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A Murder

by Marion Umney

There'd been a murder. Everyone in the square was talking about it and Maud shivered as she felt a creeping grey fear wrap its fingers around her. Murders were not so uncommon in London, everyone knew that, but this was close to home. Someone they all knew. Not well, it was true, Sarah Kemp had only been in the square for a year, and tended to keep herself to herself, but for all that she was one of them.

But of course, the tongues wagged. Why her, who had done it, was it someone she knew, someone they knew?

The older women remembered the Ripper as they gossiped on the stairs. Nigh on twenty years ago now, but the fear rose in their throats as if it were yesterday. The horror of the murders, the rape and disembowelling of the victims still made them lick their lips, as the fascination, horror and fear came back; the very gruesomeness evoking a perverse pleasure and excitement.

They clung to their daughters and granddaughters. Was this the same, was the Ripper back? He'd never been caught. Was Sarah Kemp a prostitute too? In some ways that made them feel easier. If that was the case their girls would be safe, or would they? It felt as if a dangerous monster was threatening their community. This unknown man in their midst. No question it was a man of course and in their midst. They cast through their minds as to who it might be. Who were the drunkards? There were certainly a few candidates there. Who might have been lusting after her? There were candidates there too, she was pretty. Did she have a beau? No one knew.

Maud did though. She had seen them, Sarah and Sam Riley. Should she say? She knew what would happen. When the community was under threat they would find someone to hang it on, whether it was the truth or not. Hang it...she shuddered at the thought. That was the penalty for murder and she didn't want Sam to hang. But could he have done it?

As she gathered her work things together she heard her mother call to her, "You mind how you go Maud."

Then her mother shouted across the yard, "Sam, can you wait for our Maud and walk with her today, keep her safe."

"Sure Mrs Gaunt," he replied. But Maud wasn't sure at all.