

RESURRECTING BOBBY

by

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Chapter 1

Too bad about old Sausages; I was fond of that dog. He had character.

I got him off a ratting cove down Bermondsey way, cheap for the price of a pint. He was only going to knock old Sausages on the head anyhow on account of he wouldn't go. Some dogs just won't - no killer instinct nor no taste for it. That was old Sausages, he preferred his grub hot, greasy and out of a frying pan, which is why I called him Sausages. Do anything for a snag, he would.

Not much for ratting, but good company all the same. Funny-looking bugger with his hair all sticking out, like he'd read a Penny Blood and got the frighteners on. Looked a bit like a sausage and all, which gave me a chuckle. All body, stubby little legs and only a morsel of a head. He shared my scran and kept me warm some nights.

Facey never took to him much. Then again Facey doesn't take to anyone much. 'Look after number one', says Facey. Then he shoots me his look and says, 'and maybe number two. But never no more 'an that, as you well know, Sammy Boy, since two is company but three is one too many a mouth.' That's Facey for you.

I suppose Facey always reckoned Sausages was one too many a mouth and good for nothing but he was my pal. So, I was sorry when they hanged him. But they had him bang to rights, the Kent Street lot. One of them youngsters had come by a few rashers in a nice parcel when Sausages caught the scent of it. He could move when he wanted to all right. Before you could say 'knife' Sausages had them rashers in his teeth and was off. They cornered him down by the canal, gammon gone, and not even a scrap of greasy newspaper left from the wrappings. Well, of course, after a big dinner like that Sausages was no trouble to catch. He always did like people. Too trusting by half.

Fair play, they gave him a proper trial, with evidence called and a beak appointed and all the trimmings. One of them youngsters even came on for the defence. But poor old Sausages never stood a chance, what with him all trussed up, shame-faced and whimpering every time the beak asked him why he done the crime.

They hanged him from one of them new lampposts on the canal. And I'm sorry for it but you can't go round stealing people's dinners, even if you are the kind of ratter what prefers a fry-up.

We buried Sausages this afternoon at the brick fields over Haggerston way and Facey said some words, which I'm appreciative for: 'Sausages. You and me were never friends. But Sammy liked you right enough, so I suppose that's something.' Or some such.

That shows class in my book.

Chapter 2

‘Now, Sammy Boy, pocket that twine,’ orders Facey. ‘waste no time on them that ain’t a coming back, for there ain’t no profit in it. You of all people should know that.’

Woolgathering. That’s what I’m doing. Took me a moment to realise I was running old Sausages’ string through my fingers. Should have kept him on that lead a bit more often. If I had of done he’d still be above ground.

‘Make a hole in that,’ Facey aims a meaty finger at my glass of shrub. ‘Be proper dark soon.’

I ram the twine back into the long greasy inner pocket of my overcoat where I feel the cold touch of the short iron crowbar. In my other pocket I sense the reassuring weight of its business partner, the broad chisel, along with a small tin box of freshly made up mortar. I have a good stout rope triple-wrapped around my waist. These are the tools of our trade. Mine, at any rate. Facey keeps other articles about his person, which carry the greater risk should we be searched by the Crushers.

Of a sudden Facey quivers like Sausages used to when he smelled viands cooking in the pan. Facey misses nothing.

‘Now then, Mrs Pigeon,’ he bellows over the noisy throng, ‘a little something to warm the cockles.’

Though Mrs Pigeon is only four feet and some few inches, Facey has been quick to spot the small black pudding of a figure across the busy wine vault crammed with bodies.

The woman trundles over to us like a skittle ball. ‘Oooh, Mr Facey, you’re a sight for sore eyes. I’m no tippler as all hereabouts can testify, but just this once I will take bracer of something to keep the chill from me bones.’

‘Geneva?’

‘Well, gents, unaccustomed to spirituous liquors as I am, but seeing as how the melancholia must needs be kept at bay, I’ll break the habit of a lifetime and join you in a glass of something reviving. Geneva, just as you say, Mr Facey.’

Facey raps a coin on the counter to summon Fearon. Though there are plenty of customers in the vicinity who, in all honesty, have a prior claim to the man’s attention, Facey is not a man to be ignored or kept waiting. ‘A glass of your tuppenny best, Mr Fearon. None of your sulphuric adulterations, if you please.’

‘Don’t be coming down on a man for making a living, Mr Facey. There’s plenty as prefers their concoction that way.’ Fearon expertly twists the stopcock of a small black barrel to release a crystal stream into his less than crystal receptacle.

Facey slaps his two coppers on the counter in exchange for the brimful beaker of gin.

He drops a shilling from under his palm into the beaker before extending it to Mrs Pigeon, ‘Well, Mrs Pigeon. This is, as you say, the good spirit what drives away the bad spirits of that melancholia, which you was just now mentioning. And if anyone is more deserving of the contents of this glass, I can’t think of them.’

She reaches for it with a trembling hand, Facey dangles it just out of her reach.

‘But first we need to know on what grounds these melancholic spirits have arisen and on account of who?’

‘Well, my dear Mr Facey, didn’t my aunt Pikelet get carried off with an ague just two days previous and isn’t she in the ground already this day. Who is to know the will of God in this wicked world?’

‘Crepe?’

‘Certainly, Mr Facey, a quantity of black crepe has been worn today in respect of my great aunt Pikelet, God rest her.’

Crepe is cant for the aged ones, denoting wrinkles. If the deceased party is young, Mrs Pigeon knows to say silk. Should some nosey party happen to stick his great flappers where they’re not wanted he would rate the conversation quite innocent, concerning only mourning garb.

Facey grimaces. There’s not so much profit in the old ‘uns. Our customers like the merchandise young, smooth and in good health, notwithstanding they’re dead, of course. Silk is what we’d prefer to hear.

‘Age catches up with us all.’ Mrs Pigeon knuckles her eyes. ‘But I do take solace in the notion that my dear aunt Pieclott, is now gathered up and safe and sound in the arms of our Lord, having first been laid to rest most beautiful, inside the Shoreditch. God bless ‘er.’

Shit.

This is not good. Mrs Pigeon is telling us that the best she’s got is an oldster inside St Leonard’s rather than outside in the churchyard. Inside is always more risky. Takes longer on account of we’ve got to break in first.

I wait and see what Facey decides.

He allows Mrs Pigeon her glass of Geneva at any rate.

‘I thank you, gents. There’s not many that understand what it is on the nerves to be out there day in and day out, observin’ all them aspects of humanity put into the

ground. It do make you feel a touch of maudlin. It do, Mr Facey. And that's all I got for you today, ' she shrugs. 'Middlin' weather, you see, gents. T'ain't sufficient hot for the murdering miasmas of summer nor chill enough for them winter killing frosts what bring on the deadly croup.'

'Well, you just take a bracer, Mrs Pigeon and no one can say you han't earned it.'

Facey tips me the wink.

Fuck.

He wants to do it. I hate these churchy pulls.

Facey summons us closer. As we huddle, surrounding drinkers shuffle back a ways, allowing us a private word or two. There's due respect here when business is being discussed.

'The late Ma Pieclott, you say?'

'Some'at as like. Must of popped her clogs pretty sharp as they ain't yet had time to carve a name into the memorial stone. But you'll feature it, never fear. Blank slab, elm coffin.' Mrs Pigeon tosses off the gin in one and gives us a wink.

'Did you just drink off your perquisite, my love?' asks Facey, grinning.

'Fuck, I did an' all. I've gone an' dranked that shillin' what you slipped into my glass', ' belches Mrs Pigeon by way of reply. 'The specie is already repeatin' on me. I'm tasting the King's silver here.'

'Well then, Mrs Pigeon, you must go forth and meet the world arsey-versey.'

'How so, Mr Facey?'

'Why, you must shit before you can eat and not t'other way round.'

I snort my drink. Facey is not what you might call a wit under normal circumstances so this squib is something of a triumph for him. It shows he's in a good mood, which is always welcome.

Mrs Pigeon is not amused. She scowls. 'Funny, Mr Facey, funny. I hear there's an opening for a warm-up man over at the Troc, which a man of your gifts might comfortably fill.'

Mrs Pigeon freezes. She's overstepped and knows it. Facey's upper lip is stretched tight across his front teeth. Not a pretty sight. Facey can dish it out all right but is never comfortable as the butt of another's wit. I do take liberties myself but Facey and I have known each other since we were snotty street arabs in Portsmouth.

'Now, now, Mr Facey, don't take offence at an old woman's poor attempt at fun. You've paid me well in both liquor and specie, even though I've dranked the money by mistake, it will keep, and I will have it to spend tomorrow, bowels and the Lord permitting. Like the goose what laid a golden guinea, I daresay. Only silver, and a shillin' in this case.'

Facey's lip relaxes. A moist, rumbling chuckle escapes from deep inside his chest. He produces another couple of coppers for Mrs Pigeon. 'Pieclott then?'

'Pieclott, Piecrust, something of that order. Don't signify really. Won't be of no help. Like I said, the slab were blank as yet.'

Facey grins, 'Remember what old Pounds used to say, Sammy boy. Life is but a blank slate what is waiting for you to write something worthy on it. Or words to that effect.'

'Or words to that effect,' I murmur. Actually, what Pounds used to say was this: 'Life is but a blank page, waiting for you to fill it with your dreams.' Still does as

a matter of fact. But I'm not about to bandy words with Facey. Doesn't like me spending time with John Pounds. Never did.

Facey casts around for Michael Shields. The Four Feathers is Shields' second home of an evening and, sure enough, we clock his dial over by the fireplace, yarning with Jack Stirabout, a pudding maker of dubious reputation. Facey tips him the wink. Shields nods and slips away. Jack Stirabout turns and warms his bum, but really he's watching us, hooded eyes, black as printer's ink, over his leather mug.

'Best have the pins then,' announces Facey, rubbing his hands. Facey keeps a set of pins at the Feathers and another at the Fortunes of War up Smithfield way.

He raps a penny on the counter, 'Penny for our pins, Mr Fearon.'

Fearon reaches under the counter and hands over two stout rolling pins. 'No rest for the wicked then, Mr Facey.' He pockets the penny.

Facey slips the pins into specially sewn pockets down the inside of each trouser leg. 'The pastry won't make itself overnight, Mr Fearon. And if Sammy and me are not there to do it, there's many will go hungry without their breakfast bite tomorrow morning.'

'You're a pair of shire horses, Mr Facey: an example to us all. If every man adopted suchlike virtues of honest labour the world would a better place. Truly it would.' This is rich, coming from Fearon, whose establishment, The Four Feathers, is famous for accommodating pretty well every vice known to mankind.

Facey beams. The pins are an absolute stroke, performing as they do no fewer than three different functions. A legacy of Facey's less than glorious naval service, they are, in fact, belaying pins: teak, and hard as iron. Facey has simply carved a handle on the other end of each. In consequence, there are some few of our acquaintance who still believe us to be relatively honest bakers, a trade which

accounts for our odd hours. Some nights, we even pat our hair and faces down with a little flour to gild the lily. In reality the pins are for slabwork. And they make a handy pair cudgels should we have to resort to brute physicality, which on occasion, we do.

By the time we exit the Feathers, Shields is ready outside with his handcart. He nods once and settles his chin into the turned up collars of his overcoat though the night is barely chill.

We set off at a brisk pace, staggering a little up Shoreditch High Street. As yet we are a perfectly reputable trio of working men on the way home after a hard day on the market. From our unsteady gait it might appear that we have overindulged somewhat in the spirituous liquors. We bob and weave across the pavement taking care to avoid exposing ourselves to the glare of the gas lamps, which have lately sprouted here, all the while keeping a wary eye out for the Crushers.

We slip down Cock Lane, which, mercifully, is as dark as a Gypsy's curse. Before us is the low wall surmounted by a high railing enclosing St Leonard's churchyard: The Shoreditch.

Facey is up and over the spiked iron railings before you can blink twice. To his credit he has never lost the strength and flexibility he developed on the old Billy Ruffian with all that climbing about in the rigging, even if he did run in the end.

I sling my rope over the railings while Facey hauls me up like a mackerel on a line. Behind us Shields waits in the lane, merging with the black mass of his cart.

I land feet-first in the churchyard and hunch in the cover of a nearby tombstone as Facey creeps towards the church.

Within minutes he's back, 'Skelly-keys won't open the side-door,' he whispers. Then he's off again into the night.

I kick my heels against the stone for what seems like an age, so long that I'm actually beginning to see in the dark. I can make out the words cut into the stone I'm hunched against: Take ye heed, watch and pray for ye know not when the time is, 1787. In Memory of Mr John Onely who died march 24th 1777. Aged 36 years.

I'm still considering this sage advice when finally Facey reappears. 'I've had to cut the padlock on the lobby door. It's done, but the snatch will need to be disguised.'

I follow him up a set of stairs on the south side of the church where there's a side door into a lobby of some kind. We enter, carefully closing the door behind us. Though it's blacker than the Earl of Hell's riding boots in here, I can hear him fiddling with a heavy latch. There's a breath of stale, frozen air as he opens the side door into the church.

I remain in the ante-room, carefully casting about in the dark. By touch alone I discover a cloth-covered table, which I explore. My scuttling fingers encounter a glass object; a bottle or decanter of communion wine by my reckoning. I take a pull. Good fortified red wine. I take another swig and retreat back through the lobby door into the churchyard where I empty the contents onto a mound. I hope the recipient is duly grateful. Though I doubt it. I leave the decanter propped up on whomever's memorial it happens to be. In the morning the empty will be found and, with luck, will account for the broken padlock on the lobby door.

Task complete, I flit back up the stairs, ease through the anteroom, stepping softly as a mouser, and slip silently into the icy church. Light sputters to my left. Facey, holding a stub of candle, which he fits carefully into a small tin shade designed to mask the glare.

Without a word he works his fingers around a blank slab, searching for joints. Finally, he produces a thin blade and sinks it into the soft mortar around the edges. ‘This is the one all right, Sammy.’ He pronounces.

Facey produces a small bottle of vinegar from his coat, which he pours around the edges of the slab. After a minute or so he works his blade back into the mortar, running it to and fro, followed by more vinegar, then more blade. Finally, he looks over, satisfied with his endeavors and hisses. ‘Go on then, Sam. Have at it.’

I widen the gap first with my chisel, taking care not to damage the stone. Next, I heft the short crowbar from my coat, shove it into the edge of the slab and ease my weight onto it. As the slab rises an inch or two Facey slips in a couple of wooden wedges. I push down again. My partner deftly pops in another couple more wedges.

I insert the crowbar a little further. This time there’s enough space for Facey to shove one of the teak rollers under, canting the slab.

I slowly withdraw the crowbar allowing the slab’s weight to settle firmly onto the roller and move to the other side where we begin the process again. Facey inserts his wedges and slips in the second pin. The heavy stone slab is now raised a couple of inches, sitting handsomely on the twin rollers. We give it a push and slide it to one side. It moves like it’s on wheels, exposing the earth floor beneath through the dim glow of the tin lamp.

‘Well?’ I ask.

‘Blank slab. Fresh earth, Sammy boy. Gotta be right.’

Facey scrapes away a thin layer of soil to reveal the pale yellow wood of a coffin lid. It looks brand new. Just to be sure, he removes a long thin flexible rod and jams it through the wood. He withdraws the rod and runs it across his tongue. ‘Elm, new, lined in black cloth,’ he pronounces.

I never know how he does this. Elm, yes, I understand. But I don't see how anyone can taste black cloth, even someone as good as Facey.

It's the work of minutes to dig away the dust and loose earth around the coffin and pass my rope underneath. Facey and I haul it up. He levers the lid with my crowbar and surveys the prize. Sure enough, the coffin is lined with black cloth. Inside, an elderly woman, freshly passed within a day or so. Her waxy countenance further jaundiced by the flickering candlelight.

Our task now is to remove every stitch of clothing. We do this because the legal penalties for theft of property, including shrouds and clothing, far outweigh the penalties for bodysnatching. Facey and I are not thieves. We're better than that. We're Resurrection Men.

We bundle the shift and sundry articles of clothing into the coffin before lowering it back into the hole and replacing the loose earth. Now we roll back the slab, reversing the excavation process. I take a little tin box from my cly and begin to fill the joints with fresh mortar. Finally, to give the impression of age, I dust the edges with a little brown powder from a tiny bag I keep around my neck. Facey gives the slab a quick polish with a soft rag, flicking loose dust from around the joints. It's a fine job, as always, and will stand all but the very closest of inspections. Pity it's only crêpe for our efforts.

The stiffness of rigor has passed, the body is slack and surprisingly heavy. Between us we lug the corpse through the churchyard and drop it over the railings. The carcass slaps to the cobblestones with a wet, meaty sound.

'Tom's,' Facey hisses into the night.

‘That is a fair distance, Mr Facey, sir, and London Bridge is likely still busy even at this time. A fair distance is a fair risk. Five bob is not worth the candle. What say seven?’ comes back at us from the dark.

‘Don’t play with me now, Shields.’

‘Sure as a shilling, I am not playing with you, Mr Facey. But that is many a mile to be carting a object that I would not be able to vouch for. The risk is uncommon severe.’

‘Do not use my name. And do not presume to bargain with me while I am on the other side of an iron railing.’

‘Certainly, I will wait for you at Saint Tom’s but I hope you will take my labours into account when it comes to a reckoning.’

‘I will, Shields, be sure of it.’

Shields creaks away with his burden while Facey and me clamber back over the railings, cut back down Cock Lane and head south towards Norton Folgate. Facey is still simmering with rage. Shields has pushed his luck here. There are only a few destinations for goods such as ours, as Shields well knows. St Thomas’s Hospital is usually first port of call, then St Giles’ and occasionally King’s College School of Anatomy in the Strand. From time to time with an especially young or fresh corpse, we might venture over to the West End to sell direct to the toffs; amateurs or those with private anatomy studios. It is quite wrong of Shields to quibble with us over price while we are at a disadvantage like that and to my mind shows a want of character. At any rate, sooner or later there will be a reckoning and if I’m any judge of Facey’s mood, it will not be to Shields’s advantage.

Facey has still not uttered a word by the time we reach Bishopsgate.

From the shadows of a doorway I spy the gaslight glimmer reflecting off a row of brass buttons. Instantly I cast my arm round Facey's shoulders and stagger, throwing in dry retch or two for good measure.

The Bobby steps out, barring our way. A most imposing figure, he must be well over six feet in his boots, maybe seven if you count the reinforced stovepipe hat. We stand, arms round one another, swaying slightly, playing it lushy as he raises his bulls-eye lantern to better inspect us.

'Now then, men. It is some six hours past the hour of sunset. How do you account for yourselves here in the street at this time?'

'I have already given a good account of myself at the Four Feathers in Shoreditch, sir,' belches Facey thickly.

'How so?'

'I have stood a round or three of good Geneva in the company of honest friends tonight, as many a man can testify.'

'Well then, where do you go now?'

'To our place of work, sir. For we are bakers and must prepare our crusts for the morning pies.'

'I have no doubt you come from consuming spirituous liquors tonight. No doubt on that account, since your breath is sufficient testimony. As to your profession and destination, can you offer proof? If not, I must take you before a Magistrate.'

With that, the Crusher unsheathes his baton.

'For what, cocky?'

'Being abroad after the hour of sunset without a good account as to your purpose. And making riotous assembly.'

‘But there are only two of us here.’ Facey untangles my arm, looks me up and down, cross-eyed and swaying slightly. ‘Or is it three?’

‘Loitering with intent also,’ the Bobby grips my arm and raises his baton. ‘Now, show me the tools you have about your person before I am forced to chastise your accomplice.’

‘A moment, sir, a moment,’ Facey rummages in his long trouser pocket for one of the pins. ‘Here is my rolling pin.’

The Bobby releases my arm and raises the lantern for closer examination.

