

'A sharp eye for high and low society
and absurdly readable'
Daily Telegraph

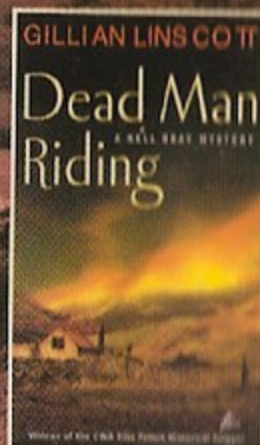
Nell Bray is despatched to collect a valuable painting which had been left to the suffragette movement by Philomena Venn. The family of the dead woman reluctantly hand it over, but when Nell delivers it to Christie's for a valuation it turns out to be a fake.

Shamefacedly, Philomena's husband admits to deception, but demurs at producing the real article. Against her better judgement Nell agrees to liberate the painting herself, only to find herself caught red-handed together with a corpse . . .

PRAISE FOR THE NELL BRAY MYSTERIES

'Linscott writes like a rewarding angel'
Sunday Times

'Just the right mix of period detail,
character psychology and suspense'
Express

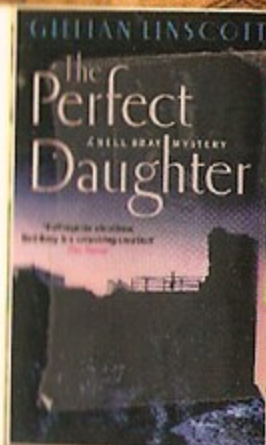


CRIME FICTION
Cover photograph:
©Imagestate
Cover design:
©www.blacksheep.uk.co
U.K. £6.99*
CAN \$12.00
* Recommended only

ISBN 0-7515-3399-8



9 780751 533996 >



GILLIAN LINS COTT

'Suffragette sleuthess Nell Bray is a smashing creation'
The Times

Blood

A NELL BRAY MYSTERY

on the Wood

R

Soon after that I left, avoiding further questions. It was about half-past five with an overcast sky and a used-up feel to the air. I walked up Kingsway towards Oxford Street just for the sake of going somewhere. Should I have done more to talk sense into Daniel? Probably, but what was sense in this situation? I couldn't stand by and see him on trial for murder without telling the police what I'd seen and heard – in which case they'd probably arrest Felicia. The point of his plan, if you could call it a plan, was to buy time to find a murderer who wasn't Felicia. He'd nominated Harry Hawthorne for the role. Hawthorne was trying to steer suspicion towards the Venns, Adam in particular. There was a problem with that theory that I hadn't discussed with Hawthorne because I didn't trust him. As far as I could see, Adam was the only person who couldn't have shot Daisy. Bobbie and I had seen him driving down to the village. Hawthorne himself had confirmed the alibi without intending to, saying the two of them had met in the pub yard. Adam could not possibly have driven back to the house in time to fire the shot in the garden.

So we were back with Felicia again. Wasn't it a sign of Daniel's innocence that he was so anxious to protect her? Or perhaps I was fooling myself out of liking for him, as Max had hinted. There's something in us that makes it hard to believe that anybody we like, or even know, can be guilty of the worst of crimes. No logic in it. Everybody who's ever committed murder had to have some people who knew him, even liked or loved him. Liking is no guarantee – and I had good reason from my past to know that. Still, the instinct to believe that evil must be something that comes from the outside, from people we don't know, is strong. *Except one little window where Long Lankin crept in.* Crept in from the moss with long fingers and a devil's face.

By this point I'd got as far as Oxford Street and was being jostled by crowds of people making for bus stops and underground stations on their way home from work, or just arriving from the suburbs for an evening's entertainment. The smells from a café doorway reminded me that I was hungry, so I went in and ordered poached egg on toast and a pot of tea, wondering while I waited for it why I'd walked nearly to the west end of Oxford Street when it wasn't on my way home. As I made the first cut into the yolk of an especially succulent egg it came to me – the Esperance Club.

If you're not interested in good works or folk-dancing the Esperance Club may need some explaining. It was originally set up by a suffragette friend of mine, Mary Neal, as an evening social club for working girls, especially the ones from the sweatshops of the garment trade around Wigmore Street. Then it had been overtaken by the new craze for folk-dancing, to such an extent that it was now one of the main teaching centres and Esperance girls went all over the country, giving demonstrations and teaching morris dancing. The reason why my feet had carried me most of the way to the Esperance Club without my brain knowing wasn't that my problems had driven me to morris dancing, as Max might have feared. It was because they had more sense than my head and knew I'd been disregarding what might be an important group of witnesses.

