Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

# The Chamber of Shadows

Written by

## Justin Richards

Published by

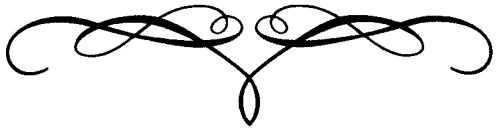
**Faber and Faber**

**All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator**

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

# THE CHAMBER OF SHADOWS



JUSTIN RICHARDS

ff
*faber and faber*

First published in 2010
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA
This paperback edition published in 2010

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in England by Mackays of Chatham plc, Kent

All rights reserved
© Justin Richards, 2010

The right of Justin Richards to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser*

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

ISBN 0–571–23799–9

The paper this book is printed on is certified independently in accordance with the rules of the FSC. It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds chain of custody

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

# Chapter 1

Ralph McNab did not recognise the sound of his own death. But then, like all the other victims, Ralph McNab assumed his killer was human.

He paused under a gas lamp to consult his pocket watch. It was gone one in the morning and the dark night was thick with fog. Even the pubs had grown quiet, and the theatres had finished. As far as Ralph was concerned, it was the best part of the day. The show was over, the takings were in the safe, and he was on his way home to a warm bed.

Ralph liked to walk when it wasn't too cold or raining. Even the smog-filled London night air cleared his head after the long evening keeping tabs on the various acts, making sure the backstage crew didn't slack and that the house was well attended. The theatre – *his* theatre – was rarely full these days. He needed to do something about that. Standing under the lamp,

rubbing his whiskered cheeks thoughtfully, Ralph considered his options.

Light, he decided, was one option. Gas and limelight were all very well. But the Savoy had opened with electric lighting in 1881 – five years ago. Perhaps it was time to invest in a generator and modern technology. But would electric light pull in the crowds? It was hardly a novelty now.

No, Ralph decided, walking on down the foggy street, what he needed was a new act. There was nothing wrong with any of the acts he had – some of them were quite good. That Lily Ketcham had a lovely voice, as well as other attributes. The unicyclist had his moments too, though Ralph winced as he remembered this evening's mishap with the loose trapdoor and the orchestra pit.

What he really needed was a single astonishing act that would be the talk of the town, that would win rave reviews and, more importantly, put bums on seats. Lots of bums on lots of seats. What he really needed was an act like the Amazing Magnus, who was packing them in at the Emperor's Theatre just a few streets away.

He paused to consult his watch, realising as he slipped open the lid and saw the time that he had checked it only a minute ago. He tucked it back into his waistcoat pocket.

Like all the other victims, Ralph didn't recognise the danger until it was too late. Like all the other victims, he barely noticed the noise . . . The sound of death. Until he reached once again for his watch.

It had been there all the time, Ralph realised. Masked by the clip of his boots on the cobbles, by the rhythm of his heart beating faster as he began to think something might be wrong. The ticking of a watch – but not his own watch. It was a slower, more insistent beat. Staccato and metallic. Getting louder.

Ralph spun round, raising his cane. But there was no one there. Nothing but the swirl of fog and the smell of the river. Yet he could still hear the noise of – what was it? A church clock? The rhythmic turning of a carriage wheel somewhere nearby? A blind man's stick tapping his way through the night?

The fog was getting thicker. It was hard to keep any sense of direction and now the sound seemed to be all around him. Ralph stood still, trying to focus, to work out what it was and where it was coming from.

The noise was definitely behind him. Ralph turned round slowly and a shape materialised out of the grey air. A dark figure. Small and awkward, it walked with a peculiar lurching gait. A child.

Ralph blew out a long misty breath of relief. Just a child. He'd thought – for one terrible moment, he had

thought it might be . . . He frowned, peering at the approaching figure. Wasn't there a theory that the killer might be a child?

There was something very odd about the approaching figure. Ralph could make out no features. It was wearing a dark cloak that covered its small frame. The hood was raised so its face was in shadow. And all the while the noise grew louder.

