

HERRINGFORD AND WATTS MYSTERIES

CONDUCTOR
of LIGHT

RACHEL McMILLAN



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Cover by Nicole Dougherty

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Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

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CONDUCTOR OF LIGHT

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Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-6929-1 (eBook)

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Dedication

*For Sonja and Michelle
And for Stephan, of course*



*It may be that you are not yourself luminous,
but that you are a conductor of light. Some
people without possessing genius have a
remarkable power of stimulating it.*

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE,
THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES

Conductor of Light

A Herringford and Watts Adventure in Four Acts

THE ELGIN THEATRE

Week of October 14-18, 1912

Daily Mats 1:30 Evenings 7:30

10 All-Star Acts of Comedy, Drama, Magic, and Music



Dramatis Personae

Merinda Herringford, a lady detective

Jemima Watts DeLuca, the same

Ray DeLuca, a reporter for the *Hogtown Herald*

Jasper Forth, a police constable

Kat and Mouse, two resourceful urchins

Nemo, a fiddler

The Great Stephano, a renowned monologist

Assorted magicians, clowns, thespians, and performers

ACT 1

In which an enigmatic Italian reporter and a stalwart police constable partake in an evening's entertainment and witness a murder.

Setting: Interior, the Elgin Theatre, October 14, 1912

The crowd was rowdy and the auditorium ripe with the smell of grease-paint and gas. Snakes of faint smoke hissed at the lip of the stage, and the crowd rustled.

This was not, of course, the crowd that had crossed through the ornate marble foyer of the theatre the previous evening to see a Mozart opera. No. Those ladies were swathed in fur and silk, gentleman in spit-shone shoes and rigid bow ties. This crowd was hungry and expectant. Some had scraped together pennies for weeks. Their fingers, still greasy from the hot chestnuts or steamy jacket potatoes they had purchased with the last of their pocket change, thumbed the leaflets left in a pile at the back of the house to consult the order of the top-notch acts awaiting them.

In the second row—sandwiched between a couple stealing the last moments before the curtain rose to explore each other's eyes and a pimply 16-year-old—was wedged a man not particularly distinguished save for a smile that could inspire clocks to stop ticking.

Back on the aisle of the thirteenth row, two end seats were occupied by a tall man with a pleasant face beside a young woman with dimples and an easy smile. The tall man was too innately kind to do anything but nod and feign amusement when the woman's hyena laugh erupted at most everything the man said, regardless of any humor found within.

The former (now squirming between the patrons enclosing him)

was Ray DeLuca, reporter for the *Hogtown Herald*, on assignment and husband to one half of Herringford and Watts, lady consulting detectives. The latter, Constable Jasper Forth, had been recently pressed into spending an evening with Hyacinth Moore, a young lady of good breeding, with a helpful shove from his mother, who believed the young lady's mother was of "excellent stock, Jasper, and she goes to church!"

Jasper's mother was, of course, acutely aware of her son's rather inexhaustible passion for another young lady (the other half of Herringford and Watts) who *did not* go to church. Or, thought Jasper, rimming his eardrum with his index finger, *possess the laugh of a hyena.*

The curtain finally rose, and the entertaining spectacle began with a hush rippling through those who had three solid meals a day and those whose sustenance was boiled potatoes and thrice-watered tea leaves. The tenor, Herbert Hanover, took the stage and began singing the refrain of an insipid song Ray knew would weave itself around his brain for days.

"Be my little baby bumblebee..." Herbert began, to the audience's delight. By the third *buzz around* of the bottomless lyric, Ray was thinking that his own rather mediocre attempts at poetry were not nearly so poor as he had always thought.

While Herbert gustily crooned another verse, Ray flipped back in his notebook to the afternoon's news. News that should have been the center of his attention rather than a few second-rate vaudeville performers. Nonetheless, jack-of-all-trades photographer and sometimes theatre-reviewer Skip McCoy was ill, and Ray was forced to sit through another bout of Hanover's incessant onomatopoeia when, really, all Ray wanted to do was continue with the piece that had inspired him hours before.

Earlier that same day, an assassination attempt on the life of American presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt had occurred in Milwaukee, but the news in the U.S. across the Canadian border meant little to those in the theatre. Outside, beggars from St. John's Ward, the poorest piece of Toronto's patchwork quilt of newly arrived immigrants—speaking all manners of dialect and scraping at all manners of

employment, legal and non—moved toward the blinking bright lights. Herbert was soon replaced (still buzzing, to the audience's delight and Ray's annoyance) by the Great Sangiovese, a wiry magician with a penchant for doves and handkerchiefs.

