

The Wisdom of Amateurs

– featuring Libby Seale –

by M.J. Zellnik

Libby Seale was no expert, but she was fairly sure Ancient Greek ladies hadn't worn corsets. She was standing in the wings of Crowther's Portland Variety watching the Dancing Whirlwinds perform their Sabine Women Ballet. And, other than some scarves draped toga-like over their shoulders, the dancers' attire could have come straight out of the 1894 Sears-Roebuck catalog. Libby had been living in Portland, Oregon for only a month now, and she couldn't help but notice that the people out here were of a rougher sort than she had grown up with in New York. Friendly, yes, but less educated and less cultured, too. Immediately she chided herself for the thought. She really shouldn't look down on her new neighbors and colleagues – she had only begun her job as temporary-assistant-costume-mistress at the Variety two weeks before, and she was lucky to have the position.

On the stage, the number was reaching its climax and that meant it was time for Libby to stop standing around and get to work. She needed to be waiting in their dressing room when the ballet finished. One part of her duties was helping The Dancing Whirlwinds change costumes for their next number (a tribute to the Autumn Harvest.) They were the resident ensemble here at the Variety, the only performers who were permanent employees. All the other acts were booked in for a run of a week or two, no more. They were a colorful lot – a singer, some acrobats, a stuffy elocutionist, and a child

contortionist with the misleading sobriquet Little Melodie – but most were friendly enough to a theatrical newcomer like herself. Libby was still getting to know all of them by name. Still, as she moved upstage, carefully avoiding numerous props and set pieces, she noticed a face she was sure didn't belong.

In one of the wings stood a boy in his early teens, dressed in street clothes. His face glowed in the golden light that spilled from the stage, revealing a look of rapt fascination as he watched the pretty girls frolic in their flimsy silk scarves. The look of frustrated longing in his eyes took her right back to her girlhood on New York's Lower East Side. The boy had the same look of hungry desire as the street urchins who used to stare fascinated at the piles of fresh fruit outside her father's shop, waiting for just the right moment to snatch a piece and run.

"Young man, what are you doing there?" whispered Libby fiercely.

The boy whirled around, immediately doffing his tweed cap. "I... I just delivered a package to Mr. Reilly..." That would be Jack Reilly, the stage manager. "... and then I saw... I stopped to watch. I'm sorry, Miss. Please don't tell Mr. Crowther, he warned me last week not to loiter, and then I—"

Libby cut him off with a shush, then gave him a friendly smile. "No harm done. But you'd better be off now."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, disappearing into the shadows. She smiled again, this time to herself. She supposed to a boy of his age the backstage of a theater must seem the most glamorous place on earth. She had felt the same way her first day. Now a theater veteran of all of eight days, she knew that the magic only worked while the stage lights were lit.

She continued on her path backstage. Through a door and up a narrow staircase lay all the dressing rooms. On her way up the stairs, she squeezed past Professor Rappaport, the elocutionist, heading down to the stage. He greeted her in passing in a pleasant if pompous manner, straightening the lapels of his morning coat. Professor Rappaport recited from the edifying works of Mr. Bulwer-Lytton, and went on right after the Whirwinds.

It was shortly thereafter that the afternoon's first disturbance occurred. On her knees in the dancers' dressing room, surrounded on all sides by petticoats, trying to untie a knot in the lacings of a corset, Libby was at first unable to determine exactly what had happened. But from the commotion at the end of the room near the doorway, the squeals, and the shrieks of, "Get out, get out," and "Filthy rascal!" the seamstress assumed that an intruder, presumably a male one, had breached the sanctity of this all female domain. Rising to her feet, Libby was just able to catch sight of the back of the delivery boy heading out the door. She sighed, and doing her best to calm the excited ladies of the chorus, hurried out after the miscreant. There was no sign of him. From the floor above, where there dressing rooms for some of the specialty acts, she heard voices asking what all the fuss was about. One particularly nasal voice, which she recognized as belonging to Cap'n Bumbo, the minstrel singer (she didn't know his real name, and if she had ever seen his pale face without coat of burnt cork she couldn't remember it) called out in the exaggerated dialect he used in performance, "Who dat makin' all de shoutin' an de yellin'?" Libby ignored the question. Blackface performers made her uneasy though she couldn't have said why.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she was surprised to see the delivery boy hadn't made a clean escape after all. Gentle Jim, one of the stagehands, had the boy in his grasp, and was gently chiding him, "Now where are you heading off to so fast, little man?" Gentle Jim was the largest man at the Variety. His muscles bulged beneath his baggy, grease-covered overalls, but his personality was so sweet there was nothing menacing about him. He had helped Libby whenever there were heavy parcels or trunks she needed moved, but otherwise he was usually found in the theater's cellar, shoveling coal into the boiler or breaking down retired sets and props. Held by the scruff of the neck in Jim's enormous paws, the delivery boy looked like nothing so much as a wayward kitten hanging from its mother's jaw. Jim smiled at Libby, "What have I got myself here, a Peeping Tom?"

