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Act of Murder

Alan Wright

1

The man spoke in low, hushed tones, and everyone in the cavernous hall shivered, moving closer to their neighbour. The gas lighting, which had been slowly dimmed until darkness now prevailed, emitted a steady hiss that imbued his sombre words with the grimness of a cold graveyard vigil. His almost mesmeric voice now took on a whispered urgency, its tremulous note of terror becoming more and more pronounced as his account conveyed a lurid horror that seemed to spread through the entire hall like a midnight mist, rather as if each heavy syllable were drifting upwards into the darkness that now enveloped the audience like a winding-sheet.

‘And on such a dark, moonless and dismal night, with the wind howling and the cypress trees shivering and swaying from the black force around them, there came a sound. The low, grief-stricken groans of a man ready to rise from the cloying damp depths of his own recently dug grave . . .’

Suddenly they saw a white face – the face of a rotting corpse!

– rise with funereal slowness, its body seemingly swathed in a soil-stained shroud; rise, rise, rise, until it hovered high above them and gazed down, an eternity of sadness and loss etched for ever in its cold, dead features. Where its eyes should have been, thick worms, glistening in the filth of death and putrefaction, seemed to writhe and gorge their way through to the inner recess of the brain, while around the head, strands of loose cloth caked in filth fluttered wildly in the hellish breeze.

‘Watch closely now. Watch and keep your breathing silent! Let no gasp of air reach the cold ether around us. Can you feel the chill of death close by? Now observe! The risen corpse is not alone!’

A woman near the back uttered a tiny scream as the gruesome shape of a skeleton slowly rose above the audience where earlier the corpse had appeared. But the skeleton was not alone. Several goblin-like creatures, their eyes blazing with anger and hatred, swirled around and around the skeleton as if paying tribute to their leader, some swooping as low as the ground and others soaring high to the very ceiling before plummeting downwards at a fantastical speed and forcing those nearby to cower and sway in terror. More women now began to whimper.

Suddenly, with a whooshing sound that took everyone unawares and generated a whole cacophony of screaming, the skeleton launched itself at the deathly pale corpse and there began the most frightful struggle for supremacy, a conflict rendered all the more ghastly by the unearthly banshee wail that now filled the entire room.

Women stood up, screamed and held their hands to their faces, as if trying in vain to keep their jaws from dropping senselessly to the floor. Now their men folk, themselves sufficiently disturbed to stand and offer at least a semblance of manliness in the face of such terror, pulled their women close to them as the grisly scene playing out above their heads came to its deadly conclusion.

Then blackness. Total blackness.

*

‘There’s a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Kathmandu,

There’s a little marble cross below the town.

There’s a broken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew,

And the Yellow God forever gazes down.’

Benjamin Morgan-Drew sighed, bemoaning the flattened vowels, and prepared to sit in his thirtieth seat of the day. As actor-manager he carried an enormous weight of responsibility, both towards each member of the company (away from London for eight long and arduous weeks) and towards the audience they had travelled so far to entertain. It was therefore his proud boast that he brought a meticulous eye and ear to every aspect of the performance, viewing the stage and its environs from every conceivable spot in the auditorium to check for visual impediments or acoustic inadequacies.

For this reason he insisted on one of the supernumeraries standing centre stage and reciting over and over again ‘The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God’.

‘No, no and again no!’ he yelled. ‘The words “with a passion of the strong” need to be imbued with the roar of a lion!’

This particular super (a local youth whose ambition to become an actor overcame the ignominy of treading the boards with the Morgan-Drew Touring Company as 'Railway Passenger No. 3') had been one of three offered as stock actors along with the hire of the theatre and the orchestra. It amused Benjamin to listen to his peculiar northern tongue twist its way around Milton Hayes's dramatic syllables, but he didn't allow his amusement to ignore shoddy projection, supernumerary or no.

'You want me t' roar like a lion?' the youth shouted into the dim light of the auditorium.

