

WALKING SHADOWS

I am a realist. By this I mean I see things as they are, not as they aren't. The suspension of disbelief seems to me pointless. I am therefore not normally a theatre-goer. But here I was, on a damp December evening, in a dismal seaside town, waiting at the railway station, with two tickets for the front stalls at the Lyceum in my overcoat pocket.

When I'd suggested the excursion, Venetia's response had been enchanting.

—Dear Freddie, she said. What fun. A last night out before my life changes for ever and ever. You can tell me which of the bridesmaids you plan to seduce.

For my part, I hoped a frothy comedy might help set the scene and make things a little less awkward. Because, as a realist, I recognised that persuading Venetia I was the right man for her wasn't going to be easy. Not when she was due to be married on Saturday. Not when she thought she loved Hugo Pocock. Not when I was Hugo's best man.

(I did not dare imagine what my sister, Abigail, would say.)

And then came Venetia's text:

sorry, sorry. tiny crisis. will miss show. see you afterwards. V. xxx

The prospect of sitting through two-and-a-half hours of *Round and Round the Gooseberry Bush* didn't appeal to me. I tore the tickets in two, tossed them in a bin and, cursing the howling wind and torrential rain, looked for the nearest pub.

There was little to recommend The Poulterer's Arms. It was dark and dingy and smelt slightly sulphurous. The landlord didn't see me at first but, when he finally looked up from his newspaper, I ordered a pint of *Stoat's Winter Warmer*, which I took to a table by the fireplace. The grate was grey and empty and held no memory of heat. The only other drinkers were three old women, who sat in a silent row, staring straight ahead, as if they were looking out to sea.

A second text from Venetia:

mini hiccup. dealing with it. V. xxx

I emptied my glass and went back to the bar.

—Sorry, said the landlord. Didn't see you there. Have to change the barrel.

While waiting, I rehearsed my lines:

“Venetia, there's something I really need to say ...”

“Venetia, there's something I really have to tell you ...”

“Venetia, there's something you really ought to know ...”

I was right. This wasn't going to be easy.

With my fresh pint of *Stoat's*, I returned to the table by the fireplace where I found I now had the company of an elderly gentleman. As I approached, he looked up at me through pale blue eyes, in which I thought I detected an expression of slight unease. For a moment, we regarded one another.

—Hello, I said.

His expression cleared at once.

—Ah, good evening, he said. It's my custom to sit at this table. I hope you have no objection.

I said I had none and asked if he minded my sitting with him.

—No, no. Not at all, he said. Do sit down. Are you expecting someone to join you? I said that I was but not yet.

—Good, good, he said. Then please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Cecil Hopwood.

He paused.

The pause lengthened.

—Cecil Hopwood, the actor? The actor, Cecil Hopwood?

—I'm afraid I ...

—No, no. There was perhaps a chance that you might have ...

—Would I have ...?

—Oh, yes, dear boy. Yes, yes. You'll certainly have seen me on the television.

Fleetingly, very fleetingly. My name appears at the tail end of the cast list. I play small parts, very small parts. A single scene. Sometimes two. Never more than three. Nothing

you'd remember. I have a forgettable face, you see, which is, of course, a blessing in my profession. I can be cast over and over again. In consequence, I'm seldom out of work. And work is all we actors ask for because, as I'm sure you know, actors are only truly alive while they're working.

—Can I ask what you've ... ?

—Oh, please don't ask me what I've been in, dear boy. Everything, everything. And all forgotten. The shows, the lines, the parts. Forgetting is a skill I learnt many years ago. I trained in weekly rep, you see. Weekly rep at the Theatre Royal. A new show every Monday night. Playing this week's part in the evening, rehearsing next week's part in the morning, learning lines every afternoon. So much to learn. So much, so much. And — almost more difficult — so much to forget. The lines, the moves, the characters. Not easy putting a play aside. A part has a life of its own, you see. It tries to stay with you but you must let it go. Once a part's been played, it has to be released. Yes, yes. An actor must learn to forget.

During the silence that followed, I noticed that my companion was without a drink.

—May I offer you a ...?

—Oh, no, dear boy. I sit here. That's all I do. Unlike many in the profession, drink is not one of my vices. I have very few vices, in fact. Another reason that I'm still working. Actors don't retire, you see. They simply cease to be cast.

Another silence followed.

Why had I left it until now to speak to Venetia? Why, after all the years I'd known her, had I said nothing before? The truth is, I suppose, that I hadn't really noticed her. She was simply another of Abigail's giggly girlfriends. But when Hugo noticed Venetia, I began to notice her, too. More and more, until ...

