



*'A story that is both
lyrical and visceral'*

SULARI GENTILL

MURDER
IN
PUNCH
LANE

JANE SULLIVAN

To David, 1950–2017

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PROLOGUE

Melbourne, 30 October 1868

Lola stands in a squalid room at the foot of a rickety bed, watching Edward bestow a passionate kiss upon the mouth of her naked friend. Marie's white arms and legs are flung out anyhow, her dark hair crawling over the pillow. Edward lifts her up from the bed. He puts his ear to her nose and lips. He slaps her hair-streaked face.

No, thinks Lola, *no*.

She pulls off her shawl and tries to wind it around her friend's body. The beautiful skin is clammy and cold, a toad skin. Edward moans, pushes Lola away. He smells of brandy. He flings Marie down, pummels her chest with his fists, then drags her into a sitting position.

'Hold her,' he says.

Lola wants to shout at him to take his damn hands away, but the urgency in his voice pushes her to the other side of the bed. She puts her arms around Marie, presses in on her shoulders, digs her fingers into the wool of the shawl. Her dainty friend is suddenly so heavy. She bends at her tiny waist. She flops forward like a badly stuffed doll. Edward shakes her, and a reeky yellow liquid oozes from her slack mouth. A great hank of hair slips

from her head and falls down her back to the pillow. *Dear God, some poison has set off a galloping mange.*

He opens his bag, draws out a long rubber tube, pushes it into the little O that was once Marie's perfect rosebud mouth. Now the O is swollen, chapped, purple. In and further in goes the tube, a serpent devouring from inside. Lola feels her own throat constrict and choke.

Marie convulses. Lola holds her down on the bed. Edward opens a flask and pours dark liquid down the tube. A bitter smell of coffee. He attaches a bulb to the end of the tube, squeezes and releases it. The liquid comes back with a sickening suck. He tips in more coffee, squeezes and releases. The liquid splashes onto the floor, and now it has a sickly-sweet chemical smell.

Marie falls limp. Glazed eyes in a waxy face stare at Lola without recognition.

'You've killed her,' hisses Lola.

'Hush.'

Edward yanks out the tube, wipes her nose and lips with his fingers, listens for a breath, pushes the tube back in.

'Water,' he says.

Lola fetches the full water pitcher from the stand. He uses the bulb to suck up the water mixed with something from another bottle with an ammonia smell. He pumps the mixture through the tube then takes the tube out of her mouth. *Thank God. Must wash her poor face.* Piled on an armchair by the bed are white gloves, silver fans, a little red book, corsets, striped stockings, a wig stand, a tangled cascade of pearls and diamonds, and a red scarf that flashes gold. Lola dips the edge of the scarf in water and tenderly wipes the sweat-dotted brow and cheeks, avoiding those bruised lips.

Now Edward gestures to her to pull Marie upright, off the bed. They yank her arms over their shoulders. They walk her up and down, up and down; her toes trail over the boards with the

tinest of clicks. Up and down. Past the picture rail and hangers with their dozens of gowns in purple and blue-striped silk, yellow and green damask, crimson satin. Up and down. At the end of one wall hangs a long black velvet cape, trimmed with white fur. Lola could close her eyes on this blaze of colour and still know this as Marie's boudoir from the scents of *Quelques Fleurs* and Earl Grey tea.

But not from the sickening whiffs of mould and ammonia. Not from the peeling daisy-patterned wallpaper, drab muslin curtains, sagging armchair and ramshackle bed, and the solitary lamp on the bare floorboards. Not from her friend's Blue Onion porcelain teapot, waiting lidless on the floor below a cracked ceiling bulging with stains.

Up and down. The lamp's sputter, their marching boots, Edward's heavy breath, her own gasps. Yet not a sound from Marie.

Suddenly Marie shakes with a series of stertorous breaths. Lola and Edward stare at each other. His Babylonian beard and eyebrows are strangely darker. It is the contrast with his white face.

A guttural gurgle from Marie's throat. *Sh* or *ch*.

Glory be, Lola thinks, *we have saved her*.

Then the breaths stop.

Edward lays her back on the bed. His fingers circle her wrist. With great gentleness, he closes her eyes and smooths her hair. As he moves away, Lola flings herself across the sweat-drenched shawl and the body beneath, breast to breast, and her howls echo around the bare room with the glittering walls.

