

The Ballroom Murder

The dancefloor shooting
that shocked Australia

LEIGH STRAW



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Prologue: 'Flash of fire'

They came from across the city, descending onto the grounds of Government House for the annual St John of God Hospital Ball on 26 August 1925. Some guests were in fancy dress, others in more formal attire. The day had hinted at the coming of spring with an eighteen-degree high but a coolness had descended on the evening. There was plenty of merriment as Sergeant William Brodie watched guests turning up from his vantage point at the bottom of the entrance to Government House. Brodie wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary. Perth was more like a large country town, and the Government House job seemed pretty straightforward for a seasoned police officer like Brodie. There would probably be some drunken antics and maybe he would need to provide a gentle nudge later in the evening to guests who wanted an all-nighter. He had already alerted the younger officers to be on watch for this. All the same, he was not taking the evening's job lightly. Government House was the official residence of Western Australia's governor and there were a number of officers from the surrounding police stations working the late shift to bolster police numbers at the ball. Sergeant Brodie had positioned police officers at entry and exit points around the building and inside near the ballroom to emphasise the police presence. Officers included Constable John Wood, who was outside the ballroom with a good view of exit points. Constable Alfred George Timms, from Highgate

Hill Police Station, was keeping an eye out at the foot of the staircase at the back balcony.

As a city emerged around it, Government House still recalled its colonial past. It was a two-storey building that had been built in the middle of the nineteenth century in the Jacobean revival style. It had been renovated in the 1890s to include a ballroom and, since then, the mansion featured in major social events. The St John of God Ball was a favourite on the local calendar.

Guests arrived from the St Georges Terrace main entrance and followed the path bordered by expansive gardens which, to the right, led over to Stirling Gardens at the front of the Supreme Court building. Government House, with its red-orange brick, paler trim and distinctive turrets, was majestic, set against a developing modern city.

At half past eight, while guests came and went from the building, music floating out from open doors, Sergeant Brodie watched two young women arrive. Dressed in pantomime outfits, laughing and pulling each other along, they were obviously looking forward to an evening of fun. Brodie switched his attention back to canvassing the building once more.

In the coming hours and days ahead, Sergeant Brodie would wonder if there was anything he had missed about these two young women, and if there was anything he could have done to prevent the tragedy that would unfold in the early hours of the morning.

Twenty-year-old Audrey Jacob was dressed as the operatic male character Pierrot, matched to her friend Annie Humphries' Pierrette outfit. In pantomime, theatre, opera and ballet, Pierrot is the naïve, unhappy clown—pining for the love of Clementine—but these two young women were merry and excited. They hurried inside the grand old building, passing by other guests walking down the hallway towards the ballroom. This was an expansive space, with an impressive arched ceiling and colonnaded balconies on two levels. The orchestra was already playing up one end, and Audrey and Annie began twirling each other in circles, caught up in their own world.

Audrey Jacob enjoyed the first hour of the ball, dancing and chatting with her friend, but her mood changed when she noticed a young man dancing nearby, and grabbed Annie's arm.

'Do you see him?' Audrey asked, pointing over and across the dancefloor.

It was Audrey's former fiancé, Cyril Gidley. He looked carefree and cheery, dancing and relishing the company of a number of young women.

'Just ignore him, Audrey,' Annie told her friend, but Audrey had lost interest in dancing. Annie convinced her to get some supper and it was there that they met another male guest and chatted over some food. Audrey seemed happy once again as the songs continued and Annie headed back to the dancefloor with their supper guest. The thirteenth song of the evening began: Gladys Moncrieff's popular hit from the year before, 'Follow Yvette'. Moncrieff was heralded as 'Australia's Queen of Song' and the mood on the dancefloor echoed this. But as Annie danced with her partner, Audrey left the dance area, solemn and withdrawn.

