

ONE

London 1885

Hector Crumhall, known to his legions of enemies and even his few friends as Devil Wix, sauntered up the alley as if he owned every cobblestone and sooty brick. He stepped over the runnel of filth that ran down the middle, touching the brim of his bowler in a mocking salute to Annie Fowler who was seated in the doorway of her house. Two of her girls, torn robes barely covering their shoulders, lounged at an upstairs window with a tin cup on the sill between them.

‘Good afternoon to you, ladies,’ Devil called.

Annie took her pipe out of her mouth, cleared her throat and spat.

A pair of urchins emerged from the shelter of some crates that had once held fish from the market. They came at Devil with their hands out, driven by desperation rather than any hope that he might drop them a coin.

‘Mister?’ the bigger one wheedled. They were poised to run in case he lashed out.

Devil stopped. Except for the two brats the only onlookers were Annie and the listless drabs, but he was unable to resist any audience for a trick. He slid two fingers into a waistcoat pocket, displacing the watch chain with his thumb. There was no timepiece on the end of the chain, but who was to know

such a detail? He slipped out a bright penny and flicked it into the air. The boys' heads jerked as they followed its ascent and descent, and they sighed when Devil's fist closed on it. He repeated the flick and catch a second time, and then a third, and the fourth time the boys' heads hardly moved. But Devil's fist didn't close again. Instead he spread his palm and gazed into the air as if searching for the penny. The boys gaped and spun on their heels, straining to hear the coin's clink, hunched in their anxiety to pounce on it. No clatter or roll sounded. Thin air had seemingly eaten the penny.

Devil frowned, raising his arm to cuff the nearest boy for losing his coin. The child scuttled off and Devil caught the ear of his slower companion. The boy immediately twisted and yelled at the top of his voice, 'Lemme go, I done nothing.'

Devil groped behind the other ear and produced a red apple. Mouth open, the boy squirmed free and snatched at the fruit but Devil held it just out of his reach. Shaking his head in reproach he bit luxuriously into it. The boy groaned and the girls jeered from their window. Devil continued his interrupted stroll up the alley, chewing with relish and smiling at the thin shaft of sunlight that slid between the overhanging eaves.

The street into which he emerged was hardly wider than its tributary alley but there were more people here. Men leaned against the house walls, dirty-faced children played with pebbles and sticks in the gutters, a couple of shawled women murmured at the steps. The cats' meat man, a familiar figure, trundled his wheeled cart round the corner. Announcing itself with a pungent reek, his merchandise was condemned meat and chunks of ripe offal. It was intended for animals, but there were plenty of housewives in this neighbourhood who were glad to buy a little piece to boil up with half an onion and a handful of potato peelings to make a dinner for a hungry family.

Tossing away the apple core Devil stuck his hands into his pockets and passed on by. The intermediate street led in turn to a much wider thoroughfare. Here there were tall black buildings and glass shop frontages with names picked out in

gilt lettering on their fascias. Painted enamel signs advertised tobacco and patent medicines, slate boards chalked with the prices of the day's dinners hung outside working men's eating-houses. It was noisy here with street vendors shouting their wares over the hammering from building sites and the clip of horses' hooves as loaded drays and hansom cabs and a crowded omnibus bound for Oxford Street rolled by. Pedestrians brushed past Devil, some of them glancing at his handsome face.

Let them stare, he always thought. What's worth looking at must be worth seeing.

On the opposite corner of the street stood the Old Cinque Ports, a large public house. He hadn't decided where he was heading today, but wherever it turned out to be would be fine because he felt lucky, and his instincts rarely let him down. In any case there was no hurry. A quick visit to the Ports would be a good way to get business started.

The heavy doors had twin panels of etched glass. Devil leaned on a brass handle and pushed open the door. It was the middle of an autumn afternoon but the lamps in the ornate saloon were blazing, and the bevels of the glass split the bright beams into little rainbows. As it always did, the interior of the pub reminded him of a place of worship. The cavernous ceiling arched overhead, polished brass and carved mahogany fittings glowed, and the altar – or in this case the long, sinuous curve of the bar – was the focus of all attention. The main differences were that it was warm in here and the place attracted a more interesting class of sinner, including numbers of women. One of them swayed towards Devil now. She had broad hips swathed in red sateen and a deep-cut bodice that revealed most of a pair of white breasts so heavily powdered that a pale fog rose off them as she moved. He didn't think he had encountered her before, but she linked her bare arm in his as if they were old friends and guided him with a nudge of the hips towards a pair of stools. Devil had no objection. He liked sitting up here against the bar where he could admire the rows of bright bottles and their reflections in the painted glass, or flick a glance

sideways at the drinkers' profiles ranged on either side to assess them as potential threat or target. The stools were carved to fit a man's rear, and when you parked yourself you felt that there was no finer place on earth to be than beneath the roof of this brewer's temple, and no more promising day in your life than this very one.