'No! I want you to project your voice with passion. Roar the words in the way a lion would. Just read the verses as loudly as you can.'

As the youth's voice boomed forth, Benjamin felt a hand touch his shoulder. He turned around and saw Herbert Koller sitting directly behind him.

'Herbert! How long have you been there?'

'Oh, a few minutes. I've been "standin' in t' dark", Benjamin!'

Herbert Koller wasn't much older than the youth who was manfully struggling through the verses on stage, and yet there was a world of difference between the two young men: where the local youth was hesitant, uncertain and still learning his craft, Herbert had about him a casual elegance, a confident manner that some interpreted as arrogance, with none of the awkwardness of movement that was being displayed on stage. When Herbert stood before the full glare of the footlights he seemed to transcend the banal confines of a theatre and take his audience wherever he wished. And of course, with his dark curls fringing a smooth forehead, and the finely chiselled, almost classical features, it was inevitable that his physical beauty would conspire to render even the most obdurate of females pliant and bewitched.

'How much longer are you going to torture that poor boy?' Herbert said, resuming his normal drawl and bringing his mouth close to Benjamin's ear. 'It isn't a performance, you know. It's an acoustics test. And it's quite evident the boy is no monologist. His vocal cords aren't suited to force.'

'His vocal cords will do what I demand!' Benjamin snapped back. He hadn't liked the tender way Herbert had referred to the 'poor boy'. 'Louder!' he called out to the stage.

Herbert gave a dramatic sigh and squeezed Benjamin's shoulder. 'Perhaps I should coach him? What do you think?'

'You will do nothing of the kind!'

'He returned before the dawn with his shirt and tunic torn!' roared the super with renewed gravitas, 'And a gash across his temple dripping red!'

'Better.'

'Bravo!' Herbert yelled through cupped hands, then gave a round of applause that brought a blush from the youth on the stage. 'All he needs is encouragement.'

Benjamin turned around once more and glared, his face reddening with a growing anger. 'You keep away from him, do you hear, Herbert?'

'Of course,' came the smooth response.

'And another thing. I need to speak to you about earlier.'

'Why?'

'Where were you?'

'Oh, I decided to take a stroll round this delightful town.'

'You missed the meeting.'

'Oh dear. Did I miss anything important?'

Benjamin stood up and turned fully and menacingly towards him.

The youth on stage peered out, his recitation slowly grinding to a halt. 'Have I done, Mr Morgan-Drew?'

He didn't get an answer. From where he stood it was difficult to see anything with any clarity. He had a vague impression of the great man bending low and saying something to Mr Koller, but the words were whispered and failed to carry beyond the footlights. Not that it mattered: as Mr Morgan-Drew had explained, an acoustics test helps assess the audibility of sound projecting from stage to audience, not the other way around. Yet from the darkness he did hear Mr Koller say something in return, followed by what he described to the other two supers later as a cackle.

'That was what it sounded like, swear on me mam's grave. That Mr Koller gave a cackle like a witch.'

*

'Well, it bloody well scared me!'

Constable Jimmy Bowery was sitting in the Wigan Borough Police Station canteen, holding court with several of the younger members of the force. It was that slack mid-afternoon period when they'd completed their patrols and were now enjoying a cup of hot tea before the pits and the foundries and the cotton mills disgorged their thirsty workforces and the drinking and the carousing began in earnest. At the far end of the room, two officers were earnestly engaged in a game of billiards, each resonant clack of the balls being met with a cheer or a curse from the few onlookers. One other, dressed not in regulation uniform but a dark grey suit that had seen better

days, sat in the solitary armchair, evidently absorbed in the newspaper he was reading.

Outside, a horse whinnied at the crack of a cabbie's whip, and the sound of a heavy wagon trundling past the station temporarily distracted the raconteur.

'What did your missus say, Jimmy?'

'Reckoned I'd took her there for nefarious reasons.'

'What? The Public Hall?'

