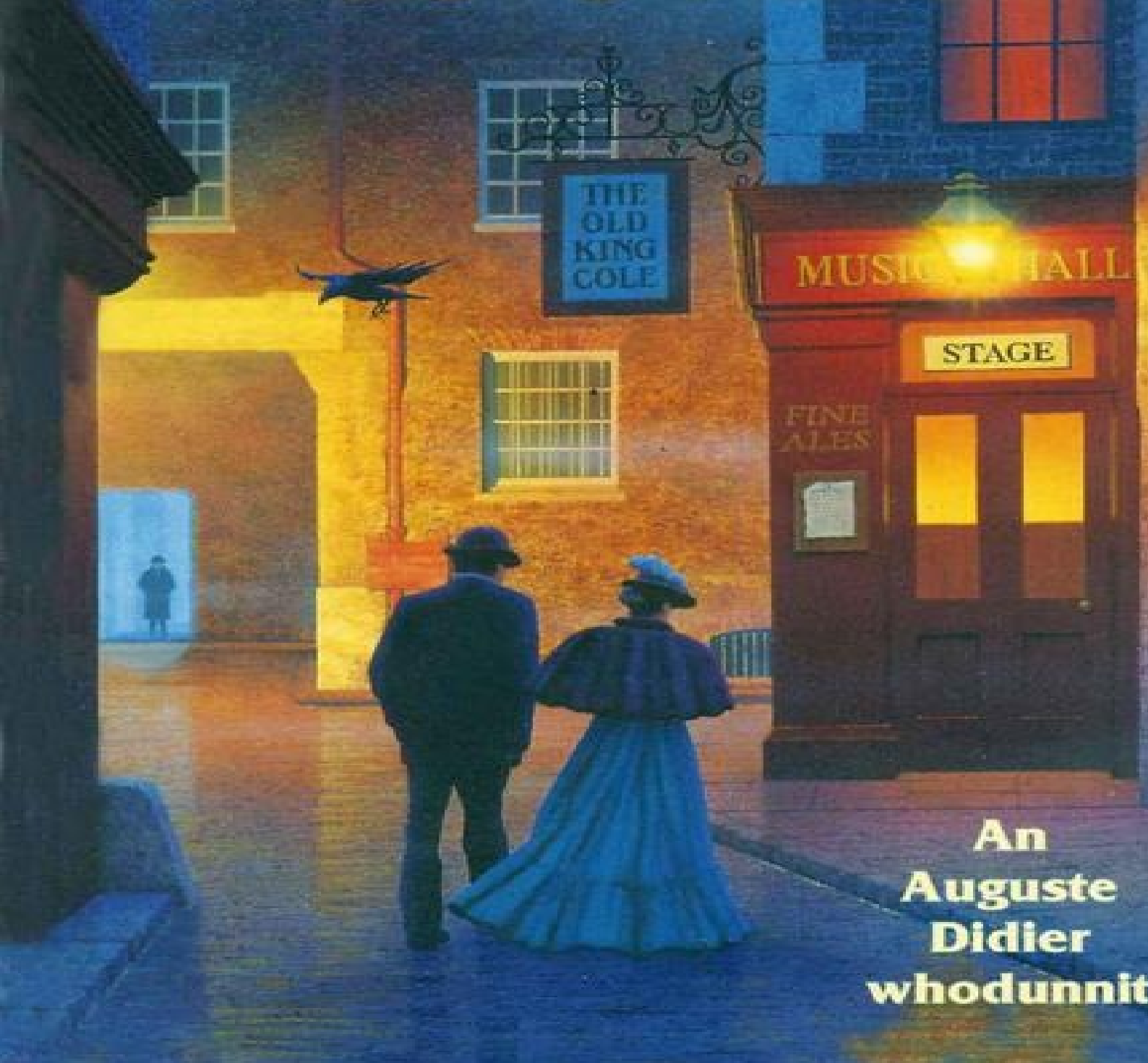


Amy Myers

MURDER AT THE MUSIC HALL



An
Auguste
Didier
whodunnit

Murder at the Music Hall

Amy Myers

The eighth Auguste Didier crime novel

headline

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First published as an Ebook by
Headline Publishing Group in 2013

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

eISBN 978 1 4722 1389 1

Cover illustration by Tim Gill

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk

www.hachette.co.uk

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About the Author

Amy Myers was born in Kent. After taking a degree in English Literature, she was director of a London publishing company and is now a writer and a freelance editor. She is married to an American and they live in a Kentish village on the North Downs. As well as writing the hugely popular Auguste Didier crime series, Amy Myers has also written five Kentish sagas, under the name Harriet Hudson, that are also available in ebook from Headline.

Praise for Amy Myers' previous Victorian crime novels featuring Auguste Didier, also available in ebook from Headline:

'Wittily written and intricately plotted with some fine characterisation. Perfection' *Best*

'Reading like a cross between Hercule Poirot and Mrs Beeton . . . this feast of entertainment is packed with splendid late-Victorian detail' *Evening Standard*

'What a marvellous tale of Victorian mores and murders this is – an entertaining whodunnit that whets the appetite of mystery lovers and foodies alike' *Kent Today*

'Delightfully written, light, amusing and witty. I look forward to Auguste Didier's next banquet of delights' *Eastern Daily Press*

'Plenty of fun, along with murder and mystery . . . as brilliantly coloured as a picture postcard' *Dartmouth Chronicle*

'Classically murderous' *Woman's Own*

'An amusing Victorian whodunnit' Netta Martin, *Annabel*

'Impossible to put down' *Kent Messenger*

'An intriguing Victorian whodunnit' *Daily Examiner*

Victorian crime series featuring Auguste Didier

1. Murder in Pug's Parlour
2. Murder in the Limelight
3. Murder at Plum's
4. Murder at the Masque
5. Murder makes an Entrée
6. Murder under the Kissing Bough
7. Murder in the Smokehouse
8. Murder at the Music Hall
9. Murder in the Motor Stable

And Kentish sagas written under the name Harriet Hudson also available in ebook from Headline

Look for Me by Moonlight
When Nightingales Sang
The Sun in Glory
The Wooing of Katie May
The Girl from Gadsby's

About the Book

It's 1902 and Auguste Didier finds himself reluctantly recruited for a week's work at the Old King Cole music hall in the East End. Ostensibly there as chef of its greasy run-down eating house, Auguste has another role: to prevent a possible foul murder by being constant bodyguard to famous comedian Will Lamb.

At first Will's fears of being the victim of someone's murderous intentions seem unfounded. After all he's only had a portentous dream and he's really rather popular. But when other more sinister omen occur, Auguste begins to sense real danger – and Will Lamb dies on stage in front of his eyes. The search is on for a killer – and it has to be someone who's had access to the props.

