

# THE VICTORIA VANISHES

Christopher Fowler



**BANTAM BOOKS**

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

For Steven, my brother and friend

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My editor Simon Taylor has been with Bryant and May from the outset, and remains as tenacious as my sleuths, although he has the tougher job because he's not fictional. Likewise, my agent Mandy Little continues to venture forth into the twilight criminal world of publishing to fight evil-doers. Meg Davis, my film and TV agent, is soft of voice but firm in her resolve to find new fans of Bryant and May. Thanks, too, to Kate Samano, whose knowledge of the PCU is now probably greater than mine, and to Claire Ward for providing visuals to this world.

Special thanks go to Jan Briggs, for the knowledge of London she gained on the beat and has been so willing to share, to Michele Slung, who advised and accompanied me on the pub crawl in the book (sorry you got your purse nicked), to Simon Rennie, who knows a lot about Londoners from both sides of the bar, to Maggie Armitage, the nicest woman ever to be turned into a witch, to Sally Chapman, my great friend and spookily efficient PA, and to Pete Chapman, for pretty much everything else.

No mention of mysterious murder would be complete without the field experts, Mike Cane, Barry Forshaw and Ali Karim. Finally, thanks to all the bloggers, reviewers and readers who do it for the love of the game.

*The Victoria Vanishes* takes place in London's quirkiest public houses. Since writing the book, some of these have already been destroyed or badly converted by greedy developers. The remaining ones are worth visiting, but I could have filled another volume with equally interesting venues. For more information visit: [www.christopherfowler.co.uk](http://www.christopherfowler.co.uk)

‘It is most absurdly said, in popular language, of any man,  
that he is disguised in liquor; for, on the contrary,  
most men are disguised by sobriety.’

Thomas de Quincey  
*Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

# **PECULIAR CRIMES UNIT**

Ib Hampstead Rd  
London NW1 0JP

## **DUTY ROSTER FOR MONDAY 26<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY**

Raymond Land, *Acting Temporary Unit Chief*

Arthur Bryant, *Senior Detective*

John May, *Senior Detective*

Janice Longbright, *Detective Sergeant*

Dan Banbury, *Crime Scene Manager/Information Technology*

Giles Kershaw, *Forensics/Pathology*

Meera Mangeshkar, *Detective Constable*

Colin Bimsley, *Detective Constable*

April May, *Office Manager/Liaison*

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE OFFICE WILL BE CLOSING AT 4.00 P.M. TODAY, IN ORDER TO ALLOW STAFF TO ATTEND THE FUNERAL OF OUR PATHOLOGIST, OSWALD ELIAS FINCH.

A NON-DENOMINATIONAL SERVICE WILL BE CONDUCTED AT ST PANCRAS OLD CHURCH AT 4.30 P.M.

DRINKS WILL BE SERVED UPSTAIRS AT THE DEVEREUX PUB, OFF ESSEX STREET, THE STRAND, FROM 6.00 P.M.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH MR FINCH'S WISHES, PLEASE DO NOT SEND FLOWERS TO THE CHURCH. INSTEAD, YOU CAN MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS TO:

C/O NHS Trust Ward ES  
Psychiatric Unit  
Broadhampton Hospital  
Lavender Hill  
London  
SE5 8AZ

## STAFF BULLETINS

We are in the process of clearing out the Bayham Street Morgue and refitting it as a Grade 4 'Secure Hygiene' area, so personal items may no longer be kept here. This notice especially applies to the person who left a box of Maynard's 'Olde Tyme' wine gums and a jar of Branston Pickle in one of the cadaver drawers.

Next Monday the PCU Film Club will be showing *It Always Rains on Sunday* with Googie Withers. This was Sergeant Longbright's choice, so all those who were expecting a screening of the new Martin Scorsese film should address their complaints to her.

Please read the new recommended guidelines on suspect searches and confiscation of property. Suspects have rights, apparently, even if you think they might have cut off someone's head and left it in their fridge. Don't blame me, I don't make the rules.

This Thursday's evening class, to be given by Raymond Land on 'Policework and the Power of Positive Thinking', has been cancelled due to lack of interest.

