

Chapter 1

June, 1893

Archie touched his tongue to his lips. Market smells. So strong he could almost taste them: the stink of the fish stall, beer fumes belching from the pub across the road, bruised fruit fermenting and horse dung, steaming in the summer heat. And smoke ...

That puzzled him. Not tobacco smoke, not chimney smoke, not food frying. More like wood smoke than anything.

He turned from his easel to lean out of the window. Horses were whinnying, pigeon wings beating in panic, street cries and banter dying away as shoppers and sellers alike snuffed the air.

‘Fire!’ The sky beyond the church spire was shimmering, turning black as thunderclouds. People ran, women picking up their long skirts and shopping bags, dragging small children away. Whistles blew, hand-bells rang. Archie dunked his brushes in thinner and hopped around the room, pulling on his shoes.

‘Archie?’

‘Go home, Ida,’ he told his model. Still tucking in his shirt, he snatched up a bag of pencils, a sketchpad and clattered down the stairs. ‘Same time tomorrow!’ he managed to yell before his front door slammed.

Out on the street, the greengrocer was putting up his shutters; his queue had disappeared, drawn more towards catastrophe than carrots. ‘Catch you up, Arch,’ he promised as his lodger began elbowing through the jostling crowd.

By the time Archie reached the burning store on the corner, bucket chains had formed from various pumps and wells and the sign ‘Wylie’s Second-Hand Furniture’ was weeping sooty tears.

Archie joined in, his bucket slopping, slurping, as he dashed towards the roaring flames, forced to duck away from the searing heat as he aimed his slosh of water, hoping it didn’t fall short. ‘Get out in time, did they?’ he said over his shoulder.

‘Dunno, mate.’ Bert, the tobacconist two doors down from the police station, passed Archie the next clanking pail, happy to let the younger man, with his superior height and longer arms, swill the water past the blistering window frame. ‘*Closed* was on the door,’ he said as Archie turned to him for the next bucketful, ‘When there was a door ...’

Archie blinked as sweat and smoke stung his eyes. The air was hard to breathe. Black ash fell like snow. ‘What about Daniel?’

‘Too ’ot to stop indoors – he’d’ve took his sandwiches outside, eh?’

But if he had, where was he now? The shopkeeper should have stood out in the crowd, being a head higher than most, with bushy beard and grizzled mane. His booming voice alone usually made him easy to find.

A creaking, a slow splintering and the upstairs came crashing down. Everyone jumped back, gasping and crying out, flinching from the sparks. The smell of burning wood and polish was sickening. No one inside could survive now, surely?

‘Dear, oh dear.’ The woman from the flower stall used the

moment to wipe her face with her apron, but her eyes continued to fill.

‘How’d it start?’ someone asked.

Did it matter? Archie swallowed. Wylie was gone.

He stayed until the fire was out, more or less, and then, scorched and sorry, his auburn thatch singed, his eyes bloodshot and sore, he walked back up the road. Fires were common enough this long hot summer, forest fires mostly, but Walthamstow was little more than a large village on the outskirts of London and still had clapboard cottages at its heart, and timber-framed buildings like Daniel Wylie’s. Tinder-dry, they were always at risk. But why hadn’t the man saved himself, let the damned furniture burn and claimed on the insurance? Unless he’d been trapped, hurt in some way, caught under heavy furniture? Archie sighed and shook his head. Poor Daniel, Archie mourned, head bowed, hand to heart, and discovered his bag of drawing-materials still slung across his chest. He’d had neither the time nor the will to use them.

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It wasn’t until the following day that the police were able to pick their way across the floor of the devastated store through to the back room. They found Wylie’s charred remains in a pile of wood ash, with only a signet ring to identify him. It lay beside the body where his left hand might have fallen, with a bunch of keys which had presumably been in his trouser pocket. His clothes and extremities had burned clean away. Although what remained of his body was charcoal brittle and black, accidental fire was not the cause of his death. According to the local *Journal*, close examination of the skull had revealed a bullet wound above the right ear, an exit hole below the left. Daniel had not escaped the inferno because he was already dead. Murdered.

