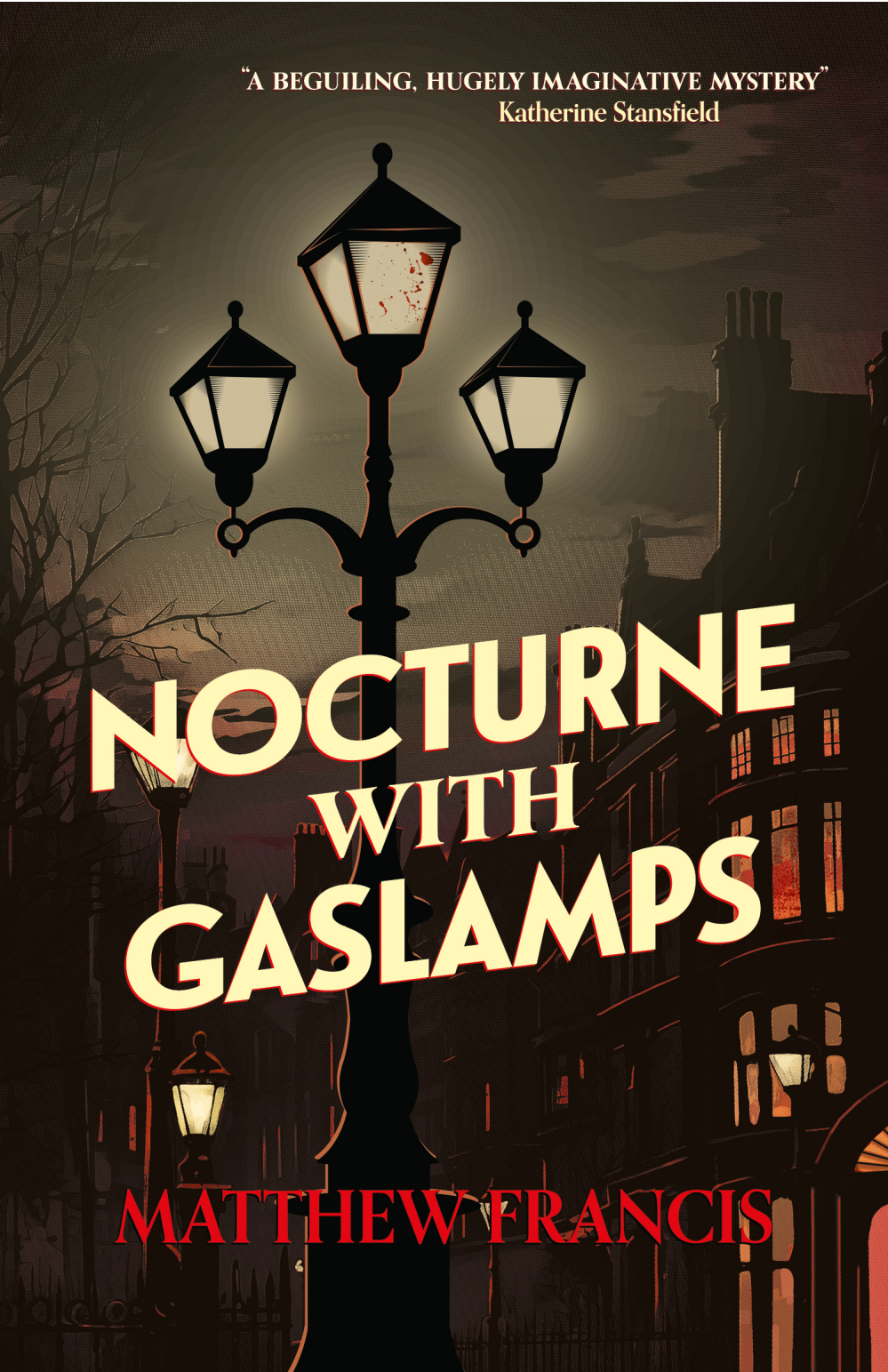

"A BEGUILING, HUGELY IMAGINATIVE MYSTERY"
Katherine Stansfield
NOCTURNE WITH GASLAMPS
MATTHEW FRANCIS





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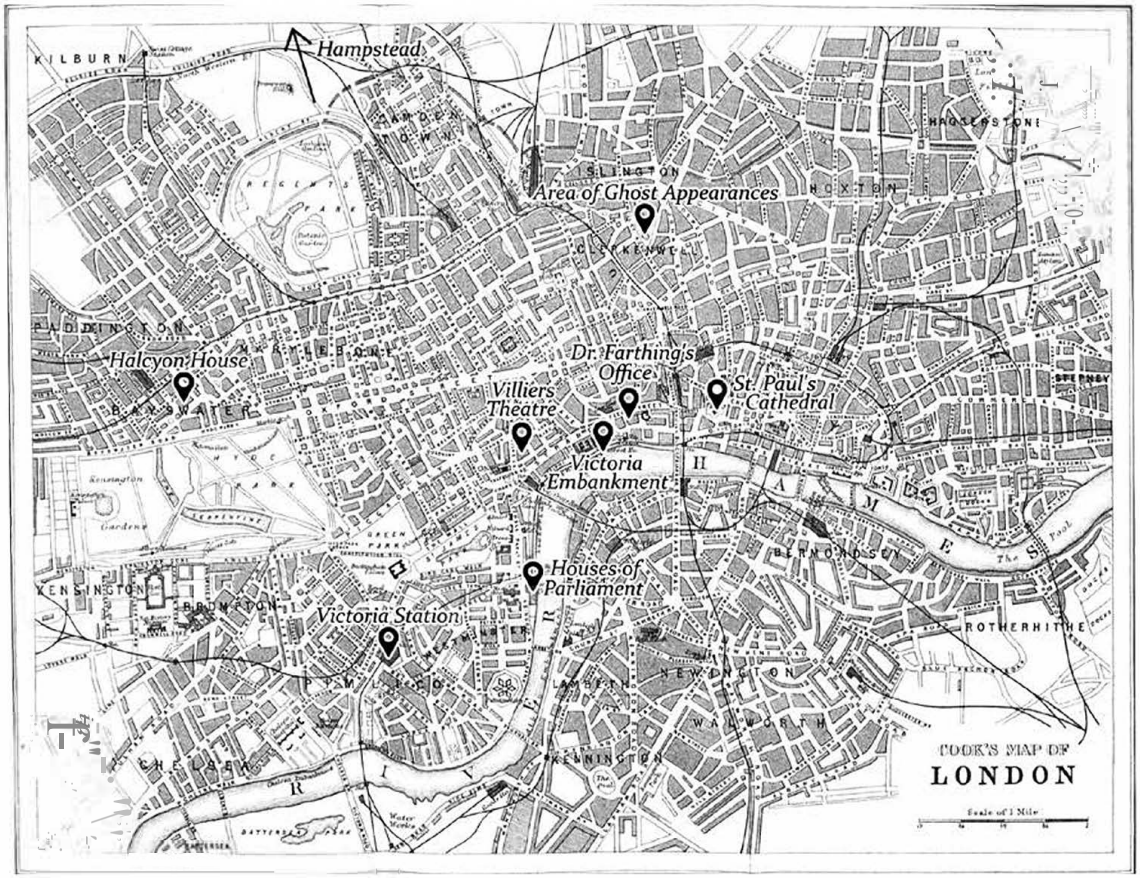
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The City is of Night; perchance of Death,
But certainly of Night

James Thomson,
The City of Dreadful Night

HAM: What, frighted with false fire!
GER: How fares my lord?
POL: Give o'er the play.
CLA: Give me some light: away!
ALL: Lights, lights, lights!

Hamlet


Hampstead
Area of Ghost Appearances
Halcyon House
Dr. Farthing's Office
St. Paul's Cathedral
Villiers Theatre
Victoria Embankment
Houses of Parliament
Victoria Station
COOK'S MAP OF
LONDON
Scale of 1 Mile

April 1883

Prologue

A pedestrian has just turned the corner from one of London's great thoroughfares into a smaller street, little more than an alley, when the lamp in the middle, some fifty yards in front of him, goes out.

