

# Storylandia

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Cover image by Kathryn L. Ramage

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### Odd Goings-on at Ferndell Farm and Other Stories

By Kathryn L. Ramage

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Odd Goings-on  
at Ferndell Farm  
and Other Stories

by  
Kathryn L. Ramage

# The Family Jewels

1

It was a beautiful, crisp, and colorful autumn afternoon. Frederick Babington, who was visiting his aunt in the Suffolk village of Abbotshill, decided to take a walk. Though the injuries he'd received during the Great War had taken a long time to heal, he was beginning to feel truly well again. His leg no longer pained him and he'd discarded his cane.

Billy Watkins, Freddie's manservant who had saved his life during the war and looked after him diligently since, insisted that he take a coat in case the evening grew chilly and not tire himself by going too far. Freddie promised to be back in time for dinner and grabbed his tweed coat down from the rack by the front door on his way out.

He had a delightful time wandering the country lanes around Abbotshill, climbing the green hills and kicking up piles of golden and russet leaves that had fallen under the trees. At dusk, he headed back toward his aunt's house by way of the Rose and Crown pub; a pint of the local beer seemed just the thing to complete his outing.

The taproom was crowded, but the girl at the bar smiled when she saw him. "We've been hearing some talk about you tonight, Mr. Freddie," she told him as she filled a mug from the tap. Freddie didn't understand this remark, until she lifted her chin to indicate a table

in the corner behind him. “Bill’s been here near an hour, telling everybody what a fine detective you are. Our constable was interested in particular.”

Freddie turned to look over his shoulder and located Billy seated with the village constable, Robert Cochrane. The two were deep in conversation and hadn’t noticed his entrance. Curious as to what they were saying, Freddie picked up his mug and made his way toward their table.

As he approached, a familiar voice could be heard through the chatter of the crowd: “I tell you, Mr. Freddie’s awfully clever. He’s solved plenty of mysteries, private-like for his family, you understand, but he likes a puzzle even if it’s nothing to do with murder. If anybody can figure out this one of yours, Rob, Mr. Freddie can.”

Freddie was deeply touched by the recommendation. There was an old saying: No man is a hero to his valet—but Billy evidently thought well enough of him to sing his praises in public.

“So you think he’ll see me?” asked Rob.

“If I ask him to, he will,” Billy assured his friend. “Whyn’t you come up to Abbot House with me? We’ll put it before Mr. Freddie and see what he thinks.” It was then he realized that Freddie was standing behind him; Billy’s face colored, his mouth opened and shut, and he ducked his head.

Freddie beamed at him affectionately. “Ask me what, Billy?”

“It’s Rob here.” Billy waved to indicate his friend. “He’s got puzzle as needs working out.”

“Bill says I ought to come to you, Mr. Babington, ‘bout this matter I was called to look into,” Rob explained. “There’s been no crime as such, but it’s an odd thing. Billy was telling me you like to investigate

odd things. I thought as you might want to have a look at it yourself.”

“What is it?”

Rob made as if to rise—he thought it disrespectful to be seated before a gentleman—but Freddie gestured for him to stay where he was. Rob remained seated, but sat up a little straighter in his chair as he reported, “There was a cottage broken into this afternoon on the far side of town—not burgled, Mr. Babington, as I say. Nothing’s been taken. But here’s the curious thing: the furniture’s been shifted about.”

“Shifted about?” echoed Freddie. “You mean, someone came in and rearranged their furniture?”

“Not so much ‘rearranged,’ more like pulled out of place. I’ve been constable in these parts for three years now, and it’s the most peculiar bit of mischief I’ve ever seen! Can you tell me why anybody’d want to do such a thing?”

The next morning, they accompanied Rob to visit the young couple who lived in the burgled cottage, Florence and Gerald Fairchild. Mr. Fairchild was a sturdy young man near Freddie’s own age, and his wife was a pretty girl with fair hair cropped in the latest fashion. They looked a little confused when the constable returned to their door with two strangers.

“Hello. Are you a police inspector?” Mr. Fairchild asked Freddie, but he looked rather doubtful; Freddie obviously had the appearance of a gentleman.

