

CASE FILE NINETEEN:

THE

POISONED ARROW

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES, BEING A BRILLIANT SCHOOLBOY detective – as I am – can have its moments of danger. Not very many, thank goodness, but it happens now and again.

Looking back through my case files, there have been several times when I've been placed in a situation of real, actual, genuine peril. For example, I narrowly avoided falling flat on my face while chasing the villains in their getaway lorry during the case of *The Bloodsucker's Grave*. And I was very nearly pushed into a huge tank full of cow poo during *The Mystery of Eviltree Farm*. However, only twice have I ever faced a situation which could truthfully be described as 'Oh-no-get-outta-there-now'.

The case of *The Poisoned Arrow* is perhaps the most hair-raising example.

It was 8.45 p.m. on a Friday evening. A sweeping fog dampened the distant glow of the streetlights. The cloudy, moonless sky cast a darkness over everything that was so deep I kept feeling as if I was staring into a bottomless pit.

I was standing, alone, on the gravelly forecourt outside the Rackham Road Community Theatre. This theatre, which is situated on the edge of town and which doubles up as a venue for all kinds of local events, is a rather squat, lumpy building, which looks like it's been put together using giant toy blocks instead of bricks. Most people call it the 'Turtle-Shell'. I was standing close to the hideous statue that's plonked down outside it, the one which shows four human figures striking dramatic poses. I guess it's meant to be theatrical.

I was looking for my phone. I'd realised I'd dropped it out there on the gravel somewhere, and it was vital that I retrieved it immediately. I was expecting a very important call, a call that would signal the endgame of a particularly nasty crime.

In the misty darkness, the crunch of my shoes on the gravel sounded like mountains collapsing. I glanced around nervously. The cold eeriness of the evening set me thinking about one or two creepy movies I should never have watched. The fog was thickening. The theatre's full-to-bursting parking area was only fifty

metres away, but I could barely make it out. The streetlights on Rackham Road seemed to have become dimmer.

Where was that blasted phone?

Right by my feet, as it turned out! I glanced down, and there it was. Tutting to myself, I bent down and scooped it up. Good – I hadn't missed any calls.

I was about to turn and hurry back inside the theatre, when the sound of approaching footsteps froze me to the spot. Pocketing my phone, I stood up and stared uneasily into the surrounding gloom. I could feel my heart beginning to thump.

Then suddenly, out of the darkness, emerging through the mist came four, five, no six hulking figures – tall, heavy men, all of them smothered in dark coats. They were each wearing a horrible Halloween pumpkin mask.

I think my heart actually stopped for a few seconds. The crime I'd been expecting was about to take place!

The men marched towards the building, quickly but calmly. The darkness of the theatre's unlit forecourt was keeping me out of their sight, but I'd be spotted in a matter of seconds. I had to get away! If they saw me . . .

The heftiest of the men, out in front, was carrying a large canvas bag. It was clearly heavy. Knowing what was about to happen, I realised with horror that inside

the bag must be weapons of some kind.

I couldn't risk being seen! But if I took a single step, the crunch of the gravel would instantly alert them.

I have never, ever, *ever* been so scared in all my life. It felt as if my insides had been forced through a paper shredder.

What could I *do*?

At that moment, my phone trilled. Loudly.

The man in front halted. 'Is someone there?' he boomed. 'Show yourself! Now!'

He twitched an arm to usher the others forward.

I didn't dare breathe. The only thought going through my head was: Why do I let myself get into these messes?

CHAPTER Two

OK, HERE'S THE FLASHBACK. HOP back in time a few days. Imagine everything's suddenly gone zzzip in reverse, until we arrive at the previous Monday afternoon, about five o'clock. I was in my garden shed – or rather, my Crime Headquarters, as I prefer to call it.

I'd spent about an hour shoving at the gardening and DIY stuff I'm forced to share the shed with. It had been teetering, in a giant wobbly mound, across my desk and filing cabinet. I'd managed to crush it back a bit, so that at least it wasn't in imminent danger of all falling on top of me.

I sat in my Thinking Chair, the battered old red leather armchair where I do all my detective-style pondering. I was sorting through some of the case notes from my

filing cabinet, a stack of papers spread across my knees. I was also keeping half a narrowed eye on that giant wobbly mound of DIY stuff. I was sure those empty paint tins were just waiting for a chance to clatter down on top of me the minute I wasn't looking.

