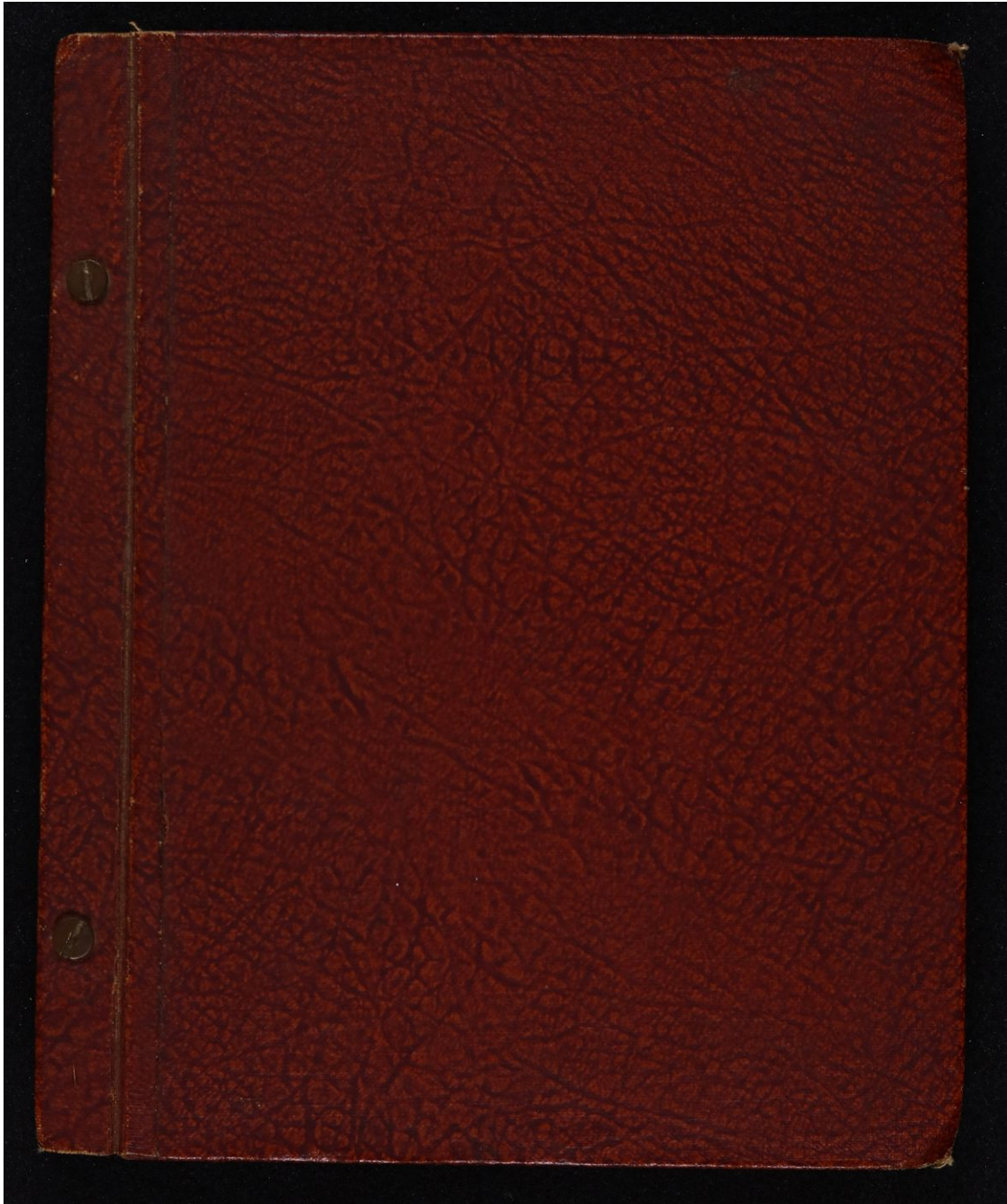
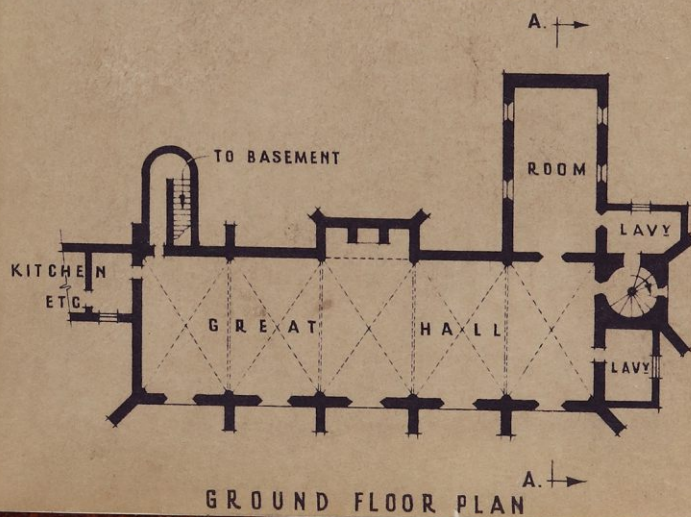
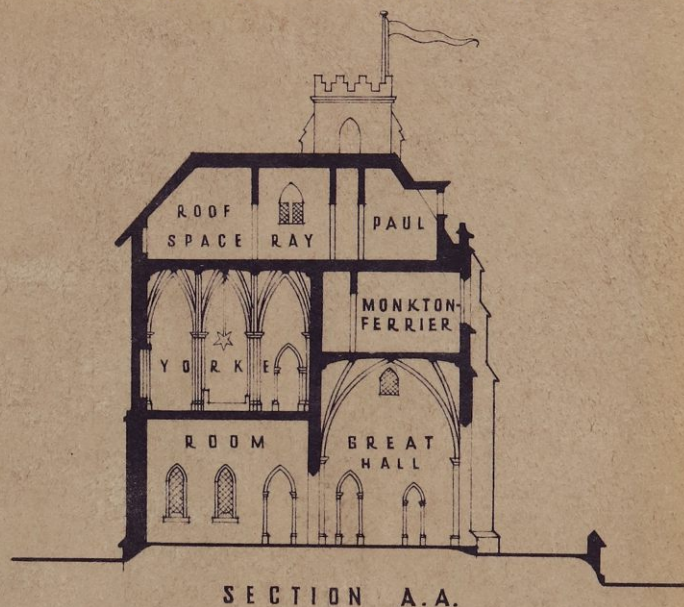