Facey cracks him a colossal blow across the temple, sending his topper clattering into the gutter. The Bobby releases his grip on me, staggers back a step but somehow remains upright. He flings the lantern at Facey, who is for a moment distracted, and strikes out with his own truncheon catching Facey a solid blow across the left eye. I leap onto the Bobby’s back and manage to get my arms around his throat.

Facey is on his knees, both hands cupping his injured eye. The Bobby bellows and whirls round in an effort to dislodge me. I’m hanging on for dear life, trying to choke the man, but I cannot bring any real pressure to bear on account of the stiff leather stock he wears around his throttle. With one immensely strong hand the Bobby begins to prise my arms open, with the other he reaches for the wooden rattle at his belt. Mercifully, Facey is now back on his feet. He brings the pin hard down on the Peeler’s unprotected crown and I feel the fight leak out of him. We sink to the kerb in a tangle of limbs.

Facey stands over us, pin raised for a killing blow, but I’m in the way.

Instead, Facey lowers the pin, points it at the unconscious Bobby and says, ‘Consider yourself chastised.’

From what I can make out in the gloom, Facey's left eye is a bloody mess, resembling something off a Smithfield butcher's barrow. Though now is not the time for a full investigation.

Together, we set off at the trot down Bishopsgate, slowing to a brisk walk at new London Bridge, which we cross without incident. Shields is already waiting for us at the hospital side entrance in Thomas Street. He nods and hangs back in the shadows on the other side of the road with his cart while we rouse the porter.

The porter knows us and our business here, and is quick to alert Eddie Barber. Though young and not yet a proper surgeon, Barber has considerable status at St Thomas's, being understudy, so to speak, to the famous Mr Green. Eddie is what they call an anatomical dresser, which means his job is to tickle up the bits and pieces ready for the surgeon's work.

I'm fond of young Eddie; he's a decent gent, gives no trouble and a fair price. His appearance though, is somewhat disheveled at this hour, most likely on account of his still being hard at the grindstone. Unlike most folk, who have a healthy respect for, or even fear of the dead, Eddie is what I would call an enthusiast. Without taking a moment to fix his stock or smooth his hair he grabs one of the spare lanterns from the porter's lodge and dashes across the road. He can barely wait to lift the tarpaulin but as he directs the beam over our offering his expression crumples. 'Oh dear. An old 'un. Singularly ancient indeed.'

'She's but a young slip of thing, Eddie. Not three days previous this one was dancing a jig over at the Phoenix. I observed her kicking up a storm with these very eyes, I swear,' objects Facey.

'If so, it can only have been with the left one, Mr Facey, which, if you don't mind me saying, is something of a shambles. I don't like the look of it even in this

Stygian gloom. When our business is concluded here, I will examine it properly if you will let me.'

'I will, sir. And very kind in you it is.'

Eddie grimaces and pinches the flesh of the woman's forearm. 'Sixty-eight, seventy years, if she's a day. Specimens of this antiquity are of little value to us, gentlemen. The veins are thin and weak and difficult to mount. No, I cannot give you much for it.'

'Have a heart, Mr Barber, it has been a long and arduous hoist tonight,' I plead.

Eddie shakes his head. 'I cannot help that, Sammy. What were you hoping for?'

'Twelve guineas,' I say without hesitation.

'Seven.'

'Nine.'

Facey and I have long ago agreed that I take charge of financial negotiations in our partnership, having the superior temperament for it.

'Eight sovs, and we will shake hands on it.'

'Done,' I say. And we do.

Barber waves his lamp at the porter who strides over and takes possession of the corpse, hoisting it over his broad shoulders before disappearing into the bowels of the hospital.

Facey counts coins into Shield's eager hand. 'Five Shillings, Shields. Not a penny more.' Shields has marked the shocking state of Facey's eye and perhaps it is this memento of violence which pacifies him. At any rate, he pockets the coins

without objection, nods once, tucks his chin into his collars and slinks away into the night, leaving us only the softly diminishing sound of his creaking wheels.

Eddie ushers us through the porter's cubby across Edward Square, through Clayton Square and into the dispensary. At this time of night it is quiet but a hospital is never entirely without activity. One or two functionaries, stewards, nurses and, strangely enough, bakers, pass us in the squares with a nod, a brief acknowledgment, but only to Eddie.

In the glare of the dispensary gas lamp, the damage to Facey's eye is obvious even to me as Eddie swabs away the blood. 'How do you see with this eye, Mr Facey?'

'I just peers out of it. Thank you for asking.'

Eddie sighs, 'Is there anything over and above the usual?'

'I see flashes of light here and there but, trust me, Mr Barber, this is pretty run of the mill for a mill of this nature.'

'A mill, sir, is our way of describing a bit of a rough up,' I interject. Eddie Barber is doing his best for Facey and I do not approve of Facey making light of his efforts.

'I see.'

'As do I,' retorts Facey.

'And is there anything else out of the ordinary? Black dots for example?'

'Certainly black dots. They swarm about me glim like tadpoles in a pond.'

Eddie grimaces before smearing a greasy orange salve across Facey's peeper. 'This will help a little but I fear there has been damage to the internal workings of the eye itself. The eye, like any other organ of the body, is a delicate mechanism designed for purpose, like a watch. I believe that there has been trauma here, which

has tipped the workings out of true. I could not, and neither could the great Mr Green, surgically enter the inner workings of the orb to remedy the situation. Rest may help. I can only advise that you remain prone, on your back, for at least one week. And apply this salve from time to time, along with this material for a bandage.'

Facey accepts the pot of salve and the brown linen strip, thankfully with a certain graciousness. On the whole, he's fond of Eddie too, in his own way.

'I will grease the glimmer every day, but you might recall that me and Sammy Boy are scarcely gents of leisure. A week on my back would be a fine thing. But I cannot have it. It cannot be done.'

'Well then, keep the bandage over for as long as you can. At least for tonight you and Sammy will remain here and rest?'

Facey nods. 'We will at that. And thank you for it.'

'I cannot admit you to the wards as I do not wish there to be a connection made between us. But you may doss in the Treasurer's Stable where you will not be disturbed since he is presently out of town.'

'Fine by me,' says Facey.

As always, I go along.

The sun is long since up by the time we emerge; someone has left bread and a pitcher of milk for us at the stable doors. We wolf it down and skedaddle. Facey seems his old self this morning, aside from the brown bandage across his eye.

One part of London is usually as good as another since we do not keep a permanent crib these days. Today, south of the river suits us very well as we have business in Stockwell. Besides, I always look forward to seeing Rosamund.

Rosamund is not the name she was born with but is the only one she will answer to. Someone, no doubt some species of divine, has assured her that rosa is Latin for rose, while mundus stands for world. It delights her to imagine an entire world full of blooms, and so Rosamund it is. And who am I to say that such a moniker is inferior to Sammy, Facey, or even Sausages come to that?

Rosamund works a tiny stretch of kerb at the Vauxhall end of Kennington Lane. In the past many have tried to steal her patch but she is resolute and has always returned. This little scrap of ground has become Rosamund's kingdom by right of occupation and, these days, she is rarely troubled by pretenders to her throne.

Rosamund is hard at it, cross-legged, head down, scraping away with her blocks of chalk.

I know she's aware of my presence by the shadow I cast across her landscapes. But without even looking up she says, 'I've not seen you in a monkey's age, Sammy. Where've you been at?'

I shrug, 'Here and there. How do you do that, Rosamund? How can you tell it's me without even looking?'

'The boots, glocky. Spend all day kerbside and you'll get to know a pair of boots a sight quicker than you recognise a face.'

Rosamund adds a bold stroke of light grey chalk to the skyline above a range of hills and rubs it in with her thumb, smudging colours, yet somehow creating the illusion of morning light. I love watching her work. It's like a conjuring trick with sunshine.

Finally, she peers up at me through slitted eyes. 'So, what do you reckon?'

'Beautiful, as always.'

Rosamund nods at the compliment, taking it as her due and turns her attention to Facey. ‘Well?’

Of course Facey has neither my patience nor my partiality. ‘They’re just fucking chalk daubs on the pavement. For two pins I’d kick your carcass out of the highway only, for some reason, Sammy Boy reckons I ought to be appreciative. I’m appreciating your art by not booting you up the arse.’

Rosamund nods. ‘Good, it is quite sufficient to have tamed the savage beast. The savage beast doesn’t have to love the work.’

‘I don’t love the work,’ retorts Facey. ‘And we have business to attend. It is a blessed nuisance but what with one thing and another we find so little time these days for outings to the Royal Academy nor even to take the waters at Bath, more’s the pity. Is that not so, Sammy Boy?’

I gaze down at my boots, having no desire to encourage him.

‘Perhaps you should. I am in favour of any activity of a self-improving nature, although in your case, Mr Facey, it’d be difficult to know where to begin.’

It takes a moment for Facey to comprehend the barb but when he does I’m relieved to find that his response is only a deep rumbling chuckle. ‘You’ve got spirit, girl. I’ll grant you that.’

Instead of acknowledging the reprieve, Rosamund simply ignores him and returns to her landscapes.

Facey considers her for a moment. ‘Why not stay here a while, Sammy? Our business with "The man they couldn’t hang" will not require us both.’

‘I will, and thank you for it, Facey.’ With that, I hunker down beside Rosamund, cross-legged on the kerb.

George Spicer, "The man they couldn't hang", keeps a Dollyshop in Stockwell high street, though his true calling is as a fence of hoisted property. A large, slow-moving, greasy cove, Spicer is known in our world as "The man they couldn't hang" on account of his having no neck to speak of.

Spicer and others of our acquaintance are putting together a Rig, a house-clearance racket to which Facey and me are contributing five hampers of chinaware. Spicer has purchased our contribution from a dealer in Lambeth and the stuff is snide rather than hoisted. With the Rig, everything on sale must be above board and regular to keep us all on the right side of the law - just. For the house-clearance racket is nothing more than a bit of fleecing. The principals have taken a short lease on one of the big villas off Russell Square; a notice of demise has been inserted in Lloyds Weekly and will be followed by advertisement of a House Clearance auction to take place this Thursday coming, catalogues duly printed and circulated with no reserve prices. Events such as these draw folk from all corners of the metropolis on the lookout for bargains; linens, crockery, knockdown silverware and such like. In short, flats hoping to benefit from the misfortune of others.

The goods we lay out are all quite genuine, bought and paid for, but of a certainty have never graced the rooms of any grand household. It's all just cheap, showy, gimcrack stuff. Come the auction, members of the Rig, like Facey and me, will be present to drive up the bidding in the expectation of taking double, or even treble what we paid for our tat.

Aside from the eight sovereigns we took last night and the few odd shillings to go along, we've sunk all our ready capital into this. It's high time we moved on from the resurrection game and we've had our eye for a while now on a nice little boozing-

ken in Stepney, which to my mind, is a far better end for Facey and me than the prison hulks or scragged.

Facey should be in Stockwell by now, checking the hampers, running through our inventory to be sure that Spicer hasn't fiddled us along the way.

'Penny for 'em,' says Rosamund softly.

'I was thinking on our tavern. We're not so far off now.'

'Good for you, Sammy.'

'You are to be our official artist in residence, you know. Your pictures will hang on the walls, seeing as it will be quite a respectable establishment.'

'They're not meant for walls, glocky. They're pavement pictures. Besides, how am I meant to shift a huge slab of granite like this?'

'I could do it for you,' I say. I could too.

'No. Pavement chinks are for the pavement. What would my pictures be doing on somebody's walls in great fancy gilt frames like chunks of gingerbread?'

'I like them.'

'So does everyone. It's why they throw me these coppers,' she replies, indicating an old linen bonnet holding a few meagre coins, 'which accounts for my fame and great wealth.'

I sigh and look up at the sky, which is, as so often in London, grey and brooding. 'Be coming on to rain soon.'

Rosamund sweeps a layer of dark green chalk across a forest canopy, instantly the quality of her images changes as though a cloud has moved across the sun.

'Rosamund?' I say.

'What is it, Sammy?' she continues to add layers, rubbing and smudging, never taking her eyes off the work.

‘A thing I’ve been meaning to ask you.’

‘Go on.’

‘Some - actually pretty well most - of the pavement artists I’ve seen, work their pictures on a scrap of paper or canvas or a bit of old tarp.’

‘Yes.’

‘So’s they can take them away at night, then lay them out again each morning.’

Rosamund turns and looks me full in the face with her strange unblinking eyes. ‘What would be the point of that?’

‘It would save you having to do them all again every day.’

Rosamund sighs. ‘You think I should ask money for doing nothing?’

‘No. It’s just -.’

‘They’re different each time, Sammy. They might be the same views but every time I do the work there’s a twist - in the light or the sky or the colours.’

‘But that doesn’t mean you ...’

‘Do you think them beautiful?’

A droplet of rain lands on her Scotch hillside, a tiny crushed spider-smudge of black. Rosamund rubs it vigorously with her thumb. More drops begin to patter around us. She runs her hands across the landscape working in the splashes, turning bright colours to mud, smudging and befouling. ‘How about now?’

For some reason I’m enraged at her wanton destruction. I don’t have the words to explain the anger and sadness I feel, so I haul myself to my feet. ‘It’s raining,’ I say.

Rosamund reaches up, grips the tail of my coat. ‘Stay.’

‘Why?’

‘I want to show you something.’ She gazes up at me with a peculiar, lopsided smile. So I sit once again, turning up the collars of my overcoat against the cloudburst. By contrast Rosamund turns her face to the sky, revelling in the rain. ‘I do believe that the heart must ache for there to be true beauty.’

The rain comes on heavier now, dark fat blotches explode across the granite. Rosamund gazes down at her chalks where the images are beginning to run and spoil without the aid of her hand.

‘Knowing that a thing cannot last is the element which renders it more beautiful in our eyes. It is what makes a thing bittersweet and achingly sad, yet even more magnificent. True beauty reflects the impermanence of life, Sammy.’

‘I believe you may have a touch of the vapours.’ I take off my overcoat to protect her, laying it over her thin shawl.

‘Don’t be such a numbskull.’ She shrugs it off. ‘Look.’ Rosamund remains transfixed by her own pictures. Rivulets of colour run and merge across the pavement, hours and hours of craft melting into a multi-hued channel of wet chalk. It’s heartbreaking, and yet I can detect a beauty in it.

‘Do you see it?’

‘I do.’

‘Well then.’

The cloudburst passes, thinning to a more delicate patter now.

‘Take a rose or a butterfly. We understand that they will not be with us long. They disappear so soon, yet the sadness of knowing that they are so ephemeral is what makes them so beautiful. Because we too will fade.’

Rosamund brushes a stray lock of hair from her brow. ‘Now you know why I will only work my chalks on a pavement.’

‘Aaah, Miss Rosamund, the fucken rain’s gone an’ fucken ruined your lovely pitchers.’

Kak John.

He could be anywhere from twelve to sixteen. Hard to say with all the muck on him. Kak John is the occasional street sweeper hereabouts. It’s not a particularly profitable patch and I suspect he only stays this side of the river so’s he can keep an eye on Rosamund. A young lad with his spunk could be doing very well for himself up in the West End by now.

In point of fact Kak John makes his real income selling pure to the Bermondsey tanners. Any kind of shit. Horse, dog, human. Doesn’t signify to Kak John. Which is why we call him Kak John. That and the fact that he’s always covered in it. Truth be told, apart from the stench, I’m quite partial to Kak John. He’s always looked after Rosamund for a starter and he’s a straight arrow; Facey and I have even used him as a crow to keep a lookout on occasion.

‘All right, Mr Samuel?’

He also calls me Mister, which is peachy in my book.

‘How’s business?’

‘Shit mostly, Mr Samuel.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘No, it’s right enough, but it’s mainly shit. The street sweeping business is not what I would zactly call thriving round these parts. Not enough tin hereabouts. How’s your good self?’

‘Thriving, Kak John. I have learned another word today.’

‘Ah, we all needs constantly to try elevate ourselves, Mr Samuel, else what are we put on this earth for to do? What is this new word, if I may be so bold?’

‘Don’t exactly know, Kak John, as I have not properly learned it yet.

Rosamund will tell you as she just finished the saying of it. Elephant, sounds like.’

‘Ephemeral,’ says Rosamund.

Kak John deliberates, mouthing the word a few times before nodding approval like some grave academic. ‘That is a rare and mighty word. What’s it mean, your ladyship?’

Rosamund grins, ‘Lasting for only a very short while. Like your promises, John.’

‘No,’ objects Kak John. ‘I never broken a...’

‘Ah, John, you promised to take me to the Gardens only last week.’

‘I will, your ladyship, any one of these evenings now.’

Kak John is not likely to take Rosamund to Vauxhall Gardens any time soon as she well knows and, much as I enjoy their banter, I expect Facey back at any time. ‘Rosamund, let me have that elephant word again please. It shall be my word of today.’

Ever since I was at John Pounds’ little school, I have always sought to extend my vocabulary. Indeed, upon my departure from that humble site of education it was Pounds who exhorted me to be sure to learn one new word each day. And this I endeavor to do.

As it happens, there are three quite rare and mighty words in those very sentences.

‘Ephemeral,’ she repeats.

‘Efferamal.’

‘Effingmill,’ echoes Kak John.

‘Remember it as though you would a set of initials - F. M. R. – a fine gentleman, an aristocrat no less, holding the rank of earl.’

‘F.M.R.’

‘F.M.R. Earl. A noble quality present in so much of what we find to be beautiful.’

‘F.M.R. Earl.’

I catch the distinct, rhythmic clump of Facey’s advancing boots and reluctantly haul myself to my feet, brushing damp chalk from my hands and keks. ‘I will try to remember that. Thank you, Rosamund.’

‘I will quiz you on it next time we meet. Now, here is your Mister Facey, who goeth about seeking whom he may devour,’ Rosamund remarks, noting the sour expression on Facey’s mug.

He arrives nursing a package. ‘Kak John,’ he nods briskly.

‘Mr Facey, sir.’

‘From the looks of you, I should say that business is good.’

‘Can’t complain, sir.’

Facey grimaces, ‘We shall never be short of shit in the metropolis.’

‘Just as well, sir. Else we should all have to make do without good shoe leather.’

‘Good shoe leather which I have willingly expended today for the sake of business only to find that "The man they couldn’t hang" rates me a pigeon to be plucked.’

‘I seldom do business with "The man they couldn’t hang", Mr Facey, unless dire need and vile circumstance leave me no choice. I cannot vouch for his nature.’

‘Nor I,’ growls Facey.

My heart sinks. If Spicer has rooked us, our savings are gone and my dream of a little boozing-ken is over.

Facey catches sight of my face. 'Cheer up, Sammy Boy. It ain't as bad as all that.' He begins to unwrap his parcel. 'Besides, I have bought you a couple of pies, still hot and hot.'

'I cannot manage two.'

'Then you must do as you wish with the other, chuck it or save it for later, for I have eaten my share at the shop.'

This is kind of Facey. I know he has bought the extra pie for Rosamund but he'll be damned before he gives it to her. 'Rosamund, Kak John, help me here. I am not such a swell as I can bear to throw away a good hot pie.'

'Always ready to see a good man out of a spot of bother. Known for it, I am,' announces Kak John.

I hand him the extra pie and note that, on breaking it in two, he donates the bigger chunk to Rosamund, whereupon he crams his own portion into his mouth without ceremony, heedless of the meat gravy trickling down in his chin.

Rosamund produces an threadbare but clean fogle from her sleeve, carefully wraps her share and places the little bundle on the pavement for later. She will not allow anyone to see her eating.

'And where is Pure John today?' inquires Facey.

'My brother has a new station, running for Lieutenant Trench,' announces Kak John, proudly.

Pure John, a filthy, impudent street urchin of about eleven years, is Kak John's younger brother. Although he has always assisted with the collection of pure, we call

him "Pure" on account of his being a good deal more fragrant than his elder sibling.

Which, it has to be owned, is not saying much.

Facey nods sagely. 'It is good for a young lad to find an honest trade and I am happy for him, Kak John.'

