

THE MANNEQUIN HOUSE

A SILAS QUINN MYSTERY

R. N. Morris



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Author's Note

Benjamin Blackley is a fictional character. However, certain aspects of his story were inspired by the life of William Whiteley, the founder of Whiteleys department store, as described in Linda Stratmann's fascinating account, *Whiteley's Folly: The Life and Death of a Salesman* (2004, Gloucestershire: The History Press).

London, April, 1914

The House of Blackley

Numéro sept! Numéro sept! Vite, vite! Allons! Numéro sept, s'il vous plait!

Inside the House of Blackley department store, a fashion parade was in progress.

The audience was highly exclusive. In fact, there were just two women watching, the countess, Lady Ascot and her daughter, the Honourable Caroline. They were seated beneath the Grand Dome, which formed the centrepiece of the recently remodelled building. Through the stained-glass cupola high above, a flood of colour-softened light suffused the vast space with a sense of promise.

Monsieur Hugo, the head of the Costumes Salon, called out numbers in French, each number corresponding to the next costume to be modelled. But there was a problem. *Numéro sept* had failed to appear.

'*Excusez-moi!*' said Monsieur Hugo, bowing sharply. He turned and poked his head through the curtain at the rear of the podium.

Backstage, six mannequins were in various stages of undress. Cries of protest met the appearance of Monsieur Hugo's male face, which was now a shade of pink that matched the last dress modelled: cerise.

'*Où est numéro sept?*'

'What's he saying?'

'He's speaking that funny lingo again.'

Monsieur Hugo rolled his eyes. '*Ce n'est pas un funny lingo. Je parle français. N'oubliez pas, vous êtes toutes des françaises!*'

'What's he say?'

'I said don't forget you're all supposed to be bloody French!' Monsieur Hugo spoke English with a strong and surprisingly authentic south London accent. 'We've got a real live *Your Ladyship* in today. Mr Blackley is hoping for great things from this showing. If Lady Ascot likes what she sees, she might spread the word among her upper-class friends. So it's important to make the right impression. Speaking of which, where is Amélie? This isn't like

her. She's normally so reliable. She is a *veritable* Parisian model. So professional. So slender. So beautiful.'

'Well, she ain' here!' snapped a tall, wide-faced girl in her underwear.

'*Elle n'est pas ici* is what you say, Marie-Claude,' insisted Monsieur Hugo.

'My name's Daisy, not bleedin' Marie-Claude.'

'You'd better not let Mr Blackley catch you talking like that! You know the penalty for profanities. It's in the rules.'

Marie-Claude pulled a face that suggested she didn't care what Mr Blackley caught her doing and cared even less for his rules, all 462 of them. This was far from the truth, as everyone knew. On the wages Blackley paid even the favoured mannequins, the sixpence fine he levied for any infringement was a serious blow.

A scrawny, moon-eyed girl in a pink slip followed the exchange closely. 'You don't think anything's happened to her, do you, Monsieur Hugo?'

'There's nothing for you to worry about, Albertine.' But Monsieur Hugo couldn't quite keep the anxiety out of his voice. He clapped his hands as if to dispel it. '*Allez, allez! Giselle, porte-toi numéro sept! Maintenant!*'

'Come again?' said Giselle, her brow creased in confusion.

'I said you can wear number seven! Gawd, give me strength!'

Meanwhile, on the floor of the Costumes Salon, in front of the stage, Mr Blackley himself did his best to pacify his very important new customers.

'May I offer Your Ladyships some refreshment? A cup of tea, perhaps?' Despite being the son of a farm labourer, Blackley's Yorkshire accent was of the genteel, almost effeminate kind. He had served his apprenticeship in a drapers' store in Harrogate, learning to blend in by emulating the softer vocal tones of the ladies who frequented the shop. It was here that he had first discovered himself to be a profound, if not pathological, lover of women. His adoption of their speech patterns was just one expression of his love. It was here, too, that he had learnt how closely the arts of selling and seduction were related.

An aristocratic moue of displeasure appeared on the countess's lips. And yet her eyes were lit with an enthusiastic fire as her gaze passed over Blackley's head, taking in the full height of the Grand

Dome. She let out an involuntary gasp at the sight of the great cupola. It seemed to float above six storeys of promise and desire, pulling the viewer ever upwards in an ascent of consumption.

Blackley allowed himself a self-satisfied smile. It would seem that the expense of the cupola at the time of the store's reconstruction had been a good investment.