“This is Mr. Frederick Babington,” Rob introduced him. “He’s a private investigator. My friend, Bill Watkins here, works for him. He’s agreed to look into this trouble of yours.”

The Fairchilds brightened. The Babingtons were well-known as a county family of prominence. “How

do you do?” Gerald offered his hand. “You’re Dorothea Babington’s nephew, aren’t you? We’ve had the pleasure of calling on her at Abbot House, though I’m sorry we’ve never met you there. She speaks of you often.”

Florence was more impressed by their visitor’s profession. “I’ve never seen a private investigator before! I didn’t know they existed outside of books. Can you really help us, Mr. Babington? Has the constable told you what’s happened?”

“Yes, in part,” Freddie replied as they went into the small sitting-room. “I’d like to hear more about it from you.”

“There isn’t much we can tell,” said Gerald. “We’d been asked to tea yesterday with an auntie of Florrie’s who’s been out of this part of this world for years—she’s visiting another aunt who lives nearby. We started to walk there, when Florrie realized she’d forgotten her hat, so we had to come back.”

“But that turned out to be lucky,” said Florence. “We hadn’t been gone half an hour, but we saw at once that someone had been in the cottage while we were out. That chest there,” she pointed to a tall walnut chest of drawers against the sitting-room wall— “was pulled out, and the rugs here and in the front hall had been thrown back from the floor.”

“The kitchen table had been moved too,” her husband added.

“And the funny thing is that it’s happened before,” said Florence.

“You didn’t say so yesterday, Mrs. Fairchild,” Rob chided.

“We were talking it over last night. We didn’t realize it at the time. If I saw that the wardrobe in our bedroom had been moved, I didn’t think it very odd. I assumed that Jerry must’ve had a reason for doing it.

And he thought I had done it.”

“We didn’t think anything of it until yesterday,” Gerald finished. “It was hard not to see that something was going on when we came back unexpectedly and surprised whoever it was.”

“You didn’t see who it was?” asked Freddie.

The young man shook his head. “I told the constable here—they must’ve fled out the back door as we came in at the front. I went after them, but never saw anyone.”

“Nothing was taken?” asked Freddie.

Both shook their heads. “Nothing we’ve missed,” said Gerald.

Freddie had to agree that this sounded very odd indeed. “May I ask, Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild: how long have you lived here?”

“Three months,” Florence answered. “Uncle Bart let us have it just after we were married.”

“Bartholomew Taggart,” her husband explained. “The cottage belongs to him. I work in Ipswich and it seemed so much more pleasant to have a country home near Florrie’s people than a pokey little flat in town.”

“How long have these odd incidents been happening?” Freddie asked.

“They began last week,” said Florence. “At least, that’s the first time I can recall something being moved. The cottage used to belong to Uncle Bart’s mother, who died last year.” She let out a nervous little laugh. “I know you’ll think it silly of me, but I’ve sometimes wondered if we weren’t being haunted by Granny Julia’s ghost!”

When they left the Fairchilds, Freddie suggested that they call on Bartholomew Taggart. The Taggarts

weren't an old county family like the Babingtons, but had gained prominence a generation ago following the success of the Taggart boiled sweets factory in Colchester. Mr. Taggart was also the local MP. Freddie had met him once or twice at his aunt's house on social occasions and, whenever he got off the train at Abbotshill Halt, couldn't help seeing the conspicuously large and jarringly modern house where Mr. Taggart lived when Parliamentary duties didn't keep him in London.

While Freddie wasn't among Mr. Taggart's constituents, many of his relatives were. When he gave his name to the parlormaid, he and his companions were shown into the drawing room. Mr. Taggart, a chubby man of about fifty dressed like a country squire, was in conference with a robust lady of middle age whom Freddie had also seen at his aunt's and assumed to be his wife—but Mr. Taggart introduced her as his sister, Mrs. Broadbelt.

Once Freddie had explained what brought him, Mr. Taggart nodded solemnly. "Yes, Jerry told me something of this odd business last night," he said. "Nettie and I were just discussing it. It sounds most peculiar."

"I've heard of your investigations from your aunt, Mr. Babington," said Mrs. Broadbelt, "although I had no idea that you'd taken it up as a profession."