At that moment, I heard a new case approaching. The sound of someone doing vocal exercises drifted into the shed. A load of 'la-la-la-laaaa's and 'me-me-me-meeee's and random lines from well-known stage musicals were being sung at maximum volume. From the way the sound was bouncing around, I judged that the singer was turning the corner at the end of my street and walking this way.

How did I know this was a new case coming my way, and not just somebody down the street having a singsong? Two reasons: Firstly, it was the voice of someone about my age, and since there are surprisingly few other kids of any age in my street (none of whom ever sing in public!), I guessed that this particular kid was probably heading my way. Secondly, there was only one person I knew who'd be la-ing and me-ing all over the place like that: Tom Bland, the gangly, swirly-blond-haired boy from my school who you may remember from the case of *The Stranger in the Mirror*.

I wouldn't have called him a friend of mine, as such, but everyone at St Egbert's School knew Tom Bland. He

was rather snobby and rather self-centred, and totally set on being the world's greatest actor when he grew up. He could be a right prima donna, too. Oh yes, everyone at St Egbert's was familiar with Tom Bland.

It was highly unlikely that he'd be heading this way on a purely social visit. If Tom Bland was coming to see me, it was pretty certain that he was in need of my detective services again!

A few moments later, there was a sharp knock at my shed door. 'Come in, Tom!' I called.

The door opened and Tom bounced in. 'How did you know it was me?' he gasped.

'Just a lucky guess,' I said, shrugging. 'What's the problem? How can I help you?'

He started pacing about the floor of the shed. Not an easy thing to do in a shed with so little space.

'Catastrophe!' he cried. 'Calamity! Ruin! Disaster stares me in the face at this very moment! Er, not meaning you, Saxby . . .'

'No, understood,' I said.

'I don't mean *you're* a disaster or anything,' he bumbled.

'No, understood,' I said. 'Calm down. Start at the beginning. Give me some background information.'

I hoisted the heap of case notes off my knees and on to the desk. I offered Tom my Thinking Chair. He sank

into it, striking a pose like a troubled soul in a Victorian painting, the back of his hand brushing at his forehead.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I must give you the facts of the case. That’s the vital thing with detectives, isn’t it, making sure you give them the facts of the case?’

‘Quite right,’ I said, encouragingly.

He took a deep breath and his hands took long symmetrical scoops out of the air in a deliberate I-am-calm gesture. He spoke as if addressing an audience of eager, wide-eyed fans.

‘As you know, Saxby, I’m someone with a great interest in the world of the theatre.’

‘Yes, I’d spotted that,’ I said quietly.

He nodded. ‘And as part of my preparations for my long-term career in the acting profession, I’m heavily involved in the Rackham Road Amateur Dramatic Society. It’s mostly for adults, I’m the only regular under-sixteen member.’

‘Is that the one which puts on plays at that weird-looking building? Whassitcalled, the Turtle-Shell?’

‘That’s the one, yes. We presented a splendid production of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* last year. I was terrific in it. Of course, it’s amazing I managed to combine my appearances at Rackham Road with my work on the school play. It’s a wonder I didn’t collapse from sheer exhaustion, but no doubt —’

'A-hem, the facts of the case . . .' I prompted.

'Oh, yes, sorry,' he said. 'Anyway, we're currently staging a production of *The Poisoned Arrow*. Do you know it?'

'Nope.'

'It's an action-packed historical drama, set in the Middle Ages. Lots of sword fights and shocked facial expressions – it's very good. I play Wilbert, a poor peasant boy who overcomes enormous odds to gain the throne of the kingdom, when the villainous landowner Baron Thornicroft tries to —'

He glanced at me. I was frowning.

'Facts of the case, right,' he said. 'Are you sure you don't know *The Poisoned Arrow*? It did really well in the West End of London a couple of years ago.'

'Nope,' I said.

