

The Insanity of Murder

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Part One

Chapter One

The Necropolis Railway, railway of the dead. Surely, Florence McClelland thought, there was no better place to plant a bomb.

Daphne glanced at the words above the well-lit station arch and snorted. ‘Why they need a sign up there, Lord knows. One can smell it from here.’

Was her co-conspirator teasing? Florence inhaled. All she could smell was the usual aroma of the London streets: lingering motorcar exhausts, horse dung, soot, and the pungency of blocked drains from a nearby public convenience. Now an image of malodorous corpses filled her mind, stacked in layers, waiting patiently for their final journey to the country cemetery.

Florence tightened her fists around the handlebars of her bicycle. The splashes of dried white paint over its seat and frame were an amusing reminder of the night they’d daubed their slogans across the Prime Minister’s motorcar — she hadn’t had so much fun in months. Thoughts of that escapade bolstered her spirits somewhat, though not enough to keep her from sticking like a limpet to Daphne’s tail. It was ridiculous really, her revulsion and her fear. With an autopsy surgeon as a sister, and her friend Daphne a nurse, she should be used to such earthy talk. But truth be told, the demystifying of death seemed to have made the process all the more horrific to her. Florence wondered, not for the first time, why she had volunteered for this mission.

Daphne came to a sudden halt causing Florence to drive her front wheel into her friend’s calf. ‘Sorry,’ she murmured.

Unperturbed, Daphne stopped, nodding towards some spearheaded railings. ‘Over there should do.’

They wheeled their bicycles over, propping them up with a racket sufficient to wake the station’s occupants. Florence held her breath and peered about. Nothing stirred, nor was there any sudden light from the windows of the funeral office. Given the hour there was little traffic about. The headlamps of the occasional motorcar pierced the sooty darkness. The lantern of a delivery cart swung to the rhythm of the lumbering horse, its driver hunched half asleep over the reins.

Florence hefted a small but heavy leather attaché case from her bicycle’s basket and followed Daphne to the station entrance. The double wrought iron gate to the station was wide enough for a hearse or funeral carriage to pass through with plenty of space on each side. Beyond the gate she glimpsed a passage lined with clean white bricks. The hands of

an illuminated ceiling clock pointed to five minutes after one. To the left of the gate the funeral offices loomed, to the right, a blackened blank wall. They almost stumbled across a vagrant woman slumped asleep against it. Daphne paused to lift the brim of the woman's floppy straw hat.

'Don't wake her, for goodness sake.' Florence took hold of Daphne's arm and pulled her away.

'She might be someone from the Women's Clinic.' Like Florence's sister Dody, Daphne's mind never strayed far from her work.

Florence sighed. 'There's nothing you can do for her now. We'll just have to shoo her away after we've planted the bomb.'

'Yes, of course. And we must make sure to cover our faces so we can't be identified.'

Florence nodded. They'd both looped scarves around their necks to pull over their faces should circumstances warrant it.

Daphne turned the handle of the gate. It was locked, as expected. At least the place did not employ a night watchman — or so their intelligence team had assured them.

'Who in their right mind would want to break into *that* place?' Christabel Pankhurst, the suffragette leader, had said during their final briefing.

Daphne linked her hands and hoisted Florence up as if into a saddle. Florence grabbed at the gate's top curlicues, her free foot nudging at the decorative wrought iron for a toehold. Withdrawing her foot from Daphne's hands, she spread herself against the eight-foot-high gate like a four-legged spider. In a bruising manoeuvre, she hooked her knee over the top curlicue and hauled her stomach and thigh over the gate. Positioned thus, she grabbed hold of the attaché case that Daphne, standing on tiptoes, held out to her. Florence let gravity do the rest. Allowing her body to slide down the other side she landed gracefully on her feet, with only a slight thump of the case.

As she unravelled her bunched up skirt, renewed confidence overtook her earlier feelings of trepidation. All that jujitsu training seemed to be paying off. And didn't Christabel say that Daphne and she had been chosen from the ranks of volunteers for their lithe bodies and athleticism? 'Young, fit and passionate — just the ticket,' were their leader's very words.