'Vulgar,' said Lady Ascot, suddenly remembering herself. She gestured a hand in the direction of one of the upper galleries, which was decorated with umbrellas and parasols of every size and colour. The bulbous canopies were like a line of overweight bottoms sticking out. Perhaps it was this that had provoked her judgement.

'But Your Ladyship, the costumes we have for you today are very far from vulgar! On the contrary, we have for your delight only the very latest fashions, direct from Paris. The height of sophistication, I assure you.'

For all his charm Blackley was a hard-headed realist. He knew well enough that Lady Ascot would not normally be seen dead in an establishment like his. But like many aristocratic families, the Ascots had fallen on hard times. Buying her couture from a department store that had a reputation for value was just one of the economies she had been forced to contemplate, after her credit had been politely declined at a number of the more prestigious establishments.

But where these older stores saw a credit risk, Blackley saw a valuable marketing and publicity opportunity. He was composing the advertisement in his head as he bowed to his seated guests: The House of Blackley, Couturier to the Aristocracy.

Benjamin Blackley was a man of prodigious talents, as well as impressive facial hair. His distinctive mutton-chop whiskers framed a permanent expression of bland affability. Indeed, his ability to maintain this expression, even under trying circumstances such as the present, could be counted as one of his greatest talents. His most impressive creation was this face, utterly without guile or guilt. To look upon it, it was impossible to conceive that ambition had played any part in his rise to commercial pre-eminence. The face declared that Providence had surely smiled on Mr Blackley, undoubtedly because Providence found him to be a thoroughly amenable fellow.

'Well, get on with it then!' commanded Lady Ascot. 'We don't have all day.'

'There has been a slight delay, Your Ladyship. To compensate

you for which, I hope you will accept a complimentary item of millinery of your choice. That is to say, a hat.'

The countess's eyes narrowed in calculation. 'Only one?'

'And one for Lady Caroline, of course.' The old crone drove a hard bargain.

Lady Ascot gave a terse nod – but no thanks – to accept the deal. 'This doesn't give you licence to keep us waiting all day, Blackley.'

'I will see what can be done, Your Ladyship.'

With his imperturbable smile in place, Blackley mounted the platform and extricated Monsieur Hugo from behind the curtain. 'Well?'

'*C'est Amélie. Elle a disparu.*'

'English, you ninny.'

Monsieur Hugo cast a nervous glance over his employer's shoulder. His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. 'I thought you said I was to speak French at all times in front of our guests.'

'I don't have time for that now,' whispered Blackley. 'What's going on?'

'It's Amélie. She's missing.'

For a moment, Blackley's calm exterior was ruffled. His brows descended, partially concealing his eyes. 'Amélie?' he said almost reverentially.

'I'm getting one of the other mannequins to model her costumes,' said Monsieur Hugo. 'She should be ready in a moment.'

But Blackley hadn't heard him. He was lost in contemplation of something private and precious. 'Amélie?' he murmured her name again, a half-appeal and half-complaint on his lips.

Then Blackley blinked once. A look of calculation came over him. His old equanimity was restored.

Waiting to go on in costume *numéro sept*, Giselle looked through a gap in the curtain to see Blackley's uncharacteristic loss of composure. She turned to the other mannequins with a vindictive smile that suited her pinched face. 'Amélie is in trouble now! Monsieur Hugo just told Mr Blackley.'

'Do you think he'll fine her?' asked Minette with an anxious shudder.

'Fine her? I shouldn't be surprised if he gives her a good beating,' said Marie-Claude.

‘He wouldn’t do that, would he?’ said Albertine, her eyes wide with fear.

‘You read what it said in *The West End Whisperer*,’ said Michelle. The girl appropriately dropped her voice to a cowed whisper. The latest edition of that scandalous magazine had been passed around the employee dormitories and lodging houses. Its *exposé* of what life was really like inside the House of Blackley was not news to any of the six hundred people who worked there, but still it was shocking to see it printed in black and white. What had been rumour and gossip was now elevated to the status of fact. ‘He took a stick to a fellow just for yawning in front of him!’

Albertine gasped in horror. She raised a hand as if to ward off a blow. A half-cry, half-moan escaped from her. It could have been a name. *Amélie*.

‘I heard about that,’ said Giselle. ‘But I never knew it was true.’

‘Well, now you do,’ said Michelle. ‘They wouldn’t have printed it if it weren’t.’