Cruelly, he was then hauled on top of a pyre of dining-room

chairs, like a Guy Fawkes, and set alight. What was that all about? A respectable shopkeeper on a bonfire in Victorian England? It was barbaric.

The neighbours, deaf and blind, claimed to have seen and heard nothing unusual: no one entering or leaving the shop around the time in question. They were used to furniture being moved around the shop during the dinner hour. They hadn't realised that Will Beswick, who usually helped with the lifting, was out of town at a two-day auction in Chelmsford, his presence verified by a dozen or more members of the public and the landlord of the Blue Lion Inn. Beswick arrived back with a cartload of furniture and no shop to put it in. He sold it off in the market for as much as he could get and then disappeared, cart and all.

Near the front of the shop, in the still smouldering embers of what had been a sales counter, the police discovered an empty cash box, clumsily forced open. If the murderers had been after money they'd have been sadly disappointed. Daniel had banked the week's takings the day before.

Who could have murdered the furniture man and, more to the point, why? As far as Archie was aware, Daniel Wylie had had no enemies. He was a good man, a churchgoer. Where most men would whistle popular songs, Daniel seemed to know only hymn tunes. In the three or four years since taking over the business, he had become known for dealing fairly with buyers and sellers alike. His second-hand furniture was always treated for woodworm and polished to an attractive sheen before being offered for sale at a reasonable price. If, like Archie, you wanted to kit out a largish room with the basics, you couldn't go wrong with Wylie. And say the painter wanted to include a chandelier in a portrait, or a fancy footstool, Daniel would willingly let him bring his sketchpad or

easel into the shop. An obliging sort of chap, he had been known to put aside any cheap picture frames he came across and to give Archie first refusal.

The police, too, were at a loss – until Mary Quinn turned up.

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Fear lent her pallid skin a wraithlike transparency that would have challenged Rembrandt. She crept into the room at the sergeant's bidding and stood trembling, as if about to collapse in a heap of rag and bone. In the silence he heard the rasp of rough dry skin, as she twisted her hands.

'Come in, have a seat.' Archie sprang to his feet.

She shrank away, gnawing her lip.

'We won't keep you, then, Sergeant,' he said, his eyebrows lifting with the smallest of hints. They had it down to a fine art after three years. Frank Tyrell would put the kettle on and stay discreetly out of the room until the drawing was well underway. In Archie's experience witnesses found describing a suspect difficult enough, without the distraction of the law breathing down their necks. But even with Tyrell gone, the girl stood nibbling her fingernails, hardly daring to look at him.

Lord, was he that frightening? He sat down quickly to minimise his height and bulk. Or had she been listening to gossip? He knew what the neighbours thought about the artist in their midst and his loose morals. If he had been a skivvy like this poor little scrap, *he* might have found him a little daunting.

She had been cleaning for the widow, Mrs Chinnery, who had rooms over the chandler's, when she had spotted a man on the other side of the road, pressed against Wylie's window, banging and signalling for the owner to open up and admit him. Half an hour later the missus had made Mary shut the window for the smoke coming in.

According to Tyrell, the girl had only spoken up this morning. Like many, she was in fear of policemen and had spent sleepless nights making up her mind to tell her mistress, who had straightway marched her up to the police station. ‘Tell them what you told me!’ she’d rapped. ‘Tell them you saw this man acting suspiciously.’

That was when they had sent for Archie.

Affecting indifference, he opened his sketchpad at a clean page, chose a pencil, and began drawing, relying on the old trick to break the ice. It worked with children. A sigh of long skirts and a whiff like a balled-up dishcloth told him that she had taken her seat. He looked up, expecting to find her absorbed in his comic sketch of the police sergeant, with walrus moustache and bulbous nose, but instead her baleful blue eyes were fixed on him.

She turned her attention to the wall where a faded etching of the queen headed up a list of dos and don’ts for those who could read. From the intensity of her gaze and the movement of her lips he guessed she only had the rudiments.

Lord, this wouldn’t do. Her testimony was all they had to go on.

