

Murder At The Portland Variety

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for Grandma

Chapter 1

From the moment she entered the lobby of Crowther's Portland Variety, Libby Seale could tell something was amiss. The first clue was the quiet. Normally the building was abuzz with voices on the stage, running through a song or dance number, sometimes accompanied by the piano in the pit. Even if no acts were rehearsing, there should have been the inevitable hammering as stagehands assembled the scenery for incoming acts. And it was dark in the lobby, as if no one had turned on the electricity yet, or even lit any of the gas lamps used to conserve energy when the electric lights – still a novelty in 1894 -- were off. The only light came through the dull windows of the box office, making the theatre entranceway look grey, despite its bright red carpeting.

Slipping through a side door that led backstage, Libby hung her coat on the peg in the hallway, and gathered up her purchases. She was later than usual in getting to the theater, and she needed to get the fabric and notions she had bought on her way into work into their proper cubbyholes before she could start to sort out the mending. Her job as assistant in the costume department at Crowther's meant she helped the wardrobe mistress with any and all of the varied costuming needs of a busy vaudeville theatre, even if that entailed running errands in the hours before work officially began. Today this had included several stops on her way into work to buy the material and trimmings for the new set of dancers' costumes, and she had gotten lost twice trying to find her way around an unfamiliar part of town. But she was in no position to complain, since her status at the Variety was only temporary, and she was very much hoping that when the time came they would offer her a job permanently. She had arrived in Portland only six months before, and in that time she had still failed to find a secure means of earning her way in the world.

Where on earth *was* everybody? The backstage area was never this quiet the afternoon before a show, especially when new performers were arriving, settling into their small dressing rooms with varying degrees of audible discomfort. Crossing the stage, on her way to the costume shop, she saw May hurrying toward the stage from the aisle. May was one of the youngest members of the resident ensemble “The Dancing Whirlwinds,” and Libby had taken a liking to the quiet sweet girl who tried to act so worldly. In fact, right now, with her fearful eyes and tear-stained cheeks, she looked more like the thirteen year old Libby suspected she was than the sixteen year old she had claimed to be when Mr. Crowther hired her.

“Miss Seale! Isn’t it terrible?”

“What is it, May?”

May looked up at Libby with her big blue eyes. “Didn’t you hear about Vera? I mean, Miss Carabella?”

“What is it about Vera, May? Is she still here?” Vera Carabella had been a performer in one of the featured acts, “The Electrical Magic of Signor Carlo”, but their run had ended the previous Saturday night.

“She’s... she’s dead!”

With that, May's eyes started welling up, and she grasped Libby's arm to steady herself. “I have to go. The other girls are waiting for me out front, but I left my bag in the dressing room. Mr. Crowther cancelled the show and sent everybody home.”

A thousand thoughts ran like lightning through Libby’s mind. She had just seen Vera, it felt like only moments ago! “What happened?” she asked the girl as gently as she could, “An accident?”

May shook her head. “The white slavers got her! Just like they got some other chorus dancer a few months back.” Libby heard the words, but they sounded so far-fetched that her mind refused to make sense of them. Her face must have registered this incomprehension, for May went on, eyes bright and feverish, without any prompting from Libby.

“That's how I got my job here. They found one of the Dancing Whirlwinds in the tunnel beneath the theater, dead! And everyone said that it was white slavers that got her, too! They say they take girls

through the tunnels and put them onto ships headed for...well, I'm not sure where...All the other dancers were so upset that for a while no one in the city would come in and audition for the Variety, and they lost some of the other dancers who worked here because they quit." Now that the topic had shifted to matters theatrical, May had lost her fearful look, and burred like a child. "So Mr. Crowther put out the word that there were positions in the chorus open, and I..."

Libby had to break in, "But what about Vera, May? What happened today?" She tried hard not to sound exasperated.