## The Melwold Mystery

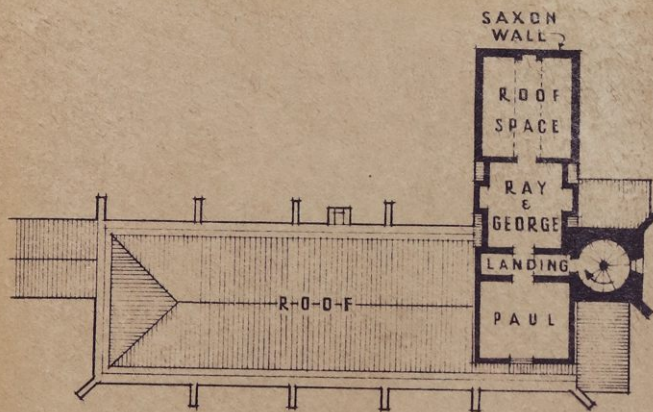
The first detective novel that Harding wrote was *How Briggs Died*, published during the Second World War in London, in 1940. (Available on Amazon.) The second detective novel (the same detective starring in both books) was *The Melwold Mystery*, written in India in 1940, revised in 1951, but not published at the time. (We will publish this in due course.) Here is the first chapter of the typescript.



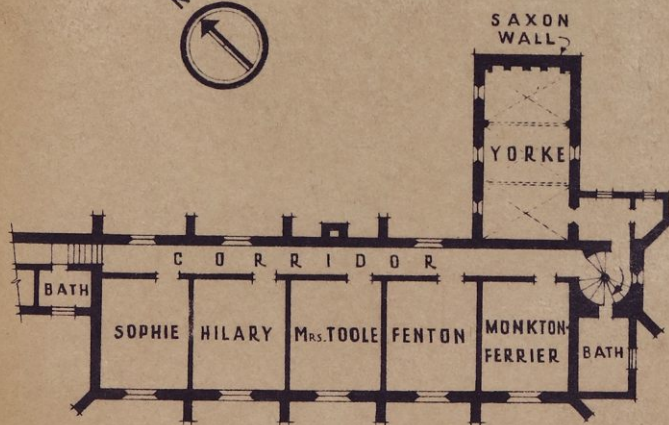
MELWOLD ABBEY  
SKETCH PLANS







SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

D. E. HARDING

CHAPTER I

He paid off the taxi-driver, and entered the pavement to his front door.