Auguste's job is made more complicated by the fact that a national treasure has also been reported missing from Windsor Castle. And there are enough tenuous threads to indicate that the crimes must somehow be linked. . .

For Richard and Barbara
with love

Prologue

Rain plopped down the collar of Chief Inspector Egbert Rose's ulster, despite the umbrella. Changing its tactics with the gusting wind through the dock, it assaulted his face and mocked his eyes. He was far from happy.

'We've missed the boat, sir.' There was no glimmer of a smile on Inspector Grey's face, whether he was conscious of his pun or not. Rose regarded Grey without enthusiasm.

The boat's missed *you*, Grey,' he retorted grimly. 'Six o'clock you told me the *Lisboa* was due to leave. It's six now, and she sailed two hours ago.' The North Quay of London Docks was no place to spend a Saturday, even a wet dismal September afternoon. He thought of Edith cosily taking toasted crumpets and seed cake at Highbury, and compared her lot to his.

'To catch the tide, sir.' Grey's reply had the desperation of the cornered rat. 'She'll dock again in two weeks.'

'Think she'll come steaming back with the loot still tucked under the captain's arm? Any chance of the river boats catching her?'

Grey shook his head. 'She'll be outside territorial waters. It would be piracy. Unless you think we'd be justified . . .' He broke off, as his companion's umbrella jerked irritably.

'Much as I'd like to don eye patch and broadsword, it ain't precisely going to soothe Portuguese prickles, is it? There's been enough fuss over this cross; there'll be more when it comes out it's been nicked from Windsor Castle. What's His Majesty going to say if the Stepney police and Scotland Yard start dancing around like the pirates of Penzance, eh?'

'In Stepney,' Grey replied stolidly, 'we have more to think about than His Majesty's embarrassment.'

Rose envied him. It was no joke to be summoned to Buckingham Palace at Saturday luncheon time by an irate monarch ordering him to track down a missing relic of incalculable value, before it left the country for good; an event, His Majesty informed him, that would ensure not only the severing of diplomatic relations with England's oldest ally, but probably his own enforced abdication, a mere month or so after his coronation. Every coastal and dockyard police force from Harwich to Plymouth had been alerted with descriptions of the two villains. In the Thames, the most obvious departure point, the dockyard police had orders to detain every piece of shipping with any connection with Portugal till cleared. Then at three-thirty, surprisingly, Special Branch had come up with a name, the *Lisboa*. Unfortunately the *Lisboa* was now in mid-ocean, ploughing its way home, in all likelihood taking Prince Henry the Navigator's cross with it. And what the press would do with that, Rose preferred not to imagine. Half of them delicately, and sometimes not so delicately, had been suggesting that Portugal ought to have the cross back anyway, and the other half had foretold the end of the monarchy if it did. Now he had to report failure to His Britannic Majesty King Edward VII, and very little imagination was required to foresee the results of that conversation. Crumpets retreated on the same odds as a castle in Spain – or Portugal.

Around them loomed the tall forbidding rain-swept warehouses of the London Docks, their cranes idle now, but stretching out threatening dark arms towards their prey; before them were moored steamers from unknown ports, their crews hurrying in the twilight towards the excitement of Saturday night in the pubs, gin palaces and less savoury institutions eagerly awaiting them. At least it was no longer Rose's job to mop up the resulting mess. As a raw newcomer to the force, his beat had taken him to the docks, not to mention the nearby St George's Street; the latter might be more salubrious than the

remembered it, but off it still lay some of the poorest slums in London.

‘Sir.’ A wet Dock Police constable materialised from the gloom at Grey’s side. From underneath his helmet, two scared eyes peered out, torn between relief at the presence of two superior-ranking officers, and anxiety since neither belonged to his own force.

‘What is it, Constable?’ Grey barked irritably.

‘A body, sir. In Nightingale Lane. Been there an hour or two, I reckon. Sucking the monkey, reckon.’

‘What monkey?’

‘Dock talk, sir. Siphoning port wine with a tube through the bung-hole of the cask. Strong stuff.’

‘Then most likely he’s drunk, you fool,’ Grey snarled.

The constable held firm. ‘Dead, sir.’

‘Nightingale Lane, you say?’ Rose’s attention was suddenly diverted from the absent *Lisboa*, as he was mentally catapulted back from the autumn of 1902 to the 1870s. So Nightingale Lane hadn’t changed. Hardly surprising, he supposed. You’d have to burn it down and plant a rose garden before you could make Nightingale Lane respectable – and even then the roses would smell of sewers. ‘Show me.’

‘There’s no need—’ Grey began.

‘Let’s go.’ His tone of voice made it clear Rose was going anyway, if only to make Grey squirm.

They squelched in the constable’s wake through the labyrinth of warehouses on the western boundary of the docks, through a locked and barred gateway into the narrow winding lane that had probably seen more murders than any other London thoroughfare. There was no sign to Rose’s eyes that anything had changed. Here the rain made no difference, for the sun was shy of the high wall of Katherine’s Dock on the one side and the tall warehouses of London Docks facing it. The bends and twists of the lane made it an admirable place for the disposal of grudges. The police torch shone in the puddles, as the constable flashed it in a narrow entrance between two of the dock buildings. There, half-hidden behind a pile of rotting rubbish, overflowing and burying the zinc pail it was aimed at, was the body, its shape indistinct in the gloom. For a moment the only sound was the pelting rain.

‘Another of them casuals,’ Grey then said disgustedly, lifting the body up slightly with one foot and letting it drop again.

‘Not from the pubs round here, sir, I know ’em all.’

Grey regarded the constable with dislike. Unknowns might mean trouble. ‘A casual’s what we call them,’ he told Rose loudly. ‘They hang around the pubs waiting for odd jobs, carrying and fetching from the docks, and don’t mind too much if they get ’em or not.’

Rose knew what a casual was all right, but he disapproved of Grey’s boot. A casual was a man with a name, even if he alone knew it. ‘Nothing strikes you as odd?’ He squatted down by the body and lifted it again.

A pause. ‘Not in this neighbourhood.’

‘He’s been stabbed. Knifed. Not much blood, because the knife’s still in it, driven in deep.’

The young constable flushed red, and seeing it, Rose added kindly: ‘You did right not to move the body, and there was no seeing without doing that.’

Overwhelmed with gratitude, the constable’s young face brightened. ‘I found this, sir, by his hand in a puddle. I took it for safe keeping.’

Rose looked at the small piece of shaped dark-red glass, examining it carefully. ‘Could be nothing or it could be a garnet.’

‘He’s a thief then,’ Grey was impatient to be away. ‘Or a fence’s runner. I’ll take it. Valuable, if

it?’

‘Not in itself.’ Rose replied absently. He was remembering this morning’s interview.

