

A Certain Man was Sick
By Charlie Cochrane

Given that the expected response to “O God, make speed to save us,” is, “O Lord, make haste to help us,” one can imagine the shock among those assembled in the cathedral for Choral Evensong when one of the tenors responded with, “Bloody Hell!” instead.

Granted that anybody might have reacted similarly had his fellow tenor suddenly puked on his feet then keeled over, especially since it turned out that the man was stone dead. And, despite the second lesson having concerned the story of Lazarus, there was no way Bert Talbot was coming back.

Mrs Talbot, wailing from her pew, cried, “I knew his heart would finish him!”

Although the cherubic boy alto—hardly a babe or suckling but the nearest thing to one present—articulated what everyone was thinking. “Coo. Has Mr Stokes murdered him?”

The feud between tenor and organist had begun two years previously, with the small matter of whether the banked takings for Stokes’s coconut shy at the summer fete had matched the money which had changed hands on the day. It had escalated through accusation and counter accusation; even intervention from the archdeacon himself had failed to bring a rapprochement. The two men loathed each other.

The results of the post mortem showed Talbot had been poisoned. An examination of his pockets revealed a tin of his favourite sweets, several of which were laced with poison.

The subsequent police interview with Stokes was always going to run along predictable lines.

“You have a fully functional laboratory in your outhouse?”

“Yes, I’m a retired chemist, but...”

“You told Talbot you’d kill him if he didn’t stop spreading stories about you?”

“Yes, but it was just idle words...”

“Talbot alleged that you’d assaulted choirboys when you were at All Hallows.”

“Nothing was ever proven!”

“Ah! So there was something *to* prove?”

When the case came to trial, the jury was swayed by the wealth of evidence, direct and circumstantial. Not least the facts that Stokes had purchased several identical tins of sweets—of the sort found in Talbot’s pocket—a fortnight before the murder and was known to tinker in the making of rat poison.

The judge donned the black cap and justice was seen to be served.

Many years later, when the cherubic alto—set in his choice of career by a close shave with Stokes in the organ loft—reached the rank of Detective Superintendent, he re-opened the case. He was the only person not surprised when new evidence strongly suggested the victim himself had purchased the bon-bons and had them doctored.

What he couldn’t be clear on was whether Talbot—knowing he was living on borrowed time with his heart—had intended to offer Stokes one of the sweets as a gesture of reconciliation and do away with him directly, or had arranged an elaborate plan to get his enemy hanged for murder and thus do away with him *indirectly*. Or, given that Talbot was always guzzling the things, had he simply ingested one of the sweets by accident and done away with himself?

Lazarus wasn’t coming forth to tell.