



THE LONDON MURDER MYSTERIES



**MURDER
ON STAGE**



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CHAPTER 1

POISON



Only Alfie saw the hand. He stared in horror, opened his mouth, but then shut it again. With all the noise going on in the theatre, the whistles, shouts, screams, catcalls, no one would hear him.

Alfie, his brother Sammy, their cousins Jack and Tom and their friend Sarah were standing right in front of the stage at Covent Garden Theatre. A man had given Alfie a sheaf of tickets, telling him to bring his friends and make as much noise as possible when the signal was given, and promising him a shilling later. It was a great occasion for a riot. The Queen herself, the young Queen Victoria, was present!

All was quiet until an actor came on stage to announce the next play – Alfie recognised him as Harry Booth. This was the sign for the rioting to begin. Someone shouted from the gallery, a man leant over the balcony rail and yelled down to the pit. A woman from down there screamed back. Two men in the pit hurled oranges up towards the gallery, where Alfie saw them burst with a mess of juice and pulp. ‘Old prices! Old prices! Old prices!’ they all bellowed.

Everyone had turned around to watch the rioters. No one was looking at the man on stage and his words were drowned by the din. Alfie looked up, laughed at the dummy of the theatre manager, with a rope around his cloth neck, being lowered from the rails of the gallery. Then he looked back at the stage – and saw the hand.

The hand came slowly and cautiously out from the place where the two curtains joined, just behind where a small table with a glass stood. It grasped a glass phial in its fist. Alfie could see the sleeve and the top of the phial gleaming in the white glow from the gas-fired limelights on the edge of the stage. He watched intently as the liquid from the phial was poured into the glass.

Harry Booth finished his speech, bowed to an

audience who had not heard a word he had said, and picked up the glass – a glass of port it looked like . . .

Instantly Alfie acted.

In a moment he had scaled the small wooden barrier between the orchestra and the audience and was pushing his way past the conductor, the violinists, the flute players and the drummers.

He knew where he was going.

During the long and boring opera that had gone before he had seen how to get on the stage from the pit. An actor, dressed as the devil, had slipped into the orchestra pit and then risen up as if by magic right in the middle of the stage.

Where he had gone, Alfie could follow.

Yes, there was a trapdoor. The bright, white light from the stage outlined it. Alfie pushed and in a moment he had swung himself up.

It was too late!

Harry Booth was lying dead on the stage.

Instantly Alfie made up his mind. There was nothing he could do. He had not been in time to prevent the murder so now he must get off the stage.

Ever since the death of his parents, Alfie had lived on the edge of danger as well of starvation, and had learnt to bolt for home when trouble arose. He took

one look at the audience – still turned away from the stage – and one last look at the body.

Already a man had dashed out from behind the stage and was kneeling beside the body as Alfie hastily retreated back down through the trapdoor. He slid past the musicians who were still playing, and slipped quietly back over the barrier.

Sarah and Jack, only a few months younger than himself, were both on the alert. Sarah was clever. Her eyes would have followed Alfie. Already she had moved forward, and so had Jack, his left hand firmly clasping Sammy's arm. Alfie jerked his head. Jack would guide the blind boy and young Tom would follow after. Moving quietly along, step by careful step, keeping in the shadow of the stage above, Alfie led the way to the exit.

'Let's get out of here,' he said when the others joined him. 'There's going to be trouble. The geezer is dead.'

CHAPTER 2

MURDER



Alfie, Sammy and their cousins had their home in a small, damp cellar in Bow Street, not far from Covent Garden market. When Alfie's parents died, he took over the responsibilities of finding the weekly rent and feeding the four of them. He had promised his dying mother that he would look after his blind brother and that meant that he had to keep a roof over their heads.

The boys begged, stole, performed tricks and Sammy, who had a voice like an angel, could always earn some money from his singing. Sarah lived at a big house where she was a scullery maid but she often visited the boys when she had finished work. That

evening, Alfie, with a bundle of free tickets in his pocket, had grandly invited her to go to the theatre with them.

As soon as they started to go down the steps, they heard an excited bark and once Alfie had opened the door, a large and very hairy dog threw himself at them. Mutsy was no beauty. He was a big dog, with masses of reddish brown fur, a fringe hanging over his eyes and enormous paws.

‘No sausages today, boy.’ Alfie patted the dog. He frowned slightly as they entered. There wasn’t much light in the cellar, but it was enough to show that there was nothing to eat.

Tom made a disgusted sound. ‘Waste of time!’ he said. ‘Why did you rush away like that? You should have got some money from that fellow. What was the point of going there for nothing? Just boring, it was!’

‘He promised us a shilling, but I wasn’t going to wait around. Not with Harry Booth dead on the stage,’ said Alfie briefly. He was annoyed with himself for not demanding money first, but that was none of Tom’s business. Alfie was the gang leader and that was the way it was going to stay. He opened his mouth to say something angry, but then shut it firmly. Eleven-year-old Tom was a nuisance, always complaining

about something, but there was no sense in starting a fight.

‘Funny, though, wasn’t it? Do you think that he had loads of tickets, then?’ asked Sarah. ‘These things cost money. I’ve seen the prices written up. You pay a guinea for a box, fourteen shillings and sixpence for the stalls, six shillings for the pit and four shillings for the upper gallery.’

