

The Pretty Little Box

Bibliomysteries

by Charles Todd, ...

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Somewhere in the Midlands of England, Winter 1915

She didn't know what had come over her.

She had never done anything like that before—had never even been tempted. But it was so beautiful. And the clerk was looking the other way, too busy ogling the pretty girl in a very unbecoming walking dress for late November who was just passing the shop window.

And so she simply covered it with her gloved hand, gently closed her fingers over the box, and then nonchalantly said, “Good day,” with a smile, and walked out of the door.

Nothing happened. No alarm was raised, no one shouted for her to stop.

She walked on casually, as if nothing had happened—as if she had nothing to hide. But her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was hard pressed not to breathe so rapidly that she passed out. The thought of a constable—an ambulance crew—anyone—discovering what was now resting in her pocket frightened her to death.

Almost to death, she amended quickly.

What she ought to do, right now, was turn around and march straight back to the bookshop and put the little box back where she’d found it. Before the clerk even noticed it was missing.

But that was even more terrifying to contemplate. He might *already* have noticed. He might have already sent someone for Constable Welkin.

She swallowed hard. She’d taken the little box because it was so extraordinary, and she’d never had anything quite like it. Ever. And she’d wanted it more than anything.

She walked on, looking for a way out.

Just ahead was the greengrocer’s door.

She hurried inside, off the High, out of sight, and realized that she was almost running. Slowing, she managed a smile and walked down to a display of late cabbages. She bought two, although she hated them.

The bookstore had just received a shipment on consignment—she knew that much from the newspapers. It was from a house that was for sale somewhere in East Anglia, and Otto’s Bookshop had been asked to catalog the library before it was put up for auction.

She’d never been interested in old books, and only went to the bookshop from time to time for the latest novels. But she *did* like pretty things, and when she’d casually picked up a small, beautifully decorated case, opened it, and leafed through the book inside with all that gold leaf and the tiny, exquisitely painted scenes on each page, she had been astonished and then covetous. She had no idea how much it might be worth—far more than she could afford, surely!—and she was afraid to ask. That was when the desire to have it overcame her scruples and her terror at something so—so audacious and unlike her.

Leaving the greengrocer’s, she stopped in at Lydia’s for a gypsy tart and a cup of tea. That settled her nerves a little, but she was still anxious, and wanted only to go home now, shut the door, and be safe. Again she contemplated returning the little book, but that was impossible without explaining how she’d come by it. Surely with all the books that had come in, no one would miss it? Not if they didn’t even know it had ever been there? The clerk had been unpacking a box, stacking books every which way before carrying them back to the inner room that served as

an office, to be examined. By the shop's rear door were a dozen more large boxes—twice that number, for all she could tell, in the shadows there.

She couldn't bear to think about it any longer, or her nerves would fail her completely. Surely if they knew what she'd done, Constable Welkin would be here by now? Surely she didn't have to wait any longer? She nearly choked on her tea as she drank down the rest of it, and forgetting cabbages in the sack at her feet, she paid for her tea and started for the shop door.

When Lydia called to her, she thought her heart would stop from sheer fright. Turning slowly, she stared at the woman by the counter.

"Your marketing, Madame?"

She followed the line of the pointing finger and saw the sack by her chair.

"Oh—oh, my goodness—yes. Whatever was I thinking?" She rushed back to her table and caught up the sack, then forced herself to smile again and walk steadily to the door. She could feel the disapproving gazes of the other customers and flushed with embarrassment.

The first thing she did after shutting and latching her door behind her was to hurry upstairs, take off her hat and gloves, then her coat, leave them on the bed and walk away from all of them as if they were somehow contaminated. Even the cabbages.

It wasn't until after her lonely dinner, taken in the small dining room, that she went upstairs again and reached for her coat. She felt a flush of guilty anticipation as she slipped her hand down the soft wool, her fingers stealing into the left hand pocket with almost sensuous pleasure.

It was empty.

She shoved her hand deep inside, then turned the lining inside out. But there was nothing except for a wadded handkerchief in the very bottom.

She stood there, so shocked she could hardly breathe.

What had become of the little book?

It couldn't have fallen out. That was impossible. And she'd kept her coat on in the greengrocer's and while drinking her tea. She couldn't possibly have *lost* it!

Had she *imagined* taking it, because she'd wanted it so badly? And actually believed it? She pushed that thought away as too frightening, and searched her coat again.

She searched the other pocket, just to be sure, but there was nothing in it but her house key.

Collapsing in a chair, she stared at the coat lying in a heap across the bed. And after several minutes, she began to cry.

She couldn't have said later whether it was grief at losing something so precious or relief...

He had managed to lift the contents of the old lady's pocket without her even noticing that he'd bumped into her. She'd been lost in a world of her own, he thought, and hardly aware of her surroundings. That's why the elderly were such easy marks, they walked down the High as if they were alone on the street.

It wasn't until he was well away that he took what he'd lifted out of his own pocket and looked at it. Then swore.