'I'll have a gin, duck,' the woman sighed in his ear. She had hopped up on to the stool next to his. Devil rapped on the marble bar top with a florin, and the barman came with a brief nod of greeting. The Old Cinque Ports was a busy place and Devil didn't come here quite often enough for the man to try to use his name, which was how he preferred it. He ordered a glass for the woman and a pint of Bass for himself, and when the drinks came he put hers into her hand.

She had bad teeth which she tried to hide by keeping her lips drawn taut over her smile. Her hair lay thin and brittle over her grey scalp. She was several cuts above Annie Fowler's wretched girls but most likely she lived in one corner of a room somewhere in the rookery from which he had just emerged, and probably struggled to find the shillings even for that. No doubt she had children to feed.

The woman lifted the glass and swallowed an eager gulp of gin. Her eyes met his, acknowledging that it was a hard life.

Devil leaned forward so their faces almost touched, like a kiss about to happen.

'Now, get off with you and leave me alone.'

Her smile died, but she made no attempt to change his mind. She slid wearily from the stool and moved into the throng in search of another mark.

Devil sat back and made a survey of his companions. Several were familiar, none was of interest to him today. Sighing with satisfaction, he drank his beer and lit a cigarette. All was well. All would be well, at least. Coupled with the gift of an optimistic disposition he had the knack of finding contentment in small things. Current circumstances were unpromising, but this was a pleasant interval and he wouldn't spoil it with dismal

thoughts. He might be broke today – indeed, he *was* broke – but that didn't mean that tomorrow would tell the same story. He wasn't like the beggars and thieves who populated the Holborn alleys, immured in poverty and unable to help themselves, nor did he resemble the slightly better-off clerks and drovers and shop workers who gathered under the decorated ceilings of this public house as a break from their menial routines.

He was a man of talents.

Devil had finished his pint and was contemplating the possibility of another when a woman screamed, high and long. This was followed by a burst of shouting and cursing. There were the sounds of a scuffle and breaking glass and Devil idly turned to see two bloodied men in shirtsleeves swinging punches at each other. A woman staggered between them as she tried to haul one out of the fray. There was some jostling for a better view and a few shouts of encouragement from the onlookers, but fights weren't at all uncommon in the Old Cinque Ports. The publican, a muscled fellow with a pugilist's face, was already shouldering his way across the room to break it up. Devil was about to turn his back on the spectacle when he noticed the child. He was sliding between the drinkers, short as a midday shadow, dipping pockets.

The slut in the red dress began hauling at the other woman, shrieking, 'Nellie, Nellie! Stop it now, afore 'e kills the both of you.' Her purse was a leather pouch pinned at her waist and the child had obviously noted that the mouth of it gaped open. With the swirl of the crowd in the path of the approaching publican to his advantage, he pressed close up against the woman and his hand flashed faster than the eye could follow.

He was good, Devil noted.

Amusement, a dart of interest, or perhaps just a sense that he had treated the whore rudely despite having paid for her gin, made him jump from his stool. He leapt through the crowd and caught the boy as he reached the doors. Devil held him by the throat with one hand and grasped his surprisingly sturdy

wrist with the other. The doors swung open and the publican booted the brawlers out into the street, followed by the handful of onlookers who wanted to jeer the fight to its end. Devil and his writhing captive stumbled out amongst them and Devil whipped off the child's cloth cap so he could get a good look at his face. He stared in astonishment at the glare that met his.

The child wasn't a boy at all but a man, his own age. There were furrows at the sides of his mouth and a jaw dark blue with stubble.

A pocket-picking dwarf. That was a fine thing.

The little man cocked an eyebrow.

'I've seen you in the halls. You're Devil Wix.'

He frowned. 'Mr Wix to you. How much did you get?' The dwarf tried to look offended but Devil snatched him off his feet and shook him until his pockets rattled. 'How much?'

The feet in miniature boots swung viciously. Devil's interest quickened. This was a lively little pickpocket.

'Put me down.'

'Give me the money you nabbed.'

'Why should I? It's not yours, is it? Unless she's working for you.'

'Do I look like a pimp?'

The dwarf put his head back, pretended to consider the question, and then shrugged. Devil almost laughed.

The combatants had exhausted their antagonism. One slumped on a doorstep and mopped his face with a rag. The other spat out blood and broken teeth while his whore clung to his arm and wailed. The woman in red stuck her fingers into her open purse and her mouth fell open in dismay. Devil and his captive were beginning to attract attention so he lowered the dwarf to the ground and roughly explored the small pockets with his free hand. He found a few coins – two shilling pieces, a threepenny bit and four pennies. He held out this haul to the drab and her mouth snapped shut again.

'Don't throw your money away,' he advised pleasantly. She took the coins from him with a blink. Dragging his miniature

companion by the arm, Devil marched out of the circle and made for the nearest corner. Another hundred yards brought them to a cabmen's halt where a sign in the smeary window read: *'Try our champion 4d. dinners'*.