"The police were here when I arrived. They said some workmen in the tunnels this morning found Vera's... body, right in the same spot where they found Polly... that was the other dancer, Polly. And then one of them — the policemen — said to watch my back. Then, when they thought I was gone, I heard him say to the other one that girls like dancers and actresses had to expect this sort of thing." She looked indignant.

Before Libby could frame the multitude of questions that popped into her mind, the girl started off towards the Whirlwinds' dressing room. "I have to go! I'll see you tomorrow, Miss Seale."

Mechanically, Libby made her way to the wardrobe room, released her armful of packages in a heap on the table and sank into a chair.

She couldn't quite believe Vera was dead. While they hadn't been close friends, she had gotten to know Vera well over the magic act's four week engagement at the Variety. Libby was too busy to become friendly with most of the featured performers, but circumstances, in the form of a backstage accident, had brought Libby and Vera together. The very first week that "The Electrical Magic of Signor Carlo" was playing the Variety, Mr. Maynard, the theater's bookkeeper and office manager, had spilled a brand new bottle of India ink all over the front of Vera's costume, ruining it beyond repair. Vera had been frantic at the loss of the gown, which was only a year old. It had been made at great expense for her in San Francisco, and she had been enthusiastically grateful when Libby, (until six months before a seamstress for a large and

fashionable New York dressmaker,) had managed to whip up a stylish and sophisticated new dress overnight.

Libby would have been the first to admit that the gown itself could never have been called high fashion, since the front of the peacock blue skirt was cut away in a wide swag to reveal Vera's shapely legs, but even so, it had an air of elegance that lifted it (and presumably Vera as well) out of the realm of the vulgar. Vera had been delighted by it, and she and Libby had been fast friends from that moment on. Libby now found some small measure of comfort at the thought that the dress she'd made had brought the doomed performer some happiness, for perhaps one of the last times in her life.

At that moment Hatty Matthews, wardrobe mistress, came through the door carrying a load of costumes every color of the rainbow, and almost as tall as she was. Hatty was in her early fifties, with jet black hair (livened by a few strands of silver just above her forehead) and classically Asian features. Though she was tiny, she had the strength of an ox, as well as a no-nonsense but motherly disposition that endeared her to Libby and everyone at the Variety. Her husband, now deceased, had been a British soldier stationed in Hatty's native Hong Kong, but when exactly she had come to these shores Libby didn't know.

"Oh, good, Libby you're here." Hatty said, putting down the mending with a sigh, and flopping down on a chair. Her English was nearly flawless, but since she had learned it as a British colonial, one could hear traces of middle-class British pronunciation nestled alongside the Eastern coloration of her 'l's and 'r's.

"Hatty! Did you hear about what happened to Miss Carabella?"

The older woman gave a sad sigh and pushed her spectacles up on her nose. "Oh, yes, it's tragic. The police were here, talking to Mr. Crowther in his office all morning." She looked at Libby with concern. "You were friendly with her, weren't you?" Libby nodded. "I was going to ask you to stay and help me with the mending, but if you would like to go home that's certainly all right."

"The mending!" Libby blurted out, "How can you think about mending now?"

“Life goes on,” Hatty said quietly, “Best not to let the bad things keep you from doing what needs to be done.”

“May told me it was white slavers? It... that... sounds like something out of a penny dreadful! Surely there aren't really white slavers right here in Portland?” She had read about all the crime and mayhem here in America’s “wild frontier”, but with all the worries and fears she had about being on her own in a new city it had not occurred to her to worry about an illegal trade in kidnapped women.

“Ah, sit down, my dear, and I’ll tell you what I know. You have heard of the Shanghai tunnels running under the city, I assume?”

“I think so.” When she had first arrived in Portland and was doing piece-work for local tailors, one of them had regularly received deliveries of imported silks and other materials via a basement entrance to his shop. He had explained to Libby that many of the cargo ships delivered their packages via the tunnels that came up from the harbor. “They’re those tunnels that go down to the waterfront, aren’t they?”

