

Mrs De Runtzen's Jewels

One freezing, foggy night in early February Inspector Arthur C. Behrends of the Metropolitan Police walked along a cramped, shabby alleyway off the Whitechapel Road, a scruffy, barefoot little boy running on ahead of him as his guide. The Inspector was in pursuit of the solution to a mystery, a scandalous crime that had shocked the finer elements of London society. He believed that solution lay here, in the slum-dwellings of the poor.

Sometimes he would lose sight of the unkempt boy as he disappeared in the clammy grasp of the thick, gray fog, but then moments later he would appear again, urging the Inspector on with quick, insistent whispers.

"This way, mister! Down 'ere, quickly, quickly!"

Occasionally Behrends would be compelled to stop as a sudden dark shape appeared through the eddies and swirls of the smog, a ghostly shadow emerging from the mist to become a filthy, bent beggar, wheezing his pitiful entreaties into Behrends' ear, or a haggard old woman, offering to sell the policeman a pair of pig's trotters.

Behrends dismissed them all, waving them away contemptuously, for he was a dour, tubby little man, and his social graces were sorely lacking in every respect. It was said by his colleagues that his temper was even shorter than he was, but that when provoked into a fit of passionate rage he could grow twice his normal size.

"Down 'ere, mister," the street urchin said, suddenly appearing wraith like through the fog and pointing down a side street.

Behrends followed the boy down the cramped street. The black, filthy buildings towered over him on either side, threatening to close in on him and squeeze the breath from his freezing lungs. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a group of men singing a bawdy song set to the tune of a Salvation Army hymn, and a woman shrieking, with delight or fear he could not tell. He passed broken windows, patched up with rags and paper, and his feet slogged through a foul river of sludge, the underground cesspits having overflowed in the recent storms. They reached a warped, broken down door, which the boy pushed open, and entered a dismal little room, lit only by the fire burning in the grate.

A woman sat at a table assembling matchboxes, dropping them in an untidy pile on the floor beside her. Her face and bare arms were as white as ivory in the flickering light of the fire, apart from the scattering of blue and yellow bruises that marked her flesh. Two filthy children sat silently on the floor, their faces blank with hunger.

Ignoring the woman and children Inspector Behrends and his guide passed through the room and ascended a flight of perilously rickety steps to the first floor. Behrends stepped carefully, unable to see much in the poor light. As he climbed he ran his hand along the damp, mildewed wall to steady himself.

"In 'ere mister," the boy said, pushing open a door into a shabby little bedroom, lit by a single, sputtering gas lamp.

Two rickety, cast iron beds dominated the tiny room. On one of these decrepit beds lay a white haired man, covered from his neck to his toes by a stained, threadbare sheet, tucked up under his chin. He was shivering violently.

Beside him, on the edge of the other bed, sat a thin, haggard looking woman, her trembling hands clasped together as though in prayer.

A mean little fire burned pitifully in a black grate, providing precious little comfort against the cold and damp.

“Is it the peelers?” the man said, his hoarse, cracked voice penetrating the silence like a knife.

“My name is Inspector Behrends, I believe you have some information about the desecration of Mrs De Runtzen’s grave,” Behrends said, still standing in the doorway.

“Yeah, that’s right, that’s right,” came back the hoarse reply. “Molly, let the Inspector sit down, there’s a good lass.”

The thin, haggard woman shuffled between the beds and found herself another spot, and Behrends sat down next to the man, who looked up at him from his sickbed with bruised, haunted eyes. Behrends caught the whiff of cheap booze on his breath and stale sweat on his body. Behind the hollow walls he could hear the constant scurrying to and fro of rats.

“My name’s Bill Sketch,” the man said, his dry, cracked lips parting to reveal a few rotten, dark brown teeth, and a black tongue.

Behrends looked at Sketch, at his gaunt face, and his shock of white hair.

“It were as black as coal yesterday,” Sketch said. “Ain’t that right, Molly? As black as midnight, it were.”

“And what happened,” Behrends said, “to turn your hair so white in a day?”

“D’yer believe in ghosts, Inspector?” Sketch whispered.

“No, I don’t,” Behrends replied.

“Neither did I, not until last night, anyways,” Sketch said. He began coughing, a hacking cough that rattled deep in his chest, flecks of spittle flying from his cracked lips.

After a few moments the coughing fit subsided and Sketch lay back on the bed, gasping for breath, the filthy sheet still clinging to his gaunt body.

“I were as fit as a fiddle, up until yesterday,” he wheezed. “And now look at me. Now look at me.”

Sketch gasped for breath for a few moments, his rasping wheeze and the scratching and squeaking of the rats the only sounds in the damp, miserable room.

“I seen a ghost, Inspector,” he said, finally. “Seen her with me own eyes, and felt her chill touch on me own flesh, and her breath, Inspector, felt her breath fluttering across my face, and stinking of sickness and death.”

Sketch suffered another coughing fit, his frail body convulsing beneath the stained sheets.

“If’n yer please, Inspector,” he said, once his coughing had subsided, his voice weaker than before, “I could do with a sip of that hot stew that Molly made for me.”