"Yes. I think..." she had to tilt her head backwards to look up into the stagehand's face, "I think it's safe to put him down." Jim lowered the boy to the ground, but kept a tight hold on his collar. By this point a crowd of backstage personnel had gathered, mostly stagehands since the performers liked to spend the time between acts in their dressing rooms. Professor Rappaport appeared from the stage, and he looked annoyed.

"What is all the noise? I destroyed my concentration, and just when I was reaching the tragic matchstick girl's haunting death throes."

"Yes, an explanation would be nice," said a slightly calmer voice. Tom Millet had joined the circle. He was the company manager, in charge of all the performers.

"Whatever the disturbance is, let's get it settled soon. We just hit intermission, but I don't

intend on holding up the rest of the show.” He addressed the onlookers, “Everybody back to work. Just a little misunderstanding I'm sure.”

With a harumph, Professor Rappaport stomped up the stairs to the dressing rooms. The stagehands melted away with less affect, leaving only Libby, Tom, the boy and Jim (who was keeping a firm grip on his squirming charge.) “Now, who would like to explain?”

Since the boy appeared unlikely to speak, and Jim was just a bystander, Libby volunteered, “This rascal – he was here making a delivery to Mr. Reilly – was discovered looking into the Dancing Whirlwinds' dressing room.” The boy hung his head. Tom tried to look disapproving, but Libby could see he was more amused than outraged.

“Well, we can't have that can we?”

“No, sir,” the boy wouldn't meet his eyes.

“All right. But I warn you, I won't be so lenient if you pull this sort of stunt again.” Millet started to walk away, “Oh, and I think you better tell your employer to send someone else with deliveries from now on. The boy nodded his head vigorously.

“All right, then. Scoot.”

Gentle Jim had barely let go of the boy's collar, when a stentorian voice boomed from the stairs, “Stop that boy! He's a thief!”

Professor Rappaport strode over. Tom Millet reluctantly returned, and Jim placed a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder to restrain him once more.

“I didn't take anything! I swear it!”

Rappaport waved an ebony cane about. "Look at my walking stick... the handle was there ten minutes ago, and now it's gone."

"But I swear – "

"How many intruders have we had in the theatre today?" The Professor's usually phlegmatic countenance was turning bright pink. "I'll have you know that handle was solid gold. It was given to my grandfather by Admiral Nelson himself, after the battle of Trafalgar, with his most gracious thanks! It was valued at over three hundred dollars."

Libby rolled her eyes. There wasn't a person at Crowther's Variety who hadn't heard about the Professor's ebony cane, with its thickly ornamented handle of solid gold. The handle featured the draped torso and head of a maiden, like those seen on the prow of old sailing vessels. Flowing back from her forehead for a good eight inches were elaborate whorls of hair, swirling in an impossibly thick stream, forming the hand grip. It was quite spectacular, Libby had to admit, in an overwrought sort of way. Professor Rappaport had waved it around, bragging and showing it off to anyone who crossed his path since he arrived the week before.

Tom Millet tilted the boy's chin up, forcing him to meet his eyes. "Tell the truth, lad. Did you steal the gold handle from the top of the Professor's cane?" The boy shook his head. "Forgive me, but I'm going to have to see for myself." He nodded to Jim, "Hold him, please." Efficiently the company manager searched the boy, checking his pockets and patting down his clothes. Clearly there was no place on the boy's person where something as large and irregularly shaped as the golden maiden from the walking stick could have been secreted. Tom scratched his head, "Maybe he hid it somewhere backstage?"