“Exactly.” She added dryly, “ I’m sure you have noticed that it rains a bit in the Pacific Northwest. The tunnels were built to make it easier to deliver cargo in inclement weather. Or so they say. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were really built to make it easier for smugglers and thieves to navigate the city underground.”

Hatty went on to tell Libby of the criminal gangs that preyed on both men and women, drugging them and spiriting them down to the waterfront for nefarious purposes. In the case of the men, they would wake up on a strange ship at sea, only to find they had been sold to the captain of a vessel in need of a crew. Since many of the boats were headed for China, the term "Shanghai" became common parlance for the crime (“to Shanghai”) as well as the tunnels. If Hatty had any personal feelings about the fact that it was the land of her birth that was being slandered by this slang, she kept them well hidden.

The fate of the women abducted was murkier, and all Hatty knew were the rumors... that attractive girls were sometimes abducted from the seedier bars in the area, taken on ships far away from their homes, far away from anyone who might rescue them, and then stranded in remote parts of the world

where they would be trapped and unable to return home. The saddest part was that once a girl had been ruined in this way, she was effectively unable to ever return home, even if she could find the passage, since her reputation and virtue would be in shreds.

“So our theater basement has an entrance to these tunnels?” asked Libby, fascinated. “May said something about another body being found under the theater a while back. A dancer here...?”

Hatty cut her off, anticipating the rest of her question. “My, my, no wonder you’re so upset. Please, don’t go thinking this sort of thing happens all the time at the Variety. But yes, it’s true enough. I suppose it would have been a little over 2 months before you started working here. There was an unpleasant incident involving one of the showgirls here, but it was something she brought upon herself. Her name was... well, she called herself Polly Pink. She was...” She squeezed her eyes closed, apparently trying to come up with a delicate euphemism, “a gay girl from the streets trying to move up in the world, and people here thought that’s why she was killed. They say she must have let a man into the theater after hours, someone she knew from her previous line of work, and he drugged her and then dragged her into the tunnels through the basement, intending to sell her to the white slavers. They found her dead down there, with the drugged rag still over her face. Apparently, her killer had used too high a concentration of chloroform in his attempt to subdue her, and she died.”

The more Hatty told her, the more apparent it became to Libby that there was a whole world of unsavory characters and criminal activity that she never read about in the papers. It made her wonder whom one could trust to get an honest assessment of any city or town. As she looked out the small grimy window at the city street, Portland seemed newly menacing, as if she had never really seen it before.

Lost in her reflections, it was a few minutes before she realized that Hatty was no longer speaking. Instead, the costumer was looking at her with a mixture of pity and exasperation. But when she spoke her voice was kind. “There isn’t any point dwelling on the crime, Libby. Let’s get to work, these aren’t going to mend themselves.” With that, she looked meaningfully at the pile of costumes.

Hatty was right, of course. Best to move forward and throw herself into her job, rather than endlessly analyze the circumstances that had led to Vera's death. With difficulty, Libby turned her thoughts to the tasks at hand.

A few moments later, as she was diligently darning a torn stocking, Hatty asked her if she had gotten the new buttons and ribbons. With a start, she remembered her purchases, though it seemed like days ago that she had bought them. "Oh, Hatty, I got the loveliest yellow brocade for the new Rickshaw Ballet costumes, and I found some dear little pearl buttons reduced for quick sale at Prager Brothers, which might work on those spats..." For the first time since she had arrived at the theater that day, a sense of normality returned.

The rest of the day passed slowly, the theater almost empty without any of the performers. The one loud interlude in the day occurred when Signor Carlo, the magician whose assistant Vera had been, flounced into the theater and proceeded to mourn her melodramatically. Ostensibly, he was at the theater to supervise the moving of his trunks to the railroad depot, but having waved the bored and taciturn movers towards the dressing rooms he flopped down in the middle of the stage, practically begging for attention. He spotted Libby, who had been drawn out of the wardrobe room by all the noise, hovering in the wings.