‘Who told them? That’s what I want to know,’ wondered Minette.

‘Oh, Mr Blackley has no shortage of enemies,’ said Marie-Claude with a grim smile. ‘There’s plenty who want to destroy him. One day he’ll go too far, you mark my words. Then the whole rotten House of Blackley will come falling down around him.’

‘What’s going on, Blackley? It may be All Fools’ Day, but I will not be made a fool of like this!’

The countess’s sharp tone did not seem to perturb Blackley. He bowed deeply, employing the full serenity of his smile. ‘I do apologize, Your Ladyship. It seems that one of our mannequins has gone missing. I shall look into it myself, personally.’

Lady Ascot gestured impatiently with her hand. ‘You will do no such thing! So a girl’s gone missing? Good riddance to her, we say. Have one of the other girls model her costumes. It’s all the same to us. You can chastise the miscreant later. We don’t have all day, you know. We have a lunch appointment with the Duchess of Brecknock at twelve. When you do catch the idle hussy, be sure to remember the inconvenience she has caused us. We trust you will deal with her with the utmost severity.’

‘You may count on me to take all appropriate action.’ Blackley straightened himself. He signalled to Monsieur Hugo. ‘On with the show, Monsieur Hugo. We must not keep Her Ladyship waiting.’

Monsieur Hugo clapped his hands and called out *numéro sept*.

With Lady Ascot distracted by the next costume, Mr Blackley moved discreetly away. He signalled to one of the sales assistants. ‘Arbuthnot, isn’t it?’ Blackley’s voice was an urgent whisper. ‘I want you to do something for me.’

A look between terror and pride showed on the young man’s face. This curious expression betrayed how Blackley’s employees felt towards the great man more eloquently than any article in *The West End Whisperer*.

Young Arbuthnot had been chosen for a commission. More than that, Mr Blackley knew his name. This was undoubtedly an opportunity to be noticed. If things went well there could be a bonus – even a promotion – in it. If not, his life, it might reasonably be presumed, would not be worth living.

He listened to Mr Blackley’s words with a look of such intense concentration that it was close to panic.

‘You understand,’ said Mr Blackley, when he had finished explaining the mission, ‘the importance of discretion in this matter? I trust that my confidence in you will not prove to be misplaced.’

Young Arbuthnot gulped and nodded nervously. Mr Blackley’s mouth was formed into the same affable smile as ever. But in his eyes, there was the glint of ice.

The House of Blackley was a sprawling establishment occupying a considerable length of the south side of Kensington Road. It had grown organically over the years, as Blackley had snapped up the leases and freeholds of all the adjoining properties; all of them, that is, apart from the Roman Catholic church of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. And so the store had mushroomed up around the church, a temple of Mammon surrounding one of God.

The church was only accessible through a narrow entrance passage that gave on to Kensington Road, a kind of tunnel through the House of Blackley. The church’s location seemed to give its name an extra significance: was it the sacred heart at the centre of Blackley’s commercial empire? An emblem of his conscience, perhaps?

A thorn in his side, more like.

The complete destruction of the original store premises in a fire some years ago had afforded Blackley the opportunity of radically remodelling the site (although he was still unable to do anything about the presence of the church, which had stubbornly survived

the fire intact). However, apart from the addition of the Grand Dome, and the transference of the Menagerie from the fourth floor to the ground floor close to an exit, he chose to retain most of the store's original haphazard design.

The result was a veritable warren of consumerism, in which it was possible even for regular visitors to lose their way. But that was part of the pleasure of shopping at Blackley's: to be lost, and yet to find precisely what you were looking for, even if you didn't know you were looking for it.

Even members of staff were not immune to this spirit of disorientation, especially those like young Arbuthnot who had only recently started working there. As he hurried across the floor of the Grand Dome, he had no clear idea of where he was heading. He was impelled only by a sense of urgency. He had been charged with a task by Benjamin Blackley himself. There could be no delay, not the slightest hesitation or uncertainty. The situation clearly called for him to be eager and brisk; for rushing about, in other words. If he could not be purposeful, then at least he would be energetic.

It was only when he was out of sight of Blackley that Arbuthnot paused to take his bearings. He had come out of the Grand Dome into the Frills and Fripperies department, in the eastern wing of the store. Or was it the western?