What the hell was *this*? A beautiful little box—and inside a beautiful little book? And where in God’s name could he find anyone to buy *that*? It must be worth a thousand quid, but more to the point, it was easily recognizable, and if the old lady called the police, everyone would know exactly what this thing looked like. It might as well have her *name* on it! Right there on the cover, for all to see. Worthless piece of—

He broke off. God damn it, there was *Ricky*, walking toward him. Praying he hadn’t been seen, he dodged into the ironmonger’s shop and frantically looked for a rear door. He owed Ricky, and it was overdue, what he owed. And this wasn’t the time to be seen.

But the rear door was locked. Didn’t the stupid clerks in this shop know that was a fire hazard? He wanted to kick it, but that would bring him attention he didn’t need right now, and he looked for a display he could hide behind, in case Ricky came in.

The bell over the front door tinkled as it opened and someone walked into the shop. Sweating badly, he waited. But there was a woman speaking to a clerk, asking about door latches. He waited until she had gone, then decided it was safe to leave too.

Just as he stepped out from behind the display, the clerk took a handful of old boxes over to the rear door and unlatched it to take them to the dust bin. He hurried after the clerk and stepped out into the rear alley. When the clerk turned to stare at him, he grinned sheepishly.

“That was my girl, just came in. And this isn’t the time to face her,” he said rapidly. “Not when she’s that mad at me.” And he trotted off, ignoring the clerk’s glare.

As if I’d shoplift, he said to himself as he came to the end of the alley. *What’s to steal in a bloody iron monger’s? I ask you.*

He’d just reached the end of the alley, when Ricky stepped out from behind a dust bin, and grinned at him. It wasn’t a nice grin, and he shivered.

“Where’s what you owe?” Ricky said pleasantly. “You’re behind, you know that?”

As if he could forget!

“I don’t have it yet. Market day was raining, and pickings were slim. I do have this, though. It ought to be worth more than what I owe.”

He took out the little box and handed it over to Ricky. One of his men had come up behind their leader, and his face wasn’t friendly.

Ricky put out a hand for the offering, and looked it over.

“You must be mad,” he said, still pleasant. Which his way of scaring a grown man into doing anything to get away. “I don’t want it, I can’t sell it, and there’s no value to me in having it.” He tossed it aside, then said to the man behind him, “Don’t kill him. He still owes me.”

And then Ricky was gone, and it was too late to run. But he tried, although it didn’t serve. He was left bleeding and battered behind Lydia’s tea shop. An hour later, he managed to crawl away. It wasn’t until much later that he gave a thought to the damned book in a box.

By then he was in hospital dying of a ruptured spleen. He cursed the book with his last breath.

Ricky was condemned to death at the next Assizes.

He wasn't pleasant to the hangman.

Tommy Hood had skipped school the day the beating took place. He hadn't done the reading he'd been assigned on Friday last, and he didn't feel like another lecture from Miss Henley. She was good at lectures. And he hated school anyway.

And there was Constable Welkin! Just coming out of the tobacconist's.

Swearing with words he'd heard his Pa use when the hammer hit his thumb, he dodged into the alley, and hid behind the dustbin.

It was while he was squatting there, sweating bullets, hoping to God Constable hadn't seen him, that he noticed the little box just at the edge of the dustbin.

It was a little larger than a packet of cigs, and really elegant. Intrigued, he was about to reach for it when he heard Constable's boots walking past the alley's mouth.

Sick to his stomach with sudden fear, he pressed himself back against the worn brick of the wall, making himself as small as he could. His Pa would have something to say if Constable brought him home!

But the boots passed on. He waited, in case it was a trick, then scabbled for the box, opening it and taking out the little book inside.

Gorblimey! It was his first reaction. The second was, who'd lost this? And was there a reward for finding it? But there was no name inside. All right, then, he'd have to look in the newspaper, to see if there was an advert.

Carefully putting the book and the box in his pocket, he crept out of the alley and went on his way.

He'd almost forgot the box was there until he showed up at school the next morning and Miss Henley, the ugly witch herself, caught him as he came through the door.

"And where were you yesterday?" she demanded. "And where's your reading report?"

He'd been watching his dad shoeing the mare last night. It had slipped his mind that he had to *read*.

"Speak up," she said harshly. "Or I'll have your father in here to answer for you."

That made his mind kick in, and he remembered the box. "Please, Miss Henley, I was on my way to school when I found this on the High. I was looking for the owner, but so far I've had no luck." He handed her his treasure.

Startled, she looked at it. "Found it?"

"Yes, please, I saw it at the edge of a dustbin by the ironmonger's, but they don't know anything about it. I looked for Constable Welkin, to show it to him, but I never found him. I looked in the newspaper, but no one appears to have lost it. So I brought it to school today to ask you what's best to do about it."

She opened the box, then the book. Suspicion replaced surprise. "This is a very expensive prayer book. Are you sure you didn't pinch it yourself?"

"Please, no, Miss Henley, what would I be doing with another book?"

