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The SECRET of the TREASURE KEEPERS

A. M. HOWELL

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ELY
CAMBRIDGE
ROOK FARM
HOUSE FIELD
ROOK FIELD
MAGPIE FIELD
EEL MAN'S HUT
GULL FIELD
EEL FIELD
MARSH FIELD

Chapter 1

Telephone Call

Ruth leaned against the wall in the depths of the British Museum, as the telephone continued to ring. She shifted position, her scuffed brown shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor. The telephone in the nearby office demanded attention, but it was late Monday afternoon and most museum staff had already shrugged on woollen coats and scarfs and headed into the February gloom to spend time with their families over the school holidays. Ruth's eyes settled on the office where the ringing was coming from, and the small nameplate attached to the half-open door.

Mr S. Knight
Curator of British Collections

Except Mr Knight wasn't just in charge of British Collections, he was also the person Ruth's mum, Harriett Goodspeed, museum volunteer and aspiring archaeologist, was being interviewed by in the coins room along the hall in the hope of getting a paid job. Ruth chewed on her bottom lip and glanced at the office next door to Mr Knight's. The man who worked in there had left ten minutes ago and she had seen no one else since. He had flashed Ruth a quick smile, which was also laced with a dollop of sympathy. "I hope your mum gets the museum assistant job. I'm afraid Mr Knight's in a sore mood. He's still smarting from not having found anything of interest at the Sussex dig," he'd said, adjusting the angle of his black hat.

Ruth had wished the man a pleasant evening, though her shoulders had drooped a little at learning of Mr Knight's poor mood. While her mum was in awe of Mr Knight and his encyclopaedic knowledge of British archaeology, Ruth didn't warm to the near-permanent downward curl of his lip and his ability to look through her as if she was swathed in a mist of invisibility. But

despite her own thoughts on Mr Knight, this interview was very important and had preoccupied her mum for weeks. While the wireless hummed in the background and Ruth searched through their well-thumbed cookery books for recipes that would not use up all their precious post-war egg and sugar rations, her mum had diligently pored over her books and field notes late into the evenings to ensure she was fully prepared for today's interview.

Ruth shifted from one foot to the other as the telephone continued to ring. Its shrill tone swallowed up the corridor's calm silence and was terribly annoying. Whoever was on the other end of the line was persistent. Puffing out a breath and walking the few steps to Mr Knight's office, Ruth pushed the door fully open. The room was large, with tall rectangular windows reflecting the inky blackness outside. An anglepoise lamp on the desk threw a spot of light onto leather-bound books and cardboard folders filled with handwritten notes. Floor to ceiling shelves bore the weight of files, each with a small, typed label pasted on the spine. *Roman Hoards; Fourth Century*. *Viking Silver; Tenth Century*. The office smelled musty and old, in keeping with the ancient dates on the folders.

Balanced on the edge of Mr Knight's desk was the ringing telephone. Ruth's throat constricted as she saw it was vibrating so forcefully that it was likely to dive to the floor any second, quite possibly taking some of Mr Knight's books and folders with it. Rushing into the room, she placed both hands on the telephone, anchoring it to the desk. Making a quick decision she picked up the receiver. She straightened her neck and took a deep breath. "Um…hello. British Museum here. Mr Knight's office."

"Oh. Hello. Someone is there after all," replied a woman. She sounded crackly and very far away and Ruth pressed the receiver hard to her ear. "I was about to ring off, but it's raining here and I made a special trip to the telephone box," continued the woman.

Beneath the crackles of the poor line, Ruth could hear that the woman had a warm voice, the exact opposite of the shrill ring still echoing in her ears. "Yes, the weather is beastly, isn't it?" she replied, relaxing a little.

The woman coughed and there was a short pause on the other end of the line while she gathered her breath. "Yes. Beastly is a good word for it. Particularly here in the Cambridgeshire Fens," she croaked. "Right. Well.

I was calling to see if Mr Knight had read my letter."

Ruth chewed on her bottom lip, realizing that she hadn't thought this through. She had been so intent on stopping the telephone from ringing she hadn't considered that the person on the end of the line might want to ask her a question. "Your letter," repeated Ruth with a frown, casting her eyes around the chaotic room and the jumble of papers, files and books.

"I sent it two weeks ago. It's really quite urgent," said the woman. There was another pause. Ruth could hear the steady thrum of rain against the telephone box the woman was calling from. "I've been watching for the post every day but got no reply. I wonder if the letter is lost?"

Ruth detected a wheeze in the woman's voice. The sound of the rain intensified, and she felt a bolt of sympathy. She cast her eyes around the office again. There didn't seem to be a tray for correspondence, or anything resembling a filing system at all. Perhaps Mr Knight saw his office as having some sort of order, just as she did with the casually dropped clothes on her bedroom floor. But the room seemed to be in a proper state of chaos and she did not know where to begin searching for this woman's letter. "I'm afraid I don't

know anything about a letter. Perhaps you could call back tomorrow and speak to Mr Knight then?" Ruth asked hopefully.

"I went to the post office in Ely and paid the correct postage," said the woman, ignoring Ruth's suggestion. "Are you Mr Knight's secretary? Perhaps you could take a message?"

Ruth glanced to the corridor, straining to hear the squeak of shoes, feeling more than a little worried now about being caught in Mr Knight's office. Thankfully it was still quiet. "Yes, I can take a message," she said, quickly reaching for a pencil and a scrap of discarded paper.

"If you can tell Mr Knight that some of the treasure – well, what I hope is treasure – is still in the field. The ground is becoming waterlogged, and snow is forecast this week," said the woman. "I just don't know what to do for the best. Do I take it out, or leave it where it is? I'm worried it will get damaged."

Ruth drew in a long breath and watched the tiny dust motes dance under the gleam of Mr Knight's desk lamp. "Treasure," she repeated, carefully printing the word on the scrap of paper.

"Can you tell Mr Knight that I'm keen to establish if

the items are worth something. I remembered his name from the wireless – when he was interviewed about some Roman silver found a few years back. A similar treasure trove might well save my farm." The woman had a sudden coughing fit.

Ruth winced and held the receiver away from her ear until the woman had gathered her breath again.

"Sorry, I just can't seem to shake off this darned cold. You *will* pass the message to Mr Knight, won't you?" insisted the woman, whose voice was tight with the effort of withholding further coughs.

"Yes. Of course," said Ruth, staring at her hastily scribbled notes.

"Mr Knight can reach me at Rook Farm. We're just south of Ely. I'm afraid I don't have a telephone, so he'll need to write or send a telegram."

"Don't worry, I will pass the message on. Oh. I didn't take down your name…"

"Mrs Sterne. My name is Mrs Mary Sterne," the woman wheezed. "Goodbye then."

"Goodbye, Mrs Sterne," replied Ruth. There was a click as Mrs Sterne ended the call. Ruth returned Mr Knight's telephone receiver and looked again at the piece of paper in her hand.