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MURDER AT HOLLY HOUSE

*The Memoirs of Inspector
Frank Grasby*

DENZIL MEYRICK



PENGUIN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

It's odd how little bits and pieces find their way, almost indiscriminately, to this person or that.

In my case, though I'd heard tell of Frank Grasby – a distant cousin on my mother's side – all I knew for sure was that he'd been a police officer in Yorkshire, roughly from the end of the Second World War until some time in the late sixties.

He was one of the lesser names in her family canon; therefore, it is safe to assume that my mother relegated him to a mere mention now and again because of a flaw in character or deed. Until then, it didn't appear to me as though he'd lived a particularly noble, interesting, or even worthy existence. But when two small wooden crates were sent to me as part of the goods and chattels left over after my parents died, my interest was piqued.

On opening these crates, I discovered that, not only did they contain Frank Grasby's self-penned memoir, but also a positive archive, consisting of police reports, telexes, statements, meeting notes and many other little gems, all pertaining to cases he'd investigated. I include these sparingly, though I hope they add to the context of it all.

I was also pleasantly surprised at the fine condition of the many notebooks that form the story of the inspector's career, and was most surprised that, despite Grasby's challenging handwriting, I seemed to be able to decipher

it quite easily. Perhaps it's a family thing. But nothing is perfect in this world, and the odd ripped-out or water-damaged page sometimes appears at the most inopportune of moments. It was fun, though, to piece together the evidence at hand, and recreate these lost passages – almost as though one were in Grasby's head at the time.

Frank Grasby is a good writer, born entertainer and storyteller. His tendency to head off at a tangent, however, has required me to trim here and there. I've tried to do this with the minimum of interference possible.

What follows is virtually as written. I've taken the precaution of changing some names in order to protect the reputations of those mentioned, living or dead (most are the latter). I've also toned down some of the more 'explicit' content, be it bad language or some of the author's more colourful adventures. In essence, I've done my best to curate them in a manner more suited to these modern times and sensibilities.

The memoir leaps backwards and forwards in time. I chose this as his first published case, as I think it best sums up the great fellow. Also, it's as he intended (see Grasby's note below).

But, to all intents and purposes, please find herein a glimpse into the extraordinary life of Inspector Frank Grasby.

Original Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Welcome to my jumbled, scattered remembrances. I begin, not at the beginning, but with a case into which I was flung unwittingly. It turned out to be pivotal, not just as far as my career was concerned, but as regards the course of my whole life. A fine place to start, as you'll see.

It's so often the way, one crashes into situations unprepared and ill-informed. When sent by then Superintendent Arthur Juggers to the village of Elderby, I wish I'd been given sight of this police report. Unfortunately, it came into my possession after the fact. It contains, albeit obliquely, information that may have influenced my decisions and conduct on arrival in the village. But being wise after the event is one of my little foibles.

I found it in the old police archives, just as I was completing this volume of my memoirs. I enclose it for reference, and as a nod to the absolute peril into which I was unwittingly stepping.

I hope you will find interest in the life story of this old chap.

*Frank Grasby
York, March 1975*

North Yorkshire Police Report:
17th May 1949

By Telex: 1050 hrs

On the evening of 16th May 1949, at about 2000 hrs, a call was received by Elderby Police from the Hanging Beggar public house in the village. A complaint regarding rowdy customers refusing to leave the premises was made by staff.

Being the duty officer, Inspector D. P. Moore took the call at his domicile and attended the Hanging Beggar at around 2015 hrs.

On his arrival, he apparently found the public house to be quiet and all in order. However, following protocol to the letter, Inspector Moore stayed behind to take statements from staff and customers, and ensure that the miscreants did not return.

This duty complete, Inspector Moore left the Hanging Beggar at approximately 2215 hrs, his intention being to return to his domicile.

Though on a re-rostered rest day, I answered a call from Division at approximately 2355 hrs that same evening, 16th May. Mrs Moore, the Inspector's spouse,

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informed the night shift at Pickering by telephone that her husband had failed to return home and she was worried as to his whereabouts. She told them of his leaving the public house and intention to return home.

Shortly after midnight, I made a cursory search of the area, including Elderby police station, in case Inspector Moore had returned to write a report on the matter and perhaps fallen asleep after what had been, by all accounts, a busy day.

There being no sign of Inspector Moore at Elderby police station, or in the environs of the village, I called Division and officially reported him missing at 0222 hrs on the morning of 17th May.

I and seven officers from Pickering mustered at 0500 hrs on the morning of 17th May in order to prepare a search, commencing at first light, approximately 0620 hrs.

At approximately 0745 hrs, a member of the public, one Andrew Moleston, a man local to the village and of sound character, approached officers from Pickering to say that he had observed something odd while angling on the River Lise, at the weir. This is a location approximately two miles east of Elderby.

Attending, Constables Rickmansworth and Hastie discovered the body of Inspector Moore at 0824 hrs. The remains had become

entangled in weeds in a shallow part of the river.