'Hmm. Anyway, we're doing this play. And the production is hugely, gigantically, vastly important for all of us at Rackham Road, for three reasons. Reason one: we're only doing one performance, and it's for charity. Our theatre runs on donations and voluntary help and it's always been short of money. But now debts have mounted up and we need a pile of cash to stop the place from being demolished. If we go bust, the place gets sold to some money-mad corporation and turned into flats. Reason two: because it's for charity, we've got none other

than the marvellous Sir Gilbert Smudge himself playing King Lionel. Reason three: because it's for charity, and because a professional actor as famous as Sir Gilbert is involved, the audience is going to be filled with every important person for miles around. The mayor, lots of local business people, three Members of Parliament . . . all sorts of influential types. There's a long and very impressive guest list. Sir Gilbert's even got some of his old celebrity pals coming up from London. There'll be bow ties, dinner jackets, ladies dripping with pearl necklaces, the works.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Sounds like it'll be quite an event. Even I've heard of Gilbert Smudge. He's in all those old movies and TV series that keep getting shown on ITV3, right?'

'Oh yes,' said Tom, bright-eyed with enthusiasm, 'he's had a very distinguished career. He's won every award going. Marvellous actor. Nice man, too. Full of interesting theatrical stories. Got an odd smell of paint about him, though, can't quite work that one out. But a marvellous actor.'

'So, umm, at the risk of sounding a bit rude,' I said, 'if he's so very famous and distinguished, why is he appearing with the Rackham Road Amateur Dramatic Society? Charity performance or not, that's an odd thing to find someone like him doing, isn't it?'

Tom squirmed slightly in the armchair. His face wriggled with embarrassment. 'Yes, well,' he said at last, 'times have been a little hard for him recently. He's not as young as he was, as my granny would say. Offers of acting roles have been rather thin on the ground for him, and some of the parts he's accepted in the last few years haven't always been a wise move. He should never have agreed to play Mr Squitty in that *Masked Avenger* movie. It dented his reputation as a serious actor. Then he was a giant rabbit in *The Happy Bunnybears II: Bobo's Journey*, and since then the work has dried up almost completely. Sad, very sad. Marvellous actor. I think this performance is something of a last chance for him. He's hoping it will get him some good reviews and lead to better things. We've got quite a few media people coming. Newspapers, radio and so on.'

'So I assume the performance is going to be very exclusive?' I said. 'Eye-poppingly expensive tickets, that sort of thing?'

'Ah, no,' said Tom, wagging a finger. 'Sir Gilbert suggested a different idea, based on something he did for one of those TV charity nights about ten years ago. The tickets are only a few pounds each, and the people on the guest list are getting in for nothing.'

'So where does the fund-raising come in?' I asked.

'During the interval, Sir Gilbert is going to give the

audience a please-give-generously speech, then go around collecting donations personally. The guests are expecting it – the details are all printed on the back of the tickets.'

'I get it,' I said, smiling. 'With all those influential people there – most of them pretty wealthy – he's likely to collect a small fortune. They'll probably start competing to be thought of as the most generous. Especially once the media start taking pictures. Clever.'

'Exactly,' said Tom with a grin. 'Everyone wins. The posh folk get to look important, Sir Gilbert makes a triumphant comeback, the Turtle-Shell is saved from the bulldozers, and the Rackham Road Amateur Dramatics Society scores the biggest hit in its history.'

'I must say,' I said, 'it's all looking very impressive.' I paused for a moment. 'So, what's this calamity you were on about? What's happened?'

Tom slumped back in the Thinking Chair, looking all pale and feeble. 'It's a nightmare,' he whispered. 'A living nightmare. The whole event is threatened!'

'Let me guess,' I said. 'Ummmm, someone has broken into the building during the night and stolen all the costumes?'

'No,' said Tom.

'The sets have been sabotaged?'

'No.'

'Sir Gilbert Smudge has been kidnapped and held to ransom?'

'No.'

'OK, so what crime *has* been committed?' I asked.

'None,' said Tom. 'None at all.'

I gave Tom the same narrow-eyed look I'd been giving that teetering pile of paint pots in the corner. 'So . . . why are you here? What's the calamity?'

'Oh, there's *going* to be a crime,' said Tom. 'I can feel it in me bones, as my grandad would say. On Friday night, *The Poisoned Arrow* is going to be turned into a major disaster by evil forces as yet unidentified.'

If I'd narrowed my eyes any more, I'd have been unable to see. 'Let me get this straight,' I said. 'You want me to investigate a crime which *hasn't been committed*?'