It was an old light blue, in an old setting. The generous flared surface was silky smooth and without ornament, like the flanks of an expensive saloon car. Its wheels were the deep rich yellow of marigolds. And while the door was in itself an object likely to attract the passer-by, the shock of it was increased by the fact that the thing stood in the midst of a unrelieved rectangle of whitewashed brick, without a single

THE MELWOLD MYSTERY

architectural feature that was not a part of the wall. It had suggested a well-furnished guest room, with a black and white carpet and heavy leather furniture. Even before the taxi-driver had pulled down, the neighbors had begun disapproving remarks at the house and about it. The day. And this house, having come to the end of its life, was being erected in elegant stainless-steel yesterday when the door. But apart from one or two illegible letters in the papers, a well-kept record of the local property owners' association, and a landscape artist with a bar truck, the world had shrugged its shoulders and looked itself to Ray's new house. It had written nothing about the old owners of being so different and unEnglish, and the neighbors had gone about its business as usual. There was no word of the new house being built for anything between the old and the new.

He allowed himself to linger over the business of collecting the material and so that he might write the new house being built for anything

PART I

CHAPTER I

Ray paid off the taxi-driver, and crossed the pavement to his front door.

It was an odd front door, in an odd setting. Its generous flush surface was silky-smooth and without blemish, like the flanks of an expensive saloon car. Its colour was the deep rich yellow of mari-golds. And while the door was in itself an object likely to startle the passer-by, the shock of it was increased by the fact that the thing stood in the midst of an unrelieved rectangle of whitewashed brick, without windows, or cornice, or visible roof, or any architectural feature whatever. To its owner it had suggested a well-furnished cubist sun, rising into a bleak and otherwise empty heaven.

Even before the scaffolding was pulled down, the neighbours had wagged disapproving heads at the house and named it The Box. And this name, having come to Ray's ears, presently appeared in elegant stainless-steel lettering above the door. But apart from one or two impolite letters in the papers, a mild protest by the local property holders' association, and a frustrated effort with a tar brush, the world had shrugged its shoulders and resigned itself to Ray's new house. It had muttered something about the bad manners of being so different and unEnglish, and then (according to Ray) gone about its business of rebuilding London in styles that have been stone dead for anything between four and fourteen generations.

He allowed himself to linger over the business of unlocking the door, so that he might enjoy once more the feeling of material and



spiritual parenthood which the sight of his home always aroused in him. Having designed the whole, and made parts of it with his own hands, a certain maternal tenderness was to be expected.

He assessed his work for the hundredth time, saw that it was still very good, and went in. Outside, London had clattered and roared. Closing the door was like switching off a noisy radio: the perfect quiet inside the house smote the ears with an excess of silence. Ray congratulated himself, again for the hundredth time, on the elaborate insulation of the walls, the exceptional pile of the carpet, the windows with double glass, and the air-conditioning plant -- arrangements which (as he told his friends) gave him the advantages of living on a peak in Darien, while remaining within easy reach of the British Museum Library, Covent Garden, the Tate, and the delicatessen round the corner.

The room in which he stood was vast -- barn-like to those who merely disapproved, factory-like to those who held stronger views. It was a vast room for the sufficient reason that it was the only room, not counting the kitchenette and usual offices. Low movable screens marked out the floor into spaces for eating and sleeping and working and lounging; but they did not partition <sup>the</sup> room, which remained one and indivisible. Ray was particularly pleased with the resulting elasticity. One day the sitting room would double itself to fit a party; another day it would merge with the dining room or the study; and often all the screens would go, showing off to advantage the spaciousness of the Box.

Yet Box, it suddenly struck him, was the wrong word. It should have been Tank. For, over the patternless sea-green carpet fitted

right up to the walls, over the four perfectly bare walls themselves, there shone, cold and wonderfully luminous, the great glass ceiling, like the gleaming undersurface of another world.....

.....

A cough roused him from these musings with what was more than a jerk. Gripping the walking stick that he still held, he wheeled round.