'She said I'd only taken her 'cos I wanted to give her the screamin' hab-dabs. I said don't be daft, woman, you've got them already!'

The others laughed. The youngest of them, Constable Turner, gave him a playful nudge. 'So did you get a cuddle late on, Jim? You know, "Ooh, Jimmy, put yer arms round me an' make me feel safe."'

Bowery frowned. 'Now then, Paintbrush,' he said. 'I reckon that's oversteppin' the mark.'

'Aye,' murmured one. 'He's right there, Paintbrush.'

'What goes on between man an' wife shouldn't be made a subject o' mirth, Paintbrush,' opined another, whose grave tones were accompanied by a sly wink to the others.

Constable Turner, whose rank and surname had rendered his soubriquet inevitable, gave a shrug and gazed into his mug of tea.

'So why did you take her, then?' another of the constables asked. 'I mean, if you knew it was that bad . . . These magic lanterns are not called magic for nowt.'

Bowery smiled. 'Well, tell the truth, lads, I did know it was goin' to be bad, on account of what I'd heard by the way. I'd had to move Clapper along t'other day, rantin' an' ravin' outside the hall, sayin' it was the work of the Devil and yellin' for all he was worth at the poor sods leavin' the hall. I was just about to drag him down here for a night in the cells when they all said how right he was. Said if I didn't believe 'im, why didn't I see for meself? So I let Clapper off with a crack round his thick skull and bought two tickets there and then.'

They all nodded sagaciously. They knew Clapper, alias Enoch Platt. Most people in Wigan knew him, and most people in Wigan avoided him as if he were contaminated with cholera.

'Besides, between us, like, she'd been havin' a go these last few weeks. Reckoned I never took her out any more. You know what they're like, women, eh?'

They all concurred, including Constable Turner, though he was as yet unfamiliar with the wiles and ways of the female of the species.

‘So I thought if I took her there and scared her to kingdom come, well, then, Bob’s your uncle!’

The man with the newspaper folded it slowly, placed it under his arm and strolled over to the table. He gazed down at Bowery and shook his head.

‘Sergeant?’ said the constable.

Detective Sergeant Samuel Slevin reached for the newspaper, a sudden movement that caused Constable Bowery to raise an arm for protection. But the newcomer smiled and carefully opened the newspaper, pointing at the main article.

‘See that, Constable?’

Bowery leaned forward and squinted at the small print. ‘Yes, Sergeant.’

‘What does it say?’

For a few seconds the constable’s lips moved soundlessly.

‘Aloud,’ said Slevin.

In a hesitant monotone, Bowery read: ‘There is widespread speculation that the new Blackpool Tower, now nearing completion, may well become the victim of powerful winds and collapse into the town. However, the firm of Heenan and Froude, a highly respectable company responsible for the Tower’s construction, say that its main supporting legs will be resolutely encased in concrete, ensuring complete safety, and that the project is on schedule for the coming Whitsuntide.’ Bowery looked up. ‘I don’t get it.’

Slevin rolled the newspaper and tapped him on the head. ‘Magic lantern nonsense? Phantoms and witches? If you want to impress Mrs Bowery, and render her terrified and speechless into the bargain, then I suggest you take her to the grand opening of the Tower in May – escort her to its very top, all five hundred feet of it, in one of its two hydraulic lifts and let her admire the view. That would at least be real, genuine fear, wouldn’t it? And not this lurid display of tomfoolery. It would also give her the added advantage of seeing how small we really are. Show her the future, man. Then Bob would indeed be your uncle.’

With that, the detective left the room.

‘What the ’ell does ’is lordship know?’ grumbled Bowery when the door had closed. ‘E wasn’t there.’

There were sympathetic mutterings of ‘Take no notice, Jem,’ and ‘Too big for his bloody boots, yon mon.’

Only Paintbrush kept quiet. It made a change, someone else getting it in the neck.

