

WHERE IS FLORRIE?

A Melodrama

by

Angela Lanyon

SchoolPlay Productions Ltd

15 Inglis Road, Colchester, Essex CO3 3HU

WHERE IS FLORRIE?

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CAST

Florrie Dennis	<i>An occasional dead body</i>
James Read	<i>A handsome much married young man</i>
Fred Rush	<i>A labourer</i>
P.C. Samuel Hawtree	<i>Of the Southend Police</i>
Inspector Baker	<i>Of Scotland Yard</i>
Mrs. Myers	<i>Florrie's sister</i>
Mrs. Read	<i>James Read's wife</i>
Mrs. Benson	<i>Another 'wife' of James Read</i>
Old man	<i>Telegraph 'boy'</i>
Friends, neighbours, onlookers etc.	

WHERE IS FLORRIE?

or

Who Put the Body in the Prittlewell Brook?

by **Angela Lanyon**

In and around Southend and district, Prittlewell Woods, Deptford Docks and Surrey. The songs are sung by the CROWD and the individual PERFORMERS step out of the crowd for their scenes. The action is continuous. The songs are folk tunes and songs of the period and, unless specified otherwise, everyone should join in. The basic tune is 'Twas ON A MONDAY MORNING.

Mrs. Myers: *'Twas on a Monday morning,
When I beheld my sister,
She looked so sweet and simple
In her pretty muslin gown;*
Florrie: *"I'm off to catch the train"*
Crowd: *she said,*
Florrie: *"To see my love - we'll soon be wed."*
Crowd: *And that's the last she heard of her:
Her little sister, Flo.*

(On the opposite side of the stage MRS. READ, clutching a BABY, enters).

Mrs. Read: *'Twas on a Monday morning
I stood and watched my darling,
He looked so strong and handsome
In his lovely woolly combs.*
James: *"I'm working late,"*
Crowd: *her husband said,*
James: *"So don't wait up, but go to bed"*
Crowd: *And so she waved "goodbye" to him
And watched her Jimmie go.*

(The CROWD now take up seaside activities: strolling along the pier, fishing, eating rock).

Crowd: *'Twas on a Monday morning,
An ordinary morning,
The sun was shining on the pier
And all the sea was blue;
When Florrie in her pretty gown
Got off the train at Southend Town
And met her Jimmie waiting
By appointment on the pier.*

(JAMES and FLORRIE step forward).

James: *(Removing his hat).* Good day, Miss Dennis. *(He twirls his moustache).*
How delightful you look.

Florrie: *(Simpering).* Oh, Mr. Read!

James: Oh yes, I assure you, Miss Dennis, a picture. Quite a picture.

Florrie: Oh, Mr. Read, saying things like that you make me feel all shy.

James: There's no need to be, Miss Dennis - or, may I call you, "Florrie"? *(She giggles).* Dear Florrie. Oh, do say "yes". You've quite won my heart.
Would you allow me to buy you some rock? Or would you prefer a jellied eel?

Florrie: I don't know what my sister would say.... talking to a young man.

James: Well, my dear, she's not here to ask, and I'm hardly a stranger. How about a tasty plate of cockles? Warm up the cockles of your heart, Florrie.

Florrie: There's some people don't need warming up by the sound of it.

James: *(Seizing her hand).* Warming up, Florrie! I'm burning with passion for you.

Florrie: Oh my goodness!

James: Say something, Florrie. I'm offering you my heart.

Florrie: *(Nervously).* Ooh! I'd rather have a plate of whelks.

James: Oh, bother the whelks.

Florrie: But I'm hungry, Mr. Read.

James: *(Aside).* Curses. Is she ever anything else? But not for what I want!

Florrie: Don't you fancy whelks, then? They're not everyone's cup of tea.

James: And talking of tea, what about a stroll along the front before we sit down?
A little wander in the woodlands, a cuddle in the coppice, Florrie, my darling.