"I caught him just as he reached the bottom of the stairs. No time," offered Jim.

"And I reached the bottom of the stairs almost as soon as Jim had him," Libby added.

Professor Rappaport jumped in, "Perhaps he tossed it away upstairs, when he realized he had been spotted." The others looked doubtful. "Well someone stole it! It was there when I left my dressing room. I'm sure of it. I left my room, then I passed Miss Seale on the stairs, and..." His eyes narrowed. "Miss Seale..."

"I know nothing about it!" Libby sputtered. "I went straight in to the dancers dressing room to wait for the Whirlwinds to come upstairs. Shortly thereafter I heard a commotion and ---"

"All right, clearly we need to get to the bottom of this." Tom's authority clicked in, and he briskly gave orders. "Jim, would you watch the boy? Wait for us down here. ... oh, and don't let anyone leave by this door for the moment. Miss Seale, Professor Rappaport, if you would accompany me, we'll head upstairs."

"Shouldn't we send for the police?" Libby began.

Tom's voice was calm, "I don't think that will be necessary. Bad enough most people already think theatre folk are no better than riff-raff. We don't need this to get out if we can help it. Perhaps the missing object is still somewhere in the Professor's dressing room. Perhaps it fell off. Just a simple accident."

Libby thought it highly unlikely that a gold handle had unscrewed itself from a cane accidentally, but she said nothing and followed the men upstairs.

Three minutes later it was clear her supposition had been correct. There was no sign of the golden maiden in the Professor's dressing room. The scene of the crime was,

in fact, fairly empty, like most of the dressing rooms used by visiting players. It contained a simple table without drawers, over which hung a mirror, and two hardback chairs. Over one chair lay Rappaport's street clothes, carefully laid out (Tom Millet quickly ascertained the handle was not trapped in their folds.) And in the corner lay the Professor's traveling trunk, empty, since his costume and makeup were currently unpacked. The trunk was no bigger than a large suitcase, and it took but a moment to pull it from the wall and peer behind it – which revealed nothing, other than the fact that someone had not done too thorough a job sweeping. Libby did wonder why the Professor didn't keep the dozen or so leather-clad volumes, presumably the ones from which he selected his readings, inside the trunk, for they lay in a messy pile on the floor just next to it. She supposed he must have his reasons.

The one small window was cracked open a few inches at the top. “Did you leave this window open?” she asked Rappaport.

“No... wait, I might have done. I don't remember.”

Tom crossed to the window, and looked down. A dozen feet below lay the flat roof of the stables backing onto the theater. “Too far for someone to have climbed in...”

“Someone could have thrown the handle down to an accomplice waiting on the roof,” Libby suggested. She and Tom had fallen into an easy rapport, and Libby was grateful that Tom took her seriously, not dismissing her thoughts as unworthy because she was female. Perhaps it was true that out West society was less hidebound and conventional. She was also grateful he appeared not to seriously consider her a suspect, despite the fact that she was new at Crowther's Variety.

Rappaport, however, was not of a similar mind. “I don’t know why you’re staring out the window, Millet, when you have someone standing right here who could easily have nabbed my cane topper while waiting for the dancers. I insist you search her right now!”

Millet scratched the blond stubble on his chin. At first he acted as though he hadn’t heard the Professor’s outburst. “I don’t think someone would have climbed up on the roof of the stables. He’d be running a big chance of being spotted. Besides, if someone was climbing over that metal roof the horses would have set up a ruckus” Sighing, he turned back from the window, “Still, it’s looking more and more likely that it was someone inside the theatre behind this. The Professor’s dressing room is nowhere near the Whirlwinds’ room, where Miss Seale spotted the boy, and he had no way of knowing about the cane. What are the chances he stumbled across the most valuable item backstage, and on the spur of the moment figured out a place to hide it, or dispose of it?”

This was the longest speech Libby had ever heard from the usually laconic company manager. “I’m afraid I will have to ask you to submit to a search, Miss Seale. But naturally I won’t undertake it myself. Please, both of you, wait here.”

