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

Twelve Minutes to Midnight

Written by

Christopher Edge

Published by

Nosy Crow Ltd

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

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

TWELVE MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

CHRISTOPHER EDGE



For Chrissie, Alex and Josie

First published in the UK in 2012 by Nosy Crow Ltd
The Crow's Nest, 10a Lant Street
London, SE1 1QR, UK

Nosy Crow and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Nosy Crow Ltd

Text copyright © Christopher Edge, 2012

The right of Christopher Edge to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

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

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Nosy Crow Ltd.

Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, St. Ives Plc
Typeset by Tiger Media Ltd, Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire

Papers used by Nosy Crow are made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN: 978 0 857 63050 6

www.nosycrow.com

I



Montgomery Flinch gripped the sides of the reading lectern, his knuckles whitening as he stared out into the darkness of the auditorium. His bristling eyebrows arched and the gleam of his dark eyes seemed to dart across the faces of each audience member in turn. A mesmerised silence hung over the stage; it was as if the theatre itself was holding its breath as it waited for the conclusion to his latest spine-chilling tale. The expectant hush seemed to deepen as Flinch finally began to speak.

"And when he turned and looked into the mirror, his trembling visage a cracked alabaster in the moonlight, he saw the dread face of Dr Cameron staring back at him, the man that he had murdered some seven years before."

The dimmed gaslights lining the walls of the theatre flickered faintly as a shocked gasp rippled through the audience.

Flinch's face twisted into a grotesque grimace,

his voice now a guttural rasp that echoed around the auditorium.

"'I'm back,' the face in the mirror snarled. The man shrank in fear as Cameron's gnarled fingers reached through the glass. Stumbling backwards, he dashed the lamp from the table, darkness shrouding the violent scene as the two men struggled, until only one figure was left standing."

Montgomery Flinch paused, his dark hooded eyes looking up from the last page of the manuscript stacked on the lectern in front of him. A low whimper was audible from the back of the stalls as the audience shivered in their seats. Flinch began to read again, his voice trembling slightly as though fearful of what it was about to reveal.

"Reaching out, a wizened hand righted the lamp and, as its warm pool of light spilled across the room, the hunched form of Dr Cameron stepped towards the ornate mirror. Imprisoned there behind the glass, his murderer raised his hands in a desperate plea of pity.

"'I'm sorry,' he cried, the ghosts of his words whispering behind the glass. 'Please, I beg of you—'

"With a hiss of satisfaction, Dr Cameron raised his stout walking stick high, its brass-tipped ferrule glinting in the lamplight, and with an unnatural strength far beyond the capabilities

of his frail form, he brought the cane crashing down with a whip crack."

Flinch brought his palm down on the lectern with a thunderous report.

"The mirror shattered into a thousand pieces, and, for a moment, in every single shard, the face of the last Earl of Pomeroy could be glimpsed, his mouth stretched in an endless scream as his dark and murderous deeds were finally avenged."

In the front row, three young women fainted dead away, their consorts frantically ransacking the previously unexplored hinterlands of beaded purses in search of smelling salts to revive their swooning spouses. Further back in the stalls, an elderly gentleman in a navy-blue frock coat clutched at his chest, his drink-mottled cheeks wheezing as a paroxysm of fear overwhelmed him. But around them, the audience rose to its feet as one, thunderous applause filling the auditorium as Montgomery Flinch bowed deeply.

The evening was a resounding success. This rare appearance by the reclusive Master of the Macabre and sneak preview of his latest story would have hordes of eager readers queuing in the streets tomorrow for its exclusive appearance in the pages of *The Penny Dreadful*. And to think, nobody had even heard of the name Montgomery Flinch a mere twelve months ago when *The Penny Dreadful* was a fourth-rate magazine scraping by with a readership counted

in the dozens. Now, ever since the appearance of Montgomery Flinch's fictions in its pages, *The Penny Dreadful* had a circulation close to half a million, the magazine flying off the bookstands every month as the readers devoured Flinch's dread tales. In the fading days of the nineteenth century, the fame of the man himself even threatened to eclipse that of Dickens, Kipling and Doyle – the literary world astounded by his meteoric rise to stardom.

As Montgomery Flinch stood there in the spotlight, his hands raised in false modesty as he soaked up the applause, the pinched face of the theatre manager nervously peered around the crimson drapes at the side of the stage. With a shuffling gait, the black-suited impresario inched his way across the stage as the house lights were raised until finally he was standing by the author's side, the ovation still ringing out across the theatre. He nodded towards Flinch with an obsequious bow and then, turning back to the audience, held out his hands to gesture for silence.

Reluctantly, the applause slowly faded away into a smattering of handclaps, the theatregoers returning to their seats as the manager began to speak.

"May I once again extend the heartfelt thanks of the Lyceum Theatre to the illustrious Montgomery Flinch for finally breaking his silence and sharing this exclusive performance of

his Christmas tale of terror with us," he fawned. "This story will be published tomorrow in the December issue of *The Penny Dreadful*, available from all good booksellers."

