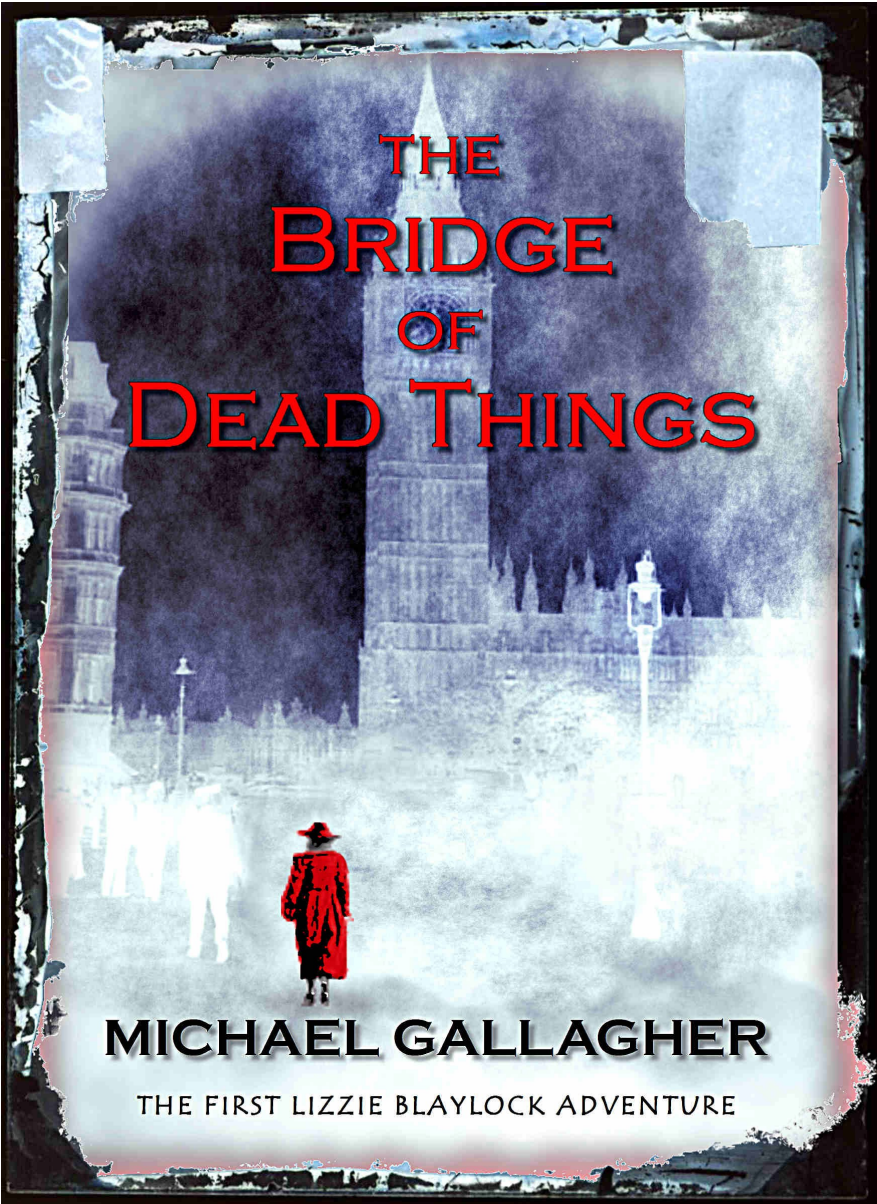




THE BRIDGE OF DEAD THINGS

MICHAEL GALLAGHER

THE FIRST LIZZIE BLAYLOCK ADVENTURE

THE BRIDGE OF DEAD THINGS

by
Michael Gallagher

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

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[**Miss Lizzie Blaylock**](#)

[**Mr Thomas Reginald Blaylock**](#), Lizzie's father

[**Mary**](#), Lizzie's younger sister, who suffers from tuberculosis

[**Mrs Ellis**](#), their landlady

[**Mrs Smutts**](#), Lizzie's teacher

[**Miss Dorothea Canning**](#), also known as Dorrie, the school bully

[**Miss Sally Stanley**](#), Lizzie's school friend

[**Miss Bronwyn Jenkins**](#), Lizzie's classmate

[**Miss Thyrza Gault**](#), their former classmate who drank hat paint; now deceased

[**Mrs Eugenia Ledden**](#), Lizzie's first employer

[**Miss Violet Ledden**](#), Eugenia's long-suffering daughter

[**Mr Alfred Ledden**](#), Mrs Ledden's deceased husband, and Violet's father, whose stage-name was *The Great Aladdin*

[**Ida**](#), Alfred's younger sister, whose stage-name was *Padmini, Little Indian Princess*

[**Frank**](#), Ida's husband

Mr Simeon de Florence, Lizzie's next employer

Albert Olave, Simeon's young helper

Mrs Meakins, Simeon's housekeeper

Mr Dircks, the engineer that Simeon occasionally employs to carry out electrical works

Miss Ophelia Downle, who used to work for Simeon some years ago

Lady Caroline Dabney, Simeon's friend and client

Master William Dabney, also known as Billy, Lady Caroline's deceased son

Miss Otis, an elderly clairaudient medium whom Lady Caroline has started to consult

Mrs Silver, a medium who was 'ghost-grabbed' by Simeon and now sews for him from time to time

Mr Silver, her deceased husband

Mr George, photographer-in-charge at *Maull and Polyblank*

Frederick, his assistant

Tyler, his other assistant

Mrs Millicent Thorne, Lady Caroline's friend from the United States of America

Sir Joseph Warboys, Mrs Thorne's English lawyer

Mr Robert Fenton, a friend of the Thorne family, who refers to Mrs Thorne as 'Auntie'

Mr Heiram Thorne, Mrs Thorne's deceased husband

— CHAPTER 1 —
MRS SMUTTS'S EYE

‘ELIZA MAY BLAYLOCK! Stand up!’

Apart from my teacher, Mrs Smutts, nobody ever called me Eliza. It was always Lizzie. Lizzie Blaylock. It’s a plain enough name and for thirteen years it had served me fine.

An ordinary name for an ordinary girl, you might imagine. I’d certainly only ever thought of myself as ordinary. And up until that day in the spring of 1885, I *was* ordinary. Really I was. I took myself to church on Sundays, said my prayers every night, and attended school regularly. But all that was about to change.

‘Eliza! Did you hear me? I told you to stand up!’

Dorrie Canning, the girl sitting next to me, lowered her head and began to snigger. I scowled at her as I struggled to my feet. When I finally looked up, I began to get an inkling of what was on the damned scrap of paper that she’d just forced into my hand. Something awful had happened to my teacher’s face. A vein had burst in her right eye; it now resembled a spongy, peeled tomato.

‘Eliza Blaylock, were you *passing notes*?’

‘No, miss,’ I said, so sickened by the sight that I nearly dropped the crumpled paper then and there.

‘You know I take a particularly grim view of girls who pass notes in my class?’

‘Yes, miss.’ I bowed my head and stared at the floor. I suppose it probably made me appear even more guilty, but I couldn’t bear having to look at that eye for another second.

‘You were in trouble last week for not handing in your homework, Eliza. And the week before that there was your appalling outburst during morning prayers.’

‘Yes, miss.’ The truth was that Dorrie Canning had stolen my homework and ripped it to shreds in the playground; the week before, she’d put a damned spider down the back of my neck, just as we reached the part of the Lord’s prayer that goes ‘*Give us this day our daily bread*’.

Mrs Smutts sighed. ‘Well, if you weren’t passing notes, please explain to me what you *were* doing.’

‘I wasn’t doing anything, miss.’

‘In that case, Eliza,’ she said silkily, ‘I’m sure you’ll be able to tell the class the solution to the problem.’

‘What problem, miss?’

‘Why, the *arithmetic* problem I just posed...we *are* studying arithmetic, are we not?’

My friend, Sally Stanley, cupped her hand to her lips and whispered something to me—something about my

age, though I couldn't tell what.

‘Sally Stanley! Take your hand away from your mouth this instant!’

Sally gave a nervous cough and slumped down in her seat.

‘Well, Eliza? Do you have an answer for me?’

‘I'm afraid I can't have been listening, miss,’ I said with my head still bowed.

‘Not listening, eh?’ Again, my teacher's silkiest voice. ‘Then I suppose I shall have to repeat the question. Nines go into a hundred and seventeen how many times?’