‘There’s no rush.’ He forced a smile. ‘Take your time. Try closing your eyes – that sometimes helps.’

That was asking too much. Almost perversely, she fastened on Archie’s box of newly sharpened pencils, watching, he supposed, for them to wriggle and grow teeth. Suppressing a sigh, he raked his fingers through his damp auburn hair and asked her questions about height, build and colouring, trying to get a picture in his mind of a monster who would murder a decent chap like Wylie.

He had to get it right. There were no shortcuts: comic sketches like the one he’d done of Sergeant Tyrell wouldn’t do for police records and, contrary to current theories, there really was no

criminal 'type'. Wrongdoers were not easily identifiable by the thickness of their skulls or caveman's physiognomy, and the caricatures featured in *Punch* magazine and the like were unhelpful. Perhaps a shifty or threatening manner might give them away but their features, give or take the odd scar or broken nose, were not remarkable – no more so than those of law-abiding citizens. In this case the suspect seemed to have been a fairly well-to-do young man, wearing a light-coloured, three-piece suit. Archie was forced to lean in close to catch the words. Her breath was sour, the lilt Irish.

'Collar and tie?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' she whispered.

'Hmm,' he said, overcoming his doubts, 'and on such a hot day, too.' Where the hell was that tea?

'Collar and tie, sir,' she insisted.

As he selected his first fine-pointed pencil, the tea arrived, the policeman withdrew and Archie watched blunt finger-ends add a greedy six lumps of sugar to her cup. There were biscuits, too, to be dunked, sucked and swallowed with relish. Lord, the girl was famished. No wonder she looked so washed out. Not a speck of colour in her face apart from those startling ultramarine eyes, all but lost in the dark saucers of her skull. Little by little as the tea went down, her lips grew less pale and with a touch more vigour she began describing a young man in his middle-to-late twenties, shorter than Archie, who stood up for comparison, his hair grazing the low ceiling. 'Not your build at all, sir, not so broad in the shoulders.' Her man had a high forehead beneath a brown bowler hat or derby, a long, narrow jaw, sandy or fair hair, pale eyes and 'rabbity' teeth. At Archie's prompting she remembered cheekbones, 'Sharp, no meat on them at all,' adding, shyly, not without a touch of admiration, 'not like yours, sir.' Feeling her

eyes on him, he kept his own on the drawing and changed to a softer pencil for shading under the bone. Oh yes, she recalled a moustache, big and bushy, like Sergeant Tyrell's. Instinctively Archie's fingers strayed to his own upper lip, his gingery stubble – Tyrell had got him out of bed this morning – and, becoming conscious of her appraisal, returned to the task in hand. It wasn't the first time a witness had used him as an *aide mémoire*. 'And *he* hadn't the side whiskers, sir. Nor a dimple in his chin,' she added, almost cheekily.

As they went on she grew bolder, letting him know that the eyes he'd drawn, that she'd approved earlier, were set too close, 'Too piggy altogether,' and the eyebrows were too heavy. He tried again with larger irises, further apart.

'No-o-o,' she dared to groan, 'nothing like!' Setting his mouth in grim compliance he erased this effort also. 'Oh.' Her pout said it all. 'I'm a nuisance, amn't I? Hadn't we just better forget it?'

'Not on your life,' he said. 'You're very good. Most people would have used these much earlier.' He was referring to his collection of 'visual aids' created over the three years he had been working for the police: pages of head shapes, noses, mouths, chins, brows, jaws, hairlines, ears and, of course, eyes. From his folder he selected drawings of deep-set eyes, 'normal' eyes and more protruding eyes. She chose from the third sheet and, without hesitation, a pair with long upper lids. 'There's your man.' While they were at it, could she see the noses, sir? She did believe his was thinner than the one Archie had drawn.

He continued erasing and re-drawing at her dictation until suddenly he knew how it went. This was a face he'd drawn before! Quickly he flipped the page and began afresh, drawing now with swift strokes, shading around the nose and to show the fullness of the lower lip. 'Sure an' you have him, sir,' she said, catching her

breath in wonder that he'd seemed to read her mind, 'that's him exactly.' He erased smudges of soft pencil for highlights on the cheekbones, the forehead, just as he had before, and finished him off with a collar and tie and a derby tipped back on his head.

