

KRIK-KROK, THE WALKING DEAD

1. A Strange Starting Point

Rotherhithe was one of the sketchiest districts in London; constables only went there in pairs. The streets were narrow and gloomy, and were interrupted by large vacant lots inhabited by a few wretched squatters in decrepit shacks. Its taverns were dives where the dregs of the city's population gathered—yet they were more comfortable than the gin joints of Limehouse or Shadwell. A few were famous, as much in the annals of crime as among tourists following the “Grand Dukes’ Rounds” of celebrated memory.

One of them, the Blue Shark, was certainly the queen of them all. Over its fortunes presided fat Piffney, a veteran of the merchant marine of warm and cheerful demeanor. Piffney was a clever fellow, careful not to irk the police, but he was no informer—in spite of the tempting offers he'd often had to be one.

The tavern wasn't large. The taproom held only a dozen tables, close together. A long counter filled the back wall, with a high window above it providing the only daylight—since the window opening onto the street was always covered by thick curtains.

One cold and rainy afternoon in May, Piffney was rinsing glasses in a large zinc tub and keeping a seemingly careless eye on two wretched tramps who sat at one of the tables, eating meagerly and drinking nothing but small beer.

A customer came in. He wore a long ulster, and the flat cap pulled down over one ear gave him an unkempt look.

Piffney greeted him with a wink. “Morning, Skerry,” he murmured.

“Someone's meeting me here,” said Skerry in a low voice.

“Go through the alley when you've emptied your glass,” answered Piffney in the same tone, “and go into the kitchen... That way you can be sure...”

Just then one of the tramps sang the chorus to a sailor's shanty, and Skerry turned toward him. “Will you have a drink, boys?” he said abruptly.

“We'll see,” answered the singer.

“No orangeade, that's for sure.”

“Nor chamomile tea,” said the other man.

“A gin toddy for me, and a brandy grog for my friend,” said the singer.

Skerry took a breath, and motioned to the landlord. “No need to go through the alley: these two friends are in on it.”

Piffney nodded that he'd understood, and brought them full glasses. After they'd drunk, the men went through into the back room, and then into the kitchen, where a spiral staircase led to the upper floor. They climbed it, and pushed open the door of a very comfortably furnished little sitting room, where they settled into armchairs around a good fire.

“We haven't met,” said Skerry, “but that doesn't matter, since you've been summoned by HIM. My name is Skerry.”

“Prescott... Jim Prescott,” said the man who'd sung.

“Ned Sullivan,” said the other.

“Those names are as good as any, and they suit me fine,” replied Skerry in a tone of authority. “Now we just have to wait. I know nothing.”

“Neither do we,” echoed the others.

Piffney brought them nothing more to drink, and the three didn't think to ask. They were content to smoke a lot of cigarettes while listening to the rain beating on the windows.

It was beginning to get dark when they heard a step on the stairs, and someone pushed open the door.

“Harfang!” said Skerry, sounding a little disappointed.

The newcomer, a decently dressed man in his thirties, shrugged. "If you were expecting HIM to go out of his way for you!" he said scornfully. "I'm supposed to make arrangements with you, and the job won't be easy, by all appearances. Tonight we have to be in Sheldon Street with the car. Sullivan will drive. Prescott will ride next to him, to give him a hand and hold the door open. Skerry, you'll wait at the backstage entrance to the Little Theater in Drury Lane. We'll flank the individual who'll get into the car at some point. Then we'll bring him here, to the reception room."

"Huh?" said Skerry in surprise.

"You heard me!"

"We don't often get to work in such a serious way anymore," said Skerry. "Say, Harfang, I'd hoped to see... HIM, but it's you who came." In a low voice he added, "I've never seen him."

Harfang nodded gravely. "I could boast, but I won't. Me neither, Skerry—I've never seen HIS face. I've heard his voice, and after that, I swear to you, you don't forget." He passed a hand slowly across his clean-shaven cheeks. "The reception room," he murmured. "Damn, I'd gladly have a drink before that!"

"All right. Call Piffney!"

The tavern keeper answered the summons on the buzzer and took the order: old, very dry whisky. When he'd brought it and served them, Harfang pulled a wad of banknotes from his pocket and began counting out the bills.

"Ten pounds each up front, those are the orders. Twenty-five pounds for Piffney."

The tavern keeper reacted with surprise. "Do I understand, Harfang," he murmured, "that tonight..."

"The reception room, yes," answered Harfang curtly.

The fat man's ruddy cheeks turned pale. "Let it be just as HE wishes," he said quietly, and his hands shook as he picked up the banknotes.

Soon after that the three men parted, each of them headed a different way.

Krik-Krok...

A name that inspired the greatest horror...