Florrie: You'll have to mind my hat, it's new.

James: *(Arch).* Don't you know me well enough to take your hat off?

Florrie: You won't forget the whelks, will you?

James: Could I forget ?

(THEY stroll off hand in hand).

Crowd:

[Tune - *DAISY BELL*]

*Florrie, Florrie, give me your answer, do.
I'm half crazy all for the love of you*

(Change of pace)

Crowd: *'Twas on a Tuesday morning
Without a word of warning
Her sister met the Southend train
And Florrie wasn't there.
Oh where, oh where, has Florrie gone,
Her best straw hat she had got on,
She went to visit Southend Pier,
And now poor Florrie's gone!*

Mrs. Myers:

[Tune - *BLUE BELLS OF SCOTLAND*]

*Oh where, tell me where, has my sister Florrie gone?
Alas, oh alack, she has left me all alone!*

Mrs. Myers: *(Addressing the CROWD)* Well, I want to know where Florrie is. Left all her things when she went off, didn't she? Ought to have been home by now. Running off like that, no good'll come of it, mark my words. I've a feeling in my bones *(To one of CROWD)*. No, dearie, it's not rheumatism - not at my age. How old did you think I was?

(SOMEONE shouts something outrageous)

Mrs. Myers: What a cheek! No, I know it - I can tell, something's happened to Florrie.

(The CROWD move apart to reveal a Counter with the POSTMASTER behind. MRS. MYERS goes to him).

Mrs. Myers: I want to send a telegram.

Postmaster: Very good, missus.

Mrs. Myers: To James Canham Read. R.E.A.D. Deptford Docks.

Postmaster: *(Writing it down slowly)*. Deptford Docks. And what do you want to say?

Mrs. Myers: Where is Florrie?

Postmaster: Is that all?

Mrs. Myers: Yes. Where is Florrie? Florence Dennis, my sister. Where is she, that's what I want to know, where is she? What's he done with her?

Postmaster: Run off has she?

Mrs. Myers: Run off! Run off! Been made away with, more like.

Postmaster: Are you going to wait for an answer?

Mrs. Myers: Yes. Send it 'reply paid'. I'll spare no expense to find my sister.

(CROWD murmurs its approval).

Postmaster: That'll be sixpence

Mrs. Myers: Sixpence! Whatever next!

(CROWD make various comments).

Woman: Daylight robbery, that is.

Man: What's the poor girl done?

2nd Woman: Don't know what things are coming to.

Mrs. Myers: *(To POSTMASTER).* And don't hang around, just get that telegram off. Oh, my poor sister Florrie, made away with like as not.

3rd Woman: And in her best hat.

Postmaster: Don't worry, missus, you'll have an answer before long.

(On the other side of the stage a very ancient TELEGRAPH BOY delivers the telegram to JAMES READ who is sitting at a table. The CROWD now switch their attention to this scene).

James: A telegram! *(He reacts wildly).* I am discovered! Boy - what are you waiting for?

Telegraph Boy: An answer, guv. Reply paid, it is.

James: Curses. *(Tears open envelope and reads).* Where is Florrie?

Telegraph Boy: Not me, mister, my name's Fred.

James: And you're waiting for an answer. Well, you shall have one. Here. Write - I have not seen the said person for eighteen months. *(Aside).* That should fool them.

(CROWD all draw breath).

James: And now to get rid of the fellow. *(He brings a coin from his pocket).* Boy, here you are, get the answer off quick sharp.

(TELEGRAPH BOY salutes and goes off. JAMES starts to panic).

James: But now, I must make my escape before that nosy parker sister of Florrie comes searching for the girl. And I have just the place prepared, my little Ethel's cottage. *(He brings a cash box from under the table and takes out a money bag).* The dock yard funds, a hundred and sixty pounds, Her Majesty will not miss that. *(Aside).* What can I tell the crowd? Ah - yes! *(He pulls out a large pocket handkerchief and bursts into sobs. He addresses the CROWD through his tears).* My mother, my mother's dead. A poor and sainted soul.