'The very man, so it is,' said the girl, shrinking back in something like horror. 'It's uncanny.'

No. There were no Other World spirits at his shoulder, no angels. It was just a knack he had, getting the witness to relax, letting her talk, listening carefully.

He called in Sergeant Tyrell, told him they were finished and, with his face set against any giveaway show of emotion, slid the sketchbook along the table towards the older man. 'See who it is, Sergeant?'

'By crikey!' He leaned round Mary Quinn and moved his spectacles further down his nose to peer over them. 'That's Mad Tommo Hegarty, that is!' His nostrils flared with distaste. 'Well, 'e 'as come up in the world.'

'You know him?' She sounded more alarmed than surprised.

'Not as well as I'd like,' the officer grumbled. 'Give us the slip last time. Your first case weren' it, Mister Price?'

Archie jerked his head in acknowledgement, remembering the disappointment when, after all his efforts, the villain and his accomplice had got away. He had a sudden thought. 'I'd better let the Kingtons know.'

'If you would, Arch – uh, Mister Price. Let's 'ope we can catch the blighter this time.'

'Bastard,' said Archie. 'Hanging's too good for him.' He glanced at the girl with sudden regret for his rough language, but she was hardly a lady. Indeed, the way she was staring at them both, you'd think she might add some epithet of her own.

'Come on, you,' said the policeman, curtly. 'You're done 'ere.'

She turned on her worn-down heel and followed him out of the door.

Archie was still packing up his materials when Tyrell returned. Tearing out the page he said, 'I'll get a poster done, then.'

The policeman grunted assent, his mind clearly elsewhere, on the next steps in the investigation perhaps, consulting the files, alerting the rest of the force, writing up his report.

'First thing in the morning all right?'

'Sorry? Oh yeah, thanks, soon as you like.'

'She was good, wasn't she? The girl, I mean.'

'Mm-hmm.'

'You don't think so?'

The sergeant took a long breath, scratched his forehead. 'In so far as she went, Archie, she was spot-on. I mean, the man she's described is Mad Tommo, no doubt about it. He was there. But there's gotta be at least one other person involved. At least.'

'Oh?'

'Think about it. Hegarty's an evil little worm, wiry but short in the arse. Even s'posing he done the killing, he ain't gonna be strong enough to lift the dead weight of Daniel Wylie up onto that pile of chairs all by himself. I mean Wylie was at least as tall as you, Arch, and a few stone heavier. I doubt you and me between us could have raised him above shoulder height, alive or dead. So I'm wondering, when, where and how did his mates show up? Was they already in the shop when the Quinn girl spotted Hegarty or did they come after?'

'And who were they? Was it Hegarty's idea?' Archie was enjoying the puzzle. 'Why, most of all, *why*?'

'I don't see Hegarty as the brains behind this, Arch. He's more your smash-and-grab bully-boy. Look what he done to that Squire Whatjemacallit ...'

‘Mowbray.’ The old Squire been smashed to a pulp. Archie’s friend John Kington, coming across the killers just after the attack, was lucky to escape with his life.

‘Mowbray, that’s the one.’ Tyrell nodded. ‘No, Tommo’s just a mindless thug. Whoever killed Wylie planned it, done his research. Knew Wylie shut up shop between twelve and one, knew Will Beswick’d be away and he’d have Wylie’s undivided attention. But what was they after?’ He paused, his heavy brow furrowed in thought. ‘Not the cash – he’d already banked the week’s takings, the day before, according to his wife. He’d a known that – whoever done it – shopkeepers round here bank on a Friday. Carry a big float on Market day, you’re asking for trouble. And then there’s the shooting. Hegarty’s more at home with a shillelagh, we know that.’

‘He’s had three years to learn how to use a gun,’ Archie pointed out.