When the song ended, Annie went to find her friend. She hoped to see her in the hallway but grew increasingly worried when she didn't find her there. Nor was she in the cloakroom. Annie checked all the main areas but there was no sign of Audrey. Frantic now, she hurried back to the dancefloor but was pulled into a dance with another man. Circling around the ballroom, she looked for Audrey, hoping she was dancing with someone else.

Minutes later, Annie saw Audrey. She had discarded her fancy dress and was now wearing a stunning blue evening dress. Before they could talk, another man came along and whisked Annie away to dance. Distracted now by concerns for her friend and the time—it was one in the morning—Annie was anxious to leave. She lived a good thirty minutes away in Fremantle, unlike Audrey who had an apartment in the city. Annie caught sight of her friend again, this time up on one of the balconies. She was looking down over the ballroom. Looking for Cyril, thought Annie. She rushed up the staircase to Audrey.

'I need to leave and get my things from your room,' Annie told Audrey, hoping her friend might also want to leave the ball.

Audrey did not take her eyes off the dancefloor but told her friend where she would find the key to her room, back at Surrey Chambers. She then said she was going to talk to Cyril. Annie wondered if that was

such a good idea but she doubted she could convince Audrey otherwise.

On her way out, Annie passed by the lounge and it was there that she saw Cyril with a female companion.

'Miss Jacob would like to speak to you,' she told him, pointing up to the balcony where Audrey was standing.

Cyril looked up, as did his dance partner.

'I'll go and see her soon,' he said.

From Government House, Annie walked the short distance to Surrey Chambers where Audrey had recently moved. This was a large building on the corner of St Georges Terrace and Howard Street, three blocks from Government House, and some of its rooms were let out to renters. Once in Audrey's room, Annie changed out of her costume for the ride home on public transport. She was optimistic she could still make the last charabanc to Fremantle.

Back at Government House, Audrey was waiting for Cyril to come and see her but he had decided instead to head back out onto the dancefloor with his partner. Maude Mitchell was a beautiful young woman who appeared to be enjoying Cyril's company very much indeed. As they laughed and danced their way through another song, Audrey descended the stairs from the balcony and walked across the ballroom floor towards Cyril.

No one saw the revolver she was holding as she wound through the throng. She stopped six feet away from him. The gun was now pointed at Cyril.

Then someone heard a 'flash of fire'. Guests close by screamed. The dancing stopped. So did the orchestra.

One man rushed to help. Perth doctor Sydney O'Neill knew the next few seconds were vital. He looked for others to help and soon there was a small crowd around Cyril.

Newspaper editor Victor Courtney was nearby too. He and his business partner, John Joseph Simons, had turned the *Mirror* into a popular local newspaper which delighted in titillating its readers with sensational headlines about scandals, particularly divorce cases. Courtney would find himself playing an instrumental part in the drama that was about to grip his city.

PROLOGUE: 'FLASH OF FIRE'

Hearing the crack, and the cries of the guests, Sergeant Brodie and other officers ran across the dancefloor from all directions. Their first actions were to secure the scene and check on the man lying on the floor. Dr O'Neill motioned for them to take the victim to the cloakroom. There, in the genteel surrounds of Government House, just minutes later, Cyril Gidley died.

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Audrey Jacob was driven from Government House to the police lock-up a few blocks away. Shortly after, a lawyer was engaged to represent her, and the police began their investigation into the murder of Cyril Gidley. Alone in her cell, Audrey waited to see what daylight would bring. Across the city, and down by the port, Audrey's family slept through the rest of the night not knowing that their lives would never be the same again.

The Jacob family lived at 592 High Street, Fremantle but they had moved around a fair bit since Edward and Jessie were married in Perth in 1902. They were both from Victoria—Edward was born in Collingwood in 1871 and Jessie was born in Hotham in 1878—but had met in Western Australia. Their first child, Rupert, was born in Victoria Park in 1903 before Audrey came along two years later on 9 February 1905. Her middle name, Campbell, was her grandmother's maiden name. Ann (née Campbell) and her husband, Colin Junner, had emigrated from Cromarty in the Scottish Highlands to Victoria in 1871 with Jessie's three elder siblings. Audrey would identify most with this Scottish heritage.