Following a brief examination on the riverside, at which I attended, commencing at 0931 hrs by Force Doctor Terrance Clancy MD, life was officially pronounced extinct. The time was 0935 hrs.

Inspector Moore's remains were removed to Pickering for post-mortem examination at 1005 hrs, under my supervision.

Sgt. E. M. P. Bleakly
Elderby Police Station

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York, December 1952

Each day of the week has its own feel – or so I think. Mondays are universally loathed, whilst Fridays bring a spring to the step. For me, a Sunday heralds a nagging echo of my lost piety. Gone is the angelic choirboy, the youth who seriously considered following his father and grandfather into the Church. I still feel guilty that I only attend around this time of year or other high days, holidays, weddings and funerals; I've seen far too many of the latter.

I suppose my job as a police inspector offers some mitigation, but never enough to quell the wrath of my prelate father. In fact, hell hath no fury like a village vicar spurned by the bishops of the Church in which he serves.

But with Christmas on the way, I've decided that it's high time I try to improve my form as far as church attendance is concerned. If I'm honest, I need all the help I can get being, yet again, in hot water.

I try not to think about it as I walk along the smoky corridors of police headquarters in York. The senior officer

who's about to drag me across the coals bears more than a little resemblance to the man who gave me life; not physically, though. While the Reverend Cyril Grasby is tall, thin and grey – almost as though he is in the process of fading away – Superintendent Arthur Juggers is squat and florid. He is very much of this earthly realm, a true corporeal reality wrought in blood, bone, pipe tobacco and ale. He's the kind of man one thinks could stand in front of a solid wall and will it to collapse by sheer force of personality alone. I'm sure you know the type. But we get on passably well – sometimes.

I straighten my tie and stub out a cigarette on a nearby ashtray as I stand before his stout oaken door. I'm reminded of his presence by a shining brass plaque bearing his name and rank.

'Who's hovering out there?' he bellows in the thick brogue of the county. 'Everyone knows I can't abide bloody hoverers.'

It is as though he possesses the aural qualities of a large bat – a querulous, malicious one, at that.

I knock; hear him grunt admission, and enter. His office is as you might expect: much wood panelling, old photographs, various citations for bravery and other achievements. The pungent but strangely pleasing odour of pipe tobacco and a hint of stale beer is never far away. Behind him on the wall is a painting of the pavilion at Headingley. Thankfully, cricket is the one thing we have in common. I aim to use this in my defence. Had it not been for the intervention of the Second World War, being a rather late starter and having an unfortunate predilection for getting out to wide balls on the leg side, I would be turning out for Yorkshire now, instead of pursuing an ever-growing list of miscreants and ne'er-do-wells. But life can be cruel, as we all know.

'Don't sit down,' he says without looking up from the newspaper he's reading.

I do as I'm bid, then embark on my strategy. 'I saw young Trueman this morning, sir.' I feel this foray in the direction of Yorkshire County Cricket Club has had the desired effect, as he lifts his eyes from the paper and stares at me over the rim of his half-moon spectacles.

'No small-talk, Grasby – not this time. If you'd not been so bloody feckless you could be out there. Even though you're at the veteran stage now. Can't be worse with a bat than you are with a notebook, mark you.'

'Sir?' I enquire disingenuously, as though I have no idea of what he's about to say.

'Lady bloody Winthorpe. Does that ring a bell?'

'Ah.'

'You go out to Admere House to bring a light-fingered servant to justice, but before you can say "How's he?"; twenty of the best thoroughbred horses in England are running free across the county.' The newspaper is cast aside. 'Seven are still missing!'

'Just a confusion between myself and the groom, sir.'

'Confusion? You arrested the groom and forgot to lock the stable door. Bloody classic stupidity, is that.'

'In all fairness, sir, Constable Armley was also present. He should have been paying attention to such minor details.'

'He was handcuffed to the prisoner – this groom chap. You expected him to secure the stable block too?'

'Well . . .'

'If we don't find these bloody ho'ses His Lordship's going to sue the chief constable. How do you feel about that?'

I ponder on which response is most suitable, deciding that a grimace should do the job.

'No wonder you're pulling a face, Grasby. I'm all that's

between you and the dole. You can't go messing with the aristocracy. We'll have the young queen at the door next, no doubt demanding your head. Aye, and I'll give her it an' all – on a plate. She's got enough to worry about, poor lass, without fretting on inept Yorkshire detectives.'

There follows a dire list of consequences, all of which leave me more and more alarmed, as the superintendent's face turns an increasingly unhealthy beetroot colour. No doubt feeling as though his head is about to explode, he reaches for the solace of his pipe. As he's tamping down tobacco, I'm worrying I may be forcibly transferred to East Yorkshire, envisioning a wet Tuesday night on the docks in Hull. It's happened before, you know. Mumford, an old colleague of mine when we were detective sergeants, ended up walking the beat as a bobby on Hessle Road. Not for the faint-hearted, let me tell you.

