CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

BRYANT & MAY

and the Memory of Blood

About the Book

For the cast and crew of the New Strand Theatre, the play, *The Two Murderers*, seems less performance than prophecy when a cast party ends in the shocking death of the theatre owner's son.

The crime scene itself is most unusual. A locked bedroom, with no indication of forced entry, nor are there any prints or traces of blood. The only sign of disturbance lies on the floor: a gruesome, life-size puppet of Mr Punch. Everyone at the party is a suspect – from the corrupt producer and rakish male lead to the dour set designer and the assistant stage manager (who just happens to be the wild daughter of a prominent civil servant).

It's a perfect case for Arthur Bryant and John May and the Peculiar Crimes Unit, but the Home Office, wary of the Unit's eccentric methods and intensely aware of the potential embarrassment, wants them off the investigation.

The nimble minds of Bryant and May are not so easily deterred, however. Delving into the history of the London theatre and the disturbing origins of Punch and Judy, the detectives race to find the maniacal killer before it's curtains for everyone!

Whip-smart and as chilling as a London fog, *The Memory of Blood* is the ingenious, intricate and hugely entertaining new novel from the fiendishly inventive Christopher Fowler.

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BRYANT & MAY AND THE MEMORY OF BLOOD

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

This book is a small wedding gift for
Martin Butterworth,
wishing you a universe of merriment and joy.

PUNCH: I shall be feared. I shall be the Bogey-Man that frightens children in the dark.

BLIND MAN: Children will love you. And the more people you kill, the more they will laugh. (*To audience*) Now you have seen our little puppet play, here is a moral you may take away: Suppose tomorrow's sun should rise for *you*, give you the power for a single day, how would you use it? Would our tale come true?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Old (and new) readers will notice that Bryant & May books aren't like other detective series – they can be read out of sequence (in fact, they sometimes benefit from it), and I cheekily incorporate suggestions from readers. I have a feeling that if I tipped Bryant & May over the Reichenbach Falls they'd find a way to climb back up. Every time I prepare to send them to their deaths, they win a reprieve and fight on.

This time I owe their survival to my US editor, Kate Miciak, who always believed in the characters and willed them back into existence, and to my UK editor Simon Taylor, who has consistently and wholeheartedly supported the series. I'd like to thank my agent, Mandy Little, for remaining, without question, the truest of true believers. These are interesting times for publishing, and authors need all the help they can get. On that score, I'd like to thank book clubs and library groups everywhere for championing these adventures and providing a lifeline for authors like me. In particular, I'd like to thank Jan for her inside knowledge of London, and Stephen 'Stalky' Groves, who knows more about my movements than I do.

As always, the least-likely sounding facts in this novel are, in fact, true. For further information, visit:

www.peculiarcrimesunit.com and my daily blog www.christopherfowler.co.uk

The following undated document appeared on Wikileaks and is now the subject of a government investigation. It may be read before the case which follows, skipped, or used for reference.

EYES ONLY – THIS COMMISSIONED OBSERVATION REPORT (COR) BG298/10–14 WATERMARKED TO H.O. WHITEHALL INTERNAL SECURITY POLICY UNIT – EYES ONLY –

A GUIDE TO THE PECULIAR CRIMES UNIT, ITS STAFF AND AIMS

This is a restricted communication. No part of the following personnel report is intended for public release. No reference copies may be reproduced from this document, and reading may only take place within the Records Office upon the receipt of signed approval.

An Explanatory Note on the Origin of the Peculiar Crimes Unit, 231 Caledonian Road, King's Cross, London N1 9RB

The Peculiar Crimes Unit is not like other police divisions.

It was founded soon after the outbreak of the Second World War, as part of a government initiative to ease the burden on London's overstretched Metropolitan Police Force. In this time of desperation most able-bodied men had been taken into the armed forces, and seven new experimental agencies were proposed by the Churchill government. The Peculiar Crimes Unit was one of them.