Edward and Jessie moved their young family to Collie in the Wellington District before another son, Clifton, was born in 1907. Three more children were born in this district—Keith (1909), Enid (1910) and Verna (1912)—before the Jacob family moved again, this

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time to Dundas, a town near Norseman in the Goldfields–Esperance region. The last two Jacob children were born there, Vivienne in 1916 and Dudley in 1919. Within three years, they were back in the city, at South Fremantle and then at the High Street house. The family moved with Edward's work as a clerk of courts. The regional appointments gave him more experience for an ongoing city position.

In the early 1920s, Fremantle became their long-term home. It was a thriving port town known for its shipping, transport, wharves and unions—a rough-diamond kind of a place. If you were going to have a scrape somewhere, it was probably going to be down in Fremantle. The locals stuck fast to one another and viewed visitors with some suspicion, especially if they came from Perth. Western Australia's two main centres had developed distinct characters over the decades. Perth was a 'shabby-gentee' place, whereas Fremantle was working-class and proud of this distinction. It didn't stop the press in Perth calling out Fremantle as a port of 'Beastly Backyards and Stinking Slums' and the kind of place where you could find a 'brothel between two churches'. And, as it turned out, you could; that was all part of its rugged charm.

Fremantle was a poorer part of the metropolitan area, with a greater concentration of small cottages and boarding houses in the inner streets. The wealthier favoured the riverside streets of North Fremantle and parts of East Fremantle along the Inner Harbour. South Fremantle came to be known as home to 'the racehorse and the battler', with limestone and wooden cottages also having stables out the back.

It could also be a rough, criminal place. Thieving gangs centred their attentions on the shipping sheds and yards, and the wharves provided dishonest lumpers with opportunities to steal items from cargo arriving regularly in the port. Police and Customs raids on houses in North Fremantle late in December 1902 failed to turn up six cases of tobacco stolen from the 'B' sheds at Victoria Quay.

But the harbour was not the only dodgy part of town. People were susceptible to attacks in alleys and laneways. In April 1924, the head of the Fremantle Criminal Investigation Branch expressed his concern in court that the absence of lights in the laneways behind businesses was 'an inducement to boys to embark upon careers of

crime'. Speaking at the trial of three boys charged with stealing from Fremantle shops, he declared unlit lanes provided a cover of darkness for raids of shops, during what the paper termed a recent 'epidemic of thieving' in the port town.

Pakenham, Leake, Bannister and Market streets all featured regularly in criminal cases being reported in the newspapers. In an effort to deal with the problem of prostitution and houses of 'disreputable character', police raided a number of houses over the course of a weekend in May 1903. Houses in Norfolk, Arundel, Pakenham and Bannister streets were targeted and the police were commended in court soon after for trying to 'rid the town of its undesirable characters'.

But as rough and ready as it was, Fremantle was also a cosmopolitan place, flourishing from the gold rushes of the 1890s and the opening of the port soon after. An influx of immigrants and seamen from around the world clambered ashore in Fremantle. They came from China, Japan, Sweden, Germany, Britain and America, and regularly disembarked at Fremantle, enjoying the town's entertainments or taking the first steps towards a new life. Italians took to fishing in Fremantle and set up market gardens while other European food producers, many of them from Greece, established businesses along Market Street and South Terrace. Local workers and new arrivals with a thirst for beer also brought about the building of new pubs as a means to keep up with a rising clientele. By the 1920s, the P&O, National and Fremantle hotels were also bringing more young people into the port town.