Some of the girls at the camp had been Londoners and country dancers, so it was a fair guess that they'd be members of the Esperance Club. Most of them had gone back to town on Sunday evening but there was an outside chance that some might have stayed. If so, an outside chance of an outside chance that they might be able to fill in the blank of Daisy's last hours. As far as I knew, nobody had seen her after four o'clock on Monday afternoon at the latest, nine hours or so

between then and when I'd found her body in the cabinet. If Harry Hawthorne, or anybody else for that matter, had encouraged Daisy to go up to the Venns' house, they were the most likely ones to know about it.

I finished my egg on toast, drank another cup of tea and walked on up Portland Place and Albany Street to the club premises in Cumberland Market.

Even from outside, you could hear the piano playing and the sticks clicking. Inside, the pattering of feet and the tinkling of hundreds of ankle bells sounded like an avalanche of icicles. It was obviously a dress rehearsal for one of the club's demonstration teams, for the six women clashing sticks in two dancing lines facing each other were dressed like somebody's idea of country milkmaids. Cotton frocks in bright colours, blues, greens and reds, tight-fitted in the bodice and ending a few inches above the ankle. Over these, white muslin aprons and fichus, topped by big sunbonnets in the same colours as the dresses, trimmed with rows and rows of cotton lace.

As they danced, a tall woman with two long plaits of brown hair stood by the piano, calling out comments. 'Don't stamp, Phyllis. Sally, more height in the hops.' In spite of this, they seemed to be enjoying it, grinning at each other, eyes bright. I found a seat by the wall along with some other spectators and looked round to see if I could recognise anybody from the Scipian camp. A couple at the far end looked familiar, in ordinary working clothes apart from their dancing shoes. When the morris ended in a final clash of sticks and the woman with the pigtails said the dancers could take a ten-minute break, I walked over and reintroduced myself. They knew about Daisy's death and didn't seem to find it surprising that I wanted to know more. But neither had spoken to Daisy, beyond a few kind and casual remarks

about food or blankets, and both of them had left the camp on Sunday evening. I asked if anybody else there had been at the camp.

'Sally was.'

One of them nodded at the group of dancers crowded round the instructor by the piano, probably receiving a detailed critique. Sally – the one who hadn't been hopping high enough – was a spectacularly pretty dark-haired girl who looked around nineteen or twenty. She was wearing a poppy-red dress with a lovingly tailored bodice that emphasised every curve, her white fichu knotted over it in a way that managed to be less demure than the costume designer probably intended. The group broke up as we looked and the other two beckoned her over. She came across with an easy walk, almost a swagger, and recognised me.

'Weren't you at that bloody camp?'

Quite friendly, though. The other two tutted at the language, but Sally wasn't bothered. I said I'd like to talk to her about Daisy and she glanced towards the door.

'Outside do you all right?'

I followed her, supposing she had something confidential to tell me but when we got outside she settled on the top step with her back to the door, flipped up her white apron and took a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches out of her dress pocket, both rather crushed from the dancing. She offered me a cigarette – not taking offence when I said no thanks – lit one for herself, took a few deep draws on it and sighed with satisfaction.

'Ufff, that feels better. Florence'd go mad if she knew. She says cigarettes spoil your wind for dancing.'

'You enjoy morris dancing?'

She made a face. 'Left to myself, I'd as soon be doing cakewalk, but you get around more with morris and meet a nicer class of young man.'

'Was that why you went to the Scipian camp?'

'Oh, come on! Waste of time and money, that was. I only went because a friend said did I fancy a cheap few days in the country and when we got there, nothing but miles of grass and cows' doings and blokes from factories without the price of a port and lemon between them going on about bringing down capitalism. I'd have gone straight back to town on the next train, only the girl I share a room with was having a friend in for the weekend and three's a crowd, isn't it?'

She untied her sunbonnet and put it down on the step beside her, stretched out her legs in their blue-grey stockings and crossed her ankles. A passing workman whistled from the street but she took no notice. It turned out that she too had left on Sunday evening.

'And not before time either. I'd had enough country air to last me a long lifetime.'

'Did you see much of Daisy?'

'The one who got killed? Not much, no. The other girls were looking after her and I'm not the sort who goes round adopting strays. I'm not saying I'm hard-hearted, but there's enough problems in life without going out to look for them.'

'Did you notice Mr Hawthorne with her at any time?'

'He the big hairy bloke that did all the talking?'

'Yes.'

She shook her head. 'Shouldn't think she was his type, too skinny. He made a grab at me when we were dancing and quite a few of the other girls too, the old goat. I just let him have it in the ribs, like this.' She demonstrated on me with her elbow, quite painfully.