There was the ring of truth in his voice, and she heard it.

"Well, then, I shall keep it until you find the owner. Now go sit down at your desk, or I'll mark you as absent again."

He scurried off, grateful to get by with no more than a threat.

Miss Henley stood there staring at the exquisite little book in her hands. She'd been teaching in this benighted school for seven years. Her pay didn't begin to cover the aggravation she suffered from the likes of Tommy Hood day in and day out. She hated her work and she saw no way out of it.

Today she tasted of joy for the first time. Something like this must be worth a fortune. She was tempted to take it to Otto's Bookshop to ask just how much it was worth, then shook her head. Too close to home...

She had planned to go to London over Christmas, a treat she'd saved and scrimped for all term. She would take the little book to someone there and see what she could get for it. That's to say, if the owner didn't come forward. But Tommy—being Tommy—could have come by this treasure anywhere, and if no one claimed it before Christmas, she would keep it and sell it herself.

Pleased with her plan, she tucked the box in her pocket, turned on her heel, smiled at the student she'd nearly collided with, and went to take attendance.

By Christmas no one had appeared to ask for the little book, and Miss Henley had no doubt that Tommy had forgot all about it. It had saved him a scolding by the Head, and worse from his father, and therefore had served its purpose. She had kept an eye on the Lost column in the newspaper, but there was no mention of the book there. Of course she hadn't turned it over to Constable Welkin, and the more time that had passed since the book had come into her possession, the harder it would be to explain why she hadn't spoken to him at once. And he was a Chapel man, he didn't have much to say to women.

On the day before Christmas Eve, she carefully packed the little box in her valise, then changed her mind and put it in her purse. Just in case something happened to the valise. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her best hope of escape after waiting so long for this journey and what it might bring. An hour later, she went to the station and boarded the train for London. Her conscience was reasonably clear, for her need transcended that of anyone who might have lost the little book—after all, if the previous owner could afford something of this quality, he wouldn't miss one small book. He'd lost it, hadn't he? Such carelessness didn't deserve to be rewarded!

As the train moved south, wheels clacking in her ears, for the first time she allowed herself a small dream. Depending on what the little box brought, she might escape the Midlands forever and find a better position nearer London. Surrey perhaps, or Kent. She could put in applications, now that she might be able to afford such a move. The dream was enticing.

She had brought sandwiches in a basket, to avoid costly meals on the way to London, and they had left her drowsy. Tucking her head against the wall by the window, she closed her eyes and drifted into sleep.

And so she never heard the grinding of the brakes until it was too late, and the train shuddered with such force as it collided with the farm cart on the line that she was thrown forward, striking her head on the carriage lantern. It was the last thing she knew.

The man who was sitting across from Miss Henley was hurt as well, his back twisted rather badly. As the carriages came to a jolting halt, he struggled

upright, pushed aside the body of the young woman who had been sitting across from him and had cannoned into him with the suddenness of the accident.

“Anyone badly hurt?” he asked the compartment at large.

Groans met him. But the woman was silent. He reached out to feel for a pulse. He couldn’t find a heartbeat. He put her gently back into her seat by the window and tried to close her eyes. They wouldn’t close at all, their blank stare so unnerving that he looked away. The older woman in the compartment was bleeding, and one of the men by the door were unconscious.

He started to give the dead woman last rites, then remembered that he no longer had the right to do that or anything else that might be considered priestly duties. As he turned away, he saw that her purse had spilled onto the floor, and he reached down to retrieve what he could. He knew he ought to be ministering to the living woman who was bleeding, but somehow he couldn’t bring himself to do that, any more than he could give last rites. Words of comfort stuck in his throat, and the purse was a distraction.

When he saw the little box, he knew at once what it was. A book of hours, a prayer book that in the Middle Ages wealthy men and bishops carried with them on journeys. He slipped it into his pocket. It was no longer of any use to her, and someone else would snag it if he didn’t. And it meant something to him.

A man was coming down the corridor outside the compartment, asking if anyone was hurt. When he reached them, he could see at once that the younger woman was dead. The side of her face was torn, but there was very little blood. Her staring eyes looked at nothing. The other woman whose arm and leg were bleeding appeared to be stable, and one of the dazed men by the corridor door as well. The other man was bleeding from his nose and mouth.

The man moved on to the next compartment.

The former priest in the corner sat with eyes closed, his face pale, his conscience bothering him more than a little. He had no right to that little box with its beautiful contents, and yet he felt in a way that God had meant it for him, when he needed his faith most.

He had lost his church and the woman he’d been so sure he loved. She’d gone back to her husband, abandoning him to the disgrace that had ensued, and he’d learned a hard lesson—too late. Yet, in spite of it all, he still believed the church was his calling. And this prayer book was surely a sign that he could still do *something* with his life that would fill the emptiness he’d felt for the past week. He’d told himself then that he was going to London to get as drunk as he possibly could. Now he realized he would do no such thing. He’d find a way to serve.