Two people -- a man and a woman -- were sitting there all too comfortably. The screens had hidden them.

"Forgive us," the woman mocked, "for interrupting your devotions."

Ray's startled scowl melted into something like urbanity. With drawn-out deliberation he put his walking stick in its proper place by the door, and approached his visitors.

"I always end by forgiving you, Hilary," he said. "But first introduce me, and then explain how you broke in."

Turning from Ray, Hilary Bone bestowed her celebrated smile upon her companion. She said: "You already know by repute the distinguished archaeologist, detective, and odd-job-man, Jethro Ray. Well, here he is in person. And what a person!"

Her critical eye worked down from Ray's sandy and straying hair, by way of his squinting eyes shining behind disconcertingly thick spectacles, green woollen tie, and tube-like flannel trousers, to his slightly down-at-heel shoes.

"You'll agree," she remarked, "that he's a disgrace to his house."

Ray smiled a teeth-revealing smile and answered mildly: "When you've finished ticking off my points like a dog-judge, perhaps you'll tell me who my other guest is. Or shall we go on treating



him as mere furniture?"

"To confuse him with your furniture" -- she waved a perfectly gloved hand in the direction of a glass-and-steel table -- "would be too insulting..... Here is Mr Monkton-Ferrier."

When these casual and belated proprieties were over, and everybody had sat down on what were really (in spite of Hilary's comments) luxuriously comfortable chairs, Ray turned to her and asked:

"Would it be inhospitable to want to know just how you got in?"

"By the ordinary method of ringing the bell. George did the rest."

"George?" cried Ray. "Has he moved in again? Where is he?"

"In the kitchen making tea. I'll fetch him."

In her absence Ray examined unobtrusively his other visitor. White-haired, with an imperial beard to match, and a dapper bow tie, he looked vaguely ambassadorial. Ray got the impression that Monkton-Ferrier's rotund, tight little body consisted of some peculiarly energetic substance -- so much so that his smooth reddish skin, and even his buttoned-up blue suit, seemed to suffer from the strain.

The fact that the man was talking penetrated Ray's consciousness.

"...so stimulating to come into a really contemporary house for once. As severely practical as a 'plane, and as beautiful. Perfectly comfortable to the eye as well as the ear. The scale is magnificent, after the poky, over-furnished vulgarities we live in. Congratulations."

"That's kind of you now. My visitors, doing their best not to hurt my feelings, usually say what an amusing idea it is to live in a warehouse, and won't it be nice when I've finished converting it



into a house."

Monkton-Ferrier's trim little figure trembled with internal laughter, which presently ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

"But why," he asked, "have you made everything so low? There's almost nothing but blank wall above waist-height."

"Haven't you noticed, when you're walking down the pit of a full theatre, or down a hill, how on top of things you feel? Physical height produces its mental counterpart. Particularly in his own house a man likes to feel superior, but if he's surrounded with furniture that competes in stature with himself, and with a lot of things he has to look up to instead of down on, why he starts feeling like a worm. Of course..."

"Don't lecture," cried George, arriving with a loaded tea-tray.

Ray looked on his friend with a pained expression.

"Welcome home," he said, without enthusiasm.

George grinned sheepishly. "I moved in last week."

"Quite comfortable, I hope."

"Well there is...." -- He was interrupted by Hilary coughing.

"I'll deal with you later, George... Where were we? Oh yes, the house."

Hilary shook her head. "You seem to think you're the only one with an odd house. The Monkton-Ferrier place is much queerer than this."

Having poured out tea, Hilary started to tell George a long tale about her stage career. The other two went on with their conversation.

"Yes," said Monkton-Ferrier. "My house would interest you as an archaeologist. It was built by the mad Earl of Melwold in Strawberry-

thinking. Do you mean to say you're going to sit here doing nothing while atrocities like this are going on under the same roof?"

"What do you suggest?"

"Let her out, of course."

"Chivalrous, but not very practical at this moment. Remember we're on this Monkton-Ferrier's island, and in his power..... Tell me, was this cry, or whatever you call it, human?"

"Yes."

"When you heard it your nerves were strung up, you know. Did you hear what you expected to hear?"

"Are you suggesting he keeps animals down there?"

