

## 7 Mystery

MYSTERY

"Mr. Vickery would go up-country that same evening to take over certain naval ammunition left after the war in Bloemfontein Fort. No details was ordered to accompany Master Vickery. He was told off first person singular – as a unit – by himself."

The marine whistled penetratingly. "That's what I thought," said Pycroft. "I went ashore with him an' 'e asked me to walk through the station. He was clickin' audibly, but otherwise seemed happy-ish."

"You might like to know," he says, "that Phyllis's Circus will be performin' at Worcester tomorrow night. So I shall see 'er yet once again. You've been very patient with me," he says.

"Look here, Vickery," I said, "this thing's come to be just as much as I can stand. Consume your own smoke. I don't want to know any more."

"You!" he said. "What have you got to complain of? – you've only had to watch. I'm it," he says, "but that's neither here nor there," he says. "I've one thing to say before shakin' 'ands. Remember," 'e says – we were just by the admiral's garden-gate then – 'remember that I am not a murderer, because my lawful wife died in childbed six weeks after I came out. That much at least I am clear of,' 'e says.

"Then what have you done that signifies?" I said. "What's the rest of it?"

"The rest," 'e says, 'is silence,' an' he shook 'ands and went clickin' into Simonstown station."

"Did he stop to see Mrs Bathurst at Worcester?" I asked.

"It's not known. He reported at Bloemfontein, saw the ammunition into the trucks, and then 'e disappeared. Went out – deserted, if you care to put it so – within eighteen months of his pension, an' if what 'e said about 'is wife was true he was a free man as 'e then stood. How do you read it off?"

RUDYARD KIPPLING "Mrs Bathurst" (1904)

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A FEW PAGES EARLIER, discussing a "cliffhanging" episode in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, I revealed that the heroine eventually rescued the hero, but gave only a clue as to how she contrived to do so. For readers unfamiliar with the novel I thus converted an effect of suspense ("what will happen?") to one of enigma or mystery ("how did she do it?"). These two questions are the mainsprings of narrative interest and as old as storytelling itself.

One of the staple ingredients of traditional romance, for example, was mystery concerning the origins and parentage of characters, invariably resolved to the advantage of the hero and/or heroine, a plot motif that persists deep into nineteenth-century fiction and is still common in popular fiction today (in literary fiction it tends to be used parodically, as in Anthony Burgess's *M/E*, or my own *Small World*). Victorian novelists like Dickens and Wilkie Collins exploited mystery in connection with crimes and misdemeanours, leading eventually to the evolution of a separate subgenre, the classic detective story of Conan Doyle and his successors.

A solved mystery is ultimately reassuring to readers, asserting the triumph of reason over instinct, of order over anarchy, whether in the tales of Sherlock Holmes or in the case histories of Sigmund Freud which bear such a striking and suspicious resemblance to them. That is why mystery is an invariable ingredient of popular narrative, whatever its form – prose fiction or movies or television soaps. Modern literary novelists, in contrast, wary of neat solutions and happy endings, have tended to invest their mysteries with an aura of ambiguity and to leave them unresolved. We never discover for certain what Maisie knew about her adult relations' sexual behaviour, whether Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* was a tragic hero or a human devil, or which of the alternative endings of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is the "true" one.

Kipling's story "Mrs Bathurst" is a famous example of such a text, and particularly interesting in coming from a writer who commanded a huge popular audience, most of whom must have been baffled and exasperated by its elaborate and undecidable mystifications. By the same token it shows that he was a much

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more self-conscious, artful and experimental writer than he is often given credit for.

The story is set in South Africa shortly after the end of the Boer War, and concerns the mysterious disappearance of a British sailor called Vickery, known as Click on account of his ill-fitting false teeth. The few known facts of the case emerge gradually in the course of a conversation between four men who meet by chance on a railway siding beside a Cape beach. They are: Vickery's shipmate Pycroft, a Sergeant of Marines called Pritchard, a Railway Inspector called Hooper and an anonymous "Y" narrator (by implication, Kipling himself) who frames the story by describing the circumstances of their meeting, and reports their conversation. Pycroft describes how, in the days immediately preceding his disappearance, Vickery insisted on taking him with obsessive frequency to see a cinematic newsreel, part of a travelling entertainment for the troops called Phyllis's Circus, because it contained a fleeting glimpse of a woman alighting from a train at Paddington station. She was a widow called Mrs Bathurst, also known to Pycroft and Pritchard as the friendly landlady of a pub in New Zealand, with whom Vickery evidently had a guilty relationship (though her own character, as Pritchard testifies, was spotless). Pycroft's (which is to say Kipling's) remarkable account of this bit of film — the first he has ever seen — is one of the earliest literary descriptions of cinema, and encapsulates the elusiveness of the story's core:

"Then the doors opened and the passengers came out and the porters got the luggage — just like life. Only — only when anyone came down too far towards us that was watchin', they walked right out o' the picture, so to speak . . . Quite slowly, from be'ind two porters — carryin' a little reticule an' lookin' from side to side — comes our Mrs Bathurst. There was no mistakin' the walk in a hundred thousand. She come forward — right forward — she looked out straight at us with the blindish look which Prich alluded to. She walked on and on till she melted out of the picture — like — like a shadow jumping over a candle . . ."