But you haven’t, have you? Not in this carriage full of the injured and dying. And you’ve been a thief as well. The voice of his conscience was loud in his ears, and he tried to shut it off, so that he didn’t have to hear it.

The conductor was shouting from somewhere forward, calling for a priest. He shrunk farther into his seat, trying to ignore the plea for help.

The voice of his conscience grew louder and he clapped his hands over his ears, bending forward as if in pain. He wasn’t a priest now, he couldn’t comfort the dying! He had no right—they needed to believe they were being saved. And it would be a *sham*.

People from the nearest village were running across the fields toward the tracks. He could hear their voices as they came to help. He opened the carriage door and stepped out into the cloudy day, and simply walked away, taking nothing with him but the little book.

Her husband finally caught up with him in the third village he'd walked through in as many days. He was just coming out of a tea shop, and her husband waited. There were too many people about to call out to him. The man followed his former priest at a distance, and when they were well away from the last straggle of houses, out of sight of church spires and curious sheep, he caught up with his quarry.

Not far from where they were standing, a stream sang as it ran over rocks fallen from the higher ground above. Although they couldn't see it, the sound it made served to cover their raised voices.

"She never loved me," the priest protested as the argument began to get out of hand. There was almost a whine in his voice. He hadn't made it to London, and he hadn't found a way to serve. The lovely book in his pocket seemed by turns to mock and torment him. He hated it and he needed it. As he had both hated and needed the woman who had betrayed him. He was feeling too sorry for himself to notice the rage in his interrogator's eyes. "And no, I never slept with her. I wanted to, but I never did."

The cuckolded husband didn't believe him. And he was too much in love with his wife to blame *her*. *She* had been the victim, this ex-priest her pursuer.

The husband would tell himself later that he hadn't intended to kill. That he'd brought the ball peen hammer with him for self-defense. But it wasn't self-defense, it was murder.

He undressed the priest and tossed his body down into the singing water. Then he began the long walk home. The hammer he left under the hayrick where he'd slept peacefully that night, untroubled by what he'd done in the afternoon

Anything that might identify the priest he took with him to bury in some distant place. He was tempted by the little book, but he was afraid his wife might recognize it and begin to suspect why he'd gone away so suddenly.

He couldn't risk that. He considered selling it, to profit from what he'd done. But that also might lead the police back to him.

And then the husband thought of a far more satisfying use of the pretty little box.

No one would know that these ordinary garments had belonged to a defrocked priest. He'd be buried in them because they were all he had. Except for the little box with its angels and apostles on every page. It would be put into the coffin too. And it would lie there on his body to torment him through all eternity: *This was what I was, and can be no more.*

Taking his soul as the cold river water had taken his body.

They found his body after they'd found his clothing neatly stacked by the river. Coat, shirt, trousers, stockings, boots.

There was no name. Whatever identification he'd had was missing, as if he had not wished to be known. There was, however, a small beautiful box, with an equally beautiful book inside it.

The Constable who had been called in, looked at the quality of the man's clothing and at the little box, and said to the doctor who had been summoned, "He must have come from a good family. Have a look at this."

Standing over the corpse, he said, "Dear God. Good thing he didn't take it into the river with him. It would have been such a waste."

"Suicide then?" the Constable asked.

"There is some bruising, but I expect that came from the river. It's turbulent just below here, rocks and the like. Doesn't appear to be anything more than that. What shall we do with this?"

"We'll put an advert in the papers and alert the Yard. Someone may come along to identify him. We'll keep it safe until then." He looked down at the body. "Poor sod. I wonder what drove him to it."

"I doubt we'll ever know. I'll send the undertaker to bring in him in." The doctor nodded and walked back to his horse.

A year later, when Constable Donaldson was killed in action in France, his mother went through his belongings and gave most of his clothing to the church for distribution to the poor. Her son had little enough left to show for ten years as a policeman. Some money put aside, which the undertakers would take, a good watch, a sturdy pair of boots. There was his helmet and uniform, of course, and she thought he'd have liked being buried in that uniform, rather than the King's. But the Army had had the last word there. She offered them to the older man who had been sent to replace her son, and he was grateful for them. The boots didn't fit.

There was the little book, of course. She found it in the top drawer of the chest by his bed. How he'd come by it, she didn't know. He wasn't one for reading, and he went to services of a Sunday to show a proper face to the world. Not religious, precisely, but certain of the rightness of being seen there every week, part of his duty to the village.

She took it with her after she'd cleaned out the little room above the police station where her son had lived. The furniture the incoming Constable was grateful for too, although she kept the quilt from her son's bed. She had made it for him herself, out of the scraps she'd saved from her work as a seamstress. Her needle had kept them in food and clothes since her husband had been killed in a farming accident. She had never learned to read, of course, having gone to work young to help out her parents, and then married at seventeen. Well, that wasn't completely true, she could read enough to make her way in life, but the fancy script in the little book, elegantly shaped and with flourishes on the capitals, was beyond her.

What had possessed him to buy such a thing? She wished she knew. And how had he come by the money in the first place?

