘What sort of name is Cadbury Holt? Sounds a rum sort of name to me. More like the name of a cake. Well, you’ll need more than sugar and spice in your guts if you are serious about this plan of heading off into the desert in search of nuns. Especially with this . . . this . . .’ He indicated the prisoner who stood before his desk and who would act as my guide. The wretch really was the sorriest, most louse-infested rogue imaginable. He wore a grin of permanent insolence and in his eye was a leer that would shame a pickpocket at a funeral. ‘We will keep his brother in jail and if you do not return within a month, or send word that you are safe, we will shoot him.’

‘Try not to forget to send us word.’

‘Frankly,’ said the consul, taking the top off his fountain pen,

‘I resent the fact that I will be landed with paperwork for your funeral.’

‘Yes,’ said the pipe smoker. ‘Personally I wouldn’t entrust him to look after a rhubarb patch, let alone a Christian soul.’