'It is a few more pennies each day to put between ourselves and the picking of oakum, Mr Facey.'

'Trench is a spinner; no officer, and certainly no gentleman, but I daresay there are worse men to be grafting for.' With that Facey throws a curt nod in Kak John's direction and we are away.

'You are vexed, I can tell,' I say, as we head towards Regent Bridge.

'Calm yourself, Sammy Boy. There is no real harm done, other than to Spicer's konk. I am vexed only because "The man they couldn't hang" took us for a pair of flats.'

'He did not deliver then?'

'There are five hampers, certainly. All shipshape and Bristol fashion. But I took it upon myself to tally the contents, each and every piece from creamer to tureen. And, as you well know, Sammy, reckoning is not my strong suit.'

'Pass beyond the digits of your hands and you are all at sea,' I agree, perhaps a little too readily, as Facey throws me one of his dark looks.

'To cut a long story short, after some deliberation, it appeared to me that the contents of but four hampers had been spread around to fill five. Giving voice to my suspicion, "The man they couldn't hang" made no attempt to dispute the fact, merely shifting blame onto the shoulders of his disreputable vendor, blackguarding that absent individual in a multitude of ways, whilst asserting to his own spotless conduct in the matter.'

By now we have crossed Regent Bridge and find ourselves north of the river once again.

‘How are your boots, Sammy?’ asks Facey, inspecting the sky, where a watery sun is battling to elbow its way through the overcast.

‘Sound, for the moment.’

‘Well, then, what say we take the towpath to the Palace of Westminster? A spot of mud will not hurt two gentlemen in stout boots such as we.’

‘To what end?’

‘There is to be sport at the Cockpit.’

‘Ah.’

Facey enjoys his ratting and has a keen eye for a capable dog. One of the reasons he and Sausages never saw eye to eye, I shouldn’t wonder.

‘And don’t you waste no sleep over our missing inventory, Sammy Boy. Come Thursday, the shortfall will be made good by "The man they couldn’t hang". Every last piece.’

‘Surely not from the goodness of his heart?’

‘I was forced to chastise him a little.’

‘You should not have. Another mill is the last thing you need, given the condition of your eye. Perhaps you should follow Eddie Barber’s prescription and rest up. We could try Bridewell Sal’s, she’ll take us in for a day or two.’

‘It was scarcely a mill, Sammy. Spicer is a mumping great jelly of a man, with no skill at throwing the raws. Besides, it was only a love tap I gave him; a gentle swipe across the jaw and one in the razzo. As for resting up, there’ll be plenty of time for that when I’m a dead ‘un.’

‘No more mills, Facey. And no more night work until the Rig is done, then we will know where we stand.’

‘Just as you say, Sammy Boy. A little sport will put me straight. And who is to say we have not earned a bit of a spree?’

My boots are heavy with mud by the time we clear the boatbuilder’s yards. There must be a leak somewhere as my left foot has been immersed in a slippery soup for a good half a mile now. Mercifully, the changeable weather has finally made up its mind to stay fine for a spell. Mudlarks are out, pecking away down at the waterline, skiffs haul against the current, transporting wares and fares upriver. Patches of late afternoon sunlight wink and glitter across the river and this, along with the promise of sport, has put Facey into a more even temper.

Ahead, the Palace of Westminster looms over us; Facey gazes up at these grand edifices, which are covered in scaffolding. ‘Half London goes hungry and yet there is always sufficient tin for fine new buildings should their purpose be the greater comfort and glory of our betters, eh, Sammy Boy?’

‘I do not pretend to understand the world. All I know is that we are born to a station in life and there we must remain ‘til the day we die. But some few, in the manner of the Fancy, will hazard all they have on a chance or two.’ I shrug, ‘In so doing they may rise. Or they may fall. If fortune does not favour their endeavours, they will sink to an even lower station, that is for a certainty.’

Facey gazes at me for a moment, ‘You always was a deep file. Too much thinking is not good for a man. Take care, lest you fuddle the noggin.’ He shakes his head disapprovingly, ‘You worry too much, Sammy Boy.’

‘It is by no means a perfect philosophy. There are always decent God-fearing folk who are content to remain in their station, bothering no man, yet find themselves

slipping nevertheless, towards the lowest rungs of humanity through no fault or hazard of their own making. This, I cannot account for.'

'You are speaking of Rosamund then.'

'I am.'

'For a man to climb out of the steaming pit, there must be the backs of others to climb upon.' Facey grimaces. 'It has always been the way.'

'You have never liked her. Why?'

'I do not have an opinion of Rosamund, one way or t'other. It is disease I do not care for.'

'She is not diseased.'

'And yet her face resembles the skin on a tapioca pudding.'

'You well know they are smallpox scars, and from many years ago.'

'I do not care to catch it from her.'

Sometimes there's just no talking to Facey.

Chapter 3

We traipse along Great Peter Street in silence before turning into St Anne's Lane. In a matter of moments we have been transported from the lofty grandeur of Westminster Palace to the most squalid poverty imaginable. The distance may be small but the contrast is beyond reckoning. A trickling, stinking sewer runs along the centre of the street; on either side wooden hovels huddle together, canting crazily at all angles like rotting, blackened teeth. A few thin children, filthy and nearly naked pick through the awful piles of refuse. I flick a few coppers in their direction. It does not seem so very long ago that Facey and me had as much.

Facey shoots me a disapproving look as we turn the corner into Old Pye Street. There is plenty of life here but little joy. Coarse women squabble over bottles, shouting enticements at us, waving slack bobbies and hoisting skirts. The houses here are more substantial although there is still an overwhelming air of decay and the stink of bad meat on the boil. A dust contractor's yard, halfway up the street, seems to have burst its bounds, leaking oyster-shells, cabbage-stalks, and broken china into the open thoroughfare. Children again, sifting through the filth for anything that can be sold. Bullet-headed young men wearing tight corduroy kecks and showy neckerchiefs loiter in doorways, ogling us with hard eyes from under flat caps.

Facey sneers, glaring about him through his one good glim, daring any one of them to chance his arm. None does. These men may be poor and predatory but they are not raving mad.

Between a slop-shop and a threepenny ken is a flaking green door. There is no sign, nor outward manifestation of the activity within, only a door with a pitted brass knocker. But the very fact of a brass knob remaining attached and unmolested in a

street such as this tells its own story. Facey gives three sharp raps. The door is opened by a hard-looking ginger cove who, without a word, ushers us along a dark, cramped hallway and down a precarious wooden stairway to the cellars.

The cockpit is, in fact, two cellars knocked together to form one large, noisy space full of fag. The combined stinks of smoke, stale flat beer, rats, dogs and unwashed human beings is almost overpowering. By comparison, Pye Street enjoys wholesome country air.

Gaslights illuminate the centerpiece: a ring enclosed by wooden barriers, not unlike a small arena of those ancient Romanish times. Wooden bleachers, arranged one over the other, rise stepwise above it nearly to the ceiling. This is the pit for dogfights, cockfights and rat killing.

As yet, the sporting fraternity mill around the outskirts of the pit, swilling bad beer and adulterated liquor, bellowing and hooting. Facey and me shove our way through the press in the direction of the counter.

‘Ah, Mr Facey and ...and associate.’ A sweaty, bleary-eyed, weasel face intercepts us, waving a beaker of gin.

‘What do you want, Mattheson?’ grunts Facey.

‘Money, tin, shine. Same as all else hereabouts.’

Molly Mattheson, at one time the Honorable Henry Mattheson, is, or was, the son of a baronet. Now known as Molly, for an inclination to sodomy. Disinherited, cut off for numerous vile practices too public to be ignored or covered up, Molly Mattheson is a procurer for wealthy gentlemen of particular tastes and a pipe addict. He is beyond redemption and it is, frankly, a miracle that he remains amongst the living.

He grins through rotting teeth, perspiring face swaying close to mine, so close I can smell his carrion breath. He taps his florid nose. 'I know a thing.'

'Then I wish you joy of it,' snaps Facey, turning away. Likewise, I barge past, making for the counter. But Mattheson is not so easily ignored and has a grip on the tail of my coat, like a drowning man. Facey spins abruptly, grabs the bony white wrist and squeezes hard, almost to breaking point, if Mattheson's squeals are anything to go by. 'Fuck off,' he hisses.

Mattheson backs away, nursing the wounded joint and contents himself with wheedling. 'Come now, gents. No need for the mauleys. We are all friends here.'

'We are not friends, Mattheson, barely even acquaintances and still, there is shame enough in that.'

'Nevertheless, I am possession of something that men in your line of work will always have need of.'

Facey shoulders his way through to the counter, where he raps a shilling on the wood.

'And what might that be?'

'Why, information, sir. Information,' smirks Mattheson, unabashed.

Facey bellows his order for two beakers of Old Tom. When we turn, drinks in hand, Mattheson is still there, waiting with the patience of a poacher. 'Now, gentlemen, for a small emolument, I could put you in the way of a very advantageous business opportunity, in your line of work as it were.'

'We are bakers, Molly. Have you suddenly come into possession of a stolen beef pie, a quantity of suet perhaps?'

He gives us a sly wink. 'A tasty pudding certainly.'

I sip my Old Tom. The extra sugar in the gin does not quite mask the vile aftertaste of turpentine.

‘Out with it then,’ snaps Facey.

Mattheson smiles, exposing too much gum and a quantity of saliva, which, along with the turpentine, has pretty well put me off my drink entirely.

‘Two days ago an unfortunate party met their maker.’

‘Why should that be our concern?’

‘Perhaps it is not. Perhaps you are merely in the business of raising buns. But if you did happen to have an interest in, shall we say, the raising of other, less toothsome, articles from their places of rest, you might find this news considerably to your advantage,’ with that he taps his sharp nose twice. It is warmish on account of the press of bodies and lack of ventilation, yet Mattheson perspires like a busted cistern, oily drops leak continually from his hair and face. He mops his brow with a disgraceful rag.

‘Folk drop like flies in the metropolis every day. This is scarcely news to us. Nor anyone.’

‘Ah, but I have it on good authority that this one is a bit special. A little out of the ordinary and would, I’m certain, attract a fine premium.’

Facey is raring to have a gander at the dogs, but Mattheson has him on the line now. ‘In what way special?’

‘This one is neither man nor woman, but something in between. A curiosity of nature known as a hermaphrodite. Got to be worth twenty guineas, if a penny.’

Facey sips his gin, considering. His mouth twists in disapproval. I can’t tell if it’s the drink or Mattheson’s foul breath. ‘I do not know this word, this ...this oddity.’

‘Hermaphrodite, a creature, having the parts of both man and woman, most precious rare, and of profound interest to any anatomical gentleman worth his salt.’

Facey throws me a quizzical look. I shake my head. He well knows I’d rather sit tight, at least ‘til the Rig is done. Nevertheless he continues to nibble away at Mattheson’s bait. ‘On what “good authority” does this information come into your possession.’

‘Ah,’ Mattheson smirks, indicating his threadbare togs, ‘I was not always as you see me now. I have fallen low, I admit, and yet I still have honest friends in a higher society than the one to which I am currently consigned by the fickle hand of Dame Fortuna.’

Facey nods philosophically, ‘Aye, buggery and the pipe will do that to a man.’

Mattheson starts, somewhat put out by Facey’s candour. ‘My dear sir, it appears you have quite the wrong impression of me. Cards have been my downfall, along with a foolishly trusting nature.’

‘Just as you say, Molly.’ Facey smiles, nods briskly and turns his attention to the yelping, baying dogs, which are being held in check by their handlers over by the far wall. He shoulders his way through the sporting crowd in the direction of the din. I stick close behind in the realization that I am mistaken: it is not Facey who has swallowed the bait here, but Mattheson. The man dutifully follows, unwilling to drop a promising prospect, raising his voice now. ‘I have particular knowledge of the circumstances, I shall not say how, but it is likely the easiest hoist you will ever make, Mr Facey. None else knows of it. The body is freshly passed but two days previous and as yet, not even interred. It lies in a West End tavern cellar waiting for the right men to come a calling.’

Facey swivels with a thunderous countenance. In the violence of his expression the bandage has slipped, revealing a terrifying, blood-gorged eye. 'Never presume to mention the specifics of my trade or the next time you open your foul mouth, it will be full of soil,' he hisses.

Mattheson backs off, cowering in fear for his life. He quickly melts away into the throng.

Facey grins, adjusting his bandage. 'Useful tip there, Sammy Boy, and no push expended for it. Not even the price of a wet.'

'It's not a job for us, Facey, not now with your glim and such,' I plead.

'Let me think on it.' Facey concedes, elbowing a couple of punters out of the way. He crouches to cup the snout of a likely-looking pie-bald Bull-Terrier. The ratting-cove is hard-pressed to keep the creature in check on its stout leather lead, such is the animal's enthusiasm for the coming combat. The dog is all muscle, teeth and fury, but for some reason, it permits Facey to maul its bullet head, even fondle its tattered ears. Perhaps it recognizes a kindred spirit. At any rate, Facey rises and makes his pronouncement. 'This is the one for us, Sammy. I like cut of his jib.'

The contender's name is Billy and he's carried to the pit where his weight is proclaimed to be twenty-six pounds. For some reason, this fact is significant; the sporting crowd nod sagely at one another, odds around the pit are retabulated.

Facey approaches a florid gent in a bottle-green coat, murmurs something in his ear, while dropping heavy gold coin into his upturned palm.

Bulging sacks are emptied into the pit, emitting a squealing, wriggling mass of rats, black and brown bodies thrown into contrast by the stark white surface of the arena.

Now Billy is released. He has no way of knowing this, but Billy has twelve minutes to kill one hundred, else his owner and other members of his syndicate are a good twenty sovereigns out of pocket.

Billy lets loose with all that pent-up rage and enthusiasm of his. The snapping of his jaws can even be heard over the roar of the crowd, crimson spatters across white paint and in a short while his head and snout are covered in gore. After five minutes the clock is stopped. Billy is given a breather and a bowl of water to lap.

Facey is as jovial as I've seen him in a good while. 'Here we are, Sammy Boy, fifty-eight rats accounted for in under half the allotted time. With our push down at two to one, we are golden. Come on, Billy.'

Billy is cleaned up and dropped back into the pit, where he finishes off the hundred in a total of eleven minutes something, snapping necks and tearing throats, quick as looking. Each of the two umpires checks his timepiece and the feat is confirmed. Facey is delighted, slapping my back repeatedly. 'Good enough, Sammy Boy, I'll collect the tin we are owed and there's an end to hazard. I'm content to watch the rest of the night.'

Facey stops dead, his hand remains on my shoulder and begins to squeeze. I look up, following his point of view, and catch sight of Mattheson, deep in conversation with none other than Teeth.

Teeth is bad news. For the living and the dead. And most especially for other Resurrection Men. You cannot miss Teeth, even across a crowded cellar such as this, since he is two yards high and white as marble. An albino, I've heard tell, is how one should describe such a man. Yet it is not his paleness that marks him out over and above other men, but his teeth. A set of Waterloo dentures, supposedly collected by the man from the very field itself and incorporated into a set of gnashers, way too

large and perfect to be convincing. Although he must be approaching his fourth decade, he still carries himself well; ramrod straight in threadbare but well-fitting frogged black coat and trousers. Word is that Teeth was with Blucher back in '15: one of his infamous Black Prussians.

Teeth works with a file known as Mutton and together they make a formidable pair, best avoided. Regrettably, they are in the self-same business as me and Facey, but most of the time we stay well away from one another's turf.

We observe Teeth drop a stream of silver shillings into Mattheson's outstretched paws.

I can sense Facey's wrathful indignation through the quivering hand on my shoulder. 'Now, now, Facey, let it go. We did not care for the hoist in any event.'

Mattheson, clutching his new wealth, scuttles away up the rickety stairs no doubt in a hurry to clamp his ghastly wet lips around a pipe of some description, clay, flesh, or both.

Teeth surveys the room, with his height advantage it is but a moment before he catches sight of Facey and me. He acknowledges our presence with a slight dip of the head; he grins, treating us to a great horse rictus.

Facey scowls, he cannot bear to lose out to any man but in this case discretion is certainly the better part of valour, so I take his arm and steer him towards the wagering gent in the bottle-green coat. The name, Nicodemus Riley, has been picked out in childish white letters along the flap of his thick leather satchel. He is all smiles and twinkles.

'Ah, Mr Facey, sir. I wish you joy of your success.' Riley nods, winks, claps, bobs and shakes our hands, as though sharing our good fortune with us. In short, everything but hand over our winnings.

Facey, who has less patience than most, can bear it no longer, ‘So, Riley, will you produce my tin or are we to stand here all night bobbing about like a set of dumplings?’

Riley huffs and sighs, with an apologetic grin he opens the satchel. It is empty but for a few slips of paper. ‘Ah, sir, there is the nub of it. Had you come but a minute or two previous I would have been able to give you satisfaction, but as you see there has been a run on Billy tonight and the mutt has quite cleaned me out. Who would have thought it? Snap. Fifty-eight buzzers gone in six minutes. Snap, snap, snap. The remainder destroyed utterly in eleven something. Unheard of. Ain’t natural and that’s the truth. You will take my marker, of course.’

‘I will take my readies.’

‘I have none to give.’

‘Then I must take your life. For this is no small sum.’

‘Ah, sir. I do not say you could not do it. But how would it profit you to press a suit for twelve sovereigns against a dead man?’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Sixteen. Just so. I stand corrected. How would you then recover -’

Without warning Facey’s left hand shoots out, grips the man’s greasy neck stock and twists. He cocks his right fist back, poised to snuff the man’s lights, if not his life.

Riley drops the satchel, goggles and gasps for breath as Facey slowly hoists him off his feet. If Riley had been relying on the public nature of our disagreement for his safety then he was much mistaken. The fracas barely attracts attention from the sporting fraternity, other than what I imagine to be a few swift wagers here and there on Riley’s chances of survival.

Riley squirms and manages to gasp, 'Now that I think on it, there may be a little travelling money about my person.'

Facey releases the man. With one hand Riley frantically claws at his tightly twisted stock, with the other he rummages in his pocket for a couple of sovereigns and a silver shilling, along with a cloth button. 'Take it,' he croaks.

Facey takes the money, expression darkening by the second. Riley now rootles in his satchel for one of the paper slips and, with a stub of pencil, laboriously letters an IOU for sixteen sovereigns, using the satchel for a writing surface. He offers it up. 'Never fear, my trade is underwritten by Messrs Pimlott and Chuffington, no less. You will see that these slips are endorsed by those well-regarded gentlemen. In consequence my markers are safe as any banknote signed by the governor of the Bank of England himself. Safer even.'

I examine it, sure enough has been ready printed with the simple header P&C, and Riley's lettering is in order. It is something I suppose.

'This is a mere scrap of paper, whereas I gave you eight sovereigns in hard cash money,' objects Facey, with that wolfish grimace of his.

'That is true,' explains Riley, 'but -' We'll never know what he was going to say next as Facey's massive fist crashes into his dial. Riley is lifted off his feet by the force and thumps quite forcibly into the whitewashed cellar wall where he collapses in an untidy heap, leaking claret from a pulped razzo. Facey stands over him. 'You have until tomorrow to bring me my tin, Riley, or by God I will find you and administer further chastisement.' A pointless exercise since the man is quite unconscious, and will remain so for some time by the looks of him. There are a few half-hearted cheers and whistles from around the room but otherwise little response to the violence, which is more or less commonplace hereabouts. In any case, for most

folk there is far more important business afoot. The dogs are about to go in again.

This time a pair: Towser and Ajax, matched against one another for the most kills in a minute. We make our way to the arena and watch as the canines set to with a will.

Facey has the hump, and even though the dogs are exemplary, a couple of whirling dervishes, accounting for no fewer than two-dozen vermin in sixty seconds, they fail to cheer him. I expect this black countenance to last the remainder of the evening.

