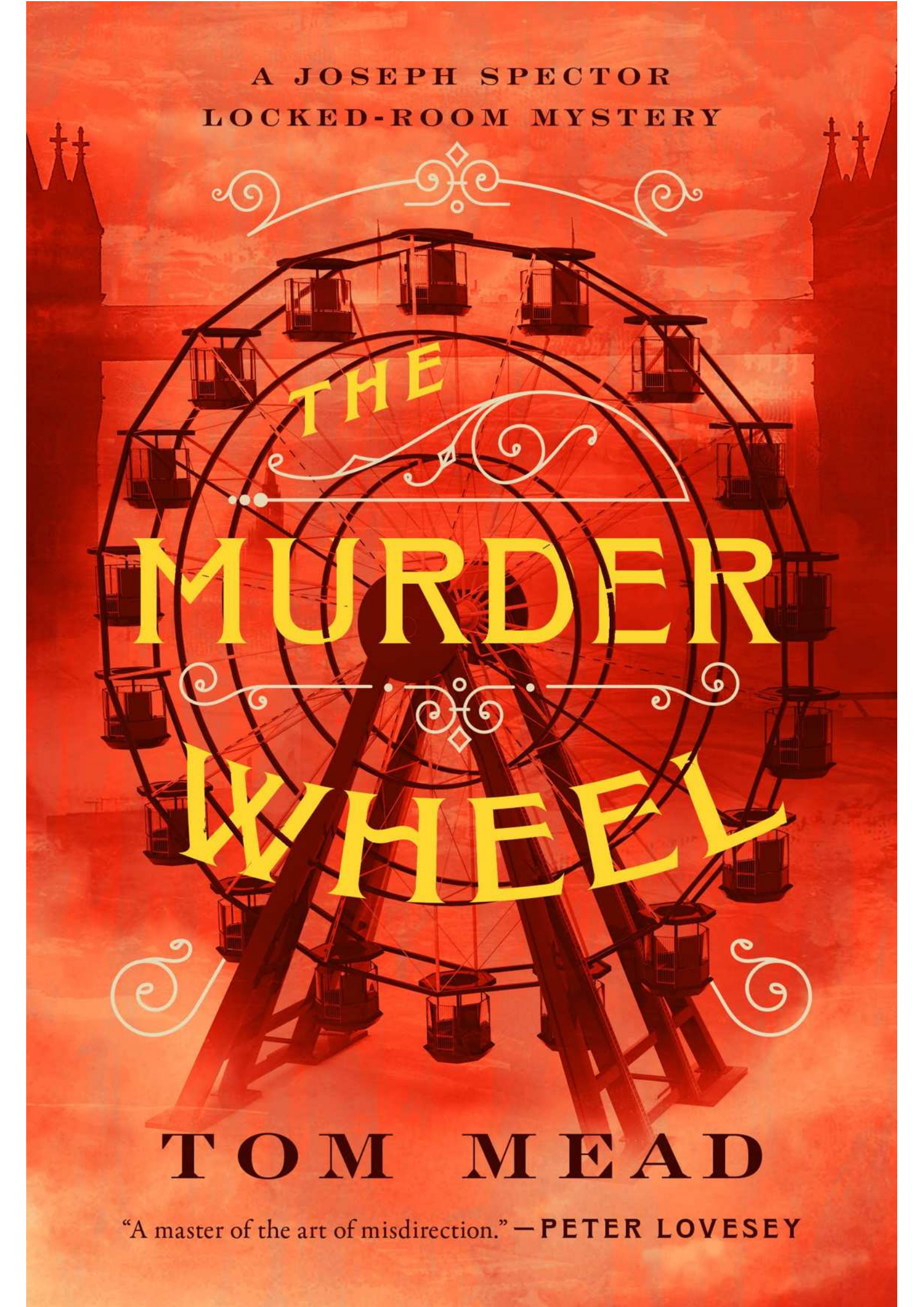


A JOSEPH SPECTOR  
LOCKED-ROOM MYSTERY



THE  
MURDER  
WHEEL

TOM MEAD

“A master of the art of misdirection.” —PETER LOVESEY

**THE  
MURDER  
WHEEL**

**A JOSEPH SPECTOR  
LOCKED-ROOM MYSTERY**

**TOM MEAD**



**THE MYSTERIOUS PRESS  
NEW YORK**

*To my mum and dad  
and  
once again, in memory of the maestro  
(1906–1977)*



If the world will be gulled, let it be gulled.

—Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Part III, Section  
IV



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Acknowledgements

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

*At the Pomegranate Theatre:*

“Professor Paolini,” a magician

Martha, his assistant

Sidney Draper, a stage manager

Kenneth Fabris, a stagehand

Max Toomey, a look-alike

Alf, a doorman

Will Cope, a lighting technician

Andrew Morgan, a journalist

Ned Winchester, a troublemaker

*And elsewhere:*

Edmund Ibbs, a lawyer

Titus Pilgrim, a criminal

Mr. Keegan

} his men

Mr. Branning

Carla Dean, a widow

Dominic Dean, a bank manager (deceased)

Felix Draven, an acting bank manager

Maudie Cash, a cashier

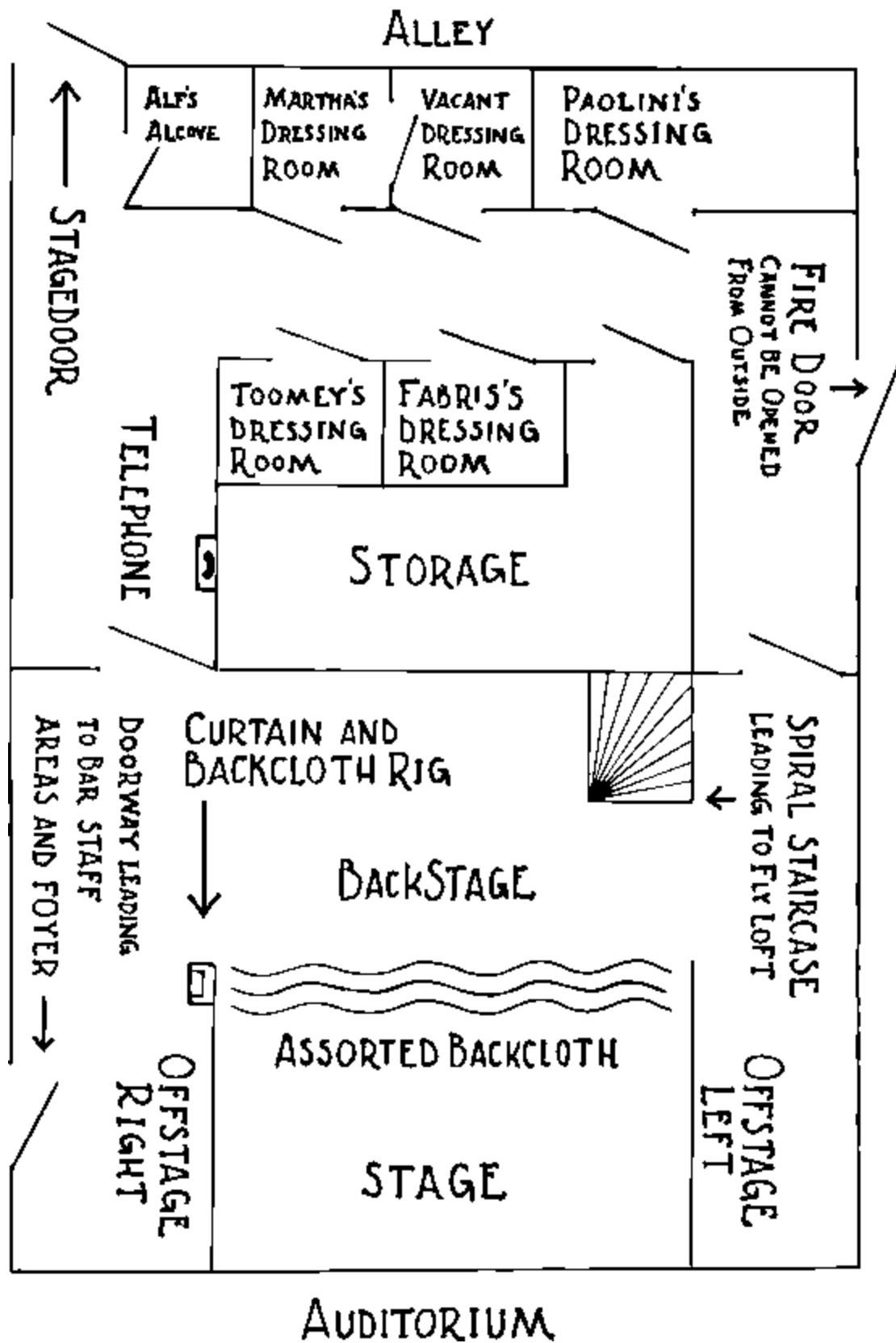
Miklos Varga, a fairground man

Boyd Remiston, a suspicious character

Inspector George Flint, of Scotland Yard  
Sergeant Jerome Hook, of Scotland Yard  
Joseph Spector, a professional trickster

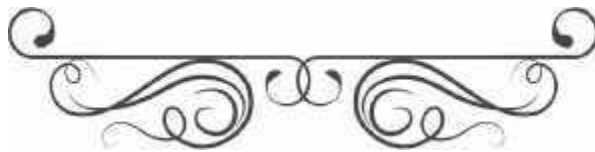


# THE POMEGRANATE THEATRE



## PART ONE

# SOME MUST WATCH



No matter how large or small an illusion, there is one thing to remember:  
your audience is in front of you. Keep them there.

—*The Master of Manipulation*, “Ruminations”

Nothing must be left to chance in a magical performance. Everything  
conducive to enhancing the mystery of the illusions must be arranged with  
painstaking care and thought.

—David Devant

## CHAPTER ONE

# **“CAN YOU SOLVE THE FERRIS WHEEL MURDER CASE?”**

**I**t began with the book. If not for the book, the rest of it would not have happened. At least, that’s what Ibbs told himself after the fact. But truthfully, the whole hideous thing—every single facet of the case—slotted together so neatly that it was like an immaculately-timed sleight-of-hand trick. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye. But at the same time it had the kind of mad, surreal logic that is typically found in the most lucid and frenetic of fever dreams.

Ibbs did not believe in magic. And yet the macabre and bloody comedy of errors that occurred at the Pomegranate Theatre that night could not have unfurled more perfectly if it had been planned and executed by some invisible hellion. A puckish trickster, mocking his misfortune at every turn.

That was Friday, September 16, 1938: the day the gods played their wickedest trick on Edmund Ibbs.