'I feel like I've got a hole in me. Let's eat,' he said.

'Got no money. You just stole it,' the dwarf snarled.

'I'll play you for a dinner,' Devil offered and the little man suddenly grinned, showing pointed teeth that made him look like a wolf backing into the undergrowth.

'Right then,' he agreed.

Inside the eating-house damp steam scented with boiled meat and potatoes rose around them and Devil sniffed appreciatively. A score of hungry cabmen clattered and guffawed as they shovelled up their dinners.

They took their seats at a table towards the back. The dwarf was perhaps three feet tall. He hauled himself into place with muscular arms and then settled on his haunches to bring his chin to the right height at the tabletop. He pushed his cap to the back of his head and Devil took a good look at him. His long-chinned but well-shaped face looked too large to be perched on his stunted body but his expression was alert and his hands were quite clean and cared for. He was no vagrant.

'Cards or cups?' he asked Devil, who only waved a hand to indicate indifference.

The dwarf took three tin cups out of an inner pocket and with a flourish placed a pea under the middle one. Devil was already bored. The dwarf shuffled the cups, elaborately feinting, and as soon as he sat back Devil pointed. The movements had been practised enough, but not so quick that he couldn't follow them. He knew exactly where the pea was, and when the dwarf flipped the cup he wasn't surprised to be proved right.

'You pay,' he yawned.

Slyly his companion lifted the second cup and then the third, and there were peas under those too. Devil grinned back at him. The little man had a sense of humour, and his touch wasn't bad.

‘All right, my friend. You get a fourpenny dinner for your efforts.’

The cups and peas were tucked away and the dwarf rubbed his hands.

‘Are you going to tell me your name, since it seems you know mine already?’

‘You can call me Carlo.’ The dwarf didn’t sound as if he came from London, but neither did he sound as if this exotic label properly belonged to him. He was from the north of England, Devil guessed, although he was hazy about the geography of anywhere that lay beyond Bedford.

‘What kind of name is that?’

‘The one I have chosen,’ his new acquaintance snapped.

A pimply boy leaned over and slapped down cutlery, and at a sign from Devil followed it up with two swimming plates of mutton stew and mash.

‘Or is it a half serving for you?’ this person sneered at Carlo, making to scoop one plate away again. ‘It’s only tuppence for littl’uns.’

‘You put that down,’ Devil ordered. ‘And keep a civil tongue for customers.’

Devil and Carlo ate eagerly. The dwarf dispatched his plateful so quickly that he must have been ravenous.

‘Now,’ Devil said when Carlo belched and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘What’s your story, Carlo from Manchester, or wherever it is and whoever you are? What brings you to London with your quick fingers? Richer pickings down here, is it?’

‘None of your business.’

‘I believe it’s at least fourpenn’orth of my business now.’

Carlo pursed his lips. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and unwrapped a toothpick from the folds. Applying this instrument to his teeth, he seemed to weigh Devil’s desire for information against his own requirements.

‘Morris’s Amazing Performing Midgets,’ he said at length.

‘Eh?’

‘I said . . .’

‘I heard. I’m asking you to elaborate.’

Carlo sighed with impatience, as if he could hardly believe that Devil wasn’t already familiar with the Midgets’ reputation.

‘You should know. I know you, and you’re not even first-rate.’ He pronounced it *foost*. Devil said nothing, amused by the dwarf’s high opinion of himself. ‘High-class act, it was. We didn’t just play the penny gaffs, although I’m not saying there wasn’t times when we were glad to. But we were booked in the better halls, and some private entertainments. We did song and dance, of course, and Sallie had a little piano and a miniature harp, very popular that was, especially with the ladies. Sam and me did a juggling turn, a set of acrobatics, well rehearsed, top-notch costumes. But the meat and taters of the act was magic. Cards, coins, handkerchers. Miniature. And we ended it all up with a nice box trick. *Very nice*. All my own work, that was.’

The little man delivered the last snippet of information in a theatrical whisper, tufty eyebrows drawn together, his sharp eyes peering up at Devil. And as he must have known they would, his words made Devil sit up and pay attention.

‘All your own work?’ he repeated. ‘Inventor, are you?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, well.’

Devil snapped his fingers at the serving boy who carried away the empty plates and brought them pint mugs of tea. Devil blew on his and took a swallow.

‘Was, you said. *Was* a high-class act?’

‘Nowt wrong with your ears.’

Devil reflected. He had heard on the circuit or perhaps read in the trades of a northern touring troupe of midgets. The name that suddenly came to him in this connection was Little Charlie Morris.

‘Charlie Morris, that’s who you are. What’s the business with *Carlo*?’

The dwarf sucked at his teeth to extract the last remnants of food and folded away the toothpick.

‘New start.’

