

DEATH  
OF A  
PRINCESS

PETER  
WALKER

# DEATH OF A PRINCESS

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The shallow moorland stream rippled over sunlit pebbles behind the freshly leafed alders. In front of the alders, a brilliant patch of wild bluebells dominated the low-lying field with a spread of incandescent colour. It was an oasis in the moors, a picturesque and idyllic scene. It was marred only by the woman's body lying dead among the flowers. She had been shot in the head, according to the local constable.

Detective Superintendent Mark Pemberton, tall, fair-haired and immaculately dressed, halted some distance from the corpse. Motionless in concentration, his dark suit, polished black shoes and black briefcase were, like the body, incongruous in these surroundings. More apt were the piles of cow dung, hundreds of them. Their age varied from fresh to very dry, he noted, but there were no cows in sight.

To his right was a bank of deciduous trees, a wood of ancient oaks interspersed with ash, elms and beeches which grew in profusion on Mill Bank to form a backcloth to the meadow. Dressed in the new green of spring, the trees of Mill Bank Wood rose above a carpet of thick bracken and granite rocks. Above and behind those trees

were the houses, shops and people of a moorland village. Out of sight from here, it was called Campsthwaite End and was the higher part of the village. The lower part lay at the foot of the dale. That was called Campsthwaite – the residents of the higher portion liked to make that distinction.

To his left, Pemberton saw the waters of Cam Beck, clear today but sometimes amber-tinted due to their passage from distant peat moors. The beck flowed over rounded stones and pebbles and was a haven for wildlife, particularly trout. Pemberton could hear the water rippling softly in the deathly silence of that mild and sunny afternoon. It was the music of nature enhanced by the notes of a willow warbler, a recent arrival in this green and springtime land.

There were no signposts or paving stones here, but the field bore evidence of several footpaths, little more than tracks defined by the occasional passage of human feet or the movement of cattle. One ran along the banks of the beck, another passed through isolated clumps of bluebells in an erratic route among the grass and meadow flowers. One path might even have been made by the dead woman. If she came regularly, she could have created that path. It wound haphazardly across the field, sometimes

veering from its route beside the stream to weave through the grass and bluebells. But Pemberton was interested in the section which disappeared into the trees ahead. That path went towards the old mill.

Formerly Milverdale Mill and now called Mill House, it lay sleeping among the dark bank of trees which filled the shallow dale ahead, stretching from the rising slopes to his right and reaching the edge of the beck to his left. The dense canopy of trees concealed and shaded most of the atmospheric old house. It must be lost in deep shadow for the whole of each day. It was hardly a desirable country residence, Pemberton thought; it was far too gloomy and remote.

No other house was visible from this quiet place. There were stepping stones behind him to his left; they crossed the beck not far from the farm gate. Even the farm, directly behind him and through whose yard he had driven to reach the bluebell field, was out of sight about a quarter of a mile away. Neither the farmhouse nor its outbuildings were visible from where the victim had fallen but the cow pats had probably been deposited by its livestock. This field appeared to be part of their grazing ground. The farmer might be able to help with Pemberton's enquiries.

The other indication of human presence was the single track railway line which served the dale. It passed the bluebell field at the far side of the beck where its elevated route lay on an embankment rich with primroses. The track ran almost parallel with the beck and was about quarter of a mile or so from where he stood. It approached this point through a three-arch stone viaduct which was out of view from here, hidden behind the rising landscape. He'd have to establish the times of local services – a passenger or crew member might be a vital witness.

Standing in silence among the bluebells, Pemberton realised he would be visible from a wide area even if he could not be seen from the farm or the village. Surrounded by the undulating, picturesque landscape, the bluebell field was like a central stage with the auditorium rising all around at differing levels and in different forms. With the scene imprinted on his mind, he turned and saw Detective Constable Lorraine Cashmore walking slowly towards him, tall, graceful and beautiful.

‘Ah, Lorraine, you’ve made it!’ She halted about twenty yards away, pale-faced in the afternoon sunshine, and rewarded him with a fleeting smile. ‘So what did the doctor say?’

‘I’ll tell you later, sir,’ she said as the smile vanished, the brief nod of her head acknowledging the presence of the uniformed constable only feet away.

‘All right.’ He studied her carefully, wondering what news she brought, then turned his attention from domestic matters to professional duties. ‘Now, this is what we must do. The entire scene – this field of bluebells, the wood, all of it, right up Mill Bank to the village boundary, the banks of the stream on both sides and the woodland at the far side of Mill House – all of it must be preserved for scientific examination. Mill House too, inside and out, and the track leading to it, the one down through the wood from the village. This is a bizarre death. She’s been shot dead in such a lonely place but with so many places to aim from. We’ve got to take great care with this one.’