‘True, very true, Arch, but I don’t see our Tommo as a gun man, somehow.’ He shook his head, defying argument. ‘And piling up the chairs like that, making a bonfire, what’s that in aid of? The man’s dead. Who they trying to impress?’ He tapped his fingernails on the table and pursed his lips. ‘No, it’s not as simple as it looks, mark my words.’

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They paid the artist a guinea for his pains. They gave Mary Quinn nothing. Helping the police with their enquiries, albeit reluctantly, was, after all, no more than her civic duty.

Easily sloughing off a sense of injustice on her behalf, Archie bounded down the steps of the police station, looking forward to a plate of eels and mash, when he saw her ahead of him at the crossroads, waiting for a gap in the traffic. Should he slow down, pretend he hadn’t seen her? He’d spent a lifetime ignoring such

people. Their interests were not his, their God not one he recognised. She stepped out into the road and hastily jumped back, crossing herself, as a horse and carriage rounded the corner in a choking cloud of dust and dried clods of dung. A brewer's dray ground by on the other side, pulled by a pair of massive Shires.

'You look that way and I'll look this,' he said, taking her bony elbow in his palm and dodging a butcher's boy on a bicycle. Skivvy or not, she was still a woman, and manners learned at his mother's knee were ingrained. 'It wasn't so bad, was it?' he asked when they were safely across, wiping his hand, where he'd held her, on his coat. 'I'd say we did a good job between us.' She stared hard at the ground. Any minute now she'd bob a curtsey. 'In the interview room, I mean.' He smiled, but there was no response. The creature was struck dumb by his attention. He really should stop teasing her, tip his hat and walk away. Some wicked impulse prompted him to persevere. 'You seemed decidedly anxious in there.' The frowsy hat dipped lower; blunt fingers came up to scrape loose hair behind the ear. 'But there was really nothing to it, was there?'

She flicked a glance at him. 'No, sir,' she said, twitching her mouth in what might have been a smile. Why did he get the feeling that what she had just done carried tremendous weight for her? Poor wretch – he realised, in a life so close to the gutter, a visit to the police station must either be a glorious highlight that would keep her in gossip with her ragged cronies for weeks, or unendurable torture.

'Not that it wasn't of critical importance,' he hastened to add. 'The police have been after that scum Hegarty for years. Your evidence will nail him, once and for all.'

He caught the flash of her eyes as she muttered, 'Always supposin' they catch him ...'

She was right. And if Hegarty found out who had fingered him, he would make it his business, his *primary* business, to silence her. She had been very brave in coming forward, very brave indeed. There was more to her than met the eye.

In fact, he couldn't help thinking, with a few hot meals inside her and something decent to wear she'd be almost passable, with those thick black lashes and that delicate bone structure – 'a face full of bones,' his mother would have said. The way her head was poised on that skinny neck was very pleasing, very pleasing indeed. Just so long as she didn't open her mouth. They had no conversation, these people, no education, just a lot of empty chit-chat. But as one thought struck him so another took its place, a scheme ...

'Come along,' he said firmly, and taking her arm again, steered her into the fragrant pie and eel shop. She protested a little, struggled feebly, but it was clear as day that she couldn't believe her luck. She was like a child at the high counter, her eyes misting as she followed each chunk of stewed fish ladled into the dish, each drop of hot parsley liquor puddling the mash: her moist tongue actually licking her lips. He told her to find a table and he'd bring over the food.

Tears filled her eyes as he put her plate before her. 'It's too much altogether,' she whispered. But one greedy mouthful followed another, freeing her tongue at the same time. Hardly pausing for breath, or even to chew her food, she prattled on about the news of the week, the fire at Wylie's.

'Couldn't I feel the heat of it with the window closed, hear the roaring of it?'

Slow down, slow down, finish your mouthful, he wanted to tell her. Her manners were appalling. He could scarcely bear to watch her, blathering away with her mouth full of fish and green

parsley. Any minute now she'd abandon her knife and fork and stuff the food in with her bitten finger-ends. Oh God, this was such a mistake. Could he possibly invent an urgent appointment and leave her to it? Now there was an idea.