Ray pondered. At length he said: "I grant you three things, George. First, that one does not keep pets, and still less the more useful kinds of domestic animal, in such places. Second, that one does not generally call an animal by one's wife's Christian name. Third, that it would be a strange coincidence if another woman called Fay were here. All of which goes to support your theory. On the other hand....."

He broke off, and sat staring intently at George. "Try to remember exactly what occurred," he said. "It was very dark down there. It must have been very difficult for you to see who was carrying the torch, unless he happened to shine it on to his own face. Did he?"

"No....." George admitted, reluctantly. Then he gave a start. "Here! What are you driving at?"

Ray went on: "Did you hear him speak quite distinctly?"

"Quite distinctly." -- George was getting angry now -- "Do you think I'm lying to you? Because if so..."



Hill Gothic, in the seventeen-eighties. Melwold Abbey. It's on a little island -- Spurgis Island. You've heard of it?"

"I think so. Haven't you some Saxon remains?"

"A few walls and arches, which the Earl incorporated in his folly. You're a Saxon specialist, Hilary's told me."

Ray didn't deny it.

"Well then, you must come down for a long week-end and look round. The Saxon work really is unusually good. In any case the Abbey itself is worth a visit. It will be still more amusing when my daughter has done painting the walls."

"It sounds stimulating -- not to say improbable."

"The place is improbable. That's why I took it. By night, with half a gale blowing up outside, and nothing but paraffin lamps indoors, and Sophie's rather scarifying paintings writhing up the walls till they're absorbed into the darkness of the vault -- the effect is genuine Poe. Though I must admit that in the daytime the Abbey makes me think of Elstree's idea of Hollywood's idea of the old English ancestral home. When we shifted there a few months back the place was as bleak as a wine cellar, and about as comfortable. Only crazy. When we've finished it will be habitable, but certainly not sane. The wall-paintings will take care of that."

"I've always thought," said Ray, "that the insides of Gothic churches were half ruined when the iconoclasts whitewashed them. Your place sounds like a mediaeval parish church as it was meant to be -- an eschatological poster in full colour, leaving nothing to the imagination. Tailed and clawed devils roasting the souls of the damned over eternal fires, and the complacent blest looking down from high Heaven. (Looking down -- there you have the importance of

height again.) And the only slightly less repulsive boredom of saints and angels, with eternity on their hands. Are your daughter's murals in the same style?"

"They're terrifying," Hilary cut in. "You must see them."

"I've already asked him to come down. What about next week-end? George and Hilary are coming."

Ray thought it might be difficult to get away.

"Do come," the little man persisted, "if you can bear with a certain amount of discomfort. The place is chaotic now. The main room's half workshop, and electric wires are draped everywhere. But with any luck the Abbey should be fairly habitable by next week-end."

"You make Melwold sound doubly attractive. Carpentry is one of my occasional hobbies. These bookcases, for instance.... But I'm afraid..."

"I really think you ought to cancel whatever it is and come with us instead," Monkton-Ferrier interrupted. "If it's a normal week-end party you'll probably have nothing to do but stifle your yawns and wish for Monday morning. Whereas with us... I rely on you, Hilary and George, to bring him along."

"Leave it to us," said Hilary. "We'll bring him, dungarees and all."

Hilary stayed on, after Monkton-Ferrier, accompanied by George, had gone.

At twenty-six, Hilary Bone had already got herself a reputation, amongst discriminating theatre-goers, as an actress of real, if erratic, brilliance. She always excelled in the part of the languid over-sophisticated society woman, whose elaborately modish exterior



and polished manners make anything like a mind seem irrelevant, if not actually a solecism. And the odd thing was that, off-stage, her fashion-plate kind of beauty went perfectly with her exceptional intelligence. Or so Ray, who had known and admired and feared her for longer than he could remember, devoutly believed.

"Now Hilary," he began petulantly, "what is all this? Who is this eccentric that looks like a Balkan impresario, and talks like ....?"

"You. That's why I brought him along. I had the feeling that you were waiting for someone like me to bring you together."

"So! And what does he do besides haunt his cloisters in a cowl? I suppose he does wear a cowl? Money having provided him with an abbey, and nature with a tonsure, the rest seems inevitable."

Hilary sighed. "Don't be so insufferably superior. What do you do, except play at building houses, catching murderers, and nosing round cobwebby ruins?"

