

Bradt travel guides

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THE DART RELOADED

I run down the slope towards the dead body. It lies in wild garlic. Female. Middle-aged. Ginger fur coat, stolen from the tailor's dummy in Agatha's dressing room.

I look to my travel buddy. He will know what to do. He is a murderer.

'South Devon cow enjoying the sun,' he says.

OK. In a TV episode of Poirot, his character Mr Graves whacked an Italian Count with a rock-god figurine. Beethoven, I believe. Besides corpses, it seems he is quite the authority on livestock. 'Biggest cattle breed in Britain, also called the orange elephant.'

We are searching for the boathouse. Our journey here involved a series of unscheduled events. In them, I sensed the weave of the great crime writer herself.

'Mechanical failure,' the lady outside the Dartmouth National Trust shop had said of the boat booked to take us up the river to Greenway, the summer home of Agatha Christie.

'Is there an alternative method of transport?' inquired Mr Graves with the honeyed voice once used to seduce Miss Lemon.

'I'm locked out. My colleague has gone missing. There's a steam train on the other side of the Dart, from Kingswear.'

'Foul play,' I mooted, after we had crossed the river by ferry and stood on the platform, 'did you see blood on her hand?'

'And sugar on her lip,' he replied, 'from the half-eaten doughnut.'

Raging steam and a hoarse whistle-blast announced the red and black engine. Driver and fire man riding high, sleeveless and shiny, trustworthy with combustibles. A shift of heavy leavers and grinding of wheels brought the monster to a halt.

In our compartment, a girl with gem-studded fingernails put on reading glasses and unfolded a triptych leaflet. 'Agatha liked hot lobster and blackberry ice cream.' Her boyfriend picked at the print on his 'archaeology rocks' t-shirt. An avowal troubled by errant earphone wires and a distant hip-hop beat. 'I'm more interested in the Mesopotamian finds of her husband Max Mallowan,'

I mentally log this sound bite. It feels scripted. In a scene so fitting to our destination, that changes to our travel plans seem meant to be. The two protagonists chat on, for the duration, like a vintage dub sampled and reloaded.

Obedient to the heritage track, the gold and fawn carriages ahead of ours arc, in and out of sight. Gold and fawn, a passé colour combination that reminds of my childhood brownie uniform. Three weeks of wear, before 'an over-active imagination' deemed me not suited to pack life'. Marlene Tucker, the victim in Dead Man's Folly, made it all the way to 'girl-guide' prior to her strangulated finish in the boathouse.

Access to the upper level of the boathouse is from a path cut horizontal into the steep bank. So says our map, though it is difficult to find. The walkways contest with bolshie thicket. In-your-face pink

rhododendrons curse our advance through three-hundred-year old trunks. Sunlight turns the canopy lime green. Oak leaves are pastry-cutter sharp, other foliage veined and skeletal. Mr Graves stoops to examine some speckled tree fungus stacked in the manner of large plates on the serving arm of a waiter. Did I see him tear some off and hide it in his pocket?

He disappears. Stepping from wilderness straight into a large salon with bleached wood floor, arched windows and door opening onto a balcony. The view across river takes in ear-popping hills and cottages where wannabe Marples rehearse knitting with sleuthing. Quick eyes might catch the turquoise flash of a kingfisher, sharp ones a seal playing with a salmon.

Back on the path, stone steps take you down to the riverbed and a side entrance beneath the decked salon. Inside is concrete, rectilinear, rough-edged. Eyes must adjust to the gloom. This and the dank make it difficult to understand the attraction of the plunge pool that fills with saltwater at high tide. It lacks the timber-crafted nod to nature of the room above. If that was heaven, this is hell. The sort of place where a body might be discovered face down, afloat.

In Tudor times, long before the existence of the boathouse, Sir Walter Raleigh sat on the bank enjoying a pipe of tobacco. Local legend says that his servant, unfamiliar with 'new world' smoking and thinking him on fire, doused his master with ale. The 21st Century Mr Graves, vapes as we sip wine in the barn café. He raises an actor's brow at this anecdote, considering me the sort to throw pinot over him and his e-cig.

'Does my drink smell funny?' I say. 'Bitter almonds, the odour of cyanide?'