ONE

A skeleton wearing a jaunty hat barred Lola's way just inside the door of the Yorick Club. It took her a moment to realise the thing was inanimate. She gave it a wide berth and crossed the rush matting towards a well-stocked bar. The scribblers' den shook and echoed with a deep rumble of voices. Fellows lounged on the bundles of papers tied with string that served for seats, knocking back brandy nobblers or putting their heads together, no doubt to share newspaper gossip. The biggest crowd was at the bar, where a young fellow in tall black riding boots was cocking one arm like a fencer. 'Science has identified four categories of young unmarried female,' he declaimed. 'The goddess, the prim miss, the willing woman and the willing for the money woman.' The crowd burst into laughter.

Where was her quarry? She had never seen him or had a description. All she knew were his words in newsprint. That baldie? That greying whiskery man? He would have an air of authority. All the others were vultures. The room seemed larger and larger. As she came closer to the bar, a silence fell. Perhaps fifty heads turned, stared. She was the only woman in the place. Her best blue dress buttoned up to her chin, yet those eyes stripped her bare.

A short figure with a magnificent beard broke from the bar crowd and came to her elbow. Edward Neild, her doctor and Melbourne's veteran theatre critic, with brandy on his breath. At least he wasn't a vulture. More of a pouter pigeon.

'Miss Sanchez, what are you doing here?' His voice was low, anxious. 'Yorick doesn't allow females, don't you know that?'

'Do they accept women as guests?'

'Yes, but –'

'Then I am your guest.'

The scowling bartender had moved out from behind the bar and was bearing down as if she were a wild dog that had sniffed its way in. Lola grabbed Edward's arm, held it tight. 'I am looking for Magnus Scott. Can you point him out?'

'What in blazes do you want with Magnus?' He nodded at the bartender, began to steer her back towards the skeleton.

'Did I hear my name?'

The young man who had been holding forth at the bar stood just behind Edward, towering over him. His face, one of the few clean-shaven in this place of goats, was in shadow, but she could tell he was gazing intently at her. She freed herself from Edward's arm and shook the young fellow's hand like a man. 'I am Lola Sanchez. The actress. I seem to have broken the Yorick rules, Mr Scott. But I'm hoping you will help me.'

'Always happy to help a lady.' He half-turned towards the bar where the men had recommenced their talk. The barman had retreated but still glared at her, while Edward was hovering helplessly. Someone whistled, others brayed and snickered. It was like standing in a tank full of eels.

'Let me take you to the Café de Paris – it is more welcoming.' He took her arm as if he thought it belonged on his, swept the hat off the skeleton as he passed and dropped it on his own head. Those riding boots took long strides; she had to scurry to keep up. She forgot about Edward, about the vultures, the eels, the goats.

As he strode he tapped the pavement with a silver-handled cane. Was that Excalibur, his famous swordstick? It looked like any other walking stick. But of course a sword could be hidden inside.

The Café de Paris was quiet; only three solitary figures sat hunched over their drinks. The boots crossed the chequered black and white floor to a secluded booth. He took one side of the table, waved her to the other. The moment they sat, a waiter in a long white apron bobbed up with a humidior of cigars and a box of matches.

‘A bottle of the usual, Leonard.’

Lola said she wanted lemonade.

‘Nasty stuff. I insist you taste the Veuve, the queen of champagnes.’ Magnus Scott took off his hat, pulled out a cigar, lit it, made a business of coaxing the flame and sat back with a sigh, all the time looking at her with narrowed eyes that were almost sinister, though it could have been the smoke. He was at least thirty years old. His skin was pale and smooth, his shoulders and arms and chest muscular under his smart coat, and he sat as if he possessed the whole of Melbourne. But this city was nobody’s plaything. How long had it taken to coax his russet locks into careless curls?

‘Lola Sanchez. The *actress*.’ He had dropped the declaiming tone of the bar. Now his voice was a low, caressing drawl. ‘Forgive me. I have such a shocking memory. I cannot recall you in any role.’

Ha. Were only divas good enough for him to remember? She crumpled in on herself, then inflated, choked out a dry shriek and raised her claws.

‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair, hover through the fog and filthy air.’

He gasped then applauded. ‘Now I recall your name on the playbills.’

‘Very far down the list. You probably thought I was Lola

Montez and wondered why I didn't do a spider dance. I named myself after her as I admired her so much.'