The cloak opened, just slightly. Just enough to allow a small hand to emerge. A child's hand. The knife the child was holding gleamed in the sulphurous light from the nearest gas lamp. At the same moment, the child's awkward walk dislodged the hood of the cloak and it fell back slightly. Enough to reveal a face that in no way resembled a child's.

Like all the other victims, Ralph McNab had assumed the Tick-Tock Killer was human. Only now, when it was too late, did he realise how wrong he'd been.

He turned to run. But the child that wasn't a child at all was already on him. Its pace quickened. The tick-tock clicking that accompanied the figure did not vary. The hand holding the knife whipped out with mechanical efficiency. When it withdrew, the blade had lost its gleam.

Ralph slid slowly to the ground. His hand pressed hard against the sticky cobblestones. The thump of his

heart beat a metronomic rhythm in his ears, keeping time with the receding footsteps and the fading sound of a clock.

He knew he was dying, and he was terrified. He knew he'd never get to his warm bed now, or install electric lighting in his beloved theatre, or put on an act to rival the Amazing Magnus. But that wasn't what scared him. What made Ralph most afraid was what he had seen. More terrifying even than death was the face of the Tick-Tock Killer.

The night was cold and clammy, and Tom needed somewhere to doss down. He didn't have enough money for a room and anyway he'd prefer to find a quiet, sheltered corner than to share with half a dozen or more other people. He'd earned a few ha'pennies when the theatres finished, finding cabs for gentlemen. He'd hung around outside the Lamb and Lion, hoping a drunk might drop a few coppers as he stumbled out.

Now Tom was heading for the graveyard. He knew a bank where the grass grew long and soft. He could huddle under his threadbare coat and sleep till first light. He didn't mind the company of the dead.

But the dead he didn't mind were long gone and buried deep. The body he found lying in the gutter was

altogether more recent. He thought at first it was a bundle of rags. Closer, and peering through the gloom, Tom could make out what looked like a decent coat. His luck was in after all. Then his foot slipped on the slick cobbles and he fell on to the heap of clothes.

There was someone inside them – drunk, asleep or both. Tom muttered an apology and got to his feet. The pavement was sticky and slippery at the same time. A dark stain spread across it and down into the gutter. He could make out the viscous liquid running to the nearest drain and caught the rusty scent of blood.

'Oh, cripes!' Tom said out loud.

His luck wasn't in at all. He was tempted to run, but some more noble instinct caused him to stay. The body in the gutter stirred. It moved slightly, struggling to raise a pale, bloodless hand.

'I'll get the peelers,' Tom said. 'Don't you worry. You'll be all right, you will.'

'Too late,' the dying man gasped. His hand grabbed Tom's shirt, pulling him down towards him with a strength that surprised Tom. 'Tick-Tock . . .'

'You what?'

'Tick-Tock,' the man said again. He coughed and his grip loosened. 'The Tick-Tock Killer . . . He's not – not . . .' The hand fell away.

'I'll get help,' Tom said.

They were in a narrow side street. But the main road wasn't far away – there would be people there. Or, if not, the Gaslighter's Arms was only a couple of minutes further on.

Tom almost cried out with relief as he saw a distinctive silhouette loom out of the fog. With his short cloak and pointed helmet there was no mistaking the policeman.

'Thank God,' Tom began to say.

But his words were drowned out by the policeman's gruff cry: 'You there – boy. What are you doing? Stand still.'

Tom froze. The policeman stepped closer, looking from Tom to the lifeless body at his feet.

'I think he's dead,' Tom said.

'You don't move a muscle, my lad.' The policeman fumbled in his top pocket for his whistle. 'They said the Tick-Tock Killer might be a child, and God help me I never believed it could be possible.'

'What? No – not me!' Tom couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'I ain't even got a knife.'

The policeman blew several short blasts on his whistle. The shrill noise cut through the foggy air. Almost at once, Tom could hear the sound of running feet. Somewhere nearby a window scraped open.

'What's going on out there?'

'It's him, ain't it – the Tick-Tock Killer?' came another voice from across the road.

'He's only a boy!' a second policeman said, running up.

'It wasn't me!' Tom protested.

Figures appeared all round him out of the fog. Tom looked at them desperately. 'I ain't the killer. I just found him here. He was dead already.'