Another round of applause broke over the stage again, the audience sharing their thanks in the only way they knew how.

Reaching inside his frock coat, the theatre manager pulled out his fob watch and glanced down at its face, nervously twisting its chain with his other hand.

"And as the performance appears to have finished slightly ahead of schedule," he continued, "I'd like to throw open the stage to any questions from the audience. I'm sure Mr Flinch would welcome this unique opportunity to talk directly with the devotees of his most remarkable fictions."

The impresario turned back towards Montgomery Flinch, whose face had cracked in horror. Flinch drew back from the lectern, his dark eyes flashing with fear.

"I really don't know if I can—"

A forest of hands reached up from every corner of the theatre. Questions fired towards the stage in an excited hubbub of voices.

"Mr Flinch! Why are your stories so scary?"

"Where do you get your ideas from?"

"Monty! What's your next story going to be about?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," the theatre manager struggled to make his voice heard above the sudden din, "one at a time, please."

From the middle of the front row, a man's booming voice hushed the crowd as his question rang out as clear as a bell.

"What's the big secret, Flinch?"

There was a sharp intake of breath as the audience craned to see the face of the questioner. The voice belonged to a tall, thin man in a pinstriped suit who leaned forward in his seat towards the light spilling off the stage. His neatly trimmed moustache gave his lean, pockmarked face the appearance of someone trying to look older than their meagre years. In his hand, he held an open notebook, pen poised above the paper as he waited for Montgomery Flinch's reply.

The author's broad shoulders sagged as he reached forward and grasped hold of the lectern's edge.

"Wh-wh-what do you mean?" he stuttered, his face suddenly pale beneath the spotlight. A single bead of sweat slicked down his forehead and poised suspended from the end of his long nose before falling silently on to the manuscript pages below.

"You're the most celebrated author in Britain, but nobody knows the first thing about you," the young journalist continued, his voice echoing around the now hushed theatre. "Other authors

toil for years in obscurity, but here you are, an overnight star." His eyes glittered mischievously. "I'll ask you again, what exactly is your secret?"

"There's no secret," Flinch blustered, waving his hands dismissively at the question. "I'm just lucky I suppose..."

The journalist frowned, his eyes narrowing as he opened his mouth to speak again, but before the words could escape his lips, a shrill cry echoed across the theatre.

"That's not true!"

The eyes of the audience swivelled to the far end of the front row. There, a young girl in a fashionable red dress had risen to her feet, her outstretched finger pointing straight at the stage. Her long dark hair was pulled back from her face and her pretty green eyes sparkled with indignation.

"I've read every single one of your stories, Mr Flinch," she said, her voice rising in protest. "It isn't luck that has made your name, but sheer dazzling talent. Nobody else could have dreamed up such nightmarish visions, created such mesmerising characters or crafted your spine-chilling tales. We don't need to know your secret – just give thanks that you are willing to share your stories with us."

Still standing in the spotlight, Montgomery Flinch's face flushed with relief. Reaching into his pocket for a handkerchief, he dabbed at his brow

as yet another peal of applause rang out from the audience to acclaim the young girl's words. In the front row, the journalist was still struggling to make himself heard. He glared at the girl, a gleam of recognition in his gaze, but his voice was lost in the tumultuous ovation.

"That's very kind of you to say," Flinch finally replied as the applause gradually dimmed. "And now I really must bid you all goodnight, but I'd be most honoured, Miss, if you could join me backstage so that I can present you with a signed copy of my latest tale."

Stepping out from behind the lectern, he held out his right hand towards the girl and the audience's applause redoubled at this unexpected act of kindness. The dark-haired girl slowly climbed the steps at the front of the stage until finally she was standing in front of the author as Montgomery Flinch strode to greet her. Then, with a final bow to the audience, the two of them exited stage left, disappearing behind the heavy crimson drapes.

As stamps and cheers shook the stage, the author led the way through the maze of corridors backstage. His broad frame brushed past discarded pieces of painted scenery and forgotten props, clothes rails filled with musty costumes, the smell of greasepaint heavy in the air. The two of them walked in silence until finally they reached the dressing rooms at the back of the theatre.

Stopping outside a door with a fading star nailed to the peeling green paint, Montgomery Flinch unlocked his dressing room and ushered the girl inside.

The poky room was dominated by a large mirror surrounded by lights. This sat on a solitary table overflowing with vases of flowers, empty glasses and crumpled sheets of paper. Around the room, more brightly-coloured costumes hung from rails amid the decapitated bodies of mannequins, ghostly relics of the actors who had gone before.

With a heavy sigh, Montgomery Flinch slumped into the chair in front of his dressing-room table. He reached towards a crystal decanter filled with a dark amber liquid and, with a shaking hand, poured a generous measure into the nearest empty glass.

Closing the door behind her, the dark-haired girl turned towards the author, her pale face now wreathed in fury.

"What in the blazes do you think you are doing?"