But even as he slipped his hand into his pocket to consult his watch, she was off on another tack: her daily grind. Apparently Mrs Chinnery wasn't the only lady she 'did' for. As if he gave a tuppenny damn! Mostly she cleaned houses and shops. Up and out by four in the morning, she'd have swept up the sawdust at The Horse and Groom, emptied the spittoon and cleaned the lavvies before Mister Reeves opened up. That done, she'd take herself down the road and mop a shop floor or two before knocking on Mrs Chinnery's door at eleven on the dot.

He was hardly listening. Head aslant, he studied her face, thinking, Lord, Lord, why does she spoil her looks with that dreadful tuft of crimped hair and that cheap fluff of feathers on the brim of her hat? And a regular encounter with soap and water wouldn't come amiss. Quite apart from improving her 'bouquet' she'd be almost pretty with those sky-blue eyes, bright now and animated, those flyaway eyebrows and that delicate skin. A good scrub and he might be able to do something with her. In fact, she'd make a striking picture.

In fact ...

His bag of materials sat beside him on the bench. But the white wall tiles were too cold, the high-backed booth too functional and, besides, he'd seen something similar in the Academy by one of the new French artists, with an eminently forgettable name. But he could still see the painting of that derelict couple, the woman drinking absinthe, also at a marble-topped table, looking completely unfocused, un-posed. Funny the impact it had made and it wasn't even well done: the brush-work was crude, the

colours dull. And yet it said something a more ‘finished’ painting somehow could not. Degas – that was the chap. The galleries in town were agog with him and his cronies, with their preference for common subjects, realistic scenes.

If this was the coming thing, perhaps he, too, should ...

He closed his eyes to focus on a vision fast-forming in his head, of a raggedy-Annie, a dirty little immigrant, hardly connecting to the real world except to clean it. She would be in the foreground looking out of the window, her washcloth laid aside as she stared at the shocking scene across the street, the burning building, the wild-eyed horses, flames, devastation, death. He could use the sketches he’d made for the *Journal*.

And her. He’d use her.

Oh, this would be very different from his usual style which, he had to admit, had hardly changed in five years and still owed much to the tenets of the Pre-Raphaelites, his idols at college. Like theirs, his paintings were designed to lead the viewer away from reality’s imperfections, to a world of make-believe where only the most beautiful and luscious of leaves and fruits grew and the most beautiful and luscious of people lived. Like Ida, all peaches and cream; like Charlotte, another Jane Morris, with her dark hair and pouting lips; Gussie even had the Titian colouring so beloved of Rossetti and company. He aimed so to consume his viewers with beauty that they failed to see that in Victoria’s England things were flawed, were smelly and noisy, were in fact downright ugly.

This new work wouldn’t pull any punches. On his way home he’d buy some long flat-headed brushes, some tubes of ready-mixed paint. Stand aside Pre-Raphs! Enter true realism.

He would paint this girl exactly as she was: bony wrists, dirty neck and all, and he would show her humanity in every brushstroke. He would be holding a mirror up to poverty.

Photography be damned, this would be ten times more real, more telling.

He gulped down the food now, hardly tasting it. He couldn't wait to get started. Casually, delicately, as though the act of arranging the segments of fishbone around the rim of his dish was oh so absorbing, he explained what he had in mind, if she would deign to sit for him. They could go now, well, when she'd finished eating. His studio was just up the road. 'No need to change. Come as you are.'

She blushed. She scooped up the very last crumb of her mashed potato and slid off the bench. Her dish clattered against the marble top as it caught her sleeve and she pointed the knife at him in a dangerously different grip. 'Oh no,' she said, looking him in the eye as she backed away, 'you've got me wrong there, mister. You'll not buy me with a plate of fish. You'll have to find someone else for that sort of thing, so you will.'

What sort of thing? Surely she didn't imagine he would stoop to ... good God! He watched, speechless, as she left the shop, and held out his hands to Bernie, the restaurateur, in complete bewilderment.

Bernie was more concerned about the girl's empty plate. She'd made off with his cutlery.