And then she had a horrible thought. Had he taken it from the corpse by the river? The dead man they'd pulled out of the water had seemed to trouble her son more than most of the bodies he'd seen. He'd told her once he sometimes dreamed of the youngish man with the soft fair hair tangled in roots and wet leaves. There must be a mother grieving somewhere...

“Didn’t seem right for one that young to take his own life. I couldn’t get it out of my head, that he must have a family somewhere. But he didn’t want them to know, did he, what he’d done? He saw to it that he had no name. And I wondered what could be so bad that even his parents couldn’t forgive him?”

Well, Harry had seen far worse carnage in France since then. He’d written several times about the haunting sights he’d witnessed. *I thought a policeman’s life showed him the worst that people could do to each other. But I was wrong, Ma. This is what hell must look like.*

She didn’t like to keep the little box with its pretty book. Not if her son had come by it dishonestly. She found that hard to believe, but as long as the little box sat on the shelf in her parlor, she couldn’t help but doubt. She told herself that if no one had ever claimed the poor young man’s body, there was no one to claim the box either. That gave her some comfort. Still, Harry’d never shown it to her, and she’d only found it by chance amongst his clean handkerchiefs. Not hidden, precisely. But not downstairs in the Constable’s desk drawer either. That was what troubled her.

In the end, that spring of 1916, she gave it to the church fete. Anonymously, of course. That way there would be no accusations against her son, no tarnishing of his name. She did notice, when the day of the fete came, that the little box was marked very high.

That worried her more, and she didn’t stand around to see who might pay that much for it.

Miss Cunningham spotted the little box almost the minute she stepped into the stall. It was where the more precious items were for sale, bits of china and a piece of Coalport that had a tiny chip in one of the leaves. There was also a sandalwood fan, a Paisley shawl, and a lace parasol that had yellowed with age but nevertheless was in good condition.

Miss Oglethorpe hadn’t yet arrived to help with the money tin, and so Miss Cunningham lifted the little box and examined it surreptitiously, keeping it out of sight under the stall shelf.

She knew at once what it was, having had a very expensive governess who had taken her—with her father’s permission—to London and various museums.

It was quite real, she was certain of that. The quality of the workmanship spoke for itself. And the price was outrageously low—twenty pounds. But twenty pounds she did not have. Her father had always kept her short of money, believing that too much of it led to unpleasant temptations. If she wanted a new bonnet or even a new pair of gloves, she was forced to ask for it. Not that he refused her, but he must know how every penny was spent. “Your husband will expect you to be careful with his money, and if you have never been indulged at home, you will not expect to be indulged as a wife.”

A Victorian prude whose view of life saw sin lurking in every direction. It made her wonder sometimes how he’d spent his own youth, to be so deeply suspicious.

Of course she had wanted to marry, if only to get out from beneath his thumb, but she was not so foolish as to jump at any offer made to her. Most of them with an eye to the money she would bring with her. What she wanted was a taste of freedom, and most of the young men of her acquaintance were hardly likely to take

that view of marriage. And then the war had come along, and every eligible (in her father's opinion) male had enlisted. What was left was under seventeen and over fifty.

And here was an Opportunity, if ever she'd seen one. This little book of hours must be worth a fortune as old as it was—surely fourteenth century!—and in surprisingly good condition. She wondered where it had come from, and who had donated it to the Church Spring Fete. Not her father, not the Vicar, nor the elderly physician who had taken Dr. Smithson's place when war came.

But there was no time to wonder; here was Miss Oglethorpe bearing down on her with that stupid grin of hers.

Miss Cunningham pocketed the little book, and when Miss Oglethorpe wasn't looking, deposited a pound in the tin box that was to hold their earnings. It was far from enough, but it was all she had in her purse, and it salved her conscience.

By the end of the day, no one had come forward to ask how much the little book had brought. And so she walked confidently across the meadow to the house where she'd lived all her life.

But not for long. After dinner, her father went to bed, tired from judging jams and heifers and the three-legged race. When she was certain he was asleep, she rose from her own bed and began to pack the valise she had surreptitiously brought down from the attics while he was having his bath.

She took only what she was fairly certain she would need. And added one silk gown to err on the side of caution. One could never tell what one might be called upon to do in her new position. Because she already knew what she intended to do: war work. Her brother was at the Front, and if he could serve his country, so could she. If they wouldn't have her in the munitions plants or as a farm worker, if they couldn't teach her how to drive an omnibus, she would apply to one of the nursing services. Meanwhile, the little book would bring in what she needed, until she was settled. She had already been putting aside as much as she could from her meager allowance, and that would pay for the morning train and a few nights in lodgings. No hotel for her. She's been rigorously told from childhood that respectable women didn't go to one alone.