—Bunny Montague ...

—I'm sorry?

—Dear Bunny. He took a shine to me, you see. Invited me to join his company at the Theatre Royal. I'd always known I wanted to be an actor. Being myself had never felt quite enough. I wanted to be other people, too. Bunny had an eye for the boys. Boys —

men — don't interest me much but I was happy enough to play along for a while. It was all very innocent. For the first year there were three or four walk-on parts and I understudied all the male leads. Oh, the lines I learnt and never had the chance to speak. Bunny would sit in the stalls, watching rehearsals and smoking a huge Havana cigar. Dear Bunny Montague. Long since dead, of course.

My companion raised his hand in a gesture of farewell.

Hugo, I thought. Hugo Pocock. My oldest friend. How long had I known him? Years and years. But was he really a friend? After all, we had nothing in common. Except, of course, that we both loved Venetia. Although Hugo didn't know that. Not yet ...

—I'm as certain as I am of anything, said Cecil Hopwood. Bunny Montague won't have left the Theatre Royal. No, no. He'll still be there. Fresh cigar smoke lingering in the stalls. There's an affinity between 'the profession' and 'the other world', you see. Theatres are full of shadows. Ghosts, if you like. We had our share at the Theatre Royal. The stage door keeper, sacked for drunkenness, who turned lights on and off at awkward moments. The ASM who'd been jilted by her lover and stepped in front of a train and used to shuffle things around on the props table causing all sorts of panic and confusion. The old character actor with a hacking cough who walked the corridors every evening, wearing a brown cloak and a tin crown. All harmless. Quite benign ...

Another text from Venetia:

crisis averted. stay put, dear freddie. V. xxx

What was really beyond me was what Venetia could possibly see in Hugo. His floppy hair, his foolish grin, his shiny pink cheeks. What on earth was the attraction? A wonderful girl like Venetia. Bright, beautiful. It defied belief. Of course Hugo's family had money. Lots of it. A mansion in Leicestershire, an apartment in Manhattan, a chalet in Verbier. But I couldn't believe that would make any difference. Not to someone like Venetia ...

—Alaric Crane and ...

—I'm sorry?

—Alaric Crane and Violet Martillo. They were the stars in our provincial firmament. Violet Martillo still shone brightly. Spellbinding, ethereal, almost translucent, she ascribed her youth to her 'invigorating relationships'. At the time I was too young to know what she meant. But the years had been much less kind to Alaric Crane. Alcohol. It causes some people to sparkle and others to shrivel. All so sad. Alaric Crane was hopelessly in love with Violet Martillo, you see, and always had been, but — except on stage — she would have nothing to do with him. She said that any sort of consummation would affect the 'chemistry' between them and she couldn't allow it. That's what drove him to drink. Although Alaric was a very disciplined actor. Learnt his lines quickly, always knew his moves.

The rest of the company showed no interest in me. I was simply 'another of Bunny's boys'. But Alaric took me under his wing. Passed on his stagecraft secrets, taught me the tricks of the trade. In return, I listened to him, night after night, as he drank his whisky and expounded on his love for Violet Martillo. It was a small price to pay ...

The truth is I was caught off-guard. It all happened so quickly. One moment Hugo was hanging about like a lovesick spaniel; the next he was leaping up and down saying he and Venetia were engaged. I was utterly wrong-footed. All I could do after that was tag along, squashed into the back-seat of Hugo's showy little sports car. They didn't seem to mind having me with them. In fact they both said they liked it. I found I had become Venetia's 'special chum' which wasn't what I wanted at all ...

—Yes, yes. A highly disciplined actor ...

—Would you mind if I ... ?

—No, no, old boy. Please do. Please do.

I called Venetia's mobile but it went straight to voicemail. The evening was fading away and with it the time I had left to convince Venetia that she was about to make a grave mistake. That she ought to ditch her limp, love-struck fiancé, Hugo Pocock, and instead she should marry me. I didn't leave a message ...

—A fishbone was Alaric's undoing. Trout, I believe. He always took his lunch at the Grand Hotel where a table was reserved for him. The fishbone was quickly removed by the hotel doctor but it had done some damage to his throat and he was forbidden to speak for ten days. Bunny took me aside and asked me how I felt about going on that evening. I'd learnt the part. I told him I'd be fine. The local critic was most complimentary about my performance and Violet Martillo, who before then had not spoken to me, now began to notice me much more. More than was comfortable, in fact. To be frank, dear boy, it was tiresome because women — girls — don't interest me either ...