*

The Royal Court Theatre in King Street was a matter of yards from the Wigan Borough Police Station, and yet in aesthetic terms it was a thousand leagues distant. The deceptively small foyer entrance, with its staircase hidden behind musty drapes, gave an impression of stuntedness, inspiring a lowering of spirits and expectation that was not improved by the sight of the glass-fronted cubicle that served as the ticket office. It was barely a foot wide, and the person normally found inside serving tickets and programmes to an eager audience was appointed not for her sales acumen or approachable countenance, but simply because of the width of her shoulders: the narrower the better.

Yet once the paying customers stepped beyond the deep velvet drapes and mounted the grand sweep of staircase to the main body of the theatre, their world was instantly transformed. The first thing to enchant the eye was, of course, the stage itself – or rather, the heavy curtains that suggested the marvel of what lay beyond – and the splendid curves of the proscenium arch, its tall golden columns edged with the most elaborate floral designs. But it was the splendid array of gilded boxes, richly decorated in gold and red, that confirmed the impression of opulence, and forced the more modest patrons in the stalls to glance upwards throughout the performance and marvel at the glamour that surrounded them.

From one such box – the one reserved for the mayor of Wigan and his especial guests later that day – Benjamin Morgan-Drew took little notice of the grandeur of the auditorium; he watched with studied impatience as the technical rehearsal was limping to its conclusion. That was the problem with touring. You were inevitably relying on the unreliable: where the script called for ‘the sound of torrential rain’, the effects on offer (a wooden box filled with dried peas and shaken slowly) produced something akin to a light summer drizzle or the snoring of gnats; the changes of scenery were taking far too long and were in danger of destroying the dramatic tension; and the theatre’s gas lighting seemed to have a mind – and a voice – of its own. In his long and distinguished career, he had occasionally been subjected to the hiss of a dissatisfied audience, but for the footlights themselves to create such an audible sound of disapprobation might encourage some of the lower orders to take up the call and turn the stalls into a giant snake pit.

As he surveyed the painted scene at the rear of the stage, he sighed and thought of the Lyceum in London, where the *mise en scène* had no equal: the marvellous effects produced by a subtle blending of colours and lighting could create the misery and the danger of a winter storm in one moment and the dazzling possibilities of a lark-filled sky in another. But Mr Craven, Irving’s genius of scenic artistry, was hundreds of miles away. Benjamin had to make do with coarse approximations of the play’s dramatic backdrops.

He privately gave thanks that the abominable display of childish projected phantoms in the Public Hall across the street would almost certainly draw an audience comprised in the main of miners, foundrymen, mill-girls and their kind.

The so-called Phantasmagoria had been laughably described in the local newspaper, the Wigan Observer, as a 'powerful source of rivalry for the famous London touring company, and it is the opinion of this newspaper that such diversity of choice can only serve to enrich the cultural diet of the borough.'

Cultural diet! He had thought such fantastic demonstrations of hocus-pocus had long since died a natural death, and was surprised there was still a profit to be made from projecting ghostly figures onto a screen with the express intention of alarming an audience, albeit a gullible one.

'Tragedy or disaster?'

Benjamin wheeled around, startled by the disembodied voice behind him. 'Jonathan! What the blazes are you doing? I could have had an apoplectic fit.'

'Sorry. I saw you from below. Your frown was quite expressive.'

Jonathan Keele was the oldest member of the company. He had been an actor for more years than he would care either to remember or admit, and he had agreed to accompany the tour as a special favour to Benjamin, of whom he was rather paternally fond. Some members of the company relished his reflective moments, when he would regale them with tales of Macready, whom he first saw play Othello in Bath in '35 and who was responsible for infecting him with the curse of Thespis, or of working with the Bancrofts at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Tottenham Street.

It had been the kindest of gestures from his old friend that the final performance of The Silver King should be given over to his benefit, and Jonathan had been genuinely touched by this demonstration of affection.

Benjamin sighed and gazed back down towards the stage. Three or four of the footlights which had begun to flicker suddenly gave up the ghost. 'Is it any wonder?'