Behrends looked where Sketch indicated and saw a dirty, battered tin cup containing a thin, watery gruel, in which floated tiny bits of unidentifiable meat and gristle. The Inspector picked up the cup, lukewarm to his touch, and held it to Sketch’s lips. He sipped noisily at the stew, the loud sucking sounds sending shivers of revulsion through Behrends’ body.

“Now come, come, my dear fellow,” he said. “All this talk about ghosts, it’s no wonder your nerves are so unsettled. Don’t you have something to tell me about Mrs De Runtzen?”

“That’s right, Inspector,” said Sketch, a rivulet of the watery stew running down his chin and onto the bed sheet. “That’s what I were tellin’ yer about, Mrs De Runtzen, and how me and ‘Jem the Rake’ robbed her of all her jewels.”

“Go on then lad,” Behrends said. “Confess all. After all, that’s what they say, isn’t it, that confession’s good for the soul.”

“Well, I hope that’s right, an’ then maybe I’ll get some peace from her, if not in this world, then maybe the next.

“It were like this Inspector, me an’ Jem we heard about Mrs De Runtzen havin’ died, an’ how she’d been buried wearin’ all her jewels still. Times is hard, Inspector, as I’ve no doubt yer can appreciate, an’ it seemed a little unfair to me and Jem that some old lady should go to her grave wearin’ more than I’ll ever earn in a lifetime.”

Inspector Behrends nodded, but said nothing. Like everyone else in London he had heard about the lavish burial, read about it in the paper. The De Runtzen family’s enormous wealth had been accrued from their trading company’s forays into the African interior. With the whole of the Dark Continent now carved up between the European countries the De Runtzen trading company was able to expand, shipping slaves, gold and ivory to every corner of the world, and so quickly making their fortune.

The elderly Mrs De Runtzen had taken to parading her newfound wealth by wearing it at every function she attended. Some said she never removed her jewellery at all, not for any reason. This rumour was finally given substance after her death, by the news that she was to be buried in her finest ball gown, her body adorned with her gold and silver bracelets, her necklaces, and precious stones.

Any fool could have predicted what would happen next.

“So you decided to desecrate her grave, and take her jewels.”

“That’s right, Inspector, that’s what we did, may God forgive our souls. We jumped over the wall of the De Runtzen estate the night after she’d been buried. It were pitch black, freezing cold and foggy. Yer could hardly see a foot in front of yer, and we stumbled about fer a long time like a couple of old drunks, but we found her all right, we found her. She’d only been buried that afternoon, and yer could still smell the freshly dug earth. Well, me and Jem we starts diggin’, and the diggin’s easy and goes quick fer the soil’s all loose and the spades cut through easy like. But Jem, he’s a bit nervous, an’ a bit headstrong, an’ before you know it he’s smashed through the coffin lid with his spade.

“ ‘Watch what yer doin’ Jem,’ I says. ‘We’ll have ’arf a London down here wonderin’ what’s goin’ on, all the racket yer makin.’

“We got the rest o’ the soil off the coffin, an’ we lifted the coffin lid up, an’ there she were, Inspector, all laid out in her finery, like they said she would be. Only...only...”

Sketch began trembling again, and he closed his eyes, but only for a moment, quickly opening them as though horrified at what he saw in the dark of his own mind.

“Well?” Behrends said. “Only what?”

“It were her eyes, Inspector,” Sketch whispered. “She had her eyes open, wide open, and was starin’ right at us, as though darin’ us to steal from her.”

“Don’t be stupid, man, she was dead,” said the Inspector. “Wasn’t she?”

“She had to be, Inspector, ’cos even if she hadn’t been dead when they buried her she were now, on account o’ the dirty great hole Jem had bashed in her head when his spade went through the coffin lid. Well Jem was all fer givin’ up right there an’ then, an’ goin’ home empty handed. He sat on the mound of dirt we’d dug up and stared at the old bird, and she stared right back up at us while I convinced him we had to carry on with it. In the end I had to throw a handkerchief over her eyes, just so’s she’d stop lookin’ at us, an’ we could get down there and start robbin’ her.”

“Very brave of you, I’m sure,” muttered Behrends. “Now come on, man, come on, what about the jewels?”

Sketch's dark eyes took on a faraway look at the mention of the jewellery. He had stopped shivering now, but still lay with only his head protruding from underneath the stained, threadbare sheet.

"Ah, Inspector, we would have been set for life after pawnin' that lot. Her coffin were full o' gold and silver trinkets, bracelets, gold necklaces, diamond rings, ruby brooches bigger than yer fist. Lord knows how she ever walked around, all that weight draggin' her down like that. It woulda tempted an honest man like yerself Inspector, it surely would. Me an' Jem we set to work and gathered it all up in a bag we brought special, an' it were the easiest pickin's we ever had. Pretty soon we had everything like, apart from the rings on her fingers. An' the old bird had rings on all her fingers, every single bloody one, an' not just one ring either, but two or three, sometimes even four or five, as many as could be crammed on. But the thing was, all her fingers had swelled up, an' those rings were stuck where they were, weren't no use tryin' to get any of them off."

