THE BLIND DETECTIVE

By Christina Koning

The Blind Detective Series

The Blind Detective

Murder in Regent's Park

Murder at Hendon Aerodrome

Murder in Berlin

Murder in Cambridge

Murder in Barcelona

Murder in Dublin

THE BLIND DETECTIVE

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In memory of my grandfather and First World War veteran, Charles Frederick Thompson (1890–1964)

'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

I knew you in this dark.'

Wilfred Owen, *Strange Meeting*

Chapter One

The fog had made all the trains late. He'd need to get a move on. As always, he was on his feet and had his hand on the catch, ready to lower the window, as the train slowed down. He'd timed it so that he was pushing down the handle as the engine halted; its loud, final expulsion of steam was the signal for the door to be opened. Although this had to be done with caution; it wouldn't do to knock some poor bloke for six. The juddering lurch as the carriage stopped gave momentum to his first step onto the platform. He'd found that a swift – or at least, confident – progress through the crowd was best. Not that this prevented

occasional collisions – '*Oops, sorry!*' '*Don't mention it, old man.*' – but, on the whole, people tended to get out of one's way, if one seemed to be moving with sufficient purpose. Crossing London Bridge, the smell of the fog was intense, and left an acrid taste in the back of the throat. He resisted the temptation to spit, although others around him were not so restrained. Disgusting habit. Still, the fog was beastly. The way it filled one's mouth and nose with its sulphurous odour – like a mixture of coaldust, rotten eggs, and bad drains – awakened memories he'd as soon have forgotten: *bluish lips fringed with blood and froth*. He was still hemmed in by the surging crowd. The inexorable slowness with which it moved was like that of a column of men wading through mud: he remembered the suck and heaviness of it, the way it clogged one's legs. But it was starting to thin out a little; soon he'd be able to stride more freely. From the traffic lights it was six hundred and seventy paces. After seven years, he knew the route so thoroughly he could have walked it blindfold. St Paul's was to his left, Tower Bridge to his right, although both of course would now be invisible in the fog. He heard the ghostly booming of a ship's siren in the distance. From closer at hand, behind and ahead of him, came the steady trudge of footsteps: his fellow toilers in the City's stony vineyards. Disembodied voices floated towards him.

'. . . filthy weather.'

'. . . nil–nil draw.'

And, from the pavement, 'Spare us a copper, guv'nor. Wife an' kiddies to support.'

'What was your regiment?' he asked, bending towards the seated man.

'Manchesters, sir.' The whining note was absent, now.

He fumbled in his pocket, found the shilling he had intended for his lunch. 'There you are.'

A hand reached up to take it.

'Thank you, sir.'

'I was with the RFA Wipers. A bad show.'

'It was that, sir. Good luck, sir.'

'The same to you.'

Another ten steps brought him level with the Monument. Close as it was – no more than a hundred yards away – it wouldn't be visible in this. He'd climbed it once, when he was a lad. He remembered the view from the top, the river's brown ripples sparkling in the sun, its forest of ships' masts, clouds scudding past, and the face of the girl he had been with that day. Maud O'Sullivan. Yellow hair she'd had, coiled in a bun, and beautiful, light green eyes, with pale lashes, that turned to gold in the sun.

'Look out!'

The impact of a shoulder colliding with his nearly knocked him off his feet.

'Sorry!' He put out a hand to steady himself, and encountered the iron spears at the top of the steps leading down to Monument Underground station. 'This fog . . .'

'I know. Dreadful, isn't it? One can't see a blessed thing.'

A dray lumbered past, with a steady clip-clopping of hooves, leaving a whiff of horseflesh and leather in its wake. It was followed by the rumble of a motorbus, going more slowly than usual, he guessed.

'I say, do you mind telling me the time? My watch seems to have stopped.'

'Not at all. Let's cross, though, while the lights are in our favour.' At the far side, his new acquaintance tapped his sleeve. 'It's five and twenty past eight.'

'Thanks awfully.'

'Don't mention it, old man.'

