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Also by Ann Featherstone

The Victorian Clown (with Jacky Bratton)

The Journals of Sydney Race 1892–1900

WALKING IN PIMLICO

A Novel of Victorian Murder



ANN FEATHERSTONE

JOHN MURRAY

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For my family

To walk in Pimlico *colloq.* to be handsomely dressed

*Murray's Dictionary of Slang, Cant and
Flash Words and Phrases*
(1857, 3rd edition)



Murderous Beginnings

Corney Sage - Whitechapel, London

Here is a murder.

And here is yours truly, Corney Sage, comedian, clog-dancer, comic vocalist, actor and all-round funny fellow.

And though I never saw the murder, hardly knew the person what done it (not really), and only nodded to her what was done in, I was there at the beginning. And at the end too, though it cost me my health and reason, and still interrupts my sleep with bad dreams.

But stop me. I cannot tell the end before the start and, as per, I am going on ahead to put on my hat before my stocking. There is some business to be got through first before I can tell about the murder, so like the pro that I am, I thank you for your indulgence and trust to your good offices, and hope that nothing offends.

Or some such.

Now how I came to be doing my season at the Constellation Concert Rooms in Whitechapel is not of much importance, though if I was giving chapter and verse, as the parson utters, I should say that on this occasion I didn't get my shop through any advertisement in the *Era* newspaper (the Bible of the Acting Profession), but through the good offices of a young woman with whom I was acquainted, Miss Lucy Strong. No one, except the Gov, Mr Pickuls,

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would say that the Constellation was the best gaff in London, for it certainly was not, but I was short of a shop, and there was nothing else about, so I was glad to be set on to do a few turns on the platform. This was in the days when my dancing was something to behold. Dan Leno may offer to meet all comers and think he owns the world, but if he'd met me in my heyday there'd have been a different king on the throne! I don't blow my own horn as a rule, but it strikes me as rum when a man isn't give the credit for what he does best.

Anyhow, here are the dram. pers., as they give it in the theatre. Mr Pickuls, the Gov'nor, quiet-spoken, if full of himself, and his wife Mrs Gov, dark as the inside of a cow, and twice as mean. The Chinns, Mr on the piano and Mrs on the fiddle. (Not their proper names for they was from Roosher or some such far-off place, but their real moniker was such a tongue-binder that it was cut short – to Chinn.) And then there was the girls – a rum collection of Janes, Pollys, Nancys and Nells, but sweet-natured. Set on to do the poses plastiques which, when I first saw them, made me blush, so natural did those girls appear in their body-pink fleshings, standing stock-still on the stage and pretending to be marble figures of the Six Graces or what have you. There was not much of a stage, only a fiddling platform, and that barely off the floor and leaning to the right on account of the blocks having rotted away and being held up by house bricks. And a rag curtain what truly was a rag, so patched up was it (Mrs Pickuls's skill with the needle not being remarkable) and rings missing along the top. But it had been red plush (last century) and carried more gold than a Frenchman's breast pocket, so in a dim light it appeared to look the business.

'The Six Graces, Corney,' Gov says, with his chest puffed out, as the Chinns struck up and the girls held steady, some with their arms up, some down, and all of them gazing out to sea and like statues, as if they was made of stone.

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But his judgement was to the mark, and no mistake, for the poses filled the Constellation to bursting with swells and City men and young rantans. There were bills up and down the High-street, and certain it was difficult to be ignorant of the 'startling and edifying display of classical statuary **IN THE LIFE!!!!**' so industrious were the bill-stickers with their paste and brushes. It all promised to be as rosy as the girls' cheeks, and I thought I should be settled there for a season, and had worked up a few pieces which brought me cheers of recognition when I stepped upon the stage. Just my dancing and some merry songs: 'The Industrious Flea', 'Alonzo the Brave' and the like, and borrowings from old pals, like Billy Ross, who I stood chummery with when he was at the Coal Hole. (But of him and his favour to me, more anon, as the story papers say.)