As Sangiovese returned to the wings, Schmendrick the Clown took center stage, juggling oranges and knives with an exaggerated smile that inspired Ray to scribble any verb but *joyial*. Then another performer and another, sometimes allowing the attendees belonging to Toronto's burgeoning immigrant community to see themselves held up in the mirror of caricature. Even so, each accented ditty or makeup smeared attempt at comedy scraped at some semblance of home as they attuned their ears to the fast lilts of Canadian dialect and adjusted to a metropolis that thrust them into oblivion while it chugged on in its progressive stride.

And, of course, there was a bit with a dog, as in Shakespeare's inimitable *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, to provide comic relief. He first came out to accompany Timmy Tune and would an act later return to hop around Stephano's shoes. This very evening in an unscripted turn of events, Muffin the Rottweiler seemed to be off the leash—and then some. Despite the efforts of his owner, Timmy Tune, who bandied between barking commands louder than his canine companion and turning to the audience with a nervous smile, the dog had several ideas of his own. Ray yawned loudly in one aisle, while Jasper disengaged his arm from Hyacinth's tight grip.

The monologist Stephano took to the stage, opened his wide gums, and began to emit the first languid syllables of his source material. Even Ray could admit the man had a talent to match his remarkable looks: strong profile, ebony black skin, and a loud baritone voice that caressed each of Valentine's wooing verses from the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: "What light is light if Silvia be not seen?" Then, to interrupt the tone of the scene and keep an audience who preferred a higher scale of comedy to tragedy, he welcomed Muffin on stage. The dog, standing in for Crab, the sour-tempered mutt from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, barked and panted a bit as Stephano moved through the character Lance's lines.

Thereafter, Stephano returned to more serious selections, inspiring Ray to wonder at the elasticity the thespian possessed as he moved fluidly from comedy to tragedy to romance. For Stephano possessed talent that was squandered between a variety of jugglers, second-rate soft-shoes, and straw-hatted cake walks, though serious opportunities were not often afforded men like him.

Ray squinted into the glimmer of the footlights as the set changed and a few leftover feathers from an ornamented costume were swept out of the way to conjure a piece about vaudeville's reflection of the world he saw in Toronto every day. As Stephano planted his feet, turned on a diagonal and soliloquized, he saw beyond momentary rhapsody to the contrived community filling the hall. A patchwork quilt of people striving to make their voices heard in the constant carousel of Toronto's change.

Several rows back, Hyacinth was leaning in closely—too closely—awe-struck by the romantic overtures of Stephano, his golden voice, and his well-picked sonnets.

Stephano straightened his spine, squared his shoulders, and from the depths of his diaphragm blessed the rafters with couplet and rhyme. For several popular scenes, he embodied Macbeth and Hamlet and finally Romeo, joined by a fair young woman, one of the Tansy Twins from an earlier act. Her Juliet, Ray surmised, possessed the delicacy and nuance of Muffin the Rottweiler, who, at that very moment, had the audacity to dash on stage to a string of loud whispered curses from his owner in the wings. The audience, unsure as to why a canine should be present at all during the most somber of love scenes, coughed and sighed their frustration as Stephano attempted to shoo the dog away.

Finally, the dog ran behind the curtains, and Juliet and Romeo continued their passage into death's abyss. Stephano raised the vial of poison to catch the glow of the gaslight, prepared to fictionally follow his love into the beyond.

His trembling hand lifted the vial to his lips, and he sipped slowly. Juliet overacted her way through a tragic last scene before joining

him. There they lay, marble-still and entangled while the audience applauded.

Then Juliet stood. She looked to the audience, gave a little bow, and started to tug at Stephano's hand.

"This is taking it a little too far," Juliet hissed through the side of her mouth. "You're supposed to count to twenty, Stephano, and then get to your feet."

She prodded him. Then she sank back on her heels. Then she screeched. "I think he's actually dead!" she shrieked, covering her mouth with her hand.

The audience collectively gasped. The curtain was drawn with clumsy haste, brushing Stephano's lifeless form.



Jasper Forth sprinted into constable mode. "Someone ring the station house!" he shouted to an usher as he jogged down the aisle, ignoring Hyacinth's swooning comments about his take-charge stance.

