

THE CHINESE PUZZLE BOX

Before DCI Bland could ask, Julia continued:

“I find it odd that the only addition to Dr Gordon’s possessions should be a relatively cheap Chinese puzzle box,” and with that Julia moved swiftly to a small drawing room where on a three-legged stool with fine intaglio work sat a non-descript whitish cube. Julia picked it up and started to show to Bland the simple but ingenious mechanism.

“This is not bad quality – it is ivory for a start – but it just does not fit with the character of Dr Gordon’s collection.”

Bland found the notion that collections possessed “character” difficult to swallow, but he was too keen to see the contents of the box to start quibbling about semantics.

“Can you open it, Mrs Flowers? Please.”

Julia was enjoying her role of teacher in antiques, a role that she would play occasionally when invited by Women’s Institute clubs and the like, ostensibly to give a talk on Japanese porcelain or Chinese jades but in practice to provide free valuations for the assorted items that earnest WI members and retired Army officers would inevitably bring along ‘to know the history of the piece’, of course.

“These boxes are made up by a series of sliding pieces, which must be pushed in and out in the correct sequence for the box to open. They were made in China in large numbers mainly for the export market especially in Victorian times, but now are out of fashion and you can pick up a decent specimen like this one for one hundred pounds or so at auction these days.”

Bland was not really in the mood for an Antiques Road Show episode and his frustration must have been quite visible, because Julia stopped lecturing and started to demonstrate:

“This box’s mechanism is quite primitive, you see Mr Bland, all you have to do is to slide these two pieces in opposite directions and then” – here she

paused for what seemed to DCI Bland to be an unnecessarily long time – the lid is released and the box opens”. Julia passed the open box on to DCI Bland without looking at what was inside it.

Bland grabbed the box firmly in his hands, peeked inside and then raised his eyes to look straight at Julia: “But it’s empty.” Bland could not hide his disappointment.

“Yes, most of them are; they are just curiosities, not storage devices.” Julia felt sorry for DCI Bland and slightly guilty for having unwittingly raised his expectations. She took the box back from Bland’s hands and started to examine it in more detail.

“This is odd,” she said after a while, “See this piece, Mr Bland? It is not ivory like the others. It is ivorine.”

Julia could see from Bland’s expression that the significance of the detail was lost on him.

“Ivorine is poor man’s ivory. In fact it is cellulose nitrate and nowadays can be manufactured to look and feel just like ivory. The question is: ‘why would Dr Gordon take the trouble to replace a missing or damaged ivory piece?’ Having the ivorine piece made to measure would have cost him more than the whole box is worth.”

“Could I see the piece, Mrs Flowers?” DCI Bland turned the rectangular shape in his hands more in frustration than in hope. “It really looks and feels like ivory. Ah, the Chinese. They can copy anything, can’t they?”

“Actually, ivorine is a European invention. Swiss, I think. It’s the weight and density that gives it away.”

Julia took the piece back and proceeded to tap it. “But even for ivorine, this feels far too light. Odd.” Julia sounded surprised at her own little discovery. “Of course, it may be hollow. But why?”

Bland practically grabbed the piece off Julia’s hands. “Do you think you can prise it open, Mrs Flowers?”

“I am not sure we should, Mr Bland. Are we allowed to damage Dr Gordon’s property? Perhaps we should check with Reid & McHalm first”.

“This is evidence in a murder case. I take responsibility. Please, can you open it?” Bland had a feeling about this wretched piece of fakery.

Julia took her eye-piece from her handbag and inspected the ivory rectangular shape under magnification, looking for cracks. It turned out to be easier than she thought: the tweezers in her bag were enough to crack the piece open. She passed it on to DCI Bland. This time it was not empty.

Bland's face lit up and, for the first time since Julia had met him, he smiled.

"Ah, a memory stick." This was his terrain; he felt in charge again. "I'll have it examined straightaway. You have been most helpful, Mrs Flowers. Thank you. I may have to contact you again."

"Of course, Mr Bland. Here is my card," Julia took out of a bag one of her business cards and added, "I'll write my mobile's number on the back. In case you want to contact me when I am not at work. I work part-time, you see."

While Julia was scribbling Bland realized she had kept calling him "Mr" Bland and that he had not insisted on being called by his job title. Was Detective Chief Inspector too long for Mrs Flowers or did she see him as a civilian?

"Very kind of you, Mrs Flowers. I'll leave you to finish your work here. I'll scoot to the station. This may be important," said Bland waving his precious piece of new evidence.

And he left as abruptly as he had arrived.