'Nothing to it,' Florence whispered, adjusting her hat. She'd selected a sensible toque for the mission. It wouldn't do to wear a big flapping hat likely to fall off at the critical moment.

She thrust her hands through the gate to make a stirrup for Daphne and within seconds Daphne was over the gate, too, and standing beside her in the first and second class entrance of the Necropolis Railway.

Florence had not attended a funeral here since she was a child, yet she could still remember the place with almost photographic detail. The ceiling was made of glass, the passageway paved with white tiles and bordered with potted palms and beech trees to lift a mourner's gloom. Gilt-adorned doors protected the plush first-class waiting rooms. The not-quite-so-plush doors of the second-class rooms were adorned with silvery-coloured tracery. The third-class hall was situated out of sight further down the railway track.

Deliveries for the undertakers rested against the passage wall: crates, a heavy stack of memorial leaflets, a wooden barrel — sherry for the mourners, perhaps? Embalming fluid? *Don't be silly*. Florence attempted to rein in her galloping imagination. The mortuary rooms were much further down the passage, conveniently located in the arches of the old viaduct, where the bomb's impact would not reach. Those rooms would have their own delivery entrance. Mortuary supplies would not be kept here.

The women glanced at one another. Without words they edged the barrel towards the gate. When their mission was accomplished they could use it to climb back over the gate and make a speedy getaway.

Florence squatted on the ground and clicked the case open. Daphne removed the newspaper wrapping around their lantern and lit the wick. They closed the bag leaving the wired and similarly wrapped dynamite in situ and set off down the passageway. Their footsteps echoed off the tiled floor as they passed the waiting rooms. They stopped when they reached the room they were looking for, the main Brookwood Cemetery administration office. While Daphne shone the lantern on the door lock, Florence unsheathed her hatpin and prodded at the keyhole. One of their members had learned the technique when she was last imprisoned and had passed her skills on to the rest of the Bloomsbury Suffragette Division. The tumbler gave way and the door opened with a satisfying groan.

At first glance the room looked no different to any other office: shelves bulging with files and books, a partner's desk, and visitors' chairs. The photographs on the walls, however, marked the place as unusual, depicting row after row of regimented graves and decorative mausoleums; mournful angels and weeping cherubs; eerie glades and shady bowers; oversized urns and weighty crosses.

Daphne put the lantern on the desk. Even the robust nurse seemed to have paled beneath its rosy glow. ‘Simply ghastly,’ she murmured as she looked around. ‘Who could work in such a place? All those graves look so wrong massed together in the countryside like that — industrial even. And where’s the church? No pictures of a church at all.’

‘Almost like the new housing estates,’ Florence agreed. ‘But I suppose they have to put the bodies somewhere, and there’s no room left in London for them. Come on, old girl ...’ She encouraged her friend, hoping her voice sounded stronger than it felt. ‘Let’s keep our minds on the job. Put the bomb there on the visitor’s chair. It doesn’t have to be hidden. It’s not as if anyone’s going to see it.’

Florence held out the attaché case and Daphne removed the bomb — sticks of dynamite wired by their Irish explosives expert to an alarm clock. She glanced at the fob on her coat, set the alarm clock for one thirty, gave it a wind and placed it back in the case on the chair.

Florence could not help herself — she shot Daphne a schoolgirl smile. ‘Just a minute,’ she said, removing some colourful ribbons from her pocket and tying them to the handle of the case.

Daphne laughed. ‘What’s the point? The ribbons will be blown to smithereens anyway.’

‘Symbolism, my dear Daphne, symbolism.’

Daphne grinned and grabbed the lantern. They rushed from the office and closed the door, both leaning against it as if to contain a wild beast. Upon meeting one another’s eyes, they erupted into peals of nervous laughter — they’d done it!

‘Oi, what the ’ell do you fink you’re doin’?’

The women gasped and whirled towards the voice, trying to make out the face behind the raised lantern. The man seemed a long way up. *Shooting death!* Their intelligence team had got it wrong. There *was* a night watchman, and he was a burly fellow to boot.