Libby and Professor Rappaport waited in uneasy silence for only a moment before May and Carrie, two of the Whirlwinds, poked their head in the door. “What’s going on, Libby? Did they catch the Peeping Tom!” This was May, the youngest, and most excitable of the resident dancers.

“Yes, they did. He’s downstairs. But I’m afraid the Professor has misplaced something, and –“

“Misplaced? I’ve been robbed!” The two girls gasped, but with delight, not horror.

Libby cut Rappaport off, “Perhaps you two ought to wait in your dressing room. Mr. Millet will be back in just a moment, and I’m sure he’ll explain it to you.”

A voice from the hall broke in, “Yes, I’ll be in to speak to you girls in a moment.” Tom had reappeared, trailed by Hatty Matthews, the diminutive wardrobe mistress at Crowther’s. Turning to Libby he said, “I’ve asked Mrs. Matthews to help me. If you would please let her search your person. If you’d like, the Professor and I will step out of the room.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Libby said crisply. “I have nothing to hide.” She waited patiently while Hatty patted her clothes, smoothing her skirts down her legs, and squeezing the folds of fabric gathered to make a small bustle to make sure there was no object hidden in the multiple layers of cloth.

“I apologize, Libby,” Hatty whispered, “I was certain I would find nothing.”

“I understand, Mrs. Matthews. Please don’t be concerned.”

Hatty turned to Tom. “I swear that Miss Seale is hiding nothing.”

Tom Millet was interrupted before he could reply. “What the hell is going on up here? And why is that moron Jim lurking outside the dressing rooms like Frankenstein’s monster?” As usual with Mr. Crowther, his voice made an appearance before his body did. “The curtain has been down for sixteen minutes now, and the lads in the audience are running out of beer.” Eating and drinking was probably the most popular pastime of those who filled a vaudeville theater’s seats... often surpassing any interest patrons had in what

was occurring onstage. Unless you counted heckling. “If we don’t put someone onstage soon we’re gonna see mass walkouts.”

“Sorry, Mr. Crowther. We’ve got a situation here.” Quickly the company manager sketched out the situation, concluding, “So, since no one has come or gone out of this part of the theatre since the boy and Miss Seale here, it stands to reason someone who was in this hallway took the handle.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re having fun playing Sherlock Holmes, Millet, but this is a theater, not a bank. We’re not in the business of safeguarding gold – what the hell did you want to bring a thing like that backstage anyway, Rappaport? We put on shows. Get someone on the stage. Now.” Crowther pushed his way down the hall... by this point most of the performers from the floor above were gathered in the corridor outside the Professor’s dressing room, and it was getting crowded. His feet could be heard clomping down the stairs. For a moment there was silence, and then a low buzzing started among the assembled actors.

“Okay. Let’s see, Joe and Fannie... you go on right after intermission, correct?” Joe and Fannie Schildkraut, known professionally as the Two-Step Twosome, were a married couple who demonstrated popular dances. Right now they were costumed as Dutch peasants, complete with oversize wooden clogs, appropriate to their comic ‘Tulip Waltz’. “I’m afraid we’ll have to search you before we can let you down to the stage. Mrs. Matthews, if you would help me.”

The Schildkrauts, sweet people, offered no objection, as Tom patted down Joe and Hatty did the same to Fannie. Soon enough they were cleared to depart for the stage. “And if you would please wait downstairs after your act... I will let you know when

you're permitted to return to your room." Tom was all business now. "The rest of you please return to your own dressing rooms.. Expect a visit in a few minutes." He strode to the door of the Dancing Whirlwinds dressing room and knocked, "Are you all dressed?" A general sound of giggling, girlish assent indicated he could enter. "Ladies, a change to the show's running order. I'm going to move your Harvest Tableau to right after the Two-Stepping Twosome. You've probably heard that someone has taken the gold handle of Professor Rappaport's walking stick. It's quite valuable, and while I'm sure none of you had anything to do with its disappearance, we need to make sure. Mrs. Matthews and Miss Seale are going to ascertain you are not carrying the object, and then you will be allowed down to the stage." With that, Tom discreetly withdrew.

