CAT & THE SLOOTH MYSTERIES

The Crime of the Century

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT

Christopher Scott Books

First Published by Christopher Scott Books in 2023

Text copyright © Christopher Scott 2023
Illustrations copyright © Catherine French 2023
The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-7392362-0-5

Printed by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

www.christopherscottbooks.com



For Ian



CHAPTER 1

People who know me call me Cat. It's not short for Catherine. It's short for cat burglar, because that's what I used to be. I was good too. Until a copper nabbed me.

It was my own fault. I mean, no one can expect to get away with being caught red-handed wriggling through a small window of a big house. Not if it's the dead of night and they're clutching a bag of stolen silver they can't.

I tried telling the tall skinny policeman, whose fingers of steel were gripping my collar, that I lived in the big house and I'd forgotten my key.

He didn't even bother to give me a suspicious look. He just raised an eyebrow and jangled the bag under my nose. 'I don't think so, miss,' he said dryly. 'You see, the *big house*, as you call it, is a club for the gentry. Children your age aren't even allowed to go in, let alone live there.' Then he pulled two solid silver candlesticks out of the bag and held them up to the gas lamp that lit the little cobbled street where we stood. 'Perhaps you can explain why these candlesticks have got *The In and Out Club* engraved on them?' he said.

'Well, I'd been *in* and I was coming *out*!' I told him.

'Very droll,' he replied, rolling his eyes. 'I'll let you explain that to the judge. Let's see what he makes of you.'

Well, the judge made a criminal of me, didn't he? But first he gave me a good ticking-off. 'This great country of ours needs honest hard-

working citizens *not* more criminals,' he scolded, frowning under his funny wig and glaring over his half-moon spectacles. 'And let me remind you, young lady, it is 1885 and this is a modern, civilised country. You are ten years old and you should be in school, not thieving silver at the dead of night!'

When I pointed out that I would soon be eleven and school was closed at the dead of night, he was not amused. And when he gave me six months in reform school, instead of five, I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

Seconds later, I was being led away by a policeman who towered above me. Not that it's difficult to tower above me, because I am quite small. And while I'm on the subject of me, I've got unruly fair hair, a freckly face and blue eyes like Queen Victoria's – and also like Aunt Sadie's.

Aunt Sadie's eyes were fixed on me as the policeman led me away. Her look of disappointment filled me with shame, because she's an amazing woman and I knew I had let her down – badly. The thing is, she's got four kids of her own, but she still took me in after my precious mum died. She insisted I wasn't going to an orphanage. 'No arguing, Edith,' she said.

Edith. That's my real name. Cat is what people started calling me after they found out I'd been a cat burglar. 'Alright, Cat?' they'd say, with a sly grin as I passed. It annoyed me at first, but the name stuck and now I prefer it. I'm not at all ashamed of it. I mean, I only got into the burgling because of Aunt Sadie.

Don't get me wrong, Aunt Sadie didn't *make* me do it. She's not a criminal mastermind, like Fagin in that story about Oliver Twist. She had no idea what I was up to. But I cat burgled to help her. I worked alone and, like Robin Hood, I only robbed rich people so I could give to the poor – i.e. Aunt Sadie. Getting sent to reform

school put a stop to it though. What a horrible place, but it did what it promised! When I was released I went straight. I had done my time and I thought that would be the end of it. But it wasn't!

One day the following January, I was helping Aunt Sadie with the washing that she takes in to scrape a living. It was so cold I had my ragged coat on and my hands were raw with handling wet laundry in the freezing air. I was pushing some sheets through the mangle when there was a knock at the door. There were always knocks at the door, so I didn't take much notice of this one. Aunt Sadie went to see who it was, and I continued to turn the mangle handle. I had no idea that within minutes my days of squeezing water out of other people's sheets would be over. My life was about to change for ever.

♦♦♦

When she came back, the look on Aunt Sadie's face worried me. The police constable who followed her through the door worried me even more. And when a bearded man in a brown coat squeezed into the tiny room behind them and announced that he was Mr Burke, private detective, my heart sank. I could suddenly see where this was going.

'I didn't do it!' I said quickly, thinking I should get in first.

'Didn't do what?' asked Mr Burke.

'Whatever it is you are going to accuse me of,' I said.

Mr Burke's eyebrows arched like adults' eyebrows do when they don't believe a word an eleven-year-old has told them. 'Please proceed, constable,' he instructed, with a nod to the policeman.