'Was anybody else talking to her or paying her particular attention?'

'No, apart from the one she was supposed to be engaged

to, Daniel Venn. And he wasn't there much of the time either. I suppose he had other business elsewhere.'

There was something about the way she said it and her eyes had narrowed, watching her cigarette smoke float upwards. Also, she remembered the name.

'You noticed Daniel Venn, then?'

She nodded, not at all put out. 'Didn't you? He's a bit of a bantamweight, but if it had been him trying to put a hand where he shouldn't in *A-Nutting We Will Go* he might not have got the elbow quite so fast.'

'He could hardly do that with his fiancée there, could he?' I said, pretending innocence. The conversation wasn't going quite the way I'd expected and I couldn't see how to get it back on track. Her laugh wafted a cloud of smoke in my face.

'You'd be surprised what men will do.'

Again, there was something in her tone and it struck me that she might have heard about Daniel's engagement to Felicia, although I hadn't thought news of that had reached the Scipian camp by Sunday.

'Are you thinking of Daniel Venn in particular?' I said.

She nodded again. 'I don't know why he went and got engaged to that poor little scrap, but I don't reckon it would have lasted even if she hadn't got killed.'

'Why not?'

'Something I overheard.' She was grinning, not maliciously but enjoying the gossip.

'What about?'

'Not about anything in particular. Just heard.'

'Overheard, you said.'

'All right, overheard. And I wasn't creeping round listening deliberately. We just happened to hit on the same cart shed, that's all.'

'Same cart shed as what?' I was floundering, trying to keep up.

'Same as Daniel and the other one. You all right? I mean, you're not part of his family or anything?'

'No. But I'm trying to find out what happened to Daisy.'

'Well, this wasn't anything to do with her, apart from what I'm saying about the engagement not lasting anyway. We just happened to go to the cart shed they were in and heard them talking.'

'We?'

'There was this man I'd met before in London and quite liked. He'd got dragged down to the camp by his friends like I had and he didn't think much of it either. So we were quite pleased to see each other and we decided to go for a walk and get away from the others. So we'd gone a little way and I was fed up of all that grass and the flies and we came to this big shed place with a hay cart and hay, so I said why don't we go and sit inside and have a cigarette?'

'When was this?'

'The day we all got there, the Saturday. It was before suppertime – if you can call the muck they served up supper. Anyway, we started going inside, but before we'd gone more than a step or two we heard somebody else in there on the other side of the hay cart. So we stopped and kept quiet, thinking it might be the farmer or somebody and he might not like it. But there was this woman's voice, saying something about they shouldn't have done it.'

'Shouldn't have done what?'

'Well, it's obvious, if you think about it. You get a man and a woman in a shed full of hay and she's saying they shouldn't have done it, what would you think?'

'How does this connect with Daniel Venn?'

'Well, it didn't at the time because I'd never met him. But we heard this toff's voice, telling her the usual things.'

'Usual things?'

'That it would be all right, she mustn't worry, nobody would guess. You know the sort of things.'

'The woman's voice – was it Daisy's?' I felt angry, remembering Daniel's elaborate concern for Daisy's reputation.

'Good God, no. The woman was a toff as well. That was what made it so funny.'

'Did . . . did you see them?'

'What do you think we are, peeping Toms? No, we got out smartish and they didn't hear us, only later when Daniel Venn was there at the bonfire, as soon as I heard him talking I thought, "So it was you then was it, my lad," and when he got up on his hind legs later and said he was engaged to Daisy, well – it was all I could do not to laugh.'

'You're sure it was Daniel Venn you heard in the barn?'

'Well, there weren't many other toffs round there, were there? We'd been laughing to ourselves all the way back, imitating them.'

'Imitating?'

'Just for the laugh. I put on a voice like the woman's and was saying "Oh, we should never have done it. What if he finds out?" And Jimmy – that's my friend – he puts on this other voice – "Don't worry, Flissie, he won't ever know and—"'

'What was that you said?' I couldn't help it coming out sharply. She looked at me, surprised.

'Just what he was saying. Not to worry, the other man wouldn't know.'

'No, the name he called her.'

'I said, Flissie. That was part of the joke, it was such a silly sort of name.'

From inside the hall the piano thumped out a few emphatic dancing bars. The cry went up, 'Sally. Where's Sally?'

She stood up, stamped out the cigarette butt with her silver-buckled dancing shoe.

‘Got to go. Nice meeting you. Sorry I haven’t been able to help.’

I stayed sitting on the step for quite a while, hearing the music and jingle of bells through the half-open door.