‘*Can you describe the cross, Your Majesty?*’

‘*Silver with ivory, studded with precious stones.*’

‘*What kind of precious stones, sir?*’

‘*Mainly garnets,*’ the King had replied promptly.

‘I’ll take it to the Yard.’ Rose scribbled a receipt. It was probably coincidence, but it might possibly be the tarragon in the sauce. He remembered Auguste once saying that of an apparently insignificant detail. He shivered. There were smells in this narrow corridor that were far removed from an Auguste Didier kitchen. Smells of decay and death, that remained uncleansed by the rain steadily beating down. And smells stirring in his mind as well – and those he didn’t like.

Chapter One

‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’

The little man broke off. He looked perplexedly at his audience. ‘I ask you, you’d think he could see it was a dagger. “The handle toward my hand.” Now, is that poetry? No, that is a —’ he wildly searched for the right word — ‘a *perlice* report.’

The dancing dagger pranced along its invisible wire, as Will Lamb made valiant attempts to grasp it, leaping around the stage in increasing desperation as each time the dagger jerked out of his reach. ‘Come, let me clutch thee,’ he pleaded to it in vain. He appealed to his audience. ‘Now, if that was how an old woman there I could understand it, but a dagger, well, I ask you, who’d want to clutch a dagger? Nasty unfriendly things. No, if you ask me,’ shaking his head sadly, ‘this Shakespeare fellow’s got it wrong.’

The literary context was familiar to him, but even if it had not been the comedy was irresistible and universal. Auguste Didier laughed helplessly in his private box at the back of the Empire Theatre’s grand circle.

Lamb’s anxious eyes bore the bewildered expression of Everyman faced with a world of inanimate objects beyond his control. ‘Downright dangerous, I call it.’

‘Horrible, terrible,’ shouted out a jovial member of his audience.

The theatre rocked with laughter, as Lamb, peering anxiously round, made one final desperate glance of appeal to his audience, then plunged after his elusive quarry, and promptly tripped over, falling flat on the dagger, which had condescended to rest on the ground point upwards.

‘He is superb,’ Auguste cried enthusiastically to his companion. ‘He is another Grimaldi, a true clown.’

‘And a nice man, too.’ Gwendolen, Lady Westland, alias the former Magnificent Masher, the toast of the halls until her marriage, commented apparently casually. Auguste glanced at her, catching something odd in her tone, though she was laughing as hard as he. Was it just his imagination or could it be that the company of Auguste Didier was not the sole reason for her last-minute invitation to escort her this evening? Perhaps he longed too much for something just a little out of the ordinary to happen, and was seeing bears where only bushes existed. High society into which he had perforce been catapulted on his marriage provided a constrained life, and Tatiana had so far been more ingenious than he in squirreling out escape routes. She had her School of Motoring for Ladies, whereas his ten-volume work, *Dining with Didier*, was proving insufficient to satisfy his restlessness.

The troupe of brightly and lightly clad pierrots who concluded the first half of the programme were greeted with the polite but unrapturous applause to which they were resigned, after the final chorus of the song that larded Lamb’s patter: ‘So I said to the Bard . . .’

As Auguste escorted Lady Westland through the notorious Promenade to the select champagne bar, his eyes strayed a trifle wistfully to right and left where soft birds of paradise sparkled in jewels and allure in search of custom for later this evening. Wistfully? He caught himself guiltily. He was a happily married man, he reminded himself, then cheered up as he reflected that to appreciate the aroma of the soup was not the same as sipping it.

The sight of the Veuve Cliquot awaiting them, as he advanced behind his hostess’s ample purple-satined posterior, cheered him even more, and it was well into the second glass before he ventured to put voice to his suspicions.

‘It is indeed a pleasure to be here, Lady Westland—’

‘But you want to know why, is that it?’ Gwendolen cut in cheerfully.

~~He nodded, relieved. After all, he hardly knew her. He had only met her once, and then only partially. He had visited Tatiana’s School of Motoring (an elegant title that discreetly failed to mention the motor garage, complete with engineering workshop, also on the premises), to discover his wife clad in hideous bloomers lying underneath a motorcar with someone in a similar state of dress. His wife emerged, Lady Westland had remained mostly hidden, as it appeared repairs were at a critical point. In her fifties now, Lady Westland had retired from the music-hall stage over twenty years ago. As the Magnificent Masher, she had stormed the music halls of the late seventies and eighties with her male impersonations and comic abilities. Auguste suspected the comic potential of her life had seriously declined, and that she missed it in her present role of Magnificent Peeress.~~

‘Dear Tatiana asked me to entertain you while she was away.’

‘And why else, Lady Westland?’ he asked politely.

‘Nettie Turner’s got a job for you.’

Auguste had of course seen Nettie Turner on stage before – one could hardly avoid it. She was the darling of the halls in East and West Ends alike, and he seemed to remember hearing that it had been Lady Westland who had first spotted and encouraged her talent. Her warmth and vitality seemed to increase with the years, and she was well over forty now. How quickly magical illusion could vanish however. As they went into her dressing-room after the performance, Auguste saw merely a middle-aged, tired woman, her face lined with more creases than laughter had provided, sitting in a room as plush and crowded with mementoes as any parlour. Where was the bewitching creature who had just held three and a half thousand people in the palm of her hand as she teased them, laughed with them, enchanted them? The innuendoes and movements accompanying her songs were carefully toned down for this audience, as she thrust her personality over the footlights, but Auguste had seen her in less refined halls. For Auguste, it was like meeting Sarah Bernhardt, but with her coster’s costume giving way to a rather dull cream silk evening dress which emphasised the sallowness of a skin newly cleansed from greasepaint, Nettie looked disappointingly ordinary – until she smiled at them. Immediately her face came alive, the warmth came back into her eyes and he saw then the strength of her personality was just resting, not vanished. ‘Gwennie, me old dear. How’s the Gold Plate? Still keeping you on a ball and chain?’

‘Randolph is well, thank you, Nettie.’ Gwendolen correctly translated Plate as Mate. She ignored the jibe. ‘May I introduce Mr Auguste Didier, Nettie?’

For an instant, Auguste was aware of being appraised by the sharpest eyes he’d seen since he first met Egbert Rose, then the impression vanished, as she asked conventionally, ‘Enjoy the show, did you Mr Didier?’

‘Who could not, with you topping the bill?’

‘*Will* and me.’

‘Has he waited for us?’ asked Gwendolen.

‘We’re playing the Empire, Gwennie, not five halls a night. ’Course he’s still here. Have you met Will, Mr Didier?’

‘No, and I’d very much like to. He is a great artiste.’