The city has not known real darkness since the beginning of the century; the gaslamps in every street give a purplish glow to the night sky that seems part of the texture of the air. Now this purple has turned to black and it is as if the man has been plunged into the depths of space. A spontaneous noise seems to arise behind and all around him, a sort of gasp, as if the entire population of the city is catching its breath. He hears the whinny of a panicked horse. Without turning round, he knows it is dark on the main road, too, only the lamps of a hansom cab making an island of brightness that merely emphasizes the black sea around it. He is a little surprised at how disturbed he feels: he has lived in this city all his life, and has often said he knows it blindfold—now is the chance to test the reality of that claim. He has no more than a few dozen yards to go to his destination, and besides, he is one of the very few people who have been expecting this.

All the same, some primeval instinct made him stop the moment the light went out, and now he has to force himself to begin walking again, feeling at each step that he might drop through the cobbles to fall endlessly through the universe. He cannot help lurching to his left in search of the wall, which turns out to be further than he pictured it, so that he almost loses his balance and his hand thumps painfully against the brick. He wants to cling on with both hands, turn his body to the wall and press himself against it until the lights come back. He is shivering despite his heavy coat and the mild evening, and he feels a curious bristling sensation under the dome of his bowler hat. *Humbug*, he tells himself, *I ain't got enough hair left for it to stand*

on end. He has risked his life many times, faced down men with knives, broken bottles, guns. He is not a child, to be scared of the dark.

"Humbug," he says, out loud this time, and feels better, a human being again rather than a formless mass of sensations. "I know who you are now," he says, "and you ain't getting away with it. This is the last time, my friend, the very last time. Got me?" But his boldness only lasts a moment, and he wishes he hadn't ventured on such a dramatic speech. What if someone really is listening? That's the trouble with darkness; you can never tell when you've got company. Embarrassment is another feeling he is unaccustomed to, and it goads him into resuming his walk. Resting the fingertips of his left hand on the wall, he takes a step, then another. The fingers run lightly across the wall as he moves, and he is proud of the way he maintains his balance on the uneven surface.

His progress along the wall is slowed by doorways and junctions between the jumbled buildings, and he clunks his shin against a wooden flower tub he is sure wasn't there when he last passed this way. But his confidence has grown, and the pain only makes him more determined. Already his mind is working on the next problem, that of recognizing his destination when he reaches it. If he can forget a flower tub he must have skirted unthinkingly many times before, can he trust his memory for the door he wants? He should have been counting his steps; too late now.

His fingers touch brick, brick, painted wood, more wood, and then they are holding the cold metal of a doorknob. He turns it, and it opens. Still here, then. What a duffer he would have been to come all this way in the dark, and then find the fellow had packed up and gone home for the night. But no, not on this of all nights, when everything's coming together at last. He takes a deep breath of the musty indoor air, just as dark as the street, but somehow safer, and steps inside. There is the staircase in front of him, so it is the right building after all.

He climbs three flights, noticing that there is no sign of life on the lower floors. Everyone else in the building must have

gone home at a normal hour. As he turns the corner after the second landing, he becomes aware of a paleness, not enough to illuminate the steps, but light all the same. By the time he has reached the third-floor landing it has become a clear yellow, a bar of dappled light at the bottom of the door on the left-hand side, stretching out to lap unevenly over the floorboards. He lets out some breath he hadn't realized he was holding and knocks at the door. There is no response, and he knocks again, then a third time. Was that a sound, a clearing of the throat that might have meant "Come in"? He tries the door and it opens.

After the darkness, the candlelight in the room is dazzling. The flames are disturbed by the draught from the door and jump about, creating a flickering effect that feels like rapidly opening and closing one's eyes. Through the optical confusion, he sees the desk at the far side of the room and a dark blur that might be its usual occupant or just the empty space where the occupant would have been. "Sorry," he murmurs. "Excuse me, sir, I just wondered…" He takes a few steps, but, in his disorientated state, he veers off to the right and comes into contact with the wooden back of a piece of furniture. Oh, of course, he'd forgotten that was there. Clumsy great object to have in a place like this.

"What? What?" The man he has come to see rises up almost under his nose. "Oh, it's you."

"Sorry, sir, was you sleeping? I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No, no, I was just thinking. I never sleep. Not even at night."

"The lights have gone out, sir," the visitor says as they shake hands awkwardly across the intervening obstruction. "Good thing you're equipped for it." He indicates the candles.