Could I really bring myself to do it to Hugo? He might be a bore with a simpering grin but I'd known him since we were both in short trousers. Taking Venetia from Hugo would be a deplorable act. Unpardonable, inexcusable. And then I pictured her. The sweet smile, the silken hair, the swanlike neck. Could I bring myself to do such a thing to Hugo? Yes, I thought. Yes, I could.

—After the episode of the fishbone, Alaric was never quite the same. He'd lost his self-belief and was drinking more and more. He existed in a thin mist of whisky and was having difficulty with his lines. He missed cues. His pauses lengthened. There were rows at rehearsals when the girl on the book either prompted him too soon or not soon enough. One night he missed an entrance. The audience didn't notice — audiences seldom do — but it couldn't continue. I've forgotten whether it was a Jacobean tragedy or a Restoration comedy when Bunny cast me for the lead. Alaric was apoplectic. He stormed out of the theatre vowing never to return. He'd done this on other occasions but Bunny had always coaxed him back. This time he let him go. It's rather shameful to admit how little we missed him. We didn't forget him, but we didn't remember him, either. Bunny had a new boy to dote on, Violet's attentions were firmly fixed on me and I was thrilled to find myself playing leading roles. It was a terrible shock, of course, to learn that Alaric Crane had hanged himself in a bedroom in the Grand Hotel, but — so we told ourselves —the show must go on. And for some time it did ...

I excused myself and went to order another pint of *Stoat's*. The simpering twit and his idiot grin, I thought. Hugo doesn't deserve her. Showing off in his little sports car which he always drives ridiculously recklessly. My course was clear. Venetia had to be rescued. I steered my way resolutely back to the table by the fireplace.

—One night, after the final curtain, I was returning to my dressing-room when I saw a familiar figure standing outside the door. As I approached, he walked away and disappeared into the darkness. Puzzled and apprehensive, I opened the dressing-room door and looked in. There, written in greasepaint on the mirror:

A POOR PLAYER, THAT ...

It was most unsettling but it didn't happen again. What happened instead was worse. Alaric Crane started popping up in the audience. In a box, in the grand circle, at the back of the stalls. Jeering and gesturing. Thumbing his nose at me. It was very disconcerting. Later he took to standing in the wings, emitting strange sounds. Finally, he began appearing in my scenes. Stage left. Stage right. Wherever I looked, there was Alaric Crane. Sneering and snarling. Blocking my entrances and exits. More than once, I found him standing next to me at a curtain call. It was becoming unbearable. And then, quite suddenly, it stopped. A week or two went by and I began to relax.

—I'll just try again ...

—Of course, dear boy. Of course.

Again my call went straight to voicemail. This time I left a message:

"I must speak to you urgently, Venetia ... Now ... Before you ... Before you make a terrible mistake. Call me back ... Right away ..."

—Did you know that there are eighteen ghosts in Shakespeare's plays and that eleven of them appear in Richard III Act V Scene 5?

I confessed that I didn't.

—No, no. Few people do. Where was I? Oh, yes. I thought I'd seen the last of Alaric Crane but then there he was again. Standing outside my dressing-room. This time, however, instead of walking away, he went in. My pulse quickened. I began to perspire. With some trepidation, I opened the dressing-room door. What was I going to find? My

jacket was draped across a chair. A glass of water stood on the table. My paper was lying open. All was exactly as I had left it. In a state of some relief, I sat down, picked up *The Evening Herald* and, as was my habit, set about completing the crossword. Above me, the Tannoy was relaying the action from the stage. All was as it should be. There were several scenes before my next entrance. Did I fall asleep? I don't know. I can't say. Suddenly I became aware that time had passed and my entrance was fast approaching. There was less than a minute before I was on. I checked myself in the mirror, hurried to the door and turned the handle. Nothing. The door was stuck. I turned the handle again. To the left. To the right. I pushed. I pulled. In the background, I could hear the Tannoy. In half-a-minute I would be off. In a state of rising panic, I rattled and scratched and banged at the door. Still nothing. Fifteen seconds. Ten seconds. I sobbed and shouted. Five seconds. And then it was too late. Silence. A deep chasm. An empty void. A darkness in which I thought I heard the whisper of forgotten lines, melancholy sighs, soft moaning. Then a jolt. A shuddering crack. A low groan. The odour of stale whisky. Something knocking against me. Once, twice, three times. What? A dead weight, a sack, a body. Swinging from side to side, as if suspended from above. After which? Again I can't say but I found I was alone in my dressing-room, sitting in my chair and someone was knocking at the door. I stood up and opened it. There was Bunny's boy. Violet Martillo had sent him to let me know she was waiting for me. I followed him to the snug bar of *The Third Bell* where the company always gathered on Saturday nights. Another show over. Another week gone. The blessed emptiness of Sunday to follow. Jollity, levity, nothing amiss. I laughed. I smiled. I played my part. But I knew my nerve had deserted me. Whatever it was that had happened in the dressing-room ended my life on stage. My time at the Theatre Royal was over.