'Don't worry. These things have a delightful habit of coming together. Rather like a broken bone setting, eh?'

'Well, the simile is apt, at any rate. At least as far as the pain and the damage are concerned.' He gave his old mentor a rueful look. 'Worry is what I do. Worry is what pays our way, Jonathan. Do you know how long it took those imbeciles to change the flats?'

The veteran of the stage shook his head.

'Fourteen minutes! We had the curtain drop for fourteen unconscionable minutes! I mean, what is the audience going to do for nigh on a quarter-hour? Play I-Spy? They said it was an impediment in the grooves and they could solve it with a drop of oil. Oil? I ask you! And we've got the full dress rehearsal to follow. Our tragedy, as you say, will be just that. Thank the good Lord we're on King Street, Wigan, and not Charing Cross Road! I shudder to think what The Era would make of us.'

It was Benjamin's turn to shake his head. From the darkness behind him, Jonathan smiled, but placed a hand gently on the manager's shoulder.

'You take too much on yourself, Benjamin. All the weight of the world on your shoulders.'

'No. Not that bad.' He gave a smile that was hidden in the darkness.

'Benjamin . . .'

'Yes?'

He turned and saw the old actor bite his lip and stroke his narrow chin as if in contemplation of saying something that was perhaps quite difficult. But he merely stood there, his face half-covered by the shadows.

'What is it, Jonathan?'

But the moment had evidently passed, for Jonathan Keele smiled and said, 'No matter. It will keep, I dare say,' before turning around and disappearing through the velvet curtains.

Georgina Throstle stood at the window of the Royal Hotel and felt the pain begin. It invariably began with a pricking sensation behind the eyes, as if a hypodermic syringe were piercing her eyeballs from the inside. The metaphorical needle would then slide its way down the side of her face, rendering her cheekbones raw and indescribably tender, the only analgesic for which was the external application of oil of peppermint and her own particular prescription from their local doctor. Yet they had forgotten to bring both the salve and the compound from Leeds, and although Richard had shown admirable concern and a brisk determination to seek out the nearest pharmacy, when she observed him leaving the hotel he was actually sauntering along the street with his hands in his pockets as if he were off to watch the races. It was insupportable! He had been gone an agonising half-hour and there was still no sign of his return.

Down in the street below, the fog, which had been a mere ground mist earlier in the day, had thickened alarmingly, and she watched an assortment of shoppers and street-hawkers, every one of whom was blithely unaware of her misery and going about their business with a vulgar nonchalance as they appeared and disappeared like wraiths. God, she despised this town!

These ghostly figures somehow put her in mind of her brother Edward. She gave an involuntary shudder and turned her mind to more pleasing thoughts. If Richard's plans bore fruit, why, they could soon become the foremost proponents of the magic lantern in the entire country, and he would be able to purchase the latest projection equipment, perhaps buy a small theatre of their own, somewhere in the West Riding, where they could establish a more permanent home for his presentations. After that, who knows? A grand tour of demonstrations in France, and Belgium, and perhaps even Venice. How she would love to visit Venice!

But she had to convince him first. He had to give up the dark business, as she tactfully described it. There could be no more of that if they were to achieve the sort of respectability and renown that she craved so much.

Suddenly, through the fog, she caught sight of Richard's casual, unhurried gait. He was strolling past the Legs of Man public house on the other side of the street, when a man, dressed quite respectably in dark coat and tall hat, emerged from the entrance and, evidently recognising her husband, approached him and extended his hand. Richard spoke at length to the stranger until finally, bowing low to whisper some confidence in the man's ear, he shook hands and they parted company.

By now her face was a raging torrent of spasm. The physician had told her the name of her condition – *tic douloureux* – and it was her sole consolation that she was the victim of an affliction elevated to Parisian grandeur by its exotic, romantic-sounding name.

She had to wait an age before she heard Richard's boots clacking along the wooden boards outside their second-floor room.