But first: the book.

The morning began promisingly enough: a rap on the door of his quarters. He was lodging in upstairs rooms in Chancery Lane, not far from the Inns of Court in central London. Though he had not yet reached his thirtieth birthday, he’d completed his legal studies the previous summer and was now a full-fledged solicitor. Like all greenhorns, he was the object of his colleagues’ blade-edged wit, and frequently found himself lumbered with heaps of the most tedious paperwork and monotonous administrative duties. But he didn’t let it bother him. In fact, he considered it to be a rite of passage. No doubt they too had gone through it in their time, and now it was his turn.

At the door was the elderly porter Lancaster; stout and stolid as a pint

of Guinness. He was holding a parcel.

“Morning Mr. Ibbs, sir.”

“How do, Lancaster? Got something for me?”

“Book of some description, sir.”

Ibbs took it, feeling its heft on his palm. He had scarcely said a cheery goodbye and closed the door again before he was wrenching the paper away. The scraps drifted lazily to the floor as he examined the book by the window. Its embossed title caught the light: *The Master of Manipulation*.

He could almost feel the book’s talismanic power rippling through his fingers and up the length of his arms, like a tangible electrical charge. But it was just a book, he reminded himself. Mere words on paper. What he was actually experiencing was an adrenaline surge; the excitement and anticipation bubbling over.

Ever since he first heard about *The Master of Manipulation*, Ibbs knew that he simply had to have a copy. It was not the sort of item a regular bookseller would stock, but he had a man in Marylebone who tracked down the more outré titles for him, and who had been only too willing to source a copy the day after it was published.

Though a lawyer by trade, Edmund Ibbs was also an enthusiastic amateur magician. Or, to use the appropriate term, *illusionist*. And when he first heard rumours of the book at a meeting of the London Occult Practice Collective (a trade organisation which was surprisingly welcoming when it came to amateurs) it had seemed like the answer to a prayer. Needless to say, the professionals were utterly scandalised. But for dilettantes like Ibbs, *The Master of Manipulation* was the book they had all been waiting for.

