

# The Mystery of the Vanishing Treasure

What's better than a mystery? Why, of course, two. *The Mystery of the Vanishing Treasure* (1966), the fifth of the T3I series, and the first since *Terror Castle* (1964) to not open with a scream or a cry for help, enjoys the rummest summary yet; the T3I "become involved in a baffling museum robbery, assist a lady troubled by a bad case of gnomes, find themselves on the way to the Middle East to become slaves ..."

I have always been real fond of *The Mystery of the Vanishing Treasure*. Not only does it delight with an extra helping of mystery, but also weds the two (my childhood associate – the brother – steps in and calmly points out that the Hardy Boys mysteries used this technique almost every other story).

Back then I had not wised up to the trope of two seemingly separate mysteries being related. Robert Arthur does toy with this ploy in the *Whispering Mummy* (1965). But there the second strand is a wisp, quickly dispensed with. The link, with the air of an afterthought, is no great shakes. You can also spot it from a mile off, as clear as a lighthouse on a moonlit night (naturally, I was utterly oblivious).

Here, Robert Arthur crafts two solid mysteries. And, then nails the link with that thrilling, unexpected end.

The story has a neat structure. It begins with Jupe raising the possibility of a break-in occurring at the Peterson museum where star exhibits, the Rainbow Jewels and the Golden Belt, are currently on display. In the very second chapter, Jupe is proved prescient with the T3I in the thick of the action.

The setting has all the trappings of a typical heist movie. Laser beams, armed guards, man in a mechanics overall – you get the drift. Lights are cut off, alarm bells ring, children run helter-skelter – confusion worse confounded.

In an engrossing account of the robbery, the Golden Belt is stolen right under everyone's nose. A thorough search reveals nothing. The specter of a locked-room mystery is raised (the museum doesn't have any windows and no one had left by the back door). The [scepter of King Ottokar](#) beckons.

Just when we ready ourselves to go chasing after golden belts, Reality clears her throat. Mr. Togati, the Japanese detective in charge of the exhibits, understandably snubs T3I's offer of help believing them to be too young.

Any lingering thoughts on the robbery are pushed on the back-burner when Alfred Hitchcock sends a strange case their way. Gnomes have been calling upon a Miss Agatha Agawam, a writer friend of Hitchcock. Yes, gnomes – those dear, red-hatted, rose-cheeked toadstool residents so often found in Enid Blyton stories. It's quite surreal to move from mundane matters such as a belt robbery to the mythical realm of gnomes. But the gnomes of *Vanishing Treasure* seem to be real, and real menacing.

The tale of the lady and her gnomes takes up most of the story thereafter. Near the end, the museum subplot pops up again to round off the mystery of the vanishing treasure.

It's curious and telling how the appeal of some books change over the years. When a kid, I loved the clueing and cleverness of *Vanishing Treasure*. Rereading now, more than the mystery I am taken with the wonderful sequence where the T3I first call on Miss Agatha at her home. I must have totally zipped by it in my childhood, so new it felt now.

Robert Arthur draws a cozy picture of the afternoon at tea. He begins by describing the neighborhood. The portrayal is essential to the mystery; the sentence "The two buildings [a bank and a theatre] boxed the old house [Miss Agatha's] in completely." holds, in a nutshell, the solution of the gnome mystery. It also evokes pathos for that lonely house stranded amid the herd of shops and stores. ("That's the only building that could be a private residence.")

Thus is the lay of the land, one where Miss Agatha's house is squeezed upon by its neighbors. A neat mirror-like reversal lies in the architecture of the overall plot, one where Miss Agatha's story juts out over the museum robbery at both ends.

As the T3I make their way towards the house many delights await. An unusual note bearing "Please ring bell. Gnomes, elves and dwarfs, whistle." is pinned at the front gate. A bird house doubles up as a loudspeaker. Visions of haunted-house movies arise when the gate slides open as if worked by invisible hands. A quaint charm lies in the sun-beaten, cracked redwood front. Add a room brimful of bookcases and you would find it hard to put a lid on a grin.

Miss Agatha then tells T3I her tale. Of what drew her to writing stories full of gnomes. Of happier times holding tea-parties for children in the neighborhood. And of the inevitable. Of life getting in the way. Of the children growing up and going away. Of being left behind.

Of the monster of commerce that ate away at the heart of her locality. Of a world of make-believe giving way to a world of "believe in our makes" (the local fairylike theatre is being torn down to make way for a 12-storey office building).

Perhaps, the declining sense of community is the real vanishing treasure here.

Miss Agatha has clung on refusing to budge from her place of birth. And now she's being haunted by her childhood companions. She narrates with nary a trace of bitterness. Robert Arthur adds just the right amount of lightness and poignancy to the sequence. He sneaks in sprinkles of humour throughout Miss Agatha's narration. Consider Jupe's dietary preferences ("...Miss Agawam said, offering cookies, of which Jupe took several." and "Jupiter took time to swallow a cookie."), and Miss Agatha's obvious fondness for tea ("...poured herself a last cup of tea.").

The T3I prove ideal listeners. For starters they don't dismiss her claims which is what one expects from them what with their motto being "We Investigate Anything". They show empathy and wisdom beyond their years as they acknowledge Miss Agatha's situation, her battle and her beliefs. Miss Agatha enjoys herself so thoroughly in their company her joy is obvious and contagious. It's a cozy scene indeed in that house "which seemed to be hiding from the busy world outside."