As I said, the Constellation was shining bright with success in its own firmament and would have continued until the appetite for the poses died, but one morning, of a sudden, the Gov decided upon a change. The poses were old sweat. The Judge and Jury was the thing. He had been on a convivial outing with his catering pals, and finished off at the Cyder Cellars in Maiden Lane where he saw performed his first judicial stunner, those naughty mockeries of mi'lords and mi'ladies, put up to inflame and amuse.

'I have expectations, Corney,' he croaked to me, looking pale and crusty, and with eyes like pips. 'My Constellation will be talked of all over the town.' He was much in earnest and so shabby from the night before, that I didn't have the heart to argue, and encouraged him, even as he was dragging the girls from their beds before noon and sending a special summons to the Chinns.

Bunting, the carpenter, was called up, to build a dock and bench (no need for plans, Bunting being very familiar with the inside of a courtroom), and Perlmann was given orders for the costumes. This Hebrew was not of the tailoring persuasion, of course, but in the 'Old Clo' business, having emporiums over three streets, and what

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he could not provide in the overcoat line was not worth having. But judges' robes were a different matter, of course, and ladies' down-below, neither finding their way to Petticoat-lane as a rule. And it was when old Perlmann started about me with his reckoning eye and his pencil stub and asking me whether I could muster a linen shirt, that I clocked that *I* was in line for the Bench too.

'In case you had forgot, Gov,' I reminded him, when he was taking a breather in the yard, 'I am only your comedian, with dancing – clogs and high boots – and comic songs as required. What I know about the Judge and Jury is like Nelly's drawers: too little to mention. And I am happy to say that I am also unacquainted with the law and the insides of a courtroom.'

But I might have saved my breath, for he had made his mind up. He patted me on the shoulder, mopped his brow, and said it would be in my interest if I conned a good few blue wheezes and read up on recent ripe goings-on in Battersea and Kilburn. Otherwise he'd heard Mr Jolliffe at the Salmon and Compasses in Pentonville was in need of a waiter. That marked it out for me clean as a penny. Either I sat on this Bench, or I could look for another shop, Pentonville way.

I wasn't the only one objecting, for some of the girls were rowdy about it too, but it was no use. He was like a man possessed, and would hear no argument. All he was bothered about was the show.

'What you must do,' he told us for the umpteenth time, 'is simple – make a mock of the swells and all their goings-on in the courts. It is very easy. Corney here is the Judge, and he will tell the case and introduce defenders and pleaders, and then you girls will act about a bit and make up this and that – Corney will tell you what. And the Jury will decide who's done right and who's done wrong – Corney will say. And that's that.'

It sounded to me like Corney was down for five years' hard labour. But no use arguing. Gov was so sure that his Constellation

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was set to be the Canterbury Hall of the East End that he went deaf, and then went out and bought new duds and a shiny watch and chain, and started wearing gloves and all, and peeling them off and putting them on again till everyone got sick of seeing them. He believed he was the Big Man about Whitechapel now, and no mistake, and if he wasn't fiddling with his gloves, he was whipping out his watch and chain (all going green of course), or waving his stick around.

He was quiet on the first evening, for there was only half a room full of locals, even though the bill-stickers had been hard at it for days, but after a very few weeks it was much better. And we were too, having grown accustomed to the business. Kitty and Lucy were mostly to the front, having the best figures and not shy, though it was me who did most of the speechifying, and that I gave with as much seriousness as I could muster, and tossed in a wheeze when I could, and would tip the audience a wink. After a few weeks, we were regular in the practice of Judge and Jurying. The Gov'nor would con the papers and come up with some new trial – how many there were, it was truly astonishing! – and we would quickly understand the meat of the argument and turn it into a jape in half an hour. After a few months we were a Judge and Jury what could hold their own, and the Gov said the 'Great Baron Richardson' had heard of us and meant to pay us a visit, which seemed to me unlikely, the 'Great Baron' having enough on with his own business. And, in truth, he never did come, though he was much looked for, if you know what I mean.

So after all this previousness, I have now arrived at the evening when my whole history, and that of others too, was stood upon its head.

Tuesday.