Satisfied that she hadn't overlooked anything, Miss Cunningham went to bed. At five in the morning, before the servants had stirred—what was left of them now that the men had gone off to fight for King and Country—she stole out of the house and walked to the railway station. The valise was heavier than she'd expected, and she had to stop half a dozen times to catch her breath. But she was there, ticket in hand, long before the train to London rolled into sight in a cloud of steam and cinders. She had lied to the station master, telling him that a cousin was ill and had no one else to care for her, for fear he might send a message to her father asking if she had had his permission to go.

He'd raised his eyebrows when he saw her—it was an ungodly hour of the morning, and she had walked to the station rather than arrive in her father's carriage. But she had found the courage to lie and was convincing enough, she felt, to keep him from doing anything rash before she got on the train. It was clear enough that the entire village knew how she was treated, and she flushed at the thought as she stepped on board. As it rolled out of the station without her father appearing in a storm of fury to forbid her to leave, she sighed with relief.

When she got down in Charing Cross station, she was stunned by the number of men in uniform waiting for the trains to wherever their transport waited, many of them surrounded by family tearfully or bravely sending them off to fight. She hadn't been allowed to see her brother off. Her father had decided it would be too emotional for her, and so she had had to say her goodbyes in the hall, watching him follow his father out to the carriage and disappear down the drive.

Giving in her ticket, she strode out of the station and into the watery sunlight of the capital of Empire. She had some idea of how the city was laid out, thanks to her governess, and so she found her way to the City, where she hoped to sell the little book. But there she encountered a woman dressed in the uniform of one of the nursing services and on impulse asked her where it was located.

Two hours later Miss Cunningham was sitting in the waiting room for an interview with one of the senior matrons.

She had been wary enough of her father charging down to London to find her, and so she gave her own name—Florence Cunningham—but gave her address as Keswick, in the north. Far enough north, she hoped, that no one could show her up for a liar. Her mother was dead, she informed Matron, and that was true enough. Her father was a country vicar, and had given his blessing for his eldest daughter to serve her country and God. She herself had written the letter she presented as proof of this, using her left hand. The scrawl was legible, and sounded like a man of the cloth. She had certainly heard the Rector at St. Stephens drone on enough times to quote him at length, but only three paragraphs were needed for “permission” to work at any “respectable and godly war work”, words vague enough to suit any situation she might choose to apply for. She had made certain the stationery was appropriately fine as well.

It was clear enough that this Miss Cunningham was educated and of good family—one had only to look at the cut and cloth of her walking dress, a demure dark blue wool with a white and blue striped shirtwaist. Neither terribly fashionable nor second hand. Just what a vicar's daughter might choose for a visit to London.

By five o'clock that afternoon, Miss Cunningham found herself accepted into the service and given a list of lodgings suitable for her to live in while she trained.

The little case with the book inside it was still in her valise when she unpacked it in Mrs. Downing's Lodgings for Gentlewomen. She was beginning to feel that it was bringing her luck, and she was almost reluctant to part with it. Her own funds were sufficient at the moment, and so she'd buried it deep in a drawer where it was safe until she needed to sell it.

Six months later it went to France with her. She had no safer place to leave it. Her training had been arduous and had required more of her than she'd anticipated. But she had been an apt pupil, and Matron had praised her diligence and her determination.

There had been no message from her father—neither his blessing nor his curses. In some sense, it had hurt her that he had so easily let her go, a measure of his anger. The other side of that coin was that she had not dared to write to her own brother for fear he would side with his father.

A German breakthrough on the first month she was at a forward aid station had sent the lot of them scrambling for safety, and she had had no time to worry about her kit, not with seven severely wounded men to get out of danger in a hurry.

She never found the little book again, and she grieved for it. Sometimes she prayed that it had fallen into caring hands.

The young German soldier who pillaged the kit was looking for cigarettes or chocolates. He was homesick and heartily tired of fighting, but his three elder brothers had gone into the army, and he'd wanted desperately to do the same thing. Only he hadn't been suited for killing. He sometimes fired his rifle high, if he thought his comrades were in no danger from the advancing British, and closed his eyes when he had to fire at men. He'd seen sights that haunted him, too many men blown apart or left half alive with the gas or horrendous wounds. He wanted only to go home, but to leave his post was to invite being shot as a deserter, and that was no solution either. What he longed for now was to be taken prisoner, and kept safe for the rest of the war.

A Lutheran, he had no idea what the pretty little box was, nor could he read the words, but from the tiny, exquisite paintings of angels and what appeared to be Apostles, he knew it was a religious book, and so he'd kept it, his war souvenir. Much better than the revolvers and field caps and shell casings that appealed to his comrades.

He'd been in France with his regiment for another five months when he was finally shot in the leg and left behind by his company as the British advanced. A nursing sister had cleaned his wound, bandaged it, and offered him tea. He had no taste for tea, but she was young and pretty, and he pretended to be grateful, all the while worrying that he might be sent back to his regiment in a prisoner exchange, since his wounded knee would make him noncombatant for months to come.

But he was lucky, and taken south with other prisoners. Because of his knee, he was allowed to ride in a lorry with the other serious wounds.