"Only when he plays is man really human," Ray quoted pompously. "But Monkton-Ferrier ...?"

"Well, just now he writes, tries to make films of one sort and another, and renovates his abbey. Before that, he seems to have done almost everything. Rather a rolling stone, you know. His wife is charming. He remarried recently."

"Then the daughter who paints is the child of a previous marriage?"

"That's right. His first wife died rather suddenly about two years ago. Sophie and Paul are her children."

"Paul Monkton-Ferrier -- that's a familiar name.... A broad, rather hunched-up man, tough-looking, with close-cropped hair like a

convict?"

"Not really. But I can quite believe that's how he'd look to you."

"And <sup>a</sup>rugger man? Bit of an actor, too? Then I know him. Oxford five or six years ago.... That settles it, Hilary. You and George are welcome to this fellow's island. I'm sticking here."

"Don't be childish, Ray. Paul's improved beyond recognition. He's going to do well as a film actor. And his sister is altogether charming."

"Sister or no sister, I'm not interested."

Ray pulled off his glasses and started polishing them assiduously. Blinking, he peered at Hilary with his head on one side.

"I can't make you out," he said. "One would think you got a fee from the prior of Melwold Abbey for every acolyte you dragged along. Or have you suddenly, after all these wasted years, awakened to my fascination?"

Hilary set his mind at rest on that score, and tried another approach.

"Do you believe in premonitions?"

"No!" Ray retorted, putting on his spectacles with an air of finality. "At least, not in yours. Have you forgotten the result of your last hunch? I often wonder how I got away with my life, on that occasion."

But Hilary was not to be put off. "All the same," she persisted, "I've a feeling -- a conviction -- that Spurgis Island harbours a mystery. The family, their abbey, and their island, are all odd. But that's not what I mean. Something queer and rather sinister -- I can't put my finger on it -- surrounds the Monkton-Ferriers. You



might localize it."

Ray laughed mirthlessly. "I once knew a man who felt there was something queer in the air. He was right. But it wasn't one of your precious premonitions. The queerness was his own work, murderous work..... I have it! You're about to get rid of one of your friends and you want to involve me.... I provide the screen of innocence."

"Ass!"

"Or is it smuggling? Under your psychic influence I already begin to suspect this Monkton fellow of gun-running, white-slave traffic...."

"Fool!"

"His first wife died suddenly, you say. Plain case of poisoning by husband and second wife elect."

"Well," -- Hilary's voice was quite serious now -- "there was some talk at the time."

"Talk!" Ray snorted. "What's talk? If you could go by the talk of this neighbourhood I sacrifice cats to Satan and gabble the Black Mass here nightly. If all <sup>that</sup> people said about you were true, you'd .... Bah!"

"Who said I believed it?" Hilary asked patiently. "Take it or leave it."

"I leave it. I don't trust these hunches. You oughtn't to either."

Hilary crushed out her cigarette with severe deliberation and got up to go. Ray waved protesting hands.

"Now Hilary, don't be unreasonable. You can't expect to drag me about as if I were your husband, you know."

"I know," Hilary replied, moving towards the door. "If an engaging talker like Conrad Monkton-Ferrier, an atmosphere of mystery and perhaps a chance of some detective work, a delightful girl like Sophie, some astonishing murals, and Saxon walls with fascinating pieces of carving -- if all this won't take you to Spurgis Island, obviously I can't. Goodbye."

But Ray stood barring the door.

"You said Saxon carvings."

"Quite elaborate ones."

Ray shook his head doubtfully. "Probably Gothic Revival fripperies. The mad Earl's work. You're a good actress Hilary, but that's no help when it comes to telling pre-Conquest ornament from a modern fake. Don't tell me you're an archaeologist on the sly."

"God forbid! But in this case at least I'm sure of my ground because Conrad Monkton-Ferrier himself, and he knows about these things, spent ~~leasily~~ half an hour pointing out to me a lot of mouldering arches and blank walls, and carvings I could have done better myself. He said they were tenth century. They looked miserable to me. I advised him to pull them down."

"What?" Ray cried in an agonized voice. "Oh all right, I'll come," he added grudgingly. "But if it turns out to be faked, I'll ...."

And that was how Ray came to be involved in quite the oddest and most complex case of his career as a criminal investigator.