

THE MYSTERY OF THE MEWSTONE • HERBERT RUSSELL

A MEWSTONE MYSTERY

The Mystery of the Mewstone

A strange tale of an abandoned boat, a ruined house—and a visitor from the stars



The Great Mewstone rises beyond the entrance to Plymouth Sound. Illustration created for this edition.

BY HERBERT RUSSELL

First published before 1937 • Presented here in a lightly modernised retelling

About this edition

This story appeared in the Wigton Advertiser on 21 August 1937, although it was evidently written much earlier. Herbert Russell places his mystery among real landmarks around Plymouth Sound: the Cattewater, Phoenix Pier, the breakwater, Wembury Head and the Great Mewstone.

The newspaper printing is dense and its language belongs to another age. This reader's edition retells the complete story in clear modern English while preserving its setting, spellings, characters, dialogue, sequence of events and wonderfully improbable conclusion. Some dialect has been softened for readability. The illustrations are modern interpretations; they do not claim to reproduce real people or an actual incident.

A note for readers This is a work of fiction. The Mewstone and surrounding places are real, but the murder mystery, rescue and meteorite are part of Russell's tale.

Principal characters

Horace Farquhar: the young narrator, visiting Plymouth aboard a friend's yacht.

The waterman: an eccentric local boatman who knows the Mewstone well.

Maisie Darling: a fashionable young woman discovered in a state of shock.

Lawrence Bolitho: Maisie's former fiancé, found dead in the ruined house.

The Mystery of the Mewstone

A modern retelling of Herbert Russell's story

I. A morning in Plymouth Sound

If you know Plymouth at all, the name of the Mewstone will probably bring to mind a slate-grey island rising more than two hundred feet above the sea. It stands beyond the breakwater, close to Wembury Head, looking like a natural fortress at the mouth of Plymouth Sound.

From the mainland it seems utterly remote. Its cliffs are dark and steep, and the ruined walls of an old house stand above the landing-place. Stories were once told of goats living there and of treasure hidden beneath the ruins by wreckers in earlier centuries. Local fishermen knew that a landing could be made in calm weather, but to most people the island remained inaccessible.

At the time of my adventure I was staying aboard a large schooner-yacht in the Cattewater. My host enjoyed short voyages and long periods at anchor, which often left his guests to arrange their own amusement. After breakfast one hot morning, I came ashore at Phoenix Pier and wondered how to spend the day.

Several watermen were waiting for fares. One of them approached me: a small, weathered man with wild grey hair beneath a sugar-loaf hat, sharp eyes and a red checked shirt. He suggested Batten for the golf links, or Cawsand Bay for mackerel. I pointed instead towards the Mewstone.

“Could we land there today?”

“Couldn’t have a better time,” he said. “Smooth water, and the young flood will be making by the time we arrive.”

He then mentioned a strange local incident. The previous afternoon, a young gentleman and a young woman had hired another waterman’s boat and had not returned. The missing craft belonged to a man known as Sneezer Bill. Some thought the couple had been caught by a change of weather. Others suspected that the young man had stolen the boat, although nobody could imagine what he hoped to do with it.

We set off, rounding the Reny Rocks and passing the iron-caged Shagstone. The sea was almost calm. A light breeze filled the boat’s small mainsail and its triangular scrap of jib. Ahead, the Mewstone seemed to grow out of the summer haze until its cliffs appeared twice their true height.

II. The abandoned boat

As we drew near, the waterman suddenly stopped speaking and stared towards the rocks below the island.

“Blessed if that isn’t Sneezer Bill’s boat!”

A white boat lay stranded with its bows pointing towards the land and its stern resting in the froth of the surf. At first I assumed its occupants had landed at Wembury Sands and walked home, leaving the tide to carry the unsecured boat away. But when we went ashore and examined it, we found a rope running from its stern to a rock.

The craft had been deliberately made fast. Its paddles were aboard. A woman's sunshade and a pair of gloves remained in the stern-sheets, as though the visitors intended to return within minutes.

"They landed yesterday evening," said the waterman. The length of rope and the marks of the tides told him that the boat had arrived near low water. As the tide rose, it had floated to the full extent of its cable and been carried onto the rocks.

I decided that we could not remove the boat until we knew whether anyone remained on the island. Leaving the waterman beside the stranded craft, I followed a rough track that twisted up the slope towards the ruined house.

III. The ruined house

The climb took about ten minutes. Rabbits scattered through the grass, and seabirds wheeled above me. At the broken doorway I paused, half expecting some hostile occupant to challenge my intrusion.

Instead, the sight inside stopped me cold.

A young man lay on his back with his arms outstretched and his legs folded awkwardly beneath him. He wore a checked suit. His soft felt hat had been crushed beneath his head, and a dark wound marked his brow. His open eyes held the unmistakable stillness of death.

As I stepped nearer, a choking gasp came from a shadowed corner. A young woman staggered towards me. She was tall, perhaps twenty years old, and fashionably dressed in pale summer clothes. Her face was colourless. Her jaw trembled, and she seemed barely able to form words.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "What has happened here?"

"Dead!" she whispered, pointing at the body. "Have you come back to kill me too?"