"Quite." The man is probably smiling. "But let me get you something. And do take a seat."

The visitor skirts the place where his host was recently lying and chooses a plain chair next to an occasional table with one of the candles on it. "Well, sir, thank you, that would be kind on a night like this. A glass of the monstrous fluid would be much appreciated." He chuckles.

"Of course, of course." The host, now coming into focus, as he crosses to the far side of the room, is slightly built and his movements are lithe and fussy at the same time. He stands beside the desk with his back to the visitor.

The latter takes his hat off and puts it on the table beside him. The fire in the hearth is not lit, so he keeps his overcoat on. He is only going to stay for one glass, as there is much to be done tonight. But he has come to talk, and he cannot even wait till he has a drink in his hand. "I shall be glad to take a glass, sir, by way of celebration, for this is a great night for me, dark as it is."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. In fact I think I may safely say that this is the last such night either of us will have to put up with."

The host, still with his back turned, says something muffled that is probably another "Indeed?" He is preoccupied with getting the drink, which must be a more complicated process than one would suppose, or perhaps he has suspended operations until he has heard what his visitor has to say.

"Yes, sir. I know who our man is. I told you I had my sources, didn't I, sir? You pooh-poohed it, as I remember, but there's nothing like the professional touch in these cases, after all. Not that I ain't grateful for your contribution, sir. But I expect you're as keen as I am to see the fellow's antics stopped."

The other has half turned so that the candlelight catches his spectacles and a corner of white forehead. "Of course. And you really believe…?"

"I don't believe, sir; I know it. My chaps are on their way to his residence now, up the hill, as we say round here. Before you know it, it will be my great pleasure to introduce him to you, and then you'll see what's what and who's who. That," he adds pointedly, "is why tonight's celebration is in order."

"Up the hill? You're sure there's no…" His voice dies away.

"Absolutely none, sir. We know the man's name and where he comes from, which is not this country, I'm glad to say, and his position in the world, if that's genuine, which I very much doubt. And most important of all, we know his address, not that

I can pronounce the name of the house. That would be more in your line than mine, sir—it's one of them foreign words, and I ain't had the education you have. Still, education ain't everything, is it? Now, what about that magic potion, sir?"

The host has turned round completely now, and there is a decanter in his left hand. But the object in his right hand is not a glass. It is something stubby and dull-looking in comparison with the glitter of the decanter, though the candlelight just licks the tip, making it look as though there is a small flame at the end. He is trying to talk. His mouth opens and closes, but no words come out.

"I'm sorry, sir. That's just how it is," the visitor says. "No hard f——?" And then he recognizes the object in the man's right hand.

He knows that sound must be the gun going off, but it is not like any gunshot he has ever heard, more like a door slamming in a distant part of the building. There is no pain, just a violent blast of air that pushes him back against his seat. The man in front of him is still trying to speak and looks distressed (are there tears glinting behind the spectacles?) and the visitor feels the urge to help him. He stands up and takes a single pace forward. *It's all right*, he tries to say, *these things happen and I know you didn't mean it, and after all no harm done, so hand that nasty thing over and let's have that drink together*. But now he too cannot speak, and even his intended words are becoming weak and strange-sounding as they pass through his mind, as if someone else is speaking them in a language he cannot understand. He makes one last attempt to assemble his ideas. *I think, perhaps*, he says to himself, *I made a mistake somewhere. After all I may have got this wrong*. It's an annoying thought but it is stuck in his mind now, and no amount of shaking his head will get rid of it.

And then the lights go out, everywhere in the world.

September 1882

Chapter 1

That evening there was a new resident at dinner at Halcyon House, and Cassie was struck by his appearance. He was the only gentleman present without whiskers or beard, which made him look little more than a boy. He had a way of looking round the table for an eye to catch which also struck her as schoolboyish. When Mr. Flewitt, as the oldest gentleman, was saying grace and only Cassie and the newcomer, Mr. Wimbury, had their eyes open, his look was conspiratorial, as if to say he had caught a fellow unbeliever, and Cassie, who was not so much an unbeliever as a person whose beliefs were in a perpetual state of evolution, immediately wanted to argue with him. Her eyes might be open for any number of reasons, and there was nothing to be deduced from the fact.