I heard Mrs Smutts's chair being pushed back, then caught the rustle of her dress as she moved down the rows of desks towards me. It was at that point I first smelled something unusual in the room—not the everyday smells of sawdust and polish, but something much sweeter and mustier. *Pears. Rotting pears. Bruised flesh going bad by the minute.*

‘Do you imagine the answer's written on the floor, Eliza?’

‘No, miss.’

‘Then look at me!’

I raised my head a fraction and found myself staring straight into my teacher's blood-engorged eyeball. I gasped. Weirdly, instead of air, it was the taste of rotting pears that went shooting down my throat. I began to splutter and cough, not that it got me any sympathy.

‘Your answer, Eliza?’

Those sweet, cloying fumes were making it impossible to breathe, let alone think. Nines into a hundred and seventeen. Nines. Ten nines are ninety...ninety plus twenty-seven...

‘Thirteen! The answer’s thirteen!’ Oh, God, of course. My age.

The crimson eye blinked rapidly. ‘All right, Eliza. Now I want you to show me what you’ve got in your hand.’

‘What?’

‘It’s quite simple. You’ve got something in your hand and you’re going to show me what it is. Hold out your hand.’

The whole class went silent.

‘I said, *hold out your hand.*’

Even though I was feeling terribly giddy from the fumes, I still had the wits to put out the safe one, the empty one.

Mrs Smutts leaned forward.

‘Now the other,’ she said, glaring at me, and suddenly the stench of pears was so thick it was like snorting liquid into my lungs.

I felt my legs begin to buckle as my teacher ripped the note from my fingers and I found myself dropping to the floor, almost as if my bones had been sucked out of my body. I lay there for a moment staring at Dorrie Canning’s boots, shocked to see how they seemed to be turning red right in front of my eyes. Then I glanced up and caught the blasted girl grinning at me. She appeared to be turning

red, too, though by now her face was fading fast. Just my luck: those bloated, toad-like features were the last thing I saw as the world that I knew slipped away.

*

When I awake, I discover that I'm lying on the side of a hill—a perfectly round, incredibly big, green hill—staring out into space. And though I should be wondering how on earth it is that I come to be here, the first thing that pops into my head is that I've been blessed with a miracle; I won't have to cope with Mrs Smutts ranting on at me.

I'm lying on my back, perhaps fifty feet from the summit, breathing the good, clean air. Then I start to notice how alive everything feels.

More than alive.

The grass that I'm lying on acts as a mattress. I can actually see the blades growing when I move, sending out new shoots to cushion me as I roll from left to right.

Dear God, I am so safe here. I am protected.

I want to say something out loud but, of course, I'm no longer certain that I have a voice to speak with. I open my mouth and out comes a single word—

'Hello...?'

Just a peep of sound, so small that it feels like a memory.

But then it builds: dull at first, then sharp—echoing like crystal—then singing, and singing, and singing until, like a million stars colliding all about me, it explodes in my

ears. For one full minute, it's truly deafening.

Green hill. Blue sky. But is there anything else here?

Hardly daring to breathe now in case I set the music off again, I pick myself up and head for the top of the hill—to see what I can see.

*

So where was I *really* during all of this? As you probably guessed: down amongst the chairs and desks, jerking and fitting on the hardwood floor (and all the while doing the most bizarre thing, if Mrs Smutts is to be believed, but we'll come to that later).

By the time I regained consciousness, my teacher had sent most of the class home. Only my friend Sally and this other girl remained. I could see them huddled by the door, staring at me as if I'd grown a second head.

Mrs Smutts leaned over me and peered into my face. I quickly looked away.

'Can you move your fingers?' she asked, watching closely as I wiggled them for her. 'How about your toes? Yes? Then I'm going to sit you up.'

She went to take my hand, then hesitated. She gazed at it for a good few seconds before finally grasping me by the wrist and pulling me into a sitting position. Immediately a vast stream of vomit came hurtling out of my mouth, missing her by inches.

'*I'm sorry...*' I groaned, staring down at the sodden mess in my lap. Bronwyn, the girl by the door, burst into

tears and clung on to Sally for comfort.

‘Can’t be helped,’ clucked my teacher, dabbing her handkerchief over the couple of spots that had landed on her blouse. ‘Sawdust will fix that for now. Just be sure you rinse that smock out as soon as you can. And for Heaven’s sake, Eliza, use ammonia in the water.’

‘Yes, miss.’

Mrs Smutts turned to my friends in the doorway. ‘Sally, fetch me the sawdust.’

‘*What? Me?*’ Sally shrank back in horror.

‘Yes, you, Sally! The bucket in the corner! Quickly, girl!’

I sat there feeling mortified, trying not to move a muscle as Mrs Smutts scraped the worst of the mess off my smock.

‘Now,’ she said, surveying the results with a nod, ‘Bronwyn and Sally have volunteered to walk you home, and here, Eliza, is a letter for your parents. I need them to come and see me first thing in the morning. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Do you think you can stand up?’

‘I think so, miss.’

‘In the morning, then.’

Sally and Bronwyn may have volunteered to walk me home, but really they were no help whatsoever. No sooner had we got out the door than the pair of them took off at a gallop, racing through the streets of Waterloo so fast that I could barely keep up. At The Cut, when they bolted

across the road, leaving me to dodge the cab horses on my own, I decided I'd had enough.

'You two just go home,' I shouted at them over the noise of the traffic. 'I can make my own way from here.'

They glanced at each other with looks of relief, then scuttled off into the gloom like a pair of jittery rabbits.

Morpeth Place is a tiny turning off the Waterloo Road, just around the corner from the station. I lived in a house at the end with my father and my little sister, Mary. Three other families lived there too; well, four, if you count the landlady and her husband. We rented the two rooms at the very top—the cheapest ones, since the more stairs you have to climb, the less you pay in rent. We paid five shillings a week, which was a shilling less than the couple who had rooms on the ground floor. That might sound like a fair bit of money we were saving, but, honestly—trust me—when you're dying of thirst and there's not a drop of water left in the jug, there's always that mountain of stairs to face if you go to the pump to draw more.

The walls of the house were paper-thin and I could hear my sister coughing even before I'd reached the top landing. I pushed open the door and was about to go through to attend to her when I noticed my dad's coat slung over a chair. I frowned. Normally it was at least another hour before he got back from the docks.

'What are you doing home so early?' I asked as I made my way through to the bedroom.

My father looked up with a guilty start then squinted at

my dress. ‘Gawd almighty!’ he cried. ‘What the hell happened to you?’

‘I threw up at school. Actually, I think I might have had some kind of fit.’

‘Oh, girl, you don’t want to go having no fits! Lord... you don’t need the doctor to you, d’yer?’

I heard the catch in his voice: doctors were expensive. Nobody in our neighbourhood would dream of calling one out unless they were actually dying.

‘Don’t worry, Dad, I’m feeling much better now,’ I lied.

Mary rolled listlessly on to her side. My father sat her up and began tapping away at her back, his cupped fingers producing odd little popping sounds as he struck at the flesh between her tiny shoulder-blades.

‘You sure you’re all right?’ he asked, glancing at me as he worked.

‘Certain.’

I went and got a clean smock from the drawer.

‘Then why the sad face?’

‘No reason...’

‘Girl, you got a face on you like a lemon.’

I stared at the dress in my hands. ‘It’s just...well... when Sally and this other girl walked me home, they wouldn’t say a word to me. They didn’t even ask if I was all right. You know, I got the strangest impression they were scared of me for some reason.’

‘Scared of you?’

‘Terrified, even...’

Dad laughed. ‘You can hardly blame them for that, girl. You know, I sees this chap, once, ’aving a fit. Frightened the bleedin’ life out of me!’

I noticed my father stroking his nose with the side of his thumb—always a bad sign; it usually meant that he was about to tell a lie.

‘I ends up having to stand watch over the poor so-and-so while he’s thrashing about in the street, just in case someone was out to rob ’im.’

‘Oh, really? And did...‘*someone*’...manage to rob him —?’

‘Lizzie Blaylock! What you accusing me of? I didn’t take a penny from the stupid cuss! Would I do a thing like that?’

‘*Hmmm...*’ I rolled the soiled smock over my head, folded it, then started pulling on the clean one. My father stopped what he was doing to watch. I suddenly felt very self-conscious and turned my back to him.

‘Dear Gawd above! Where’d you get them bruises, girl?’

‘Where do you think?’