Arbuthnot caught the attention of Mr Dresden, an old commissionaire who had been with the store since the beginning. Indeed, his presence was so permanent that it seemed probable his spectre would walk the floors of Blackley's for all eternity. 'I say, Mr Dresden, sir. Is this the right side for the Abingdon Road exit?'

'You're on the wrong shide here, shonny,' said Mr Dresden, his dentures whistling sibilantly. 'You want the other shide of the Grand Dome.'

The commissionaire moved on, giving Arbuthnot no opportunity to explain that he could not possibly go back into the Grand Dome and risk being seen by Mr Blackley.

Arbuthnot hurried on through Boots, Shoes and Waterproof Articles into Locks, Clocks and Mechanical Contrivances.

The arrangement of departments in Blackley's might have appeared curious at times, or even random. But there was always some subtle logic behind the juxtapositions.

To take Arbuthnot's journey so far as an example: the Costumes Salon in the Grand Dome naturally led on to Frills and Fripperies.

Mr Blackley's instinctive understanding of the female psyche told him that any woman who had indulged her passion for the Fashionable would before long seek to redress the balance by striving towards the Practical – without, however, going too far in that direction. Hence his placement of Boots, Shoes and Waterproof Articles nearby, a department in which the Fashionable and the Practical were harmoniously combined.

Waterproof Articles keep out the rain; Locks keep out unwanted intruders. Thus, one form of protection leads to another. Put so crudely, the connection may seem contrived. But in fact it revealed a sophisticated grasp of psychology. If the relationship between one department and the next was not consciously perceived, so much the better. The subconscious association was always felt. An almost dreamlike state of existence was conjured up. And as the Viennese doctors will tell you, the wellspring of dreams is wish-fulfilment.

And so the visitor to Blackley's found herself not in a shop, but in a dream and, more precisely, in the kind of dream where every desire is capable of satisfaction. She only had to reach out and . . . purchase.

For a moment, Arbuthnot, too, felt like a figure in a dream, though in his case it was a nightmare. Surrounded by a perplexing assortment of locks, he suddenly found himself incapable of movement. It was as if the idea of imprisonment in the department was so strong that he himself was fixed in place. His sense of the urgency of his mission did not diminish. On the contrary, he felt it all the more intensely. And the more intensely he felt it, the more powerfully was he immobilized.

'What do *you* want?' The voice was charged with antagonism and suspicion, which was not unusual among Arbuthnot's colleagues. In fact, it was Spiggott, one of the sales assistants for this department, who made the enquiry.

'I want to get out of here.'

'Then go. I am not detaining you.'

'Yes, I shall. Just as soon as I . . .'

'What's wrong with you?' Disgust rather than concern showed on Spiggott's face.

'I can't . . . move my feet!'

'Don't be ridiculous. Of course you can. I saw you run out of the Costumes Salon a minute ago.' Spiggott looked past

Arbuthnot back into the Grand Dome where the fashion show was still in progress.

‘This is terrible,’ protested Arbuthnot. ‘Believe me when I say that I am trying with all my strength to move my feet.’

‘Well, you can’t stay here. You’ll get us both into trouble.’

‘You don’t understand! I don’t want to stay here! Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to leave! I have been charged with an urgent commission by Mr Blackley himself! I must *not* delay!’

At that moment, quite unexpectedly, a customer made his presence felt. It was impossible to say if he had been there all the time, unobserved by the two young men, or if he had just stepped into the department of Locks, Clocks and Mechanical Contrivances. The former seemed improbable because he was a man of considerable bulk, dressed in a voluminous Inverness cape – a veritable mountain of tweed. And yet, he must have been there for some time, for he demonstrated a complete understanding of Arbuthnot’s predicament.

The man, who was wearing a monocle, stared fixedly into Arbuthnot’s eyes, raised his right hand and moved it in front of Arbuthnot’s face in a mysterious manner. At the same time he murmured something softly to Arbuthnot.

To his amazement, Arbuthnot felt himself instantly released. He was aware that the stranger had spoken to him, but had no memory of what he had said. And now he was gone, as suddenly and inexplicably as he had arrived.

‘How strange,’ said Spiggott. But then he began to berate Arbuthnot. ‘If it hadn’t been for you, he would have bought something. You’d better go before you scare away any more of *my* customers.’ But there was no conviction in his complaint.

Even so, Arbuthnot needed no further encouragement to be on his way. He put his head down and ran through the shrieks and howls of the Menagerie into the stockroom at the back of the store. From here, he could exit to the street via the delivery entrance.

