

MURDER IN THE HAUNTED
CHAMBER



BILL LEFURGY



ALSO BY BILL LEFURGY

Sarah Kennecott and Jack Harden Mystery Series

Into the Suffering City

Non-Fiction

Criminal Slang: Annotated Edition of the 1908 Dictionary of the
Vernacular of the Underworld

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ISBN (Paperback): 978-1-7345678-3-0

ISBN (Kindle): 978-1-7345678-4-7

LCCN (Paperback): 2021907328

"One need not be a chamber to be haunted" J 670/F 407 and "The whole of it came not at once" J 762/F 485: THE POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON: READING EDITION, edited by Ralph W. Franklin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1998, 1999 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965 by Mary L. Hampson.

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First edition: June 15, 2021

High Kicker Books

Takoma Park, MD

www.billlefurgy.com

For my wife and cats

One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —
One need not be a House —
The Brain has Corridors — surpassing
Material Place —

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
External Ghost
Than it's interior Confronting —
That cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase —
Than unarmed, one's a'self encounter —
In lonesome Place —

Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed —
Should startle most —
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least —

The Body — borrows a Revolver —
He bolts the Door —
O'erlooking a superior spectre —
Or More —

—Emily Dickinson

CHAPTER 1



SARAH—FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 1910, 3:00 A.M

*A*n eerie creak sounded from deep within the dark, silent house.

As usual, Sarah could not sleep. Reading something light and frivolous was the only way to quiet her hyperactive mind enough to induce slumber. The journal article open before her, “Psychology and Perception of the Paranormal,” was suitable for that purpose.

A floorboard squeaked, closer this time. Then a faint rattle as if someone had touched the doorknob. The housekeeper could be up and about, even though the woman rarely stirred at this hour.

“Hello?” No answer.

Sarah massaged her temples, exhausted. She had volunteered twelve hours a day for the past week at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital, a treatment facility for the mentally ill. She usually put in less time, but several patients came down with typhoid fever and needed her help. One patient died—an older woman who took great comfort from Sarah’s devoted attention.

She picked up reading where she left off: the deluded belief that people can communicate with the dead. “This fantasy includes encounters with ‘spirits’ purportedly claiming to offer

advice or confer criticism. The subject may talk of apparitions that appear spontaneously or via the services of so-called ‘mediums.’ We may attribute most such sightings to neurotic suggestibility, although we cannot rule out a serious personality disorder or even psychosis . . .”

Sarah closed the journal. After switching off the electric lamp, the bedroom glowed with the full moon’s cold silver brilliance. With a shiver, she pulled up the blankets and closed her eyes.

“My sweet sister.” Grace stood over the bed, wearing a pale dress. Her light hair was in a thick nighttime braid that fell over a shoulder.

“Grace. I am surprised to see you.”

She laughed softly and sat on the bed, light as a feather. “I’ve missed you terribly, Sarah. And yes, I know you’ve missed me, too. You don’t need to say so.”

Grace understood her better than anyone. Sarah sobbed as they embraced.

“You are unchanged since we last met,” said Sarah, using the sheet to dab her wet cheeks. A disturbing thought floated through her mind: she was twenty-five, and Grace was three years older. It was therefore impossible for Grace to be nineteen, as she appeared.

“And you are all grown up.” Grace leaned over to wipe away more of Sarah’s tears and stroke her hair. Her sister had exactly the right touch—a precious comfort that Sarah had dearly missed.

“I am so proud that you are a doctor with a degree from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine,” said Grace. “It’s a remarkable achievement, especially for a woman. More remarkable still is your work as a forensic pathologist on behalf of justice. All of us deeply appreciate what you are doing.”

“I am determined to hold murderers accountable for their crimes.” Sarah clutched her sister’s hand tightly.

“You have a new opportunity in that regard. Let me show you.”

Sarah was now standing in a room looking down at a young woman lying on a bed and wearing a yellow nightgown embroidered with pink roses. “Who is this sleeping person? Why am I here?”

Grace stood close by, looking at the supine form. “She is not sleeping. She is dead—murdered. Only you can find the killer.”

In an eyeblink, they were back in Sarah’s bedroom. “Grace—how can I investigate the murder of an unnamed victim in an unknown location? Will you notify the police?”

“You must use your expertise to help the police solve the crime.”

“I prefer to work alone. Except for Jack, of course.”

“Yes, I know all about your Jack,” said Grace. “But you must engage boldly with others if you are to solve this killing.”

“Grace. Explain how you can present yourself here and communicate with me when you were murdered over eight years ago. Bear in mind that I do not believe in the supernatural. I rely on tangible evidence, not on information from a dream.”

“There is more to the world than you know, darling sister. Our minds are capable of experience far beyond the ordinary. Think of love, of how different it makes you feel.”

“I have not loved another since your death.” Sarah squeezed her sister’s hand, desperate not to let her go.

“Are you sure?”