Inside the ruined house, Farquhar discovers Lawrence Bolitho and the terrified Maisie Darling.

Her words made me believe that shock had unbalanced her mind. Perhaps, I thought, she had struck the man herself during some violent frenzy. I stepped back instinctively.

*“Without him I do not wish to live,” she moaned. Then her fear flared suddenly.
“But you shall not take my life!”*

Before I could stop her, she darted through the doorway. I followed at once.

IV. The leap

She ran with astonishing speed towards the southern side of the island. Once she slipped and nearly fell, but recovered and continued. The rough path ended at a brow where the rock dropped abruptly to the sea, some twenty feet below.

At the edge she threw out her arms and vanished over the cliff.

I reached the brink in time to see a ring of disturbed water spreading below. She did not rise. I pulled off my coat, shouted to the waterman to bring the boat, and dived.

Almost immediately I found her beneath the surface. She was unconscious at first, and I lifted her head above water. The instant she felt my grip, however, she began to struggle wildly. I had learned the principles of lifesaving, but panic had given her dangerous strength. She thrashed and fought until I feared that we would both be drowned.

There was only one thing I could do. I struck her hard enough to stun her. The struggle ceased, and I was able to keep her afloat until the boatman reached us.



Farquhar supports Maisie in the water as the boatman rows to their aid.

Together we pulled her into the stern of the boat. I climbed aboard after her, breathless and exhausted. We wrapped my jacket around her head, shaded her face from the sun and left the missing boat where it lay. Whatever had happened on the island, it was now a matter for the police.

V. Back to Plymouth

The young woman remained unconscious as we sailed back. I searched her pockets but found nothing that established her identity. At Phoenix Pier I sent the waterman for a cab and told him to say nothing about our discovery.

We carried her into the vehicle, and I took her to the South Devon Hospital. The doctor listened without interruption as I described the abandoned boat, the dead man in the ruins and the woman's leap into the sea.

He recognised her face from Plymouth, although he did not know her name. She was placed in a private ward, while I went directly to the police station and reported everything that had happened.

The authorities soon identified her as Maisie Darling, daughter of a Plymouth family. The dead man was Lawrence Bolitho, a former fiancé. His terrible head wound appeared to prove that he had been murdered. Yet there was no weapon, no sign of robbery and no clear motive. Maisie remained dangerously ill with brain fever and could give no sensible account of the tragedy.

The police were left with an impossible puzzle. If Maisie had killed Bolitho, why? If someone else had attacked him, why leave Maisie alive as a witness? And who was the mysterious person whom she believed had returned to kill her?

VI. The clue from the sky

During her illness, Maisie spoke in disconnected fragments. Most of her words meant nothing, but one subject returned again and again: shooting stars.

A doctor wondered whether this obsession might be connected with what she had witnessed. The police therefore made another careful search of the ground around the ruined house.

There, buried roughly two feet into the earth, they found a meteorite about the size of an egg.

The supposed murder weapon had fallen from the sky.

The position of the object and the nature of Bolitho's wound convinced the investigators that he had been struck and killed by the meteorite. Maisie had seen him fall without understanding what had happened. The shock of such an impossible death, followed by grief and terror, had temporarily destroyed her reason.

What had seemed to be murder was instead a freak accident—so extraordinary that nobody had considered it until Maisie's confused references to shooting stars provided the clue.

VII. Six months later

About six months after the mystery, a brief newspaper announcement supplied the story's final chapter. At St Andrew's Church in Plymouth, Maisie Darling married Horace Farquhar—the man who had discovered the tragedy and saved her life beneath the cliffs of the Mewstone.

The Mewstone remained as it had always been: remote, steep-sided and silent beyond Wembury Head. But for those who knew the truth, its ruined house would forever be associated with one of the strangest deaths ever imagined in Plymouth Sound.

Afterword: fact, fiction and the Mewstone

Russell builds his adventure around genuine local geography. The Great Mewstone stands off Wembury at the entrance to Plymouth Sound. Small boats did land there, and the island really did contain a house. Its isolation, cliffs and ruined buildings made it an ideal setting for maritime adventure and mystery fiction.

The story's meteorite solution belongs to a popular tradition of late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century "impossible mysteries", in which an apparently criminal death receives an ingenious scientific explanation. Modern readers may question whether a small meteorite could produce the exact circumstances described, but realism is not quite the point: Russell's pleasure lies in leading the reader from familiar Plymouth waters into an increasingly extraordinary puzzle.

The tale also preserves echoes of its period: the bustle around Phoenix Pier, hired open boats, watermen waiting for fares, yachts lying in the Cattewater and the mysterious pull of the Mewstone itself. Those details make it more than a sensational story. They turn the landscape around Wembury into one of its principal characters.

Publication note

Herbert Russell, "The Mystery of the Mewstone". Reprinted in the *Wigton Advertiser*, 21 August 1937. Herbert William Henry Russell (1869–1944) also wrote *True Blue* and *My Atlantic Bride*. This edition is a modern retelling prepared from the surviving newspaper printing. It is intended to make the story accessible while encouraging readers to consult the original text.

Illustrations in this edition are newly created historical interpretations. They are not contemporary photographs and should not be treated as evidence of the island's exact appearance or of any real event.