Another three steps brought him to the heavy oak doors, whose bronze handles were shaped like a bundle of sticks, with an axe-head protruding. Fasces. Carried by the lictors in front of Roman magistrates, he recalled. Denoting that the said officials had the power of life and death. As a firm specialising in criminal cases, Saville's dealt with all of it: insurance fraud and embezzlement, but also murder, suicide, and what the newspapers liked to call 'sex crimes'. One never knew exactly what each day would bring. He entered the echoing vault of the foyer just as the lift arrived. Its doors clashed open, and someone got out, bringing with him a pungent stench of tobacco.

'Morning!' Jackson. A pipe smoker. His teeth clenched around the said article. He returned the greeting, stepping past his colleague into the open

lift. The concertinaed cage doors were slammed shut, their oily wheeze setting his teeth on edge as always. 'Well, toodle-oo,' said Jackson, having performed this operation. 'I'm off. The Houndsditch case. Back lunchtime, if anybody wants me.'

'The Houndsditch case,' he repeated automatically, feeling behind him for the concave brass disc of the lift button. 'Right you are, Mr Jackson.' He pressed the button and, with a convulsive jerk that threw him momentarily off-kilter, the lift started to ascend. At the third floor it stopped again, to allow two more people to get on. Miss Poole and Miss Johnson. The Ladies' Cloakroom was on the third floor, he recalled – a fact which gave rise to frequent complaints from the female staff as to the inconvenience of this arrangement.

'Morning, Mr Rowlands,' said Miss Poole, with the note of false cheerfulness he'd come to expect from her sort. Miss Johnson's greeting was more restrained – either from natural reticence, or as befitted her dignity as secretary to the junior partner.

'Shocking weather, isn't it?' continued the irrepressible Miss Poole.

He agreed that it was. Then there was no more conversation until they reached the fifth floor, where a little squabble ensued as to which of them should go first. 'After you,' he said, but Miss Poole wouldn't hear of it of course.

'Oh no! After *you*,' she simpered, so that he had no choice but to give in or risk making more of a fuss than

the occasion warranted. With a grudging murmur of thanks, he moved past her, out of the lift, catching a whiff of her sickly-sweet perfume. *Californian Poppy*. Loathsome stuff. He was glad Edith didn't use it.

The big clock that hung out over the street above the window was just striking half past as he entered the office: its chimes reverberated through the room.

'There you are, Mr Rowlands, sir. I was wondering where you could've got to.'

A powerful smell of hair oil assailed his nostrils. 'Morning, Bert,' he said.

'I was just saying to Mr Cheeseman here,' the post-boy went on in his nasal sing-song, '"Mr Cheeseman," I says, "what do you suppose could've happened to make Mr Rowlands so late? Seeing as how he's always in by a quarter past at the latest."'

'Trains, Bert,' he said, suppressing the irritation he felt at this inquisition. Of course he wasn't late – not even by a minute – but his nerves felt jangled, just the same. Perhaps it had been Edith's sharpness that morning, their row of the previous night still unresolved. Her furious scraping of the blackened toast (how *did* she manage to burn it quite so often?) and the irritable way she had of banging down her teacup conveying her feelings more eloquently than words. Poor Edie, he thought, with a guilty flush – for *this* to happen, when she'd worked so hard to make ends meet, and they'd almost saved enough for her to take the girls to Bournemouth for a week in the summer. It was just

their luck. Still, it was hardly the end of the world – a point he'd tried to make to her the night before. 'It's all right for *you*,' had been her reply. With a sigh, he hung his coat on the rack inside the door, and after switching on the lamp over his desk, for it wouldn't do to sit in darkness, sat down at the switchboard.

'I said it must be them blessed trains. Didn't I say it must be them blessed trains, Mr Cheeseman?'

'You did that,' agreed the janitor, with a bronchial wheeze that lent a portentousness to even his lightest remarks. 'Well, best be getting on.'

'Yes, thank you, Mr Cheeseman,' he said automatically. 'Anybody in, yet, Bert?'

'Mr Jackson's been and gone.'

'Yes, I spoke to Mr Jackson. Nobody else? That's all right, then.'

'It's just that . . .' Still the boy hovered. *There was a definite whiff of halitosis. If he'd only stand further off.*

'Just *what*, Bert?' He tried to keep the impatience out of his voice.

'If the tellyphone was to ring, like . . . an' you wasn't here.'

'Then one of the secretaries can answer it. Or you can let it ring. We've been through all this before, haven't we?'