Not a packed room, but heavy enough with swells, who make a loud noise and cannot hold their drink. But they are heavy spenders

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and the Gov, who knew the Fancy all around, had put the word about that our Judge and Jury was worth a visit, and so this out-of-town party, half a dozen swells who was pretty much in their cups, took my notice as I was conning the crowd. They was frisky and handling the girls, though not roughly yet. Now I look out for our girls, although without a doubt they can look out for themselves, Kitty in particular, who had travelled the country with her father's boxing booth and has smacked a frisky swell more than once when he got over-playful. Not that the other girls were afraid of using elbows and knees when they was required, but it is a fact that swells turn powerful nasty of a sudden, unlike your working man who in general has a slower rise. So I had one eye upon our pack of swells, six or seven in number, who are noisy but not yet wild, and Gov is watching them too, though more concerned about his new tables and chairs, and the half-dozen mirrors he's put up around the walls only that afternoon.

We commence. Here is our courtroom, presided over by yours truly, a Learned Judge, with my wig and gown. Hammer in one hand, glass in the other, I Address the Assembly, what is the girls, some in gowns and some in breeches, trying to look like blokes, but not intending to do a good job of it!

'H-I shall co-m-mence,' I always began, and rap my hammer on the block. 'Tonight we 'ave the case of Lord B and Lady C brought by Countess D who is much dis-tressed. Bring 'em on, Master Clerk.' And here Bessie, who is wearing a wig what slips over her eye and a clerk's gown over her down-below, nips out to fetch Lady C and Countess D who are Kitty and Lucy, of course, dressed up like regular dames, only common, and showing a deal of leg and bosom. They parade up and down a bit and have the swells roaring so well that I have to bang about with my hammer again to get order.

'Well, Yeronner,' starts Kitty, trying to look aggrieved, 'I am

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much offended by the behaviour of my 'usband, Lord B. When we was married, 'e promised to keep me 'appy and attend to my every need. 'E said 'e would do anything 'e could to satisfy me.' (Here she winks – which was my idea – and starts the crowd laughing again.) 'E brought me into society, and let me 'ave a go at everything.' (Laughter.) 'And I did.' (More laughter.) 'E hintroduced me to Countess D.' (Here Lucy starts curtsying and showing plenty off.) 'She learned me a fing or two what I never knew before.' (And Lucy does a bit more.) 'And then, Yeronner, 'e took 'er off me.'

This always gets a good laugh, particularly when Kitty and Lucy embrace most passionately. It is here that I have to play the waiting game myself, using all my long experience to know just how long to let 'em embrace before I chime in. I have a long drink and light a pipe before I strike my hammer again and say, in my best Judge's voice, 'And what do you 'ave to say, Countess D? Is it true that 'er 'usband took you off 'er?'

Kitty looks about the room, and then gives Lucy one on the lips. Lucy appears much affected and is much inclined to attempt another embrace, but Kitty puts her off.

'Ho,' says Kitty, with much h-affectation, 'Lord B h-only wanted a bit of company. 'E is a gent much troubled by 'is h-affairs.' (Laughter.) 'Fings get very 'ard for 'im, and 'e yearns for relief. What h-I give 'im.' (Uproar.)

Lady C protests. 'You – flibbertigiblet!' (Laughter.) 'What about what you promised me? What about them bonnets what I give you? And them stockin's?'

I intervene. 'Yes,' says I, 'where is them bonnets? And them stockin's? Clerk. 'Ave these h-items been brung up as h-evidence?'

Bessie comes prancing in again, holding on her wig with one hand and carrying a small black bonnet and a pair of red stockings in the other.

'I've brung 'em, m'lord,' she squeaks. 'Do you want a glim?' (Not

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very clever, I know, but, my word, what roars of laughter it produces!)

And so we go on, with more of the same and, depending upon how enthusiastic the crowd is, we make it short or long. The Chinns play us on and off, and provide an interlude, and it is, as the Gov predicted, a belter. And it is good-humoured, also, with only one gent having a mardy, and Minter, the Gov's supporter, on hand to show him the way to the door. It is remarkable how poor the gentry are at holding their drink, though they have been brung up on it from the breast, as it were. But God's creation, as my old father, Mr Figgis, would say, is wonderful in its variety.