"I've only done it to help members of my family before this," Freddie acknowledged. "I suppose this will be my first professional case."

"It may not be, young man. I believe we are connected by marriage. Our youngest sister Ruby is married to Wilbur Chodeley, a cousin of yours?"

"Yes, Wilbur's a distant cousin. I don't know him well, I'm afraid." But Freddie was aware that Wilbur's

house was barely half a mile from the Fairchild cottage. Was Ruby Chodeley the aunt they had been going to visit?

This slight marital connection was sufficient incentive for Mrs. Broadbelt to invite Freddie to sit down and tell them how they could assist him.

“I’d like to find out more about that cottage,” Freddie began as he took a seat. Billy and Rob remained shyly at the door, Rob with his helmet in his hands and Billy eyeing the cut-glass bowl on the sideboard filled with Taggart Toffee Treats and the red-and-white bull’s-eye candies known as Taggart Targets. “The Fairchilds tell me that it’s your property, Mr. Taggart. It used to belong to your mother?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Mr. Taggart. “The cottage was Mother’s. She and our father lived there when they first married and when we were small children, before he came into prosperity. Father built this house for her when he had the money, but Mother preferred her old home. After he died, she returned there to live until she passed away last summer.”

“Did she live there alone?” Freddie asked.

“Her maid Dilly looked after her,” said Mrs. Broadbelt. “Doris Lavender—Mother always called her Dilly. She took care of Mother when she was a girl and looked after us when we were young. She never left Mother’s side until the day she died.”

“After Mother’s death, the cottage sat empty for months until young Florrie married,” her brother added. “I offered it to her and her husband as a honeymoon home.”

“Did anything odd like this happen when your mother lived there?”

“No...” Mr. Taggart glanced significantly at his sister.

“It’s the jewelry,” she concluded. “I’ve always said it was still in that cottage!”

“Jewelry?” said Rob, suddenly alert. “What jewelry is this, Ma’am?”

“Mother’s.” Mrs. Broadbelt explained in more detail, primarily to Freddie: “She had some lovely pieces—pearls, rings, a set of antique gold combs, and a famous emerald necklace worth more than all the rest together. You can see it, there.” She pointed to a portrait on the wall above the fireplace, depicting an elderly lady wearing a dress in the style of 1900 and a magnificent collar of green stones. Rob examined it more closely. “It’d been in Mother’s family for generations before their fortunes took a bad turn. All her own mother had left were these jewels and she held on to them to the end. Mother was just as loath to part with them.”

“I believe she sold a few small pieces to help Father begin his business,” Mr. Taggart interjected.

“Yes, but nothing she truly valued. That necklace was her prized possession. It had always gone from mother to daughter and Mother was determined to carry on the tradition. As her eldest daughter, I should’ve received it at her death.”

The door opened and another lady, more stylishly dressed than Mrs. Broadbelt, with a smart-looking girl of eighteen came into the room. “Bartholomew, dear—?” the lady began. “Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn’t realize we had visitors.” She examined Billy, then Rob, with a look of perplexity. “Why is the constable here?”

“Have you come about the burglary at Florrie’s?” the girl asked excitedly.

“It wasn’t a burglary, Meddy,” said Mr. Taggart. “Nothing was taken.”

“Only because the burglars were interrupted,” his wife replied. “Such things shouldn’t be allowed. It makes one feel quite unsafe. Something ought to be done about it.”

“We’re doing our best to put a stop to it, Ma’am,” Rob assured her deferentially. “That’s why I’ve brought Mr. Babington here.”

“Mr. Babington?” Mrs. Taggart’s eyes fell upon the young man seated beside Mrs. Broadbelt.

“He’s going to look into this matter for us, my dear,” her husband explained. “Mr. Babington, this is my wife and our daughter, Medora.” After the proper courtesies had been exchanged, Mr. Taggart went on, “Nettie and I were telling him about Mother’s missing jewelry. It may have something to do with this odd business at the cottage.”

“You said that your mother meant to leave her emerald necklace to her eldest daughter,” Freddie reminded them.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Mr. Taggart. “Mother made a list specifying which pieces were to be given to whom. The necklace, of course, was to go to Nettie, the pearls to Ruby, the combs to Opal, and other pieces were meant for Medora and my sisters’ daughters.”