Chapter 2

Mary ran down the High Street, the knife up one sleeve, the fork up the other, the eel and its lovely juices swilling in her belly. Thinking she would be sick and that'd be a waste of it, she slowed to a walk when she was sure he wasn't following. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, she thought, gulping air and crossing herself, wasn't that a narrow escape?

She had only herself to blame, of course. She'd known what he was like. Nobody spoke to her directly, the girl polishing the brass fittings on the door of the Conservative Club, but the shrill voices of the stallholders floated over to her.

'Fair dos,' said the one they called Charlotte, laying out her knick-knacks, 'he pays all right – shilling an hour, and eighteen pence for specials.'

'*Specials*, what's that?'

'You know – bare-arsed.'

Shrieks and squeaks and '*Lawks!*' had Mary straining her ears to catch their drift.

'Well, I tell ye ...' went Charlotte, lowering her voice even further. Mary couldn't make it out, not over the rattling letterbox. She turned her attention to the doorknob.

'Never!'

'Oh yes! Ain't nothing sacred with painters.'

‘And you let him, Charlotte Wiggins. What was that then, *extra* special? Gawd ’elp us, no wonder he always looks like he’s just got up, with them bedroom eyes, an’ all.’

‘Oh he’s lovely, Bess, but I tell ye, gel, you sit for him, you wanna watch you don’t come out with a sight more’n what you went in with! ’Old up, here’s yer old man.’ Their laughter ended abruptly. ‘So, Bessie, what d’you think of me new line, eh? Little black cat for luck and you can have green eyes or red. Go on, treat yourself.’

The missus at the pub didn’t mince her words, either. ‘A wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ she reckoned. ‘Melt your heart, he would, with that smile of his and *could* I let him have half a bitter on the slate, just till he gets to the bank? Cheeky beggar! I soon told him what for. Course, we all know where his money goes, at a shilling an hour. Them silly geese – if their mothers only knew ...’

And she was one of them, another silly goose. A prize eejit. Oh, she could kick herself. But how could you *not* trust a man who could see into your mind and transfer what he saw to paper? Down to the last button and whisker? What he did was amazing. There was magic in his fingers. He listened hard, to every blessed word, bending his head in close, a flea jump away. And breath like honey.

She should have known it wasn’t kindness that had him offering her dinner. Why should he? The likes of her? And him with ladies a-plenty, real ladies in pretty dresses? But she’d been so very faint with hunger she hadn’t thought what he might want from her. Doing that shameful thing in the police station had used up all her strength, and the biscuits with the tea no help at all. Sure, and when had she ever sat down to a proper dish of fish and parsley sauce?

Fish *stew*, maybe, if she could beg a few fish heads in the

market. 'For the cat?' she'd wheedle. But they knew, the butcher and the fishmonger, and all their customers, too, that the marrowbone 'for her little dog' and the fish heads would end up in the cook pot, alongside any carrots and onions that had rolled off the barrow, or the leaves off cauliflowers, or soft tomatoes. But it wasn't the same as eels and mash you hadn't had to cook yourself. That was special.

Mammy made the best fish stew in the world. 'Feeding the multitude,' she called it, with a herring or two off the boat and the shellfish the children gathered in from the beach: crabs and razor-shells and winkles. Cooked up with some praties and a few pot herbs, you'd think you were a queen at a feast. Even when Da died of drowning Mammy could make do with the scraps from the filleting down on the quayside. But then the fish stopped biting and the boats came back empty more often than not and there was no work for anyone, men or women. Sooner than live off seaweed and nettles, gulls' eggs and what few shellfish were left now that everyone was picking them, the nine children dwindled to six, then five, then four as they all went for a better life in England. After Brian went it was her turn. And here she was, alone and making what she could of it. She supposed she'd never see Mammy again or many of the others, come to that.

She crossed the road to 'Uncle's' and, sucking them clean before she went in, pawned the knife and fork for sixpence. The old man gave her a squinty look, like he knew they were stolen, and so he should, but never mind. Needs must.