‘Lord, you didn’t let on that it was as bad as all that!’

I shrugged. ‘Listen, Dad, I’ve got a letter for you from my teacher.’

My father sat bolt upright. ‘What the hell’s she sending *me* letters for?’

‘I expect she wants to see you.’

‘See me? *Why?* I ain’t done nuffin’ wrong!’

‘It’s probably about my fit.’

‘Well...I s’pose that’s different...’ He didn’t sound very convinced. ‘Read it out for us, girl; I don’t have no specs on me.’

‘Dad, we both know you can’t read.’

‘No need to rub it in; yer Dad’s had a busy day.’ He was scratching the side of his nose again.

‘All it says is that you’ve got to come to school with me tomorrow.’

Actually, what it said was:

‘Dear Mr and Mrs Blaylock,

Something occurred in my classroom today—something which makes it imperative that I speak to you as soon as possible. Can you please come to see me tomorrow morning at eight-thirty? As this is a matter of considerable importance, I do hope that this time you will both be able to attend.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Smutts.’

—not that I was prepared to tell my father any of that.

‘I s’pose I *could* take an hour off work...’ He was still scratching his nose.

‘Dad, you’d better not be thinking of bailing on me!’

‘What? Nah...nah! I was just wonderin’ what to wear.’

‘But what you’re wearing’s fine.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t go like this, girl; it wouldn’t feel right. I’d ’ave to wear me suit.’

‘Oh, please, not the suit...’

‘What’s wrong with my suit?’ he whined. ‘It’s quality, that; all wool: you mark my words...’

‘Dad, it’s three sizes too big for you!’

‘No it ain’t...well, not so’s you’d notice.’ He set to work on Mary’s back again. My sister’s cough had eased a little and her fever seemed to be down a bit.

‘Do you want me to take over from you?’ I offered.

‘No, I’ll carry on here. You go wash that dress of yours, then you can get the supper on. What say we have them kippers? They’re startin’ to pong a bit...’

‘Dad, it’s your turn to make the supper!’

‘For Gawdsake, Lizzie, why can’t you do it? That damned landlady always shouts at me for crowdin’ up her kitchen.’

‘But Mrs Ellis *hates* me!’

‘Lizzie, love, Mrs Ellis hates everyone; it’s just her way! Go on, girl...I promise I’ll come with you tomorrow if you do...’

‘Oh, very well! I suppose it’s kippers, then.’

*

The next morning I was pleased to see that Mrs Smutts had taken to wearing an eye-patch; the thought of seeing that eye of hers again had been giving me the creeps.

‘Considering the seriousness of the situation, Mr Blaylock, I’m surprised that Lizzie’s mother could not also attend,’ she observed sourly as she rose to greet us.

My father looked puzzled. ‘Lizzie’s mother? What the hell would she be doing here?’

I gave my dad a kick. ‘What he means to say is that someone had to stop in to look after Mary, miss.’

Dad gave me an angry look but thankfully took the hint. ‘Yeah, right...right. Mary’s the youngest, see. *Delicate*, like—got the consumption eating away at her. Needs looking after day and night.’

Mrs Smutts pursed her lips. ‘Oh, yes,’ she said, ‘I’d quite forgotten about Mary. Tuberculosis is such an awful disease; I’m sure it must be very difficult for you both.’

‘Ah, well, miss...who are we to question Gawd’s will?’

Mrs Smutts appeared to shake her head doubtfully at this, but then I realised she was actually studying my father’s suit.

‘So, Mr Blaylock, let us get down to business. Did Eliza tell you what happened yesterday?’

‘You mean about her fit, like?’

‘No, Mr Blaylock. I mean about what she *did*.’

‘What she did?’

Nothing could have prepared me for what my teacher said next.

‘Yesterday, in front of the whole class, your daughter had the gall to imitate a former classmate of hers, a truly unfortunate girl called Thyrza Gault.’

I could hardly believe my ears—I hadn’t been imitating anyone, especially not little Thyrza. What on earth would possess Mrs Smutts to say such things?

My father frowned. ‘You call me in here just to tell me that Lizzie was imitatin’ some damned classmate of hers?’

‘A *former* classmate, Mr Blaylock; it so happens that Thyrza Gault committed suicide last year. The poor girl went home one night and downed half a bottle of hat paint—terribly toxic stuff—and, as you can imagine, she died a horrible, painful death. Tragic...tragic. It was a shock to us all. And yesterday your daughter took it into her head to entertain the class by imitating her.’

My dad’s eyes narrowed. ‘Lizzie? Is this true?’

‘No. I promise you, I never—’

Mrs Smutts struck the top of her desk with a resounding *thwack!*

‘*DON’T YOU LIE TO HIM!*’ she bellowed. ‘*I saw you do it with my own two eyes!* You were there! On the floor! Mimicking the girl in front of everybody! You contorted your face till it looked like her face; you spoke with that pathetic little stammer of hers! You even copied the terrified smile she always resorted to whenever she got picked on. And the things you said about your fellow classmates! Well! I was disgusted!’

‘But I didn’t, Mrs Smutts; truly I didn’t. I was... I was...’ At my green hill. That’s what I wanted to say. At my wonderful green hill, running all the way to the top.

My father gave an apologetic cough. ‘If Lizzie says it weren’t her, then you best believe it. My daughter don’t lie.’

I was so proud of him for saying that, but then I clocked

him giving me a big wink. I think Mrs Smutts noticed it too.

‘Mr Blaylock, *I saw her do it*. The whole class did. There’s no question of it being otherwise.’

‘Oh, but, Dad, I didn’t! Honest, I didn’t!’

My teacher rounded on me with a face like ice. ‘Really?’ she hissed, pulling something from the top of her desk. ‘And I suppose you didn’t draw this, then, either?’

It was the note that Dorrie Canning had forced on me. She held it up for my father to see. It was a pencil sketch of a one-eyed monster holding what looked like a chimney-brush in its hand. The caption read: ‘*If you poke about in chimneys, you’re bound to get smuts in your eye*’.

Knowing my father, I expected him to snigger, but all I got was a stare. ‘Girl, ain’t yer goin’ to answer your teacher?’

‘It was Dorrie Canning,’ I mumbled, no longer caring whether I’d be labelled a tattle-tale for the rest of the school year. ‘She passed the drawing to me.’

Mrs Smutts snorted loudly. ‘Dorothea Canning? You have the nerve to blame Dorothea Canning?’

‘Well, why not? It’s the truth!’

‘Let me tell you this, young lady: Dorothea’s parents sent word this morning—the girl was so distraught after the things you said to her, she went home and tried to copy poor Thyrza. She was just about to swallow hat paint herself when her mother walked in and caught her.

Luckily the woman managed to grab the bottle away from her daughter before any real harm could be done. Even so, they still had to send for a doctor to calm the girl down.'

'A doctor?'

'Yes, Eliza, *a doctor*. Dorothea Canning had a very narrow escape. And so, I might suggest, have you...' Mrs Smutts studied me long and hard with her one good eye. Her expression wasn't difficult to read. 'Why did you do it?' she asked, and I knew from the tone of her voice that we were no longer talking about the drawing.

How do you answer a question like that when telling the truth clearly isn't going to work?

Mrs Smutts shook her head. 'Of course,' she continued, watching me squirm, 'it's quite impossible for you to return to class. You realise that, don't you? So I imagine you'll be needing a job.'

'*What?* You're saying that I've got to leave school?'

'That's precisely what I'm saying, Eliza.'

'Can't she just h'pologise?' my father asked weakly.

'You really don't seem to appreciate the seriousness of this matter, Mr Blaylock. Look at the number of complaints I've had—' Mrs Smutts tapped a pile of letters on her desk '—all of them threatening to withdraw their daughters if Lizzie remains here at Webber Street Girls. This is my livelihood, I'll have you know; the School Board pays me strictly by results and I am not prepared to see my salary go walking out the door simply to accommodate your badly-behaved daughter! Now, as it

happens, I recently received a letter from a local woman, asking for a girl to train up as a maid.'

'A *maid*?' I shrieked.

Mrs Smutts ignored the outburst and kept her eye trained on my father. 'It's the best offer she'll get, Mr Blaylock, I can assure you. I should think very carefully about it, if I were you.'

Dad scratched his chin. 'She'd get paid for this, right? Proper money and all?'

'Of course.'

'What d'yer reckon, girl? A maid. It ain't so bad bein' a maid...'