The port captured the creative interest of a young Audrey Jacob. The views along the wharf and over the water were ideal for watercolours or acrylics, though both could be expensive and beyond what her parents could buy her. From her house on High Street she could catch a tram into Fremantle and wander along Phillimore Street and down to the port. The comings and goings of the place were fascinating: people arriving, others leaving, and always something happening.

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Perhaps it was ingrained in her, this fascination with people moving about, travelling, arriving somewhere new. She had already moved several times in her young life and her grandparents were immigrants.

Audrey also experimented with self-portraits and, apparently, they were very good, lauded by those who saw her as gifted. This artistic ability may have come from her grandfather. Colin Junner was a painter before he emigrated to Australia, albeit a painter of buildings, houses, fences and properties—nonetheless, it took a creative eye to consider colours, texture and broader property appeal.

Edward Jacob was not supportive of his daughter's ambitions. He objected to Audrey wanting to become a professional artist. It was hardly going to pay the bills and, as one of the older children, it was on Audrey to help out at home with the cost of living. But it was the jaunts into town with friends which took Audrey into Fremantle's social life and worried her family more.

It was a fine time to be a young woman. This was the Roaring Twenties, which saw the ascent of the modern young woman, or 'flapper', as she came to be known. The flapper had been around since the late-nineteenth century but it was the post-World War One world which made this version of the modern woman famous. The tragedy and loss of war on a world scale left people looking to a new decade where they could try to overcome the burdens of that recent past. Young people in particular were hopeful for a better future free of war. Flappers wanted to break from the constraints of the past and push the boundaries of social expectations of femininity. They had already begun this process during the war, with more women entering into work in the vacuum created by men enlisting.

Flappers were not passive women, defining themselves by sexual purity and high morals. They were 'trouble' and enjoyed attention, living beyond convention. They usually started out at sixteen or seventeen years of age and were determined to stand out in society, especially in public. They smoked, danced late into the evening in clubs and at house parties, and were the cause of great concern in conservative circles. They defied conventions to embrace independent lifestyles.

Flappers experimented with colours and designs in their clothing,

basking in youthful androgyny. The boyish shaping of dresses, with dropped waists to create straight contours, flattened the chest and hid hips. Dances of the time, many a variation on the Charleston, were best demonstrated in short, light dresses with no sleeves so that young women could move their arms more freely. The idea, even in the way they dressed and danced, was to proclaim that women could have their own identities.

Flappers found one of their greatest champions in the works of American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's early works—*The Beautiful and Damned*, *This Side of Paradise* and *Flappers and Philosophers*—transformed the flapper into a literary symbol for the lost generation of the 1920s. She was powerful, complex and contradictory. Fitzgerald modelled the flapper on his young, exuberant and unconventional wife, Zelda, and gave young women an icon for the era they could relate to. And his works were being read and talked about in Perth and Fremantle, on the other side of the world.

Not everyone was keen to see this new modern woman out in public. The *Fremantle Advertiser* raised questions in January 1924 about 'unprotected' young girls being 'allowed to frequent the streets late at night' and asked for a curfew. Of particular concern were the sailors meeting the interests of the young women:

In a port of this size, the danger is most acute. Sailors of a certain class, particularly those of different nationalities, are apt to judge by appearances. Girls parading the streets without proper protection are immediately classed by them as belonging to the lowest strata of society, and treated accordingly. The girls in the beginning, do not realise this aspect. They are eager for flattering attention, and with too much liberty, seek it in dangerous places. If the parents will not realise the seriousness of the position, the matter will soon be taken out of their hands.

[...] Somebody has suggested a "Curfew Bell" and an attendant patrol. It would seem to be in imminent need. In about a month, there will be an influx of British sailors to Fremantle, and while everybody will delight

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in welcoming them, the lure of uniforms has always a most seductive effect upon many of our girls. The need for supervision will be doubled, and while we desire our hospitality to be of the highest grade, it must be our aim to see that it is in no way violated.