'Ah yes, dear Lola. Do you know she can scratch the back of her head with either foot?'

'Do you know she horsewhips impudent men?'

Leonard brought a bottle in an ice bucket, made a great to-do of popping the cork. Magnus poured them both generous glasses, raised his own: 'To love, youth and happiness.' She had resolved not to drink. A sip, for courage.

'So you want to advance up the playbill list?' He drained his glass, poured himself another. 'It can be done. A singling out from the cast, a glowing notice or two, and Miss Lola Sanchez is on her way to stardom.'

'You mean, you would ...'

He smiled, gave her a little bow.

'I would not dream of asking you. It would be quite wrong of me. And then I would be in your debt.'

His smile broadened. 'You might enjoy repaying me.'

Did he actually mean what she thought he meant? She should slap his smug face and walk out this minute. Hold your horses, Lola.

'Science has identified four categories of male,' she said. 'The hero, the idiot, the pest and the devil.'

He lowered his eyes. 'That was just nonsense to entertain the chaps. If it offended you, I am very sorry.'

'I've heard worse.' She took another sip. 'Now, sir, please listen. I am seeking your help because you are the only obituarist who wrote the truth about the character of Marie St Denis.' Her voice softened. 'I wept when I read your description in *The New Bohemian* of the beautiful room in Jolimont, the vases of flowers, her lace-trimmed nightgown. Your recollections of her brilliant performances. The way all the roles – Juliet, Lady Audley, Desdemona – became Marie.' He watched her, impassive. She

clutched the stem of the champagne glass. 'All the other reports were rubbish. They called her voluptuous, and we all know what that means. The insinuations.' She ticked them off on her fingers. 'That she was fallen, dishonoured, abandoned. That she did away with herself with a laudanum overdose because she identified too closely with the grand tragic parts she played. They implied she was a maniac, or a whore, or both –'

He interrupted her. 'My fellow scribblers are not generous. But I never speak ill of the dead. I save that up for the living.'

'You captured her well. It was so true, what you wrote: *In her presence, you never felt alone*. Did you know her?'

A brief pause. 'Hardly at all, alas. But I could scarcely fail to admire that chestnut hair, the lustrous eyes, alabaster skin, rosebud lips, petite figure, tiny waist ...' He sounded dreamy.

'What about her consummate skill? Her wonderful stage presence?'

'That too.' The smoke rising from his fingers smelled like gum trees and hot chocolate. 'I declare, I was half in love with her. That is my cross to bear, I can never fall more than half in love. But I do it very often.'

'I'm sure you do.'

He ignored her dry tone, gazed distractedly around the room, then returned his gaze to her. 'You know, Miss Sanchez, you could be a beauty too.' He leaned forward, scanned her face slowly as if considering a shop window display. 'Very different type, of course. Tall, commanding. Black curls, rosy cheeks. Black eyebrows. A wide red mouth.' An appraising pause. 'Cherry red.'

Good God, would he go on to describe her figure?

Then he leaned back. 'If only you didn't frown so much.'

'And you, sir, could be handsome. If only you didn't smile so much.'

Oh, he'd never listen to her now. Men were so touchy. They thought they had a right to play with you.

His eyes widened. Then he burst out laughing, a warm, gravelly sound that might win over a lesser target. 'Touché, madam. Now, how can I help you?'

Heigh-ho, now she must flatter. 'Mr Scott, I admire your newspaper writing. Your perceptive theatre reviews. Your satire. Your comedy. The way you prick hypocrisies and cant. The way you expose corruption.' She made her words blunt and flat. No wheedling. 'The way you stride fearlessly about the city for your Walking Gentleman column, storming the blackest dens of criminality, routing the wicked –'

'Oh, I tickle the facts.'

'Tickle?'

'I exaggerate outrageously.'

That was the least of it. But he'd lapped up her words like Touchstone with a bowl of cream. He puffed on his cigar, took it out of his mouth and looked at it as if it were a woman he had just kissed.

'Marie was my dearest friend.'

'Ah.' He put down his cigar. 'I am so very sorry.' He began to top up her glass.

Lola took a deep breath. 'She was murdered.'

His hand froze.

'The police won't listen to me,' she said quickly. 'But they will listen to you.'

'Please don't believe that.' His voice was very gentle now.

