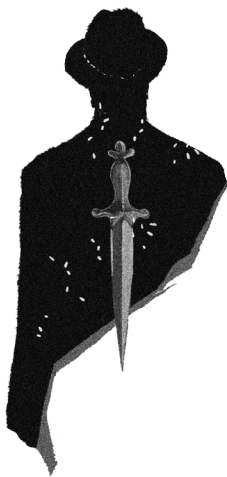




Josephine Tey

*The Man  
in the Queue*



Kharkiv  
«Folio»

## Chapter 1

### MURDER

**I**t was between seven and eight o'clock on a March evening, and all over London the bars were being drawn back from pit and gallery doors. Bang, thud, and clank. Grim sounds to preface an evening's amusement. However, no last trump could have so galvanized the weary attendants on Thespis and Terpsichore standing in patient column of four before the gates of promise. Here and there, of course, there was no column. At the Irving, five people spread themselves over the two steps and sacrificed in warmth what they gained in comfort; Greek tragedy was not popular. At the Playbox, there was no one; the Playbox was exclusive, and ignored the existence of pits. At the Arena, which had a three weeks' ballet season, there were ten persons for the gallery and a long queue for the pit.

But at the Woffington, both human strings tailed away apparently into infinity. Long ago, a lordly official had come down the pit queue and, with a gesture of his outstretched arm that seemed to guillotine hope, had said, "All after here standing room only." Having thus, with a mere contraction of his deltoid muscle, separated the sheep from the goats, he retired in Olympian state to the front of the theatre where, beyond the glass doors, there was warmth and shelter. But no one moved away from the long line. Those who were doomed to stand for three hours more seemed indifferent to their martyrdom. They laughed and chattered, and passed each other sustaining bits of chocolate in torn silver paper.

Standing room only, was it? Well, who would not stand, and be pleased to, in the last week of *Didn't You Know?*

Nearly two years it had run now, London's own musical comedy, and this was its swan song. The stalls and the circle had been booked up weeks ago, and many foolish virgins, not used to queues, had swelled the waiting throng at the barred doors because bribery and corruption had proved unsuccessful at the box office. Every soul in London, it seemed, was trying to crowd into the Woffington to cheer the show just once again. To see if Golly Gollan had put a new gag into his triumph of foolery—Gollan who had been rescued from a life on the road by a daring manager, and had been given his chance and had taken it. To sun themselves yet once more in the loveliness and sparkle of Ray Marcable, that comet that two years ago had blazed out of the void into the zenith and had dimmed the known and constant stars.

Ray danced like a blown leaf, and her little aloof smile had killed the fashion for dentifrice advertisements in six months. "Her indefinable charm," the critics called it, but her followers called it many extravagant things, and defined it to each other with hand-wavings and facial contortions when words proved inadequate to convey the whole of her faery quality. Now she was going to America, like all the good things, and after the last two years, London without Ray Marcable would be an unthinkable desert. Who would not stand forever just to see her once more?

It had been drizzling since five o'clock, and every now and then, a light, chill air lifted the drizzle and half playfully swept the queue from end to end with it in one long brushstroke. That discouraged no one—even the weather could not take itself seriously tonight; it had merely sufficient tang to provide a suitable aperitif to the fare in front of them. The queue twiddled its toes, and Cockneywise made the most of whatever entertainment provided itself in the dark canyon

of the lane. First, there had come the newsboys, small things with thin, impassive faces and wary eyes. They had flickered down the queue like wildfire and disappeared, leaving behind a trail of chatter and fluttering papers.

Then, a man with legs shorter than his body laid a ragged strip of carpet on the damp pavement and proceeded to tie himself into knots until he looked as a spider does when it is taken unawares, his mournful toad's eyes gleaming now and then, from totally unexpected places, in the writhing mass, so that even the most indifferent spectator felt his spine trickle. He was succeeded by a man who played popular airs on the fiddle, happily oblivious of the fact that his E string was half a tone flat. Then, simultaneously, came a singer of sentimental ballads and a syncopated orchestra of three. After they had scowled at each other for a moment or two, the soloist tried to rush things on the possession-being-nine-points principle, by breaking into a wailing *Because you came to me*, but the leader of the orchestra, handing his guitar to a lieutenant, proceeded to interview the tenor, with his elbows out and his hands lifted.

The tenor tried to ignore him by looking over his head, but found it difficult, because the musician was half a head taller than himself and appeared to be ubiquitous. He persevered for another two lines, and then the ballad wavered uncertainly into bitter expostulation in his natural voice, and two minutes later, he faded up the dark alley, mumbling threats and complaints, and the orchestra broke into the latest dance tune.

This being more to the taste of the moderns than inappropriate resurrection of decayed sentiment, they promptly forgot all about the poor victim of *force majeure*, and twiddled their toes in time to the lively measure. After the orchestra, and severally, came a conjurer, an evangelist, and a man who allowed himself to be tied up in a rope with imposing-looking knots, and as imposingly worked himself free.

All these did their little turn and moved on to another performance elsewhere, and each one, before leaving, made a tour of the line, thrusting limp but importunate headgear into the meagre interstices of the queue, and saying, "Thank you! Thank you!" as encouragement to the bountiful. By way of punctuation to the programme, there had been vendors of sweetmeats, vendors of matches, vendors of toys, vendors even of picture post cards. And the crowd had parted good-naturedly with their pence and found amusement sufficient to their needs.