‘I see.’ Devil understood that well enough. ‘What about your sister and her husband?’

He was almost sure, as fragmentary recollections came together, that Charlie or Carlo’s fellow performers had been these two members of his family.

The dwarf’s face flooded with such real sadness that Devil was sure it wasn’t part of an act, nor any attempt at gathering sympathy for mercenary reasons, but the base note of his being.

‘They passed away last year, within a week of each other.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Carlo jerked his head. He added, ‘In-flu-en-za,’ tapping the syllables between his teeth with such finality that Devil didn’t want to upset him by fishing for any further information. But naming the illness seemed to unlock the dwarf’s tongue.

‘My father was like me, my ma’s one of you although she’s no giant. Of us four children there’s two big ’uns and then my sister Sallie and me, and we two always knew we’d have to take care of ourselves because of being small. My dad was a singer in the taphouses. Used to stand him on the counter, they did, and he’d do a ballad and play the piccolo and pass his hat round.

‘Our two brothers went in for mill work but for us littl’uns the best we could have got was being sent to crawl under the looms to collect the waste, and our ma wouldn’t have that. So we were going to join our dad with the act. Make all our fortunes, he said. He trained us up and made us practise the routines, and when we didn’t work hard enough he’d thrash our hides raw with his belt. Poor old Sal used to howl. She was glad to marry her Sam to get away from home. Sam came from Oldham. Just him in the family was small, so it was lonely for him. He was sweet on Sal the minute he saw her. They’d been wed a year when our dad fell off the stage one night when he was corned and hit his head. He didn’t last long after that. I had Sam into the act gladly enough, even though he didn’t have the talent for it. Sal was the one out of the three of us

who had the real stage quality. You should have seen her. Like a shining star her face was, under the lamps.

‘We did all right. Then one night Sam was ill with a fever and she was nursing him, and two days after that she was ill herself. Less than a week went by and they were both gone.’

Carlo drank his tea. His mouth tightened as if he regretted having confided so much.

Devil waited. This story would surely lead to a request for money, a bed for the night, a helping hand of some sort, and he was already wondering precisely how much he would be prepared to do for Carlo Morris if the circumstances happened to be right.

The dwarf added, ‘I can’t be a troupe of one, can I? Can’t work the box trick single-handed for a start.’

‘And so you’ve come down to the big city to look for some work in the halls. Juggling, acrobatics, and the magic, I think you said? Just doing some dipping for the practice, were you?’

Carlo smacked his hand on the table so violently that the mugs rattled.

‘Don’t talk to me like I’m a casual fallen on hard times. I don’t need to look for work. I’ve already got a job. And if I’m hungry today and an open pocket is held out to me in an alehouse, am I going to turn my back on it?’

‘I suppose not,’ Devil agreed. This attitude rather neatly matched his own. ‘You performed well enough. First time you’d tapped a purse, was it?’

This time it was Carlo who shrugged and flexed his strong fingers. He climbed down from the chair and straightened his cap on his head. ‘I’d not see Sallie go hungry. Or our ma for that matter, even though she’d slap me round the head quicker than cook me a dinner. Same with you, I daresay.’

‘I don’t have a sister or a mother. I wouldn’t take trouble for them even if I did.’

Carlo tipped his head to scowl up at Devil.

‘It’s not right to speak of family like that.’

‘I’m obliged to you for the sermon.’

Devil reached in his pocket for eightpence, and gave the money to the pimply youth. They made their way back out into the street. Now he had eaten, Carlo seemed relaxed, almost genial. He tucked his thumbs into his pockets and looked about him. Devil supposed that from his perspective the scenery was mostly composed of hansom wheels and women's backsides.

'I'm going that way,' Carlo pointed. For a miniature man in a strange city he seemed remarkably at ease. 'Why don't you walk along? You can take a look at my new place of work. You'll be interested in that.'

Devil wasn't going anywhere in particular. 'All right.'

They strolled through the crowds in silence imposed by the three-foot difference in height. They crossed a busy road, with Carlo picking his way ahead. He had to gather himself to spring across puddles that Devil stepped over without checking his stride. They skirted the web of alleys where Devil currently lodged and headed south into the yellow-grey murk of a fading afternoon.

'Know where you're going, do you?' He addressed the button on top of the dwarf's cap.

'Do you take me for a fool?'

Devil was still amused. This dwarf was a lively little person.

After a longer interval of walking in silence Carlo led the way out into the Strand. By this time the lamps were lit, each yellow flare wreathing itself in a wan halo of mist. Devil regularly worked in the taverns and supper clubs lining the nearby streets and he had assumed Carlo was heading towards one of these. But the dwarf stopped only when they reached the Strand itself, at a gaunt building on the southern side that Devil had often passed and never troubled to look at. There was not much to be seen anyway because the front was largely obscured by boards, nailed into place with heavy beams to shield passers-by from bricks or chunks of stonework that might fall from the crumbling facade. Tufts of dried brown buddleia sprouted from the cracks in the lintels.