‘There aren’t many nice people around in music hall,’ Nettie said soberly. ‘Many of us start off nice, and the higher we get on the bill the less nice we become. Will’s the exception. He’ll always do anyone a good turn. Money flows into one hand and jumps out of his other. He’s a bloody marvellous

Most of us depend on a whole troupe of agents, writers, publishers, to prop us up. Not Will. He's got an agent who looks after the business side, but as for the rest, he needs no one but himself. He writes his own material, the patter, the song, the whole act. His head's full of music. He's always scribbling, if he don't want the stuff for himself, he'll give it away. He let me have my Donkey Song, the one I did tonight.' She winked, wriggling her body suggestively in her chair, bursting out with 'Everybody pats me, everybody strokes me, oh give me a carrot, oh do.'

Auguste blushed, and seeing this she roared with laughter. 'That's how I do it down East. But you didn't blush out front tonight, did you?'

He laughed. 'I did not.'

'That's better,' Nettie said, relieved. 'You'd better get used to our ways.'

'Why?' Auguste had a sudden foreboding.

'You're going to be Will's personal detective.'

For a moment Auguste thought he'd misheard, but from the way in which he appeared to be the cynosure of both Nettie's and Gwendolen's eyes, he was greatly afraid he hadn't. 'I have had some success in solving crime,' he began firmly, 'but—'

Nettie blithely disregarded him. 'Ever heard of the Old King Cole?'

Auguste racked his memory. Something came back to him, something Egbert Rose had once said and not a polite something. 'A music hall in the East End?' he inquired cautiously.

'Right. In St George's Street, Wapping, down near the docks. Will and I both started our career there. The owner's an old rogue who sees bailiffs round every corner and no wonder. Percy Jowitt he called. This time he's really in a bad way, and looks as if they'll get him this time. He asked if we'd go back there for a week's run to save him from the workhouse a bit longer. Will being a generous soul, too bloody generous this time, if you ask me, agreed.'

'That was indeed kind of him,' Auguste said.

'In this instance, not so bloomin' kind, in fact. There's an attraction who sat in the scales to add weight to Percy Jowitt's arguments – he sent her to do his dirty business for him. A lady called Mariella Gomez. An auburn-haired English beauty married to a Portuguese juggler.'

'She too is an artiste?'

Gwendolen caught Nettie's eye and burst out laughing. 'Adorable little doggies in frilly collars sliding down a chute into a water tank.'

'Come on, Gwennie. You're not being fair,' Nettie roared. 'She's a serio-vocalist.' She relapsed into her stage persona as she piped out mockingly:

'What's a poor mermaid to do
When she's only got a tail?'

'She'd find out soon enough,' Gwendolen snorted.

'Provided it's not with Will.' Nettie sobered down. 'He was crazy about her ten years ago, at the Old King Cole, but he was a four-foot-nine no one then, so she chose Miguel. She might have made the right choice in some ways –' she caught Gwendolen's eye in unspoken understanding – 'but not the way Mariella chiefly cares about. Money.'

'And that is why he needs a nursemaid?' Auguste was appalled.

‘No.’ Nettie instantly sobered. ‘He’s convinced someone’s going to murder him.’

Will Lamb’s dressing-room was a stark contrast to Nettie’s, a plain working room with not a person or object to be seen. Yet the room didn’t seem empty, not with the nervous energy and personality of Will Lamb in it. He was sitting staring into the mirror, removing the last of the greasepaint from his eyebrows, but even at this mundane task he had the air of a bouncing ball merely awaiting the slightest touch to be back in play.

Nettie sailed in, wasting no time. ‘Will, I’ve brought your personal detective.’

Will leapt up, hurried towards Auguste, and pumped his hand warmly. ‘That’s really very generous of you, Mr Didier, very kind.’ He beamed.

‘I have explained, Mr Lamb, I am a chef,’ Auguste tried to protest, ‘and though I have experience of detection, I do not feel I am the right person to protect you.’

The two women exchanged a look, and Gwendolen grinned. ‘You could cook,’ Nettie said brightly. ‘We’ve arranged all that.’

Panic was replaced with cautious interest. ‘Cook?’

‘The Old King Cole serves food in its bar – quite a famous local eating-house it’s become,’ Nettie said airily. ‘They need a cook, and Will needs someone to protect him.’

Auguste looked at her suspiciously. ‘But how can I do both?’

‘There’ll be staff there, of course, Percy says. I’ll see Will to the theatre, then you nip backstage and keep an eye on him. You can watch the acts if you like. Rubbish, most of it. The regular turn Percy can afford to put on don’t keep him in bangers and mash.’

Will looked anxious. ‘Harry?’ he murmured.

‘Oh yes.’ Nettie roared. ‘Harry Pickles. He’s my husband, not that you’d notice. We don’t see much of each other. Fancy your remembering, Will. Husband number three,’ she explained to Auguste. ‘I told him if he don’t keep his name clean, he’ll be out and Will here can be number four.’

‘That will be nice, Nettie,’ Will said valiantly.

‘Don’t worry, old cock. I’m too fond of you to wish that on you.’

For a moment Auguste glimpsed the pain behind the bravado. It was common knowledge. None of Nettie’s marriages had given her happiness. ‘Mr Lamb, why do you think someone wishes to murder you?’ Auguste asked firmly, getting back to the heart of the matter.

Will looked anxious. ‘Dreamed it,’ he told Auguste apologetically.

‘Dreams are not real.’ Auguste said with relief.

‘Will’s are,’ Nettie remarked glumly.

It was then he remembered that Will Lamb had had several breakdowns and was always in fragile health. Yet after all, there could be nothing to a mere dream, so the job of protecting Will would not be onerous, and the temporary job of cook would be an *adventure*. He was not sure Tatiana would approve of either task, let alone His Majesty, but after all, neither, he told himself, would ever know.

‘He dreamed of Bill Terriss. He was a friend of his,’ Nettie explained sombrely.

Auguste understood immediately. The murder of the famous actor William Terriss a few years ago at the stage door of the Adelphi, committed by a crazy super who imagined his path from crowd scenes to leading man had been blighted by Terriss, had shocked the theatre world and public alike. Who in their right mind would want to murder Terriss – or Will Lamb?

As if following his thoughts, Nettie said robustly, ‘I’ve told him it’s ridiculous – isn’t it, Will?’

‘No.’ Will Lamb’s large eyes looked dolefully at them. ‘On the morning of the day Bill died, he

understudy told me he'd had a dream the previous night of dear old Bill lying on the stairs with a group of people round him, one of whom was his leading lady. He died. And that evening his dream was re-enacted in real life. So you see, dreams *can* be warnings.'

Perhaps, Auguste thought to himself, but even if recognised, how can they be acted upon? Boldly he spoke briskly. 'Then please do not go to Wapping, Mr Lamb. Let Miss Turner go alone.'

Will Lamb stared at him blankly. 'Oh no, I must go. I must. Don't you see?'