(THE CROWD pull out handkerchiefs and say 'Aah', Sob etc).

James: She leaves a grieving family.

Crowd: *(Start to sing). Abide with me, fast falls the eventide....*

James: *(Under the cover of his handkerchief and in tune).*

I must go now before they find I've lied

*(To CROWD): Alas, my friends, my mother is no more
A pious duty draws me from your side.*

(Weeping false tears he exits with the money bag wrapped up in his scarf).

Crowd: *[Tune - DAISY BELL]*

Florrie, Florrie, where has poor Florrie gone?

We're all worried, wondering where Florrie's gone.

There won't be a moment's quiet (Pointing to MRS. MYERS).

She'll even start a riot

Until she spies where Florrie lies

In the arms of her gentleman friend.

Mrs. Myers: *(To THE POSTMASTER)* I sent that telegram half an hour ago and I'm still waiting for the answer. Talk about efficiency

Man in Crowd: It's the cuts, love.

Mrs. Myers: Where is it?

Postman: Hold on, hold on, here he comes.

(The TELEGRAPH BOY arrives at a run and out of breath, the CROWD cheer).

Telegraph Boy: Here you are, missus. Here's your answer.

(He collapses and is helped off by two of the ONLOOKERS. The rest of the CROWD are trying to read or guess what the telegram says).

Mrs. Myers: *(With a wild gesture).* Said person! How dare he call my sister "said person". I have not seen "said person" for eighteen months. Liar! What's he done to my sister? Where is Florrie?

Part of the Crowd: *(Take up as a chant):*. Liar, Liar, where is Florrie?

Part of the Crowd: *(Sing).*

*'Twas on a Wednesday evening,
Fred Rush was homeward weaving*

(Enter FRED RUSH).

All Crowd: *He found a bloodstained glove
Beside the brook at Prittlewell,
And further on poor Florrie lay
Another glove not far away,
A hole was in her forehead
And a rosebud in her hand.*

Fred: *(Singing).* *There's an old mill by the stream
Nellie Dean, Nellie Dean
Where I used to sit*

Fred: A glove! And blood stained too! What dastardly act have I uncovered?

(The CROWD move aside and there is FLORRIE face downwards, dead).

Fred: A maiden -- dead. Struck down in her youth. *(He turns the body over and she has a large rosebud in her hands and a very obvious bullet hole - labelled "BULLET HOLE", on her forehead).* A crime of passion. Help! Help!

(Enter P.C. HAWTREE).

P.C. Hawtree: Now, then, now then, what's going on here?

Fred: A maiden, pretty as a picture, struck down and drowned in the brook.

P.C. Hawtree: Shooting and drowning.

Fred: Shooting?

(FLORRIE moves an arm mechanically and points).

P.C. Hawtree: Can't you read? See that - "bullet hole". That's what it says.
(Sees rose) And look at that!

Fred: A rose, I found it crushed beneath her lifeless form.

P.C. Hawtree: Tampering with the evidence.... can't have that. Here, you *(He points to some of the ONLOOKERS)*. Give me a hand, we must carry her indoors.

(Some of the CROWD pick up the body and P.C. HAWTREE puts a large red spotted handkerchief over FLORRIE'S face. INSPECTOR BAKER leads MRS.MYERS on).

Inspector: Come, madam, you must be brave. Brace yourself.

(The CROWD all "OOH" and "AAH" and P.C. HAWTREE dramatically pulls off the covering).

Mrs. Myers: *(Shrieks)* It's her. It's Florrie.

Inspector: Never fear, we'll track the killer down.

(MRS. MYERS faints into the arms of the ONLOOKERS and while the CROWD sing the following THE INSPECTOR and P.C. HAWTREE with huge magnifying glasses detect everything in sight).