Carlo dipped into the alleyway that sloped along the building's

side. Somewhere further down lay the busy river; the reek of mud drifted up to them. There was a door in the side of the building, the cracked panels just visible in the fading light. The dwarf knocked, waited for a response, and when none came he put his small shoulder to it and pushed it open. The two men stepped into the damp, dark space within.

‘What’s this place?’ Devil asked.

‘You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?’

Devil grabbed his collar. ‘Someone of your size might take more trouble to answer them.’

‘Listen,’ Carlo said.

There was music playing. It was tinny, so faint that the trilling was almost swallowed by the clammy air. They shuffled towards the sound and the glow of light spilling from another doorway.

In the centre of a hall that lay beyond, its shadowy depths hardly penetrated by a pair of gas lamps, a couple was dancing. The music was louder and sweeter here. It came from a musical box held in the lap of a solitary spectator, a very fat man in a heavy old coat. A silk scarf was knotted under his sequence of chins. When the mechanism wound down the fat man lifted the box and turned a handle until it started up again, and the couple went on waltzing. All three of them ignored the new arrivals.

Devil studied the dancers. Carlo swung on to a stool to give himself a better view.

The woman was very young, with long glossy hair that fell almost to her narrow waist. Her profile was serene, her lips slightly parted in a faint smile. Her partner was an attentive man of middle age, his face partly shielded by steel-rimmed spectacles. He danced with great concentration, his head bent so close to hers that his lips almost brushed the lustrous hair. The precision of his steps and his protective bearing suggested that she needed guidance in some manoeuvre more complicated or demanding than a waltz before an audience of one. Devil saw that the man’s shoes were rimmed with the mud of London

streets, but the woman's were pale satin and unmarked. She hadn't walked here, or anywhere else, in those slippers.

The music stopped and the fat man turned the handle once again. Devil nodded to himself. The oddness of the scene, the dim light, the abundant hair had all momentarily confused him but now he knew what was happening here. He let his attention slide away.

They were in a derelict little theatre. As his eyes acclimatised he saw that it had been partly burned out. The space where the stage would once have been was a mess of charred wood and fallen beams, and the delicately painted walls of the auditorium had been spoiled with smoke. The ruins of seating had been thrown into the corners, and every surface, except for a circle in the centre that had been roughly swept for the dancers, was layered with soot. Yet even in its decayed state Devil could see that this was a harmonious space. A gallery extended its arms almost to the stage, from which it was separated only by two levels of little boxes with apron fronts that had once been lavishly gilded. The gallery was supported by slim pillars, blackened too but still intact. When he looked upwards he glimpsed the ruins of a once-magnificent plaster ceiling.

The last tinkling notes of the mechanical waltz died away, yet seemed to be still echoing in the intimate sounding-box of the hall.

Devil listened, all his senses heightened as a pulse ticked in his neck. What was this place?

'Thank you, Herr Bayer.' The fat man was barely smothering a yawn.

The dancers stopped but the man's right hand still clasped his partner's, and the fingers of his left rested lightly at her waist. Then he bowed to her and took one step back. As soon as she was released her white arms gracefully descended to her sides. She stood motionless, her eyes glittering. Her faint smile now seemed too fixed.

Devil had seen already that this was not a woman but an automaton.

A well-made thing, but still a thing.

‘She is beautiful, yes?’ Herr Bayer said.

The other shrugged.

Herr Bayer’s voice rose. ‘We have toured in France and Austria as well as in Switzerland. In Berlin we danced for a niece of the Empress.’

The fat man’s chins looked like warm wax melting into his scarf. ‘Tell me, what else does the doll do?’

Herr Bayer recoiled. ‘If you please. Her name is Lucie.’

‘What else does your *Lucie* do?’

Bayer guided her to a seat across the circle from the fat man. She moved in a stately glide, her head turning slightly on her slender neck as if to acknowledge her admirers. He dusted the chair seat with his handkerchief and she folded at the hip and the knee to adopt a sitting position. Bayer lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it.

‘As you see, Lucie stands and sits, walks and dances.’

‘I hear Mr Hoffman has a mechanical creature who plays chess. It will take on any opponent, and it usually wins.’

‘Hoffman’s Geraldo is hardly bigger than a child’s toy.’ Bayer swung on his heel and pointed at Carlo. This was the first acknowledgement from either man of their arrival. ‘And there is a person like *him* concealed in a box just behind its shoulder, directing the movement of the pieces.’

‘Davenport’s latest invention tells fortunes and reads minds.’

‘He uses a clumsy puppet, a scarecrow, hardly more than that. And the act is a common memory game. Pure trickery.’ Bayer almost spat. His Swiss-German accent grew heavier.

The fat man sighed. ‘It is all trickery. This is what we do.’

