

Act Of Murder by Alan Wright

The Royal Court Theatre in King Street was a matter of yards from the Wigan Borough Police Station where Constable Jimmy Bowery was exhorting the benefits of marital compliance, and yet in aesthetic terms it was a thousand leagues distant. The deceptively small foyer entrance, with its staircase hidden behind musty drapes, gave the casual visitor an impression of stuntedness, generating a lowering of spirits and expectation which was further enhanced by 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 guests slid behind 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, the tall golden columns edged with the most elaborate floral designs that seemed to float effortlessly in the smooth transition from column to ceiling, where fine heraldic patterns continued the decorative motif across the upper level of the arch itself. But it was the splendid array of gilded boxes, richly decorated in gold and red, that confirmed the impression of an opulence rendered at once tantalising and transitory, and forced the more modest patrons in the stalls below

to glance upwards involuntarily 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 around him; he watched with studied impatience as the technical rehearsal was limping to its conclusion. That was the problem with touring, he knew. You were inevitably reliant 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 funereally) 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 fracturing 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, arrayed along the front of the stage, to create such a prominent 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 set scene at the rear of the stage, he sighed and thought of the Lyceum in London, where the *mise en scene* had no equal, the marvellous effects produced by a subtle blending of colours and lighting and those amazing coloured glasses that 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 ilk. The so-called

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

With a sinking of the heart he saw thin wisps of mist creep along the upper balcony, fugitives from the fog that was thickening outside, and he earnestly hoped the proprietors would be able to ensure it was prevented from entering the main auditorium. He had performed in fog-shrouded theatres before, and they offered little enhancement to the drama enacted on stage.

“Tragedy or disaster?”

Benjamin wheeled round, startled by the disembodied voice behind him. He blinked hard at the dark, heavy curtain until he could make out the shape of the one who had addressed him so alarmingly. “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; of his experiences in the luxurious Green Room at Covent Garden, its magnificent chandelier sparkling on a splendid divan covered in damask; of working with the Bancrofts at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Tottenham Street and the novelty of matinee performances, and how the Bancrofts then paid the full salaries for afternoon shows, a practice now sadly fallen into misuse.

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 at the rear of the mayoral box.

"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 round 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 hesitant and dyspeptic surgeon were inserting a hypodermic syringe into her temple and attempting to pierce her eyeballs from the inside. The metaphorical invasive needle would then slide its way down the side of her face, rendering her cheekbones raw and indescribably tender, the only analgesic to 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 spotted his exit from the hotel he had actually sauntered 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 mockingly 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!

The ghostly figures down below somehow put her in mind of her brother Edward. She gave an involuntary shudder, and turned her mind to more delectable thoughts. If Richard's plans bore any sort of 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. The two of them spoke for a while, and she saw Richard's shoulders stiffen in the manner she was so familiar with, a physical betrayal of caution and refusal that

would be suitably disguised by amiable and urbane words, leaving his interlocutor empty-handed but gratified that he had been granted the most sympathetic of audiences. As on the occasions she broached the subject of Venice.