‘My dog, sir, I came for my dog,’ she said shakily. ‘We were taking her for a walk and she squeezed under the gate. She’s very small — no bigger than a rabbit. Have you seen her?’

The women began to edge back down the passage towards the main entrance. At a fast sprint they might make it to the gate before him. But that would mean leaving the man behind to the mercy of the bomb, and they couldn’t do that.

‘A likely story,’ he said. ‘You was in that office, I saw you leave. You’re some of ’em pesky suffragettes. I’ll stake my life on it.’

Lord, Florence thought, you might well have to. Bloody hell, they had less than ten minutes — what to do?

‘Just stay where you are, right there.’ The man moved towards them and raised his arm as if to clamp Florence on the shoulder. Before he could connect, though, her training kicked in. With snake-like speed she grabbed his arm and twisted her body under his. His lantern shattered as it hit the floor. For the briefest of moments, he lay across her shoulder like a sack of coal. Then, with an arch of her back and a kick of her hip, she sent him tumbling through the air to land on the tiled floor like a slab of dead mutton.

Daphne clapped her hands. ‘Bravo, Florence! Bravo!’

Florence dropped to her knees and examined the unconscious man. Her sense of elation trickled away with the blood that streamed from his head and bloomed red upon the white tiles.

‘He must have cracked his head when he fell,’ Daphne said as she felt the man’s pulse. She lifted his eyelids and shone the lantern into his eyes. ‘Alive, thank God, but concussed. What are we going to do?’

‘Do you know how to turn the bomb off?’ Florence asked.

Daphne looked stunned. ‘No, I thought *you* knew.’

A frozen patch in Florence’s stomach began to spread through her body. ‘They only ... they only taught me how to set the alarm clock, not turn it off.’ She put her hands to her mouth and chewed on her glove, eyes fixed on the ceiling clock as if she could will time to stand still. In five minutes the office would be blown to bits.

‘We can’t carry him over the gate ...’ *Think, think, think*, Florence murmured to herself. She took a deep breath, roused herself from her numbed state of panic and patted the watchman down. A bulge in his waistcoat revealed a heavy iron key.

‘To the gate?’ Daphne asked.

‘I sincerely hope so.’

To their relief the key turned in the lock and the gate swung open. They grabbed an arm each and dragged the man into the street, leaving a slippery red trail in their wake. Florence felt sick. There was not supposed to have been anyone in the building at this time of night – that was one of the main reasons the Necropolis Railway had been chosen for the attack. An explosion here would provoke shock and horror and draw tremendous attention to their cause, but would do little damage. ‘Not a cat or a canary’ was to be injured during their battle for the vote. They had just broken one of the suffragettes’ most rigorously enforced rules.

They dragged the unconscious man to safety behind the gas-lit public convenience. The old woman had left her spot by the railings and there was no one in the vicinity of the station entrance.

Fear for the watchman had erased Florence's sense of time. When the station exploded, it struck with the surprise of a thunderclap, knocking her to the ground. She curled into a foetal position while everything happened at once. Overwhelming pressure built up in her body and threatened to burst her apart. A sucking motion, like the force of a retreating wave, tore at her clothes. The office windows erupted; shattered glass cascaded down, ricocheting off the ground like hail. Smoke and flames spewed from the blown gate.

The women huddled behind the convenience, shielding the injured man as best they could. The small building shook as heavy objects landed on its roof. Ornate gas lamps popped and sputtered. Putrid fumes scoured their lungs. The women gasped for air and retched.

When at last the racket began to diminish and the air to settle, Florence peered tentatively around the corner, her ears ringing. Then there was the pop of another, smaller explosion. Something cannonballed through the air towards her. She darted back behind the wall and watched as the object rolled for a few feet before coming to a halt.

A woman's head.

Two dull blue human eyes, fixed and unwavering, gazed back into her own.

Chapter Two

‘Wake up, Miss Dody, wake up.’ Annie’s voice invaded Dody’s dreams. She screwed up her eyes under the lemony flare of the electric light and focused on her bedside clock — ten past three — and moaned.

‘Telephone call for you, miss. The police want a word,’ her maid said.