"I am going to ask everyone to remain calm," he said, addressing the audience. "I'm Detective Constable Jasper Forth, and I'm instructing you to sit as calmly and quietly as you can. We may have some questions for you."

"I paid for a show!" a man whined from the back.

"And you have had more than a show," Jasper explained. He looked out over the house, a colorful collage of people from all stations, melded together for a palpitating and finite moment. "If anyone here feels they may have some information that will lead to the discovery of the perpetrator of this murderous act, I would beseech you to come forward. Otherwise, I believe it would be prudent for you to stay in your seats." A few shuffles and whispers wafted over the crowd. Jasper turned and raised his voice over the rim of the footlights. "The performers, I trust, will refrain from returning to the upstairs dressing rooms and will please await my further instructions onstage or in the back of the theatre."

Moments later, each curtain—from the ornamented grand drape through the tormentors and teasers—lifted like a hastily peeled onion until only the backdrop remained. The players all moved to the wings.

“It was one of the Tansy girls,” a patron whispered from behind Jasper. “Probably a love affair. It’s always a love affair.”

Jasper turned and settled his eyes on the woman a moment before turning back to the empty stage, calculating his next move.

Far back in the house, Ray sashayed from a patron to an usher to a properties master in a sort of uncoordinated dance, his notebook and pen in furious choreography as he attempted to record every moment, movement, thought, and action.

“At once an act and murder,” he mused to himself in his native language before adding in English, “if only Merinda were here.”

ACT 2

In which two trouser-clad lady detectives are introduced to a world of magic, disguise, romance, and general mayhem.

SCENE 1

Outside the theatre and unaware of the commotion inside, two women on the wrong side of twenty-five were silhouetted by the lights of Victoria Street. The wet pavement slightly glistened due to a recent rain-fall and caught the wink of the marquees of the grand Elgin and Winter Garden theatres. The weight of the taller woman's light frame leaned jauntily on a walking stick, an accessory to her long coat, trousers, brogans, and bowler hat. Her companion was dressed in similar fashion, though she was decidedly more womanlike even in her male garb.

Merinda Herringford and Jemima DeLuca, née Watts, often at the mercy of the darkness and the Morality Squad, were enjoying a slight reprieve and had been since they returned from a high profile case in Chicago. They stood catching their breath and calculating their next move in the process of returning a family heirloom to a family in St. John's Ward.

"Cracker jacks! Can't get two steps in the Ward these days without Montague's hounds on our heels." Merinda kicked at the tarmac and the toe of her shoe smudged a soggy newspaper.

SPECIAL EDITION
ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT
ON CAMPAIGN TRAIL IN MILWAUKEE

Merinda smacked at it emphatically with her walking stick, drawing Jem's attention. "We saved his life only to have him throw it away!" Merinda exclaimed. For they had recently stopped an anarchist bomb attempt on the presidential candidate at the Chicago Coliseum, a case since documented as *A Lesson in Love and Murder*.

"He didn't throw it away," said Jem reasonably. "He was attacked."
"Humph."

By way of placating her friend, Jem added, "And this time he didn't have us to help him."

The smile beginning to stretch Merinda's face disappeared as a figure shuffled in the shadows.

Merinda swiveled around, raising her walking stick in anticipation of a predator. Instead, she faced an older man with a nondescript hat over stringy black-gray curls, a haggard face with lines etched from sorrow rather than laughter, and intelligent ebony eyes that sparkled, compensating for the damp, dark evening around them.

"Good evening," Jem said politely as the man came nearer.

Merinda noticed a fiddle and bow dangling from his hand. "You play?"

"You are those lady detectives," he said, his words thickly coated with a Slavic dialect neither Jem nor Merinda could place.

"Yes." Merinda raised her chin slightly with pride at the recognition.

"I was playing inside as part of the show." He scratched at his chin with his free hand. "Though we never did get to my bit of the act."

"Why are you out here?" Jem asked.

"Checking on my cart," he said briefly. "But I think you will want to go inside."

"Why is that?" asked Merinda, scraping her stick over the pavement.

"Murder," the gap-toothed man said. "Murder," he repeated. "Stephano. Murder."

Merinda's eyes lit up.

"The Great Stephano!" Jem gasped. "Murdered?"

"The Great what?" Merinda queried.

"Stephano." Jem's voice was a reverent whisper.

"Poison," the fiddler said.

“And you’re off to your cart! Stay here! Wait. The police will—”

But even as she spoke, the fiddler disappeared into the darkness of the alleyway.