Its aim was to tackle high-profile cases which had the capacity to compound social problems in urban areas. The affix ‘peculiar’ was originally meant in the sense of ‘particular’. The government’s plan was that the new unit should handle investigations into those situations deemed uniquely sensitive and a high risk to public morale. To head this division, several young and inexperienced students were recruited from across the capital.

The crimes that fell within the Unit’s remit were ones that could potentially cause social panics and general public malaise. Its staff members were outsiders, radicals and freethinkers answerable only to the War Office, and later the Home Office.

The Other London Units

One of the other experimental units created at that time was the Central Therapy Unit, set up to help the bereaved and the newly homeless cope with the psychological stresses of war. This unit closed after just eleven months because bombed-out residents continued turning to their neighbours for support rather than visiting qualified government specialists.

A propaganda unit called the Central Information Service (later to become the COI) was set up to supply positive, uplifting news items to national newspapers in order to combat hearsay and harmful disinformation spread about our overseas forces, and to fill the void left by the blanket news blackouts.

A further unit based at the War Office employed a number of writers and artists, including members of the Royal Academy and novelists Ian Fleming and Dennis Wheatley, to project the possible outcome of a prolonged war with Germany, and to develop stratagems for deceiving the enemy. The most famous wartime deception created by this unit was Operation Mincemeat, in which the corpse of a dead Welsh tramp was disguised as a drowned naval

officer, planted with false plans and left for the Germans to find.

The most successful of the seven experimental units launched by the Churchill government in wartime was the cypher-breaking division based at Bletchley, where Alan Turing and his team cracked the Enigma Code, and in doing so laid the foundations for modern computer technology.

The PCU since 1945

The PCU remained in operation through the war and has continued in one form or another ever since that time. In the past two decades, reorganization of the national policing network has aimed at reducing the influence of individual units and creating standardized practices operating from guidelines laid down for a national crime database, subject to performance statistics.

The PCU unofficially aided a number of high-ranking politicians in the past, and as a consequence has remained exempt from these measures. Subsequently, a series of high-profile embarrassments has placed the Unit on a cross-governmental blacklist of Organizations of Potential Detriment, which is the reason for this ongoing internal surveillance.

The following notes are supplemental to official PCU personnel career details (see attached D/SC12–649). They are not intended to be comprehensive and represent public observations made by various co-workers. As such, they are provided to act as guideline opinions only.

RAYMOND LAND

Temporary Acting Head of the PCU

Raymond Land’s original PCU contract was intended to last for eighteen months but was extended indefinitely after no other applicants could be recruited. He has applied for a transfer from the PCU on no fewer than seventeen separate

occasions, which gives some indication of his dissatisfaction with the Unit.

Land comes from Luton, which says it all. He's never really lost his suburban temperament. He finds it hard to work with his detectives, who appear to pay no attention to his directives and treat him with amusement and disdain. His attempts at discipline go unheeded.

As a former graduate of the Central London Criminal Biology Unit, Land has on occasion proven himself to be intelligent, driven and meticulous, but I once heard it said about him that 'he could identify a tree from its bark samples without comprehending the layout of the forest'. Most members of the PCU seem to share this flaw.

In the past he has shown himself to be a strong government ally, but he can't be trusted to toe the party line, and has switched sides on more than one occasion. He could probably be easily manipulated with a promise of relocation/early retirement.

ARTHUR ST JOHN BRYANT

SENIOR DETECTIVE

Where do I start with Arthur Bryant?

Bryant is the original thorn in the side of the establishment. I could point out that he managed to blow up his old headquarters, that he released illegal immigrants into the underground system, infected a Ministry of Defence outsource unit and offended a member of royalty, but let's stick to the more salubrious facts.

Bryant was born in Whitechapel, East London. Formerly of Bow Street, Savile Row and the North London Serious Crimes Division. In policing terms, Bryant has really covered the waterfront. He's handled just about every type of case, including multiple murder, kidnap, vice, burglary, public affright, terrorism, the disappearance of a pub and the theft of forty cats. Typically, it was the solving of this last case that most endeared him to the general public.