'Yes, Mr Rowlands.'

'Well, then . . .'

Still muttering under his breath, the boy shuffled off. From anyone else it would have seemed like cheek but

Bert wasn't that sort. *Not quite the round shilling*, *poor lad*, *the mother a widow, out Dalston Junction way*. *A cramped little flat over a butcher's shop*. Unhooking the earpiece from its cradle, he slipped the wire frame to which it was attached over his head, checking that the mouthpiece was at just the right distance – no sense in deafening them – and made a minor adjustment to the swivel chair. Then, as he did every morning, he ran his hands lightly over the board, feeling the beautiful intricacies of its switches and sockets under his fingers, and making sure that everything was as it should be: the dolls' eyes open, each cord ready to be connected to its particular jack a each switch in the correct position. It was, he thought, like a great brain: a network of ganglia, across which electrical pulses darted and flickered. Sound waves, communicating information, in a flash, from one mind to another. All done through the magical electromagnetic technology of which he was the conductor. When he'd started this job, the switchboard had been newly installed – a Stromberg-Carlson model, with an oak frame and a bakelite front-panel. Its shape resembled an upright piano, with a high back panel consisting of rows of female jacks ('jills' might have been a better word, he thought) and a bank of switches and cords where a row of ivory keys would have been in the musical instrument. There were fifteen lines for incoming calls and the same number of internal lines. A buzzer sounded when the call came in, and you took your cord and plugged it

into the right jack, before pushing back the front key in line with the jack. 'Number, please,' you said. Then you took the cord which was directly in front of the back cord and plugged it into the jack for the called number, simultaneously pulling the back key towards you to ring the called party's telephone. When the called party answered, and the call was connected, you closed the talk key. A convex disc called a doll's eye dropped down when the circuit was in use, retracting when it was idle. At busy times, he'd have five or six calls on the go, whisking the cords in and out as if engaged in a complicated bit of weaving. It had taken him all of a week to get the hang of the system; now, of course, it was second nature. It didn't bother him in the least that his was generally regarded as a job for women.

His arrival was followed by that of Mr Jardine, *smelling strongly of wintergreen*, who'd been with the firm eight years, and Mr Mullins, who had joined them six months ago, straight from Oxford. He greeted them both and handed them their letters, already sorted into piles. Miss Foy, one of the younger secretaries *tip-tapping on high-heels*, appeared next, complaining of the trains. Then came Mr Fairclough, another of the lawyers, who asked that his nine o'clock client should be shown straight in. At five to, a very flustered and out of breath Miss Taylor arrived. She'd walked all the way from Ludgate Circus, she said, the bus having broken down. At five past, the doors swung open to admit the senior partner. 'Morning, Rowlands.'

'Morning, Mr Saville.'

'Any messages?'

'None so far, sir.'

'Mr Willoughby in?'

'Not yet, sir. The fog—'

'Yes, yes.' *His lumbago must be playing up again.* 'Well, send him along as soon as he gets here, will you?' By a quarter past, the dolls' eyes were dropping down, with that peculiar ticking sound they made, as his colleagues started making the first calls of the day. The buzzers signalling an incoming call were going every couple of minutes now, sometimes two at a time, but he was used to that. Most of these were routine enquiries, some of which he dealt with directly – one woman wanted to know if they handled breach of promise cases; from the faint tremor in her voice he guessed it must be her own case she was referring to, and put her through to Mr Jardine, whose manner towards the ladies was more sympathetic than that of most of his colleagues. At half past nine he put through a trunk call for Mr Saville: the Scottish fire insurance case proving a bit sticky, he surmised. It took him all of fifteen minutes, but in the end he got his man. Well, he and the five other operators between here and Inverness-shire. Being in the telephone service, like being in the army, was all about teamwork.