‘No.’

Bayer leapt to Lucie’s side. He put one arm round her smooth shoulder as if to defend her from insult. ‘This is no trick. She is what she is, a work of art. A miracle of precision, perfect in every movement. Look at her face, her hair, even her clothing.’

Devil strolled across the circle. ‘May I?’ He reached out to stroke Lucie’s head. The hair was human, but it felt lifeless

under his hand. The automaton's dress was lace and silks and velvet, but there was no breathing warmth within its rich folds. The face was exquisitely moulded and painted and utterly unmoving. He stepped back, faintly disgusted by the doll's parody of womanhood.

Bayer said, 'She is lovely, you see? Mr Grady, you will not find a better or more ambitious model to delight your audiences.'

The man smiled but an imploring note had entered his voice. Lucie might be dressed in the latest finery, Devil saw, but her partner's clothes were worn and mended. The man was another itinerant performer, hungrily searching for a paying audience, just like Carlo and – indeed – himself. For a moment Devil was depressed to think how many such hopefuls there were in London, let alone elsewhere, but he didn't allow the anxiety to take hold. *He* would succeed, because he would do anything and everything necessary to ensure that success. And the rest of them could go to hell. He returned to his contemplation of the theatre's lovely ruin.

Grady put aside the musical box and wrote in a notebook.

'Very well. Come back here in two weeks. We'll be ready to open by then. I'll try you out for a few performances, see whether the crowd takes to you.'

Bayer's face brightened. He bowed to Grady and nodded to Carlo and Devil, but his proper attention was for Lucie. He wrapped a shawl round her shoulders and kissed the top of her head before bringing forward a brass-cornered trunk and undoing the clasps. The interior was padded with red plush and shaped to accommodate a female form. Bayer lifted the automaton in his arms and gently folded the doll into captivity. Then he hoisted the locked trunk on to a wheeled frame like a market porter's, bowed again to Grady and took up the handles of the frame.

'*Auf Wiedersehen,*' he said from the doorway as he trundled Lucie away.

No one spoke for a moment. Then the fat man looked at his pocket watch.

‘Let’s get on with it,’ he said to Carlo. ‘What’s your name again?’

‘I told you. Carlo Boldoni,’ the dwarf replied, unblinking. ‘And as I said, direct from performing before the finest drawing-room audiences in Rome. And Paris.’

‘The finest taphouses in Macclesfield and Oldham, more like. Real name?’

‘In our world of magic and illusion what is real, Mr Grady?’

‘Pounds, shillings and pence,’ the fat man snapped, not greatly to Devil’s surprise. Grady looked like a man who would count all three most carefully. What were his plans, and what was the story of this ruined theatre?

Devil considered the possibilities, and the potential for himself, but said nothing.

‘Call yourself whatever you like,’ Grady went on. ‘I haven’t got all day to listen to you. Show me what you’ve got. And who is this?’ He pointed at Devil.

‘He is my assistant.’

Devil opened his mouth and closed it again. There was a time and place.

Carlo hurried into the shadows, then staggered into view once more bearing a pile of boxes and cloths.

‘Here,’ he muttered to Devil. Obliging he unfolded the legs of a small table as Carlo shook out a green cloth covering. On the cloth he placed an opera hat and a wicker birdcage. He stood in front of his table and made a deep bow to Grady, then whipped a silk handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his brow as if the effort of setting up his stall had brought on a sweat.

‘I haven’t got all day,’ the fat man scowled.

Carlo fanned himself with the handkerchief. His expression was so comical that Devil smiled. Then Carlo clapped his hands and the handkerchief vanished.

‘Dear me. Where has that gone? Can you tell me, sir?’

‘No,’ yawned Grady.

‘Then I will show you.’

Carlo produced the handkerchief from his pocket and clapped his hands. Once more it vanished, to be extracted from the pocket again a moment later.

‘You see, sir, how useful this is? Especially for a gentleman like you whose time is so valuable. You have only to take out your handkerchief, and never trouble yourself to put it away again.’

Devil knew how this old trick was done, because it was the first he had learned. But he had to acknowledge that it would have taken plenty of practice as well as natural skill to perform it so adroitly.

‘Continue, please,’ said Grady.

Carlo tipped the hat to show that it was empty but for the smooth lining, then pulled from it a knotted string of coloured silks. He whirled these round his head, drew a pair of scissors from the hat and snipped the silks into bright confetti that drifted to his feet. He scooped these fragments into his tiny fists, balled them up and threw them into the air, where they became whole handkerchiefs again. Devil was impressed. Improvising his role he snatched up the hat, bowed over it to Grady and gestured elaborately to acknowledge Carlo’s mastery. This gave him the opportunity to examine the hat, ingeniously constructed with a double interior.

Carlo lifted the birdcage and his sad, long-chinned face peered through the struts at Grady.

