

A PETTICOAT POLICE MYSTERY

THE DEATH OF

DORA  
BLACK



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*In 1915, Fanny Kate Boadicea Cocks became the first policewoman in the British Empire employed on the same salary as men, and with the same powers of arrest. This story is dedicated to Kate Cocks and her colleagues in the Women's Police Branch of the South Australian Police Force.*

## ADELAIDE, JANUARY 1917

Miss Cocks and Ethel met at the office of the Women's Police Branch on Landrowna Terrace, Victoria Square, at nine o'clock the following morning. By five past nine Ethel was deep into her critical appraisal of Violet Newbold's iced and jam-filled mixed spice biscuits.

'An awful lot of flavours are competing against each other,' she said, regarding her fifth sample before taking another large bite. 'I'm not sure I like them.'

'Clearly,' said Miss Cocks, glancing at the near-empty tin. The two women occupied a single room on the ground floor of the double-storey terrace, making do with a wobbly desk, two chairs, a bench seat under the window and an aged but lockable sideboard. On one wall was a faithful copy of Lady Dorothy Stanley's 1896 portrait *His First Offence*. Painted by an artist friend at the State Children's Council, it was cherished by Miss Cocks because it had been presented in honour of her appointment as the first policewoman in the British Empire to be hired on the same salary as men, with the same powers of arrest.

By half past eleven the policewomen were uncharacteristically idle. Only one woman had been detained in the nearby City Watchhouse overnight, and Miss Cocks had secured her release by arguing she was sick with food poisoning, and not suffering the ill effects of cheap brandy consumed in an effort to forget what would have been her daughter's fifteenth birthday. Though a strict teetotaler, the senior policewoman didn't mind bending the rules for first offenders. She saw no point in imprisoning a woman who'd spent the past decade working at the Salvation Army Women's Refuge after losing her husband and only child to tuberculosis.

After returning to the office, Miss Cocks had discovered nothing of import in the morning's post. Ethel had already scoured the city newspapers for any advertisements promoting the illegal practice of abortion, or attempting to lure gullible girls into immoral work. They had also reviewed the morning's press coverage identifying Dora Black as the drowning victim.

It was then that Ethel finished her fifth biscuit, replaced the lid on the tin and made an unorthodox suggestion.

'A moving *picture*?' replied her boss, looking up from the office journal in which she'd recorded Mrs Aunger and her case of food poisoning at the City Watchhouse.

Ethel's mouth twitched, like she was trying to hide a smile. 'Well. It is work. Of sorts.'

Miss Cocks waited expectantly.

Ethel tried to sound like she hadn't rehearsed the words. 'Moving pictures can be quite corrosive to young minds.' She gestured to her boss. 'As you yourself told *The Advertiser* in that interview last year.'

'Ah yes.' Picture theatre owners had railed at her in the newspapers for days afterward for talking rot, speaking piffle and not knowing the difference between innocent fun and vice. 'Go on.'

Ethel paced a little, fiddling with a lock of blonde hair that had escaped her bun. ‘I believe, as women officers, it’s our duty to keep abreast of the sort of pictures being shown to impressionable children and young women . . .’

‘And?’

Ethel clasped her hands behind her back. ‘That’s all.’ She closed her mouth tightly. Lengthy monologues had proven counterproductive in the past. Then she pointed to the newspapers on the desk and blurted out, ‘Well, that and the fact we’re trying not to think about poor Dora Black and that horrid Detective Sergeant Clarke until we receive Dr Fitzpatrick’s post-mortem results.’

Ethel opened the front door to let in some cool air from the verandah. It was getting awfully close in the small office.

Miss Cocks stared at her colleague for a moment, then smoothed down her journal and returned to her writing. ‘Fine. Check when that new Charlie Chaplin picture is showing. I like him.’

‘Really?’ Ethel leaned forward. ‘*The Adventurer?* Everyone says it’s . . .’ She cleared her throat. ‘There’s a matinee at the Pav at half past twelve. We’ll be out in plenty of time to chaperone any unaccompanied women and minors arriving on the two o’clock train.’

The gate outside creaked, and then a man appeared in the open door bearing a large bunch of pink roses. He leaned on a walking stick.

‘Don’t let me interrupt, ladies,’ he said, tipping his trilby at the pair and then presenting the flowers to Ethel. ‘I just wanted to say I’ve missed you.’

Ethel accepted the flowers with a small curtsy, hoping she didn’t look as guilty as she felt for ignoring the poor chap’s requests to meet in recent weeks. ‘Well, how sweet.’

Miss Cocks stared. ‘And which one are you?’

The gentleman opened his mouth and then shut it again.

With her hands full of roses, Ethel nodded toward him. ‘Forgive my manners. Mr Xavier Colbert, I’d like to introduce Miss Kate Cocks. Xavier is completing his second degree in . . . oh, remind me again, Xavier?’

Xavier’s smile receded. ‘Physics.’

Ethel nodded reassuringly. ‘That’s it! Physics.’

