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Opening extract from

First Class Murder: A Murder Most Unladylike Mystery

Written by

Robin Stevens

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From the way my father is carrying on, anyone would think that the murder which has just taken place was our fault – or rather, that it was Daisy's.

Of course, this is not true in the least. First, holidaying on a train was *his* idea – and inviting Daisy too. And as for Daisy and me being detectives – why, it is just who we are. This murder would always have happened, whether Daisy and I had been here to detect it or not, so how can we be blamed for investigating it? If we did not, what sort of Detective Society would we be?

Naturally, murder is always rather dreadful, but all the same, after our last murder case (at Daisy's house, Fallingford, in the Easter holidays), when every suspect was someone we knew, this seems rather separate to us, and that is a relief. With one exception, everyone who might possibly have been involved in this crime was a perfect stranger to Daisy and me two days ago. So

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although we are sorry that one of them is dead (at least I am, and I hope Daisy is too), more importantly we are detectives on the case, with a puzzle to solve and a murderer to bring to justice. And we will succeed, whatever my father tries to do to stop us.

You see, although this murder does not seem as though it will be as upsetting for us as the cases of poor Miss Bell or awful Mr Curtis, it may well be the most difficult to solve. Infuriating obstacles have been put in our way by grown-ups who want to ensure that the Detective Society is not able to detect at all. This is supposed to be for our own good – like eating vegetables and going for walks in January – but that, of course, is nonsense. Daisy says, Daisy-ishly, that they are simply jealous of our superior intellect. I know they are simply trying to keep us safe, but I wish they wouldn't. I am older than I was in April – and *much* older than I was last November – and I can decide for myself whether or not I want to be in danger. I am quite all right with being afraid for a while, if it means that we catch a murderer.

It is funny to think, though, that only a few days ago I was determined *not* to be a detective this holiday at all.

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I do feel rather guilty about breaking my promise to my father. You see, when he found out about the murder at Easter, he telephoned to tell me that he would be coming to England in the summer hols, to make sure I didn't get into any more trouble. I didn't really believe he would, but I was wrong. He really did come all the way from Hong Kong, by plane and train and boat. I ought to have known that when my father says he is going to do something, he does it.

On the last day of the summer term at Deepdean, where Daisy and I go to school, we were lazing on the lawn behind House with Kitty, Beanie and Lavinia, our dorm mates and fellow third-formers, cut grass scratching the backs of our knees. I had my eyes closed as I listened to Kitty and Daisy talk, the sun making the parting of my hair feel warm.

'And can you believe Miss Barnard chose *Elizabeth*

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as Head Girl?' asked Kitty. Miss Barnard is our new headmistress. She is surprisingly young for such an important grown-up, and most people are amazed when they first see her, but if you spend any time around her you can quite understand. Calm spreads from her like a cool wave – it only takes five minutes for her to make any problem vanish. She is my favourite of all the new mistresses; I think she is slightly magic.

'And the new prefects too!' said Daisy. 'They're all quite dreadful. Imagine, we shall have to be ruled by them for a whole year!'

'I know what you mean!' said Kitty. 'You never know quite what they'll do next—'

She was stopped there by the noise of a car purring up the drive and parking outside the big front door of House. We all sat up. Kitty's father was due at any moment, and we were expecting him, so my heart gave a little lurch when I saw a big black sedan with my father's secretary, Maxwell, at the wheel – and beside him, my father.

It was a very strange sight. You see, even though my father was the one who told me all about England when I was younger, so that it was all in my head before I ever arrived, and he is the reason why I go to Deepdean School, I had never been able to picture him in England before. He seems to belong to the Hong Kong side of my life. But seeing him there in his immaculate dark

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suit and tie, climbing out of the car to stand next to the front door of our House, was like holding up a stereoscope and watching the two halves of the picture come together with a snap.

My father is not tall, but he is determined-looking, with a square jaw and little round glasses that nearly hide his eyes – which he narrowed at me when he saw me sitting on the grass in such an unladylike way. I jumped to my feet, shamed.

'Goodness,' exclaimed Beanie, eyes wide. 'Is that your father? How funny – he looks exactly like you!'

'Beans,' said Kitty, rolling her eyes, 'who *else* would he look like?'

'I don't know!' said Beanie. 'I mean – does *everyone* in Hong Kong look like you, Hazel?'

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that when I first came to England, everyone had seemed identical to me – but then I saw Kitty looking at me assessingly. 'Awfully nice car,' she said.

I blushed. 'Is it?' I asked – although I knew perfectly well that it must be. My father always has the best of everything, wherever he goes, but explaining that to Kitty would be talking about money, and I have been in England long enough to know that talking about money is not nice, especially when you have quite a lot of it.

I curtseyed to my father, who was still watching us. Then the door opened and the maid ushered him

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inside. While he was speaking to Matron (I rather dreaded that, in case she mentioned how untidy I have become – in Hong Kong I am absolutely neat, but I have discovered that to fit in here I must be careless with my possessions, and leave at least one thing on the floor every day), our trunks were brought outside. There was mine, with all its ship-dents and fading customs stickers – and there, next to it, was Daisy's.