Formerly of Hampstead and Battersea, he's currently sharing habitation in Chalk Farm with his landlady, one Alma Sorrowbridge. His brother died on a Thames barge, parents lived in Bethnal Green, father was a street photographer and a drunk. Bryant had a French wife, Nathalie, who died after falling from a bridge. He was devastated and never remarried. A loner by nature, he's rumoured to sleep no more than four hours a night. Has commited numerous driving offences, incurred in an ancient Mini Cooper apparently called Victor (187 TWR).

Bryant is past Civil Service retirement age and his health is far from good, but despite having had a heart attack and needing a walking stick he seems surprisingly robust. He's extremely eccentric, offensively rude and is known to smoke cannabis, supposedly for his arthritis. We could probably get him for that.

Bryant's success rate in investigations is far above the capital's average, and this is the main reason why Whitehall continues to sign off on his budgets. Arthur Bryant and John May have a long history of refusing promotion, and the loyalty this engenders allows them to maintain control of the Unit. They are still well connected in political circles.

Bryant garners much of his information from a loose network of psychics, healers, New Age fringe-dwellers, police time-wasters and anarchists, many of whom have lengthy arrest files. He is also an expert on the subject of London and its history, and conducts guided tours of the capital in his spare time.

Bryant's oddly lateral thought processes remain a total mystery to us. University College London is currently offering a course that attempts to explain his methods. Whether deliberate or inadvertent, he has a habit of making us look bad. He has broken local, national and international laws on numerous occasions, but somehow always seems to get away with it. He remains entirely

beyond the reach of influence. I simply wouldn't go there, if I were you. Personally, I find him incomprehensible and utterly ghastly.

JOHN MAY

SENIOR DETECTIVE

Bryant's partner was born in Vauxhall, South London. He's the human face of the team, and could be considered to be Bryant's alter ego. There's one sister, Gwen Kaye (married name), living in Brighton, married with two children. May moved from Hampstead to St John's Wood, and now resides in Shad Thames. He was married to Jane Upton, now divorced, has an estranged son, Alex, and had a daughter, Elizabeth, who also worked for the PCU until her death on active duty.

The source of the estrangement between May and his son is not known. May's ex-wife was declared mentally unstable soon after their divorce. His granddaughter, April, suffered from agoraphobia until she had resolved issues about her mother. She worked at the Unit for a while, but we understand she now lives with her uncle in Canada.

May is a pragmatic, determined worker well liked by his colleagues, but, like Bryant, he has a few secret anti-government contacts we're not happy about. On a personal level, he's fitter, friendlier and certainly a lot more pleasant to deal with than his partner. He is three years younger than Bryant, drives a silver BMW, knows a surprising amount about new technology.

On a personal level he has loneliness issues, and continues to date women the department classifies as high security risks. May suffers from high cholesterol and has a history of lower back pain. His continuing loyalty to Bryant is complete and unfathomable; there seems to be little likelihood that he could ever become an ally of the department.

JANICE LONGBRIGHT

DETECTIVE SERGEANT

Longbright's parents were Gladys Forthright and Harris Longbright, both highly respected former Metropolitan Police officers. She was once an Olympic javelin hope until an injury ended her career. Janice Longbright has been employed by Bryant & May for almost her entire adult working life, and is fiercely loyal to them, largely because of their relationship with her mother.

She dated DCI Ian Hargreave for ten years, but inexplicably chose not to marry him. Her last partner, Liberty DuCaine, died on active duty. She lives alone in Highgate. Not to be underestimated. Lately there have been odd rumours about her supposed clairvoyant abilities, although perhaps someone is pulling our leg on this. There was also some kind of scandal involving her role in the running of a Soho burlesque club, but we haven't been able to uncover any details.

GILES KERSHAW

FORENSIC PATHOLOGY

Kershaw was a child prodigy who dropped out of Queen's College, Oxford, after his wealthy family became newly impoverished, but he subsequently took his medical degree at UCL. He has now left the Unit to become the St Pancras coroner, but continues to work with the PCU on special investigations. By a peculiar coincidence, an earlier St Pancras coroner, Sir Bentley Purchase, was the supplier of the corpse for Operation Mincemeat (see above). When a government representative had trouble finding the coroner's office, Purchase famously suggested that he would get there quicker if he got hit by a bus. Kershaw's brother-in-law was the last Home Secretary. His reputation is unimpeachable, and his loyalty to the PCU is also entirely unfathomable.

