

Dear Nancy,

I'm scribbling this quickly to say that I had hoped to come and see you at the Grange on Sunday but Father is taking me out for a treat. He says that I need cheering up. If he'd only let me abandon that wretched school I would be cheerful every day! Rest assured, I am thinking all the time about our investigation.

Your friend,

Ella Otter

P.S. If you come across any more strange occurrences: remember, think scientifically.

17. GOOD HUNTING

Professor Otter's idea of a treat was to visit a ruined abbey and then call on another professor for tea. Many years ago he had left his small town in America, which he felt was much too *new*, to study archaeology in England; and he never tired of looking at heaps of old stones. In the ordinary run of things Ella would have enjoyed the outing, but today she felt as if it was wasting precious time.

The abbey was in the middle of a farmer's field. Low ruins of walls were barely visible through their covering of brambles and shaggy grass. They marked rooms and doorways and passages, all meaningless to Ella. She would have learned something if she had listened to her father, but she was too busy thinking, 'I could be at Oxcombe, looking for clues and questioning people!' She scrambled up the remains of a stone archway and watched the afternoon sun drop down behind the trees. At last her father signalled that it was time to go. She shivered and jumped down.

When they reached Professor Goring's house, Ella discovered that his study reminded her of home. Perhaps

all professors' houses were the same. It was cluttered with books and papers and curious bits and pieces, and smelled of pipe tobacco and woodsmoke from the fire. Mrs Goring brought Ella a pile of children's books to look at. They were much too young for her but Ella sat politely thumbing through, with half an ear to the adults' conversation. They were talking about the abbey.

Professor Goring said, 'When Henry VIII had the religious houses closed down, some—the choicest sites—were handed over to his friends and made into private homes. Some, however, were destroyed outright. Others were allowed to fall into ruin. In either case that was not quite the end of them. Their stones were scavenged for building materials by the local people. Now *that*, young lady,' he said, trying to include Ella, 'would be an interesting occupation: trying to spot ancient stones and beams and tiles that have been carried off and incorporated into newer buildings.'

'It sounds fascinating,' Ella replied, glad to find that Professor Goring didn't think she was just a child, 'but I'd have to find a site near home.'

Mrs Goring came back in with a plate of crumpets to toast on the fire, followed by a maid with the tea tray. They had to step carefully round Professor Goring, who was rifling through the bookshelves in vague sort of way.

'Something about that here . . . where is it . . .?' he muttered, but before he could find what he wanted something else distracted him. 'Look at this, Otter, ever

seen anything like that before?'

He held up a stunted, bulgy clay figure of a horse, not much bigger than his hand, which looked to Ella as if it had been made by a small child; a ham-fisted one at that. Professor Otter took it and turned it about, examining the figure closely. 'Interesting,' he said, in a tone that showed it *wasn't* a clay model made by a child. 'Not my area of expertise at all. But I can see it's very old. Where did you get it?'

'Some chap who deals in antiquities. Bale? Bailey? He keeps a shop not far from the British Museum—that's where I saw it, in the window. From ancient Greece, he says, the chap.' Professor Goring chuckled. 'It's far from *my* area of expertise, too!'

'If only you stuck to what you knew about, dear,' Mrs Goring teased him, and glanced at Ella to see if she agreed. But Ella felt strongly that she was on the professor's side, and refused to smile simperingly back.

Her father handed her the figure. Looking closely, she could see that it wasn't some clumsy childish attempt. Its bulges matched on both sides, its sturdy legs and neck showed the animal's strength. She returned it to Professor Goring who set it carefully back on a shelf.

'Now, where was I? Ah, yes.' He pulled down an old book and flicked through the roughly-cut pages. 'Where do you live again, Otter? Seabourne, is it? Yes, yes, there was an old priory, just a small community, at a place called Oxcoombe. Sold to Sir William de Warne.' He turned to Ella with a big smile, showing

off his snagged teeth. 'Oxcoombe's not far from Seabourne. Good hunting!'



It was quite dark by the time they got on the train home. Ella gazed out of the window. Her reflection, yellowish and hollow-eyed in the dirty glass, gazed back. The tiresome treat had proved most fortunate in the end, better than she could ever have expected. An old priory at Oxcoombe, seized and sold to one of King Henry's friends, while its monks were thrown out and abandoned to their fate. Rebuilt as a private house . . . perhaps the shade of an angry prior or a miserable monk still haunted it? It had to be Oxcoombe Grange. Unless there were other large houses there? She had serious investigating to do. Good hunting, indeed.

18. JUST LIKE GOLDILOCKS

NANCY'S JOURNAL

I spoke too soon when I put 'Nothing to Report'!

Miss Dearing decided to take her supper in the Dining Room. She says she's the Lady of Oxcoombe Grange now & ought to act like it. Talk about fuss & bother—there's no one to know but me! (Not that I call putting up a washing line v. ladylike.) She cooked most of the meal herself but I had to carry the dishes thru. It took a while to get them from the kitchen & down the hallway, growing colder all the time. To my mind Miss D. looked very sad sitting there all alone at the end of that great long table. Like Goldilocks after she stole into the Bears' house—if the Bears' house was hung about with the heads & hides of other creatures they had captured & eaten!

