

The Murder in the Stalls

By A.G. MacDonell

“So in the case of a murder where there are no clues or any reliable evidence to speak of, how on earth do you track down the murderer?” I asked.

Inspector Fleming lit his pipe and looked at me with that look of earnest intensity which I learned to recognise as a sign that he was about to tell me one of his extraordinary case histories.

‘If you find a motive you find the murderer. That’s a good working rule,’ said Inspector Fleming ‘Though I remember once I found a lovely motive and it nearly landed me in a right mess.’”

‘It was during that very cold winter. Do you remember the murder in the old Imperial Theatre? The play being shown was by a man called Ibsen, a Norwegian. I’ve never seen it myself but when it was produced in London all the socialites and intellectual stars came to see the first night. But after the audience left, one seat remained filled. Seat 21, it was, in the middle of the third row. The occupant was dead, with a long, thin stab under the left shoulder-blade. I was on night duty at that time and I was down in the theatre within a quarter of an hour.

‘After I sent the doctor home I had a chance to look at the body properly. That was when I got a surprise. The man was dressed like a labourer, and yet he was sitting in the third row of the stalls on the opening night of a particularly prestigious production. I was no longer asking myself why the man had been killed or who had killed him. Instead I was asking, “What on earth is he doing here?” What had brought this dishevelled, unshaven creature to the theatre surrounded by shirtfronts, fur-coats and diamonds? I made myself comfortable and began to think.

‘I started with a general question. What takes men to a play, I asked myself, and got three answers (1) interest in drama; (2) invitation of a friend; and (3) to see a favourite actor or actress.

‘I ruled out interest in the drama. The man wasn’t that sort. Invitation of a friend? No, the programme-seller had noticed that the victim came alone.

‘That left the third motive for visiting a play, the desire to see a particular actor or actress.

‘Such people are either a relation of, or in love, with, one of the players’

‘I went over and took another look at the murdered man. “The only thing that would bring you here,” I said to myself, “would be a woman. But what type of woman could love you?”

‘And why would a successful West End actress love such as you? Perhaps the dead man was not the lover of the “star”. But her husband of earlier days. I rose from my stall and summoned the manager.

‘ “Are there many female roles in the play,” I asked.

‘ “Only two. And one doesn’t speak.”

‘ “Who plays the starring role?” I asked.

‘ “Miss Penelope Hilditch,”

‘ “ And is she married?”

‘The manager looked surprised. “Married?” he said, and then laughed. “No she isn’t, but she damned nearly was last week. Broke it off at the church-door, as you might say. It was in all the papers. A big scandal. Did wonders for the play. Sold out ever since!”

‘ “And who was the man she jilted?”

‘ “Freddy Hunter. The comedian. He’s also her publicity agent”

‘ “Do you know what happened?” I asked.

‘The manager shook his head. He was an unhelpful fellow, but he did at least give me Miss Hilditch’s address. I took a cab to her Chelsea flat.

It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when I arrived and I was surprised to see that the windows were brightly lit. It had started to snow and was very cold.

‘I knocked and the door was answered by a man who I instantly recognised as Freddy Hunter, the comedian.

‘“I would like a word with Miss Hilditch,” I said. “I’m from Scotland Yard,”

I expected Hunter to look shocked as most people did when I said this.

But he just gave me a long stare.

‘From inside the flat, a woman’s voice called out “Who the devil’s that, Freddy?”

‘I went in and found a lady whom I took, rightly, for the actress Miss Hilditch.

‘Hunter followed me in and said casually, “It’s a policeman”.

‘Miss Hilditch was a tall, dark, rather handsome woman with magnificent black eyes. She waved Hunter out of the room.

‘ “Well. Go on,” she said to me, “Ask your questions.”

‘I thought it best to go right into the middle of the affair, so I started off with “Why did you break off your engagement to Mr Freddy Hunter?”

For a moment she became agitated and then her training as an actress came to her rescue. She produced a charming ready-made smile

‘ “But I didn’t break it off. Mr Hunter did.”

“Why?”

‘ “Better ask him” she answered lightly.

I leant forward, determined to get something more out of her, “Miss Hilditch. If Mr Hunter broke off the engagement, what is he doing in your flat at one ‘o’ clock in the morning?”

‘She shook her head impatiently. “Talking business. He’s also my publicity agent”

‘In order to take the lady by surprise, I tried my best to put my next question in as conversational a manner as I could.

‘ “And when did you last see your husband?” I said.

‘The effect was dramatic. Miss Hilditch sprang to her feet, a terrific scowl darkening her face. “Mr Policeman, you know a hell of a lot,” she said “I wonder just how much you do know.”

‘ “Then you are married?”

‘ “Yes.”

‘Everything was working out exactly as I had deduced it. The corpse in the stalls must have been her late husband.

‘It was then Freddy Hunter, who must have been listening, rushed in.

‘ “For God’s sake, Toots,” he cried, “don’t say a word. Not a word.”

‘ “It’s nothing that he doesn’t know already,” said Miss Hilditch, “He knows about the marriage.”

Hunter threw himself down on a chair and muttered despairingly, “The press will have a field day with this.”

‘ “You’d better come along with me, sir” I said.

‘ “Inspector,” he said, “What is the charge you are about to prefer against me?”

‘ “Murder,” I said shortly and looked round the room. For a moment there was a silence and then Hunter looked at me with a real genuine smile, “And whom have I murdered?”

‘ “This lady’s husband,”

‘ “Well in that case it must be suicide. I am that lady’s husband.”

‘When Miss Hilditch produced the marriage documents I sat down heavily in an armchair. “Mr Hunter,” I said, “Will you please tell me what this is all about.”

For the second time he smiled. Then he turned to me and explained the whole business.

‘Apparently Freddy Hunter, as Miss Hilditch’s publicity agent had organised his engagement and the breaking-off at the door of the registry office as a publicity stunt! But his plans were thrown out of gear when he genuinely fell in love with Miss Hilditch. That was when he insisted on getting married at once. They had managed to keep their marriage secret for three months so they could work up the publicity of their apparent engagement followed by the public breaking off. And it *had* worked. The theatre was full every night. “No real crime in that, is there Inspector?” said Hunter.’

With that Inspector Fleming fell silent.

“But how did it all end?” I cried. “Did you ever solve the mystery of the dead man in the stalls?”

‘Oh yes it was solved the following morning. The producer of the play did it.

He committed suicide and was found in his room in the theatre with a confession note by his side. So that was that. It appeared that the dishevelled unshaven man found murdered in the stalls was what is called a dramatic critic.’ said Inspector Fleming with a glint in his eye ‘ He had been slating the producer’s work in the paper he wrote for.’

I smiled back uneasily. As an erstwhile drama critic myself, this was not a case I relished hearing about.