DAN BANBURY

CRIME SCENE MANAGER/INFOTECH

Banbury is the only staff member who seems completely normal. Born in Bow, London. Married with a ten-year-old son. Lives in Croydon. He's a solid worker, eager and enthusiastic and reputed to show intuitive brilliance at crime scenes. He's a dyed-in-the-wool tech-head who once ran afoul of the Official Secrets Act while still a teenager. The case file on that incident appears to have been mysteriously erased. Another loyal supporter of the PCU, despite the fact that his wage level has remained unchanged for nearly three years.

JACK RENFIELD

SERGEANT

Formerly a duty sergeant based at Albany Street police station, Renfield's a bit of a thick-eared old-school copper, and has a reputation for playing it by the book. He's on record as being an outspoken critic of the PCU, but lately appears to have been won over and has started siding with them, which turns him into a liability. I'd love to know what Bryant & May put in the water that makes their staff become so doggedly loyal.

MEERA MANGESHKAR

POLICE CONSTABLE

This one's a tough South Londoner from a large Indian family, hardworking, responsive, with a strong sense of duty. She has argued with her superiors and lodged complaints against them in the past, but things seem to have gone quiet on that front. However, there are rumours that she's not happy in her current position. Has anger management issues. Could be exploited.

COLIN BIMSLEY

POLICE CONSTABLE

Another inherited employee; his father and uncle were both former members of the PCU, so he's pretty much bound to the Unit for life. By all accounts decent enough, he suffers from Diminished Spatial Awareness (DSA), which made him a liability at the Met. Trained at Repton Amateur Boxing Club for three years until suffering a head injury. Maybe Health & Safety could look into this?

FRATERNITY DUCAINE

POLICE CONSTABLE

This chap appears to have joined the Unit without any Home Office approval. It seems Bryant took it upon himself to offer the lad a job. Can somebody do some digging on him?

NB There have been numerous Health & Safety infringements at the Unit, including unsecured weapons in the Evidence Room, illegal wiring and dangerous chemicals stored on-site. There also appears to be a cat called Crippen (a surviving relative from Bryant's feline investigation) wandering around the place. Unfortunately, although the Caledonian Road building is unsafe, it was privately rented by Bryant in a deliberate attempt to exploit a legal loophole, and therefore does not technically fall under the jurisprudence of the Home Office.

Although it is entirely possible that the HO could find a way to close the Unit down, the basic problem continues: so long as the PCU is useful, it remains a necessary evil.

On a personal note, I find it astonishing that these officers are allowed to remain on active public duty. If Bryant and May were removed, the place would collapse like a house of cards. Just a thought.

This report commissioned by Leslie Faraday (Home Office Liaison) for Oskar Kasavian (Internal Security)

1

CHAMBER OF HORRORS

ARTHUR BRYANT STOOD there pretending not to shiver. He was tightly wrapped in a 1951 Festival of Britain scarf, with a Bloody Mary in one hand and a ketchup-crusted cocktail sausage in the other. Above his head, a withered yellow corpse hung inside a rusting gibbet iron.

'Well,' he said, 'this is nice, isn't it?'

His partner, John May, was not so consoled. The great chamber was freezing. Rain was pattering into an array of galvanized buckets. The smell of mildewed brickwork assailed his nostrils. A few feet behind him, the Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins was stabbing a thin-bladed knife into a screaming priest, looking for the marks of the Devil. On the other side of the detectives stood a torture rack and several members of the Spanish Inquisition clad in crimson robes, armed with flaming brands and scourges.

'You could have made an effort and put on a clean jacket, instead of that ratty old overcoat,' said May. 'You look like a character from *Toad of Toad Hall*.'