So, here am I, fit to burst (having a weakness in the bladder) and hastening out of the side door to relieve myself by the wall. And there, in the passageway between the house and the concert room is a swell and one of our girls, Bessie. He has her agin the wall and is belabouring her good and hard. And she, bless her sweet heart, is dead to the world. I enjoy my moment and breathe in the damp air and contemplate the blank, black wall, putting out of earshot the rasps and gasps of Mr Cocksure, for certain it is no business of mine. But Bessie I am fond of. She is only sixteen (though she looks older on account of her hard life), and I wonder whether this swell will give her what she is due, for he has handled her roughly and I hear her head smack the wall once or twice.

So I says quietly and without looking at either party, 'Wipe yourself off when you've done, Bessie, and get back sharpish,' and I nod towards the door, and then, turning my eyes away from the swell but letting him know I am addressing him, I say – 'Don't be too rough with her, sir. She's a good girl, and needs her looks.'

He is holding her by the shoulder, flat to the brickwork and her bare arms glow white in the darkness.

His lordship is aggravated by me. 'What business is it of yours?' he demands. 'You her pimp?'

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I shake my head and open the door back into the hall, and for a moment all the fug and smoke and noise billows out into the yard in one great grey cloud. 'Not me, sir,' says I. 'But she's a good girl, and looks well. And deserves her dues, sir.'

He has released Bessie and she is all of a heap, half standing, half crouching against the wall and crying, I think. Or laughing. It is hard to say.

I call out to her, 'Bessie? You all right, gel?' and in reply she starts to sing.

'Here, Corney, listen to this:'

*Johnny, John, what a lad
Lips as smooth as a baby
Hips so slim, cheeks so peachy
Wouldn't you think he's a lady!*

I laugh, though it isn't so witty. But it touches Bessie, who shrieks with laughter.

'How much now then, my cocky? How much to keep Corney quiet when I've told him?'

'Tell me what?' I want to ask her, but her young swell is not amused, and kicks her hard when she cries out. I bite my tongue and debate what I should do, for though I do not like to stand by and see Bessie so ill-used, yet she *is* taunting him and riling him into a temper. Besides, I know that if I interfere and break the young devil's jaw (as I have a mind to) I will come off the worst, for he will lose me my shop. We both will lose our shops. So I try to hush Bessie, who is crying out that he has broke her leg, and I say to my lord, 'Since you have used her, sir, perhaps you should have a mind for her? She is a working girl and if you spoil her face, she must starve.'

But this touches a raw spot with him, and he makes a sudden rush at me, stumbling and lurching on the wet stones, and then

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sinks to his knees, cursing me for a pimp, which I much resent but leave to the night air.

There is no point trying to reason with a swell in his cups. That is what I told myself. And so concerned was I for my shop – my skin he could have any day – that I left him on his knees, and I know now of course that he was not saying his prayers.

When I got back inside, the Gov was in a rare old state, for our company of swells, having more coin than brains, had put a pile on the counter for another ‘trial’ and he was not inclined to refuse them. But Lucy had made herself scarce, Bessie also, and the Chinns were eating pork and cabbage across the way. So, as I was shutting the door behind me, and thinking of Bessie and her foolish song, Gov was upon me, plucking at my arm and smiling and demanding a favour of me – ‘though I know you is only committed to two trials a night, Corney, but I will see you favourably obliged’ – and, true to you, my wig was upon my head and my hammer in my hand before I could rightly tell him to go to heaven on a string. In fifteen minutes, we gave them Lady M who liked to dress as a boy, and the Mad Italian Countess and the Butler. It was a proper gaff-show, but as most of our audience was, as the hymn book says, beyond all comprehension, it was probably not of much account.