What a pity Miss Agatha is given an abrupt end. Thinking the T3I have abandoned her, she finally caves in. She rushes off to her nephew and declares her intention of selling off her home. What's more she doesn't appear again in the story. Her tale is wrapped up offstage so to speak. The last we hear of her she's settled by the sea. Perhaps she would be happier by the shore. The sea is after all a rich vein for lore.

Though the T3I cover considerable distances in *Vanishing Treasure* Worthington is surprisingly absent. (It's fun to imagine him taking time off to perhaps attend a seminar on Owl and Cowl: How to Combine your Passions). However, what's welcome is plenty of word space for Hans, the burly Bavarian. He gets to flex muscles and generally act like a gentle Hulk. The exchange

"Hans!" Bob shouted with a sudden inspiration. "Drive fast! Break the gate down!"

"Okay, Bob, good idea!" Hans grunted.

could have leapt straight out of the pages of the *Avengers* screenplay.

This is also a mystery where Jupe's back in the spotlight after being curiously kept in the background in the *Green Ghost* (1965).

He outvotes Pete and Bob 1 to 2. He makes a series of good deductions (which really don't get the T3I anywhere); raises sound questions ("Why didn't the thieves take the Rainbow Jewels?"); is quick to praise ("I couldn't have done anything without Pete and Bob helping." in response to "Jupe has done most of the solving..."), quick to scoff ("A folding, collapsible ladder?...That he put in his pocket before he scooted into a hole in the fourth dimension?"), and quick to dismiss Bob's claim of spying a gnome ("You do have a very strong imagination."); fails to spot a trap; risks Pete's life and limb (bravo Pete for scaling a 70-foot wall); and then pulls off a daring trap of his own nearly risking the T3I's lives again.

A kaleidoscope of Jupe's different dimensions. His character arc goes from peak puffed-up Jupe to a humble-pie munching Jupe and then back-to-square-smug Jupe.

While ever so often I enjoy Jupe's lordly behavior, I winced at some of his lines here: "No organization [T3I] can function unless orders are obeyed." Robert Arthur also draws a small parallel between Jupe and the story's bad guy by employing similar sentences to describe them: "Jupe had the slightly smug look he sometimes got when he felt he had a good idea." (this sentence is in fact repeated later in a slightly altered form), and "...looked pleased with himself." Jupe's even invited to join the dark side. That's where the comparison ends of course. Still, it's interesting to see Robert Arthur willing to let Jupe cop some stick.

After the disappointment that is *Green Ghost* in terms of mystery and clues, Robert Arthur is back in fine form here (I liked how the museum thieves were gold-bearing in more than one sense). He follows classic [GAD](#) (Golden Age Detection) tradition by indulging in fair play. Throughout the book, he smuggles in several clues to the gnome mystery and indeed the locked room mystery in the most mundane places.

Of course, I never spotted the clues on the first read. But once you know the solution, you can see them everywhere. Consider the sentences "...the gang picked Children's day at the museum on purpose..." (for more than one reason as it turns out), "...called your young friends gnomes and dwarves and elves...", or "...the rear door opened and four small boys hopped out...". Robert Arthur seemed to be having a whale of a time leaving this trail of clue crumbs.

*Vanishing Treasure* is similar to *Whispering Mummy* and *Green Ghost* in the bare-bones of the overall plot. But Robert Arthur puts the familiarity to good use by turning it into a red herring (the sequence involving Mr. Jordan, the theatre owner, and his night-watchman Mr. Rawley) to wrong-foot the reader.

To be fair, when I learnt how the Golden Belt had vanished I was underwhelmed. Robert Arthur provides a couple of false solutions at first like a certain Mr. John Dickson Carr, the second of which was too technical for my taste and boy was I glad that that was not the answer.

But even the actual solution is not up to scratch. Actually, scratch that. Most locked-room mysteries hinge on highly intricate and technical details and in that sense, Robert Arthur's solution fares well. Still, the hiding place is mentioned just twice (including at the time of reveal) in the whole book. It's much the same as learning that [the butler did it](#). Of course, the relatively less time spent on the museum mystery does hinder a satisfying solution.

There's a faint murmur of Sherlock Holmes running through the book. Twice he's mentioned. One of the storylines summons shades of *The Red-Headed League* (1891). When Jupe examines a blob of earth suspecting it may have fallen out of someone's shoe, Bob points out that it could well have come from one of Miss Agatha's flowerbox. In the short story *The Honour of Israel Gow* (1911) by G. K. Chesterton, Father Brown, detective and occasional priest, furnishes several solutions to explain the connection between an odd jumble of objects. Each time he asserts that the solution he has offered is almost certainly the wrong one.

"What a perfectly extraordinary notion!" cried Flambeau. "Do you really think that is the truth?"

"I am perfectly sure it isn't," answered Father Brown, "only you said that nobody could connect snuff and diamonds and clockwork and candles. I give you that connection off-hand. The real truth, I am very sure, lies deeper."

...

"Is that all?" asked Flambeau after a long pause. "Have we got to the dull truth at last?"

"Oh, no," said Father Brown.

...

"I only suggested that because you said one could not plausibly connect snuff with clockwork or candles with bright stones. Ten false philosophies will fit the universe; ten false theories will fit Glengyle Castle. But we want the real explanation of the castle and the universe."

One could well think Bob and Robert were going for much the same sentiment.

Vanishing Treasure is a solid entry in the T3I series. Through an indescribable alchemy of heart, humor, action, and mystery Robert Arthur forged an underrated gem.

-Aditi Mukund Prabhudesai

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