Please note that sardines in sunflower oil do not agree with Crippen, as the person who stacked their outgoing mail near his litter tray will discover to their disadvantage.

# I

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## ASLEEP IN THE STARS

She had four and a half minutes left to live.

She sat alone at the cramped bar of the Seven Stars and stared forlornly into her third empty glass of the evening, feeling invisible.

The four-hundred-year-old public house was tucked behind the Royal Courts of Justice. It had been simply furnished with a few small tables, wooden settles and framed posters of old British courtroom movies. Miss Curtis had been coming here for years, ever since she had first become a legal secretary, but every time she walked through the door, she imagined her father's disapproval of her drinking alone in a London pub. It wasn't something a vicar's daughter should do.

Hemmed in by barristers and clerks, she could not help wondering if this was all that would be left for her now. She wanted to remain in employment, but companies had grown clever about making women of a certain age redundant. After her last pay-off, she had spent time

working for a philosophical society instead of heading back into another large firm. Now she was waiting for – what exactly? Someone to surprise her, someone to appreciate her, someone –

She stared back into the melting ice cubes.

Her name was Naomi, but her colleagues called her Miss Curtis. What was the point of having an exotic name if nobody used it? She was sturdy-beamed and rather plain, with thick arms and a straight fringe of greying hair, so perhaps Curtis suited her better. If she had married, perhaps she would have gained a more appealing surname. She regretted having nothing to show for the past except the passing marks of time.

She checked the message on her mobile again. It was brief and unsigned, but casual acquaintances sometimes called and suggested a drink, then failed to turn up; the legal profession was like that. Looking around the bar, she saw no one she recognized. Friends usually knew where to find her.

‘Give me another Gordon’s, darling. Better make it a double.’

*Adorable boy*, she thought. The barman was impossibly slim, probably not much older than twenty-one, and didn’t regard her with pity, just gave her the same friendly smile he bestowed on everyone else. Probably Polish; the ones who worked in bars now were quick to show pleasure, and had a rather old-fashioned politeness about them that she admired.

She touched her hair back into place and watched him at work. She would never eat alone in a restaurant, but taking a drink by herself in a pub was different. Nobody knew her past here, or cared. There were no tourists in for



once, just the Friday-night after-office crowd jammed into the tiny narrow rooms and spread out across the pavement on an unnaturally warm winter night. It would have to be a lot colder than this to stop the city boys from drinking outside.

When she noticed him, it seemed he had been standing at her side for a while, trying to get served. ‘Here,’ she said, pushing back her stool. ‘Get in while you can.’

‘Thanks.’ He had a nice profile, but quickly turned his head from her, probably through shyness. He was a lot younger than she was, slightly built, with long brown hair that fell across his face. There was something distantly recognizable about him. ‘Can I get you one while I’m here?’ he asked.

*Rather a common voice, she thought. South London. But familiar in the way that certain men belong in pubs. Someone I’ve talked to after a few gins?*

‘Go on, then, I’ll have another Gordon’s, plenty of ice.’

He slid the drink over to her, looking around. ‘I wonder if it’s always this crowded.’

‘Pretty much. Don’t even think about finding your way to the toilets, they’re up those stairs.’ She pointed to the steep wooden passageway where a pair of tall prosecutors were making a meal out of having to squeeze past each other.

He muttered something, but it was lost in a burst of raucous laughter behind them.

‘I’m sorry, what did you say?’ she asked.

‘I said it feels like home in here.’ He turned to her. She tried not to stare.

‘My home was never like this.’

‘You know what I mean. Cosy. Warm. Sort of friendly.’

*Is he just being friendly*, she thought, *or is it something else?* He was standing rather too close to her, and even though it was nice to feel the heat of his arm against her shoulder, it was not what she wanted. In a pub like this everyone's space was invaded; trespass was part of the attraction. But she did not want – was not looking for – anything else, other than another drink, and then another.

He showed no inclination to move away. Perhaps he was lonely, a stranger in town. He liked the pubs around here, he told her – Penderel's Oak, the Old Mitre, the Punch Tavern, the Crown and Sugarloaf.

'Seen the displays in the window outside this place?' he asked.