'You think it's better to suppose she took her own life? Better for some, maybe.' Lola spoke faster to outwit the welling tears. The highest-ranking police officer she could find had called her 'girlie'. He wasn't the slightest bit interested in her theory. In his role as coroner, Edward had produced Marie's 'Goodbye cruel world' letters. The imbeciles were convinced it was suicide.

'But the inquest verdict and all the evidence points that way.'

'Nonsense. Marie was in no mood to take her own life.'

‘But the suicide letters –’

‘They were written a long time ago. She tried to kill herself before. That time, Edward saved her. He must have kept the letters. He’s a great one for filing things.’

‘So this was her second attempt?’ He frowned. ‘She should’ve been watched night and day. How could they just let her die?’

‘I don’t know who you mean by *they*. Marie had people who cared for her. I was one, Edward was another. So don’t you dare tell me what *they* should have done.’

He made to speak, but she interrupted.

‘It’s true that Marie has been unstable in the past. No money, women’s troubles, the rift with her mother. But this was not a second attempt. For one thing, in the last few weeks, she was happy. She was just finishing her run as Desdemona at the Princess Theatre, and she was practising her singing for her new role at the Duke of Edinburgh as the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein. You don’t practise your singing and then kill yourself.’

She held up one finger, drained her glass in one gulp. The queen of champagnes was a fine drink when you got used to it.

‘For another thing, she made me a solemn vow that she would never again try to take her own life. Marie was never one to break a promise. If she had been even the slightest bit tempted, she would have told me.’

‘My dear Miss Sanchez.’ His hand hovered for a moment over hers. She tensed, ready to snatch it back, but then he tapped the table. ‘Your passion for your poor friend does you great credit. But still, there really is no reason to suspect murder.’

Lola felt dizzy, put her face in her hands. She could hear him refilling her glass. Then she looked up. ‘Everything you have said and written proves it was murder.’

He was staring into the huge mirror over the bar, straightening his already straight cravat. Such vanity. She didn’t like his eyes on her, but she liked it even less when he eyed himself.

‘Pay attention, please.’

He turned back so fast she expected a mocking salute.

‘Marie could be scatterbrained,’ she went on, ‘but she’d plan her own death down to the last detail. Even if she was destitute, she’d pawn her jewellery to get a nice room, a French lace nightgown, new perfume, vases of flowers everywhere. She’d leave letters to be found. And only then would she begin the fatal act.’

Now she had his full attention. ‘Just as I described.’

‘Yes, and do you know why I wept when I read your description?’

‘Because it was so beautiful.’

‘And also because it was a lie.’

‘Eh?’

‘How dare you try to fool me, Mr Scott. I was there. I saw her die.’

‘Good God.’

‘There was no grand room in Jolimont, no vases of flowers, no lace nightgown. Only a little bare room with a leak in the ceiling.’

‘You poor creature –’

‘And if I told you all, you would vomit up your Veuve.’

‘I swear to you, I believed my account was the truth. I had it from my friend Edward –’

‘Then he is the liar, and I cannot conceive why. Did he not tell you I was there too, trying to save her?’

‘Not a word. Perhaps he was trying to protect you, and Marie.’

Lola snorted.

‘How can I help you, Miss Sanchez?’

‘I had some idea I could persuade you to write the whole truth. Now I’m not so sure. But you owe me a debt for your damnably false reporting.’

He opened his mouth, then shut it. She twisted and untwisted her gloved fingers in her lap, her eyes searching his face. He closed his eyes. For the first time, his cockiness had deserted him.

‘I’ll tell you what I intend, though I doubt very much you can

help,' she said. 'I will go back as soon as I can to the room where Marie died. If I can find it again.'

It was somewhere in the streets behind the Theatre Royal, she said. A boy had come to her with a message that Marie was sick, and she got him to drag Edward out of a dinner at the Menzies Hotel, and the two of them went to the house in great haste in a cab. It was pitch black and rainy ...

'A broad street?'

'Very narrow. Two high brick walls. Some sign about celestials.'

'Oh, the Chinese quarter.' He smiled, leaned forward. 'Of course I can help. I will find the place for you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Easiest thing in the world. I've gadded about there so often.'

'It's such a maze, everyone gets lost.'

'Not the Walking Gentleman. Stick with me, I will guide you. I know the place like the back of my hand. And anyway, you need an escort. The Chinese quarter is no place for a lone woman. But why do you want to go back to such a terrible room?'