Jem shrugged, and then Merinda was tugging her in the direction of a back door.

The double-decker building housing the Elgin and Winter Garden theatres was familiar to both women. For Merinda, it was the scene of their first case as Herringford and Watts, Toronto’s Premiere Female Consulting Detectives. For Jem, it was the setting of a few romantic moments, the memory of which still caused her cheeks to flush and her heartbeat to quicken.

Merinda and Jem dashed through the backstage hallway with the propriety of an elephant stampede, Jem’s upbringing left somewhere in the vicinity of the soggy newspaper outside.

A proper lady would never show the mounting excitement Merinda Herringford did at hearing about a murder by poisoning; but then again, a proper lady would never swing a walking stick to and fro in time with the frenetic energy she found backstage.

“The house is cleared!” a black figure called from above as the pulley lads inspected the drops from an extended bridge overhead, where the lighting master oversaw all lights at the lip of the stage. Jem and Merinda strolled unnoticed as a commotion of actors and clowns and scantily clad women bustled about.

Two medical attendants adjusted a stretcher on which Stephano lay.

“My goodness!” Jem breathed. “The Great Stephano.”

“Stephano...” Merinda repeated, waiting for a surname.

“Just Stephano,” Jem sighed. “When you’re that wonderful, you only need one name. I’ve read all about him in magazines!”

Jem listed his many magnanimous attributes, most of which centered on his fine aquiline profile, ebony skin, and brilliant white teeth.

“You know my uncle was into this Shakespeare nonsense.” Merinda couldn’t take another one of Jem’s flowery descriptives. “It’s why the trunk in my attic is so chock-full of nifty disguises.”

“I thought you’d love Shakespeare,” Jem said, pressing them further into the throng. “Women dress as men all the time.”

Merinda mumbled something distractedly, her eyes flitting around the scene with their usual impatience.

They skimmed the action: a juggler in the corner, a mime stretching the kinks out of his back, a woman with a lifelike dummy draped over a metal chair.

“Look,” Jem said, nudging Merinda. “Mouse is here.”

Merinda had long had her own brand of Baker Street Irregulars. Kat and Mouse had proved themselves invaluable to Merinda on more than one occasion. The latter was now currently in the wings, perched on the side of a props table and swinging skinned knees over the side.

Mouse, gnawing on an apple core, seemed unfazed by the hubbub around her. Merinda instinctively looked for Kat, knowing that where one was, the other was sure to soon follow.

“Miss Herringford!” Mouse said through a mouthful of apple. “Mrs. DeLuca!”

“For heaven’s sake, Mouse, what are you doing here?”

“I’m making an honest dollar.”

“How?” Merinda cocked her head.

“I help with the props.”

Merinda took the final two steps separating them and leaned close to the girl. “What happened?”

“Stephano was poisoned.”

“Purposely?” Jem asked. “Real poison?”

Mouse shrugged. “That’s what this hullabaloo is all about.”

“How?”

“The vial of water he drinks in his Romeo scene was poisoned.”

“And you were working props?” Jem’s eyes widened. “Did you see something?”

“Nothing. I helped lay them out. At one point the table was knocked over by Muffin.”

“Who is Muffin?”

“The dog.”

As if on cue, Jem and Merinda heard a nearby bark.

“So you say the dog knocked over the table. Someone may have had

a chance to switch out the vial. Or pour poison. I assume it's rather dark back here during the performance?"

"Yes, but—"

Mouse's explanation was cut short by a tenor voice Merinda knew as well as her own.

"*What* are you two doing here?"

Jasper had apparently noticed Jem and Merinda by the table with Mouse. He gave them a look that was a cross between a scowl and surprise. Then he walked toward them.

Merinda looked pointedly at the vial in his hand. "Solving a murder." She locked eyes with the constable. "They sure rang the police fast!"

Jem watched a clown walk by. Merinda's eyes wandered to the gleam of a knife swinging at the clown's hip. *Knives*, she mentally corrected a moment later when she noticed two others hoisted like a bouquet in his other hand.

"How did you get in here?" Jasper asked, edging around the clown.

"Careful, he has sharp objects!" Merinda cautioned.

"I doubt they're actually sharp."

"Why are you here?"

"Why are *you* here?"

Their shoulders brushed with familiar camaraderie. Jasper, of course, aware of the heat that crept through him at the most innocent touch, and Merinda oblivious, her cat eyes following the clown with the knives.