“From eldest daughter to eldest daughter, it always was,” Mrs. Broadbelt repeated, “but since I have no children, Mother thought it more fair to divide her jewelry between all her daughters and granddaughters.”

“Mother Taggart was kind enough even to remember my niece Florence,” said Mrs. Taggart.

“Even though the girl was no relation to her,” added Mrs. Broadbelt, “except by marriage.”

Mrs. Taggart glared at her sister-in-law, and Freddie was afraid that the two ladies were going to quarrel.

“But the jewels was never given to anybody,” said Rob. “What happened to them?”

“Well, you know the way of old ladies,” said Mr. Taggart. “In her last days, Mother grew rather scatterbrained and began to worry about her jewelry box being stolen. We think that she must’ve hidden it someplace safe, but she never told us where. Perhaps she forgot. We went through her things after her funeral, searched the cottage, but never found it. That was well over a year ago.”

When Freddie, Rob, and Billy left the Taggart house, Mrs. Broadbelt exited with them.

“Your aunt Dorothea isn’t the only one I’ve heard speak of you, Mr. Babington,” she told Freddie once they were outside. “I’m also acquainted with Julius Babington of Cherrystone House as well as your aunt Lydia. They say you’re an intelligent young man, but you’ve taken a peculiar turn since the war. Julius is kind enough to attribute it to shell shock and that you only need a steadying influence like marriage or the diplomatic service to put you right again. Lydia maintains that there’s always been something odd about you.”

Freddie had to laugh.

“Well, I’ve never taken Lydia at her word about anyone,” Mrs. Broadbelt conceded. “I prefer to form my own judgments about people. Perhaps some sort of idiosyncrasy is just what a good investigator needs to do his work. It requires a keen imagination, which is a quality I’m sorry to say most respectable people lack. You’ll find Mother’s jewelry, won’t you?”

“If I can,” Freddie answered, “but the strange occurrences the Fairchilds have experienced at their cottage may have nothing to do with your mother’s

missing jewelry. It may be a separate problem entirely.”

“Oh, pshaw!” Mrs. Broadbelt dismissed this suggestion. “It’s all one and the same. Find out who’s plaguing Florrie and Jerry and I’ve no doubt you’ll find out what Mother did with her jewelry. I always said that it must still be somewhere in that cottage. You’ll see in the end that I’m right!”

2

“What do we do now?” asked Billy as he munched on purloined toffee.

“Return to Abbot House for lunch. I’m famished,” Freddie answered and gratefully accepted a piece of toffee from his friend. “This afternoon, I’ll call on the Chodeleys. You needn’t come with me, Bill, nor you, Constable Cochrane,” he added to Rob. “I’ve already taken you away from your regular duties too much today.”

“It’s been a pleasure seeing you work, Mr. Babington,” said Rob, “but you’re right—I’ve my rounds to do.”

“Then why don’t you carry on, and we’ll meet at the Rose and Crown this evening? If I have anything to tell you, I can do so then.”

Rob agreed to this and, with a tap on the rim of his helmet, went on his way.

Over lunch with his Aunt Dorothea, Freddie pondered his proposed visit to the Chodeleys. He’d never paid a call on them before and he needed an excuse for doing so now. His aunt would be happy to accompany him, but she was a rather scatterbrained old lady. If he confided in her about the true purpose behind this visit, would she be able to keep it to herself? Much as

he loved her, he doubted it.

While he was considering how to suggest a visit to the Chodeleys without having to explain why he wanted to go, a better solution arrived in the form of his cousin Virginia Barlow. Virginia and her husband Amyas were also staying at Abbot House, but had been gone this past weekend to return their eldest sons to school. Virginia arrived shortly after lunch, explaining that Amyas had stayed on to see the boys settled. A Babington by birth, Virginia had grown up in Abbotshill. She was in her middle thirties, the same age as Ruby Chodeley, and must surely be better acquainted with Ruby than Freddie was himself.

Freddie broached the subject at the first opportunity.