Now a shudder ran down the line—a shudder that the experienced recognized as but one thing. Stools were given up or folded into handbags, food disappeared, purses appeared. The doors were open. The lovely exciting gamble had begun. Was it to be win, place, or lose by the time they came to the wicket? Up in the front of the queue, where the order was less mathematically two-and-two than down in the open, the excitement of the door-opening had for a moment or two overcome the habitual place-keeping instincts of the Englishman—I say Englishman advisedly; the Scot has none of it—and there had been a mild pushing and readjustment before the queue had become immobile in a wedged and short-breathing mass before the *guichet*, which was immediately inside the pit door. The clink and rattle of coin on brass proclaimed the continual hurried transactions, which made the lucky ones free of paradise. The very sound of it made those behind strain forward unconsciously until the crowd in front protested as audibly as their crushed lungs permitted, and a policeman went down the queue to remonstrate. "Now then, now then, stand back a bit. There's plenty of time. You won't get in by pushing. All in good time."

Now and then, the whole line tottered forward a few inches, as the emancipated ones ran in twos and threes from the head of it, like beads rolling from a broken string. Now a fat woman held them up by fumbling in her bag for more

money. Surely, the fool could have found out before now the exact amount required instead of keeping them back like this. As if conscious of their hostility, she turned to the man behind her and said angrily:

“Ere, I’ll thank you to stop shoving. Can’t a lady be allowed to take out her purse without everyone losing their manners?”

But the man she addressed took no notice. His head was sunk on his chest. Only the top of his soft hat met her beady indignant gaze. She snorted, and moving away from him to face the box office squarely, laid down the money she had been searching for. And as she did so, the man sank slowly to his knees, so that those behind almost fell over him, stayed like that for a moment, and then keeled still more slowly over on his face.

“Chap fainted,” said someone. No one moved for a moment or two. Minding one’s own business in a crowd today is as much an instinct of self-preservation as a chameleon’s versatility. Perhaps someone would claim the chap. But no one did; and so a man with more social instinct, or more self-importance than the rest, moved forward to help the collapsed one. He was about to bend over the limp heap when he stopped as if stung and recoiled hastily. A woman shrieked three times, horribly; and the pushing, heaving queue froze suddenly to immobility.

In the white clear light of the naked electric in the roof, the man’s body, left alone by the instinctive withdrawal of the others, lay revealed in every detail. And rising slantwise from the grey tweed of his coat was a little silver thing that winked wickedly in the baleful light.

It was the handle of a dagger.

Almost before the cry of “Police!” had gone up, the constable had come from his job of pacification at the other end of the queue. At the first of the woman’s shrieks, he had turned. No one shrieked like that except when

faced by sudden death. Now he stood looking for a moment at the picture, bent over the man, turned his head gently to the light, released it, and said to the man at the *guichet*:

“Phone for the ambulance and the police.”

He turned his rather shocked gaze on the queue.

“Anyone here know the gentleman?”

But no one claimed acquaintance with the still thing on the floor.

Behind the man, there had been a prosperous suburban couple. The woman was moaning continuously and without expression, “Oh, let’s go home, Jimmy! Oh, let’s go home!” On the opposite side of the *guichet* stood the fat woman, arrested by this sudden horror, grasping her ticket in her black cotton gloves but making no effort to secure a seat now that the way lay open to her. Down the waiting line behind, the news went like fire in stubble—a man had been murdered!—and the crowd in the sloping vestibule began to mill suddenly in hopeless confusion, as some tried to get away from the thing that had spoiled all thought of entertainment, and some tried to push forward to see, and some indignant ones fought to keep the place they had stood so many hours for.

“Oh, let’s go home, Jimmy! Oh, let’s go home!”

Jimmy spoke for the first time. “I don’t think we can, old girl, until the police decide whether they want us or not.”

The constable heard him and said, “You’re quite right there. You cannot go. You first six will stay where you are—and you, missus,” he added to the fat woman. “The rest come on.” And he waved them on, as he would wave the traffic past a broken-down car.

Jimmy’s wife broke into hysterical sobbing, and the fat woman expostulated. She had come to see the show and didn’t know anything about the man. The four people behind the suburban couple were equally reluctant to be mixed up in a thing they knew nothing about, with results that no one could foresee. They, too, protested their ignorance.

“Maybe,” said the policeman, “but you’ll have to explain all that at the station. There’s nothing to be scared of,” he added for their comfort, and rather unconvincingly in the circumstances.

So the queue came on. The doorkeeper brought a green curtain from somewhere and covered up the body. The automatic clink and rattle of coin began again and went on, indifferent as rain. The doorkeeper, moved from his habitual Jovian abstraction by their plight or by the hope of reward, offered to keep their rightful seats for the seven derelicts. Presently came the ambulance and the police from Gowbridge Police Station. An inspector had a short interview with each of the detained seven, took names and addresses, and dismissed them with a warning to be ready to come up if called upon. Jimmy took his sobbing wife away to a taxi, and the other five straggled soberly in to the seats, over which the doorkeeper was brooding, just as the curtain rose on the evening performance of *Didn't You Know?*

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