"A fiddler told us about a murder." Merinda snapped her eyes back to Jasper. At once she noticed that he was not in uniform, but rather his Sunday best. Jasper sported no more than three looks: his uniform, his lab coat for the smelly chemistry experiments that often found the duo in the university lab of a Saturday, and a few attempts at modern fashion with pinstripes, boat shoes, and straw hats that never seemed to suit him the way his uniform did. His shoes, often slightly scuffed, were tonight so shiny that the gaslights of the backstage labyrinth gleamed in them. "Jasper Forth." Merinda smiled delightedly. "Are you here for an evening out?"

He coughed and adjusted his collar. "Well, yes...I mean...I was here to escort a young lady, a friend of my mother's who is..."

"Jasper, are you *courting* a girl?" Merinda jested, surprised that this piece of information rivaled the excitement of the crime that had lured her inside the theatre in the first place.

"I am..." Evidence of Jasper's embarrassment crept up his ears. "Now, see here, Merinda, there is a murder here, and...are you going to keep staring at me?"

"I am amused." She shrugged her shoulders. "So what should Jem and I do? We were in pursuit of a missing heirloom, but Montague's henchmen are swarming the streets like bees!" She smiled at the extinguished footlights. "It's safe as houses in here, even with that poisoned vial."

"Nothing. There is nothing you can do. Go home, Merinda."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Jasper Forth, you need us! Are you going to question all these people and the audience on your own?"

"I rang the station. We'll soon have plenty of officers to assist."

"Is that the vial?" Jem asked.

He nodded. He took his forefinger, dipped it into the liquid, and then lifted it to his tongue.

"Jasper!" Merinda's eyes rounded. "Be careful!"

"You and I both know that the miniscule amount I am applying to my tongue would at worst do little but give me a headache and a sour taste." He flashed her a fond smile. "But I am touched by your concern."

Merinda opened her mouth to counter him just as Muffin darted across the stage with a blur of skirts and high-heeled boots in pursuit.

"Watch out! Watch out!" A girl in with long eyelashes and rouged lips chased the dog. At her final approach, Muffin snapped his jaws.

Jasper dashed over. "Are you hurt, miss?"

"Christina! Step away from Muffin."

Jasper stepped back beside Merinda and lowered his lips to her ear. "Timmy Tune, Muffin's handler and co-performer."

"You've set him off!" Tune was frustrated.

"He's an ill-behaved beast, that's what!" Christina retorted. "His actions have little to do with me and you know it."

Timmy Tune snarled, and the handle of his moustache twitched. “It is you!”

“Maybe you don’t have control of this...this animal! He ran out on stage too many times tonight. The director will see your act pulled.”

Timmy Tune cursed.

They continued on a moment, Muffin finally docile enough to whimper and then sit, watching them.

“What a fascinating world this is,” Merinda mused sardonically.

“Mouse said the dog knocked over the props table,” Jem explained. “Perhaps that gave the murderer a chance to tamper with the vial.”

“Mouse is here?” Jasper looked around.

“Earning an honest dollar.” The girl materialized as if on cue.

“Hmm,” said Jasper.



Being of medium height and insignificant stature, not to mention of a dark complexion that complemented his black eyes and hair, Ray DeLuca had the uncanny ability of seeming to be nowhere and everywhere at once, not unlike the magician Sangiovese. After searching out every last usher, vendor, and ticket collector and then scribbling down their answers to his questions, he returned from a survey of the staircases and foyer into the auditorium to find the police focused on the patrons. Ray took the opportunity to mount the side steps leading to the stage, pull back the russet-colored drape, and slide behind it.

The backstage commotion had a far more tangible tension than the murmurs and buzzes in the auditorium beyond. Ray almost tripped over a clown, and his shoe narrowly missed being caught by the teeth of the excited Rottweiler, who was still sporting his ridiculous accordion collar from the earlier act.

Ray’s eyes were looking over the performers, all still clad in their costumes, when they settled on two familiar figures in trousers and brogans. While one kept her bowler hat over her blond curls, the other’s hat was held in a hand at her side, and chestnut waves fell down her back.

Ray took the stage in two strides “I thought you were going to the pictures!” he seethed.

“Hello there, Ray.” Jasper appeared from the shadows with a smile. “Ha! The pictures! Have Jem and Merinda ever gone to the pictures when they say they are going to the pictures?”

“I always have high hopes,” Ray said sourly.

