

## **The Murder in the Stalls**

By A.G. MacDonell

‘If you find a motive you find the murderer. That’s a good working rule,’ said Inspector Fleming, his hand closing round the handle of his tankard as he spoke. ‘Though I remember once I found a lovely motive and it nearly landed me in a right mess.’”

The Inspector coughed.

‘Do you remember the murder in the old Imperial Theatre? It was before your day, I expect. I’ll tell you about it.’ He paused to relight his pipe then proceeded. ‘The play being shown was called “Rosmersholm” by a man called Ibsen, a Norwegian. I’ve never seen it myself but when it was produced in London all the social and intellectual stars came to see it. And then afterwards they all went. All except one who was still in his seat as the attendants were closing up. C.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.

‘It wasn’t until after I sent the doctor home that I had a chance to look at the body properly. That was when I got a surprise. The man was dressed like a labourer in his Sunday best. He wore a very rough, dark, ill-fitting suit that had never known press or iron, and on the floor lay a cloth cap.

‘And yet he was sitting in the third row of the stalls on the night of a particularly brilliant performance of “Rosmersholm”. 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 coarse, unshaven creature to a stall on an Ibsen night surrounded by shirtfronts, fur-coats and diamonds? I tilted up another stall, made myself comfortable and began to think.

‘I started with a general question. What does take men to a play, I asked myself, and got three answers (1) interest in drama; (2) the 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. Then there was the invitation of a friend; but the programme-seller had particularly 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. Immediately the next inference sprang into my head. If the dead man was in love with one of the actresses, it would not only have brought him to the play, but would also provide the motive of jealousy for some

man who also loved the actress.

‘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?”

‘I carried on reasoning, trying to work out how a successful West End actress could love such a man as the dead man must have been. Then I had my final flash of intuition. West-End actresses have not always been West End, nor indeed always actresses. Who knows what is sometimes left behind them in their career? The dead man was not the lover or the would-be-lover of a London “star”. He was her husband of earlier, would-be-forgotten days. The case was clear. 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 shortly. “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.”

‘ “And who was the man?”

‘ “Freddy Hunter.”

‘I knew Freddy Hunter to be comedian of some note at that time, mainly in musical comedy.

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

‘The manager shook his head. He was a silent dog, but he gave me Miss Hilditch’s address and 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.

‘I knocked and the door was answered by a man whom I instantly recognised as Freddy Hunter. He was the true, old-fashioned type of comedian who looks in private life as if his heart was breaking.

‘ “I would like a word with Miss Hilditch,” I said.

‘ “There are lots of people wanting that,” he answered gloomily.

‘ “I’m from Scotland Yard,” I shot out, expecting Hunter to look shocked as most people did when I said this. But he just gave me a long stare and then said “Already?”

At this my heart gave a sudden bound. That one word “already” was absolute proof to me that my chain of reasoning had been sound and that I had gone straight from corpse to murderer.

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

‘I went in and found another man, in evening dress, and 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 while the third of the party, the man in evening dress, was a stoutish man of about fifty called Cecil Alderson. Miss Hilditch waved the two men out of the room.

‘ “Well. Go on,” she said to me suddenly, “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 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

‘ “It isn’t a pleasant thing to have to admit,” she answered with a semi-humorous twist of her lips, “but I didn’t break it off. Mr Hunter did.”

“Why?”

‘ “Better ask him – he’s here,” 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. The other man, Cecil Alderson, is my – one of my business advisors.”

‘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 galvanic. 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.”

‘Again I had that heart-bound. Everything was working out exactly as I had deduced it.

‘It was then Hunter rushed in.

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

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

‘Hunter started and said in a low voice: “Then he must have guessed tonight’s affairs.” He threw himself down on a chair and muttered despairingly, “It’s been a hideous bungle. It’s a relief, in a way, that it’s all over. If you hadn’t have come so quickly inspector it might have been all right. I don’t know how the devil you managed it.”

‘You can imagine how my chest swelled with pride at this tribute from my

adversary. "You'd better come along with me, sir" I said.

"Got your notebook inspector?" Hunter asked. "Well, take this down as a statement. I swear that in all this damned show there was never any intention of claiming against the insurance money. That I swear."

"This struck me rather as a case of straining at a gnat. If you murder a man, it doesn't make it any less of a crime if you swear that you didn't do it for his insurance money. Nevertheless I took his statement solemnly in my book.

"At that moment there was a loud knock at the front door of the flat and the next moment a uniformed police-sergeant came in, followed by a constable. And I have to say I was not happy to see them. "I'm Inspector Fleming from Headquarters," I snapped "You're just in time to escort me to the Yard. I've got the pair of them."

"The pair of them, sir?" the sergeant seemed surprised "I thought there was only one. The telephone message said nothing about a pair."

"It was my turn to be startled. "Telephone message? What telephone message?"

"Why the message from a gentle man called Alderson."

"I turned "Mr Alderson," I shouted at the business-adviser "What was the message you sent to the police."

Cecil Alderson simply goggled at me while Hunter's dull eyes lit up as he said, "By George, I don't believe he knows after all."

"By this time I was beginning to lose my temper. I turned to the sergeant. "What was the message, sergeant that brought you here?" but the comedian chipped in again.

"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," I jerked a thumb over my shoulder at Miss Hilditch.

"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 the comedian smiled, "And we thought you knew all these things." Then he turned to me and explained the whole wretched business.

"Apparently Alderson was Miss Hilditch's publicity agent and it was he who arranged the whole thing. He organised the engagement and the breaking-off at the door of the registry office, but his plans were

thrown out of gear when Hunter genuinely fell in love with Miss Hilditch and they insisted on getting married at once. They had managed to keep it secret for three months so they could work up the publicity. On top of that Alderson was going to get Miss Hilditch's jewellery stolen and claim the insurance. They had sent a message to the police announcing the theft and were just settling down to put the finishing touches to the story they were going to tell when I walked in. They hadn't expected the sergeant for another half-hour.

Inspector Fleming took a long pull at this beer and was silent. Then he said ruminatively 'It was a queer thing how perfect my argument seemed at the time.'

'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 next morning. The producer of the play did it. He was found hanging in his room at the theatre with a confession on the table. So that was that.'

'But why did he kill him? And how did the seedy, unshaven man get into the stalls in the first place?'

'Oh, he was what is called a dramatic critic,' said Fleming, struggling into his overcoat, 'and he had been slating the producer's work in the paper he wrote for.'