That made it real. Daisy truly *was* spending the holidays with us! It was as though a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

You see, what happened at Easter – all the business with Mr Curtis being murdered – meant that Daisy couldn't go home to Fallingford for the summer hols this year. Her house has been locked up, and her family are all up in London for the trial. Daisy wanted to go too, desperately, but we were both absolutely banned by Inspector Priestley. Secretly, I was glad. I did not want to go at all. I did not even want to think about it – not that we have been able to get away with ignoring what happened.

The story of Mr Curtis was all over Deepdean within a day of the beginning of the summer term. There were whispers up and down the corridors, and people turning and looking at us in Prayers. Daisy hated it. I could tell by the way she held her chin up and pressed her lips together. She does not like being

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pitied – it does not fit in with the myth of the glorious, perfect Daisy Wells. Of course, she was very good about it, thanking everyone prettily for their concern when they asked if she was all right, but I could feel her burning up with rage next to me. The Marys, her devoted followers, bought her the largest box of chocolate creams I have ever seen and left them on her bed. When Daisy found them (luckily, I was the only one with her), she hurled them quite across the dorm. Then she picked them up, and shared them with the rest of us later.

To try to distract everyone, Daisy became more herself than ever, throwing herself into everything and being a Jolly Good Sport to show how all right she was. But beneath it all, she was not all right, and neither was I.

I hate thinking about Fallingford, and what happened there, and the trial that is about to take place, but as the term drew to a close and the day of its beginning grew closer, the words began to go round and round in my head: *The Trial, The Trial, The Trial.* My mind began to wander in lessons. My hand made restless doodles in the margins of my exercise books and my heart always beat a little faster than normal. Daisy clowned about just the way she always does, exasperating the mistresses and delighting the shrimps and scoring five goals in the hockey match against St Simmonds, but inside she was just as restless and unhappy as I was, and

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that was why I was so happy that we were both being taken away by my father.

The week before, he had sent me a letter about it:

Dear Hazel,

I hope you are well, and studying diligently. As agreed, I will arrive to collect you and Miss Wells on the morning of Saturday 6 July. I would appreciate you both being ready for a prompt departure – we have a train to catch.

I know that this term has been difficult for you and your friend, and I hope that this change of scene will be good for you both. I have been in contact with Miss Wells's parents, and they agree. It does seem to me that Miss Wells has a way of getting you into undesirable situations, and that you have a way of going along with her. I want you to try to influence her this holiday – you must be on your best behaviour. I don't want any talk of crime. You have had far too much of that already. You will be discovering Europe, and enjoying yourselves – I want you to promise me that you will be a good, sensible girl, and show Daisy Wells how to be likewise.

Your loving
Father

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I was a little cross when he said that I follow Daisy. That is not true – or at least, not always. Nor was I sure that Daisy would enjoy being a good, sensible girl – but for my father's sake I decided that I would have to try. And he was right about us and crime, I thought. We had had far too much of that already. I didn't want to think about death and murder again.

I felt very virtuous as I decided that.

My father emerged, and beckoned us over. I rushed to meet him, and Daisy followed behind.

'Good morning, girls,' he said, smiling, hands behind his back. Because of his schooling (he went to Eton), my father speaks perfect English.

I could tell that Daisy was surprised by this, although she did not show it. She only bobbed a curtsey and said, 'Good morning, Mr Wong. Thank you for letting me come with Hazel.'

'I could hardly have left you with your matron all summer,' said my father, who has very firm ideas about justice. 'Anyway, every child ought to be shown Europe at least once in their life. It expands the mind.'

He was not mentioning the other reason – The Trial – and I was glad.

'Now, I have a chaperone for you,' he went on.

I froze. I remembered what had happened in the Easter hols, with the governess Daisy's parents had hired. Surely not again . . .

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'Not a governess,' said my father, as though he had seen inside my mind. 'Although I expect you to always be learning, I do not see why you cannot manage yourselves. However, I have obtained the services of a certain person you may recognize.'

He waved at the car impatiently, and out of the back popped Hetty's frizzy red head, a new straw boater perched on it. She was beaming as she curtseyed. Daisy, remembering where she was, only smiled back regally, but inside I think she was dancing with glee. My heart was leaping about too. If we were to be looked after by Hetty, that would not be bad at all. Hetty is the maid who works for Daisy's family at Fallingford, and she is a true brick – if she were not a grown-up, I am sure she would be an excellent Detective Society member.

'Now,' said my father, shooting a slightly dark look at Daisy, 'I want both of you to behave yourselves. Allowing you this freedom is a very great honour, and I expect you to earn it. Miss Lessing' – he meant Hetty – 'will be your maid, and I expect you to be good and polite to her. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Father,' I said.

'Now, into the car.' He smiled again. 'Trains will not wait, and we are catching the twelve fifty-five to Dover. Don't look like that, Hazel. The crossing will be quick.'

I blushed. My father really is good at knowing what I am thinking, and I had been dreading the ferry to

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France. Merely thinking about the big ship I travelled on from Hong Kong still gives me a washing feeling in my stomach.

'We'll be in France before you know it,' he added. 'And then the real excitement will begin!'

That was when Father told us exactly what our holiday would be. Daisy beamed, and even I had to smile. It was quite true. My father does not do anything by halves, and so a holiday around Europe could never mean less to him than the Orient Express.

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