At the mention of police, Dody flung back the bedclothes and allowed Annie to help her into her silk kimono and slippers.

‘Did the policeman give you his name?’

‘No, miss. But it weren’t Chief Inspector Pike if that’s what you were thinking.’

Annie never tired of showing her disapproval of Matthew Pike, a regular visitor to the house. In most households the maid would be disciplined for such impertinence, but in her own home Dody preferred to choose her battles. There were battles enough to cope with at the mortuary. She sighed, rubbed the sleep from her eyes and made her way down the three flights of stairs to the telephone in the hall.

Superintendent Shepherd’s fuss and bluster made his voice hard to hear above the static. She dug the telephone’s receiving device into her ear, only catching fragments of speech. ‘Necropolis Railway ... explosion ... bodies ... Armageddon ...’

‘You want me at the railway station now to help retrieve body parts?’ Dody translated.

The static on the line was swept away as if by a broom. ‘Miss, err, Doctor. Have you not listened to a word I’ve said?’

Battles, Dody reminded herself. ‘I’ll be there as soon as I can, sir.’ She set the earpiece back on its hook and turned to Annie who was hovering on the stairs. ‘Wake Fletcher, please, and have him bring the car to the front of the house. And give Florence my apologies when she gets up — I assume she’s home now? I’ll probably miss her at breakfast.’

Annie glanced back up the stairs and opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, then changed her mind. Dody had no time for playing games with the maid. ‘Lay my work clothes out on the bed, please.’

‘Cape too, Miss Dody?’

‘No, I think my black velvet coat is more appropriate. I will need full use of my hands and the cape will get in the way.’

The black will also hide the stains, Dody thought as she steeled herself for whatever the night had in store for her.

Headlamps from half a dozen police vans and several fire engines shone on what was left of the station. Fletcher parked on the other side of Westminster Bridge Road and opened the passenger door for Dody. As soon as she stepped from the car a police sergeant scurried over to her.

‘You can’t park ’ere, ma’am, the ’ole place is out-a-bounds.’ Behind him other policemen were attempting to erect wooden barricades around the perimeter of the bombsite, their progress hampered by a crowd of spectators, many wearing overcoats over their night things, jostling for a closer look at the carnage.

‘Give us a look!’

‘What’s goin’ on ’ere?’

‘That racket near shook me out of bed!’

‘This road needs to be blocked off too,’ the sergeant shouted over his shoulder before returning his attention to Dody.

‘I’m Doctor McClelland, senior autopsy assistant to Doctor Bernard Spilsbury. Superintendent Shepherd has requested my presence at the scene.’ Dody had to shout above the din of police whistles, clanging bells, and the cries of the onlookers. She had no formal identification with her, but found a letterhead from the Paddington Mortuary in her pocket and handed it over.

The sergeant glanced at it and nodded his head. ‘That’ll do. Come with me then, ma’am, and watch your step.’

Dody told Fletcher not to wait, that she would find a telephone and call when she needed a lift home. She followed the sergeant, picking her way across rippled tarmac that could have been shaped by the sea. A fire engine chugged past, heading away from the Necropolis Station, firemen clinging to its sides. Dull light reflected through the soot on the men’s once dazzling brass helmets. Another engine near a cluster of police vans broke away, also heading for home. Perhaps the fire is under control now, Dody thought. She could see no flames from the ruined station and only the occasional thin plume of smoke.

She had never seen the aftermath of an explosion before and the first thing that assaulted her senses was the appalling smell. A projectile must have penetrated a sewerage pipe near a public convenience and raw sewage flooded the area, motorcar

headlamps dancing upon pools of effluent. After carefully stepping around one such evil-smelling mire, she found herself confronted by a miasma of other odours: brick dust, industrial-smelling smoke, and a metallic tang she guessed might be gunpowder. No odour of recent death, thank goodness. Now *that* was a smell to which she was accustomed.