A shadow of sorrow crossed my companion's face and then passed.

—Bunny said he was sorry to see me go. I had a glittering future at the Theatre Royal, he said. He was wrong. The theatre closed the next year and became a bingo hall. Violet Martillo married one of her admirers. A rajah or a sheikh — I'm not sure which — but someone with an exotic costume. I was fortunate. My agent found me television

work. I wasn't destined to be a star, he said. I would be better off as 'dark matter'. I didn't know what he meant. I still don't.

—If you'll excuse me.

—Of course, dear boy. Of course.

Pulling open the door marked GENTLEMEN, I was greeted by a smell of cabbage and old socks. Outside, the wind and rain continued to rattle furiously at the frosted window as if they were lost souls demanding to be let in. I called Venetia's mobile again. The reception was poor and I could barely hear her.

"Venetia? Can you hear me? I'm in a pub near the station. The Poulterer's Arms. Where are you? ... Shall I come and find you? ... Venetia? ... I'll don't want to miss you ... Venetia? ... I'll wait for you here, shall I?"

The line went dead. I washed my hands vigorously. Looking in the mirror, I tried to picture Venetia's sweet face beside mine but I couldn't. Instead — it must have been the *Stoat's Winter Warmer* — what I saw was truly horrible. Blinking away the image of Hugo's silly grin, I went to the door and pulled it. Nothing. I pulled again. Still nothing. A low groan which I realised was me. Another groan which must have been the cistern. Could it really be that I was locked in the lavatory? I pushed. The door opened easily.

There was no one sitting at the table by the fireplace. I looked around. The three old drinkers had disappeared and there was no sign of Cecil Hopwood.

—Time! said the landlord, meaningfully mopping the bar.

—Excuse me, I said.

—Yes?

—The old gentleman. Has he gone?

—Which old gentleman?

—The old gentleman I was sitting with.

—Were you sitting with someone?

—Yes.

—I didn't see anyone, said the landlord

—You must have done, I said.

—Well, I didn't.

The landlord was becoming impatient.

—Are you sure? I said. We were over there. At the table by the fireplace. We've been sitting there all evening.

—Oh, said the landlord. You mean Cecil. Was he in tonight?

—Yes.

—Yes, that's what he does. Sits there. He comes and goes. Part of the furniture. I generally forget he's there. He wasn't bothering you, was he?

—No, no, I said. He wasn't bothering me.

As I approached the door, it opened and there — damp and tousled in a pool of silver light, as if illuminated by each other's happiness — stood Venetia and Hugo.

—The long and the short of it is that Hugo insisted on coming, too, said Venetia. He can't bear to be without me, poor lamb. Not for one minute. How was the show? I'm so terribly sorry I missed it, Freddie.

—Time! said the landlord again, turning out the lights.

It had almost stopped raining but I declined Venetia's invitation to join them in a late-night stroll along the promenade.

—See you at breakfast, she said, waving.

Hugo, beside her, stood and grinned.

How prudent I had been, I thought, to book two separate rooms at the *Seaview Hotel*. I am, as I've said, a realist. Whatever my feverish dreams, to have made the assumption that Venetia would consent to share my bed that night would have been rash.

I don't know how long I lay awake waiting for them to return but at some point I must have fallen asleep. I woke late. Almost too late for breakfast. The dining-room was empty and I was grateful. To see Venetia and Hugo happy together would have been unbearable.

After breakfast, I climbed the stairs and stopped outside the room next to mine. The door was open. The bed was made. Had they gone so soon without saying goodbye or leaving a message? Well, it was probably for the best.

Then a call on my mobile. My sister Abigail's number.

—Yes, Abi?

—Freddie? Shocking news. Devastating.

Abigail's voice sounded hollow.

—Last night. In the storm. Hugo and Venetia. A collision with a truck.

She paused.

—Oh, Freddie. I'm so very, very sorry, she said. choking back her tears. I know how terribly fond you were of them both.