A warehouseman in a brown coat was sweeping the floor, stirring the scents of cardboard and boxwood into the air. He stopped to light a cigarette, watching Arbuthnot’s progress with a dark, envious glare. But what was there to envy about Arbuthnot? Only his urgent sense of purpose, perhaps.

The Locked Door

Arbuthnot shot out on to the street like a pea expelled from a peashooter.

The air had a resentful edge to it, as if to say he had no business being at liberty. But he was *not* at liberty. He had no time to appreciate the strange, unearned licence of being out of the store during trading hours. He must put his head down and hurry.

But he was only human. To expect him not to lift his head and take in his surroundings, not to breathe deeply of that air, however sharp, however chill, not to be diverted by the passing of a pretty face, or the gleam and growl of a polished motor car, was to expect too much.

Naturally he did not allow such distractions to waylay him from his course, but he did allow a certain jauntiness to enter his step. He did not go so far as to attempt a whistle. Somehow he could not quite shake himself free of the impression that Mr Blackley was watching him. Or if not Mr Blackley himself, then his spies. Arbuthnot imagined that Mr Blackley must have any number of spies. He glanced nervously at the shops on the opposite terrace, then up at the windows of the apartments above them. No sign of anyone lurking, but still, you could never be too careful.

Whistling during working hours was forbidden under Mr Blackley's rules. For a young man of ambition such as Arbuthnot, it was not just the sixpence fine that had to be borne in mind; more serious was the black mark against his name. These things were noted down, he knew. If he hoped to progress, it was important to keep a clean sheet.

The turning into Caper Street – the street of his destination – was opposite a public house. For a moment, Arbuthnot was tempted to stop off there, for a quick dose of Dutch courage. But then the absurdity and horror of what he had just contemplated struck home. He had rigorously been on his guard against whistling in the street, and yet had come this close to casually wandering into a public house for a furtive snifter. It was not that Arbuthnot was a toper,

far from it. The example of his father had been enough to immunize him against that particular vice.

He and his six siblings had grown up with the old man's drunken rages. Booze made him a fighter, but he was too much of a coward to take on any of his cronies at the Dog and Whistle. He'd stagger home and pick a fight with Ma, pulling her from the bed by her hair. She always took her beatings stoically, silently. It was Pa's snarling curses that would draw them from their beds, not any sound from Ma. They cowered behind the washing that Ma took in, taking their lead from her, keeping mum, mute witnesses to the violence. Was that where the expression came from?

Then came the day when young Arbuthnot could keep mum no longer. He rushed out from behind a hanging sheet and threw himself at his father. The state Pa was in, together with the element of surprise, worked in Arbuthnot's favour. It was shockingly easy to overpower the old man. And in that moment, the moment of his father's befuddled toppling, young Arbuthnot grasped the full extent of the degradation and shame that alcohol wrought. A grown man knocked off his feet by a scrawny twelve-year-old kid.

His father never hit Ma again. At least not in front of the children.

And so Arbuthnot had never felt the allure of the public house. Not until this day. To have felt the pull now frightened him. So he was a chip off the old block, after all? Was his father's weakness at last asserting itself in him?

The north side of Caper Street was a row of three-storey Georgian houses. The ground storey was neatly rendered in cream-coloured stucco, with rather grand arched windows in the *piano nobile* above, and plainer windows on the top floor. The row presented a unified facade of primness and propriety. And yet Arbuthnot felt the thrill of transgression as he approached number seven, the house where the mannequins lodged. Under normal circumstances the mannequin house, as it was known, was barred to male employees – to all except M. Hugo and Mr Blackley, that is. This had naturally led to much speculation as to what went on behind its door. Some even referred to it as 'Blackley's harem', with M. Hugo in the role of eunuch, no doubt. Now, here was Arbuthnot, about to cross the threshold and discover the secrets of this forbidden precinct.

The door was opened by a woman who was evidently the house-keeper. She was dressed in a black skirt and high-necked white

blouse. Her tightly bundled black hair was streaked with white. Arbuthnot guessed she was aged somewhere in her forties but had kept herself well. Her figure was stocky: muscular rather than corpulent. Her arms and upper body appeared fashioned by hard work and hefting. Her complexion was clean and fresh, as if she had been recently polished; but as Arbuthnot peered into her face, he noticed a lattice of fine lines, a palimpsest of woe beneath the untroubled surface.