'It will be the first step in my quest to find Marie's murderer and bring him to justice. I have an idea who that murderer is. But I need evidence. So I'll examine the room for clues in the manner of a detective.'

'A detective?' He looked surprised. 'You are a lady detective as well as an actress?'

'An amateur only.'

'Of course, our police force would never be smart enough to employ a woman. But this is charming. I would love to see you at work. Have you solved any crimes? Do you use powders and a magnifying glass and a tape measure and all that malarkey?'

Yes, she said, all that malarkey. 'And I use it well.'

He was mocking her. But there was a bright boyishness in his tone she had not caught before. Lord, she had engaged his interest in a way she had never expected.

Then he looked away again. 'But even if we found the room, I fear you would discover nothing. There was no murder, and no murderer.'

So near, yet so far. So much work wasted persuading this complacent fellow. She lowered her eyelids, tightened the ribbons on her hat, scraped stray tendrils of hair back under the brim. She thanked him for the Veuve, for hearing her out. Her voice was stone.

'You are not going? Leaving me all bereft? Come, we will have another bottle.'

'Not another drop.'

'Let me escort you home, Miss Detective.'

'Not for all the champagne in France. Goodbye, Mr Scott.'

She walked away, her spine erect. She would not let the Veuve sway her step. Maybe he would follow her, take her arm, stride out with her, and this time she'd wrench her arm out of his grip ... But nothing happened, and she refused to look back.

The Café de Paris was beginning to fill with evening trade. A lovely young hoyden in a bright bird of paradise hat sauntered past her, eyeing the customers. A purple feather boa swathed her bare shoulders. Mr Scott would not sit all bereft for long.

TWO

With a flourish, Lola peeled off her gloves. She tore open the bloody parcel she'd bought from the butcher on the way back from the Café de Paris. 'Lamb's kidneys.'

'Very good for the spleen,' said Mrs Harvey. She was reclining in her wrapper on the threadbare silk counterpane of her Queen Anne bed, smoking her pipe and knitting one of her mysterious garments. 'How was your day?'

For answer, Lola felt like falling onto the bed and weeping. But then Mrs Harvey would cluck over her. They'd done too much weeping and clucking since they lost Marie.

Mrs Harvey asked her usual question. 'Did you meet a nice young gentleman?'

For once, Lola had part of the right answer. 'Youngish. But not nice.'

'Fiddlesticks. They're all nice. Until proven otherwise.' Her landlady and friend narrowed her eyes. 'Good-looking?'

'An Adonis.' Her voice was flat. 'If you like that kind of thing.'

'Too good-looking.'

Lola shrugged. At the age of twenty-four, she usually wanted to laugh at Mrs Harvey's view that she was teetering on the

edge of the pit where the old maids were dumped. But today it didn't seem so funny. She turned her back, tried to find a space for her parcel among the candelabras and stuffed birds on the occasional tables.

'Does he have means?' Mrs Harvey persisted.

'He bought me some very expensive champagne.' Lola unpinned her hat. She was still dizzy from the Veuve.

'Might be a good sign. Might be bad. Does he have a name, this fellow?'

'Magnus Scott.'

Mrs Harvey dropped her knitting. 'That scribbler who edits *The New Bohemian*? Lola Sanchez, are you mad?'

'No more than usual.'

Her friend was fanning herself with the sleeve of her wrapper. 'Magnus Scott is the most scandalous young man in Melbourne. He makes my dear departed spendthrift husband look like Ebenezer Scrooge. A profligate, a demon at the card table, a colossal toper. What's more, he's a fiend for opium and the cannabis indica.' A sharp intake of breath. 'He didn't charm you into giving him a loan?'

'He didn't charm me one bit.'

'He must be flush for the moment. He's said to have prospects if he inherits his father's fortune. But money doesn't stick to him. It all drains away on liquor and gambling and fast women. And not only the fast ones. Do you know, he ruined a duke's daughter.'

'I wasn't aware there were any dukes in Melbourne.'

'Some bigwig's daughter. They had to marry her off to a chinless cousin before her belly gave her away. Lola, for pity's sake, stay away from Magnus Scott. You don't know how to handle men like that.'

'Don't fret.' Lola sat down on the bed beside her. After a moment, she slung an awkward arm round Mrs Harvey's bowed shoulders.