'You making sure of it, were you?' the first policeman asked. 'You'd best come quietly. Put that knife down.'

'I haven't got a knife – look!' Tom thrust out his empty hand.

But in the foggy night, it was a mistake.

'He's got a knife!' someone shouted.

'He's gonna stick us!' another voice said.

The policeman was holding his own hands out, trying to calm Tom. Maybe he could see the boy's hands were empty, or maybe he too thought Tom was brandishing a weapon. 'Easy now, son.'

'Get him!' came a shout. 'He's only a kid!'

That was enough for Tom. He ran – straight at the policeman, knocking him out of the way.

The policeman slipped on the blood. His foot slid off the pavement into the gutter and he fell.

'He's stabbed the copper! After him. Kill him, the dirty murderer!'

Tom had no idea where he was going. He just ran. Behind him, he could hear the shouts and cries of the angry crowd. Someone stepped on to the pavement in front of him and Tom shoved them aside. It slowed him down, but he kept running.

He sprinted round a corner and crossed the main road. A cab clattered out of the night, the horse rearing up as Tom cut in front of it.

The crowd was gaining on him. It wouldn't be long before they caught him – or someone heard their shouts and grabbed him.

Just as Tom thought this, an arm reached out from a dark alleyway and clamped on his shoulder. He tried to break free, but his unseen assailant dragged him into the darkness. A hand closed over his mouth as he cried out, choking off the noise.

Moments later, the first of the mob skidded to a halt just by the dark opening. Tom held his breath.

'Stay still and quiet,' a voice whispered in his ear.

Tom did his best to nod, but the hand was still over his mouth.

'Where's he gone?' someone demanded.

'Can't be far away. Check everywhere.'

Tom tried to twist round to see who was holding him. It was another boy, about his own age. And behind the boy, Tom could see that they were in a short alley

ending in a high wall. Trapped. The boy let go of Tom and put his finger to his lips. Then, despite the dire situation, he grinned.

'They'll find us in a minute,' Tom mouthed.

The boy shook his head.

From outside the alley came a cry: 'There he is, look. Get him!'

Tom turned quickly, expecting to see the angry mob advancing on him and his new friend. But there was no one.

'How did he get that far?' The voice was more distant now. Figures were running past the end of the alley, clearly in pursuit.

'Blimey, he must be fast.'

'No one faster,' the grinning boy said quietly to Tom. 'We don't call him Fast Fergus for nothing. Hang on.' He moved quickly to the end of the alley and checked the road outside. 'All clear. Let's go.'

In the brighter light of the main street, Tom could see the boy was better dressed than he was. His face looked clean for a street kid, but his hair was a tangled mass. The grin seemed fixed in place.

'We'll be all right now. They're looking for a kid on his own, not two of us. So, what's your story, then? Why the big chase – you a dipper or something?'

'I'm no thief,' Tom protested, though he'd been

known to dip into pockets when things got bad. 'They think I'm the Tick-Tock Killer.'

The other boy nodded. 'And are you?' he asked, like this was a very ordinary and innocent question.

'Course not. I'm Tom. I found a body and then this policeman came.'

'And he thought you'd done it? Typical. Blame the kids.'

'He said they think the Tick-Tock Killer is a kid.'

At the end of the street, another boy came running up. Out of breath, he put his hand on the grinning boy's shoulder till he was able to talk.

'I think I lost 'em.'

'Well done. This is Fast Fergus. Fergus – meet Tom. I'm Eddie, by the by, and if I don't get going pretty sharpish, I'll be in as much trouble as you were. I was supposed to go home straight after school.'

'School?!'

Eddie nodded. 'I know. Daft, ain't it? Anyway, I'd better dash. Fergus will find you somewhere to doss and maybe I'll see you tomorrow. We've got work to do.'

Tom wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. 'What do you mean, work?'

'I mean,' Eddie said, 'that if the peelers and everyone are blaming kids like you for things you ain't done, then

we need to sort that out. If they're wasting time blaming innocent children, then it's up to someone else to find the real Tick-Tock Killer. And that someone is Eddie Hopkins.'