But Mr. Wimbury's eyes did not dwell on Cassie for long. He was soon examining the contents of his plate as if he had never seen boiled mutton or turnips before, then glancing round at Miss Hartston, Mr. Lyman, Mr. Flewitt, even at Esmé, the maid who served them, mutely asking each in turn what this strange substance was, and was it perhaps dangerous? The only person he did not interrogate in this way was Mrs. Makepeace, who was ultimately responsible, but when his eyes finally reached hers their expression was one of pure delight, as if nothing could give him more joy than boiled mutton and turnips.

His conversation was of a similar character: asking each of them what they did and managing to express joyful surprise to his interlocutor ("A clerk!" "Another clerk, fancy that!") while those mobile eyes, whose colour sometimes seemed blue and sometimes green, conveyed to the others in the room that it was particularly tiresome meeting this clerk, and that *they* were far more interesting. As for Miss Hartston, at least she could say

she was not a clerk, since she worked in one of the city's great stores, while Cassie herself caused his only moment of genuine surprise by announcing her own profession.

"A stenographer? What is that?"

"A lady as takes notes in shorthand," Cassie said. "My employer dictates his letters and other writings to me, and afterwards I write them out for him in a fair hand."

"I see. Then you *are* a clerk!"

"Certainly not, sir! I'm a secretary. And a stenographer."

"I see, I see." Mr. Wimbury nodded several times to show his ironic appreciation of the distinction.

"And you, sir, what do you do?"

"Oh, I am a clerk, like everybody else." He nodded again, in a way that suggested to Cassie that he was not to be believed for a moment. She looked forward to interrogating him further about his claims to clerkship later, but when they retired to the parlour for the evening (there was no coffee served at Halcyon House, but there was, so to speak, a coffee-craving interval), she found he had slipped away.

So the evening passed as usual with Mr. Flewitt smoking his pipe and grunting in that cryptic way that made him seem almost about to say something which never materialized, while Mr. Lyman read a sporting newspaper, making circles round his favoured horses with a pencil, and Miss Hartston continued knitting a mud-coloured garment. Normally Cassie enjoyed this time, all the more so as Mrs. Makepeace never joined them for it; it was pleasant to be in the company of others rather than in the chill of her room, and to get on with reading her book instead of feeling obliged to make conversation, but tonight her volume of Madame Blavatsky seemed impenetrable, and she would have welcomed a distraction. What would Dr. Farthing make of Mr. Wimbury? she wondered. He would have observed him closely and drawn many conclusions that were not obvious at first glance. Cassie had worked for Dr. Farthing for eighteen months now, and, though she continued, in his words, to think like a woman, she hoped she had learned something in all that time.

First of all, there was that whiskerless face. She had studied it while his eyes were on the mutton, and seen the embedded flecks of hair that proved he was not one of those men who do not need to shave. The smoothness was an affectation, then; perhaps he thought it made him more attractive to women. But no, Mr. Wimbury did not seem like the sort of man who wished to attract women, at least, not if his behaviour towards her and Miss Hartston was anything to go by. What other purpose could this smoothness have? It made him look younger than he probably was, but he was young enough anyway for that to have no appeal—it was more likely that he would want to look older. Dr. Farthing would grasp the motive at once, but she felt it was still just eluding her. Well, then, what about his profession? She felt—and she heard in her mind Dr. Farthing saying, "Enough of this *feeling*, Miss Pine. What do you *think*?"—that he was not the clerk he claimed to be. There was a thought lurking somewhere at the bottom of the feeling, if she could only unearth it. Of course: it was his contempt for clerks, which he revealed both by his sardonic tone and by his facial expression. ("Observe the eyes, Miss Pine," Dr. Farthing liked to say. "Men may disguise their voices but they can never disguise their eyes!") Not a clerk, then, but why should he wish to hide his true profession? Because it was something he was ashamed of, or which could cause him some trouble or disgrace if it became known. Cassie wished she knew more about professions in general: there were so many a man might do that a woman could scarcely imagine. Dr. Farthing's work brought him into contact with many members of the public, and he seemed always to understand the secrets of their professional lives and how these might affect their *psychic organization*, as he termed it, but he did not always explain his reasoning to Cassie, and she hated to admit she was even more ignorant than he thought her.