'This is Harris Tweed,' said Bryant, fingering a frayed hole in his soup-stained sleeve. 'It was handed down to me by my grandfather.'

'Was that before or after he passed away?'

'Funny you should say that. He died in it. Gave himself a heart attack trying to get the lid off a jar of gherkins. My grandmother thought it was a pity to waste good fabric.'

A distorted tape loop of chanting monks began to play once more from hidden speakers, adding to the chamber's pervasive gloom.

May sighed. 'Of all the things you've put our unit through over the years, this has to be the strangest. Hosting a cocktail party in a house of horrors in order to catch a murderer. If you ever say a word about it in your memoirs, I'll kill you.'

'I didn't hear any better ideas from you,' Bryant reminded him cheerfully. 'This is absolutely our last chance to break the case. At midnight we'll be forced to unlock the doors and we'll lose everything, unless we can flush him out in the next hour. Keep your eyes peeled for anything unusual.'

May looked around at the kidnapped party guests, most of whom were glumly wedged between rotting corpses. 'Unusual,' he repeated, trying not to lose his temper.

Bryant sucked his celery stick thoughtfully. Somewhere above the stalactite-spiked arches of London Bridge station a train rumbled. The bricks trembled and soot sifted down. The shunting mingled with the thunder outside. Rain was pouring under the front door and pooling around the sodden shoes of the guests, all of whom were underdressed for the occasion. In the silences between rain, thunder and trains, May saw the group's breath condensing and imagined he could hear their teeth chattering. A waitress passed them, bearing a tray of bloody eyeballs on sticks. On closer inspection, these turned out to be dyed pickled onions.

'Masks,' said Bryant, apropos of nothing.

May turned to him. 'Explain?'

'They're all wearing masks. Look at them all nodding and drinking.' He waved his sausage at the partygoers. 'You wouldn't think we had to bring them here under sufferance and lock them in. They were as jumpy as cats when they arrived, but they're attempting to pretend that everything's

normal. Middle-class people with upper-middle incomes. They come alive at parties, no matter how strange the circumstances. They discuss house prices and holidays and restaurants, and give opinions on the plays they've seen. But after all that's happened in the last few days, they know they've been brought here for another reason. What do you think is going on behind those forced smiles?'

'I imagine they're morbidly curious, the way people are about watching traffic accidents.'

'But they're careful to keep up the illusion of appearing unconcerned. An interesting phenomenon, isn't it?'

'That's the English for you,' said May, studying the gathered guests. 'We're great pretenders.'

'Yes, an odd mixture of exaggerated politeness and thoughtless cruelty. The true mark of English conversation is not being able to tell when you've been insulted. I think the more sophisticated society becomes, the more it hides behind the masks it manufactures.'

'Do we have to discuss this now, Arthur? We're on a bit of a deadline here.'

Bryant ignored his partner. 'It's just that we seem to be so good at hypocrisy. I always think when an Englishman says "We really must get together soon", he's telling you to piss off. We bury ourselves so deeply inside complex personas that it's amazing we remember who we really are. Which makes this room, for example, very hard to read. You know me, I don't play those games. I prefer honesty.'

'Yes, but you're downright rude to people,' retorted May. 'And I do know you. It's a class thing. This lot make you feel uncomfortable. You're from a working-class background. Your mother cleaned cinemas for a living. You hate the idea that one of the guests might get the better of you tonight.'

'No,' said Bryant firmly. 'I hate the idea that one of them thinks they can get away with murder.'

'Well, our legal priority over the investigation ends in exactly' – here May checked his Rolex – 'fifty-five minutes.

You're cutting it a tad fine.'

'I know. We have to watch for the smallest signs, an odd look, any betrayal of emotion that might cause one of them to give the game away.'

'Arthur, an odd look isn't going to secure a conviction. We need concrete evidence before the clock strikes twelve.'

'Well, whose idea of a shindig was this?' said a tipsy blonde woman in a tight black Lycra dress that had made her tanned breasts rise like golden loaves. She turned her attention to May while ignoring his partner. It was her habit to address only men she found useful or attractive, a trait that made her thoroughly unlikeable.