Libby and Hatty made short work of searching the Whirlwinds one by one. Despite the fact that some of their costumes were voluminous pleated confections made to represent autumn fruits and vegetables, they were made from lightweight starched muslin and could not have hidden a bulky object like the gold handle. When the room was empty of dancers, Tom entered. Asking Hatty to wait in the hall, Tom and Libby searched the room. It took them a full five minutes to sift their way through the heaps of brightly-colored costumes, not to mention the dancers' street attire which hung on a line of hooks along the wall. They peered under the girls' hats, on a shelf over the clothes hooks, and on the underside of each of the dressing tables. There was little enough furniture in the room to search. The mirrors were screwed into the wall. There was no sign of the missing item.

"Well, it had to be done." Tom said to Libby. "But they're good girls. I didn't think they were to blame."

“Besides,” added Libby, “They really wouldn’t have had a chance. Since the Professor’s dressing room is past theirs along the corridor, any dancer who continued down the hall would have run a good risk of being stopped and queried by her fellow Whirlwinds. And they were only up here a few minutes before the Peeping Tom made his appearance.”

“Speaking of dressing room assignments... exactly who is where? Like most of the staff, I’m rarely up here. Only the performers, and you and Hatty, have cause to be in this corridor.”

“Let’s see,” Libby made a mental picture. “On this floor is the Professor down at the end. Next to him is a currently empty room, then the Whirlwinds and then the stairs. One flight up is The Schildkrouts, nearest the stairs. And then Cap’n Bumbo, Miss Golden, Little Melodie and finally the Provenza Brothers. Their room is right over the Professor’s.”

“I guess we have no choice but to search all of them. We’d better get started.”

“Perhaps we should search the performers themselves first?” suggested Libby. “That way the show can go on all the while.”

Tom smiled, “You’re precisely right. I should have thought of that. That damn Autumn Harvest tableau isn’t very long at all, is it? At least that’s one thing in its favor.” They shared a conspiratorial smile. The Dancing Whirlwinds’ tableaux really were rather dull. “Shall we get to it, then? After you, Miss Seale,” Tom held open the door for her, and she passed with a grand curtsy into the hallway.

With Hatty's help all the performers were informed of the need to vacate their rooms, patted down and dispatched to the backstage area. Last to leave was Hatty, with strict instructions from Tom that no one was to be allowed back upstairs until he said so.

After poking their heads in the empty dressing room, which was (as advertised) completely empty, Tom and Libby headed one flight up. They made their way down this hallway too, from room to room to room. The Schildkrauts' dressing room was neatly organized and tidy. Cap'n Bumbo's was a sloppy mess. His dressing table had been pulled into the center of the space and a deck of cards lay scattered across its surface. Little Melodie's room was dim, and practically empty. Since the slender contortionist wore little for her act, and had no props, there was nothing to look through but a valise with her street clothes in it and a small makeup kit.

Having not found what they were looking for thus far, Libby was hoping that the missing handle would turn up in the Provenzas' dressing room, despite the fact that she liked the three cheerful Italians.

The room was lighter than the three others, since it had windows on two sides. Both of these were open wide, as if to clear the air, but still it was redolent of three athletic adult males sharing a very small space. The Provenzas were brothers from Sicily who performed acrobatic tricks, and the room held not only their clothes and costumes, but a large assortment of liquor bottles... most of them empty, Libby couldn't help but notice. And their props, which held pride of place in one corner – there was a wooden ladder, some half stilts, a series of gaily-painted hoops, a basket of linen scarves, and a circular wooden platform approximately the size and appearance of a lady's hatbox. Tom carefully looked each of these over, lifting the scarves out of the basket to make sure it

did not have a trick bottom of some sort, and hefting the stilts to see if they weighed suspiciously more than they should. Meanwhile Libby sifted through the accumulated greasepaint and towels that littered the one rickety dressing table they all shared. She ended up at one open window. She could see the flat roof of the stables very far below, and, leaning out, she could actually see into the Professor's room which lay beneath this one. She wondered if it would have been possible to actually reach into the Professor's window. She bent over the sill, balancing herself on her belly and stretching out her arm.

“What are you doing?” Tom tugged her back into the room by the shoulder. “I don't need you falling out a window, on top of everything else.”

Libby blushed. “I wasn't going to fall.” She smoothed her skirt and tried to look dignified, “I was merely wondering if one of the Provenzas could have reached the Professor's window from here.”