“Subjective emotion is impossible to quantify, so therefore I cannot measure my experience—”

Grace was gone, her light laughter fading into the nighttime silence.

Sarah opened her eyes, feeling oddly certain her sister had been here. Impossible.

But for reasons Sarah could not explain or even begin to justify, she was sure the woman on that bed had been recently murdered—and that she must find the killer.

CHAPTER 2



JACK—SATURDAY, APRIL 16, 1910, 4:00 P.M

The thundering shockwave from the foundry came every five seconds, vibrating his teeth with each metallic bang. It was enough like cannon fire to draw icy rivulets of flop sweat. Not good—his nerves were already as tight as a plug in a cider barrel.

Jack was last here at the water's edge in the Fells Point neighborhood weeks ago looking for a missing person. A client had a brother who, when drunk, had a habit of threatening to take a running leap into the harbor. When the brother disappeared, Jack agreed to check the wharf pilings for floaters. He found a body but it wasn't the brother. The guy eventually turned up in a New York City jail, beaten, dazed, and wearing another man's ragged clothes.

Jack's mental troubles were under control at that point. But the visions had come back.

He was nearly broke and behind on his boardinghouse rent. His most pressing need for money, however, was for trip to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for its magical mineral baths. The soothing waters might finally banish the ghosts bent on driving him insane.

He'd seen a brochure for Dr. Hope's Miracle Bath Palace in

Hot Springs and had been sold with the promise of “radioactive waters flowing from the electric heart of the Earth,” guaranteed to “cure every affliction of the body, mind, and spirit.” The brochure pictured a happy customer tucked into bed, snoozing away in a “restorative, mind-healing sleep that settles nerves and reawakens joy in the despondent.” He hadn’t slept without nightmares for weeks and weeks. At twenty-eight, he felt like an old man on his last legs.

Jack continued down the broad wharf to a sprawling pile of oyster shells eight feet high. Straining men pushed overflowing wheelbarrows up a sloping pathway to the top. Seagulls swarmed and squawked as they circled the mound looking for bits of flesh.

He took in the ramshackle collection of buildings running along the wharf’s edge. It was hard to believe this dump of an oyster packing plant made so much money for its owner.

“Hey, mac,” called Jack to a nearby barrow man. “Where can I find the boss?”

“Dunno,” the guy kept on pushing his load without looking up, “but you can bet he’s watching.”

A stiff breeze blew in from the harbor. It smelled like sewage but had the virtue of pushing away the fouler stink of rotting shellfish. The waterfront stunk, but this spot was especially nasty.

“Harden? That you?”

Jack turned to see a short man of about forty-five approaching. He wore an expensive suit with a snappy yellow tie and a blue-striped shirt. A straw boater with a broad black ribbon sat on his head.

“It is if you own this place.”

“I do.” He thrust out a short-fingered hand. As expected, the guy’s grip was like a vise.

“Had your cornflakes this morning, I see,” said Jack. A short man always had to prove something to a taller guy.

“A buddy tells me you’re a great private detective,” said the

man. “And if you got that son of a gun out of trouble, you surely can help me. Come on into the office, and let’s talk.”

The breeze lifted the boater off the man’s head and sent it rolling along the slimy pier. He dashed on stubby legs and caught the headgear just before it went into the water. Jack followed as the guy walked into the plant.

The interior was dimly lit, and it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the murk. Several dozen workers hunched over two long rows of slatted wooden crates with tin pails hanging over the side. Nearly all the laborers were kids under the age of fourteen; many were much younger. Their small hands worked furiously to pry open oysters, scoop meat for the bucket, drop the empty shells, and reach for another mollusk. The place was damp, fetid, and much colder than outside.

“Listen up, you loafers!” yelled the owner. Nobody stopped working. “See this here detective? He’s a real bastard and is going to keep an eye on you.”

A huge man leaning against the wall gave a braying laugh. “You lazy dogs are in trouble now!” The guy had “FOR MAN” written in crude letters on a card stuffed into the brim of his greasy derby hat.

“Keep them working,” said the owner. “We’ve got another load of pearlies coming in tonight.”

“You got it, boss.” The foreman hit a crate with a long club. The sharp thwap made Jack jump, but none of the workers missed a beat. They were a sad lot, with thin, foxy faces and scrawny bodies. The youngest kids stood with bare feet on splintery risers, their short arms straining to grab one oyster after another. Nobody spoke; nobody smiled.

Jack had nothing against hard work: after running away from home at eleven, he’d done plenty to support himself. But that was on farms in the fresh air without a club-carrying goon watching his every move. He’d also been lucky enough to finish fifth grade and learn the basics of reading and writing. These wretched kids had no shot at any education. Their minds would

be forever stunted and their bodies permanently damaged—all to make one man rich.

“I was just keeping them in line,” said the owner with a friendly nudge before heading through a warped door with “Office” painted in faded lettering. He dropped into a shiny leather chair. The rest of the room was a mess, with slime-green paint peeling off the walls and wooly dust balls scattered across the floor.