'No, I don't, Will,' Nettie said forthrightly. 'If it's just because of that woman, then arrange to meet her somewhere else, for cripes' sake.'

'No, Nettie,' Will said gently. 'I have promised, you see. You don't understand. We—' He broke off, but his face was as excited as a child's watching the curtain rise on a pantomime.

'These dreams are your only evidence?' Auguste asked gently, curiosity aroused by that sudden excitement. A child – but a child with a secret.

Will shook his head sadly. 'No.'

'And what else has happened?' Auguste's spirits sank.

'Communications.' Will fished in the pocket of his overcoat, and produced a crumpled piece of paper with letters cut out from some form of print and stuck on. Its message was stark.

'Keep away from the Old King Cole.' And it was signed, 'The Raven.'

'I've had one every day this week,' Will told him dolefully.

'And when did you have your dream?' Auguste asked carefully.

'Tuesday, or perhaps it was Wednesday. Yes, it must have been Wednesday because of the pickled egg. Tuesday's my night for caviar, or is it oysters, at any rate my cook won't give me pickled egg and oysters, so it must have been Wednesday,' Will informed him brightly.

'I see.' Auguste was quite sure he did. 'So the dream could have been sparked off by the letters.'

'You mean Bill wrote the letters?' Will was puzzled.

'No, you associated Bill's murder with the threat to murder you.'

'But he was here tonight.'

'Who was?'

'Bill.'

Auguste glanced at Nettie, who came to his aid.

'Will, old chum, you've been on the beer.'

'No, no, he *was* here. You heard him, you must have done.' Will looked appealingly from one to the other. 'I heard him calling out, "Horrible, terrible," that's what he said. That's what poor Bill said to his wife a few days before he was killed, he said it about being killed with a knife. And he *was*.'

'But, Mr Lamb, that is mere coincidence,' Auguste soothed.

'And the letters?' Will asked anxiously, eager to be convinced.

'Warning from a friend,' Gwendolen said heartily. 'Reminding you that Percy's an old rogue. Or someone jealous of you.'

'Signed "The Raven"?' Auguste asked. If there was cause for concern, then Will should be on his guard, not lulled into false security.

Will pumped Auguste's hand again. 'I like you, Mr Didier,' he assured him earnestly.

'"The raven himself is hoarse",' Auguste quoted almost to himself, as three pairs of eyes fixed on him in horror. 'From *Macbeth*,' he explained, startled. 'It's a reference to your act.'

'You *quoted!*' Nettie's voice was grim.

'Of course, you're French, Mr Didier,' Gwendolen said kindly. 'You cannot know there's superstition that it is very bad luck to quote from or even name that play offstage in a theatre.'

‘Don’t worry, Mr Didier,’ Will reassured him gaily. ‘It reverses the curse to say it backwards. You see? *Esraoh si flesmih nevar eht*. Never ate? Now what a foolish thing. No wonder the poor bird feeds a little cross. Talking of which . . .’ He chattered on, giving Auguste time to recover, then picked up his stage dagger with its retractable blade. ‘I’m armed, you see, and now you have agreed to be my detective and cook, I defy any murderous chop to get past this. Chop meet dagger, dagger meet chop.’

Had he agreed? Even as he laughed, Auguste reflected, he couldn’t remember doing so. Yet after all, it offered great possibilities. What could he cook? How could he educate an entirely new and receptive clientele in the joys of dining with Didier? He would offer them such delights as they had never tasted before. Just as Alexis Soyer had both cooked and set down his recipes for all men, whether rich or poor, so now would he. A whole new area of cuisine might be revealed to him. True, His Majesty had forbidden him to cook for profit, after his marriage last year, but this job could be said to be a form of charity, and even if it wasn’t, it was unlikely Buckingham Palace would ever hear about his adventures in Wapping. Excitement welled up inside him. Tatiana would not be returning for at least ten days from her road race in France, and the boredom of ten days without her was banished. He could cook.

True, he had also to ensure that nobody murdered Will Lamb, but this, he managed to convince himself, was a simple task. Somehow those communications did not have the ring of a serious intention to murder. Indeed, given Will’s disposition, they might even have been composed by Will himself to give substance to his dreams. Splendid though Workers’ Educational Classes were, it was unlikely that anyone at the Old King Cole would be up to quoting from Shakespeare. Auguste managed in his optimism to ignore two facts. Firstly, that since Will’s most famous songs and lines of patter were based on Shakespeare, the notes were, to say the least, relevant. And secondly, that St George’s Street, where the Old King Cole was situated, was a name only a few decades old. Before that, the street had another name, the Ratcliffe Highway, at one time notorious for murder.

An anonymous figure in cap and rough jacket threaded his way through the costers’ stalls on Whitehorse Street, having emerged from the London and Blackwall railway into the Commercial Road. Egbert Rose whistled thoughtfully as he made his way towards St Dunstan’s Church and Stepney Green; then, having ensured no interested eyes watched his progress, plunged off to the right into a network of narrow streets, alleys and courts. Some of them appeared in dark blue or black in May Booth’s poverty map of London. That had been charted in 1889, but the colours hadn’t changed much in thirteen years to his way of thinking, as he got deeper into the warren. Still pretty nearly as bad as you could get, whole families in one stinking room in some of these places.

He crossed Eastfield Street and strolled past the identical small houses, controlling his impulse to look down to see what he was walking in. He needed his eyes on the level. He was observed all right by children playing in the gutters, by women glaring at him from doorsteps. Strangers were noticed and remembered. He clutched his battered suitcase, the passport for his presence. He dived off through one of the alleyways and when he emerged, walked quickly back the way he had come, and then in through one of the small courts that peppered the street. He had arrived.

‘Morning, Ma,’ he roared. The damp heat was immense, and steam curled under an inner door. As Ma Bisley waddled through, it hissed then billowed in triumph round the hitched-up serge skirt and curled itself around the broad beaming face.

‘Yer oughta know better than to come here on a Monday morning. Boiler time. I got a living to make,’ she told him amiably.

He shook his head firmly. 'Too much at stake not to, Ma, even for the sake of your washing. Around him were ticketed bundles, the mangle, washing boards and flat irons arranged in order of fashion, the paraphernalia of her business. One of her businesses, in fact; the other was providing information to him through a team of runners, within strictly observed guidelines.

'What is it this time?'

'I don't know yet, Ma. May be nothing, may be a can of stinking worms.'

His Majesty had taken the bad news of the disappearing *Lisboa* surprisingly philosophically for him. Rose had emerged with his head, and even his job, which was more than he had expected. The British ambassador to Portugal would be informed, the Portuguese ambassador to Britain would be informed, and, somewhat less enthusiastically, the British public would be informed that the cross had disappeared without trace, and that it was unlikely in the extreme that the Portuguese royal family were in any way involved, since the theft from Windsor Castle had been carried out by bogus representatives of their government who were doubtless anarchists in disguise. Staff had been reprimanded for not checking credentials, and the Metropolitan Police for failing to apprehend the villains.