'I'm afraid they've sold out of peppermint oil,' were his first words as he ostentatiously extended his empty hands.

'What?' Georgina rushed from the window towards her tormentor.

'I've been to three chemists. Hence my apparent tardiness.'

'Tardiness?' The word was dripping with mockery. 'Do you wish to see me dead?'

'If you'll allow me to –'

'Do you wish to take a photograph of my pain-ravaged corpse and flicker it across the room in your next phantasmagoria? Is that what I am? A future source of horrid amusement for the lower orders?'

Richard Thristle reached into his pocket and pulled out a small brown bottle.

'What is that?'

'This, my dearest, is a highly recommended potion that has been prepared by a local chemist.'

'But what is it? If it isn't oil of peppermint –'

Richard shook his head with a smile. 'You don't apply this. You take it. It's *Chlorodyne*.'

She approached him cautiously, gazing down at the brown bottle and the clear liquid it contained as if it were a venomous snake.

'It's an analgesic. When I described your symptoms the chemist said this would do the trick.'

She reached out and held the bottle in her hand. Slowly she removed the stopper and lifted it to her nose. 'Ugh!' she grimaced, and held it at arm's length.

'Notwithstanding, dearest, it's the latest thing. Take it, and your faces will be history.'

She looked into his eyes. Was there another hint of mockery? Or was it something else? 'Who was that man you spoke to?' she asked, delaying the moment in spite of the throbbing in her face.

'Where?'

'I watched you. I was waiting in agony. As you knew I would be.'

Richard nodded. 'Oh, that? He is a board member of the Wigan and District Sunday School Union.'

She smiled involuntarily.

'He wanted to know if I would be willing to present The Magic Wand at their next gathering.'

'I see.'

She saw him hold her gaze for a second before continuing.

'I refused, of course.'

'Why?'

'Why? It's hardly a profitable venture, nor a likely prospect. Sunday afternoon with a gaggle of filthy little miners' spawn! Besides, it would mean staying here one more night.' He gave an impish smile. 'It might please Saint Edward if I did something virtuous for a change. But it would not please me!'

'Edward is beyond pleasing.'

Richard laughed. 'No doubt he'll be kneeling on some hard wooden board in a windswept old chapel on the moors as we speak.'

She smiled coquettishly. 'You make him sound like a . . . a sanctimonious dullard. The very idea!'

'No, really? How very unfraternal of me.'

'He would dearly love to provide some financial support.'

Richard laughed and threw his head back. 'And then insist we make nothing but Temperance slides and tales from the Bible! He'd finish with a whole barrage of chromatropes, dazzling the poor unwashed until they leave the room dizzy and blinded.'

'That's exactly how they leave his sermons!' she laughed, her pain temporarily forgotten in her desire to mock her brother. 'Dizzy with his bluster and blinded by his righteousness!'

Richard put his arms around her waist. 'Forget him, my dear. And amuse yourself with the thought of his outrage if he really knew what we had done.'

She detached herself and stared down at the threadbare carpet. 'You know how I feel about that.'

'You forget, my sweet, that you have played a most active part in establishing our . . . shall we say, repertoire of delight? Our very profitable repertoire of delight.'

Georgina blushed and placed a hand flat against her right cheek.

He reached out and took the medicine from her left hand, then went over to the basin and poured a small measure into a glass. 'Come, my dear, I can't bear to see you in pain any longer. Swallow this.'

She moved slowly towards him as if she were walking to a tumbler and took the proffered glass. Its pungent aroma seemed stronger, more volatile, now it was freed from its container, and she screwed her eyes closed as she raised it to her lips.

'That's my good girl,' he said as the liquid went down. 'And if it makes you feel any better, I will consider the offer from the gentleman representing the Sunday School Union.'

She gasped and clutched at her throat. 'It's bitter!' she croaked hoarsely. 'It's so very bitter!' She recoiled in disgust, not only at the vile taste of the analgesic, but also at the unpalatable fact that once again Richard had lied to her.