When his wife turned and looked up at him with blue eyes round and glistening, Ray almost smiled. When her friend punched him in the arm with a playful, “DeLuca! This is grand, isn’t it?” any trace of said smile faded away.

“The pictures, Jemima? This hardly looks like the pictures!”

“We went to the pictures,” Jem explained innocently. “We just took a detour on the way home.”

“A detour?”

“Through the Ward in pursuit of a missing necklace,” Jem explained sheepishly.

“Good thing we crossed Victoria Street!” Merinda’s voice was buoyant. “We were just happening by, and here we are in the midst of the excitement!”

“Have you ever heard the expression about too many cooks spoiling the broth?” Ray gave her a dark look.

“Oh, posh, DeLuca! We have them cornered. We will wring out the culprit.”

“Were you at the performance tonight, Ray?” Jasper asked.

“I was. Forgive me for sparing myself the incessant questions of your men. I wanted to see if I could get a few more interviews.”

“I didn’t know you were to be reviewing this piece,” Jem said.

“I didn’t know you weren’t at the pictures,” Ray retorted. Then he looked at Jasper. “Skip McCoy was supposed to write this up, but he is ill. I stepped in.”

Jasper nodded. “Well, I officially eliminate you as a suspect.”

“Much obliged.” Ray gave a slight bow.

“All right!” Jasper clapped his hands. He looked at Jem and Merinda.

“As you two seem set on staying, I’d rather have us act together in an orderly fashion to ensure this crime is thoroughly solved and the culprit brought to justice.” His blue eyes moved from Merinda to Jem and to Ray and then back again. “Jem and Ray, start talking to everyone under the guise of being with the press.”

“Me?” Jem queried.

“You’re his assistant,” Jasper declared. “Merinda and I will search the dressing rooms.”

At that moment, Muffin began barking and circling the side of the stage.

“Rummy dog!” spat Merinda.

“He certainly doesn’t seem to be himself this evening.” Jasper chewed his lip. “If he is always this skittish, they wouldn’t have him as part of the act.”

“I thought his behavior *was* part of the act,” Ray said.

“It might be important,” Jem suggested.

“Maybe he’s the criminal,” Ray joshed, earning a punch in the arm from Merinda.



Jasper led Merinda in the direction of the dressing rooms, but before they could reach the stairs, they were overtaken by one of the Tansy Twins.

“I hate that dog!” Christina Tansy narrowed her eyes at him. More docile now, he sat on his hind legs and watched her, pawing at her skirt.

“Don’t leave the theatre, Miss Tansy,” Jasper instructed. “We will want to speak to you in an official capacity.”

Christina batted her eyes at him. “As you’re an officer of the law, I can hardly disobey.” Her eyes rounded at Merinda. “Who’s she?”

“Another officer of the law,” Merinda said glibly, turning away from her.

“You are *not* an officer of the law,” Jasper reprimanded as they mounted the staircase.

“Of course I am.”

They found two communal dressing rooms. One for the men, and one for the women. It was easy to spot which areas belonged to which performer. Schmendrick the Clown had a trunk full of wigs, oranges, and rubber knives, while Sangiovese's trunk of magical things was locked to hide the secrets of his trade.

(Readers familiar with Merinda's misadventures in mystery and mayhem will remember that her walking stick doubled as a crow bar, and she put its alternate function to use happily.)

They found little in the trunk other than money, a few dice, a dead bird that Jasper scowled at, and a deck of ribald playing cards that Merinda laughed at before Jasper could cover her eyes.

They methodically went through both dressing rooms—chest upon chest and coat pocket upon coat pocket. Though Jasper and Merinda found very little to ponder over, they had a far more intimate understanding at the mystery behind the vaudeville curtain than either had had before. It wasn't until they reached Christina's trunk that they found something of interest.

The exterior of the monogrammed chest bore markers and advertisements of the many acts she and her sister, Emily, had performed in America and beyond. Jasper spared Merinda her crowbar (though it was poised at the ready), clicked the latch, and opened it, revealing all manner of perfectly ordered lace and pressed roses, negligees, and a few magazines. Something shiny caught his eye, and he gently rearranged a few undergarments (with a dose of blushing rivalling his reaction to Sangiovese's playing cards) to discover a tin of rat poison which had, from the small flicks of powder around its rim in contrast with the otherwise tidy state of Christina's chest, been used quite recently.

"Is that what you tasted on your finger earlier?" Merinda breathed. Jasper nodded sombrely. "We have our murder weapon."