Rose had inwardly seethed, and commented mildly that Special Branch might wish to be more actively involved if anarchists were the villains; he had earned himself a glare and the ruling that 'politics were politics, but property was property'. In his relief at still finding himself employed, it was not until Sunday that he had realised he was smelling something unsatisfactory – and that it was not for once Edith's burnt roast beef. He had foregone his evening glass of ale at the Queen's Arms in order to eradicate the smell. 'Any news on that corpse?' he shouted through the telephone at the unfortunate Grey.

'Yes, sir. As I said, he was a casual, a villain by the name of Jack Knight, place of loitering the Three Tars in Limehouse. Employment putting away as many pints of porter as he could. Time of death between three and four.'

'Far off his usual beat, wasn't he?'

'They take what's offered, that sort.'

Rose knew. *That* sort of casual (as opposed to those of their more energetic brothers who stormed the dock gates daily hoping for the odd day's work) loafed in pubs waiting for work to come to them. Never sought it out. They fetched and carried merchandise, legal or illegal, to the ships, and never asked questions. For that reason, most were 'safe'. Yet this one got murdered, and not on his usual beat.

As if reading his thoughts, Grey told him: 'We've checked the pubs round Nightingale Lane, you're thinking he might have got into a fight after spending his dosh.'

'Nice job, carrying jewels,' Rose said thoughtfully. 'Must have paid him well.'

'Might have been Auntie Maisie's engagement ring. Or Uncle Sam Fence's runner. We're working on that.'

'Family?'

'Casuals don't have 'em.'

'They don't come out of nowhere. He didn't look like he slept out at nights, so he laid his weary head somewhere. Even if it's only Medland Hall.' He thought of the nearby lodging house for the destitute, and the long dreary queues that formed there waiting hopefully and hopelessly for the seven o'clock opening time.

'No one's come forward. I don't waste my men's time. I've got witnesses he was given a job around two-thirty. Someone remembers him buying a pie to take with him. That any help? If you need

to know the name of his board school teacher, let me know.'

If Grey meant this sarcastically, he was disappointed. Rose thanked him cordially, and hung the receiver up. He was a happy man. He could still smell something fishy, and he knew the fish was distinctly off.

'Corpse in Nightingale Lane, Ma,' he said now.

'What's a nice Chief Inspector from Scotland Yard doing in the likes of Nightingale Lane?'

'Ship called the *Lisboa* sailed on Saturday. A silver cross with garnets belonging to Prince Henry the Navigator. Either of them mean anything to you?'

'Not a tin farthing.'

Ma could not read, and however heated, the discussion of the newspapers, society or intelligentsia passed her by. Ask her whether Jimmy Longtooth had been up to his old tricks, or another Charles Peace or Kate Webster appeared in her territory, and she was as informed on her subject as Mycroft Holmes himself.

'The cross was stolen from Windsor Castle Saturday morning, and I was tipped off it was leaving on the *Lisboa*. The *Lisboa* left two hours early and before I got there. There was a corpse in Nightingale Alley.'

'As dirty as a dock casual's long johns.'

'They don't wear 'em, do they?'

'Not often.'

He took her point and considered it. Then he shook his head. 'Just because the King's involved that don't mean I'm smelling rats where there's only pure roses, Ma. There was a small garnet lying by the corpse.'

She looked at him sharply. 'Think this cross was pinched from him, do you?'

'Yes. Why kill him if he'd already delivered the cross?'

'Stop him from talking?'

'Then why employ him in the first place? He came from Limehouse, so someone took care over this. I don't like it, Ma. Could you ask around – urgently?'

'With the afternoon collection. Now, give me that laundry of yours. It'll be at your desk seven o'clock prompt.'

The battered suitcase having been duly ticketed took its place amidst its even humbler fellows.

Rose stared out from his high, small office overlooking the river below. By rights he should have surrendered this office to Twitch on his promotion and moved into the more accessible room on the first floor. He'd refused to. Accessibility was not one of his objectives. If people needed him, they'd come; if they couldn't be bothered to climb a few stairs, they could stay away and solve their own problems. A simple method but it worked, and he still had his view of the Thames. It helped him. The Thames flowed into London, it flowed out again to the sea. It didn't care whether it was passing the House of Lords or Limehouse Basin; it carried its corpses and secrets on regardless.

The only snag about retaining his old room was that Twitch had magnanimously decided to make the same gesture and did not accept the room elsewhere to which his promotion to Inspector entitled him. He was still next door, the faithful terrier that waited for bones. Rose had found his loyalty somewhat to his surprise, strangely moving. He firmly buried such emotion and replaced it for daily use with his usual sharp irritation.

There was one good thing about Inspector Stitch (Twitch was Rose's not so private name for him)

he delivered the goods. Unlike Grey, who let them sail down the river out of sight.

'You wanted me, sir?' Stitch was still under the impression he owed grateful thanks to Rose for not blocking his promotion. Correctly, in fact. Better the devil you knew was Rose's guiding principle.

'Yes. That post mortem on the docks' corpse arrived yet?'

'Yes, sir. I've just read it.'

'Bring it in, there's a good chap.'

Pink in the cheeks at this unaccustomed courtesy, Twitch vanished and reappeared with the alacrity of the devil in a pantomime. Rose read through the brief report. 'Late thirties, died between three and four as Grey said.' Very helpful. That meant he might or might not have delivered his package. 'Remains of undigested meal . . .'

'What interests you, sir?'

'Probably nothing, if His Majesty wasn't mixed up with it – in a manner of speaking.'

'If this chap came from Limehouse to London Docks to deliver a package, why should the body turn up in Nightingale Lane?' Stitch asked portentously.

'Perhaps he had a notion to choose his own execution place,' Rose said scathingly.

'Perhaps that's where he handed the package over, sir. If it was a secret mission, he wouldn't want to go up to the ship.'

'A rendezvous, eh? Sometimes, Stitch, you excel yourself.'

'I know, sir,' Stitch murmured, flustered. 'And then,' driven to new heights of endeavour, 'the captain or contact on the ship murdered him as per instructions.'

Rose looked at him. 'No reason why not, I suppose,' he grunted. 'Or he was murdered on the way to the ship and the cross was stolen? In the fight a garnet dropped out.'

'Why go by Nightingale Lane? That's the far side of the docks from Limehouse.'

'Perhaps he came by railway, Stitch,' Rose suggested mildly.

Twitch looked crestfallen, and relenting Rose added: 'If the cross was stolen before it reached the *Lisboa* it's still in this country.'

'Why, sir?'