‘Sir, sir. Mr Samuel, sir.’ A small, grubby hand plucks at my sleeve.

‘Why, it is Pure John.’ My heart sinks. ‘What has occurred, is Rosamund well?’

‘Calm yourself on that account, Mr Samuel. All is tip-top in Vauxhall, or was, when I last looked in, which was not so very long ago. I remind you that it is my brother what stands sentinel over that turf, keeping all mischance and villainy at bay.’

‘I do not need reminding of that, Pure John, as I myself have met with your brother only some few hours previous.’

‘All the more reason then not to let your unmentionables bunch so tight about the parts. Trust me, you will enjoy a more contented existence.’

Facey guffaws at this impudent retort.

Pure John has a good heart. No doubt of it. But he is insolent and most infuriatingly contrary. I let it pass though since he appears to have put Facey into a good humour.

‘Now then, Pure John. Tell us your business. Be quick, for we are busy men.’

‘I see that, sir. Keeping an eye on them ratters whilst supping on Old Tom can be awful hard graft.’

I gaze down at Pure John, his innocent grimy face beams back up at me. Facey emits a wet, throaty chuckle. 'Well?'

'Haven't I been across half London on the hunt for you gents tonight though?' Pure John begins to enumerate the destinations on his stubby fingers: 'One, the Fortunes of war, Smithfield - not there. Two, the Four Feathers in Shoreditch - never to be found. Three, Weller's, Drury-Lane - nary a sign of you gents and no one seen you all night. Four. The Hare an -'

'That is because we are here, Pure John.'

'I see that now a course. And do not need informing of it after the fact, since it is me what discovered you and not the other way round.' Pure John looks at me as though I am a half-wit. 'I am quite run off my feet and could use a port wine with a bit of sugar myself.'

We lead Pure John to the counter where Facey orders his revive, though I do suspect the boy of having already enjoyed a bracer or two at some of those aforementioned establishments.

Facey grins as the boy attempts to cock an elbow on the counter in imitation of his elders. Failing, on account of his diminutive stature, Pure John is content to stir a broken lump of sugar into his hot port wine. 'Now, gentlemen, I have an important commission from the good offices of Lieutenant Trench's messaging service and no time to waste about it,' he announces importantly. 'You are urgently summoned to the residence of one Joshua Brookes of Great Marlborough Street.' With that, he downs his port wine and begins to pat at the pockets of his tight jacket. 'Mister Brookes insists that you waste not a moment and will kindly avail yourselves of a hack to which end I have been entrusted with a purse of - shit ...'

He pats himself furiously once more, though it is clear that his pockets are quite empty. ‘Oh, Mother of Christ, some bastard’s only gone an’ buzzed me.’

Facey is wheezing with mirth by now, but I can see that the boy is close to tears. ‘Oh, sirs, you won’t peach me to Lieutenant Trench, will you? ‘Tis only my second day an’ I’ve already gone an’ bollixed it. Ah no, wait.’ He drops to a crouch and fiddles with his left shoe before popping back up holding aloft a soft purse. ‘G’arn, what a mutton-head I am. Here we are, gents, six shillin’ and you will be pleased to take a cabriolet at your earliest convenience and to keep the change.’

I take the purse and sift through the coin before handing the boy one of the silver shillings. ‘For your trouble, Pure John. Take it home now, to your brother’s safekeeping.’

‘Thank you kindly, Mr Samuel. And I wish you gents good fortune.’ Pure John treats us to a formal little bow as we depart.

Heading towards the stairs, we hear his shrill piping voice over the hubbub. ‘I’ll take a ceegar and sixpen’orth of brandy, your finest mind, and none of that watered-down horsepiss neither.’

Chapter 4

‘You know what will come of this,’ says Facey. ‘There will be a commission here.’

‘I know it,’ I reply, ‘but what choice do we have?’

What choice indeed? Sir Joshua Brookes is one of London’s most respected anatomists and a favoured customer of ours. In the past we have carried out a number of specific commissions on his behalf and always with considerable profit.

We are ushered from the establishment by the same ginger cove who brought us in. ‘Here is a lantern for you, sir. Our boy waits at Victoria Street, where you will be so kind as to pass it into his care along with a ha’penny for the lease.’ I take the lantern and drop tuppence into his palm as we emerge into the brooding darkness of Pye Street.

A few candles waver here and there in the rookery windows, a pathetic challenge to the supremacy the night. Without the lantern we would be utterly lost. We step out; this is not a place to linger, even for men like us.

On Victoria Street we duly relinquish the lantern to a slothful young snot-nose along with his ha’penny. A few yards along is a stand where the Hackneys wait. Our driver is surly and resentful but after some back and forth agrees to fare of three shillings, which leaves us two deaners in the purse.

We are whisked up St James’, Piccadilly and Regent Street like a couple of West End swells before heading east on Oxford Street.

‘Never fret now, Sammy,’ says Facey, lounging back in his seat as though born to it. ‘We can always decline should the task prove not to our taste.’

‘We decline and Brookes will offer his trade to others of our calling.’

‘That is a consideration, certainly,’ agrees Facey, adjusting his stained bandage.

The cab halts before an imposing sandstone villa. ‘At any rate, let us hear him out and give the thing due thought. We have birds in bushes aplenty but this is our only bird in hand for the nonce.’

I hand the surly cabby three shillings in full settlement, but he balks at this. ‘No extra then? No perquisite for a swift, safe and comfortable journey?’

I’m keen to hold back as much of the purse as possible, given our current shortage of the readies. ‘I cannot deny your skills whip and rein and but what remains in this purse is our only means. We are but working men like yourself, sir.’

The cabby spits. ‘G’arn, you scabby fellow. This is what comes of allowing dregs to ride, when by rights you should employ shanks’ pony, ‘stead of mine. You and Pirate Conrad there.’

‘What do you say, cocky?’ inquires Facey, approaching the driver, ‘dregs is it?’ The driver shifts away, the altitude of his perch precludes Facey having at him. ‘Pirate Conrad, is it?’ Facey paces around the vehicle seeking an opportunity to score a blow.

From his vantage point, the cabby retorts, ‘Dregs, I say. Men of your sort ought not be allowed to ride a cabriolet. I knewed it when I took your fare. I sha’nt make that mistake again. Gee’on!’ With that he flicks his whip at the pony.

Facey’s huge fist whips out catching the beast just above its eyes. The pony staggers, forelegs buckling to the cobbles.

‘You just punched my fucken’ hoss, you cunt.’

‘I did, and if you come down from that perch I will apply the selfsame treatment to you.’

The pony struggles to its feet as the cabby flails away frantically, ‘I will have the law on you for this.’

Facey shrugs. ‘Then you must quit the metropolis and ply your trade elsewhere, for if the law and me ever exchange words at your behest, I will seek you out you and murder you in your bed. Then after, I will punch your horse as many times as I please.’

The pony, as though aware of the threat, staggers away into the night under the whip of his chastened master.

Facey hauls on the gleaming brass bell pull.

We are admitted by an elderly, liveried servant who, expecting our arrival, ushers us up a flight of stairs into sizeable but crowded rooms.

There are suspended skeletons aplenty here of course, as befits a man of anatomy. Facey and me have no fear of such objects, but the multitude of shelves surrounding us are crammed with glass jars containing a variety of strange, gelatinous objects, which give me a sense of unease. It is full as an egg and difficult to move about in such a space without endangering some article of preserved flesh or bone. Facey and me squeeze ourselves into a small window seat, maintaining a state of rigidity for fear of breakage or incident.

It is not long before Brookes arrives in a state of undress, wiping his hands on a towel.

‘Ah, Mr Facey and Mr Samuel, my thanks for attending this summons. I am most grateful.’

‘Think nothing of it, sir. You were most generous in your disbursement of expenses. It is not every day that Sammy Boy and me are treated to a clop through the West End in a Hackney.’

‘This is not an every day commission. You will not have been in this part of the house before, I think?’

‘No, sir. Never.’

We have only ever been given our commissions at the dead of night and at the tradesmen’s entrance. It is quite something to have been admitted into the bowels of the house. It must be important to Brookes for him to take such a chance.

‘Here is my museum, or what remains of it. I have been forced to sell a great deal of my collection but this is yet the best of it. Now that you are here, you may look around if you wish. It should interest gentlemen of your calling. Ordinarily it would cost you two shillings but since we are friends, I will not charge you.’

‘Much obliged,’ says Facey, rising carefully, ‘I will take a gander.’

I get to my feet and examine the jars on the shelf nearest. To my horror a twisted double baby peers back at me from inside the glass.

‘Encephalitic conjoined twins. An aborted foetus,’ explains Brookes.

I have no idea what he’s talking about but in the neighbouring jar floats a terrible six-fingered hand.

I recoil, take a deep breath and retreat to the soothing familiarity of a stuffed, striped horse.

‘Now that is a Quagga. From the continent of Africa and quite rare.’

Rarer still, I imagine, should there be an African Facey over there treating them as he does their European cousins.

On another shelf is what appears to be a human heart, mounted on a wooden block. The heart has a complicated network of red and blue pipes leading away, tapering off to ever more tiny filaments.

‘Beautiful, is it not, Mr Samuel?’

‘It is indeed, sir. I know this to be a heart but I do not recognise the streams and rivulets here.’

‘It is not a true thing of flesh but taken from life all the same. Those are the veins and arteries, which attach to any man’s heart, feeding into a gossamer net of capillaries. We fill them with coloured wax and mount them, so. It is not our design which renders them beautiful, but God’s own work.’

‘And by rendering with wax, you will make them last, forever?’

Brookes shakes his head, sadly.

‘No, Mr Samuel. Nothing here is permanent. Though I would wish it otherwise. In time, the wax dries out and becomes friable. The structure cracks and wilts and becomes quite meaningless. And so the work must be done again. Even my jars filled with a potent preservative cannot protect the unique flesh contained within from time and ultimately, decay.’

‘I have an acquaintance who has pondered long and deep on this very subject.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Whose endeavors, like your own, are fated to melt and muddle into flux until they are quite disappeared. But she is content with her condition since she believes that the beautiful things in this world are eph...ephemeral in nature. To perceive an object as truly beautiful, it must be framed by impermanence.’

Brookes gazes at me for a moment or two, astonished. ‘Why, Mr Samuel, I am quite taken aback. You have given me something to think on. And not a small idea, neither. May I shake your hand?’

‘You may, sir. Though as I say, it is not my own philosophy.’

There is a clatter from the far room. Facey reappears clutching shattered porcelain relics. 'I hope this figurine was not worth so much, Mr Brookes. I am too big and clumsy a fellow for rooms of this kind.'

'No matter, Mr Facey. The time has come to discuss our business.'

We take our seats at the window. Brookes pulls up a spindly straight-backed chair and settles himself, facing us. 'In the early hours of Friday morning a body was discovered in a Bentinck Street doorway. Accordingly, the corpse was carried with all speed to the Coach and Horses tavern on the corner of Poland Street, where a coroner's inquest was assembled by dusk of the same day. As a householder of good standing in this locality, I was summoned to attend.

'Though attired in the style of a well-bred young man of fashion, the face and physique of the corpse were of indeterminate gender. Additionally, the hair was long and lustrous and bore the signs of the curling tongs. On closer examination, the breasts were unremarkable, but upon removal of the nether garments the body was found to be what a man of science would term an hermaphrodite.'

'I know this word' blurts Facey, 'neither man nor woman but an half an' halfer. Offering a bit of both worlds, as it were, down there.'

'Great heavens,' exclaims Brookes, jolting back in his chair, 'you gentlemen are full of surprises tonight.'

'Education is the ticket, Mr Brookes. Sammy and me endeavor to better ourselves daily. Why, only this morning I was required to render my opinion upon some fine art pieces.'

I presume by this he means not booting Rosamund up the arse. But I keep my own counsel on the subject, allowing the art critic and man of culture his moment of glory.

‘Indeed?’ nods Brookes, courteously.

‘Please continue,’ I insist.

‘Since there were no outward signs of foul play, no significant marks on the body and suchlike, the inquest has returned an open verdict. I have my own suspicions but there is unlikely to be further investigation. There were no identifying documents, so the body will remain at the Coach and Horses until it is claimed. It will not be, I am sure of it. In consequence, it will be collected by the parish to be buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave, two days hence.’

‘Then the hoist must be from the Coach and Horses?’

‘Precisely. You are familiar with the tavern?’

‘I am.’ Facey sucks his teeth. ‘But I must tell you that this is not a resurrection matter, sir, but something far more hazardous. For this is no mere churchyard disturbance, it is housebreaking, no less: a serious offence carrying heavy penalties under the law. We are not the fellows for this task. You require cracksmen, sir.’

Brookes raises a hand. ‘I cannot. I am not acquainted with men of that stamp and have no wish to be. I understand your reluctance, but I promise you will be well compensated. You have no idea what a prize this is for an anatomist, what a rara avis. Such a specimen might come along only once in a generation, if at all. Gentlemen, I must have this body at any cost.’

Facey rubs his hands along his greasy keks before moistening anxious lips. He screws his face, rubs his hair and tugs at his ears as though gripped by strongly conflicting desires. Frankly, he’s laying it on a bit thick in my opinion but old Brookes seems to be eating it up. The man leans in, a desperate expression on his countenance.

‘Well, sir,’ announces Facey. ‘We will do it, on account of you always having been a decent, fair-minded gent to us.’

Brookes leans back in his chair and sighs in relief as though divested of some heavy burden. ‘I thank you. You have no idea what this means to me.’

‘I do hope it means a good few sovereigns to you, sir,’ replies Facey.

‘How does one hundred sound?’

‘Holy Mother of Christ,’ somebody whispers. Then I realize it was me.

‘We will do it thrice over for such a sum,’ says Facey, ‘the raree aviary is a good as yours, sir.’

Brookes stamps two times sharply with his heel to summon the servant before rising to his feet. We shake hands.

‘I hope you will not be offended if my man shows you out through the tradesman’s portal. I cannot have suspicion thrown on me, since I have already been party to the inquest and my interest in such curiosities is well-known.’

‘Indeed not, sir. Front door, side-door, tradesmen’s, it is all one to us,’ Facey has become quite breezy at the promise of an easy hundred sovereigns.

We follow the servant who shows us out of a side entrance into a pitch-black alley before softly closing the door behind us.

‘Well, Sammy Boy, the wheel of fortune has turned tonight and no mistake,’ announces Facey, rubbing his hands. I detect the gleam of his teeth through the gloom.

‘Round and round, like some strange fairground ride. I do not care for such diversions, they have always made me hurl the cat.’

We exit the alley onto Great Marlborough Street, which is well furnished with gas lamps as befits a thoroughfare full of grand villas.

‘Listen, Sammy, I do believe I can hear the beautiful sound of one hundred gold sovereigns calling out to me,’ he begins to croon in horrible falsetto, ‘Come, Facey, I have kept myself pure for your hands alone. A hundred sovs, not a penny less. Here am I awaiting your caress...’ He chuckles and picks up the pace. I am forced to trot to keep up with his long, eager strides. In double quick time we cover the few hundred yards or so and arrive at the Coach and Horses on the corner of Poland Street.

Chapter 5

Facey throws open the doors and shoves his way to the counter. It is very late but the place is still crowded, mainly sporting types and a few of the younger West End toffs. But there is still a sprinkling of the disreputable: cyprians and mollishers by my reckoning, discreetly touting for a little trade. On the whole though, the Coach and Horses is a good house, and tolerates very little in the way of lewd or low behavior. This is the kind of establishment I dream of. The counter is formed from polished dark wood with brass railings, well-upholstered chairs with button backs have been furnished for the comfort of patrons, while sporting prints adorn the dark green papered walls. A fire burns brightly and I detect the welcoming aroma of good cigar smoke and brandy fumes.

For once, mindful of its gleaming surface, Facey does not rap the counter with the edge of a coin. Instead, he waits respectfully for the attentions of our host, a man of middle-age, but well-muscled and thick-set. From behind, his left ear resembles a cauliflower and when he turns to face us it is evident that his nose has been broken more than a few times. Few enough would need to be told that this man has been a pugilist.

The hammered countenance erupts into a monumental grin as he catches sight of us. ‘Now, there’s a sight for sore eyes,’ he announces in a deep bass voice. He unfastens his apron and addresses the Can, ‘Be so good as to fetch the hot fixings, Ned, quick as you like. I have here a couple of old and dear friends to attend.’

Without further comment he ushers us, still grinning, into the snug. The little room is mostly empty, but every bit as comfortable as the public. We settle ourselves into a trio of leather armchairs round a small table. Our host gazes at Facey,

appraising the stained bandage before shaking his head in mild disapproval.

‘Speaking of sore eyes, I see you’ve been letting your left drop again, young man. It always was a failing in you.’

Facey grins sheepishly. ‘Ah, Tom. You know that reprimands never did much service with me.’

Tom Canon sighs, ‘I know it. But it is good to see you, nevertheless.’ With that he extends a paw, the two of them shake hands vigorously, exhibiting their power. Tom’s grip is still firm and I note that his fist is every bit as large as Facey’s own.

Tom turns to me grinning, ‘And young Sammy, you have not been able to train him better?’

We shake, mercifully, with less robustness on Tom’s part as he would otherwise have had my arm off. ‘He is a stubborn ox and will not be yoked by any man, sir. As I think you well know.’

Tom laughs. The Can appears bearing a tray of cut lemons, sugar, hot water, brandy, spices, a small mixing bowl and three glass tumblers.

We sit in companionable silence while the can mixes our toddy. We nod and smile, well pleased with one another. And why should we not be? After all, Tom Canon has been a good friend to us over the years.

Canon is a pugilistic legend, having at one time held the heavyweight bare-knuckle champion’s belt, losing it but seven years ago to Jem Ward, the Black Diamond. Canon was himself brought on by those two greats, Tom Spring and Tom Cribb. And, at one time, might have made Facey his heir in the ring but it was not to be.

The Can bows and returns to his duties while Tom ladles out the hot mixture. We touch glasses.

Tom indicates Facey's bandage. 'You have not left off throwing the raws entirely then?'

'Only in the way of business, Tom. I am, on occasion, obliged to offer chastisement to men of less honest virtue than yourself. I have not come up to scratch for some years now.'

'Since last night, he has knocked on his back a Peeler, a Dollyman, a book making cove and a horse,' I add, not without a touch of pride.

'A horse?'

'Knocked him flat,' I affirm, feeling the toddy spread its warm, pleasant glow to my belly.

'You always did have a right hook on you, young man. Best I ever saw, including mine. Cribb's even. Could have made something of that, you know.'

'I know it, sir.'

'You got beat in the end though, by your own self. That terrible rage of yours. You never would learn the science and I'm sorry for it.'

'As am I, sir. Heartily sorry. But when it comes upon me I cannot think straight and consequences are of no concern.'

'Never fret. Not all men are born to perfect form for knuckling. You had the mauleys,' Canon taps his head, 'alas, not the noggin.'

Facey nods, subdued. Harsh words were exchanged on this subject when we last had dealings with Canon. I am thankful that sufficient water has passed under that bridge to avoid the revival of a quarrel.

Canon sips thoughtfully, ‘A horse, eh? I have never fought a horse. Though come to think on it there was a fighter back in ’23, one Billy Harrison. “Horse” Harrison they called him, on account of him having a punch like a mule’s kick. Horse’s arse more like. Punch of a kitten and a jaw of glass.’

We chuckle, prompting the ladling of more toddy. Tom gazes into his glass. ‘What a precious pair of rogues you were, to be sure.’

He’ll be thinking on our flowers, I’ll wager. Back before Tom owned his own place, between bouts he worked as the can over at the Lamb and Flag, Shoreditch. Facey and me were only youngsters at the time and made our living selling any old thing we could get our hands on, fruit and vegetables that had fallen off the market barrows. As well as plenty that hadn’t.