I stared at him in disbelief.

'Present this,' said Mrs Smutts, prodding a hastily scrawled letter into my hand. 'Just tell the woman that Webber Street Girls School sent you. There's no need to mention my name; she'll know what this is about. But be aware: I'm going out on a limb for you, Eliza; so for Heaven's sake, *don't let me down!*'

— CHAPTER 2 —
THE HOUSE IN WEST SQUARE

THE SKY LOOKED yellow and overcast as we stepped through the school gates. Black storm clouds were billowing in from the west.

‘Why d’yer have to go and bruise me shins?’ my father moaned.

‘Because you deserved it!’

‘But I backed you up with that tale about yer damned mother, didn’t I—?’

‘Yes, and then you went and plotted with my teacher to turn me into a maid!’

‘Why ain’t you told ’em, then?’

‘What?’

‘You heard. Why ain’t you told your school about yer mum?’

‘Because I don’t want them knowing my business, that’s all!’

My father eyed me proudly. ‘Lord, you really are a chip off the old block, ain’t yer?’

‘I’m not going to be anyone’s maid, Dad.’

He lowered his head and sighed. ‘Well, what yer goin’ to do, then?’

‘Why can’t I stay at home and look after you and Mary?’

His mouth grew grim. ‘Nahh...nah, you can’t do that, girl.’

‘Why not? I could shop and clean for you both...I promise I’d even see to the supper every night...’

‘That’s all fine and good, Lizzie, but that ain’t goin’ get you no wages, will it?’

‘Wages?’

‘You left school now, girl. You ain’t no child no more; you’re all grown up. From now on, it’s down to you to bring a bit of the old lucre into the house. We can’t just rely on the coins what I brings in.’ He was rubbing the side of his nose.

‘Dad, what is it you’re not telling me?’

‘What?’ He jumped guiltily.

‘There’s something you’re not telling me, and—oh, God!—I bet I know what it is...’ Suddenly it all made sense. Dad in the bedroom, home from work early. Dad agreeing to see my teacher without putting up a fight. Dad in the classroom, taking Mrs Smutts’s side. ‘You’ve lost your job at the docks!’

My blasted father went to stroke his nose again.

‘Oh, no, Dad; don’t! When did it happen?’

‘Two weeks ago.’

‘B-but you went off to work each day, same as usual...I

saw you go...’

‘I was just pretendin’, like.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

‘Didn’t want to. I knows how you’d take it.’

‘Oh, dear Lord! I suppose this means we’re behind with the rent?’

‘You always was such a bleedin’ practical child,’ he said, turning his back on me.

Two weeks. Ten shillings in arrears at least and no hope of making the next payment. Visions of the workhouse rose up before my eyes. It’s the last place on earth you’d ever want to be; actually, the very last place, since once you’re there, you’re there till you die.

‘Oh, where’s that damned address?’ I growled, pulling Mrs Smutts’s letter from my pocket.

*

West Square was one of the few parts of Waterloo that escaped the slum-clearances when the railway station was built. It was so well-to-do (and so far from the station) that nobody had felt the need to improve it. These days, though, its only real claim to fame was that all of the properties on the north side backed on to the grounds of Bedlam, the notorious insane asylum. No child born in Waterloo could ignore a tidbit as juicy as that.

‘Tell me something,’ I said, once we’d found the house in question, ‘when Mrs Smutts broke it to me that I had to leave school, were you secretly pleased?’

It was starting to rain.

‘Girl, it ain’t how you think. We’re goin’ to have money comin’ in, I swears it. I got this mate, right, down the Surrey Docks—he’s got this gear he wants me to sell: furs, all the way from Russia. We’ll be sweet, see...well, just as soon as he gets his hands on ’em.’

‘Knock-off stuff? You’re dealing in knock-off stuff again?’

‘Nah, this time it’s all on the level...’

I didn’t have to look to know that he was scratching his nose.

‘Who did you believe, Dad? Back there in the classroom, who did you believe? My teacher or me?’

‘What?’

‘It’s a simple enough question. When my teacher lied about how I’d been imitating Thyrza Gault—and trust me, she *was* lying—who did you believe? Her or me? Truth, now!’

There was a long pause while he tried to weigh up his answer.

‘Oh, I thought as much!’ Without another word, I ran up the dozen or so steps and rapped on the door with the knocker.

It was eventually opened by a woman in her early thirties, dressed in a gown of crisp red-and-white stripes that was belted high at the waist. Her skin was the colour of curdled cream and her hair, which she wore pulled back off her face in rows of tight little curls, was an unflattering

shade of auburn.

‘Yes?’ she said, staring at me blankly.

‘Miss Ledden?’

‘I am Miss Ledden.’

‘Please miss, I’ve come about the job.’

‘The job?’ She blinked her china-blue eyes at me twice.

‘As a maid, miss. Webber Street Girls sent me. I have the letter here.’

The woman’s face darkened. ‘*A maid?*’ she said, frowning.

‘This *is* Number 61?’

‘Yes; but we don’t need a maid.’

‘You *are* Miss Ledden?’

‘Yes, I am Miss Ledden; though, as I said, we do *not* require a maid. Whoever sent you is obviously mistaken.’

I shrugged my shoulders and turned to leave, but, just as I did, a noise like thunder stopped me in my tracks.

Clump! Clump! Clump! It almost sounded as if someone in the room above was taking a hammer to the place and tearing it apart.

‘*Violet! Violet!*’ came a cry. ‘*Who is at the door?*’

Dodging the raindrops, Miss Ledden craned her neck and stared up at the second-story window. The corners of her mouth began to twitch. ‘Nobody, Mother,’ she called out, though her voice had now become strained and flat.

‘It’s not the new maid, is it? I could have sworn I heard someone say that they’d come about the position as a maid. My eyesight may not be too good, but there’s

nothing wrong with my hearing.'

'You're quite right, Mother,' the woman replied. 'There is a girl here claiming to have come about a job of some sort. I told her she was mistaken.'

'Violet, if anyone's mistaken, it's you. Of course she's come about the job! You'd better send her up. Quickly now!'

'But she's just leaving...'

'Oh, you really mustn't let her leave! I'd never forgive you if you let her leave!'

Miss Ledden's eyes crinkled with fury. 'What's your name, girl?' she hissed.

'Lizzie, miss; Lizzie Blaylock.'

'Well, Lizzie, I suppose you had better come in.'

I could see at a glance why they needed a maid. Thick, matted trails of dust had settled into drifts along the hallway, and the whole place smelled of mildew and grime as if none of the surfaces had seen soap or water for years—not that Miss Ledden seemed at all concerned by this as she led me upstairs to a door on the first-floor landing.

Clump! Clump! Clump!

'Is that your mother making that noise?' I asked hesitantly.

'Oh, yes,' she said, reaching for the doorknob.

The room she showed me into was bigger than both our rooms in Morpeth Place put together. It had a higher ceiling, too. The window at the front had been wedged

open slightly, forcing the dirty lace nets that hung there to cope with any stray drops from the downpour outside. A fire burned merrily in the grate, and someone had artistically draped the four-poster's curtains into large, sweeping swags. But despite these cheery touches, the room remained dark, as dark as the heavy oak-panelling that lined the four walls.

An elderly lady was sitting up in bed, pounding away on the floor with a polished wooden shillelagh. I noticed the club had three burnished silver bands inlaid along the handle, making it look like something a giant from some children's fairytale might have possessed. In younger hands it really could have proved to be quite a nasty weapon.

‘Violet! At last! Did you bring the new maid?’

Miss Ledden's eyes narrowed into slits. ‘*Tisk, tisk!*’ she clucked, wagging her finger at her mother. ‘You’ve been up to your old tricks again, haven’t you? New maid, indeed! How on earth did you manage this one?’

The old lady laughed. ‘I simply wrote to a local school and asked if they had any suitable girls who might appreciate such a position. It’s not my fault if you’re so busy opening the letters I receive, you forget to read the ones that I *send*...’

‘What an outrageous thing to say!’

‘It certainly would be, were it not the God’s honest truth! Now, stop sulking and bring the child here. I want to get a better look at her.’

Miss Ledden nudged me towards the bed.

‘This is Lizzie, Mother. Lizzie, I want you to meet my mother, Mrs Eugenia Ledden.’

‘Good day, miss,’ I offered feebly.

‘*Ma’am*,’ the woman corrected me. ‘For me, you say, *ma’am*. Come closer, child, my eyesight’s not all that it used to be.’