Pemberton then addressed the uniformed constable who had been waiting patiently nearby. He had done such a good preliminary job in coping with the first moments of this reported crime.

‘She’s been shot, you said so in your call, PC Wardle? A head wound?’

‘Left temple, sir,’ said PC Wardle, the village constable for Campsthwaite. ‘It looks like a bullet wound. I could be wrong,

of course. It might be some other type of injury. . .’

‘Any sign of a weapon?’

‘No, sir, unless it’s under the body.’

‘So the chances are that she hasn’t committed suicide. You didn’t turn her over?’

‘No, sir. She was cold, I touched her face and knew she was dead, I thought it best to leave her.’

‘Good man. We need this scene kept in pristine condition for our scientific wizards. So who is she? Any idea?’

‘Alicia Milverdale, sir. From Milverdale Hall. The big house at the far side of the railway, near the bottom of the village. You can’t see it from here.’

‘Family seat, eh?’

‘A landowning family, sir, she’s the last one. Was the last one, I should say. She never married.’

‘Is she from an historic family? A rich one?’

‘I’m not sure whether she could be described as rich, sir, although she did live in a rather grand house. She never flashed her money around, but claimed she had a very impressive pedigree.’

‘So do we have a murder or was this a very unfortunate stray shot? This is shooting country, I believe?’

**‘Yes, sir, rabbits, pheasants and partridges in season, grouse on the moors in season, vermin of all kinds. The local farmers and their lads shoot regularly, mainly with shotguns of course. Some do have .22 rifles and air guns though.’**

**‘It’s not a shotgun wound, in your opinion?’**

**‘No, sir, a twelve-bore wouldn’t make that kind of wound, even at close range. I’ve seen farmers who’ve committed suicide with shotguns, it’s not a bit like that. It looks like a revolver shot or even a rifle wound to me.’**

**‘We’ll see what the pathologist says. We need to trace the weapon and establish the trajectory of the shot. In a place like this, it could have come from anywhere! A .22 rifle is lethal up to a mile. Just think, some rabbit-shooter might have killed her without realising. Or has somebody shot her deliberately? Right, Lorraine, we need a doctor to certify her death. Who’s the local GP, PC Wardle?’**

**Wardle responded by flicking open his notebook and reading an entry in the back cover. ‘Dr Allison, sir, on 273688.’**

**‘OK, Lorraine. Get Control Room to send him as soon as possible, then arrange for a forensic pathologist to visit the body at the scene. Force photographers and video**

teams to record everything. Scenes of Crime officers and Task Force to search the whole scene. If it is a bullet wound, we have to find the ejected shell – talk about looking for a needle in a haystack!’

‘I’ll get started, sir.’ Pemberton recognised a lack of commitment in her voice.

‘Are you all right?’ His reaction registered his concern.

‘Yes, sir, fine,’ she said with an effort.

He frowned as he studied her, but continued, ‘Tell the teams to come through the farmyard. I want all other routes examined before they’re trampled on. Then we’ll set up an incident room. It’s a bit remote, there’s not many places to set up a busy office at a moment’s notice!’

‘Remote but lovely, sir!’ breathed Lorraine with a fleeting smile. ‘What a beautiful place, a paradise you’d want to keep to yourself for moments of peace.’

‘Not the sort of place one expects murder. So, PC Wardle. How did you come to find her? You’d better hear this, Lorraine.’

The constable said, ‘She has a live-in companion, sir, a woman. A maid or housekeeper. A Miss Farrow. She found her. Alicia, that’s the deceased, always goes for – went for – a morning walk before breakfast. She always came here. It was her

favourite place. She owns all this land, the field, the wood, the farm behind us –'

'Did she come alone?' interrupted Pemberton.

'Yes, sir, so I understand.'

'No dog? Horse?'

'No, sir. Completely alone. She set off at seven and got back at eight.'

'Then what was her routine?'

'After her morning walk, Alicia always had a shower then had breakfast while she read the papers and dealt with her mail.'

'Until this morning, eh?'

'Yes, sir. This morning, when she didn't return as usual, Miss Farrow wasn't too worried because Alicia would sometimes pop into Mill House for a while – it's hers, nobody else uses it – and Miss Farrow had her own jobs to do, but when Alicia hadn't returned by noon and there was no word from her, Miss Farrow came to look for her. She found her lying where you see her now.'

'She approached the body?'

'Yes, she went to see if her mistress had tripped and fallen or maybe collapsed for some reason, then touched her. She realised Alicia was dead, she saw the blood on her head and ran to Mill House to ring me from there.'