'How did you get in?' asked Bryant. 'This is a private party. No riffraff allowed.'

Rudeness had no effect on Janet Ramsey. As the publisher of *Hard News*, the capital's gossip daily, she was used to having the door metaphorically slammed in her face. 'Actually, Uncle Fester, I'm here as a guest,' she rejoined airily. 'And you're up to something. I can smell it. I can see it on that old tortoise face of yours.'

'I'm surprised you can see anything through that face-lift,' Bryant harrumphed. 'If you print a single word about this, I'll send so many uniforms around to your office it'll look like you're staging *The Pirates of Penzance*.'

Ramsey gave him a blank look.

'There are a lot of over-zealous policemen in *The Pirates of Penzance*,' May explained to her.

'I don't know why you hang around with Rip Van Winkle here,' said Ramsey, walking frosted fingernails up May's lapel. 'He's holding you back, John. He always has. Tell me the truth. Give an old newspaper gal a break. What's this party all about? Why are the guests locked in? Why does everyone look so anxious? What exactly are you two up to?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Janet.'

'I recognize some of the people in this room.' She narrowed her false eyelashes at the assembly. 'This

wouldn’t have anything to do with the murders your unit has been investigating, would it?’

‘You can’t print conjecture,’ May warned.

‘I see the time has come to let you in on our little secret,’ said Bryant, trying not to grimace as he took Ramsey’s arm. ‘Come with me and I promise all will be revealed.’

Ramsey knew she couldn’t trust Bryant, but her curiosity got the better of her. She stumbled after him, into the chill shadows of the cobwebbed chamber. There was a short silence followed by a yelp and a clang of metal, and Bryant came back alone.

‘What did you do?’ asked May. ‘Where’s Janet?’

‘I think I managed to spike her story,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I shut her in the Iron Maiden.’

‘That thing’s just a stage prop,’ said May with a hint of regret. ‘There are no sharpened nails on the inside of it.’

‘Really?’ Bryant’s eyes widened in innocence. ‘I had no idea. What a pity. I’ll let her out after midnight.’

‘OK, what do we do now?’

‘We know that our killer is in this room. I just have to come up with a way of drawing him out.’

‘You mean you haven’t thought this through?’

‘How could I? From the very first moment, this entire investigation has been an unmitigated disaster. Nothing has gone according to plan.’ Bryant peered up his sleeve. ‘The little hand’s fallen off my watch. How much time do we have left?’

‘Fifty-two minutes. This is the last time all of our suspects will be in one room together. It’s the only chance we have to put things right. We’re so close now.’

‘John, we’re no closer than we were a week ago,’ said Bryant. ‘God, it feels like we’ve been working on this case for a lifetime. Come on.’

The pair set off into the penumbral chamber of horrors, determined to catch an impossible murderer. Last week

had felt like a fresh beginning. Now they could see it might have been the beginning of the end.

2

CLAIRVOYANCE

'A FRESH START!' said Raymond Land, striding into the Unit's smart new open-plan office in the warehouse at the corner of Caledonian Road. Over the weekend it had been painted arctic white and filled with furniture, admittedly secondhand, but it provided the staff with a pleasant communal space.

Land was pleased to see that the holes in the floor had been repaired. The workmen had almost finished re-decorating the building. Broken windows had been replaced. There were no longer bare wires hanging down from the ceiling. There was a door on the toilet and a banister on the staircase. The coffee machine was finally working. The funny smell had gone from the Evidence Room. He slapped his hands together with an approximation of good cheer and beamed hopefully around the place.

His joy was not reciprocated.

'What are you so bloody happy about?' asked Jack Renfield, not bothering to look up. The sergeant was crunching indigestion tablets and checking his emails, attacking his keyboard with great bearlike paws.

Land looked pathetically expectant. 'It's the start of a new week, the sun's out, summer's on the way, nice new paintwork everywhere, we haven't been blamed for anything awful in nearly a month. Makes you feel glad to be alive.'