Once again Miss Ledden pushed me forward and I ended up face-to-face with the old woman. At a guess, Mrs Ledden was probably in her late sixties. She wore a plain white bed-smock of good-quality linen, but no bed-cap, and it was easy to understand why. Her hair, though entirely grey, was long and glossy and beautifully brushed. It was her best feature and she was clearly keen to show it off. Apart from a plain gold wedding band on her ring-finger, her only other jewellery was the single silver chain around her neck with a tiny, barrel-shaped key attached.

‘So you’re the girl the school sent? You’re the one who’s going to be our new maid?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘You know, there hasn’t been a maid in this house for more years than I care to remember...in point of fact, not since the terrible accident that left me as you see me: a bed-ridden, helpless old woman! Oh, I still can’t bear to talk about it! Violet, you tell her! You tell the girl what happened!’

‘Why should I, when you’re perfectly capable of telling

her yourself?’

‘Because I want her to hear it from you. I want her to hear *you* say it.’

There was a slight pause. ‘My mother fell down the stairs,’ Miss Ledden announced, her voice suddenly sounding sad and flat again.

The old woman tutted. ‘Now, that’s not strictly true, is it, Violet? You’re leaving out the important word.’

‘My mother *tripped* and fell down the stairs.’

I saw a shiver run down Miss Ledden’s spine as she turned towards the fire. She seemed to be trembling even though the room was overly warm.

‘Much better!’ her mother beamed. ‘Best to get these things accurate, I always think. Now, being the dutiful daughter that she is, Violet combed those stairs, searching for any hint of what might have tripped me, but alas there was not a trace! Imagine that! I was quite positive I’d tripped on *something*—yet whatever it was had now vanished. So I asked myself, had somebody *purposely* wanted to harm me? Did somebody want to *kill* me, perhaps? Besides my loving daughter, there was only one other person in the house at the time. Tell her, Violet.’

‘The maid. She was the only other one here.’

‘And when I asked to interview the girl?’

‘I had already dismissed her.’

‘So you see, Lizzie, I never got the chance to question this servant for myself. After that, I decided we ought to do without a maid for a while. If my daughter had taken it

into her head that she could struggle through on her own—with a whole house to clean and an invalid mother to take care of—well, who was I to argue?’

‘So what’s changed, Mother? Why now, after all these years, do you suddenly decide to take on a new one?’

The old woman grinned—a wicked, mischievous grin that stretched from ear to ear. ‘Perhaps I just wanted to see a fresh face about the house, Violet. A happy face. A face I can trust. I think it will do us both a power of good to have another body about the place, don’t you?’

‘No, I do not!’

‘There! Then it’s all settled, Lizzie. You have the job. And now, I believe I want my tin.’

Violet Ledden froze. ‘But it’s the middle of the morning! You’ve had your tin out already today.’

‘I said, I *want* my tin.’

Violet huffed with annoyance and moved towards the bed.

‘Stop where you are, Violet! I want Lizzie to get it.’

‘What?’

‘You heard what I said.’

‘But Mother!’

‘No ‘buts’, Violet! I want Lizzie to fetch it for me. Lizzie, take this key and go to the top right-hand drawer of my dressing table. There you will find my tin.’ Mrs Ledden unhooked the chain from around her neck and handed me the key. You should have seen the look on Violet Ledden’s face; it would have turned fresh milk sour

in seconds. Feeling quite bewildered, I went over to the drawer and unlocked it.

Inside I found a battered-looking tin, the kind of thing my father's landlady might keep her tea in. It didn't weigh much, but whatever it contained rattled so loudly, I swear it could have woken the dead. The lid was quite loose—so loose that it nearly came off in my hands.

‘And now, Violet, you can leave us.’

‘No! I really don't think that I should!’

‘I said, *LEAVE US*.’

Violet Ledden stubbornly stood her ground. ‘I knew it!’ she moaned bitterly. ‘You've brought this girl here to torment me, but this is going too far! You never allow me in the room when you have your tin out!’

Mrs Ledden just smiled sweetly. ‘Why, Violet! Do I detect a hint of jealousy in your voice?’

‘You know nothing about this girl and yet you're prepared to trust her over your own daughter?’

‘Oh, I'm sure I'll be *quite* safe now that I have Lizzie here to watch over me, so do as you are told, and go!’

For an uncomfortably long moment Violet hovered at the foot of the bed with her arms folded. Then she turned on her heels and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Mrs Ledden chuckled. ‘You'd think she'd be grateful that she's finally getting some help,’ she said, placing the unopened canister on the pillow beside her. ‘Come closer, girl, I still can't see you properly. That's it, brush your

hair back; let me see your face.'

I swept my hair behind my ears and leaned forward.

'Well, now, no one would claim you were the rosiest apple in the barrel, but I suppose you'll do. There's spirit in those features of yours and a brain in that head, if I'm not mistaken. The question is, how much are you worth to me?'

'I've no idea, miss—*ma'am*. I'm sure it's not for me to say.'

'I read in the paper just the other day that a girl was sold off by her parents for the grand sum of five pounds. Sold off! For five pounds! Can you imagine it? Probably shipped out of the country to work as a slave, as likely as not. Disgraceful! Do you think you're worth five pounds to me, Lizzie?'

'No, *ma'am*, of course not!' It was a ridiculous amount of money.

'Oh, I expect you are,' she said thoughtfully, 'but then I'm not after your soul, girl, only your services. And for those I shall offer you eleven shillings a week. Yes, I'll happily shell out eleven shillings, given all the fun I shall get! You do understand that you'll still have to work—cooking, cleaning and all the rest?'

'Yes, *ma'am*,' I replied, though I was a bit puzzled. Surely that *was* what I was being paid to do, wasn't it?

'Good. Now, each morning at breakfast you will bring me my tray, then you'll go to the drawer and fetch me my tin. You—not Violet. Violet will stand and watch, then

I'll order her to leave the room. You will remain long enough to clear the breakfast things and see to my needs, then you'll return after exactly one hour—not a minute less, mind—to put the tin away. Is that understood?'

'Of course, ma'am.'

'Fine. Well, you may as well put it away for me now—I'm done with it for the time being. Then you can go and find Violet. You'll probably catch her listening at the door if you're quick enough. She will show you to your accommodations.'

I dutifully put away the tin (even though the woman hadn't once bothered to open it) and slipped out into the hallway, where Violet Ledden was indeed skulking by the door. She grumbled continuously as she led me up the two flights of stairs to the attic, then stood there scowling while I investigated my new quarters.

There wasn't a lot to see. It was a large, cold, draughty room with a solitary, ill-fitting window overlooking the backyard. In one corner there was a small bed (adorned with a blanket so badly knitted that I imagined either Violet or her mother had made it themselves); in another corner there was a wash-stand with a chipped bowl, but no sign of any jug for fetching water. The only other thing of interest in the entire space was the century-thick carpet of dust. It was my guess that no one had cleaned up here since their last maid left.

For the rest of the day, Miss Ledden supervised my every move. She followed me around like a shadow as I

set about trying to get to know the kitchen. In fact, she never took her eyes off me the whole time I was making the supper. She hardly said a word to me, so it came as a bit of a shock when, after we'd eaten, she actually praised the dish of dumplings that I'd cooked.

Later that night Dad dropped off my belongings, which he'd bundled into an old apple-crate, and once the dishes were tidied away and the benches had been wiped down, I popped upstairs to sort out my room—still under Miss Ledden's watchful gaze, of course. Only when I'd managed to get everything unpacked did she finally speak.

'My mother is an invalid, Lizzie,' she began. 'She hasn't set foot outside her room for the past ten years. Can you understand what it must be like, never to feel the sun on your face, to know nothing of the world around you? I'm telling you this in the hope that it will help soften what I am about say. The fact is, my mother has recently taken to having fancies...'

'Fancies, miss?'

'Oh, nothing dangerous, I assure you; but I fear that she might do or say things which will seem irrational to you. You may have to make allowances for her sometimes.'

'Yes, miss,' I replied, although I hadn't got a clue what she meant.

'I think it would be best if you weren't to take what my mother says too seriously.'

'How do you mean, miss?'

'Well, let me see. I suppose she might talk about the

famous people she's met...or a trip she took to China—that sort of thing. Not that she's ever met anyone famous, nor has she been to China.'

'Oh...'