He was just congratulating himself on his success and his future when an aircraft swooped down out of the sky and fired at the British troops guarding the column of prisoners. Many of the Germans scattered across the torn countryside, eager to escape, but he stayed with the lorry. Frantic as the firing came closer, he reached out and pulled two of the more seriously wounded against his body as a living shield. One of them took the bullet surely meant for him. He was lying there, covered in the dead man's blood, still wedged between the head wound and a bad stomach, when an orderly lifted the canvas and stared in at them.

He wanted to feel some guilt over the officer's death, but he had survived, and he told himself over and over again that the Hauptmann wouldn't have lived anyway.

In the end he was transported to northern England and a camp that was never warm, but he was grateful. When he was searched before boarding the convoy ship that was to carry him to Britain, the little book was found and taken from him. He understood little of what the men examining him were saying, but the officer seemed to be of the opinion that he'd stolen it from a church or museum, and confiscated it.

It was the only souvenir he was likely to have of his months of service in the German army, but he took its loss philosophically. After all, he was well out of the war, and he was likely to come through it with only a bad leg and nightmares to show for it.

The officer who had taken the little book from a prisoner was killed two weeks later, shot in the back by one of his own men as they charged across No Man's Land. They'd had words two nights before. Chesterton had been caught pilfering the belongings of the dead, and threatened with charges if he didn't make restitution.

Easier to kill the Captain...

The little box was sent to England with the rest of the Captain's belongings. By the time his body was recovered, no one realized he'd been shot by his own side.

His little sister saw the pretty box in the battered trunk that been returned by the Army, and she begged to have it. Her mother, too broken-hearted by the loss of her son to care, had taken to her bed to grieve, and the elderly woman who had been Nanny to the children of the house saw no reason not to let the little girl have the book. It smacked of Papism, she thought, but the child wouldn't know that, and it was comforting for her to have something of her brother's. After all, his medals and his uniforms, his pipe and the letters from his family were not suitable for a girl. And there was the possibility that Charlotte would lose interest in time. It was hardly the sort of thing to appeal to a child for very long.

But there Nanny was wrong. Charlotte found some solace in the pretty little box with the even prettier little book inside, and she kept it in the drawer of the table by her bed. At ten she still found it hard to read the script, but she loved the pictures and sometimes looked at them before she fell asleep, thinking that her brother must have done the same in a far-off trench. That was somehow comforting.

It didn't occur to anyone in the household to wonder how the Captain had come by the book. It had been in his belongings, and that was enough for them.

Over the years that followed, the little book was taken out less and less often, until it failed to see the light of day at all. Charlotte's memory of her brother faded until he looked more like the portrait of him in his uniform hanging on the wall of the parlor than the young man she'd known. She had forgot the sound of his voice, and he'd been so much older that although she had worshipped him while he was there, they had not shared very much. He was playing tennis with friends while she was playing with her dolls, and he had gone to be a soldier when she was only eight.

It was the day of her marriage that she took out the little box again. She had wanted to carry something of her childhood with her as she walked down the aisle, and it had been the perfect thing: her brother's little book. And her mother agreed that it was quite handsome with the spray of lilac she carried as her bouquet.

She set the little box aside when the moment came to throw her bouquet to her bridesmaids. She tossed it high over her shoulder, and turned amid much laughter to see who had caught her flowers. In the excited embraces that followed—her best friend had caught them—she forgot the little box, leaving there

on the table by the stairs. One of the inn's staff found the book there, in its pretty little box, and asked the owner of the inn if he knew where it had come from. He thought the Vicar must have left it behind, but when Sally Evans went round to ask the Vicar, he shook his head and told her that it didn't belong to him, and he had no idea how it had got left after the reception.

"Someone will come and claim it," the owner told Sally then. "Tuck it away somewhere safe until they do. I don't want to be told any of my people are thieves."

And there it stayed, in a drawer of the cluttered desk in the tiny room that the inn's owner called his office.

But Sally Evans remembered it, and she went into the desk a month later to take it for herself. It was just the thing, she'd thought for the past three weeks, to give to her sister for the baby she was expecting in three months' time. She didn't have anything else to give her sister, and if she was honest with herself, she really didn't want to spend her own hard-earned money for a baby gift. She didn't care for the man her sister had married, and as far as she was concerned, if the baby took after him, she would be glad she hadn't gone out to buy something she couldn't afford to begin with.

And so it was that when Geoffrey Hugh Thomas Masters was born, he was in possession of a small book of hours that had made his mother rather angry and his father rather amused. After all it was a very odd gift for a baby and would have to be put away until he was older.

Geoffrey Masters at the age of six was allowed to sit in his father's lap and look at the pretty pictures in a small book with gold trim that glowed richly in the light from the reading lamp at his father's side, and it caught his attention in the way that none of his other toys had. He begged to be allowed to look at it, and his fascination with it didn't diminish with time. Even at the age of twelve, when most boys were playing cricket or rugby, he joined in with enthusiasm, but his heart belonged not to sport but to the pretty book that was his—and yet not quite his. But which was to be his finally when he was grown up.