There was the smell of cleaning fluids about her. She regarded Arbuthnot with a calm curiosity that was perhaps a little too controlled and calculated. For some reason, she reminded him of the Mother Superior of a particularly austere order of nuns.

Arbuthnot was reassured by the thought that she did not appear to be a woman who would stand for any nonsense. Whatever rumours about the mannequin house he might have heard were suddenly and conclusively dispelled. 'Miss Mortimer? My name is Arbuthnot. Mr Blackley sent me.'

The housekeeper began to brush invisible grains of dust from the sleeve of her blouse. Arbuthnot suppressed a smile. She was almost like a bird preening itself. Suddenly her eyes narrowed as if she was angry that he'd seen her moment of weakness. Her expression became suspicious. 'Mr Blackley, you say?' Her voice was loud, almost a shout.

Arbuthnot thought she was probably a little deaf and raised his own voice to answer her: 'Yes.'

'Mr Blackley usually comes himself. He doesn't like the men to know where the mannequins live.'

'He couldn't come.' He spoke slowly, making allowance for her presumed deafness. 'He's with an important customer. Obviously he felt that he could trust me, otherwise he would not have chosen me for the errand.'

Miss Mortimer looked Arbuthnot up and down before glancing past him down the short street. 'You'd better come in.'

As the door was closed behind him, Arbuthnot breathed in deeply as if he expected to detect strange, intoxicating scents in the air. Instead there was just the homely smell of wood polish.

The hall itself was narrow. A bold, floral wallpaper, which bore the influence of William Morris, gave the impression of entering a kind of bower, faintly medieval and altogether fantastical. A rich carpet of Turkish design ran over the floorboards.

A mirror was placed just inside the door, presumably for the girls to check their appearance as they left for work each morning. Beyond that on the wall hung a couple of framed prints showing a variety of Parisian scenes rendered in what Arbuthnot presumed to be a modern style. A third picture was propped up against the seat back of a chair which partially obstructed the hallway. A bent nail projected from the wall ready to receive it. A hammer lay on the chair seat.

Miss Mortimer pushed the seat out of the way, causing the picture to fall over on to its face. There was a sharp crack as the glass hit the hammer head. When Miss Mortimer righted the picture, a jagged line of fissure ran across one corner. 'Now look what you've made me do! Mr Blackley will be furious. I was to hang these up today. I shall have to get the glass replaced now.'

'I'm sorry but I hardly think . . .'

'What's this all about?' demanded Miss Mortimer. Her voice was still loud and abrupt.

More than a little deaf, thought Arbuthnot. 'He's sent me to find out what's happened to Miss Amélie. She didn't appear for Lady Ascot's costume showing.'

'I'm sure I don't know where she is,' Miss Mortimer frowned as she considered the broken picture glass. She propped the damaged picture against the back of the chair again and turned her frown on Arbuthnot.

'Perhaps she's unwell. Did you see her at breakfast this morning? Did she not leave with the other mannequins?'

'I cannot be expected to keep tabs on them all.'

'Mr Blackley has asked me to see if Miss Amélie is in her room. He wishes me to convey his solicitude to her.'

'I do not believe she is there,' pronounced Miss Mortimer with an air of finality.

'He was very precise in his instructions. I was to knock on her door and deliver a message to her.'

'You may give me the message,' said Miss Mortimer. 'I will see that she gets it.'

'It is a verbal message,' said Arbuthnot.

'Then you may tell it to me.'

Arbuthnot was firm. 'It is for Miss Amélie's ears only.'

Something like a smile twitched on Miss Mortimer's pinched lips. 'She's not in her room, I tell you.'

‘At any rate, I must try her door.’ Arbuthnot drew himself up self-righteously. ‘That is what Mr Blackley instructed me to do.’

With an impatient nod of her head, Miss Mortimer turned to lead him into the house. ‘Be careful,’ she snapped over her shoulder. ‘I don’t want you doing any more damage.’

As he progressed deeper into the bower-like hallway, the sense that he was penetrating a forbidden interior increased. And yet there was nothing so extraordinary about his surroundings. Looking in on the drawing room through a half-open door, Arbuthnot saw that it was furnished in the manner of a respectable middle-class home, more Basingstoke than Baghdad. A pair of enormous Chinese-looking vases was the only hint of the Orient that he could detect. And there was something familiar, as well as homely, about the comfortable furnishings. Of course, he realized – everything had come from Blackley’s.