'Or she might confide in you about dabbling on the stock market, or tell you how she once acquired a fortune in diamonds—not that any of this actually happened, naturally. It's just her mind playing tricks. You wouldn't want to be taken in by such foolishness, now, would you?'

'No, miss.'

'Of course not. You're a sensible girl. Well then, I'll wish you good night. I'll call for you at six-thirty in the morning. Oh, and please—'

'Yes, miss?'

'Don't let your candle burn for too long. Candles cost money, you know.'

And, with that, she locked me in. That awful woman closed the door and locked me in, as if I were a common thief.

I had a wretched night's sleep, tossing and turning with the most unsettling dreams. I was sleeping so fitfully even though the rain had stopped, it's no surprise that I awoke immediately to the sound.

Slough!

I peered sleepily about the room, but nothing seemed amiss. Then I realised the noise was coming from outside.

Slough! Slough!

I pulled on my dressing gown and crept over to the

window to look.

Out in the freezing darkness, lit only by the flicker of a hooded oil lamp, Violet Ledden was crouched in the back garden, doing the strangest thing. At first I couldn't believe what I was seeing, so I rubbed my eyes and looked again. This time I knew I wasn't imagining things. The woman was digging a trench.

— CHAPTER 3 —
THE TIN

I’VE HEARD THAT some people garden by the phases of the moon. I’ve also heard that moonlight can turn others into lunatics. When I examined the backyard the next day, there was a six-foot trench smack-dab in the middle. That chilled me to the bone, I must say. I mean, how many uses does a three-foot-by-six-foot trench have? It left me wondering whether it was Violet, and not her mother, who had ‘fancies’.

By the following day, however, the six-foot trench had become a twelve-foot trench, and by the day after, it was longer still. Next Miss Ledden started making it wider. I once tried to talk to her about what she did at night, but she soon told me to mind my own business.

This was not the only astonishing thing about the West Square house; there was also the matter of the cleaning. What happened was this: the first morning, after I’d taken Mrs Ledden her breakfast tray and retrieved her tin for her (though, amazingly, this time Violet made no fuss), I found myself with a good hour to kill. I decided to make a

start on the cleaning and chose to begin with the back parlour, as it seemed as good a starting-point as any. But when I opened the door, I was in for a shock.

Someone had ransacked the entire room, heaping the furniture into one big pile on the floor. With its doors hanging open and its drawers pulled out, the dresser had been toppled over on to its side and several chairs were strewn about on top, along with dozens of broken knick-knacks. Every piece of upholstery had been hacked to pieces with a knife, leaving strands of horsehair poking out from every crevice.

While I was wondering who could have done such a wicked thing, Miss Ledden came sneaking up behind me.

‘What are you doing?’ she snapped, making me jump.

‘Nothing, miss...at least, what I mean to say is, I was about to make a start on the cleaning.’

‘Did I ask you to clean in here?’

‘No, miss.’

‘But you decided to poke your nose in anyway?’

‘I didn’t mean to, miss—honestly I didn’t...’

Miss Ledden’s eyes narrowed. ‘Tell me truthfully, Lizzie...what lengths would you go to for an easy life?’

I hardly knew how to respond; it felt like one of Mrs Smutts’s ghastly trick questions.

‘Nothing illegal, miss,’ I whispered.

‘Hmm. Then I’m going to make you an offer. All I ask is that you see to the meals and attend to my mother’s needs, and, if you do this diligently, I promise you you’ll

never have to set foot in these rooms again.'

'I wouldn't have to clean?'

'You wouldn't have to lift a finger.'

'Oh!'

'Now, that sounds fair, doesn't it?'

Actually, the word I would have used to describe it was *weird*—though I reckoned it best not to tell Violet that, for I had the funniest feeling that if I looked in any of the other rooms, I'd find exactly the same or worse.

'Yes, miss,' I replied, nodding a little too enthusiastically.

'If my mother should ever inquire, you will inform her that you go over the rooms thoroughly every day, taking particular care with the porcelain. Now, that's a harmless enough lie, wouldn't you agree?'

'Certainly, miss.'

'Good, then we have a deal. Now, get out of here!'

A harmless lie. Perhaps there's no such thing—at least, not when you begin to pay for it.

When Mrs Ledden asked (and believe me, she made a point of asking, right in front of her daughter), 'Lizzie, are you dusting each of the pieces in the cabinet properly? Taking them out one by one?'—I couldn't help cringing as I answered, 'Yes, ma'am, just as you would expect me to.'

And when she asked, 'And what's the garden like now? Are the Spring bulbs in bloom yet?'—I would blush as I replied, 'The early ones are finished, but the daffodils and

such should be along any day now, ma'am.'

And all the while those gentle eyes of hers would be twinkling away at me.

*

On the fourth morning, during the ritual of breakfast, Mrs Ledden sat up in bed and asked me straight out, 'Can you imagine what I keep in this battered old tin of mine, Lizzie?'

I saw Violet stiffen like an over-starched blouse.

'No, ma'am. I've no idea,' I told her as I handed back her key.

'Silly me! How could you? Why, I hardly believe it possible that *anyone* could guess what I keep in here!'

Violet muttered something under her breath at this and pushed past me out the door.

Later that day I happened to be returning from the attic when I heard raised voices coming from the old lady's room. Violet Ledden and her mother were arguing.

'What a stupid thing to do—taunting the girl with hints about what you've got in your tin!'

'It wasn't her I was taunting, Violet—and besides, you bluntly refuse to believe that's where I keep them, no matter how persuasively I rattle it!'

'You know, it wouldn't surprise me if one of these days that girl didn't attack you with your own club and make off with the damned things!'

There was an explosion of laughter. 'Oh, Violet! You

really mustn't let her do that, now, must you; because then you'd only have this wonderful old house to inherit. I *do* trust you are looking after it carefully? Maintaining it lovingly and such? Wouldn't it be awful if, after all you've been through, the only thing you were left with was the shell of a derelict house?"

"Sometimes, Mother, I could swing for you, truly I could!"

"Just remember, Violet, if I die before my time, my secret dies with me. And then you will never get your hands on the stones."

"That's as good as admitting that they're not in your damned tin!"

"As I've said all along, they might be; equally, *they might not*. The point is, I will only give them up when I am good and ready, so you need to keep me alive and happy if you ever wish to see them again."

"You had another one of those letters again this morning, didn't you? What did this one say?"

"It said: '*Now I am here*'—as if you didn't already know! When you steam open envelopes, Violet, you really ought to iron them flat again. That way the wrinkles don't show."

"Does it excite you to think that that's how I spend my time—opening your nasty, horrid letters? Or perhaps it frustrates you—imagining me doing all the things *you'd* like to be doing if only you could? I think you're an extraordinarily bitter old woman, Mother. And I want you

to know that I hate you. Without a word of a lie, I hate you!’

Fearing that Violet might storm out at any moment, I hurried back to the kitchen and didn’t manage to catch any more of their conversation. It was right after this that she took to digging the garden by day, as well as by night. Though it was clearly backbreaking work, the only time I heard her complain was the afternoon she started on about the neighbour’s dog. She stormed into the kitchen, waving around a filthy old bone she’d dug up, and crowed on and on about how it annoyed her that the mongrel was burying his treasures in her precious yard. I didn’t dare point out that there wasn’t much of a yard left.

We ended up with quite a collection of that dog’s bones, I must say; so many, in fact, that I used to smuggle the odd one back to him when she wasn’t looking. I would lean over the fence and get the little rascal to sit perfectly still for me while I taunted him with it, making a big display of brushing away all the dirt and pebbles. Only when he was truly feverish with excitement would I throw it for him. Then the sweet little mutt would spin round in a frenzy and hare off after it, leaping into the air to catch it before it could fall.

Now that all of Violet’s time was spent out in the garden, it was down to me to answer the constant *Clump! Clump! Clump!* from the floor above. I half considered buying Mrs Ledden a little bell to ring, something that would have been a bit kinder on the ear. Still, all in all,

life at the West Square house quickly settled down into a predictable if extremely odd routine and, just as Violet had promised, it proved to be a relatively easy existence for me.

My first pay-day and afternoon-off both fell on the Wednesday—and, oh, it felt great to be going home with money in my pocket for the family. Dad and Mary were so pleased to see me! Dad fussed about, making the tea and washing up. But then I noticed how determined he was with the cloth, how every surface had to be wiped then wiped again; how every dish had to be put away the second it had been used. And when I asked if he'd found any work, he just went quiet on me.