Rose stared at him. 'Because—' He stopped. 'I'm going off it, Stitch. We need to go back to our mittens. If it's straight theft, why plan to steal a cross that isn't worth much in its materials and gems? It's *what* it is that makes it special.'

'Your laundry from Stepney, sir.' An impassive sergeant, puffing reproachfully, entered to hand over the battered suitcase.

Rose's eyes gleamed. 'Did you pay him?'

'Yes, sir. Six shillings.'

Rose calmly counted out this fortune, while Stitch watched, dumbfounded. He made a mental note to tell the Chief about Postlethwaites of Clapham who'd do it for tuppence.

Still the Chief had his idiosyncrasies and if a Chinese laundry was one of them, it was harmless enough. Catch his Martha asking any Chinese men to do his laundry. She'd wash it all again. He tried to imagine Martha married to Egbert Rose and shuddered on her behalf. Thank goodness she had him Alfred Stitch.

Once the glory that was Twitch had departed, Rose opened the suitcase. Inside was the same pair of socks he had sent, now washed, and with one other benefit. Tucked inside one of them was a piece of paper, which he eagerly extracted. It was an advance programme for a music hall, the Old King Cole. He ran his eye down it: Nettie Turner and her Donkey Song, Will Lamb plays Macbeth, Our Pickle sings . . . All at the Old King Cole.

He grinned. He remembered it, for it was one of the halls on his old beat. He picked up the telephone, and shouted amiably at the operator. A few moments later Inspector Grey's querulous voice was all attention. 'Ah, Grey,' Rose told him agreeably, 'I expect you remember that ship which unfortunately left early. I need to make a few more inquiries. No objection, have you?'

Grey had not, especially if they did not rebound on his head.

The Old King Cole was not quite the Empire. Auguste looked round aghast at his new, thankful temporary, domain. And its 'restaurant' moreover was far from Escoffier's Carlton. He tried to remind himself he should be grateful for the opportunity to be able to cook at all, but his first sight suggested some prices were too high to pay. He had chosen to walk from the Tower of London to the theatre in order to acquaint himself with the area, and counted himself lucky to arrive. True, no snarling bandits had leapt out on him, but despite the most valiant efforts of the local council to improve the image of the road, the high dockland warehouses on his right, and the rows of uninviting looking shops, and pubs, with the ill-smelling alleyways and lanes leading off, suggested the effort had merely resulted in the tide of murky humanity being swept back off the main thoroughfare and forcibly held there, while it bided its time to leap out on the unsuspecting. Like Auguste Didier. Groups of sailors and dockers huddled outside the pubs, watching him curiously, and he was glad to reach the music hall.

The Old King Cole, not far from St George's-in-the-East church, had once been a humble pub, a wayside inn outside Shadwell, and no better, no worse than its fellows. Then an ambitious publican in the mid-nineteenth century had coincided with the decision to improve the murky image of the Ratcliffe Highway by renaming it. What better improvement than to expand his old ale-house and its dubious reputation into a music hall? Consequently he built out to the rear an ornate and, he vowed, a high-class music hall with a circle, gallery, *fauteuils* and sedate atmosphere. Unfortunately, he forgot to mention this desire for social betterment to his clientele, which remained identical to that which had provided his ale-house with its reputation. When LCC regulations first discouraged, then banished, the serving of food and drink in the auditorium, he gave up the struggle for respectability. The new owner, Percy Jowitt, also had ambitions, and turned the long bar on the ground floor into a grill-room, which degenerated quickly into a common eating house. Nevertheless little by little, by raising the prices, his clientele did improve to the point where respectable loving husbands were able to bring wives, even daughters. Jowitt glowed with satisfaction – though not for long. Wives and daughters, he discovered, rarely drank as much as their menfolk, and his ownership of the Old King Cole had degenerated into a constant struggle to retain such brilliant newcomers as he discovered, and to persuade his regulars to support his ageing regular turns which he shared with half a dozen or so similar institutions within a radius of three miles. Jowitt was now in his sixties, a dapper, dark-haired, anxious man, ever torn between stark reality and a Micawber-like hopefulness of the infinite possibilities of the future.

Auguste stood at the doorway and surveyed the smoky, smelly hell which he had fondly imagined as paradise. He summoned his strength. If Alexis Soyer could cook on the top of Pyramids, or in the Crimea, surely he, Auguste Didier, could transform this den into something approaching a place fit for food. The smell of stale food and plates wafted towards him, increasing the nearer he approached the bar.

'Most of the cooking is done downstairs on the gridirons and ovens,' Jowitt told him reassuringly. 'You keep it hot up here, and the potato cans are outside.'

This largely passed over Auguste's head, as he peered into a foul-smelling hot dish.

'Faggots and mustard pickle,' Jowitt told him proudly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'That's the Monday Special. You heat it up for the evening crowd. Penny hot, three-farthings cold. And in the evenings you have the whole splendid range. Herrings, saveloys, pease pudding, curra pudding, lobscouse—'

Auguste pricked up his ears, and his spirits cautiously halted awhile in their downward progress. Lobscouse? He had never heard of the dish, but no doubt it had to do with lobster. Some local dialect word, perhaps. He could produce lobscouse thermidor, lobscouse salad—

'And eels,' Jowitt was saying.

'A *matelote a la Parisienne*?'

'A what?'

'In a delicious casserole with white wine, oysters, crayfish butter and a little nutmeg?'

Percy evidently decided this was a joke, and after the required roar of laughter, amplified kindly, 'Collared or jellied.'

Auguste gazed at him nonplussed.

Jowitt did not notice. 'Mostly they take the ha'porth and ha'porth though.'

Auguste searched his vast store of culinary knowledge, but could not recollect such a dish. 'Is that a local name for fish?' he asked doubtfully.

Percy blinked. 'Fish and potatoes. Ha'porth of fish, ha'porth of spuds.' He began to wonder if the cook knew his onions.

'*À la lyonnaise*?' Auguste stopped, in quiet desperation. There was no common ground. He was on his own. 'I cannot cook and serve all by myself,' he said firmly. 'And serve the drink as well.'

'Of course not, my dear fellow,' Percy reassured him hastily, glad there was something he could answer. 'Wouldn't expect it. Full staff at your beck and call. There's the girl.'

'What girl?'

'*The* girl.'

'Her name?'

'Can't bring it to mind. I expect she has one,' Percy told him somewhat apologetically, smoothing down suspiciously black hair. 'And old Jacob does the drink. You don't have to lift a finger there.'

'You must remember I am here for another reason too,' Auguste said firmly, unconvinced.

'Keeping the bailiffs away. I know. Very good of you.'

'*Quoi*? This was no time for politeness.

'When Nettie offered me your services, I was truly grateful, my dear man. They mean to get me out of this time.'

'But—' Auguste broke off. What was the point? He fulminated against women, not so much for their deviousness, but for their blithe disregard of minor details . . . like informing those most concerned of what was going on.