She turned and saw the swinging pub sign above the door: seven gold-painted stars arranged in a circle. The wind was rising. In the windows below, legal paraphernalia had been arranged in dusty tableaux.

'Wigs and gowns, dock briefs. All that stuff for defending criminals, nonces and grasses.' He spoke quickly, almost angrily. She couldn't help wondering if he'd had trouble with the police. 'I used to meet my girlfriend in pubs like this. After she left me I got depressed, thought of topping myself. That's why I keep this.' He dug in his pocket and showed her a slender alloy capsule, a shiny bullet with his name etched on to the side. 'A mate smuggled it in for me as a reminder. It's live ammunition. If things get too much I'd use it on myself, no problem. Only I haven't got a gun.' He'd soon finished his beer. 'Get you another?'

She wanted more gin but demurred, protested, pushing her stool back several inches. He seemed dangerous, unpredictable, in the wrong pub. He took her right arm by

the elbow and guided it back on to the bar with a smile, but gripped so firmly that she had no choice. She looked around; most of the standing men and women had their backs to her, and were lost in their own conversations. Even the barman was facing away. A tiny, crowded pub, the safest place she could imagine, and yet she suddenly felt trapped.

‘I really don’t want another drink. In fact I think I have to – ’ Was she raising her voice to him? If so, no one had noticed.

‘This is a good place. Nice and busy. I think you should stay. I want you to stay.’

‘Then you have to let go – ’ But his grip tightened. She reached out with her left hand to attract the attention of the barman but he was moving further away.

‘You have to let go – ’

It was ridiculous, she was surrounded by people but the noise of laughter and conversation was drowning her out. The crush of customers made her even more invisible. He was hurting her now. She tried to squirm out of his grip.

Something stung her face hard. She brought her free hand to her cheek, but there was nothing. It felt like an angry wasp, trapped and maddened in the crowded room. Wasn’t it too early in the year for such insects?

And then he released her arm, and she was dropping, through the beery friendship of the bar, away from the laughter and yeasty warmth of life, into a place of icy, infinite starlight.

Into death.

## 2

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### THE FIRST FAREWELL

Early Monday in Leicester Square. On a blue-grey morning like this the buildings looked heavier, more real somehow in rain than in sunlight. Drizzle drifted on a chill breeze from the north-east. The sky that smudged the rooftops looked so low you felt you could reach up and touch it.

John May, Senior Detective at the Peculiar Crimes Unit, looked around as he walked. He saw cloud fragments in lakes on broken pavements. Shop shutters rolling up. Squirrels lurking like ticket touts. Pigeons eating pasta. Office workers picking paths through roadworks as carefully as cats crossing cobblestones.

The doorways that once held homeless kids in sleeping bags now contained plastic sacks of empty champagne bottles, a sign of the city's spiralling wealth. Piccadilly Circus was once the hub of the universe, but today only tourists loitered beside Eros, trying to figure out how to cross the Haymarket without being run over.

*Every city has its main attraction,* May thought as he

negotiated a route through the dining gutter-parrots in the square. *Rome has the Coliseum, Paris the Eiffel Tower, but for Londoners, Leicester Square is now the king. It seems to have wrested the capital's crown from Piccadilly Circus to become our new focal point.*

He skirted a great puddle, avoided a blank-faced boy handing out free newspapers, another offering samples of chocolate cake.

*This is the only time of the day that Leicester Square is bearable, he thought. I hate it at night. The sheer number of people standing around, what do they all wait here for? They come simply because it's Leicester Square. There's not even a chance they'll spot Tom Cruise and take his photo on their mobile phones, because everyone knows film premieres only take place on week nights. There's nothing to see other than a giant picture of – who is it this week? – Johnny Depp outside the Odeon cinema, plus a very small park, the cheap-ticket kiosk and those parlours selling carpet-tile pizzas that you could dry-stone a wall with. At least Trafalgar Square has Nelson.*

The scene before him was almost devoid of people, and could not reveal the diegesis of so many overlapping lives. The city was shaped by assembly, proximity and the need for companionship. *Lone wolves can live in the hills, but London is for the terminally sociable.*

May caught sight of himself in a shop window. On any other day, he would have been pleased to note how neatly he fitted his elegant suit. He had remained fit and attractive despite his advancing years. His hair had greyed, but his jaw and waist were impressively firm, his colouring healthy, his energy level consistently high. *All the more reason to be angry, he thought. Today he had good reason*

to be ill-tempered. He had just come to the realization that he might very well be dying.