‘I have a sweet trick with the doves but I couldn’t leave my birds here with the rest of my old props, sir, could I? All I have to show you is their pretty cage.’

He wafted his fingers inside to demonstrate its emptiness and latched its door, dropped a cloth over the cage, marched twice around the table and snatched the cloth away again. Inside the cage was a crystal ball. Carlo extracted the ball and peered into the clear interior, rubbing his chin and muttering.

‘What have we here? Ah, this is a vision worth seeing, Mr Grady. We have a packed theatre, ladies and gentlemen applauding until their hands are ready to drop off, a heap of guineas, and

handbills announcing the Great Carlo Boldoni in letters as high as himself.'

Grady stuck out his slab of a hand. Turning a little to one side Carlo blew on the ball and gave it a polish with his sleeve before handing it over. Inside the glass an orange now glowed.

'Doesn't look to me like even one guinea,' Grady scowled.

'You need magician's eyesight, perhaps.' Carlo retrieved his crystal ball, replaced it in the birdcage and covered it once again with the cloth. He settled the hat on his head and began to gather up his boxes. Almost as an afterthought he whipped off the cloth to reveal that the cage was empty once more.

Carlo tipped the comical hat to one side and thoughtfully scratched his cranium. Then he darted over to Grady, dipped a hand into the man's coat pocket and brought out the orange. From the opposite pocket came a knife.

'You look hungry,' he said, slicing the orange into neat quarters and offering it to Grady.

'Can't you do a beefsteak?' was the reply.

'Not for a farthing less than five shillings a show.'

Grady gave a sour laugh. 'For you and Her Majesty singing a duet, will that be?'

Carlo sucked one of the orange slices.

'I have plenty more tricks. And some new ones, all my own, never performed on stage. You need Carlo Boldoni for your theatre opening, Mr Grady. What do you say?'

Devil returned to studying the graceful pillars and the sinuous curve of the gallery. He longed for a brighter light so he could see more.

Grady puffed. 'I'll think about it. You heard what I said to the fellow with the doll. The Palmyra will be ready to open in two weeks.' He gestured to the gallery. 'Go right through it, we will, get rid of all this old rubbish. Make it look like something.'

'The Palmyra?' Devil interrupted.

No, he was thinking. *You won't destroy this place and turn it into some penny gaff for vulgar music hall, not if I have anything to do with it.*

Grady ignored him. To Carlo he said, ‘Your assistant doesn’t do a lot to earn his keep, does he? It was named the Palmyra, yes. That’s a town in Arabia, you know. Something like Babylon. What a name, eh? What’s wrong with the Gaiety, or the Palace of Varieties, a label with a bit of a promise in it? Built sixty years ago as a concert hall, it was. Never did any business, though, and the debts piled up until the poor devil who owned it went under. He died or he topped himself, one or the other, and there were decades of family disputes after that. In the end all the money went to chancery and they had to sell up.’

Grady tapped the side of his nose and Devil almost laughed out loud. The man was absurd. ‘The price was keen, I can tell you. Shall we just say that Jacko Grady is now the proud possessor? And under his management the old Palmyra will be the finest music hall in London.’

‘Don’t change the name,’ Devil said.

‘What?’

‘If I’d been clever enough to buy an opportunity like this, I’d keep the name. It’s different. It’s got class. More than you could say for the Gaiety.’

‘If I want your opinion I’ll ask for it. Which is about as likely as our friend here hitting his head on the Euston Arch.’ The fat man wheezed with pleasure at himself. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘I am Devil Wix.’

The dwarf hovered in Devil’s line of sight, gesturing to him to shut up.

‘Is that supposed to mean something to me?’

‘Why not? You are an impresario and I am a stage magician.’

Carlo gestured more urgently. Jacko Grady displayed no sign of interest and Devil thought, *Six months. That’s about as long as you’ll last as the manager of your Palmyra. Money is the only thing that interests you.*

Devil strolled to Carlo’s table and picked up the opera hat. He showed the empty interior to Grady, made a pass and

extracted the dwarf's scissors from their concealed place. Then he reached into his coat pocket and took out his own forcing pack of cards. He flexed his fingers, expertly shuffling so the cards danced and poured through his hands. He fanned them and offered the pack to Grady.

'Any card. Memorise it and put it back.'

Grady yawned again, but did so. Devil shuffled again and then spun in a tight circle. He flung the cards in the air, brandished Carlo's scissors and snipped clean through a card as it fell. Then he dropped to his knees and retrieved the cut halves. He held them up.

'Ten of diamonds?'

Grady nodded. Devil gathered up the fallen cards and placed the cut card in the middle. He shuffled once more and held out the fanned pack. Grady's thick forefinger hesitated, withdrew, hovered and then pointed. The card he chose was the ten of diamonds, made whole again.

The only sound that greeted this was Grady's chair creaking under his weight.