Tom now peered out the window himself. “I doubt it, that would – Wait!” He rushed to the basket of scarves, “Maybe they used one of these scarves as a kind of rope ladder.” Libby took the scarf from his hands.

“This would never have supported the weight of a grown man. It would have torn right away. Besides,” she had just realized something belatedly, “even if they had managed to get in and out of the Professor's room, using some sort of gymnastic trick, where is the gold cane topper now? We searched them before they went downstairs, and it certainly isn't in here.”

Tom's face fell. “True.” The two of them looked around dejectedly, but couldn't think of anywhere else to look. Finally they headed down to the stage to deliver the news that the missing object had not been found. They found Gentle Jim still guarding the

entrance to the dressing room hallway, with his charge sprawled over the lowest steps of the staircase. When they appeared the boy hastened to stand to attention. He looked scared to death.

Emerging backstage, they saw the show was nearly over. Miss Golden was doing her turn. She was finishing the last verse of the crowd favorite “After the Ball”, and was about to lead the audience in a sing-along of the chorus. (Since over five million copies of the sheet music had been sold, there were few members of the audience who didn’t know the words.) After that, Jack Reilly the stage manager rang the curtain down on a smiling and contented audience, who began making their way up the aisles still swaying to the infectious waltz tune.

By this time the cast had gathered around Libby and the beleaguered company manager. “Well, folks, I’m sorry to say the Professor’s property hasn’t turned up. Before I send for the police, is there anything anyone would like to tell me?” There were many covert glances, and a few mutterings, but no one spoke up. “No one saw anything suspicious during the latter part of the first act?”

“We were together the whole time,” offered Fanny Schildkrout. “Since we arrived after lunch. Neither Joe nor I went into Professor Rappaport’s room.”

Beneath Cap’n Bumbo’s grotesque painted blackface grin his lips were pursed. “Well, I was with the Provenzas in my room, playing a gentlemanly game of poker. All through the first act, after I did my turn. Any of them can vouch for me.”

At this, there was a chorus of half-English, half-Italian assent from the acrobats. The eldest, Paulo, offered, “When I pass her room, though, I no see Miss Melodie. Perhap’ she down in the Professor’s room a-stealing his gold.”

All eyes swiveled to the waiflike contortionist, who looked more embarrassed than guilty. “You must be mistaken. Or maybe I was down in the washroom.” Away from the golden glow of the footlights she looked older, probably nearer twenty than Libby had previously thought. She knew Little Melodie was a repeat performer at Crowther’s Variety, and had heard a rumor to the effect that the girl and Mr. Crowther were more than just colleagues. Libby could hear female voices in the crowd whispering gossip even now.

“I was doing scales in my room. I like to keep my voice warm between numbers,” said Miss Golden. With a haughty glance at Little Melodie, she added, “I’m sure I would never enter a gentleman’s room unescorted. Or let one into mine!” Theatre folk generally evinced such bonhomie and warmth, but how quickly this ad hoc family was turning against each other in the face of an outside threat.

“Settle down,” Tom admonished the cast, “I don’t need to know your whereabouts. Though I’m sure the police will want to know when they arrive. Now if you’ll please return to your dressing rooms, I’ll send for them now.”

As the crowd dutifully dispersed, Gentle Jim stepped forward. “What about the boy, Mr. Millet? Can he go, seeing how he didn’t do nothing more than peep at some of the girls? We already established he didn’t have anything to do with the theft.”

“I suppose so. Actually, lad, if you would stop at the police station on First Street on your way back, ask them to send an officer over.”

“What? You’re letting him go? I still say the boy was up to no good –“ Professor Rappaport tried to interject, but nobody seemed to pay him any heed.

“Yessir! Thank you, sir. I promise, I’ll send one right over.” The boy rushed for the exit, nearly running over Little Melodie, who was lingering by the stairs. Once again Libby was reminded of the New York street urchins of her youth.

And then she froze. She suddenly understood who took the gold handle, and how it was done. The question was, how best to get it back. She considered trying to stop the boy before he left the building, but decided it would not be necessary. Knowing where he worked, the police would have little trouble bringing him in later. Instead she crossed to Tom Millet, and whispered for a few minutes in his ear. At first he looked incredulous, and then he nodded.