'And you came immediately?'

**‘Yes, sir. I happened to be at home, lunchtime you see. Miss Farrow had left when I arrived. Alicia was lying just as you see her, so I radioed my sergeant from the car. Like you, I parked in the farmyard, it’s the quickest way to get here. The sergeant said I should call you direct from the scene. He told me to preserve it and remain with the body to stop anyone trampling all over the place.’**

**‘Good man. Did you see anyone as you arrived?’**

**‘No, sir, no one. Not many people come down here, it’s private property. There are no public footpaths through this land.’**

**‘Right. Now, this was a regular outing for Alicia?’**

**‘Yes, part of her daily routine. Most of the villagers knew she came here, it’s all part of Milverdale Estate.’**

**‘So we’ve a lot of suspects hereabouts! They could have shot her without anyone realising until some time afterwards.’**

**‘Yes. If Constance Farrow hadn’t come looking, she’d have been there for ages.’**

**‘And no one would see her or her killer arriving or leaving. Right, can you remain with us, PC Wardle? Stop unauthorised people entering the scene, then when my officers get here they’ll seal the area and arrange night-time supervision.’**

**‘Very good, sir.’**

**‘When things settle down, I’ll need your local knowledge – the names of likely suspects, for example, someone with a grievance against Alicia, a motive of some kind. And I need to know who’s got access to guns, people like poachers and so on.’**

**‘Right, sir.’**

**Pemberton turned to Lorraine. ‘While you’re talking to Headquarters, Lorraine, ask them to send Dr Preston, will you? In addition to the pathologist, I need a forensic expert to examine the body *in situ* and he’s the best. Go and start your calls while I’m examining the body. And where can we set up our incident room, PC Wardle?’**

**‘There is a village institute, sir, next door to the vicarage. It’s large enough.’**

**‘Good. And food for the troops? Is there a pub that can produce bar snacks for a lot of hungry coppers? Lunchtime and evening?’**

**‘Yes, the Miners Arms. It’s only a minute’s walk from the institute.’**

**‘Fine. We might pick up bits of gossip there. Now to look at our victim more closely.’**

**As Lorraine departed, Pemberton watched with an ache in his body, an ache of desire fuelled by a new uncertainty as he admired her graceful movements. His colleague, his woman, his best friend, his partner in life. . .**

With an effort, he concentrated on the corpse. He could see the route she had taken through the bluebells. It was marked by crushed plants, consequently he approached from a different direction. There might be footprints in the soft earth beneath the grass and flowers – her footprints perhaps, or those of her killer. They would have to be preserved.

A virgin route brought him towards her head where he halted and looked down at the body without touching her. He saw a woman in her middle or late forties with a head of dark brown, slightly auburn hair turning grey. It was rather unkempt. The wound in her left temple was covered with congealed blood and partially hidden by her hair. She wore no spectacles, no ear-rings, no necklace and no make-up or lipstick. Her eyes were closed. Her mouth was partially open and he thought she sported her own teeth, all in good condition. Her face was round and full, he noted. Of average build, not too stocky or too slim, she appeared to be taller than most women and was lying on her back with her right arm outstretched among the flowers, palm uppermost. Her left arm lay across her breast. Her left wrist bore a watch, he noted. A silver one on a leather strap. It was showing the present time. There were no rings on her

fingers, and her hands were delicate with well-manicured nails. They bore no evidence of heavy or manual work, no roughness from activities such as keeping horses, tending the garden or general outdoor work.

She wore a short-sleeved T-shirt, dark green in colour with no motif or design upon it, and faded blue denim jeans with frayed edges around the bottoms. Her clothing did not appear to have been disturbed. That fact tended to rule out any sexual motive for the attack. Her feet bore a pair of white Nike trainers, and he could see she wore pale green socks. She was dressed for the weather, a mild and dry morning in May, and her body did not appear to have any wounds or injuries, other than the one on her head.

Stretching forward, he touched her eyelids to confirm that the constable's diagnosis was correct. There was rigor mortis in the eyelids, one of the first places on a dead body to be subjected to that condition. An additional light touch on her forehead told him her body temperature had dropped considerably – not surprising in the open air but it did indicate she had been dead a few hours. It might not be possible for the pathologist to provide a precise time of death but it was likely she had died during her early

morning walk, sometime between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m.

Her handbag was nowhere in sight, nor were any other personal belongings scattered around her. This suggested robbery, that her killer had fled with her bag and its contents. He hadn't taken her watch, though. But would she have brought her handbag on such a regular morning trek? And if she was going to Mill House, surely she would have carried the key? The housekeeper had run to Mill House to raise the alarm, so had she used the same key? If not, how had she gained entry?

