

Title (up to 20 words) - The Balancing Act

Strapline (up to 40 words) - Famous detectives Louis Campbell and Aliester Lovell receive a telegram from an unknown sender informing them of a murder which will happen in the Travelling Circus in a few hours. They set out to stop the murder from happening and catch this murderer.

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) -

Louis fumbled with the parchment clumsily, tearing it after a long struggle.

“What is it?” stated Aliester, placing his steaming cup of tea on his spotless desk and dabbing his lips with a napkin.

“There’s going to be a murder,” said Louis, his eyes glinting with danger. “In the circus. Tonight.”

“The famous travelling circus we’ve been hearing about all around London for the past month?” Aliester raised a brow as Louis nodded. “Who sent it?”

“No name,” said Louis, turning the envelope.

A deafening screech resonated from the chair scraping along the ground as Aliester stood up and reached for his scarf and top hat.

“We must leave immediately.”

Louis slipped his coat on and followed Aliester out of their shared office and into the cold, humid air of London.

It didn’t take them long to hop into a hansom and arrive at the travelling circus’ large tent and camp.

Nobles, aristocrats, dukes, and earls all huddled round the entrance, waiting for their tickets to get stamped and to weave themselves inside the grand tent. Louis noticed a few urchins and street kids sneak inside to have a little peek at the wondrous event.

Aliester pulled Louis along and they approached the tent from the back door. As soon as they got close, they were stopped by a large man in a colourful clown costume holding a box full of equipment and vibrant costumes.

“Sorry, only members of the circus team are allowed past this point,” said the clown, scratching the heavy makeup on his cheek.

Aliester dug into his breast pocket and produced a small card with neat handwriting.

He handed it to the clown. “Aliester Lovell. This is Louis Campbell. We’re detectives. Please let us through.”

The clown chewed his lip but before he could speak, a loud voice emerged from one of the smaller tents behind them.

“Blimey. What are detectives as great as you doing here?” A plump man with a perfectly curled moustache appeared, an attractive dark-skinned girl behind him along with a pair in matching, animated magician clothing.

Aliester introduced himself once more and explained the situation.

“A murder? Oh, that is most creative, gentlemen. However, this is the travelling circus. Nothing stops us from performing and giving our best, right team?” said the round man, who appeared to be the owner of the circus, Edgar Ford.

Louis shook his head. “We’re dealing with a dangerous murderer here, Mr Ford. We cannot let the Circus continue. Someone will be killed tonight unless we stop it.”

Ford let out a hearty laugh. “Young man. I’ve had more than enough experience in this field.” He stopped laughing and rubbed his palms together. “The nobles are expecting a show. We cannot disappoint them. Now if you please. We are extremely busy. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

And with that, he disappeared, the clown following him.

“Don’t tell me you actually believe that,” said the man wearing the ridiculous magician outfit.

“Detectives these days,” said the woman, dressed exactly like her male counterpart as she rolled her eyes.

The dark-skinned girl gave the detectives a sympathetic smile. “Sorry about that. Everyone’s nervous and on edge. We’re about to be on stage. I hope you can forgive them.”

“No, it’s fine,” said Aliester with a cough whilst Louis gritted his teeth next to him in frustration.

“I’m Nora Devvy by the way. Catch me after the show. I’ll help you look around.” She waved at them as she disappeared into her tent.

“I can’t believe it!” spat Louis. “These nobles are taking it too far. This class system is bull—”

“Louis.” The stern voice of Aliester rang through his ears. “Don’t lose your cool. We’re detectives, remember. If we aren’t allowed to do something...”

“We do it without getting caught,” finished Louis, his face relaxing and a smirk appearing.

It was quite easy to shuffle around and look for clues once the show began as no one was paying too much attention. The two detectives slithered around like sneaky lizards, sniffing out any hints.

But to no avail.

“Maybe we were tricked,” said Louis, leaning back in his chair and letting out a sigh of exhaustion.

Aliester clicked his tongue. “We must be missing something.”

Louis’ eyes trail up to the tightrope. “Look. It’s that girl Nora.”

The whole crowd watched in awe, clapping and cheering, as she balanced her body on the thin rope and traversed from one end to another. Once her

performance culminated, the crowd demanded she make another appearance. With her cheeks dusted pink, Nora rushed up the ladder to her place once again.

The lights went out.

A chorus of vexed expressions floated around.

Louis turned to Aliester, their faces pale despite the absolute darkness.

Their chairs scraped along the ground as they rushed, as fast as they could, through the darkness and towards the altar.

“This must be it,” shouted Louis. Aliester didn’t reply.

The lights illuminated the tent gradually. A few sighs of relief here and there from the crowd.

Then screams.

Blood-curdling, hair-raising screams.

Aliester and Louis' eyes widened, and cheeks hallowed. Their jaws hung at the scene.

Nora, the merry, cute tight-rope balancer was tied to the rope she dearly loved. She hung from the middle of the rope, at equal distance from both ends. Splashes of blood trickled down her head and onto the ground below. The rope was tied fiercely around her pretty, jewelled neck as her body swayed in the London breeze of 1888.

A bloody sight indeed.

“Get the police!” shouted Louis at the stunned circus performers.

“And nobody leave!” yelled Aliester. “The murderer is still with us.”

The performers clumsily stumbled about; horror embedded in their faces.

Louis turned to Aliester.

“No one is allowed on or backstage except for the staff and performers,” said Aliester, reading his partner’s mind.

“Which means...” said Louis, his gaze flickering from the bloody Nora to the terrified staff.

“It’s one of them,” finished Aliester.