A magician lives and dies by the strength of his illusions. Drawing back the curtain to show the innermost workings of stage magic is a risk most conjurors would never take. There is an unspoken code concerning such things. But Ibbs was little more than a curious layman, and so the book (which was due to be published by a second-tier and not altogether reputable publishing house) was little short of a miracle. A single book containing a panoply of magical secrets—all the mysteries and wonders of the stage dispelled at a stroke!

The book was published under a foolish pseudonym—the sort of thing you’d usually find in the pages of *Punch*: Dr. Anne L. Surazal. Ibbs had been puzzling over just who the wicked lady might be ever since he heard of the book’s existence. It took an embarrassingly long time to spot that “Dr. Anne L. Surazal” is “Lazarus Lennard” spelled backward. But that information was little use without knowing who Lazarus Lennard might

be. Some insider, perhaps, who knew the tricks of the trade.

Ibbs checked the clock on his mantle and judged he had enough time to get to grips with chapter one—which was tantalisingly titled “Cards from Nowhere”—before heading out into the damp and miserable September morning. He opened a drawer in his bureau and grabbed his own dog-eared Bicycle deck. He gave the cards a quick riffle shuffle and set them down on the table (a little messy, but all right otherwise). Then he focused on the text.

The frontispiece bore a minutely detailed pen-and-ink illustration of a Mephistophelean man (complete with goatee and curled moustache). He was one of the *Acetabularii*, history’s first recorded illusionists; the cup-and-ball specialists of Ancient Rome. Ibbs was too excited to notice at the time, but a close examination of the drawing would have told him all he needed to know about how the cup-and-ball trick was done. You see, in the picture the conjuror is holding the ball between index finger and thumb of his right hand, presenting it to the observer. But look closely enough and you’ll see reflected in the fellow’s eyes the second ball, hidden from the audience in what’s called a “Tenkai Palm,” sandwiched between thumb and palm of his unobtrusive left hand. *The Master of Manipulation* was one of those books: all the answers were there if you knew how to look for them.

*The art of magic, he read, lies in the manipulation of perception. Most people will look exactly where you want them to; all you have to do is tell them. It is simply a matter of guiding their attention in the correct direction, so that they are never looking at the trick as it is being worked.*

Hardly earth-shattering, but it was enough to ensnare Ibbs’s attention that morning, to the point where he was almost late for work. He soared through the first few chapters while eating a breakfast of porridge and dry toast, and it was with a heavy heart that he finally dragged himself away and readied himself to earn a day’s pay. There was now the pesky business of the day job to be got out of the way. But it’s safe to say that magic was at the forefront of his mind as he headed out to Holloway Prison that morning.

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It was hard to leave the book behind, but Ibbs told himself that it would be much worse if he were to bring it with him and somehow lose it, or drop it in a puddle while shouldering his way through the rush-hour crowds. Instead he bought a newspaper from a seller on the corner, and boarded the omnibus. *The Master of Manipulation* would be waiting at his bedside

when he got home.

It was difficult to concentrate on the tediously innuendo-laden headlines about Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden and other such abstract political matters. The only flutter of interest he managed to muster was for a prize the *Chronicle* was offering:

CAN YOU SOLVE THE FERRIS WHEEL MURDER CASE?  
*THE DAILY CHRONICLE* IS OFFERING A REWARD OF  
TWO THOUSAND POUNDS TO ANYONE WHO  
CAN DEMONSTRATE A SOLUTION TO  
THE *IMPOSSIBLE* FERRIS WHEEL CRIME!

He folded the newspaper and slipped it under his arm with a sigh. At least the press was on his side. In the *Chronicle*, at least, she was innocent. But the court of public opinion and the court of law are two very different things.

While the omnibus trundled its way out to Parkhurst Road, his attention was caught by a boy of about six sitting across from him. The lad looked miserable and clung to his mother's skirts with palpable despondency. Ibbs took a coin out of his pocket, a sovereign. Then, very carefully as the bus traversed bumps and wove in and out of traffic, he began twirling the coin from knuckle to knuckle, showing off the practiced dexterity of his hands.