It was tempting to turn over the body and search her clothing but for the time being he must leave her precisely where she had fallen. Her position did suggest she had been spun around, perhaps partially, perhaps fully, by the impact of the bullet, to fall dead in a whirl of arms and momentary agony. And she did appear to have been shot from a distance – there were no discernible powder marks or burns on her flesh to suggest a close-range execution. A rifle shot rather than a pistol fired at closer range? He could see no relevant marks among the bluebells other than those made by Alicia and the absent cows.

How tall was she? That would be determined during the post-mortem. She

looked to be around five feet seven or eight inches perhaps, a significant point if the elevation of the fatal shot was to be determined. Pemberton, standing slightly more than six feet tall, looked around in an attempt to identify possible firing sites. A position in the surrounding woodland was one obvious choice, an elevated position near the railway was another, the banks of the beck too, or the field at the other side of the beck, or even somewhere in this open field of bluebells. And Mill House? In spite of its seclusion, could it offer a suitable sniping position? Or might the killer have lain prone among the profusion of flowers in the meadow? In such an unpopulated place, the victim, defenceless and alone in this natural arena, would have been as vulnerable as a hunted rabbit. But, reasoned Pemberton, if the killer *had* lain in wait for her, he must have known her daily routine.

Having completed his initial examination, Pemberton carefully retraced his route. Lorraine had returned after making her calls, and was waiting some distance away with PC Wardle at her side.

‘We’ve a very tricky one here,’ he told them. ‘Shot in the middle of nowhere, probably from a distance. Precious little

evidence at the scene or on the victim. No obvious motive like a sexual attack although we can't rule out robbery. Her handbag isn't here but he's left her watch. So is it an accidental killing or a local villain with a score to settle? Did you manage to raise the necessary support services, Lorraine?

'I did, sir,' and she called him 'sir' because they were in the presence of another officer. 'I've directed them to rendezvous here after parking at the farm.'

'It'll be cows from that farm who've left their deposits all over this field, I'll bet?' Pemberton grinned at the constable.

'Yes, sir, they graze here. It's a rented farm, rented from Alicia's estate in fact, Cam Beck Farm.'

'So where are the cows now?' asked Pemberton.

'I had them moved out, sir, to stop them congregating around the body and trampling all over the scene. You know what cows are, they're curious about anything or anyone in their field and would stand in a circle around her, just looking. I thought we'd better have them shifted.'

'More good thinking! So our assassin would have to avoid a herd of cows when he shot her?'

**‘Unless they were in the byre being milked at the crucial time, sir,’ Wardle suggested.**

**‘Right. So we need words with the farmer. What’s his name?’**

**‘Midgley, sir. Geoff Midgley, a decent man.’**

**‘Not a likely suspect, you think?’**

**‘I would doubt it, sir, she got on well with all her tenants.’**

**‘We’ll see what he has to say about his whereabouts this morning. Am I right in guessing he knows about the crime?’**

**‘When I arrived, I told him Alicia had been attacked, sir, then later, when I asked him to move his cows, I thought he should know she was dead. I told him to expect a lot of vehicles and police officers. He agreed to us parking on his premises.’**

**‘Good,’ Pemberton said. ‘And what time did you ask him to move his cows?’**

**‘Not long after I arrived, sir. He used a dog to move them.’**

**‘So the cows would have been returned to this field after the morning’s milking? They’d be here until you had them removed?’**

**‘Yes, sir.’**

**‘Then they might have trampled on valuable evidence! At least we know what might have caused some of the footprints around here.’**

Now, if my reckoning is correct, the fact that you alerted the farmer to something out of the ordinary means the whole village will know by now. Village gossip travels faster than the Internet! Can you help me to learn more about this place? The old mill house for starters? Is it occupied?’

‘No, sir. Alicia used it as a kind of retreat. She spent hours there.’

‘Alone?’

‘Not all the time. The local schoolchildren used to come.’

‘Children?’

‘She liked children, sir, she helped at the school with art and drama classes. Some of the pupils came to Mill House with her.’

‘Did they? And have you searched Mill House today?’

‘No, sir, I thought it best if I left it alone. If a killer had been hiding there, he’d have gone long before I turned up.’

‘So he would, but we’ll need to trace all those children who used it if only to eliminate them from the enquiry. The killer’s prints might be in the house too, so we need to trace anyone who might have gained entry for reasons best known to themselves, legal or otherwise. Now, PC Wardle, while we’re waiting for the cavalry to arrive, what can you tell me about the late Alicia Milverdale?’