"Oh, Miss Libby! My Vera, la mia bella, she is gone!" He jumped up and grabbed Libby to his chest in an expansive Mediterranean hug. "You have heard what those monsters, those animals, they did to her!" Theatrically, he bowed his head for a moment of silent reverence. But just a moment.

Then he commenced a tirade espousing the theory that whoever had done this awful deed was obviously trying to sabotage him. The rant encompassed everything from the horrible backstage conditions at this theater to the fact that Portland had always shown too little respect for the great talents of Signor Carlo. Libby, who had seen him perform, found the word 'great' a bit of an overstatement. In her opinion, Carlo (who called himself "Signor" although Vera had confided to Libby that the closest he had ever been

to Europe was New Jersey) had almost no talent whatsoever, and the fact that he put on a likable-enough act was primarily because he was canny enough to make Vera's blatant sensuality the center of attention.

It was common knowledge among the types of men who frequented theaters that a magic act was a good chance to see a beautiful, scantily-clad woman contorting herself into boxes or behind nearly-transparent screens as the magician worked his illusions. All Signor Carlo's tricks had required Vera to wriggle her body to and fro; He made doves fly out from beneath her dress, he found a shiny gold piece behind first one ear, then the other.

The highlight of the act was the "electric chair" trick, in which Vera supposedly allowed 20 volts of electricity to course through her. With elaborate showmanship, Carlo waved a magic wand, to which an electric light bulb had been attached, up and down over Vera's seated body. Sure enough, as the bulb grazed Vera's arms and shoulders, it lit up seemingly of its own accord. As he raised the wand, her hair rose up with a crackle and her shapely legs, tied to the chair, shuddered slightly. Carlo worked this magic, complete with patter about the awesome danger of electricity when not properly controlled, and the crowd was always silent, fascinated.

The one night she had sat out front to watch the show, Libby had glanced around the audience during this trick and noted with a smile that the men down front seemed particularly enamored of it, or more likely of the cutaway slit up the front of Vera's blue dress. Several of the men were regular stage-door Johnnies, who filled Vera's dressing room after every evening performance. As Carlo waved his electric wand, Vera had aimed a few winks directly at this crew, but Libby suspected this was all for show. Not once in all the weeks Vera had been in Portland had Libby seen her accept any offers for late-night suppers or drinks. Vera knew how to play to the men, and accepted their flowers and compliments, but she was wise enough to know that to favor one man in particular would be to lose the adoration of the throng. Libby realized now that, after all of the men had left every night, Vera was left in her tatty dressing room with nothing but a lot of overflowing vases. She wondered sadly if, beneath the glamorous façade, Vera's life had been lonely.

Recalling the magic act's true star, she suspected that Signor Carlo, who was still reciting his litany of woes, was in even worse shape career-wise than perhaps he realized.

"And tell me what I am to do now?" Carlo was saying, "I have to go back to San Francisco and find a new girl, and then take all the time to train her, and — il Dio mio! — it is all too horrible to think about. Not that Vera did so very much in the act, you understand. As long as there still is a Signor Carlo the act will rise again! But yet, she had a certain style, my Vera."

He slumped against the proscenium arch, then glanced surreptitiously at his watch. "Where are those moving men? I must be at my train in five minutes! There are nothing but lazy, no-good people in this city. They must hurry... I will stay in this city not a minute longer than I have to! It is a lawless place that would do such a thing to my carissima. What sort of a city is it that treats Signor Carlo this way?"

Without waiting for an answer, he rushed through the wings towards the dressing area, yelling about having a train to catch. During his entire speech Libby had not said a single word, not that Signor Carlo seemed to notice. All the way from backstage and up the stairs, she could hear him instructing the porters how to carry his trunk, yelling about its delicate contents and swearing that he would have their heads if they dropped it. Libby noticed that whenever he got angry or flustered, his Italian accent slipped from thick to nonexistent. With a sigh, she headed back to her sewing.