

HARRY DICKSON VS. MYSTERAS

1. *The Death Chamber*

Miss Delphina Cruikshank may not have been the most talented novelist in Britain—not by a long shot—but she was certainly the most eccentric.

Old Cruikshank, her father, had done all right in India, where the piratical rascal had made a stupendous fortune, which he left to his daughter on his death; she was soon besieged by dowry hunters. She wasn't good-looking, but—though lacking talent, as we've already mentioned—she had plenty of common sense. Her suitors were sent packing. She announced publicly that from now on she would live for the arts, and especially for literature. Matching her actions to her words, she began to write; a few months later her first novel was published in Paternoster Row. Surprisingly, the book wasn't bad, and people of taste began to consider Miss Cruikshank in the light of her talents rather than her wealth. Other novels followed the first, and led to a career: fame found this woman of letters.

She'd reached the age of forty when her writing took an esoteric turn much appreciated in England. That change seemed to apply as much to her life as to her writing: demanding total isolation, she withdrew forever into her ivory tower—in this case not a figure of speech, because Miss Cruikshank built a dwelling that resembled a lighthouse on a lonely shore: a cylindrical tower almost a hundred feet high, whose only windows were those at the bottom for the staff quarters, and those at the top for Miss Cruikshank's rooms.

We linger over the architecture because it'll be important later. Picture the structure like this: the bottom twenty feet or so had windows and doors; then came sixty feet of smooth, uninterrupted wall; then came the arched windows that let daylight into the writer's rooms. An elevator led from the ground floor up to that aerial apartment, but it too had its peculiarity: only Miss Cruikshank could operate it. If her servants wanted to come up, or to let up a rare visitor, they had to telephone first, and Miss Cruikshank would decide whether or not she wanted to see anyone. There was no other way to reach the quarters of this modern Muse—not even a staircase or a fire escape.

“What if you hurt yourself someday?” she was asked. “No one will be able to reach you to help you.”

To which Miss Cruikshank replied that anyone trying to reach her level should simply do what she'd done, and start at the top—a feeble enough witticism, but one that made the rounds of literary London.¹

Miss Cruikshank's peculiar house stood in a quiet part of Wood Lane, on the former grounds of the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908. It was surrounded by vast overgrown gardens within a high encircling wall topped by iron palings and broken glass.

The tower was capped not by a platform, but by a steeply curved cupola. Under that half-glass dome Miss Cruikshank had installed a kind of astronomical observatory. She spent a few hours at a time there occasionally, but it wasn't to study the stars.

A few hundred yards from her tower stood dismal Hammersmith Prison, adjoining Wormwood Scrubs. Using a powerful telescope, the lady novelist could observe the interior of the prison as easily as if she'd been sitting on its ominous outer walls. That gave her gripping material for her stories, and was responsible for the success of one of her most recent books, *The Great Jailbreaker*.

On the evening this story begins, Miss Cruikshank was comfortably settled in that observatory with her eye pressed to the viewfinder of her telescope. For several days she'd been watching some very odd goings-on in the prison. She'd noticed that the light in a small garret under the roof of the second wing of cells had stayed on all night. Normally it was used as a storeroom for old metal bed frames—something

¹ In the original French, her joke involves ladders, and turns on a particular sense in French of the expression, “to pull the ladder up after oneself”—meaning in this case, “after me they broke the mold, I'm unique.”

Miss Cruikshank had learned easily enough, thanks to her telescope. But for the past few days she'd been watching workmen up there: electricians were carrying out the instructions of an old man in a frock coat that made him look like a Victorian professor. They ran wires and installed switches, and a heavy marble table covered with indicator lights filled one wall.

The previous day the professor—that's how Miss Cruikshank thought of him—had personally installed a number of devices, none of which she recognized. She did her best to figure out what they were for, but in vain—though she was by no means deficient in scientific learning. What intrigued her above all was a kind of tall glass cage holding a large metal solenoid. Without knowing quite why, Miss Cruikshank found all this laboratory apparatus a little ominous—and she'd resolved to keep a careful eye on that strange room in Hammersmith Prison.