Crowd: *'Twas on a Thursday morning,
Just as the day was dawning
The C.I.D. arrived by train
Detecting as they came*

Mrs. Myers: *" I know who's done this ghastly deed"*

Crowd: *Cried Florrie's sister*

Mrs. Myers: *...."That man Read!"*

Crowd: *She'll have his guts for garters
Since he done her sister in.*

Inspector: Now, Ma'am, you can't take the law into your own hands

Mrs. Myers: I'll have a rope round his neck

Inspector: Leave that to the hangman.

Fred: (*Wiping his nose and singing*)

Only a rose I give to thee,

Only a rose dropped in the stream

Mrs. Myers: That's funny, a rose. I remember Florrie telling me he loved roses

P.C. Hawtree: I shall leave no petal unturned.

Inspector: I shall turn over every new leaf Rosetree - sorry, Hawtree - the dog cart!

P.C. Hawtree: (*Saluting*). The carriage awaits.

Mrs. Myers: And I'll come with you.

Inspector: This is no job for a lady.

P.C. Hawtree: Step aside. Leave this to the professionals.

Inspector: To the docks, Hawtree, and don't spare the horses or we'll find the bird flown. (*To the CROWD*). Never fear, I'll lay this villain by the heels. Scotland Yard will bring him to justice.

(*Cheers from the CROWD, MRS. READ, JAMES READ'S wife, steps out from the CROWD. She is very bedraggled and clutches a baby.*)

Mrs. Read: Oh, where's my husband? Where is Jimmie? Where's he disappeared to? My eight children and I will starve if he doesn't come home. (*Loud knocking*). Can that be someone at the door? (*Knocking again*). Can that be the bailiffs already?

P.C. Hawtree: (*Striding forward*). Is this a hundred and six Green Lane, Stepney?

Mrs. Read: It is. (*Aside*). Alas, the police.

Inspector: And are you Mrs. Read?

Mrs. Read: I am, I am, but spare a poor defenceless mother.

Inspector: We're looking for your husband, James Canham Read.

Mrs. Read: (*Aside*). Oh dear, it is my husband's name! I should have paid attention to my mother's warning. (*To INSPECTOR*). Oh, sir, tell me what dreadful accident has happened to him? He's dead. I knew it.

P.C. Hawtree: Not dead but worse. (*Brings out a Wanted poster*). Wanted for murder.

Mrs. Read: Murder!

Inspector: Now tell us where he is?

Mrs. Read: My Jim, my little Jim wanted for murder. Too cruel a fate and me with all these little ones.

P.C. Hawtree: They'll soon grow up.

Inspector: Or end in the workhouse! Now, tell me where is your husband?

Mrs. Read: At work in the docks. I've not set eyes on him since yesterday. He told me he was working late and that's the last I know.

Inspector: To the docks! (*To MRS. READ*). You'll hear more of this.

(*MANAGER of the DOCKS steps forward with the empty cash box*).

Manager: The villain robbed Her Majesty look

Inspector: For shame, another crime.

Manager: A hundred and sixty pounds he took.

Inspector: Anyone who saw anything step forward.

(*The entire CROWD move forward and surround HIM*).

P.C. Hawtree: (*Battling his way out with a note book in his hand*). Line up, line up, one at a time, form an orderly queue, if you please.

Woman: He said his mother died.

Man: He said he was going to the funeral.

P.C. Hawtree: (*Blowing his nose and wiping his eyes*). He took his mother's name in vain, is there no wickedness he hasn't tried?

Inspector: (*Bringing out the rose*). Do you recognise this rosebud?

2nd Woman: He said it came from his garden.

Inspector: A clue at last.

P.C. Hawtree: There's no garden in Green Lane.

Inspector: We must search the area. I myself will explore every avenue.

Crowd: (*Moving downstage*).