He tried not to think about the sinister manila envelope in his briefcase, about the X-rays, the Leicester Square Clinic's referral letter, and what this meant to his future. For once he just wanted to enjoy London and think of nothing in particular, but the city wasn't letting him.

*I remember when the square was different. Bigger and leafier, with cars slowly circling it and thousands of starlings fluttering darkly in the trees, that busker in a fez doing a sand-dance for coins outside the Empire. Look at the state of the place now. Kids need a purpose for coming here other than getting their iPods nicked. What will the next tawdry attraction be, I wonder? Celebrity mud-wrestling or the National Museum of Porn? At least I won't be here to witness the indignities thrust upon it. I'll be long gone. I used to drink mild and bitter in the Hand and Racquet with Arthur, then take a Guinness in the Green Man and French Horn over in St Martin's Lane. I wonder if we'll ever do that again? I always thought he would go first, but what if it's me? What on earth will Arthur do then?*

Bryant and May. Their names went together like Hector and Lysander, like Burke and Hare, unimaginable in separation. May still felt young, although he was far from it. He still looked good and felt fit, but his companion in crime detection, Arthur Bryant, was growing old before his eyes. He had all his critical faculties, far more than most, but the physical demands of the job were wearing him down. May wondered whether to hide his news from his partner for fear of upsetting him.

Despite his dark thoughts, May was still at his happiest here, walking to work through the city on a rainy February morning. Being near the idealistic young was enough to provide him with the energy to survive. He tried to imagine how visitors felt, seeing these sights for the first time. Every year there were more nationalities, more languages, and the people who stayed on became Londoners. It was an appealingly egalitarian notion. More than anything, he would miss all of this. Culinary terms were appropriate for the metropolis; it was a steaming stew, a broth, a great melting pot, momentarily levelling the richest and poorest as they rubbed shoulders on the streets.

Striding between the National Portrait Gallery and St Martin-in-the-Fields, he briefly stopped to reread the wording beneath the white stone statue of Dame Edith Cavell, the British nurse who faced a German firing squad for helping hundreds of soldiers escape from Belgium to the Netherlands. The inscription said: ‘Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone.’ *If there’s a more respectful creed by which to live*, he thought, *I can’t imagine what it is*.

He put the blame squarely on London and the strange effect it had on people. If he hadn’t come here as a young man and met Bryant, he would never have been infected with his partner’s passion for the place. He wouldn’t have stayed here all these years, unravelling the crimes deemed too abstract and bizarre to occupy the time of regular police forces. And even now, knowing that it might all come to an end, he could not entertain the thought of leaving.

Curiosity finally got the better of him, and he stopped

in the middle of the pavement to take out the envelope and tear it open. He could feel the letter inside, but did he have the nerve to read it?

*A good innings, some would say. Let the young have a go now. Time to turn the world over to them. To hell with it.* With a catch in his heart, he pulled out the single sheet of paper, unfolded it and scanned the two short paragraphs.

A tumour attached to the wall of his heart . . . a recommendation for immediate surgery . . . a serious risk owing to past cardiovascular problems that had created a weakness possibly leading to embolism.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Worse than he had expected, or better? Did he need to start planning for the inevitable? Should he tell anyone at the unit, or would it get back to Arthur?

*You can't go, old bean,* Bryant would say when he found out, and find out he would because he always did. *Not without me. I'm coming with you. You're not going off to have the biggest adventure of all on your own.* He'd mean it, too. For all his appearance of frailty he was an extremely tough old man; he'd just recovered from wrestling a killer in a snowdrift, and all he'd suffered was a slight chest cold. But he wouldn't want to be left behind. You couldn't have one without the other, two old friends as comfortable as cardigans.

*I'm not going without a fight,* May thought, shoving the letter into his pocket and striding off through the blustering rain towards the Charing Cross Road.