Here was the first act he laid out before the public—one that earned him, at a single stroke, a terrible and mysterious renown:

At the Little Theater in Drury Lane, the actors had gathered to rehearse *The Glass Tower*, the new play by Pericles Holden. Holden was a playwright in fashion, admired by the general public; his plays often lacked artistic merit, but they were full of heartrending situations and thrilling adventures, very much to the taste of the audience.

This was just a dress rehearsal before the premiere the next day. The management had given out only a small number of invitations. In the house sat the critics and a few friendly reporters, plus a few regulars, as well as the theater's backers. Pericles Holden and his assistant, Alex Winthrop, stood sometimes on stage, sometimes in the wings.

The first two acts had unfolded to general approval, and the third was nearing its end. The criminal heroine, Lady Redham, played by the superb Gladys Faines, was getting ready to stab Count Rupert Felzen—when the police burst into the room.

Holden and Winthrop were standing on-stage to one side. They were looking forward to this scene, and wanted to make some minor adjustments to it. Lady Redham raised her weapon.

At that moment there was a strange sound: "Krik-Krok!" repeated three times. Then, at center stage left, an oak closet opened.

Stunned, Winthrop cried, "What's that?... It's not in the play!"

Holden's eyes opened wide.

A man in evening dress and a top hat stood in the closet. His head was bowed.

Suddenly he leapt out, seized Gladys Faines in his arms, and picked her up. The actors stood frozen. Only Holden and his assistant, realizing that something abnormal was happening, hurried forward.

The abductor dove back into the closet, whose doors closed—but not before he'd turned his face toward them.

Horrors! A large grimacing death's head—that was all.

Holden, followed by the actors and the crew, ran behind the scenery. An uproar broke out in the audience.

They found neither the man with the death's head, nor the actress, but they could tell they'd vanished below stage by way of a trapdoor. The crowd grew. They searched the basement. They found a body, that of the stagehand whose job it was to operate the trapdoors.

The police—this time real officers and not actors—arrived to help, but they found nothing.

They did, however, find written in charcoal on one of the backstage lighting rails in enormous letters: *Krik-Krok*.

That same evening Scotland Yard, absolutely baffled, got in touch with Harry Dickson. The great detective had no more luck than the metropolitan police had, but before he left the theater he spoke to the manager. "There's nothing unusual in your office, except a fresh scratch in the paint on your safe."

The manager gave a cry of distress. "This morning I put into it two thousand pounds that I withdrew from the bank, and tonight I added another thousand brought by one of the backers."

"Let's have a look at the safe," suggested Dickson.

It was empty, cleaned out...

At midnight four Fleet Street papers brought out special editions with banner headlines recounting the eruption of "Krik-Krok"—the Walking Dead—on stage at the Little Theater, the abduction of Gladys Faines, and the theft of the three thousand pounds.

The following evening the editor of one of those newspapers received an anonymous parcel containing three thousand pounds in cash, along with this note:

Give this back to that idiot Lissitzky, manager of the Little Theater in Drury Lane, and advise him to change the combination on his safe.

Skerry, Prescott, and Sullivan spent the night of the abduction and the whole of the following day at the Blue Shark tavern, in a state of irritation that grew by the hour.

That evening a drunken sailor came into the bar, spent a little money, and left. When he was gone, Piffney found a letter addressed to Skerry behind the counter.

Skerry looked at it, and immediately turned as pale as death. "Fifty pounds each," he said finally, "with orders to take off, no matter where. London's getting too hot to hold us."

Sullivan left first, heading for the freight rail terminal. As he passed an unguarded level crossing he was pushed roughly from behind, and sprawled on the tracks just as a shunting engine arrived under full steam. The man was cut cleanly in two.

Prescott left the tavern fifteen minutes later. He reached the Grand Surrey Canal, meaning to cross it at Old Kent Road. A sandbag struck him on the head and flung him to the ground. Three seconds later he disappeared into the canal and didn't resurface.

Skerry left the Blue Shark by way of the alley. *Pop! Pop!* Two shots from a revolver equipped with a silencer, and Skerry dropped without a sound.

A small Morris came out of the shadows and stopped. Another shadow got out of it, picked up the body, put it in the car, and drove off into the night.

Not long after, the Rowdy Penguin, a dance hall of dubious repute, unlocked its doors because it was opening time. A motley clientele soon came in: the dance hall was located on Union Street, near Southwark Park, which was fairly close to Rotherhithe and shared its bad reputation.

A gentleman with a dark complexion and a heavy black mustache was among the dancers and was loudly applauded. "Hip, hip, hurrah for the South American! And Viva Argentina!"

Don Pedro Suarez spent money lavishly at the Rowdy Penguin.

In one corner of the room sat a man in the uniform of a captain in the merchant marine, calmly smoking his pipe and drinking beer. He wasn't a big spender, and no one noticed him; the staff waited on him a little scornfully, and none of the dancing girls thought to come ask to sit at his table.

No one spoke of Krik-Krok. Perhaps no one thought about him.