For the next hour, he barely took his hands away from the board: it was all switch, flick, switch – deftly putting the cords in and pulling them out of their sockets

as the calls came in. He didn't mind it, being busy, the rhythm of it, the constant click and shift and after seven years he'd grown pretty quick at the game. The trick was not to let your concentration slacken, even for a moment. Knowing just where to find everything was another must. He prided himself on running a neat switchboard: no tangled cords, or switches left carelessly open for *him*, thanks very much! It was pretty much like operating a battery, he'd sometimes thought. There was the same need for absolute precision, the same series of meticulous actions to be gone through – whether what you were doing was focusing a sight on a target, or managing a row of 'supervisories'. Discipline. Order. Taking pains. These were his watchwords. It was all about having a system and sticking to it, no matter whether it was a network of telephones one was minding, or an 18-pounder gun. A vivid image of the weapon he'd spent three years of his life getting to know filled his mind for a second: the shine of its brass fittings and its great barrel, painted dark green for better concealment (mud colour would've been better), the oily gleam of its firing mechanism, the delicate calibrations of its adjustable sight. He saw in his mind's eye the great wheels – nearly as tall as a man – on either side of the gun, and the little saddle-shaped brass seat where you sat. But what he remembered most was the way the whole thing recoiled, when the shell was fired. That, and the smell of the cordite after.

At ten o'clock, he was relieved by Mrs Gilbert, who

did the mid-morning shift. Carrie Gilbert's husband (*who'd escaped with his life but with his nerves in pieces from the tunnels at La Boisselle*) couldn't be left until there was a neighbour on call to see to him. Sometimes, when the nights had been very bad, Mrs Gilbert didn't get in till nearly eleven; then it was up to him, as the senior telephonist, to cover for her, although the partners had turned a blind eye so far.

'Morning, Mr Rowlands.' She brushed past him with an apologetic murmur, bringing with her a smell of cold. 'Sorry if I'm a bit late. The fog . . .'

'Dreadful isn't it? Don't worry. It's been a slow start.'

These courtesies having been exchanged, he went outside for a smoke. If anything, the fog was worse than it had been before. Choking, filthy stuff, that clung to one's face with a palpable clamminess like the touch of dead fingers. Sounds, in this dense atmosphere, had a curious quality, seeming at once to come from very far off and, disconcertingly, to be close at hand. A laugh jumped out at him, as if from a hole punched through glass. A snatch of talk: '—find the necessary, never you fear . . .' Out on the bridge, a klaxon hooted softly. The traffic must be at a standstill, he guessed. What it would be like by this evening, he hated to think. He hoped it didn't make him too late home. Edith was in a rotten enough mood as it was. Not that she didn't have cause to be, poor old girl. Ever since she'd found out there was another on the way – and how were they to feed the two they had already, on

the pittance he earned, and the small return she got from those shares her father left her? – she'd been out of sorts. He hadn't made matters any better by saying he'd look for another job. 'What kind of job?' she'd replied scornfully. 'There *are* no other jobs, or none that – Oh, never mind!' She'd meant jobs that he was fit to do. She was right of course, there weren't many. Still he'd persisted (he never did know when to shut up), 'I could get an evening job. They're looking for staff at the Brockley Jack.'

'What! And have the girls know that their father works in a public house? I don't think we've quite come to *that*.'

It was at times like these that the gulf between their respective backgrounds, which had seemed of no account when they'd first been married, seemed all too apparent. Because of course they were from different worlds, he and Edith. That she, who'd grown up in a big house with servants, whose brother had gone to Oxford, and who might have married a doctor, or a solicitor, should have ended up with him – a mere telephonist, although, admittedly, one that worked in the City – was a come down, to put it mildly. To have given up her world of ease and privilege for the one they now inhabited – a world of narrow streets, and mean little houses, and front gardens scarcely big enough to house the dustbins – was surely more than most women would have endured without complaint. 'Do you think I *like* living here?' she had wept, towards the

end of last night's quarrel. 'Being surrounded by these *people* . . .' She meant their neighbours: the Wilkses on one side, the Dooleys on the other. Mrs Dooley was impossible for several reasons. She was fond of drink; and she dyed her hair. As for Mrs Wilks . . . 'No one, I hope, could accuse me of being a snob,' said Edith, 'but *really*, when that woman insists on discussing her husband's difficulties with his "waterworks", I draw the line, I really do.'

For his own part, he thought Mrs Dooley a pleasant enough soul, even if she did like a drop now and then. Mrs Wilks wasn't a bad sort, either: she'd been very kind that time Margaret had been taken bad with croup. But he saw Edith's point. 'I don't mind for myself,' his wife had said. 'But the *girls*, Fred, it's so hard on them.' Privately, he doubted that their neighbours' carryings-on could mean much to children of seven and five. It was Edith he was sorry for. She'd been brought up to expect a different sort of life, that was all. 'Stuck-up,' Dorothy called her. His sister had never been one to mince her words.