For a while we had a nice bit of fakery going with the blooms from the market. Ones that hadn’t sold all day and were starting to wilt, we’d buy the lot for a song then tickle them up by sticking them in a bit of sugar-water overnight. By morning, with a lick of paint, clipping and crimping, mostly they were good as new, fresh as a daisy, so to speak. We tried to sell a bunch to Tom, but he was too fly and up to all the tricks of the street. He gave us the bum’s rush along with a good kick in the kecks for our trouble.

In time though he took a shine to us and threw us a bit of work as potboys and hauling the barrels.

In truth, it was Facey he liked the cut of. Tom rated Facey as a comer and set to train him up for the scratch, with me as second. Of course, Facey being Facey would never take to being told, nor would he learn the science of the thing and so we parted company. Some hard words were spoke but to look at the pair now you would not think it.

Facey grins and raises his glass, 'Tom, you have done very well without us about your neck. A fine living you have got for yourself.'

'Aye, I cannot deny it. And so as to yours, gents.' He coughs delicately, 'What is your own living these days?'

Facey downs his toddy. 'Tom, if it were any man but you I would say, "this and that and a bit of the other". But you are the honestest cove I ever came across, so I will tell you straight that we are resurrection men.'

Tom Canon nods, sips his toddy and says, 'I am a taverner, not a beak. It is not for me to sit in judgment on any man for his livelihood.'

'Thank you, Tom. I take that very kindly,' says Facey offering his hand.

Tom shakes and makes a wry face. 'Well then, I expect you are here to see what I have in my cellar.'

'Indeed we are.'

Tom picks up candle and scone from a nearby table and ushers us down a set of whitewashed stairs into his tavern cellars.

Barrels of all sizes line the walls down here. A small trestle to one side boasts a collection of cellerman's tools: wooden mallet; bungs; stopcocks and the like. The air is chilled and the sharp odour of strong spirits fills the air. The irregular light from Tom's candle illuminates a single empty table in the centre of the room.

'What have you done, Tom? Bundled the body into a barrel of brandy, like old Lord Nelson?'

'I have done no such thing,' replies Tom, turning towards us with his candle.

'The body is neither preserved nor concealed. It is gone.'

Chapter 6

‘If you are done, I will have that cracklin’ off your plate, Sammy Boy, for I am sharp set,’ announces Facey, before pronging the fatty remains of the bacon on my plate. His left eye now covered with a fresh linen bandage, dispensed by Tom who is well schooled in such matters. The flesh around it glistens with Eddie’s greasy salve.

We have passed the night on truckle beds in an attic room. Tom sits with us in the snug while we make short work of a hearty breakfast. ‘Fill up now, lads. Bellies and pockets both,’ orders our host. I am full to bursting but with Tom’s encouragement I cram a few heels of bread and a wedge of cheese into my pockets. ‘You’ll take a dish of tea?’

‘No, Tom, small beer will suffice for us working folk.’

Our host pours himself a dish of steaming tea while we help ourselves to the small beer jug.

‘You have become quite the swell,’ remarks Facey.

Canon chuckles, ‘I cannot deny it. I am become used to a life of indolence and luxury as my belly will attest.’ He indicates his barely noticeable paunch. ‘The habit of taking tea at all hours of the day has crept up on me and now I cannot help it, ruinously expensive as it is. I find it sharpens the mind and stimulates the digestion and so I cannot believe it to be a vice. Much like the effects tobacco. Now surely you will at least take a cigar with me?’

‘I will, Tom,’ announces Facey, working away at a morsel of gristle in his teeth with a fork prong. ‘Seeing as how a breath of tobacco is not only one of mankind’s greatest pleasures but is a sovereign remedy against any ill, if taken regularly and without stinting.’

‘Likewise,’ I say.

Tom hands round cigars and lucifers from a leather caddy, which we gratefully accept before settling to the business at hand.

‘Night before last, it went. It would appear that your commission has been frustrated and I am sorry for it,’ offers Tom. Clouds of blue grey smoke punctuate the words as he fires up his cigar.

‘No ordinary commission.’ I explain. ‘For this was no ordinary corpse, but an anatomical rarity, worthy of a fine premium.’

Canon puffs away philosophically. ‘Doubtless it is others in your trade who have made away with it then. Were they kin they would have come and claimed the body like Christians, ‘stead of breaking into my establishment in the dead of night.’ He casts a sly glance at Facey, ‘It would seem you have been beaten to the punch.’

‘Very funny, Tom,’ sighs Facey. He gives me a wry look. ‘Teeth,’ he announces.

I nod.

‘What will you do now?’ asks Canon.

‘Naught,’ I say, ‘for you have the right of it. We have been beat to the prize by others in our profession, Teeth and Mutton, most like. A dangerous, determined pair. So, we must let the thing slide and onto other business.’

‘Two nights ago, by any chance did you catch sight of a long streak of marble-white piss two yards high wearing a Blucher coat? You would not have missed him with his great carthorse grin.’

‘And a tough-looking cove with mutton-chop whiskers?’ I add.

‘I did not, for I would have recalled such types. But it don’t signify since they had no need to enter my tavern.’

‘How so?’

‘The trap to the ale cellar has been tampered with. The bolts cut through. Entry was made direct from the street.’

‘Impossible,’ exclaims Facey, ‘you forget that I have spent many an hour hauling barrels for you, even were the barrel trap thrown wide, a grown man could never squeeze down that chute.’

‘Never a man of your size, to be sure. The corpse was slim and small in stature, almost that of a child, I believe it would have been possible to bring it out.’

‘For the body to come out perhaps, but what of the man to go down that chute and shift it? That would take some brawn. Lest you are saying, Tom, that the body upped and walked on its own account?’

‘It is a conundrum, certainly. Perhaps your Mister Mutton is small but mighty.’

‘He has strength enough but he is stout. And Teeth is a yard too long for such a feat.’

‘I cannot account for it then, gents.’

Facey puffs thoughtfully on the stub of his cigar. ‘Perhaps not Teeth and Mutton then.’

I expel a steady stream of smoke from my own cigar and watch as it billows upwards toward the ornamented plasterwork of Tom’s ceiling. It curls round the cornices, softly hanging like a gossamer blanket. I’m mulling on Mattheson’s desperate craving for this substance when the realisation comes to me.

‘No. Not Teeth and Mutton.’ I announce. ‘’Twas only last night Molly tipped them the wink.’

Facey's brow wrinkles, 'You're onto it there, Sammy Boy. Teeth and Mutton are out of it. The question is: who else has Mattheson been opening his yap to?'

'The question is: whether we should not give this up as a bad business and have done with it. In three days we will have our Rig.'

Tom stubs the end of his cigar. 'I will say it, young Facey, though it may rouse you to anger. I have been made uneasy this morning by the state of your glim and so must agree with Sammy. I have seen wounds of this kind. Have a care, young man, or you will lose the use of it entirely. Rest is the only remedy. And to that end you may remain under my roof for as long as it suits.'

Facey gently prods his eye through the bandage. 'Come, Tom, it is naught but a tap and the day I am brought to bed and pap from a blackened eye is the day I put on the hempen cravat and turn myself off.'

'I will not quarrel over what I think best for you. We have been down that road before.'

'Nevertheless it is kind in you, sir.' Facey extends his hand. Once again they shake vigorously like a pair of bedlamites at a broken street pump.

I have to say, I'm disappointed. I could have done with a few days loafing about in the Coach and Horses: good, hot grub, cigars and brandy on tap. In truth, I'm also concerned about the state of Facey's eye. Evidently it's exuding some form of discharge since the new bandage is already beginning to show a small brownish stain. My expression must have revealed these misgivings since Facey punches me lightly on the arm and says, 'Chin up, Sammy, we will go directly and have words with Molly. If all leads to a blind alley, well then, I will give up the thing and lay low 'til Thursday, just as you say.'

'In that event, you will return here, I hope?' offers Canon.

‘We will, sir. With thanks.’

‘Though it is no small thing to walk away from a hundred sovs,’ mutters Facey, hauling himself to his feet.

Tom Canon whistles. ‘One hundred sovereigns, is it? I never heard of such a thing. No ordinary commission to be sure. If I’d a known I’d have sold the bloody thing myself.’

There’s a round of good-natured backslapping, which leaves me gasping since I’m half the size of these brutes. Canon produces a small purse, which he throws in my direction. ‘If you will not stay and rest, then you will at least save your legs. Here is travelling money for you. A token, but all I can afford since this habit of taking tea has all but ruined me.’

‘Now, Tom, – ’

Tom raises a huge palm. ‘But me no buts, though should you succeed and some few of those hundred sovereigns were to find their way across my counter, you would not meet with objection from me.’

Facey grins as I pocket the purse. I can tell by the weight and shape of coin that there’s a good few shillings in there. We push our way out through the public, where business is already picking up at this mid-morning hour, and out into the street.

‘As I recall,’ says Facey, ‘Molly keeps lodgings in Spitalfields.’

‘When he has the tin,’ I reply. ‘When he is without means, who knows how or where he keeps himself?’

‘For the moment he is in funds. Teeth paid out a good few shillings last night and will not be best pleased with the worthless pup he has purchased.’

‘May he choke on it. So, we will surely find Molly where there is smoke to be had.’

‘Chinee George, I should say.’

‘Chinee George, to be sure.’

Chapter 7

There are no stands on Poland so we head north to Oxford Street. As we walk I glimpse Facey gingerly prodding at his eye. He will not admit to it, but I believe it is beginning to pain him. ‘What say we take the Omnibus ‘stead of a cab and use the balance of our shillings with Doctor Nero?’ I ask.

‘Nero is a quack and I would not trust him to tell a boil from a bum. I have told you, there is nothing amiss. A day or two and the glim will be as right as rain.’

‘What harm would it do to have a little physick put by? Just to be on the safe side? After all, we are heading in that direction and have the tin for it.’

‘Very well, Sammy, I can see you will not let the matter rest until I have been poked at and mauled by every sawbones in London. I will take one of Nero’s potions if it will have the effect of keeping you silent, which is about the only claim not yet made for his nostrums.’

From the stately elegance of Poland Street we emerge into the shocking noise and bustle of Oxford Street. This is the finest, as well as the longest and straightest, of London’s main arteries, extending from Hyde Park to Newgate Street and the City. Though, like the inhabitants, the buildings lining the thoroughfare are a peculiar mixture of wealth and decay; poverty and progress: elegant mansions alongside the Pantheon rub shoulders with ramshackle one-story tumbledowns. As far as the eye can see barrow and basket women obstruct the footway selling sweet oranges, flowers, oysters or songsheets. Men tout for business every few yards, and if they are not selling goods of their own, they are hawking on behalf of others by means of brightly painted hoardings held aloft or strapped to their bodies.

The road is no less congested, filled with horses, wagons, traps, cabs and conveyances of all description, all competing to reach their destination by the quickest means possible, yet succeeding only in creating a maelstrom of chaos and confusion yielding little forward momentum. Here and there, agile and brazen young street sweepers flit to and fro, guiding patrons through muck and peril for a few coppers.

One of the basket crones grips Facey's sleeve, 'Why, 'tis Admiral Nelson, risen from the dead. Buy a sweet orange, your lordship, do.'

Facey shakes her off with a savage grunt.

'But, sir, 'tis known as the naval orange,' the hag wheedles. Her cronies wheeze with laughter and for a moment I fear that Facey is going turn back and give her a clump, which would no doubt spell a swift end to the spindly wretch.

Thankfully, he grits his teeth and pushes on through the crowds.

Over a surging river of hats and heads I can detect the painted signboard of Nero's stand. "Nero. Master of physick." is picked out in florid capital letters painted white, bordered in red against a light blue background. The words, "Teeth, Lungs, Eyes, Lights & Bones - a speciality." attest to his fields of accomplishment, illustrated by the relevant body parts.

Nero's pitch is a portable booth on the footway, consisting of small stage with just enough room for a restraining chair and the sawbones himself. Nero is in the process of extracting a tooth from a costermonger and has drawn an audience of enthusiastic loafers. They watch with relish as Nero delves into the man's gob, rummages around and after some vigorous shaking and hauling produces a bloody, blackened tripod, pincer between finger and thumb. He holds it aloft. For a moment the air is filled with a terrible stench. 'I have it, ladies and gents, the offending article. A perfect extraction for your satisfaction. A vile and noxious molar

abstracted by the ministrations of Doctor Nero, roots an' all. No breakage, shattering, and consequent risk of post-procedural malaise. Ignore the stink, for that is commonplace and merely the release of poisonous fluids built-up under pressure within the jawbone - to be expected in a life-preserving procedure of this nature.'

The costermonger leans forward in the chair so far as the leather restraints on his arms will allow to cough and puke a concoction of blood, drool and pus across the boards.

The crowd applauds, though some of the more refined ladies appear somewhat faint.

'Fuck,' slurs the costermonger, 'tis almost bearable.'

'There,' announces Nero, 'you have heard it from his own lips. A man, so maddened by pain from this masticatory organ, who but an hour hence would have topped himself. Yet within minutes under the ministrations of Doctor Nero, has attested without solicitation that the agony is all but alleviated.'

The crowd bursts into applause as Nero releases the costermonger from his straps. Nero raises his hands. 'A moment, if you please. For the second part of my procedure I will administer the absolute remedy 'gainst pain and infection of the mouth and body: Nero's Sovereign Pancurial Linctus, ultimate paragoric for neuralgia, apoplexy, dropsy, pox, the bloody flux, female hysteria, rickets, whooping cough, blotch, blemish and coarseness of the skin. Many have found prodigious benefit with only a bottle or two, even the greatest in the land, though I am precluded by their elevated status from naming them here.' Nero places thumb and forefinger against his nose to exaggerate size and shape, provoking laughter and catcalls, for we understand by this signal that he refers to First Minister Wellington.

Nero pours a dose of Linctus onto a teaspoon and feeds it to the costermonger, followed swiftly by a second.

In a short while the costermonger rises to his feet, unsteady to be sure, but alive and in good spirits. The loafers whistle and hoot their approval. He gazes about, waving weakly in acknowledgment of the plaudits. 'Ladies and Gents, thankee. I do believe I am hale enough to haul a dozen baskets.' A solicitous wife and daughter hand Nero a few coins and usher him away to his labours. Onlookers surge around the booth, as Nero embarks on a brisk trade in bottles of his Pancurial Linctus.

We wait till the congregation has thinned to a handful of gawkers before stepping forward.

'May I be of service, gentlemen?' asks Nero, pocketing a final shilling.

'You do not know me, sir?'

Nero gives us a shrewd glance, satisfying himself that we are not splitters. 'I do not.'

I raise a leg of my kecks to reveal a small puckered scar.

'Ah, bless me, such beautiful scarification. A ball in the meat of the calf and a most satisfactory extraction, even if I do say so myself. I recall the work, now that you put me in mind of it.'

'Well, sir. I have another such for you here.'

'A ball is it?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'My associate has an injury, which may benefit from your ministrations.'

'I see.'

'So, I would be pleased if you were to minister to him.'

‘He seems a big, healthy cove with fine calves.’

‘His calves are not the issue.’

‘Very well. You must tell me what is amiss and I will inform you if I can be of assistance.’

‘You do not mark it?’

Nero looks Facey up and down for a moment.

‘I cannot see what ails.’

‘His orb, the glim is the problem, I should like your opinion on it.’

Nero considers Facey once again. ‘I had thought he was in fancy dress or coming it the dashing gallant with his eye patch. 'Tis all the rage these days.’

‘Beneath the eyeshade is a wound.’

‘Well, then I will examine it.’

I sense that Facey is growing irritable, lacking my faith in Nero’s skills. ‘You agreed to this, have patience,’ I hiss, and so he reluctantly allows Nero to take his arm and guide him to the chair. Nero straps him down.

‘First, a little of the Pancurial to take an edge off discomfort,’ announces Nero, indicating a box containing dozens more bottles and the sparse tools of his trade. Few indeed, since Nero is well known for extracting teeth employing only a prodigiously powerful thumb and forefinger. For more complicated interventions, such as mine, he relies on a simple cutting knife and a sharpened spoon.

Nero administers a couple of spoonfuls of the linctus, which Facey dutifully swallows, but not before throwing me a black look.

Nero carefully removes the bandage. The lids are closed, grossly swollen, leaking pus and blood. He prods a little before prising apart the swollen lids. Facey squirms in the chair. The orb itself is clouded and crusted provoking excited

muttering from the remaining loafers, titillated by the gory spectacle. I am not a man of qualification or judgment in these matters but what I see does not fill me with optimism.

Nero is of my thinking, 'The orb is much damaged and beginning to fester. It must come out, if this man is to thrive,' he informs me under his breath

Facey shakes his head, 'Tis merely a knock, but if it will content you, Sammy, I will take a bottle of the man's paregoric. It is not so bad.'

Nero looks doubtful. 'I fear this is beyond even the powers of my Pancurial.' He shakes his head dolefully at me and whispers, 'I can see that you require proof of my efficacy.'

Nero turns to address his audience, ever the showman and keen to stimulate further trade, he flourishes the spoon. 'Consider the humdrum spoon, Ladies and gentlemen. With this instrument we prolong and sustain our lives by drawing nourishment to the mouth. And yet, how many of you I wonder, have ever regarded this humble instrument as a life saviour?'

Nero pauses, scrutinising the crowd before bellowing, 'Hare. Show yourself, sir.'

A shambling, emaciated creature stumbles through the audience, one of the many beggars who infest the street hereabouts. A thick black bandage over both eyes suggests that he is blind, though it is no surety amongst this sort.

'Here, sir,' he calls, flailing his arms about for direction. A kindly old buffer sucking on an orange, steers him toward the booth.

Nero takes the beggar's hand and hauls him up to the tiny platform. I am forced to relinquish my place to make room, stepping down into the rapidly expanding crowd.

‘The gentleman you see before you is none other than the notorious William Hare.’ A gasp erupts from the onlookers, quickly becoming an angry buzz. But Nero is master of their moods, raising his huge hands in a placatory gesture. ‘Now, now, people. The infamous Burke, prime mover in the foul murders of Mary Paterson, Daft Jamie Wilson and Mrs Docherty, has long since received his reward, rightly scragged at the Scotch Lawnmarket for his heinous deeds. But take pity on this poor miscreant, for you will discover that William Hare did not, after all, evade the Lord’s justice.’

Nero prompts the beggar with a jab of the spoon in his ribs. The man swallows nervously and begins to speak in a hoarse voice with a hint of Irish burr. ‘Tis as you say, sir. I am William Hare and had imagined that by turning King’s evidence I would evade culpability for my part in that horrid work. But no. There was to be a reckoning right enough, swift and sure.’

The crowd is silent now, hanging on his very words.

‘Not long after the events, with which you are so familiar, I made my way to County Down of my birth country, intending to live quiet and go about my business. But in a short while I was discovered and beaten senseless by a mob of mechanics and laboring types.’ The man pauses to swallow once again, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down in his scrawny neck. ‘They mauled and pummeled me most grievous and flung me into a pit of lime, leaving me for dead. With some assistance thereafter I made escape and was able to take passage for London where I begged a crust here on the street. But the lime-pit had destroyed my eyes, filling them with foulness and corruption at the very risk of my life. It was only through the Christian charity of the good Doctor Nero, with spoon and paregoric that my life was preserved.’

With that the beggar unties his bandage and whips it away to reveal stark, puckered, empty cavities beneath.

The assembly gasps. With impeccable timing Nero raises his spoon aloft like a standard. ‘Aye, ladies and gentlemen. With this very spoon, through these very hands was his life conserved. Judge the work and the work alone. Yours is not to pronounce upon the character of the man for I remind you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. What say you to that, William Hare?’

‘Indeed, sir. To be sure, not a day has passed without prayer or regret and repentance for those dreadful deeds. Had it not been for your surgical skill and kindness I would for a certainty be a dead man, without hope of redemption.’