Later, as she lay in bed, she went over her thoughts again: smooth face, not a clerk, hiding something. Could Mr. Wimbury be a criminal, one who remained clean-shaven the better to disguise his identity? She did not think criminals were usually

so well-spoken, but Dr. Farthing always warned her never to judge a man by his appearance (which struck her as odd since he was always lecturing her on how much could be deduced from it). Cassie had a feeling the process of deduction had taken her further than it was meant to. "And why, Miss Pine?" she murmured to herself. "Because you have not observed adequately. First we observe everything we can, and only then do we begin to think. Because until we have observed, we have nothing to think with!"

She woke with a slight headache and the conviction that she had the beginnings of a fever. She had a shivery feeling all over and a restless sensation in her limbs. Her first thought was for Dr. Farthing, whose reaction to her illnesses was one of his most annoying characteristics: if she went to his office with a cold, he would rebuke her for taking the risk of giving it to him, while if she stayed away because of it, he would ask peevishly where she had been and insist that she should have let him know. If Cassie asked how that would be possible, since a letter would be far too slow, he only replied vaguely that she could always send a messenger, as if there were small boys all over Bayswater just waiting to run errands for her. Even if there were, she could hardly accost them when she was too ill to get out of bed, as she supposed she was. As a man of exceptional intelligence, Dr. Farthing would surely infer that only illness could be keeping her from her work, since her conscientiousness was beyond question. It was perverse of him, for he had never been a demanding employer; sometimes he sent her home an hour or more early, or even gave her the afternoon off, saying he needed to be alone to think. Nevertheless, there was a touch of guilt mixed up with her other symptoms, together with some anxiety, in case she should turn out not to be as ill as she thought.

Every now and then she wondered if she was imagining it, and looked at the travelling clock on her washstand to see if there was still time to change her mind. Each time she did this she concluded that there was, which added to her discomfort. If

only the hands would speed up a little! Once they had reached half-past eight, she would know for certain that it was too late to rise, dress and catch the last omnibus that could get her to John Carpenter Street in time to be in the office before him; miss that, and she was definitively late for work, which was, in its way, even worse than being absent, since it was harder to explain. *At eight-thirty*, she said to herself, *I'll have burned my boats*. She shivered at the thought, and looked at the clock again: it was eight-seventeen, and, as she watched, the minute-hand clicked on to eight-eighteen, which immediately made her feel less ill. Perhaps the restlessness in her limbs was only a healthy morning sensation, the desire to get out of bed and resume her daytime activities. But no, there was a weakness at the core of her being that suggested that getting out of bed would be an impossibility. Or was that hunger? It was normal to feel weak in the morning after a whole night without sustenance. Eight-nineteen.

Now a new thought supervened: if she was ill, as she was almost sure was the case, she must have medicine. Cassie was fond of medicines of all kinds, and fixed her gaze on the medicine chest on top of her trunk in the corner of the room, wondering what she should take. A couple of cephalic pills for the headache, perhaps—but no, that seemed better now, as her head had become more used to wakefulness. Only Chlorodyne would do for a condition like this one. That resolution, if anything, was sufficient to nerve her to get out of bed, weak as she was.

The room was shockingly cold, and the carpet scratched the soles of her feet as she crossed the room with undignified haste. She unlocked the medicine chest with the key she wore round her neck (along with that for the trunk), and found the Chlorodyne in its place between the Friar's Balsam and the Epsom Salts. She kept a spoon in there, too; it had the same capacity as a teaspoon but was pleasingly medicinal in form, with a curved handle and rounded bowl, a find in one of the Penge antique shops that she had always treasured. Two spoonfuls were the appropriate dose for a condition like this one. She took them

quickly, feeling the dark liquid spread its warmth through her entire being, took the spoon to the washstand to be rinsed later and hurried back to bed.

When she woke, the clock said twenty-five past eleven and there was a knocking on the door. Cassie raised her head from the pillow as if it was unseemly to speak to someone from an altogether recumbent position and said feebly, "Yes, what is it?"

"It's late, miss," Esmé said through the door. "I was wondering if you was all right, or if you'd overslept yourself or something."