The constable was very young and nervous. He was wearing one of those new domed hats the police have got these days and it made him look really tall. 'Edith Timms?' he asked, taking out a notebook and pencil and writing something down, though I hadn't even spoken.

'Y-e-e-s,' I answered slowly, not really wanting to admit that Edith was me. 'What's this about? I'm feeling discombobulated.'

The constable stopped writing and looked discombobulated himself. 'How do you spell *dis, dis*…what was that word?' he asked.

'Discombobulated? It means confused,' I explained. 'My teacher, Miss Kandinsky taught it me.'

'Thanks,' he said. I spelt it for him, and he wrote it down. Then he said discombobulated out loud a couple of times, looking quite pleased with himself.

Mr Burke cleared his throat deliberately. 'Constable!' he said, in a way that suggested the young policeman should get on with it.

The tips of the constable's ears turned pink and he suddenly acted all stern, his words coming out in a rush. 'Edith Timms, I am arresting you for the theft of six silver serving salvers from The In and Out Club, on Piccadilly.'

'What? It wasn't me!' I told him firmly. 'Why are you saying it was?'

'Someone saw you,' the constable smirked. 'And, on top of that, you were caught stealing from the same place once before, weren't you?'

'I won't deny it,' I said. 'But what's that got to do with the price of eggs?'

'Eggs?' The constable looked discombobulated again.

'What I mean is, what has my previous visit got to do with *this* robbery?' I demanded.

'Well, you're a burglar,' said the constable, as if that explained everything.

'I *was* a burglar, but I'm not any more. I've gone straight since reform school and I tell you, it wasn't me!'

'Really?' The constable looked as if he believed me for a moment. But then Mr Burke did his coughing thing again, and after that

the constable concentrated on writing in his book.

'I'm not lying!' I said, beginning to panic and turning to my aunt. 'Tell them, Aunt Sadie!'

But Aunt Sadie just stood there looking disappointed. I could see she didn't know whether to believe me or not, and that broke my heart.

'You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say may be used in evidence,' said the constable, sounding a bit apologetic. And then he snapped the handcuffs on me.

As I was led out, Aunt Sadie avoided my eye, which choked me up even more. For once I was lost for words, and I didn't get my voice back until I reached the front door. 'It's a mistake!' I managed to shout over my shoulder. 'Aunt Sadie, they've made a mistake! You've got to believe me!'

♦♦♦

Outside, the cobbled road was slippery with frost. Even Mr Burke shivered in his big brown coat, while the constable checked the handcuffs. He must have thought I would scarper if I had the chance. He wasn't wrong.

Despite the cold, the neighbours all came out to see what was going on; nosy parkers! But you can't hide anything in the mucky little East End streets with so many people living on top of one another – particularly when it involves the police.

A few of the neighbours jeered and a couple of snot-nosed kids trotted beside us telling the constable to leave me alone. He swatted them away like flies and Mr Burke ignored them. He ignored me too, but since I was distracted by trying not to freeze to death in the bitter wind that was blowing through my useless coat, I wasn't bothered.

Perhaps I would have been more bothered if I'd known he

was going to change my life completely. But neither of us knew it at that point.

By the time we had walked to Bow Street police station I was frozen solid. It was the last place I wanted to be, but at least it was warm.

While I was thawing out, the young constable wrote my name and misdemeanour in a giant ledger and I took more notice of Mr Burke and tried to get him on my side.

'It wasn't me, honest!' I said quietly.

'So you keep saying, miss,' he replied. 'But there's no point trying to persuade me. You will have your chance to defend yourself in court.'

Mr Burke turned to the constable, who had finally finished writing. 'Bring Miss Timms to the courthouse tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, would you please?' he said.

'Right you are, Mr Burke,' said the constable. Then Mr Burke left, and I was led away to a grubby little cell where a scruffy woman, stinking of gin and snoring loudly, was sprawled across the only bench.

I spent a miserable night not sleeping and was exhausted by the time a policeman brought me a cup of tea and a hunk of bread for breakfast. When I asked him what would become of me, he blew out his cheeks with great drama. 'I don't know, miss,' he said. 'Maybe you'll be for the noose.'

'You mean they might hang me?' I heard myself squeak.

He laughed. 'No. I'm joking. They don't hang people for stealing in this day and age. Particularly little squirts like you. It'll be prison for you…unless you can persuade them you are innocent.'

'Prison? But anything could happen to me in prison!' I yelped.

'Shouldn't have done it then, should you!' said the policeman.

'I didn't do it…' I protested. But I was talking to the closing cell door. The policeman had already gone.