"So what did you do?" Behrends said.

"I cut off her fingers, one by one," Sketch said, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper. "It were a devil of a job, all I had to do it with were that rusty old knife over there..."

Behrends looked where Sketch nodded and saw a tiny, rusty pocketknife lying on the floor, in a dried pool of blood. The Inspector shuddered despite himself.

"...an' I just had to hack away with it until it cut through the flesh. But the worst bit, the worst of all, were havin' to break her fingers. The crunching noises her bones made were summat awful, thought it would wake up the whole bloody neighbourhood."

Behrends sighed, and said, "It's not going to go well with you in court, I can tell you that now. But perhaps the good Lord will have mercy on your soul for confessing your crimes. Now, where's your accomplice, 'Jem the Rake'?"

Sketch bit his lip and said nothing. He was shivering again.

"He's dead, mister," Molly said.

Behrends looked up, surprised. He had forgotten she was there.

"Dead? Dead? How on earth did he die?" he said.

"His missus found him yesterday with a hole in his head," whispered Sketch. "Just like the hole he bashed in that old lady's head. Lived long enough to say Mrs De Runtzen wanted her jewellery back."

"Mrs De Runtzen wanted her jewellery back?" repeated Behrends. "How could that be? The poor woman was dead, you saw her with your own eyes!"

"D'yer believe in ghosts, Inspector?"

"So, you're trying to tell me that Mrs De Runtzen rose from her grave and killed your accomplice in crime?" Behrends said. "More likely the two of you had an argument, a disagreement as to how your booty should be shared out no doubt, and you killed Jem, and now you are trying to lay the blame on a ghost. Now come on, man, we'll forget about that, after all, London's better off with one less of your kind roaming its streets; but what about the jewels, eh, where are you keeping them?"

"I shoulda listened to Jem," Sketch said, ignoring Behrends now, a powerful trembling coursing through his body hidden by the dirty bed sheets. "I shoulda returned the jewels like he said, but I didn't, I were too greedy. An' last night she came, Inspector, she came and took her jewels back!"

"Come on, man, pull yourself together, you're becoming hysterical!"

“Oh, Inspector, it were like some terrible nightmare, watchin’ that dreadful apparition stand at the end of the bed and dress herself with her necklaces and bracelets, and her ruby brooches, an’ starin’ at me, Inspector, all the time starin’ at me, just like she had when we dug her up. And in the end she stood there, all splendid like in her finery, but she hadn’t finished, Inspector, she couldn’t could she?”

“Why, what do you mean?” said Behrends.

“She had no fingers, Inspector, no fingers to put her rings on!”

Sketch was writhing in the bed now, and the single filthy sheet was falling from him, slowly uncovering him, first his shoulders, then his chest and upper arms, and on and on as the sheet tumbled to the floor.

“Oh, she had no fingers!” Sketch wailed.

Behrends watched, simultaneously appalled and fascinated as, like a conjurer revealing a magic trick, the bed sheet fell away to show Sketch’s mutilated, bloody hands. All of his fingers had been torn away at the knuckles. Molly had done her best to bandage Sketch’s hands, but the blood still seeped through the dirty rags.

Sketch was babbling like a madman now, and thrashing about the bed whilst Molly tried to hold him down and calm him.

Behrends slipped quietly from the room, casting one more repulsed glance at the blood stained pocketknife lying on the wooden floor. He hurried as quickly as he dare down the darkened, rickety old stairs, past the woman assembling matchboxes and her two children, and out into the foggy streets, leaving the cries of Bill Sketch behind him.

Such a thing as this could not be, Behrends’ rational mind told him. There had to be an explanation, a normal, down to earth explanation that had nothing to do with ghosts, or corpses rising from the dead.

Perhaps a visit to the funeral parlour, where Mrs De Runtzen’s body was laid out waiting to be buried again, would ease his troubled mind. After all, if she still lay in her coffin, as he fully expected her to, then that would prove what he already knew; that the dead did not rise from their graves to exact revenge upon those that wronged them.

A light still burned in the funeral parlour, despite the lateness of the hour, and Behrends was allowed access to see Mrs De Runtzen’s body.

As the undertaker lifted the lid on the coffin the Inspector felt the same sense of dread and fascination as when Sketch’s bed sheets had fallen back to reveal his mutilated hands. At the last moment Behrends almost called out to the undertaker to stop, and lower the lid, as an awful premonition fell over him that Mrs De Runtzen’s eyes would be open, and staring right at him.

The coffin lid opened to its full extent, and Behrends gasped at what he saw before him. It was not the dead lady’s eyes staring at him that caused him to recoil in horror, for they were closed. No, what the Inspector saw there was far worse than anything he had imagined. Mrs De Runtzen lay peacefully in the coffin, dressed in all her jewellery, the jewellery that had been taken from her cold, dead body only days before. Her hands were crossed over her chest, ending at her knuckles where Sketch had broken off her fingers one by one.

But now Mrs De Runtzen had a new set of fingers, one after another lying next to each of those mutilated knuckles. And there were two or three, sometimes even four or five rings crammed onto each of Bill Sketch’s severed fingers.