The rest of the morning passed quickly enough. *Flick*. *Switch*. *Flick*. Two more trunk calls, Bristol and the Coningsby case; and Stratford. At lunchtime, he eschewed, as he often did, the society of the office canteen for the anonymity of the city streets which, after seven years, he'd come to know with a thoroughness that would have made the Major proud.

'Think of it as reconnaissance,' the Major used

to say. 'Like making a mental sketch map of enemy territory.'

On fine days he'd walk down Gracechurch Street and Cornhill Row and along Cheapside towards St Paul's, and Hatton Garden. There was a bench in Bleeding Heart Yard where he liked to sit and eat his sandwiches. Or he'd go the other way, along King William Street, past the Bank of England, to Finsbury Circus or when he was in the mood for a good walk, to Bunhill Fields, *it was Bone Hill really – a hill full of bones*, and the company of its illustrious dead. Blake. He'd always liked Blake. Although all that stuff about Albion was a bit beyond him. There was the one about London. How did it go, again? *I wandered through each something street, near where the something Thames does flow* . . . Today the filthy taste of the fog in his throat made him disinclined for a long walk, so he settled for a cold pork pie, washed down with a cup of tea in the Kardomah Café in Clement's Lane, with a cigarette for afters.

Walking back towards the office, he could hear the strains of the organ of St Mary Woolnoth, as he neared the intersection with Lombard Street. He checked his watch: there was still fifteen minutes before he'd be expected back. Too good a chance to miss. He slipped into a pew near the door. It wasn't a piece he was familiar with. Bach, or Handel, he guessed. He wished he could say for certain. Although there was a gramophone at home – a parting gift from Ashenhurst and the rest of

his Pals at the Lodge – there hadn't of late been the money for new recordings. The few discs he had – Melba singing arias from *La Traviata*, John McCormack's 'She Moved Through the Fair', Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Chopin's *Nocturnes*, and Beethoven's *Eroica* – had been played almost to death. Of course there was always the wireless. But by the time he'd got home, and had his supper, and the children had been put to bed, they'd usually missed half the classical concert. In the early days of their marriage, he and Edith had been in the habit of going along to the weekly concerts at Wigmore Hall. Of late, there'd been no time for such civilised amusements. Now, their social life revolved around the monthly game of Bridge which took place at the house of one or other of their group of friends – couples, for the most part, in the same situation as themselves. He focused his attention once more on the music. How grand to be able to make a sound like that! To fill a great space like this with such cascades of notes, such peals . . . Like bells, like the skirling of pipes and the beating of drums, all rolled into one . . . How it made one's heart beat! Such intricacies of sound . . . Lifting one's spirits up, far above the misery, the *pettiness* of life . . . ''Scuse me, is this seat taken?'

It was a woman – a girl, really – who'd spoken. He realised that he'd had his eyes closed all this time. He opened them, and got to his feet, to allow her to get past, catching as he did so a whiff of her violet scent. 'Thanks. It's ever so nice, isn't it, the music?'

There was a slightly over-eager note to her voice, a tone Edith would have called 'gushing'.

'Yes.'

'I often come here, in my lunch break.'

'Do you?' He'd really rather not have got into conversation.

'Oh yes. D'you know, I've seen you here before? Last week, it was. Or maybe the week before that. I watched you for ever such a long time, but you never once caught my eye. Lost in the music, you were.'

A sort of horror came over him. He got to his feet. 'Awfully sorry.' He made as if to glance at his watch. 'Is that the time? I really ought to be getting back.' Before she could say anything more, he turned on his heel, striking his elbow sharply on the end of the pew as he did so.

Back in the office, he settled to his work again. Hours passed, without his being aware of their passing, so caught up was he in the intricate patterns of what he was doing. *Flick*, *switch*, *flick*. His hands moving over the rows of switches with the deftness of a concert pianist – if the piece he played had been an arrangement of human voices. He put through calls from Cherrywood, seeing in his mind's eye drifts of pink and white blossom; the South Wimbledon exchange; and Coppermill, which was Walthamstow, a fiery-red gleam of hammered metal; from Dreadnought – Earls Court – an iron hulk painted battleship grey and Hogarth – Shepherd's Bush, a vision of Gin Lane.