For the longest time I sat there not knowing what to say while my father polished the kettle and my little sister coughed fitfully in the bedroom. In the end, I put the eleven shillings on the table and slipped quietly away. The last thing I wanted was to make a song and dance about how I was now the breadwinner.

It was dark when I got outside. Across the road, hordes of railway workers were coming off their shift. Six o'clock. I hadn't realised how late it was and I started to run. I was going full-pelt when I turned into West Square and that's when it happened. Barely three doors from the Leddens' house, I ran straight into a woman coming in the opposite direction.

'Oh! So sorry, miss, I didn't see you there! Oh, my Lord, it's Mrs Smutts!'

‘Eliza Blaylock! Well, fancy that!’

I felt a tiny flutter of relief as I helped my teacher to her feet: her eye had finally healed.

Mrs Smutts straightened the lapels of her jacket and dusted herself down.

‘There,’ she said, ‘no harm done. Actually, I’m glad to have bumped into you—you can tell me how your job’s going.’

‘It’s all right, I suppose...’

‘You don’t sound particularly sure about that!’

‘Well, the work itself isn’t too bad, but the people are a bit strange...’

‘Strange?’ A look of concern crossed her face. ‘In what way *strange*?’

‘Mrs Smutts, I think they hate each other.’

She frowned. ‘Hate seems an extremely strong word to use, Eliza.’

‘I know...but I can’t think of a better one. You see, I reckon old Mrs Ledden blames her daughter for her fall down the stairs—’

‘Her fall down the stairs?’

‘Yes. She’s convinced that Violet—that’s the daughter—managed to trip her up somehow. And although the fall was meant to have left her crippled, I sometimes wonder...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, once or twice when I’ve been to her room, I could have sworn that the things on her dressing table had

been moved. I didn't touch them, and Violet is too busy ploughing up the backyard, so who else does that leave? No one—except Mrs Ledden herself!

‘Did you say, *ploughing* up the backyard?’

‘Yes! At first I thought she was digging a grave to plant her mother in—not that I'd blame her—but you should see it now! The whole garden's gone!’

‘Oh, my! That is strange...’

‘If you think that's strange, miss, you should see the rooms! Every one of them has been trashed. It almost looks like a hurricane's blown through the house. And would you believe it, I'm not allowed to touch a single thing? Everything's to stay exactly as it is.’

‘No!’

‘Why would anyone want to live like that, miss?’

Mrs Smutts blinked. ‘Really, I couldn't begin to guess, though I suppose this woman must have her reasons. Some things run deeper than you could possibly imagine, Eliza. I tend to think that we come into this world alone and we go out of it the same way; and in between—well! If you scratch the surface, if you lift the veil, who knows what you'll find?’

‘Mrs Smutts?’

‘Yes?’

‘I just want you to know...I didn't do that drawing.’

Mrs Smutts coughed and turned her face away. I couldn't quite see her expression as she rummaged through her handbag for a handkerchief, but I got the

distinct feeling that she was embarrassed.

‘Yes,’ she said, blowing her nose loudly, ‘I believe I already knew that. I—I expect I owe you an apology.’

‘Lizzie! Lizzie!’

I looked up at the sound of my name being called and saw Violet Ledden glaring at me from the door of her house.

‘I have to go now, Mrs Smutts. I’m sorry for knocking you over.’

‘No, no. My fault. I should have been looking where I was going.’

Violet eyed me suspiciously as I climbed the steps. Her face was pale and drawn. ‘Who was that you were talking to?’ she demanded.

‘Just my old teacher from Webber Street Girls, miss.’

‘I do hope you’re not lying to me, Lizzie. I’ll soon find out if you are; I shall visit your former school tomorrow and talk to this teacher of yours.’

‘As you please, miss.’

‘Now back to the kitchen with you! My mother wants her tea.’

From that point on, Violet watched me like a hawk.

*

It was a week later—the following Wednesday—when things really kicked off. Violet paid me my wages early, then donned her coat, pinned her hat to her head and dashed off to the market to buy flowers. Her mother had

been harping on for days about wanting a bunch of daffodils from the garden and Violet was finding it difficult to stall her any longer.

I was in the kitchen, baking scones for supper (so that everything would be ready when I got back from visiting Dad), when I heard Mrs Ledden's *Clump! Clump! Clump!* coming from the floor above. I wiped the flour from my hands, threw my apron across a chair and shot upstairs to see what the old woman wanted.

'Where's Violet?' she asked the second I opened the door.

'Gone to the market, ma'am.'

'What for?'

'I couldn't say.'

'But my hair needs brushing! How very inconsiderate of her!'

'I'm sure she'll be back in a little while.'

'There's nothing for it; you'll have to do it!'

'But Mrs Ledden, it's my afternoon off, and I still have the supper to prepare—'

'*Tchaa!* The supper, indeed! You'll find my brush on the dressing table—that's it, the one with the pearl-handle; now bring it here. You *do* know how to brush hair, don't you, Lizzie? Be sure not to pull too hard; you wouldn't want to hurt me, would you?'

'I'll be as careful as I can, ma'am.'

I sat on the bed and took a hank of hair, and began to ease the brush through it as gently as I could. Mrs Ledden

sighed and sank back on to her pillow.

‘You know,’ she said (more to herself than to me, I suspected), ‘everyone has to grow old one day. It’s a sad fact, but it comes to us all. Look at me—you’d never believe that I was once as young and as lovely as you, would you; that I had a life full of hopes and possibilities?’ She fell silent for a moment, then glanced up and caught my eye. ‘Did I ever tell you about my husband, young lady?’

‘No, ma’am, never.’

‘Well, his name was Alfred and—oh, my!—he was *such* an attractive man! Younger than me...and far better looking, though I realise that’s not saying much. Charming, too! Why, Alfred Ledden could charm the banknotes from a miser’s billfold. Do you know how I met him, Lizzie?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘He and his rag-tag little sister used to perform a mind-reading act at the Lyceum. A mind-reading act—can you believe it! ‘Can you hear me?’ the girl would bellow up at him from somewhere in the audience. ‘Can you guess what I’m holding in my hand?’ ‘A ring,’ he’d say, ‘a diamond ring.’ And he was right, every time—although I swear he’d been properly blindfolded. After the show, I always made a point of going backstage to congratulate him. Unchaperoned, of course...just he and I on our own...’

I blushed and Mrs Ledden clucked with amusement.

‘I do believe that I’ve managed to shock you, Lizzie. Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. There’s no reason on this earth why you should be any less prejudiced about theatre folk than everyone else in God’s creation. Lord! Imagine how my father reacted when I announced my intention to marry the boy! ‘Come to your senses!’ he spluttered. ‘You’re nearly thirty-five years old! Fifteen years older than this wastrel, for Heaven’s sake! Can’t you see that the cad is only interested in your money?’

‘But you *did* marry him...so what happened? Did your father have a change of heart and give you his blessings after all?’

‘Not a bit of it! In fact he would have put an end to the relationship then and there if fate hadn’t taken a hand. Less than a week after our little contretemps, both my parents died from eating foxglove leaves, which, as you may know, can be extremely poisonous. It seems that the housemaid picked them by mistake instead of spinach. The stupid girl thought she was about to be arrested for murder and fled in the dead of night. It was an appalling tragedy, really, but not without a little ray of sunshine, I think.’

‘Because you finally got to wed your sweetheart?’

‘Yes. Though, as things turned out, we weren’t destined to be together for very long.’

‘Oh! Don’t tell me your husband ate foxglove leaves, too?’

Mrs Ledden burst out laughing. ‘*Alfred?* Lord, no! The

damnable rogue walked out on me, not long after Violet was born. No row, no fuss—just up and left, saying he was off to see the world. Some men are like that—wanderers—not suited to the family life. *Ouch!* A little less enthusiasm and a little more concentration, if you please, Lizzie.’

‘Sorry, ma’am.’ I changed my position on the bed and started on a different section of hair. ‘Wasn’t it awfully difficult with the new baby and all? How on earth did you manage?’

‘I dare say I was better off than most. I had this house, you see—plus a decent income from the stocks my father left me. Violet was a bit of a handful, being the demanding baby that she was—always crying at the drop of a hat. But no, I think the worst thing I had to cope with was the fact that I missed Alfred so. Never fall for an attractive man, Lizzie; they’re rotters, all of them. They’ll kill your heart given half the chance. Remember that!’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Mrs Ledden chuckled. ‘I suppose I should be grateful that Alfred ever came back.’