Devil coaxed him, 'We have some time between other engagements, Mr Boldoni and I. Try us out, Mr Grady, and we'll put our new box trick on for your customers before anyone else in England sees it.'

Carlo's signals grew more imperative but he held still as soon as Grady turned his glare on them.

'What's this new box trick?'

Devil improvised rapidly. 'Ah, the Sphinx and the Pyramid? Mystery, comedy and Arabian glamour all in one playlet. Don't tell me that's not made for the Palmyra. There's a lot of interest from other theatres. You'll regret it if you let another management snitch us from under your very nose . . .'

Grady still spoke to Carlo. 'All right. If I don't see anyone better in the meantime I'll put your act on when we open. Half a crown a performance, and you'll play when I tell you to whether it suits you or not. That's for you and your assistant, Satan or whatever he calls himself.'

Carlo ran forward and stood in front of Grady's chair, legs apart and fists on his hips.

'Five bob.'

Grady spat out a laugh that turned into a phlegmy cough. Carlo's face turned livid with anger.

'I said five bob. I won't do it for less.'

Grady finished his coughing into a handkerchief and wiped his face. 'Then don't do it at all. It's no trouble to me, I assure you.'

Devil smoothly interposed himself, dropping a reassuring hand on Carlo's shoulder.

'I am Mr Baldano's manager as well as his assistant.'

'I thought he said Boldoni.'

'... And we are prepared to work for half a crown a show, with just one small stipulation.'

'What might that be?'

'For every show we appear in that plays to more than eighty per cent capacity, Boldoni and Wix take a percentage of the box office.'

'What percentage?'

Devil hastily ran figures through his head. Bargaining against calculations of this sort had previously only taken place in his wilder fantasies, but his fertile imagination meant that was fully prepared.

'Ten.'

Jacko Grady looked cunning. Clearly he thought that the likelihood of playing regularly to houses more than eighty per cent full, against all the competition from taverns and music halls in the nearby streets, was sufficiently remote as not to be worrisome.

'All right.'

Carlo and Wix presented their hands and the fat man ungraciously shook.

'I'll bring a paper for you to sign. Just to be businesslike,' Devil said. Grady only swore and told them to get out of his sight.

Darkness had fallen. Carlo and Devil stood with Carlo's stage props and boxes in their arms as the tides of vehicles and pedestrians swept past along the Strand.

Carlo was boiling with fury. Devil thought the dwarf might be about to kick him and he tried not to laugh out loud.

The dwarf spluttered, 'The Sphinx and the Pyramid? What blooming rubbish. What's Grady going to say? We haven't got any Arabian box trick.'

'Then we'd better get one. You talk about your new trick, all your own work. We can dress that up, whatever it is, with a few frills. We'll start tomorrow. Where's your workshop?'

'I haven't got a damned workshop. You had to buy me my dinner. I haven't even got anywhere to sleep tonight.'

Devil looked down at him. The dwarf was defiant.

'You told me you had a job already, starting tomorrow?'

'I knew I'd have one, once I'd shown him what I can do. I'm good. I'm the *best*. Compared with Carlo Boldoni you are just a tradesman.'

It was true. The Crystal Ball and the Orange had been something special, even though Jacko Grady was too stupid and too venal to have appreciated it.

'So I'll be your apprentice, as well as your manager.'

'Boldoni and bloody Wix? What d'you mean by that? And all the gammon about ten per cent of nothing, which is nothing? I want five bob to go onstage. I don't need you to manage me, thank you kindly.'

A lady and gentleman were lingering to watch the comedy of a dwarf squaring up to a full-grown man.

Devil stooped to bring his face closer to Carlo's. He said gently, 'You do need me. And you will have to trust me because I am putting my trust in you. That is how we shall have to do business from now on, my friend.'

'I am not your friend, nor are you mine,' the dwarf retorted.

Devil good-humouredly persisted. 'I've also got a roof over my head, even though it's not Buckingham Palace. You can come back there with me now. I've got bread and cheese, we'll

have a glass or two of stout, and we can start work on the box trick in the morning.'

Carlo's fury faded. Devil could see that under his bravado the little man was exhausted, and had battled alone for long enough.

'Come on,' he coaxed.

Carlo said nothing. But after a moment he hoisted his boxes and began to trudge northwards, at Devil's side.

Later that night Devil sat at the three-legged table in the corner of his attic room, an empty ale mug at his elbow. Apart from chests and boxes of props the only other furniture was a cupboard, two chairs, his bed and a row of wooden pegs for his clothes. It was cold and not too clean, but by the standards of this corner of London it wasn't a bad lodging. The landlady was inclined to favour Devil, and he took full advantage of her partiality.

Devil was watching the dwarf as he slept, rolled up on the floor in a blanket with one of his prop bags for a pillow. He twitched like a dog in his dreams.

Devil wasn't ready for sleep. He thought long and hard, tapping his thumbnail against his teeth as his mind worked.