When he'd first started this job, it had taken him quite a while to learn the names of the exchanges, to remember that 'Trafalgar' was Whitehall, 'Laburnam' Winchmore Hill; that 'Museum' was Bloomsbury, and 'Primrose' St John's Wood. Now he had them all by heart – the poetic and the mundane.

It was the same when he'd first arrived in Flanders: the way everything had its particular name. Each trench and dugout christened with whatever the incumbent regiment thought fit – so that for the Jocks it was all Balmoral and Stirling Castle; for the Taffs, the Rhondda Valley and Swansea Town. At the Salient, he'd been with a crowd of London boys, and so a city had grown up in those first months, that seemed a shadowy version of the one they'd all left behind. In Ploegsteert Wood – 'Plug Street', as it soon became – you'd follow the line of a trench called 'The Haymarket' to get to 'Piccadilly Circus', off which branched not only 'Regent Street', but, by some topographical incongruity, 'Fleet Street' as well. One dugout he'd been allocated during the autumn of 1914 – an image of its thick clay walls, lined with sheets of tin, came at once to mind – had rejoiced under the name of 'Claridges'; 'The Ritz' was across the way. Funny, the things you remembered.

Mrs Gilbert left at three-thirty, to be home in time to cook her husband's tea. After that, Rowlands was on his own again – not that he minded a bit. He put through a call to Holborn (Chancery) for Mr Fairclough, another for Mr

Saville to Grosvenor Square. He connected a trunk call to Harrogate for Mr Jackson in under ten minutes. Asked a client to wait (Mr Jardine being occupied with another). Sent Mr Mullins' four thirty straight through. Then, just after five, one of the buzzers went. He inserted the rear cord into the jack and flicked the front key forward.

'Saville and Willoughby. Good afternoon. How may I help?'

'Oh, hello.' There was a slight, but perceptible, pause, as the speaker, a woman, appeared to consider the wisdom or otherwise of proceeding. Evidently she decided she would risk it, for she went on: 'This may seem an odd question, if it turns out not to be the case but . . .' Again, she seemed to hesitate. 'I'm looking for Gerald Willoughby,' she said at last. 'Is that by any chance his office?'

'It is.' Suddenly it was as if everything else fell away – Edith's cross mood that morning, and the fog, and the trains, and that girl in St Mary's – annihilated in an instant, by the sound of a voice. Creamy, he'd have described it as. Satiny. Low. *An excellent thing in a woman . . .*

'Oh, good. I was hoping it might be. Is he there, do you know?'

He was suddenly at a loss for words. He cleared his throat. 'I'll just see. Who should I say is calling?'

'It's Celia West. Although he'll remember me as Celia Verney. Just tell him it's Celia. He'll know.'

Celia West. The name rang a bell, but he couldn't at

once say why. With a conscious effort, Rowlands pulled himself together. 'One moment, please.' He plugged the front cord into the jack, and pulled the front key backwards. Willoughby answered on the second ring. 'Hello?' It was well disguised, but there was still the trace of a boyhood stammer. *H-hello*.

'A Mrs Celia West for you, sir.' Old habits died hard. Even though it was ten years since he was obliged by the difference in their respective ranks to call the younger man by that honorific, he'd never dropped it. 'She said you'd known her as Verney.'

'Celia Verney. Good Lord!' It was hard to tell from Willoughby's voice whether he was dismayed or pleased. 'It's ages since . . . Well, well. Do put her through, Rowlands. And, by the way, it's Lady Celia. Not that you were to know.'

Now he knew why the name had seemed familiar. Celia West belonged to that select set whose comings and goings between Mayfair and Monte Carlo, Westminster and Biarritz, were regularly chronicled in the Society pages of *The Times*. Not that he bothered with all that sort of thing, but Edith took an interest. He transferred the call, waiting just long enough to make sure that the two were safely connected, and to hear his employer's voice – now registering unqualified pleasure – say: 'Celia? How v-very nice. It's been a long time.' And the reply: 'Yes, I suppose it has. Five years or more. Isn't it too absurd?'

* * *