'Do you want me to go and search for the horses, sir?' I offer.

'Abso-bloody-lutely not! The boss would have a fit. No, Grasby, it's been one calamity too many for you.'

Oh no, it's Hessle Road! I feel my knees weaken.

'He wants you out of the way for a while. Until this all blows over.'

'But my record, sir. I've brought a good few to justice since coming back from the war.'

He stands, his belly popping out over the waistband of his uniform trousers. 'You have, of that there is no doubt. But you've had more than your fair share of problems along the way.'

'No more than most, I'd say. Horses apart, that is.'

He prods his stubby finger at me. 'What about old Mrs Smelt?'

'Ah, the quote in the *Yorkshire Post*.'

'Oh aye: "When asked for a response to the suspicious death, Inspector Grasby of York Police said: 'Grandma Smelt, we wonder why?'"'

'An unfortunate comment, I admit. I was just trying to introduce some levity into the proceedings.'

As though he hadn't heard this plea of mitigation, Juggers continues. 'And what about the lord mayor's daughter, eh?'

'A tricky business, sir.'

'You had her locked up for being drunk and disorderly.'

'She was rolling about on the floor in the Minster Inn!'

'She was having an epileptic fit!'

'To be fair, that was only confirmed later by the force doctor. I don't think anyone present thought otherwise – including the publican.'

Superintendent Juggers shakes his head, jowls following slightly behind the rest of his face. 'Tell me about James Thomas Goss.'

'A breach of trust, sir. Honour amongst thieves is a thing of the past, quite clearly.'

'But your stupidity most certainly isn't. You get to London with one of the most persistent and elusive burglars the Metropolitan Police has ever encountered, and you simply let him run free.' Juggers's face is crimson again.

'Tardiness, sir. They were supposed to take custody of him at Euston. They were late.'

'And you needed to answer a call of nature because you'd been swigging beer with this reprobate all the way to London.'

'We had a refreshment – it was a hot day, sir.'

'You should have taken him with you to the bathroom. Handcuffed the bugger to something whilst you were relieving yourself.'

I'm not sure that the superintendent has chosen the

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right words here, but nonetheless I persist. 'It's very off-putting, to be honest. I find it almost impossible to go under such circumstances, sir.' I feel that most men must appreciate this little foible, or at least have experienced such a problem in a busy gents' toilet. Juggers clearly doesn't agree.

'Bloody jessie! No, your solution is to have him go to the bar and buy a couple more beers while you're indisposed. Of course, he buggers off into the throng.'

'With the ten-bob note I'd given him, into the bargain!'

'What did you think he was going to do?'

'Keep his word, like a man.'

'He's a bloody criminal! What would you do if you were facing ten years inside and some clot gave you the opportunity to abscond, not to mention providing the bus fare to freedom?'

'They found him – eventually.'

'It took two bloody years! During which time he broke into houses all over the place.'

I feel this conversation has definitely taken a turn for the worse. I pray he doesn't think of any more of my misdemeanours. But just in case he does, I decide to rest my defence. It's only making things worse. But, as it turns out, he's already come to sentencing.

'No, the die is cast, Grasby – though I'll be sad to lose you, despite everything. When you're not being utterly stupid, you can be an inspired detective.'

'Not Hull, sir. Please, for old times' sake, at least.' I'm ready to go down on bended knee at this point. But I realize such an action is more likely to inflame the situation. Instead, I adopt a pleading look, desperately searching for Juggers's better nature. My thoughts are now dominated by the sight and sounds of Hull's worst drinking establishments on a

Friday night when the trawlers come back to port. The very notion makes me shudder. Plus, these ridiculous helmets constables are forced to wear have never suited me. I've inherited my father's tall, lean frame; I look like a lamp post in a uniform. People laugh.

'Elderby, that's where you're headed.'

'Sir?' I'm wracking my brains in a desperate attempt to work out where Elderby is located. They're planning to build new council estates in Hull; I hope this isn't one of them.

'It's far enough away from the chief constable, in case you're wondering. On the North York Moors. You're on secondment for the foreseeable.' Juggers turns to the window and gazes out as light snow flutters down on passing traffic and pedestrians, the good folk of the city going about their business. 'You were good with a bat. Decent right-arm spinner into the bargain.' He nods sagely, no doubt playing one of my many great innings for Yorkshire's second eleven back in his mind's eye. 'Shame about them legside balls, eh? You could never get your head round them.'

Damn.

'You'll keep your rank and your job as a detective. Don't thank me.'

'Thank you,' I say without thinking.

He turns on his heel and glares at me with those piggy eyes. 'There's been a spate of thefts from farms in the area around Elderby. We owe it to them to be of mutual assistance. They don't have our manpower or resources. Anyhow, most of these farms belong to Lord Damnish.'

Bugger, the bloody aristocracy again.

'You sort this out, bring the culprit or culprits to justice speedily, and I'll have a chance to plead on your behalf. Get you back here once all the fuss has died down. And them ho'ses are found, of course.'