

MRS MORTLOCK'S
MYSTERIOUS
MURDER

(a gripping tale of crime in an English village)

1,486 words

Almost everyone who knew him called Detective Acton a crusty old curmudgeon. He was certainly crusty, having grown up in less than ideal social circumstances. Everyone in the village knew Detective Acton's father had run away years ago, leaving his mother to work hours upon hours in the Bakery for a pittance. Acton had been socially shunned as a child for his father's misdeeds, although this did not worry him at all. A solitary childhood ensued, as he watched the passing parade at school, in the streets, and particularly outside the Bakery. Acton's beady eyes never missed a trick. He knew the habits and personalities of all the locals. After all, he did not have any friends, and had no illusions about the realities of life. This is why he was called a curmudgeon. If no one wanted to be nice to him, he definitely did not have to be nice back to them.

These childhood skills were the beginnings of his career in the police force. "Go on, Sonny Jim", his mother always said to him. "You'd better be a Mr Plod when you grow up. You always knows everything what's going on."

Acton's background as just described, led him to the situation in which he now found himself. After forty years of glorious service in Her Majesty's Constabulary, and, with only one day to retirement, Detective Acton had been suddenly called upon to solve a mysterious murder in his local village.

He may well have wanted to simply finish his paperwork at Scotland Yard and go home. However, he now found himself opening the door to the Manor House of the village, where he slumped almost defeatedly into a soft cushioned arm chair in an elaborately decorated drawing room.

The dead woman in the drawing room was young Mrs Mortlock, who came from a well to do family. She was a breeder of rare, prize winning poultry. Her husband was a successful importer of Italian antiques.

Acton estimated that Mrs Mortlock had been dead since morning. She still looked rather fresh, he thought. That is, fresh for a dead body. Despite the fact that her cheeks were pinkish with rouge, she was beginning to look decidedly grey around the gills.

The neighbours had reported her death shortly after noon, when they had heard the Mortlock twins crying from the yard. "Mummy is still asleep", wailed the twins' plaintive missive for help. "Mummy needs a band-aid for the back of her head".

Mrs Mortlock certainly needed more than a band-aid. A pool of blood showed that she had been struck heavily. The murder weapon, a bloodied crowbar, had been found by the back door step. Somehow, Mrs Mortlock had managed to lift herself and gather certain objects about her before she succumbed to her injuries.

Detective Acton rubbed his forehead, peering quizzically at the murder scene before him. Mrs Mortlock lay with one hand clutching a Venetian blind. With her other hand she pointed to a map of Europe, copiously stained with her solidifying blood. Even more intriguing was that a full carton of smashed eggs lay beside her. In her mouth were stuffed two large brown boots.

Acton pondered this remarkable scene. He arose from the chair, circumambulating the corpse in slow, deliberate paces whilst he put his criminally adept mind to work. It was quite obvious that a murderer could not have staged such a scene. A murderer would have fled promptly, for fear the young twins would hear their mother's gruesome demise.

Acton's eye's turned to the table near the sunlit bay window, upon which sat two prepared cups of English Breakfast tea. Had Mrs Mortlock invited her murderer into the house on another pretext, Acton considered thoughtfully?

In social settings, Detective Acton always politely acknowledged the old adage that dead men tell no tales. In reality though, his professional experience told him otherwise. Dead men do tell tales. Mrs Mortlock was indeed telling a very large tale here. The gruesome murder scene displayed a message from the deceased. It was his job to unravel this message. "What does it all mean?" Acton mumbled aloud.

The main suspect was Mrs Mortlock's husband Egon, who was now aloft and on his way to Italy. The neighbours had seen his car depart very early that morning in a manner most hasty, they had said. Italy was in Europe. Detective Acton looked once more at the bloodied map of Europe and the eggs on the floor. Italy was shaped like a boot. The name Egon definitely sounded like the smashed 'eggs on' the floor. Was Egon the murderer?

Then there was Mrs Mortlock's London based Banker brother Vernon, now a discredited bankrupt. Vernon had disappeared mysteriously from the village the previous evening. Did the 'V' for Venetian blind indicate that Vernon was the murderer?

And, what about the gardener Luigi? Luigi was adamant he was at his home that morning. His wife Stella confirmed this fact, although Detective Acton was not that easily convinced, knowing full well that wives lie for their bread winner husbands. What would Stella know of Luigi's whereabouts anyway, he thought? Stella could hardly see through those thick glasses hanging off her nose. Luigi and Stella were natives of Italy. Were the brown boots in Mrs Mortlock's mouth the gardener's boots, and a sign that Luigi had murdered Mrs Mortlock?

Acton paced the floor with his hands clenched and his knuckles whitening. He muttered to himself again and again, "Venetian blind, eggs, boots, Europe". Acton let no one enter the room. Even the Forensic specialists from Scotland Yard were forbidden entry. Acton forced them all back with his insistent protests, "I must solve this crime and retire on time!" One hour passed, then two, and then three hours passed.

Suddenly, he threw up his arms. "I have it."

Acton ran outside and dismantled the hen house. Money dropped into his hands from a false bottom in the nesting box. He spoke to a startled chook squawking precariously nearby, "You are definitely not the goose who laid this golden egg!"

Detective Acton raced to the local bank to find that 50,000 pounds had been deposited and withdrawn from a particular account the day before the murder. Acton phoned Heathrow. "Just as I thought", he announced convincingly. "I'm right! Come on boys, we're off to the airport".

The sirens blared. Traffic lights were stopped. Nothing would stop Detective Acton from solving the crime and retiring. At the airport, and just in the nick of time, Acton tapped two of the suspects on the shoulder. "You are under arrest!"

Back at Scotland Yard, a woman sobbed while a man hung his head in shame. It was Luigi and Stella.

Detective Acton was steely eyed in his condemnation as he delivered his case to the accused. "You were the distraction Stella. You went into the house for a cuppa, whilst Luigi went for the money in the nesting box. Mrs Mortlock trusted you Luigi. You knew where she kept her money, because you built the hidey hole in the chook house for her! And, only yesterday, you gave her Banker brother Vernon all your life's savings for investment, only to find out he withdrew it the same day to cover his bankruptcy. You panicked and went after Mrs Mortlock's money under the chooks."

Detective Acton now turned to Stella. "Of all the suspects, only you, Stella, were born in Venice. The Venetian blind told me that you were involved. Your distraction of a cuppa in the Manor house didn't work. You didn't notice where Mrs Mortlock was looking. You're a blind Venetian! Just like the Venetian blind Mrs Mortlock pulled down and clutched in her last gasping moments. Mrs Mortlock was watching Luigi out of the corner of her eye from the bay window. She saw Luigi try to pull apart the nesting box. She knew he was after the money. Mrs Mortlock confronted you both and Luigi killed her!"

Detective Acton slammed his fist on the table. "Luigi panicked. He didn't wait to see whether Mrs Mortlock was dead. You both fled. But you forgot to put your boots on Luigi. You'd taken them off before you entered the house. Remember the golden rule Luigi? What did your mother teach you Luigi? Always take your boots off before you enter the house. We all know that cleanliness is next to Godliness."

Luigi howled in despair: "Mama Mia, I forgot my boots!"

Detective Acton turned to the astonished members of the Constabulary present in the interview room. "Luigi and Stella do deserve a long holiday. Throw them in the cells lads. There will be no Roman Holiday for them now."

Then, with a glint in his eyes and a smile on his face, Acton turned towards the interview room door with impending finality. "And now, if you don't mind." he stated, "I'm clocking off early and retiring. "