The older woman smiled with a closed mouth. ‘What happened to your leg?’

Xavier glanced down; shifted his weight on his walking stick. ‘Military training. Heliopolis.’

Miss Cocks was reminded of a photograph showing the Pyramids surrounded by Australian troops. ‘Hmm.’ She dipped her pen in the inkwell and leaned over her ledger.

‘I say!’ Xavier’s voice broke in his effort to sound genial. ‘I’d heard you women police kept a bottle of grog on the desk, but I didn’t quite believe it.’

Ethel followed his gaze to the large Jameson Irish Whisky bottle filled with pen ink. ‘But you do know it’s filled with ink, not whisky? It was a first-day gift from the men when we had no stationery. Now we can’t bear to part with it.’

‘That’s jolly funny!’ He put his weight on his walking stick as his laughter filled the office.

Miss Cocks glanced up. ‘It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Mr Colbert.’

‘Oh.’ Xavier nodded, clearing his throat. He glanced at the portrait of a young King George staring, unamused, from the back wall and decided it was little wonder. ‘Well, good day Miss Cocks.’ He tipped his hat at Ethel. ‘Miss Bromley.’ Then he was gone.

Ten minutes passed in silence while Ethel put her roses in a vase and returned to answering a large pile of letters from schoolgirls keen to be policewomen. Finally, failing to find an interesting way to



say ‘Mostly, we just walk,’ she glanced at her boss. ‘So, you’re not the least bit curious about Xavier?’

Miss Cocks studied her young officer. ‘It’s not me who needs to be curious, is it?’

Ethel blushed. ‘Indeed.’

The Pavilion Theatre’s cavernous central auditorium smelled of floor polish, caramel toffee and body odour.

The policewomen took their seats as the lights dimmed and an Australasian Gazette newsreel showed troops practising a raid on enemy trenches. The scene was filmed on a lush hillside in Australia, and the soldiers ran half-heartedly forward while bare-footed children stood watching in the foreground. The audience watched in awkward, hushed silence, knowing that in the not-too-distant future many of these same men, and others sitting among them in the Pav, would be running to their deaths. It occurred to Ethel that the early excitement of war had long ago been replaced by a stoic acceptance of loss. She felt a strong desire to hug every brave young serviceman in the theatre.

To the relief of the audience, the organist finally sallied forth with a bright tune, and *The Adventurer* began.

Act One, ‘The Man Hunt’, opened with armed police scouring a beach and cliff face, before a lazy, big-bellied officer collapsed on the sand with a shotgun in his lap. The audience cheered and clapped as Charlie Chaplin, the daring prison escapee, emerged from tunnelling under the sand and almost connected with the shotgun muzzle. As the prisoner dashed up the cliff face and outwitted one hapless policeman after another, someone yelled, ‘Look out – it’s the South Australian police at Seacliff!’ Even Miss Cocks allowed herself a smile.

A scene change revealed a young woman on a long pier not unlike Glenelg Jetty, and Miss Cocks and Ethel exchanged a look of mild surprise. When the heroine jumped from the jetty in a bid to save her drowning mother, splashing into the sea below, the senior policewoman tapped her young constable on the arm and led the way out of the theatre.

Emerging onto the pavement, Miss Cocks furrowed her brow against the fierce light. ‘The splash,’ she said, matter-of-factly.

Ethel blinked. ‘Goodness – of course!’

They headed for the office, Miss Cocks staring straight ahead. ‘Three people live in that kiosk at the end of Glenelg Jetty. The McCabes and their daughter Susie. If Dora jumped, why didn’t they hear a splash?’

‘Friday night was unusually calm,’ Ethel said excitedly, ‘not a breath of wind.’

‘Sound carries, especially a splash from a height like that. How high do you think?’

‘Those pylons have to be forty feet. Depending on the tide, the jump would have been maybe fifteen, twenty feet?’

Miss Cocks pressed her lips together. ‘If she was drugged, an assailant could have slipped her into the water at the boat landing near the end of the jetty.’ She thought for a moment. ‘But why? Dr Fitzpatrick said Dora didn’t appear to have been interfered with.’

‘And it can’t have been theft,’ said Ethel. ‘She still had the silver chain and pendants around her neck, and any decent Adelaide crook would have stolen that purse.’

Miss Cocks stopped abruptly, with Ethel pulling up alongside. ‘If Clarke won’t countenance the notion Dora met with foul play, we owe it to the poor girl to at least ask some questions.’

She nodded as if making up her mind. 'I need to speak to Ruby Campbell at Moore's on the Square.'

Ethel checked her wristlet watch. 'If we hurry, we can interview her and still meet the Broken Hill train at two o'clock.'

'No, you go straight to the railway station.' Miss Cocks was already striding ahead, speaking over her shoulder. 'Cecilia and the Travellers' Aid ladies will help if you have your hands full.'

Ethel clenched her fists in frustration, hurrying after her boss. 'But you always say a problem shared is a problem halved.' She raised her voice to be heard over a passing motorcycle. 'I'm a good policewoman!'