'Might I ask if you are expecting many bailiffs at the moment?'

'You never *expect* bailiffs,' Percy explained reasonably. 'If they came when they were expected you'd make yourself and your goods scarce, wouldn't you?'

Auguste had never been in the unfortunate position of discovering the truth of this statement, though in his apprentice days he had come close to it. He could see the logic of Jowitt's argument. Nevertheless it seemed he was expected to cook for numberless hordes, help quench their never-ending need for beer, keep the bailiffs from troubling Mr Jowitt, and, as a mere extra, prevent

possible foul murder by being a constant shadow to Will Lamb. Fortunately it was only for a week.

‘Imeretrelpyer.’

‘*Je m’excuse?*’ Startled, Auguste glanced down at the source of this squeak.

Roughly level with his chest was the dirtiest white cap he’d ever seen, crammed over long unkempt greasy hair, atop a broomhandle, or, on second glance, the skinniest girl he’d ever seen. Her boots were cracked, her too-short skirts revealed bony bare ankles, her print gown was covered by a dirty white apron. The latter was unnecessary since the dress was dirty enough in its own right. The face stared confidently and gap-toothed up at him, then cracked in a large grin.

‘I’m Lizzie.’

‘You’re a waitress, Miss Eliza?’ he asked faintly.

‘Nah. I’m yer cook.’

If ever there was a time to prove Auguste Didier was a man of resolution, this was it. He took out his pocket watch. Three-thirty. Happily providence had brought him here early. Will Lamb would not be arriving at the Old King Cole in the care of Nettie Turner until this evening and whatever culinary fate might be in store for the lucky diners tonight was presumably already stacked up, probably in some verminous outhouse. Meanwhile, garnish could do much to disguise even the worst of culinary disasters, he told himself.

‘Lizzie, kindly call a cab for us.’

‘You’re not leaving?’ wailed Jowitt.

‘And taking this young lady with me. Merely for an hour, Mr Jowitt. Should any bailiffs call kindly lock them in the cellar.’

Lizzie looked scared. ‘There ain’t no cabs round here.’

‘An omnibus then, Lizzie. Any mode of transport.’

‘Ma don’t like me going out with strange men.’

‘How old are you, Lizzie?’

‘Sixteen.’

Auguste choked. He’d put her down as ten, and promptly abandoned his original instinct to remove her to the nearest tin bath, strip her and immerse her in a bath of disinfectant. He executed all his considerable charm. ‘Lizzie, please take me to the nearest outfitters.’

‘Commercial Road’s the best,’ Lizzie said doubtfully.

Bond Street it was not, and there were none of the new horseless buses here, but they had emerged an hour later from an outfitters of sorts, a large parcel tucked firmly under Lizzie’s arm, from which she would not be parted.

‘For me?’ Lizzie asked in wonder for the twentieth time.

‘Only after a visit to the Public Baths, *ma fille?*’

He handed Lizzie plus parcel, twopence, and a threepenny tip over to the attendant. Half an hour later a Lizzie of totally different hue shyly emerged. She was bright red from the scrubbing, and much of her hair had vanished. What there was left made her look like a hopeful hedgehog.

‘My dad will take a strap to me, looking like a tart.’

‘The only tart you resemble, Lizzie, is a strawberry one.’

She eyed him doubtfully. ‘I don’t look like a tart, then?’

Auguste studied the most visible of the new clothes, the new brown print gown, fitting over the young breasts and modestly sinking beneath stocking-clad ankles. He compared her briefly with the ladies who strolled the Empire Promenade. ‘No,’ he said. Then, ominously, ‘What is that bundle under your arm, Lizzie?’

‘Me working clothes, of course,’ she said in surprise. ‘I can’t work toggged up like this, can I?’

None too gently he wrested the package from her, and threw it in a zinc bin destined for the adjoining wash-house.

‘What you doing?’ she howled in anguish.

‘Lizzie,’ he said, ‘cook for me, watch for me, *help* me, and you shall have enough to buy yourself twenty such dresses. Will you do that?’

Lizzie considered, rather too long to please Auguste entirely. ‘Yus,’ she told him eventually.

‘Excellent, *ma petite*.’ So pleased was he at this non-acrimonious agreement, so filled with dream as to what he could teach this young disciple, and then so taken with the wares of the elderly woman at the kerbside selling hot pig’s trotters, that he failed to notice Lizzie had reclaimed her precious bundle, as she dutifully climbed up after him to the open-air deck of the bus.

‘You enjoy your work, *ma fille*?’

Enjoy? Lizzie looked at him blankly, and he tried another tack.

‘The Old King Cole is a happy place?’

‘Old Jowitt’s a rum cove.’

‘That I see, but the artistes? You like them?’ He perceived from the blank expression that he was getting nowhere. The Lizzies of this world had no time for reflecting on their lot. He changed tack. ‘Tell me about them, those that come to the eating-room.’

‘Mist’rill.’

Auguste’s turn to look blank.

‘Max Hill,’ she repeated, ‘old cove. Does impersonations. Eats chops.’ She peeped at him to see if this was what he wanted and encouraged, swept on: ‘Mr Brodie, big he is. Jolly. Pats me bur beefsteak man, hates Harry Pickles, he’s a one. Eels and bangers, don’t like Brodie, Brodie don’t like him. Miguel, he’s a juggler, smarmy, thinks he’s a swell, but he ain’t, ’cos he eats his eels jellied an whelks. Mariella’s pretty – and don’t she know it.’ She giggled. ‘You’ll be meeting her,’ she added mysteriously.

‘You like her?’ Auguste inquired, interested at the mention of Will Lamb’s former love. Seeing her look of doubt, he added hastily, ‘And what does she eat?’

‘She won’t eat nothing of ours,’ Lizzie said crossly. ‘But I reckons she’d be a shrimps-and-potato lady.’

Auguste regarded her in wonder. ‘*Mapetite*, you have the makings of a true connoisseur of cuisine. To find someone after his own heart in such a place cheered him immensely.

‘Gam,’ snorted Lizzie, not understanding a word.

A brief reconnoitre backstage told Auguste much about the financial state of the Old King Cole. It looked and smelled of failure. There were two large dressing-rooms at the rear of the building next to the stage door, and a series of cubby-holes opposite the cramped wings and backstage area, two of which, according to hastily pinned notices, had been allotted to Nettie and Will; the others spilled out ancient props and lighting paraphernalia out of their doors. The performers, he understood, arrived in most cases only for their particular turns and for the moment he had the place to himself. Or so he thought.

‘Ah. How good of you, my dear chap, to keep a lookout for bailiffs.’ Percy Jowitt descended on him, beaming.

Auguste surrendered. ‘Could any bailiffs get in here undetected?’ he asked.

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