The audience is ecstatic. There’s nothing the London public enjoys more than grisly spectacle with a deeply satisfying moral conclusion. In that respect Nero’s performance is almost as good as a hanging. They show appreciation by flinging coppers onto the stage.

Hare replaces his bandage, drops to his knees and casts about the platform, fluttering hands blindly seeking farthings. Nero gazes down beaming, delighted to see that the crowd has now swollen to a considerable number. He raises the spoon again for silence.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, tarry a while. For you are about to witness that self-same procedure: an operation of the laudable spoon.’

The audience cheers. I gaze over at Facey who has been uncharacteristically quiet all this time, most likely under the dampening influence of Nero’s nostrum. He scowls down at William Hare, on hands and knees still, scrabbling around for coin. ‘William Hare, is it?’ he sneers, ‘You fool. You sad and cowardly rogue. Bring a fine profession into disrepute, would you?’ With that Facey launches a mighty kick from

the chair, catching Hare full in the arse of his kecks, sending him tumbling off the platform into the crowd, coppers scattering.

The mob howls with glee, momentarily beyond even Nero's control.

I take the opportunity to step back up into the booth and speak quietly into Nero's ear. 'Surely, you do not intend to spoon out his glim?'

'Indeed I do, sir. I will spoon him to health, sir. Trust me, young man, 'tis the best thing. Sans immediate intervention, poisons drawn to the wound will infuse and corrupt his body. In short, it is mortal.'

'You are certain of this?'

'I have seen it before. Many a time.'

'There is no other remedy?'

'Tis the only thing for it. Besides, the crowd will not have it any other way.'

'I do not care a fig for the wishes of the crowd. But desire only what is best for my partner,' I hiss.

The mob has quieted and waits expectantly. Nero abruptly turns away from me to address Facey, raising his voice for the benefit of the onlookers.

'Sir, I will employ my sharpened spoon to extract your poisoned orb. You may expect to feel pain for the briefest of moments as the optical cord is severed, but only for a second, for I will swiftly fill the cavity with powder of the coca plant, which will banish all feeling. Thereafter, you will require further tinctures of Pancurial Linctus. Let us say, for a week or so at regular intervals.'

'You will go to the devil,' bellows Facey, violently shaking his head, straining against the straps.

'One simple push, a half twist and the offending article will lie on my spoon, sir, never fear.'

A substantial crowd has now gathered, drawn in by the drama of an unwilling victim, and I am caught in an agony of indecision, unable to decide what is to be done for the best.

Facey refuses to keep his head still, frantically shifting from side to side as Nero advances. The spoon is only inches from his eye when he shoots me a look, furious and yet pleading at once.

‘No,’ I yell, ‘you will not take his glim.’

Nero turns on me and, for a moment, I think he might be about to spoon me in the face. Thankfully, he lowers the instrument. I brush past him and unbuckle the leather restraints holding Facey to the chair.

The mob is less than happy with this outcome and thwarted, begins to fling half-sucked oranges and oyster shells in our direction.

‘I am sorry for your wasted efforts, sir, but I cannot permit it,’ I bawl into Nero’s ear as we crouch to avoid flying fruit and sundry brickbats.

‘Think nothing of it, my dear fellow,’ grins Nero. ‘Never before have I drawn such a prodigious crowd. Only consider the quantity of Pancurial to be sold when they have regained their equilibrium. Besides,’ he says, indicating Facey, ‘sooner or later, you will come to me again, I have no doubt of it’

‘Well, then. In the meantime we leave you to your trade.’

‘You will surely take a few bottles for your trouble, I hope. 'Tis in the main a solution of opium along with a little arsenic and alcohol flavoured with licorice. Your friend, I think, will require it.’

Facey and me fill our pockets with bottles and quit the booth, forcing our way through the mob, who are now more interested in brawling with one another than the elevating spectacle of a medical procedure.

We find ourselves kerbside, where we are able to flag an omnibus. It is not full and so we are able to sit side by side. Facey replaces his bandage and with his one good eye examines his boots for a long while before announcing, ‘You are fortunate, Sammy Boy, that this Pancurial, in addition to banishing pain, imparts a feeling of wellbeing and a blanket sense of goodwill, otherwise I am all but certain that I would, at this moment, wish to chastise you severely with my fists.’

‘Here,’ I say, uncorking a bottle, ‘have another gobful then.’

Chapter 8

They do say that London is like a man reclining: the West End is his head, the shining face of our metropolis; the City, a great belly – the repository of trade, our sustenance; the East End, his arse.

Certainly no one would mistake Whitechapel for a shining face, not with the combined stink and fume of the tanneries and breweries hereabout, yet there are signs of advancement, like the new Pavilion Theatre, rising above the jumble. Energy too, for it will not be kept down entirely. It will not allow itself to remain forever the bowel of the metropolis without a struggle.

In some ways Whitechapel resembles an individual from my philosophy: the congregation of foul, suffering alleys, pressing in at all sides, weighs on the place with the ballast of despair. Yet it is like one of those men who, born to every disadvantage, strives to elevate himself in spite of all.

Facey and me head north up through Essex Street, giving onto Red Lion Street. There is life and commerce here, mainly rag trade; slop shops and the like; as well, there is the run-off from Spitalfields fruit and vegetable market: vigorous young street arabs, like Facey and me ten years back, hawking pilfered stock. But as we turn into White's Row, the lassitude of poverty quickly overwhelms and begins to sap the spirit. That lifeless, dismal sense intensifies as we approach Dorset Street. If the East End is truly the arse, then here is its product: squalor beyond even the Westminster rookeries. And here is a house we know only too well. For those who frequent this place are the forgotten ones: men and women who have fallen so far that they do not care how they live or even whether they survive at all; whose only desire is for the next pipeful. And, since they are past caring for themselves, they are seldom missed

when the smoke claims them, as it inevitably does. Chinese George's smoking den has always been a fruitful source of merchandise for men in our trade.

The rotting front door stands open, hanging from its hinges. There is no purpose to securing this abode, since there is nothing within of any value, aside, of course, from the tin Chinese George keeps about his person.

The hallway is empty, derelict as always, the upper floor unreachable, the stairway having long since collapsed. And so we descend; a flight of stairs, worn hollow in the centre by the ceaseless footfall of the damned. I know what hell is like, for I have been here many times to collect. Hell is a long, low room lit only by the guttering flame of an oil lamp suspended over the doorway.

The place is filled with cramped and terraced berths, resembling a dormitory or ship's cabin. In each berth is a recumbent figure, head thrown back, limbs in mindless disarray, or hunched, knees to chin, over a pipe. Most lay silent, but some mutter to themselves, others talk together in curious, low, monotonous voices. The air is thick and heavy with the smell of brown opium smoke. Through the gloom appear little circles of red light, now bright, now faint, as the bowls are sucked. A big Chin wearing a stovepipe hat moves silently from berth to berth, checking for signs of life in the bowl and in the breast. From time to time his hand expertly worms its way into coat or trouser pocket of the particularly insensible. Invariably coming up empty.

A moon face looms from out of the shadows.

'It would seem that business is good,' remarks Facey in a half whisper. The crack of doom would not wake half the occupants of this room, yet for some reason, it seems right, in this place, to speak softly.

‘Yes,’ replies Chinee George, elongating the word to a sibilant hiss.

‘We are here for Molly Mattheson; we must speak with him.’

‘Yes.’

‘He has been here, Chinee George?’

‘Yes.’ Chinee George’s face reveals nothing, not even his age. His skin is perfectly smooth, though oily and somewhat yellow, like butter. Nothing moves in that face but the eyes, which dart about from time to time.

‘He is here now?’

Chinee George shakes his head.

We have done business with this Celestial for four years, yet still we know little of him, only that he is protected in this enterprise by shadowy and powerful interests. He favours dirty ship’s slops: baggy canvas shirt and trousers cut-off at the calf, though he must surely be a man of considerable means by now. In truth, we do not even know his name. But it is unlikely to be George. We are not his only associates neither. By our reckoning, Chinee George does business with a half-dozen or more resurrection crews across London on a rota system known only to himself. From time to time a small, oriental messenger-boy appears in The Feather’s or The Fortunes of War. He says nothing, giving us only a meaningful glare, but we understand by his presence that another pipe-fiend has carked it in this place and Chinee George wishes us to dispose of the corpse. We collect the body and split the proceeds down the middle. We have never tried to rook him, though this is only because we are afeared to: Facey believes him to possess second sight and a Chink faculty for laying a potent curse.

‘Do ee knowee where Molly isee?’ Facey enunciates each word carefully in his half-whisper, though I am quite certain that Chinee George has no problem understanding plain English.

‘Yes.’

Facey sighs.

‘Will you tell us then?’ I ask in the same half-whisper.

‘Yes.’ Chinee George’s black eyes flick across at me and I swear I detect the beginnings of a smile.

Reluctantly, I unload a shilling from Tom’s purse, which I press into his hands.

Suddenly Chinee George is all pidgin prattle: ‘Got plenty tin, gone back Spitfield crib. Two hours pass, huh. Half ball took.’

‘Thankee kindly, George,’ I say, extending my hand.

Chinee George glances down at my hand, immobile as a statue. ‘Yes,’ he says.

Molly is known to keep irregular lodgings in two places. The most likely being Thrawl Street, which has the advantage of being close by, only a short walk up White’s Row, across Fashion Street and down Osborn.

The building is typical of the rookery; a blackened sandstone exterior, three stories high, infested with dippers, vagabonds, drunks, brutes and mollishers, living hand to mouth, sometimes upwards of a dozen to a room.

Naught is safe nor sacred in these places, not even the inhabitants, which is why Facey and me choose not to hold a permanent crib and keep our property portable.

We enter the dank hallway to find a family of seven encamped on the first flight of stairs. The head of the household, a massive cove in laborer's garb stained red with brick dust, is laid out to the sixth step, snoring, dead drunk to the world. His wife, a tiny, bonneted red-haired woman cuts bread and butter for her five hungry-looking children. We step around, giving them a friendly nod: Irish, without a shadow of a doubt.

On the third flight we find a young boot black sitting on the top step with his little box of brushes, piping his eyes and wailing most pitifully. 'What ails, young snot-nose, it cannot be so bad as that?' inquires Facey. I have an idea that his good humour is down to a few extra sips of the Pancurial on the way over.

The youngster wipes his razzo on the sleeve of his tight, threadbare jacket, leaving a glistening slug trail against the dark, greasy wool. 'That's all you know about it, mister.'

'What say I give you a ha'penny if you can tell me where Henry Mattheson resides, sometimes called Molly?'

'Tis is why I am here. You will keep your ha'penny and I will inform you gratis. That Molly bugger is in that there set of rooms 'long with others of his 'quaintance, who are no less buggers and brutes.' The boy snorts a prodigious quantity of snot as he indicates the fourth door along the landing.

'Then what's amiss, boy, that you should be sat here spouting the brine like Nelly Bligh, 'stead of at your trade?' I ask.

'Not half a hour previous that Molly bugger strolls up to my pitch, and I thinks to myself: now here's a down-at-heel gent, what wants his boots revived, but no. He says to me if I was to 'company him to his rooms here I was to receive a silver shilling for pulling at his parts. Well, sirs, a silver shilling is twice what I can take in

on a good day and so I says "I will".' The lad pauses to wipe another snot trail across the sleeve. 'For what harm could it do, since to my mind 'tis nothing more than a hauling at the street pump, which I must go at each and every morning to wash the blacking from my face and hands?'

'He rooked you then, is that it?' says Facey, grinning.

'No, sir. Not that Molly hi'self. But t'other gent.'

'Other gent?'

'A swell. Oh, very grand to look at, but still a bugger and a brute for all his airs and fancy togs. For when me and Molly comes up these very stairs he is waiting with his 'complice, another flash-looking cove.'

'"Molly, my dear," says the swell, "we have been waiting on you. I could not leave my card, since there was no steward to leave it with. There being naught but a tribe of savages occupying the hallway." And then this gent pulls a brown ball from his pocket, which Molly is very happy to see and which the gent give him.'

The boy rummages in his box for a filthy rag to mop his tears. Boot blacking from the rag spreads dark circles round his eyes, so now the urchin resembles a small but indignant owl. "'Now Molly, leave the youngster alone for we have business with you," says the gent, pulling at his elbow. "But sirs," I protest, all la-di-dah politeness-like, "Excuse me, pray, for I have a prior engagement here." With that, the brute laughs, clumps me round the flapper and kicks me flying down the stairs. Now I have lost a silver shilling, my ear rings like a church bell and I am sore bruised about the ribs.'

The boy's lower lip begins to tremble again. I delve into our purse and produce a silver sixpence. 'Here,' I say, 'take this for your lost trade today. In the future you will avoid men of his stamp, I hope.'

The lad snatches the coin and squirrels it away in his box. ‘Oh, thank you, sir. And do you wish for a tug on your truncheon now?’

Facey guffaws.

‘No, I do not. Get on with you before I am next to kick you down the stairs.’

The urchin scuttles away clutching his box.

Facey tries the door to Molly’s rooms. It is not locked. We push it open to reveal a single, darkened chamber, the only window being stuffed with rags. Originally, this must have been three rooms but the partition walls have been demolished, leaving only empty wooden framework, like some archeological site. Rotting straw mattresses lie scattered about the boards, some with stained blankets, most without. At present, Molly and the two swells are the only occupants. Molly lies on a mattress by the window, while the two young men are perched on a couple of seats formed from old packing cases, the only articles of furniture in the room.

One of the young men gazes up at us with distaste. ‘We are engaged in private discourse here. Be good enough to conduct your business elsewhere.’ He dismisses us with a languid wave.

‘We have business here, sir,’ replies Facey evenly.

The young man looks up sharply, evidently more accustomed to his commands being obeyed. From what I can see, he is tall and well-made with a full head of jet-black hair, fashionably curled: a strikingly handsome fellow. In his riding togs, hessian boots, calfskin breeches, royal blue cutaway coat and pristine-white choker he is as out of place in this room as a fish is out of water. ‘The business of sneak-thievery, no doubt,’ he sighs, waving us away once more. ‘Well, then you may take whatever you find, and welcome to it. It is none of our concern.’

He returns his attention to Molly, lying there before him, barely conscious, muttering, coughing and groaning softly. Meanwhile, his companion, equally well-dressed, though lank-haired and sharp-faced, prepares a pipe, filling the bowl with a large brown chunk of opium. He passes it across to the dark-haired young man, who sparks up a Lucifer and sets it to burning. The weasel-faced cove then crouches at Molly's head, raising him up by the shoulders.

'Come now, Molly. Here is another pipe for you. Smoke up, there's a good fellow,' says the dark gent, pressing the smouldering pipe into Molly's limp hands.

'Our business here is with Mattheson,' says Facey.

The dark-haired young man slowly rises to his feet. He is indeed tall, having perhaps an inch or so over Facey. 'What? You still here?' The languid manner betrayed by anger flaring in his pale blue eyes.

'Still here. And here we will remain 'til we have spoke with Mattheson.'

The young man stands quite still, only his fingers move, twisting the leather braid of his horsewhip. 'Mattheson is at his pipe, as you can plainly see. You will get nothing from him of any substance.'

Mattheson is seized by a fit of coughing. The sharp-faced cove slaps his back repeatedly before feeding him more of the pipe.

'It appears to me that Mattheson has had quite enough pipe.'

'That is not for you to say.'

'But I do say it.'

For a moment I am quite certain that the young man is about to strike out at Facey with the horsewhip. Then abruptly, he favours us with a smile and an ironic little bow. 'Come, Phillip, fetch the horses. We have been here quite long enough. I shall have to burn these togs, for I fear the stink of this place will never come out,' He

makes his way to the door. The sharp-faced associate leaves Molly to the smoke and scuttles after.

We step quickly over to the mattress and crouch at Molly's side. His fingers are slack, yet still manage to retain their grip on the pipe. The eyes are open but the lids flutter and I cannot say if there is any recognition in them. 'Molly,' I hiss. 'We are here about the body you talked of.'

'Bobby,' repeats Molly.

'Body. The one you spoke of last night.'

'Night,' he echoes.

'Here,' says Facey, lifting Molly by his scrawny shoulders, 'leave it to me.' He begins shaking Molly so violently that he drops the pipe and I hear his teeth rattle. 'Who ... else ... knows ... about ... this ... body?'

Molly pouts, reminding me of the little boot black. I fear he is about to burst into tears. 'Bobby. Poor Bobby.'

I retrieve the pipe holding it just out of reach. 'You may have your pipe, when you have told us what we need to know,' I say.

Facey slaps him hard. The eyes roll back in his head. Facey drops him to the mattress, seemingly insensible.

Of a sudden Molly smiles, the eyes flicker open and appear to focus.

'Molly, listen now. That creature; the Man-Woman. Who else knows of it?'

'Beautiful Bobby. So ...badly used. '

'Bobby? Molly, who is Bobby?'

'Bobby, bobbing back up.' Molly chuckles to himself. 'Should never have come back,' he whispers, 'Never.' Ever so slowly his eyes shut.

Chapter 9

Facey raps on the scarred counter for a couple of brown porters.

‘Will I take the pins then, Mr Facey?’ says Fearon, passing over the bottles.

‘You will, for they will not be needed tonight.’ Facey slides the pins from his long pockets and hands them across, along with a coin, to Fearon, who dips out of sight to store them somewhere beneath his counter.

Facey and me find empty places on a bench near the wall and broach the porter. I reach down into my own pockets to unload the bread and cheese from Tom’s breakfast table. For a while, we gorge ourselves in silence for we are both thirsty and sharp set from the labours of the day.

I take a swig and sigh with pleasure at the strong, malty brew. Facey pops a hunk of cheese into his mouth and drains the last of his bottle. ‘Take your ease while you can, Sammy Boy. For there is to be another trek across London, this time on the soles of our own boot leather.’

‘To what purpose?’

‘Why, we must have our tin and so tonight will renew our acquaintance with Nicodemus Reilly at the cockpit. I cannot allow such a debt to stand.’

‘And what of Brookes’ commission?’

‘What of it?’

‘We are abandoning the chase?’

‘We have lost the scent. What more is to be done?’

‘I do not know but it seems a very hard thing to be bilked of such a bounty.’

‘Well, we must take as we find. Besides, we are capable of little enough without readies.’

‘But is there aught to this “Bobby”, would you say?’

‘There is no Bobby, nor Robert that I know of amongst men of our trade and I cannot imagine that Molly means the Crushers. All we have are the addled ramblings of smoke-fiend. At the best of times, Molly’s words are scarcely to be relied upon, but after so many pipefuls there is no sense left in him at all. No, that trail is gone cold.’

‘Molly keeps elevated company these days, it seems.’

‘No better than he, for all their flash togs. There is a base, vicious inclination about the tall one, which cannot be concealed from a man such as myself. I have seen it afore at sea and in the ring. A certain savage glee about the eyes, which reveals a taste for inflicting pain. There was a boatswain’s mate on the Billy Ruffian who made too free with the rope’s end; took over much pleasure in starting the men. Went overboard one night off Rochefort and not one soul amongst five hundred saw it happen. The big cove has that selfsame look, for I marked it well as he was standing afore me thinking whether or no to try for a cut with that horsewhip of his.’

I attempt to conceal a smile, cramming the last crust of bread into my mouth.

‘I am not blind, Sammy. I see that you take me for a hypocrite.’

‘I have said no such thing,’ I reply, coughing breadcrumbs.

‘I understand it from your smile. I will admit that, on occasion, I am more inclined to fling the mauleys than most, but what is done by me is done in hot blood and not in cold. I take no pleasure in it. There is the difference.’

I make no reply, but deliberately finish off my porter and wipe the crumbs from my kecks.

He sighs, ‘Very well then, Sammy. Other than in the case of Spicer.’

I grin. ‘So, tonight you will be content to let me to play principal in our dealings with Reilly and keep a tight rein on that hot blood of yours?’

‘I will, Sammy Boy.’