Ten minutes later, Libby sat in the costume shop wiping some coal dust from the heavy lump of gold. Tom stood beside her, as did Professor Rappaport, while Hatty Matthews and a number of others formed a loose circle around her. Across the room sat Gentle Jim, flanked by two of the burlier stagehands. The cane handle had been recovered from the coal bin down by the furnace just minutes after Jim had shallowly buried it there. They were now waiting for the police to arrive.

“I’m still not sure how you deduced the Jim was behind the theft, Miss Seale.”

Libby smiled. “First of all, you were right when you reasoned the thief must have been someone inside the theater. The way Professor Rappaport waved his stick about, bragging about how valuable it was, he was practically asking for it to be stolen.”

“I beg your pardon, young lady!” Rappaport looked anxious to have his property returned to his hands.

Libby ignored the interruption. “I’m afraid I had a little advantage here. As a girl, my first job was to sit outside my father’s fruit shop in New York, keeping my eyes

peeled for petty thieves. I was just supposed to safeguard the apples and berries, but over the course of those years I had the chance to become familiar with the scams pulled by local pickpockets as well. Some of them, the most effective of them, worked in teams. One popular dodge consisted of an older, well-dressed gentleman working with a young boy. The gentleman would approach the mark and engage him in conversation – asking the time perhaps, or remarking on the weather – while the lad would pick his pocket and run. The gentleman would then say “That boy just took your wallet!” and race after the boy, who would, of course, allow himself to be ‘caught’ by his accomplice. By the time the police would come, however, the wallet would have been transferred into the well-dressed man’s coat. Since no stolen goods would be found on the boy, he would be released for lack of evidence. Later the loot would be split between the partners.

“It didn’t occur to me to question it when I saw Jim holding the Peeping Tom at the bottom of the stairs, but later it occurred to me to ask why had he been there at all. Normally he’s down by the furnace, unless there are heavy goods or luggage to carry.”

Millet spoke up, “That’s how you saw the cane, wasn’t it, Jim? Professor Rappaport, I suppose Jim helped carry your trunk up to your room the day you arrived?” Rappaport grunted his assent. “And I suppose you made sure to dazzle him with your precious cane?” A nod indicated this was so.

“I suppose you asked the boy to help since you didn’t think you could enter this part of the theatre unnoticed.” Libby asked, but gently. For all that he was a thief, she still felt sorry for him.

Jim nodded again, glumly. “I let Jimmy steal it, and then I plucked it out of the back of his trousers when I collared him at the bottom of the stairs. I was praying you

wouldn't think to search my pockets." Jim turned to the Professor, his voice despairing. "I sure am sorry about taking your gold, sir, but I needed the money. I didn't mean any harm. My wife can't go on working at that mill. It's gonna kill her if she doesn't get a rest soon, but we still owe the doctor from when our girl Jenny had the scarlet fever."

"A fine time to think about that now," snapped Rappaport. "You won't be any help to your wife behind bars."

"What's going to happen to me?" Jim addressed the question to Tom. "How long do you figure I'll be in jail?"

Tom Millet stroked his chin. "It's not good, Jim. That gold is worth at least two hundred – "

"Three hundred!" interjected the Professor.

"In any case, the charge will be grand larceny, and that's a serious charge."

Libby turned to Hatty. "Would you mind handing me a pin? There's a speck of coal dust stuck in one of these curls." When Hatty handed her a straight pin, Libby swiftly turned the sculpted piece over and made a scratch on the inside where the ebony cane would have slotted in.

"What are you doing, Miss Seale?" Rappaport was horrified.

Whatever she had seen inside the handle obviously satisfied her. "Oh, I don't think the charge will be grand anything. A misdemeanor maybe, if the Professor even wants to risk the embarrassment." Libby stood and handed the shining object to its owner. "You should know, Professor, that Admiral Nelson died during the battle of Trafalgar. I find it unlikely he would have risen from the grave to give the your grandfather a walking stick, no matter how grateful he was. I also find it unlikely such an

august personage would have made such a shoddy gift.” She pointed to where her pin scratch had revealed a dark metallic surface underneath the gold exterior. “Lead, I would think. I’m not even sure that it’s real gold on the exterior either. But, of course, I am no expert.”