“Yes, of course I know Ruby. She and Poppy Blakiston and I were schoolgirls together at St. Mary’s. But why do you want to see her?” Virginia asked. “Are you conducting another of your investigations, Freddie?” She had been involved in one of his previous cases.

“Yes, but it’s no murder this time.”

“Well, thank goodness for that! What’s Ruby done?”

“Nothing that I know of, but I’ve been given an odd puzzle to solve.” As Freddie described the curious incident at the Fairchild cottage and his subsequent visit to the Taggarts, Virginia grew more interested.

“I remember hearing of the missing jewels after old Mrs. Taggart’s death,” she said. “There was a great to-do about it last winter—you were away in that nursing home at the time. I’ve always wondered what became of them. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could find them?”

“Then you’ll help? Will you come with me?”

Freddie asked her. “The Chodeleys may have already heard what’s happened at the Fairchild cottage, but I’d rather not have them or anyone connected with the late Mrs. Taggart know that I’m looking into it. It’d look rather odd if I appear on their doorstep alone and uninvited.”

Virginia smiled. “I’ve been invited. Ruby asked me to drop in for tea one afternoon. She has a sister visiting whom she’s eager for me to meet.”

“Can we go today?” Freddie asked.

Virginia agreed and at tea-time, they went to the Chodeleys’ home on the other side of the village.

Ruby Chodeley, a plump little lady with marcelled hair and a pleasant, round face enhanced by smudged circles of rouge, looked surprised and curious when Virginia appeared at her door with Freddie.

Virginia explained her escort: “Amyas is very sorry he wasn’t able to come, but Freddie was kind enough to accompany me in his place. You don’t mind, do you, Ruby?”

“Not at all,” Ruby answered. “Come in, please, both of you. We already have quite a crowd in the parlor, but we can squeeze in two more.”

Ruby showed them to her parlor, where Wilbur and their two small daughters were entertaining several visitors: Prunella Proudhome, Penelope “Poppy” Blakiston, a mutual cousin of Freddie’s, Virginia’s, and Wilbur’s, and her husband Phineas, and to Freddie’s surprise, Mrs. Broadbelt. On the sofa in the center of the room, as guest of honor, sat another plump middle-aged lady who bore a resemblance to both Ruby and Mrs. Broadbelt. On either side of this lady sat a pair of sturdy-looking girls in their late teens.

“This is my sister, Mrs. Opal Windle,” Ruby introduced the trio, “and her daughters, Paula and Francie. I daresay you won’t remember Opal. She went to live in South Africa twenty-five years ago. This is her first visit home since.”

“How long are you staying?” Virginia asked.

“Only a few weeks,” Opal said with traces of a colonial accent. “My husband’s waiting for us to return, but I wanted to see my family again after so long. Everyone’s changed from when I last saw them. I’ve missed so much.”

“She missed both Father’s and Mother’s funerals, poor dear,” said Mrs. Broadbelt.

“My daughters have never been to England before.” Opal indicated the two girls seated beside her, “Ruby’s done her best to see that they have the chance to meet everyone they can during this visit.”

“I’m eager for them to meet everyone around Abbotshill,” Ruby agreed. “Especially the young people.” She gave Freddie a speculative look that he’d often seen from the mothers, grandmothers, and aunts of young girls. In spite of the scars both mental and physical he’d suffered from the war, he was considered an extremely eligible bachelor.

“Have you girls made many friends here?” Mrs. Broadbelt asked her nieces. “I believe Medora’s taken you around and introduced you to her circle.”

“Oh, yes, Medora’s been quite nice to us,” the younger girl spoke in a colonial accent more broad than her mother’s. “She knows so many people!”

“Has she taken you to meet your cousin Florence yet?”

“I don’t think so...” Francie looked to her mother for assistance.

“There was somebody we were supposed to meet

yesterday,” said Paula. “Aunt Ruby invited her and her new husband to tea, only they never arrived. Was that her, Auntie?”

“Yes, that was Florence,” said Ruby. “I must say that I’m disappointed. She promised most faithfully they’d come. You girls were late to tea yourselves.”

“We were out with Medora, Aunt Ruby,” said Paula. “We lost track of the time.”

Ruby turned to her eldest sister. “Do you know what happened to Florence, Nettie?”