Before her, the Necropolis Station building revealed itself like an opened dolls' house. A teetering desk hung over the edge of one of the exposed rooms, sheets of paper blowing about in a whirl and fluttering. One landed at Dody's feet. She stooped to pick it up and found it to be an advertisement for a cherrywood coffin for the special price of twenty-one guineas — enough to feed several poor families for a year. She balled the paper and tossed it to the ground.

'Wait there, please, ma'am, and I'll see if the superintendent is ready for you,' the sergeant said, as he walked off towards three non-uniformed men engrossed in conversation to the left of the ruined station entrance.

Dody continued her examination of the station building. Below the exposed offices yawned a deep dark hole. A group of cursing firemen struggled with wedging one of several props already rammed into place to stop the upper stories from collapsing into the chasm. The men dropped the prop and jumped back just as a ceiling beam gave way and crashed to the ground. Plaster rained down but the floor held. Dody stepped back further from the danger, unaware, until it was too late, of a spear of wood sticking out of a pile of rubble behind her. As she attempted to yank the wood free from her clothing it dug further into the fabric of her skirt and split the grey linen to her knee.

'So much for practical work clothes,' she grumbled aloud. Her coat was not long enough to hide the lower part of the tear and the white bloom of her petticoat drew the eye like bunting.

Tired of waiting for permission to speak, she approached the men. One was Superintendent Shepherd, the flapping bulk of his rubber Mackintosh making him unmistakable. Next to him — just as tall, though with a much prouder, upright frame — stood Pike's turbaned assistant, Constable Singh. The slightly smaller man with the cane beside Singh was Pike himself, oblivious as always to the handsome figure he cut. Dody's heart gave a jolt. Conflicting schedules prevented regular liaisons with her lover, so even these circumstances were better than nothing. The men had not noticed her so she took the opportunity to gather her composure. In public, Pike was just another policeman, and she was Doctor Dorothy McClelland, senior assistant — sole assistant, actually — to

chief pathologist Bernard Spilsbury. Their paths occasionally crossed at the mortuary or at a crime scene, but their relationship had never been anything but professional. In this fictional world, she had no idea if he snored (he didn't), whether he played the piano, (he did, beautifully) or where he was born (Yorkshire), or even that he was ex-military. He could be expected to know more about her, however. Her Fabian parents and suffragette sister meant that her family history was common knowledge to the police. But only Pike knew how much she hated Brussels sprouts. Or how the way he put his lips to her ear after he had pulled off her earrings, made her skin tingle ...

While Dody paused in the shadows of the ruined building, she caught snatches of the men's conversation.

'Unions, y'think, Pike? I'm thinking about that American union, the one that recently blew up the *Los Angeles Times* building.'

'Perhaps, sir,' Pike answered neutrally.

'Irish? Anarchists? Those mad bloody women? God knows our country has enough enemies these days. Could even be the Germans, what?'

'No one has yet claimed responsibility,' Pike said. 'As for the "bloody mad women", they pride themselves on not allowing their antics to endanger human life.'

Dody nodded in silent agreement. Still, she was relieved to know that Florence had been tucked up in bed at home all night.

'Whoever did it is probably too ashamed to own up. I mean there's destruction and destruction. This was certainly overkill,' Shepherd said.

'The firemen think the bomb was planted directly above a gas line.' Pike paused. 'It's quite possible that this level of destruction was unintentional; it blew all the way to the viaduct and the station tracks. Even roused the lunatics at Bedlam, apparently.'

Bethlem Hospital for the Insane. Dody silently chided Pike for referring to the asylum by its former, much maligned name.

'And Waterloo Station proper?' Shepherd asked.

'Unscathed, thank God, but nearby shops have suffered some damage, broken windows mostly.'

Dody stepped out of the shadows and revealed herself to the policemen. 'You sent for me, Superintendent.'

The sergeant who had escorted her onto the site gave her a black look — obviously she should have waited for him to announce her. He slapped his hands against his sides and left her to it, heading back to his roadblock on the main road.

Shepherd nodded absently. 'Good evening, Doctor McClelland.' He spotted the tear in her skirt and suddenly gave her his full attention. 'Good God,' she heard him mutter under his breath, 'can't you even dress like a decent woman?'

Dody ignored him.