We finished sharpish – for we had been hard at the business some three hours, and even Mr Kean never went on that long – and once again my bladder was giving me a call, so I slipped out the side door and went to my usual post at the grating. The night was chill and damp, and when I put my hand upon the wall that peculiar London slime of soot and wet came off upon it like grease. It was a still night, too, even though we were situate almost direct upon the Whitechapel-road. But we might have been on Richmond Hill so still and silent was the air out the back. Like as if the walls held in the noise, and certain I was musing upon this after I had done relieving myself, when I was brung up with a start.

‘Corney! Corney?’

It was Lucy. I could hear her, but I could not see her, and I looked about me and then saw her shadow by the yard gate.

‘Lucy?’ I cried. ‘What you doin’ out there in the Row?’

And when I walked over I saw it wasn’t Lucy at all, but a gent also relieving himself (as I thought) by the wall, so I tipped my hat and asked his pardon and turned around.

‘I’m here, Corney. Over here!’

I saw her then, in the shadows of the stable, her pale face staring out at me and her beckoning me over. And as I made to cross the yard, it was then that I saw something. A black shape, hard to make out, lying on the ground. I started to go up to it, but Lucy called again.

‘No, Corney. Leave it. Come here. Quick.’

And in truth there was something rum about it that made me do as she said, and I skirted round the edge of the yard, keeping to the shadows, until Lucy grabbed my hand and pulled me into the stable. The smell of her body is what I remember, and how her lips, which were usually the sweetest part of her, were thin as poverty by the light of dark lantern.

I said, ‘Now then, Lucy, you were missed, girl. You shouldn’t nip off like that.’

I expected her to give me a mouthful, but she never, and I thundered on. ‘You out here with company?’

She just shook her head and then she clung to me, as hard as ever she had. But it wasn’t loving. Not at all. Here was a girl frightened.

‘Ah, Corney,’ she said, and her voice shook and her face was pale, like the moon. ‘I have seen such – Oh my! Corney! What have I seen!’

And she begins to weep like she will never stop, but silently and heaving with fear and passion. I don’t shake her hard or bend her ear, but hold her close to me, and continue to hold her until her tears have gone, when she looks up at me with lips trembling.

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‘That’s Bessie dead, Corney. And I saw him what done it. The swell what was out here with her.’

She is breathing hard.

‘I saw him do it, Corney. He hit her hard, like this’ – and she raises her fists above her head and brings them down together – ‘on her face. And when she tried to run away and fell to the ground, he kicked her hard. Over and over.’

My mouth goes dry.

‘Corney, he was stamping on her. With the heel of his boot. He was stamping over and over.’

I have a lump in my throat as big as an egg as I look at that black heap lying across the yard, for I know I must go and see for myself. Not that I don’t believe Lucy (for she is as truthful as any working girl), but I must see it. I leave her in the shadows and creep slowly out into the yard. There is a thin wind, the sort that scuffs up the leaves and rattles them around. And it is stirring, now, the edges of the shape which I see more clearly the closer I get. Bessie’s hair, the poor threads of lace around her dress, moved by the cold wind.

I am standing over her and, as the moon comes out from behind the clouds it falls upon her face like a limelight. I push my fist into my mouth to stop myself crying out, and if I never sleep again it will be because I see that face, or no face, before me. So cruelly ruined, there are no eyes, nor cheeks, nor nose, but a terrible confusion of those features together, yet like a sad wheeze from a merry clown, they are framed about with her dark hair, which curls and tumbles like it was made to do. Even her poor hands have not escaped for they are broken and bloody too, and there are great wounds upon her arms and breast. When I feel that I will go mad if I gaze upon her any longer, I stumble back to Lucy, who has covered her face with her hands and started to cry again. I am trembling and feel a knot in my stomach to keep company with the lump in my throat.

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But I put an arm about her shoulders and try to steer her back to the house, where a few lights are still burning.

‘Come on, girl. You’ll be all right. But we must tell someone, and get this swell caught and brung up.’ And I give it her a dozen different ways, but no, she will have none of it. We stand in the stable, and it is nigh on a quarter of an hour before she can speak and longer before she can say anything sensible.

And then, with a great sigh, like she will never breathe again, she says in a whisper, ‘Ah, Corney! He saw me! What shall I do? Heaven help me! He saw me!’