“I heard that they had some trouble at the cottage,” Mrs. Broadbelt replied.

Virginia glanced at Freddie; he was watching Mrs. Broadbelt closely. Aside from Virginia, she was the only person here who knew about his investigation. What did she mean by deliberately bringing up Florence Fairchild and the cottage? If only he knew what she was up to!

With a knowing twinkle in her eyes, Mrs. Broadbelt added, “Rats, I believe. It’s that old cottage of Mother’s, you know,” she told Opal. “It sat empty for far too long after she passed away.”

“How unpleasant!” said Opal with a shudder. “I know Mother treasured the old place, but I wouldn’t live there for anything.”

“You don’t wish to visit the old cottage while you’re here?” asked Mrs. Broadbelt. “Your daughters might like to see the home where you grew up.”

“No, indeed. I’d rather remember it the way it was when we were children. It’s been so long, I’m sure I wouldn’t know it anymore. If the girls want to see it, Medora can take them.”

After some further conversation with the South African visitors, attention turned to Freddie; he too was something of an outsider to this tiny social circle

and his recent activities were of interest.

“We don’t see much of you in Abbotshill, Freddie,” said Ruby, “though of course we’ve heard you’ve been quite busy lately. That horrible tragedy at Marsh Hall this spring.”

“You were the one who helped to clear that Marsh cousin of yours of suspicion of murder, weren’t you?” asked Poppy. “That’s what everyone says.”

Although this wasn’t a topic that Freddie cared to pursue, he had to admit to this. The mystery at Marsh Hall had been the very first he’d solved.

“Like a real detective?” said Poppy. “How exciting!”

“A regular Sherlock Holmes, eh?” laughed Wilbur. “You’ll have to buy yourself a deerstalker and give up cigarettes for a pipe, old man, if you mean to take up the job properly.”

“I don’t think I could manage that,” Freddie answered diffidently.

“But you’ve done it other times too.”

“I only muddle along to try and help my friends.” The last thing he wanted was for anyone present to think of him as a professional investigator. Ruby was already interested and Mrs. Windle and her daughters were beginning to regard him with curiosity. Someone might ask if he was working on a case right now.

Virginia came to his aid. “Of course not. What a silly idea! A detective has to do things like— well— climb over walls and jump out of windows and run after criminals. You know poor Freddie isn’t up to that sort of adventure.”

“Quite beyond me.” Freddie raised his burn-scarred left hand as evidence of his semi-invalid state. “And I don’t think I’d care to shoot a revolver again.”

“Ah, I agree with you there,” said Phineas. “The war’s even put me off shooting pheasants. Can’t stand the bally noise of the guns anymore.”

The parlor door burst open and Ruby’s fifteen-year-old son Wilbur Jr. came in with his best friend and partner-in-mischief, Freddie’s young cousin Alec Proudhome.

“Sit down, boys! Sit down and behave yourselves,” Ruby urged them. “Have you had your tea?”

“Yes, Mother,” Will replied, and headed straight for the tea-table. Alec tweaked one of the little Chodeley girls’ hair-ribbon in greeting; when Will tossed a scone to him, he caught it, then sat on the hearthrug at Prunella’s feet. Will plopped himself down on a footstool to munch on another. “Alec’s grandfather gave us a good tea, so we’re nearly full up,” he reported through a mouthful.

“Young boys are never full up,” said Wilbur, and everyone laughed. “I suppose it’s better that the two of you go from house to house cramming yourselves with jam and cake than getting into trouble.”

“What naughtiness have you been up to today?” Alec’s grandmother asked indulgently.

“Nothing particular, Granny Pru,” Alec answered. “We’ve just been wandering around, looking for fun.”

“We all know your idea of fun,” said Phineas. “Who was it that stopped up Mrs. Good’s chimney with old birds’ nests? Who let the Wenhams’ cows out of the pasture last week and then ran off with a bushel of apples while Farmer Wenham and his sons were busy chasing the cows? Who left those same apples smashed on a dozen doorsteps?”

“Not us, Uncle Phin!” Will protested, which set up another round of laughter. No one believed him.