“I haven’t taken the job,” said Jack. “And if you want me to strong-arm kids, forget it.”

“The thief’s no kid. Have a seat.”

Jack considered walking out. He didn’t want to be in this place, and he sure didn’t want to deal with this character. But the job was supposed to pay well. He sat down.

“Here’s the deal, Harden.” The man lifted the top off a cedar humididor and pulled out a fat black cigar, which he sniffed for a good five seconds before sparking it up. “Somebody stole some photographs off me. I need them back before they fall into the wrong hands.”

“Dirty pictures?” This guy seemed like the type.

“No, nothing like that.” The man grinned as he puffed. “Just photos of my employees hard at work.”

“So?”

“So, some muckraker might think it’s wrong for me to give those brats honest work to earn money for their families.”

“I get it,” said Jack. “You’re afraid of getting dinged by the new law against child labor. Why were you ignorant enough to have those pictures in the first place?”

“Watch your mouth, pal.” The owner jabbed his cigar. “I’m paying you, remember?”

“I haven’t taken a dime.”

“The child labor hubbub comes and goes. Most people don’t care—law or no law. And when it comes to oysters, the newspapers only get in a tizzy about tainted product. Did you see those stories recently about how packing plant workers are sick with

tuberculosis? Got customers worried about disease in their canned oysters. It's bad for business."

"Yeah," said Jack. "A real shame."

"You bet. And unfair to me. I hire kids, mostly. Young and healthy. I see anyone cough, they get fired on the spot."

"And the photographs were meant to show how your swell operation is disease-free."

"I was going to publish a pamphlet called 'My Sanitary Oysters are Packed with Young Energy.' Still plan to do it when the time's right." The owner drew on his stogie and made the tip glow like the eye of a demon.

Jack shook his head, amazed at the pickle this guy had put himself in. While it was true that press attention to child labor went up and down, nothing sold papers like a good scandal with pictures.

"Here's what I want from you, Harden. Fetch those glass negatives back to me in twenty-four hours, and I'll give you a hundred dollars."

Jack stared at the ribbon of smoke rising from the smoldering cigar. This guy was in a big enough jam that he'd pay a lot more than that to get those photographs back.

"Probably a cakewalk for you. I got a good idea who swiped them. Fired him yesterday when I caught him coughing. I think he stole the merchandise off my desk on his way out. Low-down sneak."

"Why doesn't your gorilla foreman go get them?"

"He's my baby brother." The owner smiled. "He can get a bit too excited when smacking people around. Him killing the guy would cause problems."

"I'm supposed to deliver a beatdown, too?"

"Got to send a message not to screw with me. Look, it's easy money for you. The guy's old and won't put up a fight."

Jack stood. "Not interested."

The owner laughed and brushed ash from the desktop.

“You’re a tough negotiator. I’ll give you two hundred. Final offer.”

“I don’t do dirty work.”

“You’re a private detective. That means you’re already dirtier than a bum with a soap allergy.”

“I can deal with dirt,” said Jack. “Scum is another matter.”

“Okay, you’re weak-kneed.” The man tossed a five-dollar gold piece on the desk. “Get lost and keep your mouth shut about what I told you.”

Jack ignored the coin and walked out.

The improbable baby brother approached, his buck teeth displayed in a grin. He blocked Jack’s path and poked him in the chest with the club. “Hold up, friend. I’m supposed to give you the fired guy’s address.”

Jack swatted at the stick and knocked it out of the man’s hand. “I turned the job down. Out of my way, clown.”

The man glanced at the nearby workers. “I ain’t finished talking with you.” He stepped close, a surly curl of the lip replacing the goofy grin.

Jack tried to brush past, but the man grabbed his arm and threw a roundhouse punch. Jack blocked the swing and countered with a quick fist into the man’s chin. The blow was powerful enough to drop most men, but this guy staggered back, shook his head, and charged with a shrill yell.

Jack’s ghosts had triggers—children crying, poor sleep, even not enough coffee. For whatever reason, the screaming spectral forms, bloody and torn, chose this moment to appear in a dream-like haze. Jack barely managed to sidestep the lunging bruiser.

A ghostly woman, bloody and clutching an infant, ran at Jack with a terrible shriek.

“Mister—look out for the gun!”

The young shucker’s voice cut through the unearthly din, giving him just enough time to kick the foreman’s hand as he fired a pistol. The gun skittered away. Jack shoved the man

against an oyster crate. Everything was tinted a bright pulsing red with ghosts crowding around, screaming and moaning. Jack was ready to pound the foreman's face until it wasn't a face anymore, but the guy had tumbled backward into the crate with his big feet hanging motionless over the top.

Breathing raggedly, Jack ran out of the place, ghosts in pursuit. He kept going up the street for blocks until dropping to the curb, eyes pressed shut. Still, the bloody woman with the baby continued to shake a gory fist at him while screaming words in an unknown language.

He rocked back and forth on the curb, begging her: "I can't take anymore. Please just kill me. Kill me now."