'Doctor.' Pike and Singh spoke simultaneously, Pike lifting his bowler hat, Singh bowing so low he almost touched his knees with the tip of his bushy black beard.

Shepherd's rubber-clad arm flapped in the direction of a cluster of ambulances. 'Remains. Ambulance. If you would be so kind.'

'Are there any survivors?' Dody asked Pike.

'Only one person has been found alive, the night watchman. He was flung away from the explosion and landed over there.' Pike used his cane to point towards the public convenience on the other side of the station road. The building was missing several of its lamps and there were jagged gaps in its tiled roof. 'He was taken to hospital but is not expected to survive. I plan on seeing him myself later today if he is still alive. If not ...' Pike shrugged, 'it'll be up to you to get some answers from the body parts. I have yet to contact the management of the surrounding offices to ascertain how many people had been working late. Several shopkeepers and their families were woken by the blast, but the damage south of the station, where it is more populous, is minimal, with only a few residences affected, thank God.'

A young policeman marched up to them and held out a large paper bag to Pike.

'Excuse me, sir, the sergeant wanted you to have a look at this.'

Shepherd reached out for it.

'Gloves, sir,' Pike courteously reminded him.

Shepherd made a useless show of patting down his mac.

Pike removed some leather gloves from his coat pocket, slipped them on and took the bag. The young policeman shone his lamp into it as Pike removed the top quarter of a small attaché case, a leather handle and clasp barely clinging to some tattered shreds of charred leather.

'Where was this found, officer?' Pike asked as he carefully examined the object.

'Shine the light on the handle, please.'

'Just outside the big 'ole, sir. The firemen think it was blown clear from the ignition point.'

Pike pointed to some blackened threads of material tied around the handle of the case. Placing the remains of the case on the ground he squatted next to it and carefully untied

what appeared to be the remnants of three ribbons. The constable shone his lamp on them. Underneath the charred knot the colours were clear. 'Purple for dignity, green for hope, and white for purity,' he murmured.

Dody drew a breath — the suffragette colours.

'Those bloody women, I knew it!' Shepherd bellowed. 'Someone's got to pay this time. Someone will hang!'

'Not necessarily a suffragette, sir,' Pike said calmly as he climbed to his feet. 'Until we have all the facts, we cannot regard the ribbons as irrefutable evidence.'

Dody was well aware how much Pike hated jumping to conclusions. A scientific rationale vital to their respective specialties was one of the many things they had in common.

Shepherd's jowly face reddened at Pike's contradiction, even his fluffy mutton chop whiskers seemed to stiffen. But at least he had the presence of mind to bite back his words. Arguing with his chief inspector in front of the inferior ranks would be poor form indeed. Dody could not fathom how Pike put up with the idiot of a man. She could never have suffered such a fool.

Pike asked the constable to fetch the sergeant so they could put their investigation strategy into place. Dody left them to it and picked her way over the rubble to the ambulances. The lights from the headlamps were hazy with dust and lingering smoke. Several wooden barrels stood alongside a row of canvas body bags. Men milled around, getting on with their gruesome harvest. Behind an ambulance, someone gagged and retched.

'Some of the bodies are more or less complete, Doctor,' an ambulance attendant explained, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. 'We've put those straight under the blankets.'

Dody unbuttoned the top half of one of the canvas bags and found the body of a woman, her decapitated head resting on her breast. She asked the attendant if she could borrow his lantern and shone it into the bag.

'Very little blood on the body or in the bag — a good sign.'

'Why so, Doctor?' the attendant asked.

'It means this woman was already dead when she was decapitated.' Dody gently removed the head from the bag, pulled back the cascade of grey hair and showed the man the almost bloodless neck wound.

The man turned away. 'I wish I hadn't asked,' he muttered.

Dody replaced the head and closed the staring blue eyes. It was likely that the corpse had been waiting in one of the undertakers' premises for transportation by rail to the cemetery. She climbed to her feet, moved over to one of the barrels and glimpsed a tangle of charred limbs. A severed hand reached out as if in supplication. Red nail varnish, the latest fashion foible, shone dully under the ambulance's headlamps.