‘Six shillings!’ exclaimed Tom. ‘For that!’

Alfie frowned. It did seem strange. ‘We didn’t have seats,’ he pointed out. ‘Perhaps it’s only a few pence if you’re standing.’

‘What was he like, the bloke that gave you the tickets?’ asked Tom.

‘Don’t remember him too well,’ said Alfie reluctantly. ‘Small fellow – small and fat. Came up to me when I was doing a spot of juggling. Funny voice – a bit squeaky, like.’

‘Stupid!’ exclaimed Tom. ‘Why didn’t you look at him, proper? Then you could have chased him up for the shilling.’

‘Who are you calling stupid?’ demanded Alfie.

‘What actually happened on the stage?’ asked Sammy. Though younger than Tom, he had more brains in his little finger than Tom had in his whole body.

Being blind made him extra-sensitive to voices: he sensed his brother's discomfiture and annoyance and now he sat down beside the fire, put his arm around Mutsy and turned his sightless eyes towards Alfie.

'It was really strange.' Alfie sat beside him and Mutsy wagged his tail and sat back on his hindquarters, placing a large hairy paw on each boy's lap. Jack put a few more coals on the fire. He was the one that would have to fish some pieces of coal out of the icy waters of the Thames next morning, but no food meant that the fire was needed more than ever – an empty belly made you shiver – that was the experience of the gang. Alfie gave him a nod of thanks and continued with his story, relating how he had seen the hand pour something from a phial into the glass and how he had dashed on to the stage to try to prevent Harry Booth drinking whatever had been put in the glass.

'Whatever it was, it killed him instant,' he finished, conscious that his stomach was aching with hunger and wishing that, like Mutsy, he liked rats. There were more of them around than there was food – if you were poor that was. If you were rich, the shops and public houses and eating places were full of delicious dishes.

'Any way of finding out who killed him, Alfie?'

Sammy had a quiet smile on his face. ‘I was just thinking that Inspector Denham might be interested. Might give us a shilling or two if we could help.’

It was true that Inspector Denham had rewarded them well in the past when the sharp wits of the gang had led to the solution of a crime. Alfie licked the corners of his lips as the saliva began to flow at the thought of the wonderful meals that they had got with Inspector Denham’s money.

‘Did you see his face?’ asked Jack, but Alfie shook his head.

‘No, just the arm,’ he said. ‘Something funny about it, though . . .’

And then his mind went back to that moment at the theatre and suddenly he knew the truth.

The arm had a fancy sleeve – like a clown’s costume.

‘It was a clown,’ he said excitedly. ‘I’d bet anything that it was one of the clowns. The sleeve had that frilly end on it – just like the clowns have.’

‘Why should a clown murder an actor?’ Tom sounded scornful.

‘A clown is a man,’ pointed out Sarah. ‘He could have a reason for murder, same as anyone. And, what’s more, it would make a good disguise, what with all

that paint on the face and those fancy clothes. It would be hard to know your own brother if he were dressed up as a clown,' she added slowly, thinking her way through the problem.

'And there's clowns coming out of your ears around here since they put that sign up,' said Alfie. He had seen a queue a mile long at the back of the theatre that very morning, behind a board saying:

***CLOWNS WANTED:
TEN NEW CLOWNS ON STAGE
EVERY NIGHT,
A SHILLING A NIGHT PAID.***

And that was on top of the two regular clowns at Covent Garden Theatre.

'So it could be any of them,' Jack said.

'We have to look for someone who wanted Harry Booth dead.' Alfie was finding that thinking about the murder reduced the terrible ache of hunger. He would keep his mind on that problem.

'Someone who wanted his job,' suggested Tom.

'Not likely,' said Alfie and then changed it quickly to, 'but it's possible.' He didn't want Tom going into one of his sulks.

'He might have injured someone once,' said Sarah.

'Or he might know something about someone,

threatened him, like.’ Sammy was enjoying himself, Alfie knew by the look on his brother’s face. He had a sharp brain and loved to use it.

‘Might have been a blackmailer, mightn’t he? What was Harry Booth like, Jack? You said that you and Alfie met him,’ said Sarah.

‘He was all right – a nice fellow – gave us a few pence for helping him to shift some of these big picture things that they put up at the back of the stage – scenery, that’s it. What did you think of him, Alfie?’

Alfie thought. He had no very strong impression of Harry Booth, though he had recognised him instantly each time that he came on stage – not a particularly good actor – he was the same in every one of the small parts that he played.

‘He was all right,’ he said in the end. It was strange, he thought, a bit sad perhaps – but Harry Booth dead seemed more interesting than Harry Booth alive. ‘I’ll go down to Covent Garden Theatre tomorrow afternoon and do a bit of poking around,’ he went on. ‘They’re bound to need someone to do a bit of cleaning up. Them tomatoes and oranges didn’t half make a mess.’

Who had murdered Harry Booth? Was it one of the theatre’s two permanent clowns, or one of the ten who

came for one night's performance and might never be seen again?

Whoever it was, they arrived at the theatre well prepared for the deed. Some fast-acting poison had been poured into that glass; Harry Booth had died within seconds of drinking it.

A murderer with a poison like that in his pocket was a very dangerous man!