Geoffrey Masters was a very good student at his local Grammar School, a prize pupil. Much was expected of him, and it was clear that his future would be bright. The Church, Foreign Service, even the Law, they said, *they* being his teachers and his parents. A boy that bright? He could be anything.

When he went away to University, he asked to take his book with him. And permission was given, after some reluctance on his father's part. Eighteen was not as responsible as twenty might be. But he agreed, because his wife had never liked the little book or its box, and had held it against her sister all those years.

It had never occurred to her—but it had to her husband—that the little book was valuable. It was simply a cheap way out of giving a proper gift, as far as she was concerned. Her husband had a feeling it might be worth more than a christening cup. But it wasn't his, and so he'd thought no more about that. Except to be sure that Geoffrey took good care not to damage it. He wondered from time to time how Sally had come by it, but she hadn't liked him and so he didn't feel comfortable asking her.

Sally had had something of a checkered past. Her sister insisted that she had even driven a man to suicide, although the official verdict at the Inquest had been

accidentally shooting himself as he cleaned his revolver. The fact that Sally had been present at the time of death never came out, although her sister knew she hadn't slept in her own bed that night.

When Geoff came down from University, his parents met his train and waited eagerly for him to tell them what he'd decided to do with his life.

Afterward, his mother had cursed her sister, and his father had had a good laugh.

Geoffrey Masters wanted to be a bookseller. And with his O Levels in hand, he had taken a position as a lowly clerk in the local bookshop, paid a pittance but with promises of advancement.

He didn't expect to own a bookshop of his own until he was at least forty. It was enough to be working in one, surrounded by hundreds of volumes of every size, shape and description. Even the smell, slightly musty and yet tantalizing, appealed to him. He spent his obligatory years in the British Army, and came back to that same bookshop, grateful to find his position had been held for him.

Geoff was forty-seven when the shop's owner died. His widow had been glad to sell up, and Geoffrey had been ready with his offer. But he never took the little book to his shop. Many of his browsing clients wanted only to look at books and even to stand by the shelves reading them, but seldom wanted to buy anything. Such a treasure was wasted on them. And the collectors who could appreciate its beauty would also know its value.

It stayed in his personal library at home, and he'd already shown it to his own son and explained how it had turned him away from the Church and the Law and even Foreign Service.

He knew it was the most valuable possession he had, and would probably ever have. He'd asked his Aunt Sally several times how she had come by it, but what she told him made little sense.

"It was a gift, after I'd served at a wedding reception years ago. The bride left it for me."

Geoffrey couldn't quite believe that, knowing the value of the book. But as an explanation, it would have to do. And even if he'd wanted to sell it—which he never would, under any circumstances—he wasn't quite certain that it wasn't known to the police, who might have been searching for it for years. He couldn't quite believe that his Aunt Sally had nicked it from a museum or a private collection, but it was more than likely that someone had left it behind at the inn where she'd worked most of her life, and she hadn't turned it in. The police might even have questioned her. Still, Aunt Sally was a champion liar, and she just might have made them believe her.

The last thing he wanted was to have to give the little book up, even if the rightful owner came forward. The bedrock reason, if he dared admit it to himself, for leaving it safely at home.

It was his only crime, keeping what must surely be stolen goods, but he thought he might be able to live with just one sin on his heavenly account.

And when the time came to pass it on to his son, he would never tell him about Aunt Sally. Instead he would simply say that a family friend had brought it to his christening and given it to his own father for safekeeping until he was old enough to value it.

But his son fell into bad company, and the only good thing he did in life before drugs took it was to father a child. A boy.

And Geoff took him in and raised him. And sat with him in the big chair by the hearth, showing him the pretty book as his own father had once done when he was the same age.

But as he looked at the fair hair and blue eyes—so like his son—staring up at him in wonder as he talked about the box and the little book, he prayed he would live long enough to be sure this child would know what a treasure it was.

As the years passed, he began to see that this was how he was meant to pay for his own feelings about the book. For never searching for the true owner. For fearing that it would never be loved and kept safe as he had loved and protected it.

By eighteen his grandson had his first—but certainly not his last—encounter with the law, narrowly missing being tried for manslaughter in that motorcar accident. The police hadn't known that the boy—hardly a boy now—had also pilfered from his grandparents and taken the keys and the vehicle without permission.

The little box with its precious book was kept under lock and key now.

There was only one answer left to Geoff Masters.

He went to his solicitor and added a codicil to his will.

The little box with its precious contents was to be buried with him, next to his heart. Buried, he insisted, not cremated.

His sin. His solution.

But there was a niggling worry at the back of his mind even as he congratulated himself on his decision.

What about the undertaker? Barton and Sons had a spotless reputation, even though the firm belonged now to Barton's grandsons. Was there any way to be absolutely sure his last wishes were carried out?

Or would the tempting little box with the beautiful book inside be removed just before the coffin lid was bolted down? Who would ever know, if it was?