"Thank you, Esmé. I've decided I'm not going to work today. I'm feeling indisposed."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Will you be taking breakfast, miss?"

"What, at this time?" Cassie had no idea that breakfast was available so late at Halcyon House. The thought made her unexpectedly hungry.

"Yes, miss. Mr. Wimbury is having his now. Course, it ain't exactly hot, but he don't seem to mind about that. Don't tell Mrs. Makepeace—she's out on chapel business. Thought you might like to have some with him."

"No, thank you. I'm not well," she heard herself say, to her own disappointment. "I'll just stay in bed and try to sleep a little."

"Very good, miss. Is there anything I can get you?"

"Thank you, Esmé. That's very kind, but I've got everything I need."

She heard the footsteps going away. She was now not at all sure she was ill—the Chlorodyne must have had some effect. And curiosity was a tonic, too. Mr. Wimbury having his breakfast at twenty-five past eleven! It was most unlikely that he was a clerk, then, but she had deduced that already. Still, what employer would accept a man who arrived at work so late? There was something devil-may-care about it—the last to rise, sauntering downstairs to a cold breakfast. She was seized with a desire to rise quickly and share that breakfast with him, to

cross-question him, casually of course, about his plans for the day. Even just to see him eat it might afford her some clue.

In the course of her work with Dr. Farthing, Cassie had been trained in the observation of human behaviour at countless séances and interviews with clairvoyants, but these, after all, were only a small proportion of the population of London. Anyone might be observed; anyone, to a truly scientific student of the mind, might reveal his or her secrets in a thoughtless gesture. It was not only, Dr. Farthing used to say, the supernatural that was of interest. She rose, washed quickly at the washstand and put on the grey dress she preferred for work. The process seemed to take longer than usual, and by the time she was halfway down the stairs she heard the front door bang. Mr. Wimbury had left the house, and she must hurry after him.

A lady, encumbered with stays, petticoat, bustle and skirts, not to mention the nagging memory of having been recently indisposed, does not walk so rapidly as a gentleman. She lost sight of Mr. Wimbury several times even before reaching Bayswater Road; fortunately, the omnibus had not yet arrived. The subject of her observation was at the front of the queue, and she was able to join the back without being noticed. When the omnibus arrived a few minutes later, she was one of the last to board, and took a seat several rows behind him where she could see without being seen.

He got out at the Strand, and she followed. Here the crowds were greater, and it was harder still to keep up with him, but he did not go far, crossing the road to a large building which turned out to be a theatre. By the time she reached the other side, out of breath and with her skirts wet from the puddles, she had seen him go round the side of the building, so she made her own way there. She found herself in an alley that was both blind and deserted. She remembered the stories of spirit encounters in such places with which Dr. Farthing used to regale her on quiet afternoons at the office, but she remembered, too, that there was usually a scientific explanation for them. ("The impossible happens only rarely, Miss Pine—that is why we think

it impossible!") Mr. Wimbury was an unusual gentleman, but he was not a spirit, so he had left the alley by a material exit. And here it was, a side door to the theatre. She tried it and it opened without difficulty. Inside was a dark corridor, leading both left, towards the heart of the building, and right, towards the main entrance. She stepped over the threshold, and was on the point of turning to the left, since that was surely the way he must have gone, when the sight of a mop and bucket abandoned against the wall stopped her. This was a place where she had no business to be, a place for theatre employees. How would she explain her presence if anyone accosted her?

Besides, she had the answer now. Mr. Wimbury was an actor; it explained everything. His face was clean-shaven so that he could change its appearance at will with false beards and whiskers. He rose late because of the nature of the work, which was largely carried out in the afternoon and the evening. He pretended to be a clerk to avoid Mrs. Makepeace's disapproval of what she no doubt regarded as an immoral profession. It was all a little disappointing: she had got up from her sickbed for this!

There was nothing for it now but to make her way back to Halcyon House, so she retreated from the corridor, closed the door gently and left the alley. As she reached the corner of the Strand, intending to find the omnibus stop for the return journey, she found herself face to face with a gentleman, who raised his hat. "Miss Pine! What a coincidence!" It was Hastings Wimbury.