Her friend sniffed. ‘A crying shame you have no mamma or papa to advise you. Sometimes I wonder if you know how to handle men at all. You scare off the good ones and you’re left with the bad.’

‘I’m not going to marry him. All I did was ask him to help me with my quest. He is a famous newspaperman, he has influence. People take notice of him. The police, for example.’

‘How will he help you then?’

Lola shook her head glumly. ‘He can’t.’

‘Good, no need to see the diabolical fellow again then. Now, while you’ve been out gallivanting, I’ve decided to give Mrs Clive notice.’

‘Because of those gentlemen callers?’

‘Because she’s a thief. She stole my emerald earring.’

‘*One* earring?’

Once Lola had rented her own room in this house in Latrobe Street, which the late and occasionally lamented theatre impresario Mr Roderick Harvey had willed to his wife. But much of Mr Harvey’s estate went to pay for his flutters at the card table. His widow had to let to more lodgers. Now she and Lola shared one bedroom, high-ceilinged, bay-windowed, cluttered with genteel heirloom furniture, and reeking of tobacco, eau de cologne and stale powder. They were sandwiched between tenants. Mrs Clive lurked on the ground floor and her two milliners in the attic. When Mrs Clive and her girls weren’t turning out cheap copies of Parisian hats, they were in the back room on other business. Mrs Harvey turned a blind eye. Everyone knew an actress couldn’t run a respectable household.

‘I still hope you’ll find better company.’ Mrs Harvey’s thoughts were rambling back to young men. She sounded doubtful.

Company was not what Lola was after. She yearned for what Marie had had, and more: stardom. Top of the bill in Melbourne, Sydney, London. Lola was good enough. And she deserved it

after years at the bottom of the cast lists. Maybe Magnus Scott could have started the ball rolling for her with a glowing notice or two. But no, not at the price he was asking. She'd succeed on her own merits or not at all.

Mrs Harvey had once been a goddess of the stage. Men had fallen at her feet. Lola looked across at the plump placid cheeks, the triple chin. Still a respected player, but no more great ingenue roles, no more falling men. The useless pity flooded back. For the ageing actress, for her own fading dreams, and above all, for her poor murdered friend.

Mrs Harvey held up a warning finger. 'But be careful. You don't want to end up like –'

Tact was never her strong point.

Lola rode the familiar lurch of sorrow. Patiently she explained that she'd hoped Mr Scott would take her to the bedroom where Marie had died, but ... She trailed off.

'I'm not surprised.' Mrs Harvey was without her usual sympathy. 'So like you – rushing in where devils fear to tread. That Mr Scott would take you to a bedroom like a shot but not the room you're after. Why don't you use your detecting skills to have that sly Mrs Clive arrested and get my earring back?'

She did need practice. Slowly, Lola paced round the room, peering at surfaces, at the floor. It was possible someone had got in. Mrs Harvey often forgot to lock the door. But one earring ... it didn't make sense. She paused at the dressing table. An earring sat on a dusty surface marked with the curving track of fingers. Aha. She moved to the bedside, darted out her hand. Raised it with the flashing green on her palm.

Mrs Harvey dropped her knitting, rose to her feet and hugged Lola's stiff figure, calling her a conjuror. But it wasn't a trick. Close observation, beginner's level. Many a night she'd seen Mrs Harvey take off her earrings and drop them on the dressing table. Then she'd sweep a hand across the surface to find her

combs. The sweep often pushed a shower of hairpins into the voluminous sleeves of her wrapper. Easy to guess the earring had followed the same path.

A scratching behind her. Lola opened the window. 'Hello, Touchstone.' She held out an arm to the skinny grey cat perched on the splintered paint of the sill. He tolerated her caress.

'Not that stray again,' Mrs Harvey squealed. 'Don't let him in, he's a mass of fleas.'

Lola shut the window. She took her parcel down to the kitchen. The cook and the maid had fled long ago. She tied on an apron, rolled up her sleeves, sang a ditty as she chopped the meat. That damp patch on the wall had spread, the plaster flaking. Good. Later tonight, after she'd fed the hens, after they'd eaten their dinner sitting on the Queen Ann bed, while Mrs Harvey recited Hecuba or Volumnia or Lady Macbeth in her sleep, Lola would get up. Very quietly. She'd light a candle, take it down to the kitchen with the bottle from her detective kit. She'd use a knife to scrape some more plaster off the damp patch. The plaster would be all powdery, into the bottle, easy does it. Then back upstairs, curl up on her tiny camp bed with the candle and reread her Monsieur Lecoq novels for some more ideas.