‘There’s a bad storm coming,’ said Meera Mangeshkar. ‘It’s going to be chucking it down by noon. We’ll have to put the lights on.’

Land felt he had every reason to be in a good mood. He and his wife, Leanne, were going on a sailing holiday around the Isle of Wight at the end of the week. His desk had already been cleared in readiness. His monthly budget had been met. The Home Office was leaving him alone. The crime figures were down. Only the staff seemed fed up, but they always looked like that when he came into the room. A more sensitive chap might almost doubt they were pleased to see him.

‘Come on, you lot,’ he jeered, ‘perk yourselves up a bit. You should be thankful. You’ve got a nice new office, and the mean streets of King’s Cross are quiet for once.’

‘We’d rather be busy,’ grumbled Mangeshkar, flicking a rubber band at the cat. Colin Bimsley was making a paper sculpture of a flamingo from old witness statements. Dan Banbury was reading *Forensic Analysis in the Home – Volume 4: Drains*.

Land found it hard to share Meera’s sentiment. Being busy at the PCU usually meant risking his career, health and sanity. He still fantasized about running a police department in a sleepy Spanish village, the kind of place where the most exciting thing that ever happened was a cow wandering into a shop.

London was not much smaller than New York but averaged around 130 murders a year, compared with the Big Apple’s rate of over 460 in the same period. Most of the London cases were handled by the CID, but the more troublesome crimes were reluctantly placed in the hands of the PCU. Raymond Land had inherited the worst of both worlds; the cases that the Home Office preferred the CID not to handle were the most awkward and unsolvable, and were also the least likely to win public praise for their

solution. The PCU received no help from the Met divisions, which meant that they effectively operated in a vacuum.

Land liked order. He liked graphs and bar charts and Venn diagrams, and Excel spreadsheets of policing figures, even though he didn't really know how to use them. He didn't understand waffling academics and weirdos, and disorganization and mess, and strange, elliptical ideas that led to investigative dead ends.

He didn't understand the PCU.

Sticking his hands into his pockets, he wandered over to the window and sat on the ledge. 'I thought you'd all be happy,' he said plaintively. 'For once, everyone thinks we're doing a good job. You can take it easy. You don't have to spend the week going through someone's rubbish or sitting in a car all night staring at a front door. You can go home at the normal time, catch up on your emails, watch some telly, cook a meal that doesn't come in a plastic tub. For once, you can get on with your lives.'

But as soon as he said that, Land realized he had made a mistake. Working at the PCU meant surrendering all thoughts of a normal private life. It meant abandoning loved ones, working unsociable hours, falling out with friends, never having time to do the comfortingly habitual things civilians did. His staff barely existed beyond their working lives. Their refrigerators remained empty, their bills piled up, their houseplants died and their voice-mails were never played back. Even their pets gave up on them. Apart from a brief, disastrous stay at Raymond Land's house, Crippen had spent his entire nine lives in the office.

'Well, I feel good about today, and I'm not going to let you lot put the mockers on it,' Land said, rising and turning.

He looked back and found that suddenly everyone seemed to have brightened up a little. Perhaps his positivity had proved inspirational after all. Bimsley was trying to suppress a laugh. Meera was smiling and shaking her head. 'Right,' said Land, 'we're going to use this week to get

organized and learn to behave like a proper police unit.' He looked down to discover a thick arctic-white stripe across the seat of his new black trousers. 'You can start by getting the workmen to stick a bloody Wet Paint sign on this ledge.'

Bimsley burst out laughing.

A dark thought crossed Land's mind. 'And where are Bryant and May?' he demanded to know.

'Look here, can somebody give me a hand with this?'

Bryant appeared in the doorway right on cue. If Land hadn't known better, he'd have suspected that his most senior detective had been waiting outside to make an entrance. Bryant moved to reveal a crimson-painted wooden case. It was about five feet tall and covered in cobwebs. 'I found her in the attic.'

'What is it?' asked Land. 'How did you get it down the stairs? Must you bring it in here?'