‘For it seems that Reilly is Pimlott and Chuffington’s man and we do not wish to brush up against that pair, howsomever slantendicular.

Ordinarily, here in The Feathers men take care not to stray into the space of those in cahoots, lest they overhear something they should not. But for some time now a stocky cove in a long tarp coat has been slowly and quite deliberately inching closer. He keeps his back to us but still, he is overstepping. I am about to object when of a sudden, he turns to face us. It is clear that he is not here to drink, his arms are concealed beneath the voluminous coat, which he wears about his shoulders. ‘Forgive me, gents, but I could not help but overhear the tail-end of your conversation. And it is wondrous strange that you should happen to mention Messrs Pimlott and Chuffington at the same ‘zact moment I am here on their very commission. And stranger still that you pronounce a profound reluctance to have dealings with them since they have so very urgent a desire to meet with you. There, gents, what do you say to that?’

‘Bugger off,’ snarls Facey.

The man’s smile disappears. ‘Do not be so disoblging, Mr Facey. You will please to ‘company me to the offices of my masters as I have asked.’

Facey rises to his feet and stands over him. Although the man appears to be powerfully built, Facey has a good few inches on him.

‘Who says so?’

The interloper allows his coat to fall open, revealing two hexagonal steel barrels aimed at us. ‘Why, this pair of barkers do and they will have the final word on the matter. Come now, gents. For I should be just as happy to put a ball in each of your bellies and think naught of it.’

The irons never waver as he withdraws them just sufficiently to benefit again from the concealment of his coat. I tense, ready to jostle his aim but it is evident that the fellow is one who both knows and enjoys his business. 'You are likely nimble enough to evade me in this crowd, Mr Samuel, but should you attempt it, I promise, it will go worse for your partner who, with all his bulk, makes a most handsome target.'

'Easy now,' says Facey, 'we will come quiet, since we have given your masters naught to reproach us for.' There is nothing for it, so Facey and me allow ourselves to be herded out through the public and into the street, where a private growler awaits, along with a driver.

We climb aboard. Our custodian cautiously placing himself on the opposing seat, he shrugs off the coat entirely to reveal a pair of expensive, engraved pistols, still trained at our guts.

'I see you are assessing the firepower, gents. Should you be thinking to rush me in the hope of a hangfire, I will save you the trouble. 'Tis a beautiful pair of matched Galton's. Percussion caps, d'you see. There will be no misfire here, I assure you. Ain't progress a fine thing?'

The man has every advantage over us, so we simply settle back in our seats and wait. We pass down Shoreditch High Street and North Folgate in silence, broken only by the steady, monotonous clip, clopping of the horse.

In a few minutes we are through Bishopsgate and on into Houndsditch; it would appear that we are heading back to the City. I cannot imagine what has provoked these men to reach across half of London in order to pluck us. Like anyone in our world, we know plenty about the doings of Pimlott and Chuffington, but have taken great pains to remain without their sphere of influence. We are beholden to no

man, and our trade has always been of too little consequence for men of such preeminence to interfere. I wonder if we are to be punished for Reilly's broken razzo.

I have no time to consider this before the growler pulls up in Aldgate High Street.

The buildings hereabouts are ancient and timber framed, many having been coaching inns, at one time servicing London travellers entering by the ancient Aldgate postern. On this portion of the street there is still the Bull Yard and Black Horse but the remainder have since been converted to warehouses or given over to the practice of commerce: a respectable district, without grandeur on the scale of a Leadenhall or Threadneedle.

We are disembarked, under the baleful glare of the Galtons, swiftly ushered into one of the nondescript commercial buildings and prodded up a flight of stairs, where we are led into a place of business on the first floor.

Shelves of legal tomes line the walls; there are Ottoman rugs on the floor and a welcoming fire burns in the grate. The walls are papered in fashionable but discreet stripes and decorated with engravings of London life as well as detailed cartographics.

Two large desks split the room, each almost entirely obscured by books, writing implements, inks and piles of legal documents. At the far end sits an enormously fat cove demolishing a pie of some description, nearest to us, a spry, bespectacled party. They are attired alike in somber jackets, breeches and Geneva collars like a pair of City clerks or pulpit pounders.

The bespectacled cove jumps to his feet, rubbing his hands. 'Ah, Mr Facey, Mr Samuel, welcome, welcome.'

He cocks his head to peer out of the single window, inspecting the night sky. 'The sun has most evidently set and so I feel that a glass of something might be in

order. Yes, indeed I do.'

He gestures to a pair of straight-backed chairs set side-by-side against the wall. 'You gentlemen will be seated, while I see to the refreshments.'

The barkers are still on us, so we obey without objection while the specky gent fusses with a decanter.

He brings across a couple of dainty wine glasses containing a brownish liquid, passing a third to the fat cove.

'Amontillado, gentlemen, is characterized by being darker than Fino but lighter than Oloroso. It is named for the Montilla region of Spain, where it has been a staple for some one hundred years now.'

We have both downed ours in one quick draught, though it is probable that we should not have, especially when we observe the gentleman raise his glass and take a series of delicate sips. 'Ahh, we have had our quarrels with the Spaniard, but no man can say he is not the supreme arbiter when it comes to viniculture.'

The fat cove also takes an appreciative but tiny sip while Facey and me sit uncomfortably in the straight-backed chairs, empty glasses now superfluous in our hands.

'There is some Pound cake if you would – but no, I can tell you are eager to be at the business at hand.'

He slaps his head. 'What is become of my manners? We have the advantage of you gentlemen. And so, first, before all else must come the introductions: I am called Chuffington and that fine figure of a man is Mr Pimlott. Meathook I believe you already know.'

'Meathook, is it?' grunts Facey, sneering at the Galtons.

'Oh, dear me, no, no, no. You must not think any the less of Meathook for

employing the barkers. He is neither soft, nor a man of refined sensibility. Quite the contrary. It was I who insisted on these weapons. When occasion demands, they are often tidier and more convenient. Is that not so, Meathook?’

‘Right enough, Mr Chuffington.’

‘Rest assured, Meathook is quite without remorse or any finer feelings to speak of, having spent twenty years or more at the Smithfield market. Gore is nothing to him, he has bathed in buckets of blood and scaled mountains of offal. To Meathook you are naught but slabs of meat, two carcasses of beef, unless and until we declare that you are worthy of better consideration. Do you comprehend this? It is so very important that you do.’

We nod vigorously. Meathook grins, the Galtons disappear into his pockets to be replaced by his instrument of preference, a vicious-looking curved iron butcher’s hook.

I’m hoping that Facey does not see this as our opportunity to rush him. Our combined force may well prevail but one of us will most likely receive a six-inch barb in the vitals. Me, probably. Mercifully, Facey appears to have no such ambitions, he sits like a stone, quite expressionless.

Chuffington paces the room, almost prancing. ‘You will be wondering why we have summoned you here tonight. Pimlott and Chuffington branching out? Moving into the resurrection racket?’ He chuckles. ‘Rest assured, your livelihood is safe from us, if not your lives.’

Facey sighs, ‘With respect, Mr Chuffington, we have never knowingly trespassed on your turf or your concerns. We are but small men, seeking only to go about our trifling affairs.’

‘You believe that you are too insignificant to be of concern? That you are

unknown to us? You will be amazed, Mr Facey, at our degrees of connection.’ With that he nods at Meathook, who turns and makes for the door.

Though we are no longer under gun or hook, fleeing now would be a fruitless exercise. With their reach these men could run us to ground at any time and besides, we have yet to discover what it is that they want.

‘The Rig, gentlemen,’ pipes Pimlott, in a curious, high-pitched warble for such a substantial man. ‘We have a significant stake in George Spicer’s impending scheme. Indeed, we have become the prime movers in the affair. Do you imagine then that we would not have taken the trouble to scrutinize our associates in such an undertaking? We have investigated your character and reputation, we know a great deal about you.’ With that he crams a hunk of pound cake into his fat, slobbering maw.

‘Then you will know that we are straight arrows and quite undeserving of such treatment,’ objects Facey.

‘Such treatment?’ counters Chuffington, ‘A glass of amontillado and a slice of Pound cake? If that is deemed harsh, then I truly fear for you, should you ever be taken up.’

‘We did not get any cake,’ mutters Facey.

The door opens to reveal Meathook now accompanied by George Spicer, the pair of them lugging a large wicker hamper. They are followed by a couple of porters, similarly encumbered. As they deposit their loads on the Ottoman rug, we hear the clink of chinaware, confirming my worst fears.

Three additional hampers are brought in to complete the set. Spicer’s lip is still puffed and split but he manages to smirk and leer in our direction before throwing back the lids. It is the chinaware. Our entire fortune

The porters leave, carefully closing the door behind them but Meathook and Spicer remain, poised over our hampers like carrion crows.

Chuffington selects a small soup bowl and examines it. 'No doubt you will know something of us,' he muses.

'Indeed we do, sir.' affirms Facey, most respectful, 'Plenty enough.'

'Then you will know that we are sincere in what we have to say. Tonight, there are but two outcomes for you gentlemen: one – we find you culpable and you are punished. Two - we are convinced of your innocence, in which case, you will aid us by informing against the guilty party. Either way, it is necessary for you to fully comprehend the matter and its implications.'

Facey nods, as do I.

'We are, both of us, Pimlott and I, men of ingenuity and parts. At one time clerks, articled and apprenticed. Mr Pimlott here labored in shipping accounts, 'til he struck upon a new and revolutionary method of reckoning, a system of double-entry; in and out, plus and minus. Alas, his master, a man quite lacking in vision, suspected knavery and dismissed him out of hand.

'I, myself was a solicitor's clerk, but had the temerity to make a play for the partner's daughter. And was similarly dismissed. Mr Pimlott and I had the good fortune to meet up in a pie shop on Berners Street, the remainder of our history is as you know it, I am sure.'

We gaze at Chuffington, pantomiming our most sympathetic expressions, nodding and sighing.

'At that time it occurred to me that London is not one world at all, but two quite distinct worlds. A higher and a lower: the one that is reserved for those born to privilege; t'other for those who will make something of it by their own hand.

‘If the upper world had no use for a Pimlott and a Chuffington, then it would be to the lower that we would devote our energy and intellect. And as you see,’ he indicates the room around us, ‘it has borne fruit.

‘Our realm, gentlemen, may encompass a baser, coarser sphere but it is not entirely absolved from the principles of order and natural justice. A contract remains a contract. Dictum is yet meum pactum. A solemn undertaking must be honored. Transgressions punished. For if not, where would we be?’

‘Where indeed, sir?’ I respond quickly enough, though I do not think he was expecting an answer.

‘We are not beasts, commerce cannot thrive amidst chaos. There must be regulation and order amongst us. I insist upon it. Wrongdoing cannot be ignored, punishment must follow, swift and condign.’

‘Now we come to it,’ pipes Pimlott.

‘Indeed we do,’ agrees Chuffington. ‘Some three days previous, Mr Pimlott’s well-regarded and saintly mother passed from this vale of tears.’ He flings the soup bowl into the fireplace where it smashes to pieces.

‘I am sorry to hear it,’ I say.

‘A mason, commissioned for the purpose of imprinting the name Agnes Constance Pimlott into the stone of the memorial, this morning at his labours, observed scratches on a corner of the slab, the slightest of abrasions but sufficient to arouse suspicion. On investigation, the slab was removed, the coffin disinterred and found to be empty.’

I make a sympathetic face. ‘That is ...regrettable.’

‘Empty,’ pipes Pimlott. ‘In short, minus one body.’

‘You, or men of your profession, have made away with Mr Pimlott’s blessed

mama. Pimlott's own flesh and blood, forsooth. Ordinarily, the law would lay a fine upon the perpetrators. But since this is an action which strikes at the very heart of Pimlott and Chuffington, our judgment shall be harsher by some degree.'

'I did not care for her overmuch,' interjects Pimlott.

'That is beside the point,' hisses Chuffington.

Facey shrugs, 'We are a cagey lot in our trade, Mr Chuffington. I do not see how Sammy and me can be of assistance in the matter, knowing little to nothing about the comings and goings of other crews.'

Chuffington nods. 'I see. Then let us begin, as we ought, with the soup.'

Meathook picks out a few of the soup bowls from the first hamper and begins to smash them one at a time, slowly and deliberately with his iron hook.

Spicer, grinning, withdraws another couple and crushes them under his heavy, hob-nailed boots.

'Gentlemen, we are devilish sharp set. Surely you have aught to offer us,' urges Chuffington.

Spicer gleefully selects a couple of our dinner plates, ready to clap them together like cymbals.

Chuffington cocks his head sideways at us, like a curious sparrow. 'Well?'

Facey sighs, 'I have never been much in the peaching line, Mr Chuffington. What you require from us goes very much against the grain, but perhaps you should speak with a pair who go by the name of Teeth and Mutton. You will not mistake Teeth, on account of his teeth. And his very particular white appearance.'

Chuffington tops up his glass and chuckles. 'Oh, that is precious, is it not, Mr Pimlott.'

Pimlott makes a wheezing sound, like a busted church organ. Gigantic head

bent over his desk, rocking back and forth. Finally, he composes himself sufficiently to unfurl a pristine fogle from his sleeve and wipe oily tears of mirth from his pig-eyes.

Chuffington smiles fondly at his helpless partner. 'Not one hour ago were those very men in this very room, and you would never credit what was their opinion on the matter.'

Facey sags. 'You do not have to tell us.'

'You are a man of great perception, Mr Facey.'

'You take their word for it?'

'I do not. But men whose word we do trust were able to account for the whereabouts of Teeth and Mutton last night. It is your whereabouts that is in question here.'

Facey remains just as he was, there is no movement, no outward sign and yet I am utterly conscious that he, like me, has just seen our way out of this dilemma.

'The corpse ...I beg your pardon, the late Mrs Pimlott was took last night, you say?'

'According to the mason, the scratches were fresh made and not apparent yesterday. It would appear that the body was took last night, ' affirms Chuffington.

Facey indicates his bandage, 'I have an injury, Mr Chuffington, which has precluded work of a physical nature for the major portion of this week. I do not expect you to take that for gospel, nevertheless, we were excluded from our accustomed business this last night, as any number of good men will testify.'

'That is easy for you to say,' replies Chuffington.

'You will accept that a hoist cannot be undertaken outside the hours of eleven and four in the morning, and that is only if the moon is on the wane?'

‘We do.’

‘Then you will find that Sammy Boy and me was at the Westminster Cockpit ‘til perhaps one in the morning. Thereafter at a very great gentleman’s place on Great Marlborough Street, having been summoned there by one of Trench’s messengers. At the hour of two, or thereabouts, did we enter the Coach and Horses Tavern, where we drank off toddies with our host and passed the remainder of the night. All of which can be verified by men of no particular partiality and some degree of rectitude.’

Chuffington strokes his chin, impressed. ‘It is a good account, Mr Facey, and, for the moment, I am inclined to believe it.’

At this point Pimlott decides to pipe up. ‘There is a hole in them numbers.’

Chuffington smiles. ‘Ahh, leave it to Mr Pimlott to find a hole in the numbers. For he always will, you know.’

‘Hole? What hole?’ says Facey.

Pimlott scoops the cake crumbs from his plate and scatters them into his great gob. ‘The hours from one, postmeridian, onwards, we will, for the sake of argument, take on trust. It is the hours preceding that which I question. Those hours you claim to have passed in the Westminster Cockpit, are the very same hours and at the very same place where Teeth and Mutton was. Yet they made no mention of your presence there. Nor does anyone else that we have questioned. How do you account for this?’

‘Do you see it? Do you see how his mind works?’ says Chuffington, gleefully. ‘Is he not a colossus of logical deduction?’

‘Would Teeth and Mutton offer us an alibi, gratis, if it is not in their interest?’ I retort.

Chuffington considers this. ‘No, you have the right of it. They would not. But there were others in attendance and not one has attested to your presence last night.’

‘We were there,’ insists Facey.

‘So you say,’ insists Chuffington, ‘but it seems that there is indeed an unsubstantiated period of two hours during which you may have been able to commit this awful crime against my partner. If you are innocent, we are sorry for it, but I must hand you over to the tender mercies of Meathook and others. You will understand, I’m sure, the necessity for your immediate removal to our warehouse cellars.’

Meathook grins, producing the twin barkers once again, indicating with them that we should get to our feet and accompany him.

‘We were present when the dog, Billy, took one hundred and so buzzers in under twelve,’ asserts Facey.

‘Tis a feat much discussed across London today. You will get no credit from that knowledge, Mr Facey,’ chuckles Chuffington.

‘Your own man, Reilly, took my sovs on the mutt.’

‘Reilly is indisposed today. He made no mention you.’

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Somewhere about me I have a article, which may convince you.’

Meathook advances, cocking the barkers but Chuffington stays his man with a raised hand. I frantically rummage inside my coat but the scrap of paper eludes me.

Chuffington shrugs. ‘We may stand here forever while you claim to have seen this dog or that man, but if you cannot furnish the proof, then you must face the consequences.’

‘Please,’ I insist, ‘but one moment more.’

Between the cold chisel, bits of twine and stale breadcrumbs in the deep pockets of my jacket, my fingers finally close upon a small folded sheet of paper. I pull it out and hand it to Meathook, who delivers it to his master.

Chuffington puts on his specs and unfolds the chit. 'Upon my soul, 'tis our marker, written up by Reilly 'gainst the ratter Billy.'

'And so this "hole" is now filled to your satisfaction?' I say.

Chuffington looks to his partner whose head slowly shifts on its great fleshy pillows affirming his acceptance.

'Very well,' announces Chuffington, 'as for the rest, we will take your word on it, 'til it can be verified. You may go.'

'And what of this?' demands Facey, indicating our hampers.

'We will keep the remaining crockery as surety against your tale,' smiles Chuffington, 'never fear, we shall preserve it as though it were our own.'

Chapter 10

It is midday at the least by the time we find ourselves on Pye Corner, having passed what remained of the night at a thrupenny ken in Cock Lane. Facey digs at his thick, black hair searching for lice and fleas, unwelcome but inevitable fellow occupants in such quarters. Above us the Golden Boy, memorial to the Great Fire, gazes out across London, impervious to our troubles.

We enter The Fortune of War, which teems with the usual low-life. Facey appears out of sorts today and I cannot say for sure whether it is on account of the turn in our fortunes or the effects of his injury. Either way, he is content to settle himself at a bench and leave me to make my way through the press.

‘Let me entreat you, Mr Samuel, not to rap on my counter with the edge of your coin. Though you are on the small side to be sure, I am quite able to see you standing there,’ pronounces Ricketts, the burly taverner.

‘It is a gold sovereign, Mr Ricketts, and I should be grateful if you would break it in the course of supplying me with a bottle of port wine and some sugar.’

‘There will be more than a coin broke, if there is another dent in my counter,’ responds Ricketts, biting into my sovereign. Satisfied with its quality, he doles out a quantity of silver shillings in return.

‘And perhaps you will be good enough to send out a boy to fetch a couple of fowl and have them cooked up for Facey and me.’

‘It will be done, just as you say, Mr Samuel. And you will forgive me for my abruptness just now. For I’m sure I did not see that Mr Facey was with you.’

It is a wearying fact of life that men such as Ricketts are no respecters of intellect and resource, only brute force.

I join Facey at his table with our bottle of port wine and pour out a couple of tumblers, stirring in the few bits of sugar.

Facey produces a bottle of the Pancurial from his pockets and adds a good dose to the mixture.

‘Is that wise?’ I ask.

‘Wisdom is an overrated virtue,’ retorts Facey, downing the concoction. He pours himself another, adulterating it with more of the nostrum. His countenance is pale and the bandage round his eye vile and crusted.

‘Have you salved the glim this morning?’

‘I cannot bear to touch it,’ responds Facey, ‘It is become most shocking painful.’

‘Then what is to be done, if you will not allow the sawbones to intervene?’

‘It will right itself in time, 'tis only the pain that must be accommodated. I find the linctus answers well enough.’