Vickery, convinced that Mrs Bathurst is "looking for him",

becomes so disturbed by this repeated spectacle that his commanding officer is alarmed, and sends him off on a solitary mission on land, from which he never returns. In the passage quoted, Pycroft describes his last sight of Vickery, as he escorted him ashore, and formulates the enigma of his disappearance.

The effect of mystery is impossible to illustrate with a single short quotation, because it is maintained by a steady stream of hints, clues and puzzling data. And in the case of "Mrs Bathurst" there is additional mystification about what the central mystery is. The frame story of the meeting of the four men, and their badinage, arguments and lengthy anecdotal reminiscences, seem to occupy more textual space than the story of Vickery. The passage quoted, where the enigma of his disappearance is most explicitly formulated, and which would have come near the beginning of a Sherlock Holmes story, in fact comes very near the end of this one.

As Vickery mentions murder only to declare his innocence of it, so Kipling invokes the detective story only to distance himself from it. "Inspector" Hooper (the title could be mistaken for a policeman's) has in his waistcoat pocket a set of false teeth, found on one of two corpses that have been discovered burned to death in a teak-forest fire up-country. This seems to be forensic evidence of how Vickery met his end. "Permanent things false teeth are. You read about 'em in all the murder trials," says Hooper; but at the end of the story the narrator reports that he "brought his hand away from his waistcoat pocket — empty." Though attributed to Hooper's sense of decorum, the empty hand also symbolizes the frustration of the reader's desire for a solution to the mystery. Even if we accept the identification of Vickery, and the account of his end, we do not know what deed drove him to this extremity, or the identity of the second corpse found beside him (numerous scholars have debated these questions, and offered ingenious, sometimes bizarre, and always inconclusive answers). Vickery, like Mrs Bathurst in the newsreel, has melted out of the picture, jumped out of the story's frame, and the ultimate truth about him is irrecoverable.

Why does Kipling tease his readers in this way? The reason is, I



believe, that "Mrs Bathurst" is not essentially a mystery story at all, in the usual sense of that term, but a tragedy. The quotation from *Hamlet* that is Vickery's last recorded speech ("The rest is silence"), the echo of Marlowe's Faustus ("Why this is hell, nor am I out of it") in his earlier statement, "You've only had to watch. I'm *it*," are among several allusions to high tragedy in the story. Here, as elsewhere, Kipling shows that ordinary humble people, who drop their aitches and have ill-fitting dentures, are nevertheless capable of intense emotions, violent passions and crippling guilt; and that the greatest mystery of all is the human heart.

## 8 Names

... and a girl you have not yet been introduced to, who now comes forward from the shadows of the side aisle, where she has been lurking, to join the others at the altar rail. Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no Violet improbable a name as that is for Catholic girls of Irish extraction, customarily named after saints and figures of Celtic legend, for I like the connotations of Violet - shrinking, penitential, melancholy - a diminutive, dark-haired girl, a pale, pretty face ravaged by eczema, fingernails bitten down to the quick and stained by nicotine, a smartly cut needlecord coat sadly creased and soiled; a girl, you might guess from all this evidence, with problems, guilts, hangups.

DAVID LODGE *How Far Can You Go?* (1988)

And there, for the time being, let us leave Vic Wilcox, while we travel back an hour or two in time, a few miles in space, to meet a very different character. A character who, rather awkwardly for me, doesn't herself believe in the concept of character. That is to say (a favourite phrase of her own), Robyn Penrose, Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge, holds that "character" is a bourgeois myth, an illusion created to reinforce the ideology of capitalism.

DAVID LODGE *Nice Work* (1988)

"In that case," he said, "I'm happy to oblige you. My name is Quinn."

"Ah," said Stillman reflectively, nodding his head. "Quinn."

"Yes, Quinn, Q-U-I-N-N."

"I see. Yes, yes, I see. Quinn. Hmmm. Yes. Very interesting. Quinn. A most resonant word. Rhymes with twin, does it not?"