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THE BEACH

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MURDER AT THE BEACH

CLASSIC MURDER MYSTERIES FOR SUMMER

Edited by Cecily Gayford

Julian Symons · Michael Innes · Ellis Peters
H.C. Bailey · Joan Aiken · Peter Lovesey
Margery Allingham · E.C. Bentley
Anthony Berkeley · Catherine Aird



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The Conjuring Trick

Julian Symons

Francis Quarles was walking up the pier at Brightsand, sniffing the sharp sea air, when he saw his old friend Inspector Leeds looking in a brooding manner out over the railing.

‘I have never known you take a holiday,’ Quarles said. ‘So you must be here on business.’

The Inspector’s voice sounded more than usual like a file being rubbed on emery paper. ‘Heard of Flash Miller? He’s a front man for the Grimes gang, and he’s down here to pick up some dope. Heroin.’

‘Well?’

The Inspector continued, almost as though talking to himself. ‘The stuff comes into Brightsand and the Grimes gang gets it out somehow. We’ve had a man planted in the gang for some time now, and he rang a couple of days ago to say that Flash Miller was coming down today to collect a packet. He’s going to pick it up somehow at the concert party

show on the pier, the Merry Mirthsome Minstrels. Our chap couldn't find out more than that.'

The Inspector continued to brood, and then said suddenly: 'Like to come along tonight and keep an eye open? I'll be in the background myself, but I've got three men down here keeping tapes on Miller.'

'What's Miller like?'

'Good looking chap, pretty almost, with a nasty squint. Flash dresser, that's how he gets his name. Great family man though, very fond of his wife and two boys, one ten years old and the other six. Takes them about with him everywhere, but he's alone this time. That's a sure sign he's on business.'

Quarles took his seat that evening in the third row of the stalls at the Pier Pavilion. Reynolds, one of the Inspector's men, sat next to him. Five minutes before the performance was due to start, Reynolds said, 'Coming in now.'

Flash Miller wore a tightly waisted camel-coloured jacket, brown trousers, and fawn-coloured shoes. His hair was like a shiny black mat, and his face was delicate and darkly handsome. Quarles noticed, one could not help noticing, the squint in the dark brown eyes.

Miller took his seat just across the aisle from them. He looked bored.

There was nothing unusual about the Merry Mirthsome Minstrels. They were a depressingly average kind of pier concert party. There were half a dozen dancing girls who were approaching middle age; there was a fat funny man with a red nose, who sang out-of-date sentimental songs and told immensely old jokes with an air of false enthusiasm, and

a thin funny man, who kept being pushed about by the fat man and falling over things, and seemed only too genuinely depressed.

The fat man, the thin man and two of the girls played a comic sketch as two pairs of newlywed couples.

Quarles could feel the tenseness of the man at his side. Reynolds was not watching the show, but watching Miller.

Just before the interval a man who had not previously appeared came on and did conjuring tricks. He was listed on the programme, Quarles saw, as 'Monty the Mysterious in a Medley of Magic.'

Monty the Mysterious briskly tore handkerchiefs into pieces and made them whole again, produced eggs out of his head and turned them into white mice with the wave of a wand, and ate a mass of coloured streamers. A number of children among the audience applauded enthusiastically.

The conjurer appealed for child volunteers to help with a trick. Three went up, and Monty found sausages coming out of their necks and large alarm clocks hidden in their pockets. Finally he showed the children the white mice, waved his wand and transformed them into boxes of chocolates, and gave one box to each child. The children trotted back down the aisle, past Quarles. Idly he watched them go by.

Suddenly he felt a pressure on his arm. Monty the Mysterious had asked for three gentlemen volunteers. Flash Miller, stubbing out the cigarette he had been smoking in defiance of regulations, rose as if at a signal and strolled up to the stage.

'This is it,' said Reynolds.