They called them penny dreadfuls. But the adventures of the brave and brilliant French police detective were penny wonderfuls. They were teaching her how to find answers to her questions. Ever since she was little Ivy Pimm she'd been asking how and where and why. How did that bunny rabbit get into Papa's top hat, where did it come from, why did it go in? Nobody answered her, not even Papa. Work it out yourself, he always said. He was right. You had to work it out yourself. The answers people gave you were lies. Papa showed her how to watch carefully, so carefully, with his Amazing Pimm moves, his dancing lying hands.

Monsieur Lecoq showed her how to examine the crime scene. Hunt down those cunning criminals from the tiniest clues. He was relentless. Especially when no-one believed there'd been a murder. She'd learned so much from him. She was ready for a much tougher case than a missing earring. So what if Mrs Harvey didn't believe her murder story? So what if Mr Scott hadn't believed her either?

But where to start? She had to find her way back to the room where Marie died, that was clear. Maybe Edward would take her there? He was a kind doctor and, despite his somewhat shady reputation with young ladies, had never shown her the least impropriety. But he always shut up like a clam about anything to do with his work as coroner. And he'd told a lie about how Marie died. There was no chance he'd help.

Which left her with that most ungentlemanly gentleman, Magnus Scott. Now that the effects of the *Veuve* were wearing off, she saw him more clearly in her mind's eye than she had through cigar smoke across the table at the *Café de Paris*. Tall Adonis, if you like that kind of thing, and she didn't. Red-haired and green-eyed, his legs sheathed in shiny black leather. That silver-topped cane, his famous swordstick. All the swagger she so despised in a man. But think of it another way: swagger at her disposal. He could ruin as many dukes' daughters as he liked – what did she care? She could use that restless energy. He was the one who'd stride in where devils feared to tread. And he'd stride all the way to the room where Marie died.

Ever since she was performing contortionist tricks on the stage as little Ivy Pimm, Lola had known about the foreign domain of men. Unpredictable, mercurial, dangerous. They were the reason she felt so alone in the world. But because they ruled that world – yes, even the poor ones – a girl got nowhere confronting them head-on. Mrs Harvey had taught her that: 'A girl has to go sideways,' was her mantra. It was a lesson that Lola never seemed

to learn. She envied Mr Scott. Because he was a man, he'd never had to go sideways.

She stoked up the fire in the stove, put a pat of lard in the frying pan, placed it on the burner. Ah, but would it be worth it, putting up with more of his impudence? Why had she approached him in the first place? Because he told the truth about Marie? But like all the other obituarists, he'd lied about the room. Yet he'd told her Edward had given him that background, and he had no reason not to believe it.

And there was that strange sentence in his obituary that still struck her more than all his praise: *In her presence, you never felt alone*. Of course he meant Marie's stage presence. But hadn't she felt that too, offstage? Marie was the only friend of her own age Lola had ever had. Marie was always hugging her, calling her *ma chérie*, assuring Lola of her gifts as an actress, promising the *idiotes* would recognise her talent one day. Lola had told her all her news, whispered to her all her secret longings.

Tears pricked her eyes, and her hopes began to sizzle with the lard. Somehow this man, and no other, had divined the essence of Marie's magic that went beyond all stagecraft. That was extraordinary.

She scraped the kidneys into the pan. Out the back door, colander in one hand, she knelt and scabbled in the earth for the roots of collard greens. Beatrix and her girls came pecking for seed but fled in a huff when Touchstone dropped from the windowsill and curled like smoke around her knees. He followed her back into the kitchen.

Her choice was clear. Keep her pride, flounder around without a starting point. Or eat humble pie, write a formal note to Magnus Scott asking him to accompany her into Chinatown. He'd perked up no end when he discovered she was a detective. Well, trying to be a detective. He didn't have to know that.

'What should I do, Touchstone?'

JANE SULLIVAN

She took the largest piece of kidney from the pan and dropped it at his feet. It stank of urine. He walked around it, sniffed it, slowly began to eat. What a sideways creature, trying to prove he wasn't starving.