*'Twas on a Friday evening
Just as the sun was sinking,
Policemen found a cottage small
Along a Surrey lane.
They found James Read, his babe, his wife
He'd sworn to cherish all her life,
Arrested him and took him off
In handcuffs in their cart.*

(*Mrs. BENSON steps forward with a baby in her arms, followed by JAMES READ*).

Mrs. Benson: Rock a bye baby in the tree tops.... look, isn't she a darling? Smile

for Papa, Rosebud.

James: The prettiest babe I ever saw. (*HE kisses the BABY*). And the prettiest mamma.

Mrs. Benson: Oh, James, how sweet you are. How attentive.

James: I never want to leave you, my dear. One perfect blossom and one perfect bud

Mrs. Benson: But you'll have to look for work sometime, a hundred pounds won't last forever.

James: (*Bringing out a handkerchief*). My poor mother, alas, I am left an orphan. Her last thought was of her darling grandchild

Mrs. Benson: She must have been a wonderful person.

James: A saint. A blessed saint.

Mrs. Benson: But you've got me now. And our little cottage. And darling Rosebud. What peace. When I light the lamps and we are safe in our own little world, what a paradise we have.

(*Clip Clop of horses*).

James: What sound is that?

Mrs. Benson: Don't start so, dearest, it's only a cart in the lane.

James: I hear footsteps.

Mrs. Benson: The farmer with little Rosebud's milk.

James: A strange fear comes over me. What doom is at hand?

Mrs. Benson: Why have you gone so white? Why are you shivering like that?

James: I fear our dream is shattered. A serpent has entered paradise.

P.C. Hawtree: (*Entering*). No sir, just the police.

Inspector: Scotland Yard. I have a warrant for your arrest, James Read on the charge of murdering Florence Dennis.

Mrs. Benson: Murder! No!

Inspector: Murder most foul.

Mrs. Benson: My husband a murderer!

P.C. Hawtree: And you've had a lucky escape. He already has one wife, your babe's a

Crowd: (*Appalled put their hands over their ears. Loud shrieks of horror*). No!

P.C. Hawtree: A wife and eight children.

Inspector: And heaven knows how many other poor women he's ruined.

James: Ethel, do you believe this?

Mrs. Benson: Oh, the scoundrel. The cad. And what of little Rosebud - what's to become of us?

(She bursts into tears and is absorbed into the CROWD who now arrange themselves into a jury. One puts on a wig and is the judge).

Judge: James Canham Read, how do you plead? Guilty or not guilty?

James: Not guilty, my Lord.

Jury: Guilty.

Mrs. Myers: He killed my sister Florrie.

Fred: I saw the body.

Mrs. Benson: He ruined me.

Manager: He stole my money.

Judge: *(Severely)*. Her Majesty's money.

Mrs. Read: He ran off and left me with eight kids.

Judge: You will be hanged by the neck until you are dead.

James: But I'm innocent.

Judge: That's what they all say.

Man in Crowd: The prisoner ate a hearty breakfast.

Woman: He still said he was innocent.

Mrs. Myers: He really was a good looking man.

Mrs. Benson: Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

Mrs. Read: He certainly showed what he thought about me.

Crowd: *'Twas on a Saturday morning
Just as the day was dawning
The hangman took a walk with James
And stood him on the trap;
The story's end we now must tell,
The noose jerked tight and down he fell
And all because of what he did
That day in Prittlewell.*

*'Twas on a Sunday morning
The preacher gave this warning
With finger wagging and an air
Of utmost gravity -*

Preacher: *Who knows what future lies in wait?
And you could share poor Florrie's fate.
If you are lured by lovers
Offering whelks upon a plate.*

Finale - (*Sung by ALL after a walk down*).

[Tune - **MILLER OF DEE**]

*In Stepney town there lived a man,
A man with children eight,
On Southend pier he took the air
And there he met his fate.
From life to death by hangman's rope
This tale we tell you all,
And maidens fair, pray hear our words
If you in love should fall.
So maidens fair, pray heed our words
If you in love should fall.*

CURTAIN