I sift gloomily through the contents of our joint purse. There is little enough for our labours: a single sovereign, the shillings I have received from Ricketts and a few meager coppers.

‘Ah, you must not mind me, Sammy Boy, I am peevish and ill-tempered company for you today.’

‘As you have every right to be. It is all gone, even the marker. We are quite smashed and must begin over.’

‘Aye,’ agrees Facey. ‘It is a very great shame that Mrs Pigeon cannot be relied upon to tell a Pimlott from a Piecrust. But never fear, I will have those sixteen sovs from Reilly, marker or no.’

‘I wish you would forget Reilly.’

‘Why ever so?’

‘We are not entirely off the hook, so to speak, in the matter of Ma Pimlott. For if it ever comes to light that the corpse was hoisted a night earlier than this fool of a mason has claimed then it will be but a simple thing to connect us with the enterprise. There is Shields for one.’

‘If Shields peaches, he implicates himself.’

‘True, but there were plenty of eyes in The Feathers that night, not all of them blind drunk. I think it prudent we steer our course well clear of Pimlott and Chuffington and make ready to quit London. At least until the dust has settled. I should not desire a second interview with those men.’

‘And where should we go?’

‘Why, to Edinburgh. There are medical schools crying out for what we are able to provide and a good living to be made, though the Scotch are known to be close with their purses.’

A degree of colour has returned to my partner’s face and his spirits have lifted, owing, in the main I believe, to the effects of the Linctus. He slaps a meaty fist down onto the table. ‘I’ll claim Brookes’ bounty first.’

‘That has become a stale line. Most likely by now that corpse is diced into a hundred pieces or more, the flesh in portions, ornamenting the dissecting table of every anatomical student in the metropolis.’

‘If so, we will hear of it soon enough,’ says Facey gazing about. He has the right of it; The Fortune of War is one of the boozing kens where men of our trade are apt to gather, owing to its proximity to Barts’. Indeed, Teeth and Mutton huddle over by the lead-paned windows engaged in earnest, whispered conversation with a porter. On a bench nearby I spy John Bishop and Thomas Williams, a young, excitable pair,

who have yet to understand the meaning of caution and will intrude upon a churchyard regardless of a waxing moon or the presence of watchmen.

‘Here is your fowls, gents,’ announces the pot-boy, unloading a couple of roasted ducks on trenchers. I hand the lad a sixpence and we tear into them.

It may be the scent of the roasted duck that draws Bishop to our end of the table. He grins at me, a horrible black-toothed grimace. ‘Lord, and don’t that smell good,’ he says.

‘Tastes good, an’ all,’ confirms Facey, stripping a leg with his teeth.

I keep a stick of licorice about my person for scraping the molars and sweetening the breath and, from time to time, Facey will deign to give it some use. On the whole though, we are pretty well accustomed to reeking breath and broken, blackened teeth. Bishop, however, is in a class of his own, his teeth are not merely stained but jet-black through and through.

‘God in heaven, but what is amiss with your gob?’ says Facey, starting.

Bishop grins, a frightful black gash. ‘Tis nought but my ebony teeth, gents.’

‘Ebony, is it?’

‘I am, as you know, a great admirer of Mr Teeth, the Prussian gentleman you will observe over by the window. Seeing as how I had lost, through conflict and decay, the chief allotment of my own gnashers, it occurred to me to follow suit and have a replacement set constructed. You would be quite knocked aback, gentlemen, absolutely flattened, to learn of the cost of a set of genuine enamels fashioned on Waterloo lines. I could not pay it in a year and so determined that my teeth would be constructed from the next best thing, namely wood: hardest and most durable of its kind. And here they are. Which, you will note, they have the particular advantage of not being detectable by moonlight. Though I do wonder if ebony ought to splinter so

and taste of boot black to quite such a degree.'

Facey licks the grease from his fingers as he considers Bishop's gob. 'You are not to come anywhere near my duck with those foul articles.'

Bishop, crestfallen, shifts away, back up the bench to be replaced in his spot by Lieutenant Trench.

'Gents, I bid you good day.'

'Trench,' acknowledges Facey, working at a wing.

'I have this morning been interviewed by certain parties in regard to you gentlemen,' remarks Trench, softly.

'And you have answered honestly, I make no doubt,' retorts Facey, spitting gristle.

'I cannot afford to dissemble, nor take sides. You understand that a messaging service must be forthright and accountable at all times, if it is to thrive.'

'I am quite sure of it... Lieutentant,' says Facey, ripping the remains of the carcass apart with his fingers.

'I have affirmed that you was summoned to a gentleman in Great Marlborough Street, night before last. Nothing more, nor less. I hope that I have not been of disservice to you gents. That is all.'

Facey leaves off eating and appraises the man. 'Well, Trench, you have said what you know to be the case. Whether it is to our advantage or disadvantage don't hardly signify.'

Trench is a gentlemanly sort. A man of enterprise, well-turned out in blue coat and passably clean linens. He is affable enough and it is decent in him to share this intelligence. So I cannot comprehend why Facey is coming it so disagreeable.

Trench shrugs and makes to rise. 'I came to be amenable, not to set up a

quarrel here, gents.'

'There is no quarrel here, Lieutenant Trench, and we are grateful for your information,' I say quickly.

'And yet, your partner is not so well-disposed, it appears.'

Facey deliberately puts down the duck leg that he has been worrying at before addressing the man. 'Trench, you must know that I was, for a time, able seaman. As a seafaring man I can say for a certainty that you are no lieutenant. And yet you style yourself so.'

Trench is about to object, but decides better of it. He lowers his head. 'You are in the right of it, Mr Facey. I have no officer's commission. I was but a lowly middy in the service, having failed to pass for Lieutenant on no fewer than six occasions. I simply could not hammer the mathematics of sine or cosine into this thick skull of mine and would never make any sort of navigator. It has been a source of great shame to me and some considerable amusement to my younger comrades. You will pity the sin of pride in me, I'm sure. And perhaps even forgive this lapse? Between men who have served?'

Facey nods, considering Trench for a moment. Finally, he says: 'Since you put it so, I will, sir. Such disclosure takes courage. And that, I can admire in any man, be he middy or admiral of the red.'

Trench lowers his voice to a whisper. 'I have also found that the rank inspires faith in my rectitude, surely an advantage in a confidential messenger. And so, would not wish it known that I have exaggerated my achievements.'

Facey chuckles, 'Rest assured, your patrons will hear naught from me on the subject. You will stay, Lieutenant, and have a glass of wine with us, sir?'

'That is very decent in you, Mr Facey, and I should like it above all things.'

I fill Trench's glass with our port wine.

'On which vessel did you serve, Mr Facey?'

'The Billy Ruffian, sir.'

'A damned fine ship, sir. And we will toast to the Billy Ruffian.'

Trench and Facey touch beakers and take a hearty swallow each.

'And you, sir?'

'I had the honour of serving aboard the Aboukir. Likewise of the line and four and seventy.'

'Then we will drink to it, both victory and vessel.'

'Aboukir. Victory and vessel.'

The bottle is all but empty. Facey raps on the table with edge of a shilling.

'Ricketts,' he bellows, 'another couple of your port wine and not so near this time with the sugar, you parsimonious bugger.'

It seems that mere landsmen like myself are excluded from all this hale fellow, four-and-seventy Billies, abby dabby sea-doggerel. But I am content for the moment. It is a fine thing to see Facey back in spirits.

Ricketts duly brings the wine along with a good quantity of sugar, I notice that he has nothing to say to Facey on the subject of dents.

'And how is Pure John coming along, Lieutenant Trench?'

'He is an impudent scalawag, Mr Samuel, but resourceful. I believe he has the makings of something about him.'

'I am glad to hear it.'

'But I have no doubt that, at this very moment, he is making a beast of himself, along with the best of them, gorging on roast pork, plum duff and shrub.'

'How so?'

‘It being a Sunday, and only half-day, my messenger lads are already at Clapham, sampling the delights of the travelling fair. Indeed, they have engaged to make a party with Pure John’s brother and a young lady of their acquaintance.’

Facey cocks an eyebrow in my direction, ‘Ah, I warrant you have touched a nerve there, Lieutenant.’

‘Indeed? I had no -’

Facey shoves a good portion of the shillings in my direction. ‘Here, Sammy Boy, you will leave the Lieutenant and me to our wine and our belaying and our t’gallant staysails.’ A broad grin splits Facey’s unshaven face. ‘Come now, Sammy,’ he croons, ‘for you know how partial you are to the fair.’

For a moment I am torn: it would certainly be wiser to use this time in preparation for quitting the metropolis. But then again, as Facey has observed, wisdom is an overrated virtue.

Chapter 11

At length, the crowded omnibus halts at Clapham High Street where I alight, along with the full complement of my fellow passengers. We merge with cheerful hordes of pedestrians heading toward the Common; excited men and women, some still in working clothes, hurrying, drawn by the sound of the steam trumpet and the scent of roasting meats.

We turn north up Rookery Road, where a dozen or more canvas pavilions have been erected around a flattish expanse of scrub grass a short distance from Long Pond.

The outer perimeter consists of barrows and stalls, vending consumables of all description: meats, roasted, baked and boiled; tobacco hangs in reddish brown braids or can be had as snuff from small paper packets; there is fruit and gingerbread for sale and, of course, beer, at every turn.

The inner circle is formed by a labyrinth of tents, painted and lettered, gaudily illustrating the wonders within. At the heart of it all an arena, marked out by ropes and staves. A white-faced cove in a baggy suit and curious conical hat holds the crowd spellbound, standing upright on a horse, as it canters around.

I search the crowd and spy of a pack of boisterous youngsters over by the one of the beer vendors, Pure John amongst them.

‘Why, ‘tis Mr Samuel,’ pipes Pure John, swigging from a bottle of porter. ‘You have missed out on the pork, but that aside, could not have come at a better moment, for we are to have three more of porter. Each. We will take some

gingerbread and a little baccy and I intend to inspect the marvelous Aphrodite.’ He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the arrangement of tents housing the curiosities. ‘You may join us, if you like.’

‘Ain’t it prime, sir?’ pronounces a very tiny fellow, gripping my sleeve and leaning upon me in a desperate effort to remain standing.

‘It is good to see you in such spirits, Pure John.’ I grip the tiny fellow by the collar of his jacket, holding him upright as he pukes over my boot. ‘Your brother is here also?’

‘Oh, come along, Crabshells, there is more porter to be drunk and you are already three sheets to the wind.’ Pure John sighs. ‘Kak John is somewhere hereabouts in company with Rosamund Pitface. I did not think she would care to see the marvelous Aphrodite and so we have parted for the time being.’

The young Crabshells steadies himself and attempts to bring me into focus. ‘Ain’t it prime, though,’ he murmurs, before toppling forward, flat on his face.

Pure John grimaces. ‘He has almost ten years on him, sir, and cannot hold one or two of porter and some few of gin without coming it swipecy and puking his guts.’

‘I will see him home, never fear,’ announces another of the messenger lads. ‘For we are close neighbours and I am not well myself.’

Pure John smiles, ‘You must have a cart then, Jemmy. For I know you are situated in Lambeth, which is a long haul for lugging such a dead weight.’ He reaches into the pocket of his jacket.

‘I will pay the fee,’ I say, producing my purse.

‘You will not, for I have been at the Under and Over and have already taken four shillings off these fairground dumplings. There is nothing so simple, Mr Samuel, as the skinning of a skinner,’ he says, proudly handing a few coppers to his young associate.

‘You are a good lad, Pure John,’ I say, ‘but I would beg you not to refer to Rosamund as Pitface.’

‘I see as I find, Mr Samuel. But since it is you that is asking, that name will never be said again.’

‘I take that most kindly, Pure John.’

‘And now you will ‘company me to the tent of the marvelous Aphrodite?’

‘I will not, for I hope to meet shortly with your brother and Rosamund.’

‘Oh, sir. I wish you would. These others are pitiful and will not do it,’ he indicates the remaining messenger boys around him in their various states of staggering inebriation. ‘She is said to be the most beautiful lady alive, and only the merest wisp of gossamer veil to conceal her tits. I would do the thing on my own, Mr Samuel, only -’ he beckons me closer and whispers, ‘I am somewhat anxious.’

I sigh. ‘Very well, Pure John, since you are in funds you will pay the entrance. But you must know that I am well accustomed to such sights.’

‘Oh, I expect you are notorious for your killing airs and devilish good-looks ‘mongst the ladies, Mr Samuel.’

I cuff him lightly round the ear as we make our way past the yellow curtained

tent of the Conjurer to the pavilions.

The entrance is attended by a sly-looking barker in a brown Derby and ill-fitting, black-and-white checkered suit.

‘Pa and son, is it? What a treat in store.’ says the showman. ‘And what father would not wish to hedify his offspring with the remarkable gentleman glass-blower, his hair all of glass? Or the spectacle of Pinhead, the Dog-Faced Lady, the India rubber Gent, Bear Woman and the Mighty Midget? Or perchance it is our Learned Pig what takes your fancy, a hanimal what can select your card from a pack and tell the hexact time to the minute, blindfolded mind? If that ain’t sufficient marvel for any man, there is also waxworks and a genuine Redskin within.’

‘We are here to see the Aphrodite,’ pipes Pure John, proffering a shilling.

‘There ain’t no Haphrodite,’ retorts the showman.

‘But it is wrote on your billposts,’ insists Pure John.

‘There never was a Haphrodite, young sir. 'Twas a thing called Hermaphrodite, to be sure, known as the ‘mazing man-woman. But that creature is stone dead and never more for hexhibition.’

‘Hermaphrodite, you say?’ I exclaim.

‘Indeed, sir. In my experience these freaks of nature do not survive long. The Pin-headed curiosity is already on his last legs, which is why you must take my advice and enjoy the spectacle while you can.’

‘Is the Hermaphrodite within?’

‘It is, sir, laid out just so in a sealed tent and shut away from public view, awaiting proper burial. Were it down to me I would make a spectacle of it, quick or dead, but Professor Socrates, him what owns the fair, he do indulge his freaks so.’

‘May I speak with this Professor?’

‘You will find him within. Engaged in discourse with our Learned Pig, but quick now for the showing has already begun.’

‘Very well, Pure John, give the man his shilling.’

Pure John’s bottom lip trembles, ‘I was to see tits.’

‘You may see all the tits you like on our Learned Pig. Being a sow, you will find she keeps twelve on ‘em, and so you will be spoiled for choice,’ advises the barker, holding back the tent flap.

Pure John and me enter a damp and narrow canvas corridor illuminated by a series of tin sconces tacked to the tentpoles. We step carefully, giving our eyes time to adjust to the flickering candlelight. Ahead is a flap heralding the Bear Woman. I gingerly pull it to one side and we enter a gloomy pavilion housing a small cage. Enclosed by the bars is a colossal figure perched on a stool, surrounded by old gnawed bones. Her head and face are completely obscured by a matting of thick black hair. She wears a tattered dress, but a similar dense black fur sprouts from her arms, hands, legs and feet.

She growls at Pure John, who grips my sleeve. ‘I do not like this place, Mr Samuel.’

The creature steps off the stool and advances, rattling at the bars.

I can feel Pure John trembling at my side. 'Come now, Pure John. 'Tis only a human woman, notwithstanding the pelt.'

The Bear Woman chuckles, a very human sound. 'This last season, I was only the Bearded Lady and not so very terrifying to the young 'uns.'

She smiles, I think. It is hard to tell.

'And what of all them bones?' squeaks Pure John.

The Bear Woman shrugs, 'Old beef bones, same as you will find on any of the vendor's carts. I do not think I have ate any young men in a while now.'

Pure John releases my sleeve, stepping a little closer to the bars. 'I was not afeared, you know.'

'I am sure of it,' affirms the woman gently. 'Well, you may stroke my arm if you wish.'

'You have always been so?' I ask.

'I have, sir. A ball of fluff at birth, and much resented by my mother, who was bit by a mastiff when gravid. Stranger still is that our Dog-Faced Lady, though she has the face of a mastiff, tells of her papa being bit by a sailor's monkey. Which event occurring a good six-month afore she was even thought of.'

'And you are content to live in this way?' I ask, indicating the bones and bars.

'Why bless you, sir. 'Tis only for make-believe. The cage is not secured and for the most part I live as you do, I should imagine. Better, perhaps, for there is always a bite to be had and a roof over my head at night, albeit of canvas. And I have

travelled the length and breadth of this country, taking in the wonderful sights of it, which is more than can be said for most.'

'And your master, Professor Socrates, what manner of man is he? I have a proposition for him.'

'A good enough sort, I suppose, though mercenary. You will find no satisfaction there without the prompting of tin. And even then, perhaps, only in the language of the Romans.'

I place my hand on Pure John's shoulder. 'I fear we are keeping you from your duties.'

'By no means. Our patrons are for the while distracted by the performance of the Professor and his Learned Pig. A four times daily showing and a welcome respite for the rest of us.'

'In that case, I will inquire of you, if I may, about the Hermaphrodite, as was.'

'To what end?' For a moment, she becomes guarded.

'The boy - my boy, had his heart set on the sight of it. He is somewhat inquisitive by nature.' I squeeze Pure John's shoulder, cautioning against contradiction.

'They most always are, at that age.' She says fondly, reaching through the bars with a hairy paw and chucking him under the chin.

'Well, there is little enough to tell,' she shrugs. 'She was called Bobby. Shortened from Robert or Roberta, I could not say which, for she was both man and

woman in parts. She - I will say "she", as I believe there was more of the woman about her, though she dressed in the clothes of a man when not on display – she was known to us in full as Bobby Herman, though that was the name given by Professor Socrates as a kind of joke, a play on words, if you will: Her-man.

‘Bobby Herman came to us three years past, around sixteen years of age, having lived in London somewhere. She had been ill-treated and bore the marks of it, but that is scarcely unique amongst folk like us. Socrates made much of her, for she had a cutting wit and a quick tongue and she rubbed along well enough with the rest. But it was Stephen Florey, the India rubber Man, who took a proper shine to her. I do believe he loved her: following her about, making puppy-dog eyes, performing little acts of devotion and so forth. So, you see, young man, love is such a gift that even the least of us may live in hope of it.’

‘It is a sad tale then,’ says Pure John. ‘What is become of the India rubber man?’

‘Why, it has quite broke his heart.’

‘I am sorry to hear it.’

‘And now, we will shake hands, for soon I must come it the savage Grizzly once again and were you to put your hand through the bars another time I should be obliged to bite it off.’

‘I do not think so,’ says Pure John, grinning, as he grasps her hand. ‘I was never in the least afeared.’

We step back through the opening, dropping the flap, leaving the Bear Woman

to her bones and her cage.

‘Mr Samuel, I have shook the hand of a bear,’ whispers Pure John gleefully.

‘Just wait ‘til I tell the rest on ‘em. Thomas Lane will puke with envy.’

‘I expect he is busy just now, puking with too much porter.’

‘Not Lane. He can drink as much as any man, since he has at least thirteen years. And I should very much like to see this India rubber cove.’

‘We cannot,’ I say, leading him on down the dark tented corridor. ‘I have urgent business with this Socrates and must speak with him.’

‘We are here on my tin, Mr Samuel, and it ain’t charitable in you to hurry me along like this.’

‘You have the right of it, Pure John. There is no need for you to ‘company me and so will leave you to your India rubber cove.’

‘Oh, Mr Samuel, I wish you would not go. It is dark in here and what if I mislay my bearings? You would have to tell my brother of how you ‘bandoned me to the gloom, ‘mongst pinheads and dog-midgets.’

‘Very well,’ I sigh, ‘we will inspect your India rubber cove, then I must straight to my affair. Agreed?’

‘Agreed.’ Pure John gobs on his palm, which I am obliged to shake in honour of this arrangement.

‘And what is a India rubber gent, ‘zactly?’ queries Pure John as we seek the entrance.

'I have not the slightest idea.' I reply.