The boy watched for a little while, unsmiling and deathly serious. Ibbs placed the coin in the palm of his hand, snaring it in a tight fist. Then he held up two closed fists side by side, glancing at the boy expectantly. After some serious thought, the boy pointed to the right hand, the original hand which had held the coin. Ibbs spread his fingers, showing that the palm was empty. The coin had leapt to his other hand.

The boy's expression did not change, but Ibbs convinced himself there was a sparkle of enthusiasm in his eyes. Taking that as encouragement, he continued. He made the coin leap back and forth invisibly between his hands. It's a simple enough illusion, close in principle to the cup-and-ball trick. You just need another coin your audience doesn't know about. You always keep it just out of sight between the fingers of whichever hand is *not* flamboyantly demonstrating the trick. He had spent countless hours practicing in front of his mirror, just watching his reflection for the slightest hint of the second coin. If *he* couldn't see it, neither could his audience.

The coup de theatre: Ibbs lay flat both palms to show that they were

empty. Then he clapped once, loudly enough to wake a woman sitting beside him from a snorting snooze. The boy watched in confusion. He looked up and down the bus to see if there was something he had missed. As he did so, the coin slipped from the dome of his young head and tumbled to the floor. Ibbs stretched out a leg and caught it on his shoe.

“That’s yours,” he said. The boy pounced on it and held it aloft as though it were some pirate’s booty. Then he slipped it into the pocket of his shorts and got back to playing with his mother’s skirts.

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The next stop was Ibbs’s. He stepped off the bus energised, if a sovereign lighter, and strode along Parkhurst Road toward the immense wooden gates of Holloway.

From the outside, Holloway Prison is a kind of palace of brown brick—immense and awe-inspiring, covering untold acres of land, but snared by high walls and discreetly razor-lined wire. A guard saluted as he stepped through the gate. Ibbs wasn’t sure how to respond, so he saluted back. Then he kicked himself all the way up the path to the double doors—he should have simply looked at the fellow with steely disdain and then looked away. *That* is how a fellow commands respect.

An older uniformed man was waiting at the main entrance. “Ibbs?”

“That’s me, sir.”

“Very good. Warden Matthews.” They shook hands. “You’re here to see the ‘lady of the moment,’ I understand.”

“Carla Dean.”

“That’s the one. Been keeping us busy, she has.”

“Is she a troublesome prisoner then?”

“Not at all. Quiet as a mouse and very subdued. Reads her Bible a lot. But people are curious about her. Many’s the time I’ve had to personally stop a reporter from sneaking in through our doors to try and snag an interview. They try all sorts of disguises. It can get quite comical.”

“Seems counterintuitive to sneak into a prison,” Ibbs observed.

Matthews laughed. “You’re telling me.”

The pair strode along drab corridors that reminded Ibbs eerily of his old boarding school. They shared that same conscious absence of ornament. Décor as a psychological weapon.

“You’ve visited Mrs. Dean before have you?”

“I met her once while she was in police custody. But that was with Sir Cecil. He did most of the talking.”

“I see. And now they’re trusting you to interview her solo?”

“Well, yes. Truth be told, we’re all rather stretched.” Ibbs had been roped in to assist the illustrious Sir Cecil Bullivant, QC, who would be acting for the defence. Bullivant had promptly come down with an acute case of copropraxia for which his bemused physician had prescribed bed rest. This left Ibbs with a considerable amount of work to do in the matter of the Crown versus Carla Dean. Currently, the case to be presented before Justice Sir Giles Drury was far from watertight.

The warden threw him a sideways smile: “Well, good luck.”

*What was that supposed to mean?*

There was no denying the case had caused a sensation. Fleet Street christened its new baby the “Ferris Wheel Murder Case,” which was an efficient summary of the key features. But the name did not convey the feeling of almost supernatural mystery which permeated the sequence of events. Two people went up on that Ferris wheel, and only one came down alive.