“Nonsense, my boy,” said his father. “If there’s any mischief going on, the two of you are sure to be at the heart of it. It’ll be a relief to the neighbors when you go back to school.”

“I can’t wait to tell Amyas what I’ve been doing today,” Virginia said after they left the Chodeleys’ and were walking through the village. “He looks rather askance at these investigations of yours, but Poppy was right—it was exciting to be on the detective’s side of things. I almost felt frightened when everyone began to ask you about your work. And Mrs. Broadbelt! Whatever did she mean by talking about problems at the old cottage? She knows you’re involved, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, she knows,” Freddie answered. “What’s more, I’m sure she guessed why I visited her sister today.”

“I thought I spied a certain glint in her eye. Take care, Freddie. She’s a clever old lady. I don’t know her well, but I’ve seen enough to know that she rules over Ruby and their brother just as their mother used to. She had an eye on her sisters today. I wonder if she mentioned the cottage to see how they responded. Did you notice?”

Freddie had noticed. He was beginning to wonder if Mrs. Broadbelt was conducting an investigation of her own. “I suspect there isn’t much that goes past her unobserved.”

“Do you think she knows where those jewels are?” asked Virginia.

“I’m certain she doesn’t. She’d be wearing her emeralds now if she did.”

“What about the sisters? Could it be Ruby? I’d hate to think so—she was always a sweet girl. I’m afraid I don’t remember what Mrs. Windle was like at all.”

Freddie was forming ideas of his own. After he'd thanked Virginia for her help, he saw her on her way up the lane to Abbot House but didn't go with her. Instead, he went to the Rose and Crown. It was early; the usual crowd of farm-lads and village shopkeepers hadn't yet come in nor had Rob finished his rounds, but Billy was there, talking softly to the barmaid. The girl's cheeks were pink and her eyes shone into Billy's as she leaned on one side of the bar and he on the other. They held each others' hands across it. Freddie stopped in the doorway, not wishing to interrupt, but the barmaid was alert to the arrival of a customer even before she realized who it was and, blushing, withdrew her hands. When Billy turned to see Freddie, he blushed more deeply than his sweetheart. Freddie tactfully pretended not to notice, but requested a pint and chose a table to sit and wait for the constable.

When Rob Cochrane finished his rounds, he left his bicycle outside the pub door and joined Freddie, eager for news. Billy sat with them and, over a round of the local beer, Freddie told them both about his visit to the Chodeleys. Rob took particular note when Freddie mentioned the two boys.

"It sounds to me like this whole mystery's likely nothing more'n young Will and Alec up to their tricks," he said. "We've had our share of those lads' pranks before this."

"I'm afraid, Constable, that this is more than a prank," Freddie answered solemnly. "There's been a crime—or, at least, an attempt at a rather mean and petty one. Our burglars are sure to try again. They haven't found what they're after."

"The missing jewelry, you mean?" asked Billy.

"Yes, that's right. I'm certain that Mrs. Broadbelt is correct. It's still in that cottage somewhere, and I've

a good idea who's looking for it. It's fairly obvious, when you think about it."

Billy and Rob stared at him blankly.

Freddie laughed. "Never mind—you'll see soon enough." He rose to fetch a fresh round of beers and, as he walked away from the table, he heard a murmured exchange behind him:

"D'you know who he means, Billy?"

"No, but I told you Mr. Freddie was clever, didn't I?"

3

In the morning, they went back to the Fairchild cottage. Florence welcomed them in and asked if they'd gotten very far with the problem.

"We've made some progress, Mrs. Fairchild," Freddie told her. "I've come to ask you and your husband a few more questions. I hope you'll forgive me if they seem a little odd."

"I'll forgive anything if it will help to clear this problem up," Florence assured him. "What is it you want to know, Mr. Babington?"

"Is this furniture yours or was it here when you moved in?"

"Most of it's ours. It was given to me or to Jerry by our families when we married."

"What about the late Mrs. Taggart's belongings? Do you know where they've gone?"

"Uncle Bart took his mother's things away long before we moved in. He's got some of her furniture at his house now and Aunt Nettie has the rest."

"Do you mind if we shift one or two pieces of furniture?" Freddie requested. "I believe you said that this chest of drawers had been pulled away from the wall?"

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