A few hours after the equipment had been installed, a number of officials came to see it, and Miss Cruikshank thought she recognized members of the Ministry of Justice, including several well-known persons.

"I wonder what they're plotting," she grumbled with her usual ill humor. "Everything seems to be ready: all the copper shines, all the nickel glows like a full moon, and the professor's there, rubbing his hands together like a proud child."

The lights-out alert echoed around the prison. At once, all the dimly lit cell windows went completely dark; only the window in the room full of mysterious equipment remained lit—with a harsh white light cast by the powerful lamps that had just been switched on inside.

Two cars drove up quickly and vanished under the prison entrance porch. Anticipating that something extraordinary, something awful was about to happen, the lady novelist couldn't help shuddering with dread. But curiosity won out, and she changed her telescope viewfinder to a greater magnification that brought the room even closer.

Then she started—the room was full of people, of whom she recognized several: the eminent anatomist Weiler; Burley, dean of the medical school; the private secretary to the justice minister; a few prison officials; and lastly the little professor. He was going from one device to the next, giving voluble explanations. At the end he opened a small frosted-glass door in the cage and beckoned to his listeners. Miss Cruikshank could easily see the aversion on their faces and their gestures of polite refusal.

Finally the little professor glanced at his watch and made a sign; one of the prison officials went away, while all the rest stood waiting, contemplating the mysterious apparatus in silence.

Then the scene changed: the audience parted to make way for two uniformed guards leading a man in chains; preceding them all was a clergyman carrying a Bible.

"Ah!" murmured Miss Cruikshank in horror. "Now I understand. There's a capital punishment coming up, and they're going to try a new method, a new system of execution—death by electrocution! That explains the mystery; it's awful, yet still fascinating."

The clergyman stepped to one side, and the man in chains came fully into the light. He was tall and thin, and his gaunt face gave him the look of some bird of prey. He was dressed not in convict's garb, but in elegant black street clothes, and the whiteness of his linen was impeccable.

"I've seen that face in the illustrated papers," thought Miss Cruikshank. "That's Baltimore Harmon, who murdered the banker Probst in Park Lane. He was sentenced to death, and—since he's a bold bandit who puts on the airs of a gentleman—he must've volunteered to trade the sordid hangman's noose for the electric chair!"

In the death chamber they'd brought out an ordinary chair, and one of the guards made as if to strap the condemned man to it. But Harmon waved him off, and they simply put the chair inside the glass cage without further ceremony. Then one of the officials stepped forward and spoke to the clergyman, who offered the Bible to the condemned man to kiss. After that Harmon walked straight to the chair and sat down—but then he seemed to change his mind, and asked the little professor for something. The latter agreed, and took a cigarette from a pocket case. Someone held out a lighter, and a moment later Baltimore Harmon took a drag and exhaled a cloud of blue smoke.

A series of lights on the control panel glowed dark red. The little professor set his hand on a lever of hard rubber; the visitors instinctively drew back against the rear wall.

All the floodlights overlooking the prison courtyards began to flicker.

“The lights are dancing! The lights are jumping!” murmured Miss Cruikshank—echoing the tragic refrain of convicts in American prisons, who know by that flickering when the current is being drained to supply the execution chamber where a man is dying.

“So this is the end!” said the lady novelist.

Far away, Baltimore Harmon had slumped down slightly in his chair. The little professor opened the cage door and motioned to the guards. They took hold of the motionless dead body...

“The end! The end!” Miss Cruikshank said over and over. “How fragile is a human life!”

In the death chamber, the visitors chatted together, nodding in approval. Harmon’s body had been taken away. The little professor paused a moment to consider his apparatus; then, almost regretfully, he followed the visitors as they exited.

The room went dark, as dark as the whole prison.