Nearing the end of the High Street now, she breathed shallow against the foul smell of the Lea and its marshes. The hot weather had dried the river to a slow, lazy sludge. What boats and barges there were kept to the middle and their crews wore scarves over their noses like thieves.

There was that kid again, the one that looked like her brother Michael, his hair so thick with dirt you couldn't tell its colour, eyes sunk with starvation, and skin like sooty candle wax. His feet were bare, his clothes in shreds. She hadn't said anything to the police, but the other day, while she was looking in Underwood's at the hats, he'd been pestering Mister Wylie on the doorstep.

'Clear off, sonny,' the big man had said. 'Nothing for you here.'

She hadn't heard what he'd said, but Mister Wylie had taken it badly. 'May God forgive you, you evil little runt!' he'd shouted, purple with rage. Next thing, the door banged, the *Closed* sign went up and the kid was away down the street, holding his ear and hollering.

It wasn't like the furniture man to clout a child. Generally he was praising the Lord for a glorious day and God-blessing anyone who stopped to look in his shop. If business was slow, he'd maybe sit outside with a bowl of soapy water and a cloth to clean a looking-glass or a pretty lampshade and to pass the time of day with passers-by. But the little fellow had really upset him. As the boy's rusty wheezing faded away, Mary couldn't help but wonder what he'd said that was so bad.

Perhaps *he'd* had a hand in the murder. Perhaps he'd got his Da to pay the man a visit; set fire to his store for spite. She almost laughed. Daft idea, Mary. The police were convinced that Tommo Hegarty was their man, thanks to her. All they had to do now was catch him. And soon, please God. She crossed herself. She couldn't have him wondering who had grassed him up. He'd know soon enough, at the trial, when she pointed her finger at him there in the dock. But they'd have him in irons by then.

What was this boy thinking of, hanging round the pub on the corner, bothering the fellers as they came through the door? He was asking for another thick ear or worse. The Railway Tavern

was a den of roaring boys, and charity the last thing on their minds.

'I'd run along, if I were you,' she said to the boy, as she came up, 'anywhere but here. They eat you little ones for dinner.'

'*E* won't.' His dirty face was streaked with fresh tears, she noticed, and the bones of his cheeks were nearly through the skin. '*E*'s a toff.'

'Who's that? Your Da?'

'Ain't got no Da.'

'Oh.'

'No ma, neither.'

'Who looks after you then?'

'Me pals. Least they did.' His mouth turned down and his eyes filled with tears as he gazed longingly at the door of the Tavern. He could only have been five or six, not much more. Limbs like twigs. 'But they went and left us,' he said and a new tear washed a pathway through the dirt on his cheek.

What could she do? He shouldn't hang around here hoping for handouts from mindless drunks. He'd get more than he bargained for. He said his name was Jim. It was what his ma had called him before she 'run off with some geezer over Tottenham'.

She sighed. 'Want a biscuit, Jim?' His eyes lit up like magic and he cuffed his snout with an almighty and unsuccessful sniff. She felt for the biscuits she'd palmed into her pocket up at the police station. She'd been going to give one to Dolly but what the eye didn't see ...

It was gone in a flash and he turned his gaze on her pocket expectantly, as a dog would: knowing there were more.

She sighed again. She couldn't take him home. Dolly would have a fit, another mouth to feed. There were places for waifs and strays – orphanages, the Workhouse – where he'd have a roof over

his head, at least. ‘Look, you come with me, Jim, and I’ll give you the other one,’ she wheedled. She’d take him to the Sally Army up the road.

He squinted up at her. ‘Giss it nah!’

‘No, let’s just go and see these people I know. They’ll take you in.’

‘Gimme a bickit, first.’

‘No.’

‘Gimme, gimme!’ He stamped his little bare feet. She couldn’t torment the poor little mite and in the end left him, munching greedily, searching frantically for any dropped bits and crumbs – much good would they do him – and refusing to budge from the spot. A faint thought fluttered through her mind that perhaps she should fetch a policeman, but it scurried away in fear. Not even a needy case like Jim warranted more words with them.

With a heavy heart she left him to his fate, looked for carts and bicycles coming round the corner, and picked her way across James Street.