He had to admit that the place did not exhibit the decadent luxury that he had been imagining. However, it certainly provided a different level of comfort to the Spartan unisex dormitories where the rest of the live-in employees were obliged to sleep. He wondered if the mannequins were also forced to vacate their rooms every Sunday, eating solitary meals in cheap restaurants to pass the time. Somehow he doubted it.

Miss Mortimer stopped at a door on the first floor. Before Arbuthnot could prevent her she knocked and called out: ‘Amélie? Are you there?’

‘Mr Blackley specifically directed that *I* should knock on her door,’ protested Arbuthnot.

The housekeeper gave a disdainful snort. Even so, she stood aside. Like all of Blackley’s employees, it seemed she had learnt the importance of obeying the letter as well as the spirit of his law.

Arbuthnot rapped briskly. ‘Miss Amélie?’ He pressed his ear to the door. And pulled it away instantly as a piercing scream sounded from within.

‘What the devil?’ Arbuthnot’s eyes widened with horror. He tried the handle and pushed his shoulder into the door. It didn’t budge.

He turned to Miss Mortimer. ‘Do you have a key?’ The housekeeper appeared to be in a state of shock. No doubt it was the effect of the scream, thought Arbuthnot. He had never heard anything like it, except perhaps in his dreams. To describe it as inhuman would not have been an exaggeration. ‘I say, Miss Mortimer,’ he prompted.

She looked at him as if she had no idea who he was or how he came to be there. 'Did you hear that?' Her voice was a terrified whisper.

'Yes.'

'What was it?'

'We must open the door to find out. I assume you have keys to all the rooms?'

From beneath her apron, Miss Mortimer produced an enormous bunch of keys on a long chain. She selected one and inserted it into the lock, or at least tried to. After a series of frustrated attempts, she stood up straight and turned to Arbuthnot. The door remained closed. 'There appears to be something blocking it.'

Arbuthnot put his eye to the keyhole. 'There's another key in the lock. On the other side.'

'The silly girl has locked herself into the room.'

Arbuthnot knocked on the door again. The fearful screaming had stopped, but he could hear movement from within. 'Miss Amélie, are you all right? I have a message for you from Mr Blackley. If you will only open the door.'

'Amélie! Open this door right now!' Miss Mortimer seemed to be restored to her former self. And yet there was something quivering and uncertain beneath her composure.

'Perhaps she cannot,' suggested Arbuthnot. 'She may be incapacitated in some way.'

The horrible screaming started again.

'My God, what is the matter with her?'

'I don't think that is Miss Amélie,' said Arbuthnot.

'Who is it then?'

'*Who* is it? Or *what* is it?'

'What do you mean?'

But before Arbuthnot could answer, they heard the key on the other side begin to turn.

The effect of this on Miss Mortimer was striking. She began to shake her head in fierce denial. 'No! No! No!'

The unseen presence struggled with the key, stopping occasionally to scream in frustration.

Then, all at once, the key turned fully in the lock.

But the door remained closed. There was no further attempt to open it from the other side.

Arbuthnot interpreted this as an invitation. He reached out a hand tentatively towards the handle, looking for encouragement from

Miss Mortimer. But that lady's expression was far from encouraging. Still shaking her head, she was now murmuring incomprehensibly to herself. Arbuthnot could not understand all that she was saying, but he seemed to hear: 'This cannot be!'

He had not pushed the door more than a few inches when he saw a flash of silver speed out from the opening at ground level, brushing against his trousers as it hurried past him. 'A monkey!' he cried. The tiny shrieking macaque scurried down the stairs, a diminutive Turkish fez attached to its head.

'But that's not possible!' cried Miss Mortimer, her habitual loud volume at last justified. 'The girls are not allowed to keep animals. Wait till I see Amélie! The rules are quite clear. No animals in rooms! Mr Blackley will not stand for it.' She shook her head somewhat self-consciously, it seemed to Arbuthnot.

Arbuthnot pushed the door completely open and stepped in.

The missing girl lay fully clothed on top of the bed. She was as still and lifeless as a plaster – rather than a human – mannequin. But unlike the inanimate white dolls that populated the windows and displays of the Costumes Salon, her face was swollen and purple.

Her eyes were open. Arbuthnot's attention was drawn by the vivid bursts of red that showed in the corneas. As a salesman in the Costumes Salon, he couldn't help observing to himself that the colour of these flecks matched perfectly the silk scarf around her neck.