Ibbs had met Carla Dean once before, all too briefly. Not long enough to generate a lasting impression, at least. The newspaper photographs showed a young woman alive with intelligence and excitement. There was a glow about the face which seemed to seep from the photo paper. In prison she had aged decades. There were lines about her eyes and mouth that had grown shadowed, and her hair plumed messily. It was hard to believe this woman was not yet thirty. She wore a shapeless grey dress that looked to be fashioned out of sackcloth. Her thin, pianist’s hands were threaded in her lap and she sat patiently, waiting for Ibbs to begin. Her eyes were deep; that is to say there was much in them he could not quite fathom. Like peering into twin chasms whose dimensions are beyond understanding. Like so much in this case, it only occurred to him after the fact, when he tried to picture Carla Dean again. But at that moment, as they faced each other across the cell, his only thought was how feeble he felt in her presence. How inadequate.

Did she look like a killer? It was a question which would need to be looked into seriously sooner or later. But there was undeniably something of the coiled spring in her knotted muscles and the feline uprightness with which she perched on the bed. The stillness too; the stillness meant something.

“Good morning, Mrs. Dean.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ibbs. How nice to see you again.” When she spoke, she might have been any other high-society hostess. There was a smoky hush to her voice—the sort of voice one leans in to listen to. But her face was expressionless.



“I hope you don’t mind if I get straight down to business. I have a lot to get through today.”

“Not at all. Please sit down.”

Ibbs perched on the cold wooden chair beside the bed. Mrs. Dean remained on the mattress. She had lost weight.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like you to repeat the story you have already told many times. The story of what happened to your husband on the night of August 19th. Will you do that for me?”

She inclined her head. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Good. Please begin.” He had his notebook and pen in hand. This was purely about pinpointing inconsistencies in her account. Of course he knew the story inside out but, like a magic trick, the key was in the repetition. With each new version the nuances and idiosyncrasies came to the fore.

“He took me to the fair. It was supposed to be a little treat for me. He bought me candy floss and we danced and had a jolly time.”

“What time did you arrive?”

“I would say six o’clock. My husband works. Worked.” She blinked a little, but evidently she had done all the crying she intended to do.

“Whilst you were at the fair, did you encounter anybody you knew or recognised?”

“Certainly. There were a number of people from our street.”

“And did you notice anybody or anything that seemed unusual or out of the ordinary?”

“Well, it’s hard to say. The place was a cavalcade of clowns and jugglers and magicians.”

“Did you recognise anybody among the performers?”

“No.”

“Did your husband?”

She paused, considering her response. “He was looking over his shoulder. As though someone were following him.”

“And *was* anyone following him?”

“Possibly. The thought didn’t occur to me at the time, but afterward . . . I began to convince myself that there *was* someone. A man with a limp, I glimpsed him once or twice as we made our way round the fair . . .”

“Let’s stick to the facts for the moment. Was your husband in the habit of carrying a firearm with him when he went out?”

This was the first difficult question. Ibbs wanted to see how she would react. She seemed to take it with aplomb. There was the briefest flicker of concentration on her face, and then she answered: “No.”

“How do you know?”

“I think I would have known, don’t you? It’s true that my husband *owned* a firearm. It was a revolver, an ugly grey thing, I had no interest in it whatsoever. But it never left the house if I had any say in the matter, I can tell you that much. It was purely for personal protection, in the event of a burglar for instance. He had no reason to take it to the fair.”

“Ah, yes . . .” Ibbs flipped through a few pages in his notebook. “A ‘Nagant M1895.’ A Bolshevik weapon, I believe?”

She shrugged.

“How did he come by it?”

“I’ve no idea.”

Ibbs changed tack. “You seem to think that he was being followed that night. Wouldn’t it make sense for him to carry a firearm? How can you be so positive that he was unarmed?”

She sighed, clearly growing weary of repeating herself. “Because the evening was a little chilly and he gave me his jacket. You know, draped it around my shoulders. Chivalrous sort of thing. If the revolver was on his person, I should have seen it. And if it were in his jacket, I should have felt it.”

“What about his trousers? He might have tucked it down the back of his trousers, perhaps, or concealed it in a pocket?”

“No, no. It was too big to hide in a pocket. And if it were tucked into his trousers, it would have been clearly visible.”

“What about his ankles?”

“Stowed in his sock, you mean? No. Again, it would have been plain to see. My husband was wearing a linen suit, so the outline of a revolver anywhere on his person would have been plain to see.”