It was a common sight for young Fremantle women to be seen down at the port mingling with men from the ships, and the local press were particularly harsh about their antics:

When the Belgian barque which is now in the harbor leaves port, there will be much heartrending amongst the local flappers. Put a naval uniform on a good-looking monkey, and one would have the same results.

Audrey Jacob was a Fremantle flapper who enjoyed spending her spare time down at the port trying to attract the interests of the men working on the ships. She wasn't alone. Her friends were there too, vying for attention and entranced by the uniforms and worldly experience. Audrey wore her hair short, her lips red with lipstick and fashioned herself in the flapper fashions of the day, in stark contrast to the more conservative Edwardian look of her mother's youth. But Audrey was classically beautiful too and this was obvious even when dressed in the flapper fashions.

Audrey was young and wanted more independence. The men on the ships coming and going from Fremantle port seemed to promise adventure. Onboard for visits to the men, she could be appreciated for her beauty and artistic talents. There was always the hope of a private date with a captain who might whisk her off to some faraway, exotic place.



Cyril Gidley was twenty-three when he arrived in Western Australia in 1923. He was a charismatic, good-looking young Englishman who had

left Grimsby to work as a ship's engineer. His father, Joseph, worked as a fish merchant's clerk while Cyril and his brother and sister grew up, but was later said to have been a ship owner. Joseph and Florence had been keen for their son Cyril to pick up regular work. They hoped working as an engineer on ships would keep him busy and out of trouble. He was young, single and had a keen sense of adventure at a time when adventuring seemed possible again. It was the 1920s, after all.

Cyril's uncle Herbert lived in Newcastle, New South Wales but Cyril decided to head to Western Australia. He arrived in Bunbury, in the state's south, in April 1923, and worked on the steamer *Newquay* before he took ill shortly after. He relocated to Fremantle, much to the dismay of a young woman, with whom he had taken up. In Fremantle, he picked up work as an engineer on the motor ship *Kangaroo*, which travelled to Singapore every six weeks. Cyril enjoyed the company of a small group of close friends while he was in Fremantle, some with connections back in England, and others who worked with him on the ship.

There were rumours that Cyril had been kicked out of home in England, told by his parents that he could not return for five years until he had a steady job and turned his life around. The press would also circulate stories that Cyril had apparently brought some disgrace to his wealthy family, especially his father as a retired ship owner.

Cyril had a bit of form for causing a stir. Around April 1924, he had an argument on ship with another crew member. As the pair scuffled and fought, Cyril was hit in the stomach with a sledgehammer. He was taken to Bunbury Hospital where he was stitched up and told to take time off work. This was when he started seeing a young woman in town but their engagement was soon over. By the later winter months of 1924, Cyril was settling into life in Fremantle. His friend, a customs officer by the name of William Vincent Murphy, offered him a room in his house just outside Fremantle. The pair struck up a friendship and William's wife, Violet, also came to know Cyril well.

Free from his parents' supervision in England, and travelling the world, Cyril Gidley enjoyed his freedom. He was stylish, often seen with a cigarette held in a smiling mouth poised to impress the young ladies in the port city. His features were soft and yet his eyes were

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intense. He stood out in the crowd, and it was in August of 1924 that he caught the eye of Audrey Jacob.

Over the course of that winter, Audrey and Cyril became friends and then started dating. They met on occasion at Cyril's friends' house where he stayed while on leave from the ship. Violet and William Murphy lived in Palmyra, not far from Audrey's home, but with enough distance that the young lovers would not be caught out. Audrey's parents were not keen on her meeting men from the ships down at the port. She also knew that someone who regularly spent weeks away would not necessarily meet her parents' approval. Especially her father.

As they wandered down by the port and around the streets, Cyril talked to Audrey about his family back in England and how he was looking to make a new start. Audrey mentioned her love of art and how she wanted to be a professional painter. To anyone who saw them in the early days of their relationship, it looked as if Audrey and Cyril were young and in love.

But before too long, cracks would start to show.