Bryant leaned against the case with a mischievous smile. He removed his battered trilby, leaving his hair standing in a frightened white tonsure. 'I hear we've got no work on – this is total disaster. What are you doing about the situation, Raymondo?'

'Don't you understand, Bryant, it's good news. Nobody's doing anything they shouldn't be doing.'

'Of course they are, it just means the Met are picking up the cases before they get to us, which will make us redundant.'

Redundant. Land rolled the word around in his head, savouring it. *Redundancy pay*. An image sprang to mind; he was lying in a beach hammock in the Maldives with Leanne serving him a cocktail in a coconut.

'So I suggest you get on the phone to your opposite number in Islington and find out how we can be of use,' Bryant was saying as he halfheartedly attempted to haul the case into the room.

'Here, Mr Bryant, let me give you a hand.' Colin Bimsley sprang up to help. Together they manoeuvred the dusty

object into the centre of the floor. The box was on squealing casters, and the top half of one side was covered in filthy glass. Bryant pulled a large chequered handkerchief from his pocket, dipped it into Land's tea mug and, before the Unit chief could protest, started to wipe the window clean.

John May appeared from behind the case, patting cobwebs from his suit. 'I couldn't stop him once he'd seen it, Raymond,' he said apologetically. 'He had to bring it down here.'

'It's Madame Blavatsky,' Bryant proclaimed. 'Not a terribly good likeness I'll admit, but it's clearly meant to be her.'

Land sniffed at the box and recoiled. 'Who the hell is Madame— Who is she, and what's she doing in our attic?'

'Madame Blavatsky was a noble-born Russian spiritualist who founded the Theosophical Society. She was a Buddhist who believed in reincarnation and the spirit world. She died right here in London.'

'What the bloody hell's she doing upstairs?'

Bryant ignored him. 'Her followers thought she was steeped in the wisdom of the ancients, whereas I'm more of the opinion that she was a barking mad fascist, and a racist to boot. And she's been living in our attic for donkey's years. Remember I told you the history of this place? About Aleister Crowley's Occult Revivalists' Society of Great Britain using the building for their meetings until the 1930s? Well, I was up in the attic looking for my first edition of *Nachtkultur & Isolationism*, and found her under a blanket. There's all sorts of weird stuff up there, including a spirit horn and an electromagnetic field detector, the kind geologists used to use. They were popular in spiritualists' circles. I think there must have been many other occult societies here before Crowley's, because most of the stuff hasn't been touched for the best part of a century. We're at the centre of several ley lines, you know. They cross underneath our basement floor.'

‘Are you sure this is something to do with our previous tenants?’ asked Land suspiciously.

‘Indubitably, old trout.’

Land thought for a moment. ‘Is it worth anything?’

‘Good Lord, it’s not about the monetary value.’ Bryant had conducted some research about the PCU’s new home just after Raymond Land had discovered an alarming mural of a witchcraft ceremony hidden under the paintwork on his office wall. ‘The Occult Revivalists’ Society split from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and lived here with some ladies from the Lodge of the Isis-Urania Temple until they all fell out with each other. I think there was something saucy going on between them. The real Madame Blavatsky stayed here on her way to India, and the poet William Butler Yeats held his first séance in this building. It all turned nasty after Yeats materialized a terrifying spirit calling itself *Leo Africanus* in the room – right where you now have your desk, Raymond. Apparently the creature claimed to be Yeats’s Daemon or Anti-Self, and threatened to kill everyone and drink their blood.’

Land looked appalled. Bryant was enjoying himself. ‘Because of his experience, Yeats adopted the motto *Daemon est Deus inversus* – commonly translated as *The Devil is a God Reflected*. The occult order became a Satanist society in the Second World War, and it all ended very badly in the mid-1950s. I’m writing a brief monograph on the history of the building at the moment. I’ll give you a copy when it’s finished.’

Arthur Bryant, as you may have gathered by now, was capable of holding forth on virtually any subject for any amount of time. This made him initially interesting, then exhausting, and finally annoying. He had an aloof and self-contained manner, as if he never quite heard what most people said to him (and often he didn’t, depending on whether his hearing aid was switched on).