“And what about you, Mrs. Dean? Were you armed?”

“No. I was not. I hate guns with every fibre of my being. It was a great source of annoyance to me that Dominic felt the need to keep one in the house.”

“You were carrying a handbag, correct?”

“Yes, but no gun. I most certainly would *not* have left the house with a revolver in my handbag.”

“I see. Perhaps you’d better tell me about the pistol. What prompted your husband to buy it?”

She sighed. “He wasn’t himself after what happened at the bank. He was . . . out of sorts. Scared of his own shadow. He got the foolish idea that a gun would keep him safe.”

“But you disagreed.”

“Well, it should be obvious that a bank manager with a loaded gun in his desk is an accident waiting to happen.”

“He always kept it loaded?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Did you ever *see* him load it?”

“Never.”

“So you never felt inclined to use the weapon yourself? Or even to look at it?”

She shrugged. “Why should I? The revolver was always in his study. So were the bullets. And I never had cause to venture in there. It simply didn’t interest me.”

“I see.” Ibbs finished scribbling a few notes, then looked back up at the prisoner. “So neither you nor your husband were armed that night. In that case, where did the gun come from?”

This was the key question. The question which both the defence and the prosecution would need to answer.

“I don’t know,” said Carla Dean. “I heard it clatter to the floor and the next moment it was in my hand. . . .”

“Let’s take things chronologically. At what time did you go on the Ferris wheel?”

“I should say around nine, though I can’t be sure.”

“And whose suggestion was it?”

“Dominic’s. He was always fond of them.”

“Were you reluctant?”

“No. I’m game for most things.”

“But not gunplay,” Ibbs observed without looking up. “What did he say to you? Tell me in as much detail as you can.”

“We just talked about the ordinary everyday things that couples talk about. We bickered about our finances. We made plans. I honestly don’t remember in detail. It was absent-minded folderol. Of course I had no idea it was the last conversation I would ever have with my husband.”

“Did he have money problems?”

She was careful in her answer. “He was too generous with his spending. I often had to warn him about tightening his belt, but he never listened.”

“I see. Now please tell me precisely. You got onto the Ferris wheel. You had a passenger car to yourselves.”

“Yes. Just the two of us.”

“Who purchased the ticket?”

“Dominic. When you get onto the Ferris wheel, you have to pass by

the small ticket booth. Dominic stopped and bought the ticket. He exchanged a few words with whoever was inside the booth, but I didn't see who it was. I wasn't concentrating."

"And then you climbed into the carriage?"

"Yes." She trailed off into silence, her gaze drifting toward the barred window.

"Please," Ibbs prompted, "what next?"

"It was so cold up there. I wrapped his jacket tighter around me. He was talking ten-to-the-dozen about something he was going to do tomorrow."

"Saying what?"

"I don't remember. All I remember is the shot. I was looking the other way. I was looking down. I didn't see where the gun came from."

"But you believe your husband was the one who pulled the trigger?"

"Well, who else could it have been?"

His pen nib hovered over the notepad. "And it was just a single shot?"

"Yes. It echoed, but all the same I could tell it was just one shot. Then there was a loud clang as the gun dropped to the floor of the car. And poor Dominic was clutching his stomach, crying and yelling."

"How high up were you at this point?"

"We were at the very top. Beginning our descent."

"And what did you do then?"

"I said 'Dominic, what is it, what's happened?' It was a silly question of course. I could see just what had happened. But all he said was 'Please, I'm hurt.' Oh, it was so pitiful, Mr. Ibbs. It broke my heart. So, as the car moved down, I popped my head over the side and called out: 'Help, it's my husband, he's hurt.'"

"And then?"

"Well, naturally a lot of people heard the commotion. A crowd gathered, there was a great deal of pushing and shoving."

"And?"

"There was a doctor on hand, off duty, he just happened to be attending the fair with his wife. He took a quick look at my husband, but of course there was nothing he could do. So an ambulance was called. My husband had been shot in the stomach."

"He was in great pain?"

"Yes. Very much so. He died before the ambulance could get to him."

"And before he could say a word about what happened."

"He made some indistinct mumblings. That was all."

"Let me ask you this, Mrs. Dean," Ibbs said, laying his pen and pad to