‘Mr Ledden *came back*?’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said softly, ‘*and* he knew better than to turn up on my doorstep without an offering to sweeten me up.’

‘But surely you didn’t let him in? Not after all the pain he’d caused?’

‘Ah, now, there’s the rub. I’m ashamed to admit that I

did.’ Mrs Ledden closed her eyes and sighed. I continued brushing her hair. After a minute or two of silence she opened them again and asked me, ‘Can you sing, Lizzie? Do you know any songs?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Come, now; everyone can sing and I’m sure there must be some song you remember? Something from your childhood, perhaps?’

‘Well, there’s one song, I suppose. My mother used to sing it, before she—’ My voice trailed off with embarrassment, but luckily Mrs Ledden didn’t seem to notice.

‘Sing it for me, won’t you?’

It was a song I hadn’t thought of in years. I remembered how, when I was little, I used to call it ‘*Bake-roll*’. My mother would laugh and tell me that nothing so exquisite should ever be referred to by such a horrible name. We ended up calling it ‘The Boatman’s Song’ instead, even after I’d mastered its true title: ‘*Barcarole*’. I never really knew what it was about, but I loved it anyway.

‘*Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour...*’ I began nervously, but Mrs Ledden put two fingers to my lips and stopped me before I could get to the second line.

‘French!’ she exclaimed. ‘You know French?’

‘No, ma’am. Just the words. Just the sound of the words.’

‘It’s the language of love, Lizzie. So beautiful, so pure.

Please, won't you start again?'

I still felt silly, but after a few lines I was surprised just how easily the lyrics came back to me. As I sang, the old lady's breathing became slower and more rhythmic, matching the gentle lilt of the tune. Soon the muscles of her mouth had become slack and her eyelids were starting to droop. Mrs Ledden, it seemed, was falling asleep.

Don't ask me why I did it; just plain nosiness, I guess. There in front of me was the woman's key—and this was my one chance to find out what was inside that tin of hers!

I set the brush down on the bed beside me and grasped the chain lightly with both hands, fishing for the clasp at the back. Mrs Ledden stirred slightly and mumbled something into her pillow. I waited for what seemed like an eternity for her breathing to slow again, then slipped the clasp undone.

As quietly as I could, I made my way over to the dressing table and inserted the key into the lock. The bolt slid back with a soft, reassuring click. I suffered a few hairy moments when the damned tin rattled in my hands, but the old lady slept on regardless. I knelt down on the floor and slowly lifted the lid.

Gingerly I peeked inside.

At first I thought I was imagining things. There seemed to be nothing in the tin but a handful of pebbles. I reached in and picked one of them out. It was just an ordinary stone, hardly bigger than a raisin. It was grey in colour and slightly pitted to the touch, not unlike an eggshell.

I placed it on the carpet then picked out another. Then another. They were all the same. I'd heard that uncut diamonds were meant to look a little like ordinary stones, but try as I might, I couldn't imagine any of these pebbles being diamonds. They were exactly the same as the ones I'd scraped off the bones for the neighbour's dog. But why would the woman make such a fuss over them if they weren't valuable?

Then I noticed the very bottom of the tin. There was something else down there, something small and oblong, wrapped in a scrap of black velvet.

I reached in and fished it out. The wafer-thin package measured no more than two inches by four inches and it certainly wasn't heavy. Slowly I peeled away the threadbare cloth.

What does an ageing woman keep in a tin? What does she look at day after day?

Memories, that's what! Ancient memories!

Inside were two battered old photographs glued to cardboard mounts, both depicting some kind of music hall act. The first was of a young, bearded man, wearing a turban and an outlandish jacket, with the words '*The Great Aladdin*' written along the bottom in spidery, black lettering. It was signed on the back, '*From your adoring Alfred, I will love you always*'.

The second showed the same man again, but this time with a girl at his side—the rag-tag little sister, I imagined. The girl was draped in some kind of Indian get-up—an

exotic flowing dress fashioned from a single length of material, which she wore coiled about her like a loose-fitting shroud. This one said, '*The Great Aladdin and Padmini, little Indian Princess—The Mind-Reading Act of the Century*'.

Disturbingly, someone had rubbed away at the girl's face until there was nothing left but the grubby, wrinkled paper beneath. I was just about to turn it over and look at the back when I heard a faint rustle of linen at my shoulder.

'So this is how you repay my kindness!'

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mrs Ledden towering above me.

'How dare you go into my tin!' she shrieked, her whole body trembling with fury. 'And did you find what you were looking for? Well, did you?'

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

'What's the matter, girl? Cat got your tongue? Looks like I'll have to beat an answer out of you!' She raised her club.

THWACK! I felt it strike the back of my skull. Despite the pain and the shock, I tried to twist myself into a position where I could at least put up a fight.

THWACK! A second blow came sooner than I'd expected, catching me off-guard and knocking me to the floor. Blood began to trickle down my cheek.

'Traitor! Thief! Worming your way into my house and telling me lies! Was it Ida who sent you? Well, *was it?*'

You can tell her from me: she'll get the diamonds back over—*my—DEAD—BODY!*'

Again and again the woman lashed out. Had she been any stronger, I'm sure I would have been done for. I tried to stand, tried to ward off the blows, but suddenly there was a new threat.

That treacherous taste of pears was back—clutching at my throat and filling up my brain—already so overpowering that I could almost count the seconds left to me.

'Take that!' Mrs Ledden cried, bringing the club down across my forehead one last time. '*Take that!*'

— CHAPTER 4 —
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

AT THE TOP of the hill, there is a rainbow.

Well, not a rainbow exactly, but the *end* of a rainbow, its colours as bright and treacly as syrup. When I run my hands through them, I can feel how each particular shade has a texture all its own. Pale indigo sticks to my fingers like globs of jam; sunshine yellow slides off my skin in droplets.

At the base of the rainbow, instead of a pot of gold, there's a pool of water—as smooth and as deep as a mirror—encircled by a knee-high wall of stones.

Birds are singing a wild and beautiful chorus.

Then I realise: there are no birds. This is the sound of my own heart beating.

*

Only much, *much* later did I manage to discover what actually happened next. Violet Ledden had been heading back from the market when she'd heard her mother's cries for help. Dropping the flowers she'd bought, she started to

run.

All around West Square faces peered from open windows. A crowd of the more curious had gathered on the front steps, blocking her path to the top. As she pushed her way through, she could hear her mother's high-pitched screams echoing from the bedroom above:

'No! No! This can't be happening! You can't be here! How can you be? I killed you and now you're dead! I buried you myself! No! Don't touch me! Get away from me! I SAID GET AWAY!'

And then the reply—a muffled reply—too quiet, too low for Violet to make out, but definitely a man's voice. She was certain of it.

Violet Ledden threw open the door and shot up the stairs two at a time, struggling out of her coat as she ran. In her haste to reach the landing she stumbled and fell, crashing chin-first into the final riser. She lay there a moment trying to catch her breath, then hauled herself across the passage and propped herself up against the wall. Her whole body was racked with pain, but the fall hadn't dulled her senses any. Through the plaster and panelling she could still hear the argument raging in the room.

'Return the diamonds, Eugenia. Send them back to Ida.'

'Never!'

'For pity's sake, think of the shame she's had to suffer!'

‘But they’re mine now, Alfred; they’re mine!’

‘They were never yours, Eugenia. Never!’

‘They weren’t yours, either, if I recall correctly...’

‘I had no intention of keeping them! I’d have given them back. The minute I was finished with them, they were going straight back to Frank.’

‘Tell that to Ida!’

‘Oh, Eugenia, Eugenia! I’m not trying to excuse the fact that I’ve ruined my sister’s life. I take full responsibility for that and no doubt I shall rot in Hell as a consequence. But you have a chance to make amends. Please! Return the diamonds while you still can. Put an end to Ida’s suffering.’

‘Oh, yes? And what about my suffering? If Ida gets the diamonds, I’ll have nothing!’

‘You’re a fool if you think they’ll bring you anything but misery, woman. You’re dying, Eugenia. Day by day, moment by moment. Can’t you feel it? Doesn’t your body tell you how little time it has left? And what do you plan to show your Maker when the Angel of Death comes to take you by the hand? A heart as cold as stone?’

‘A heart as cold as stone—there’s irony for you! I didn’t kill you for the diamonds, Alfred Ledden. I killed you because that’s all you left me with when you deserted me—a heart as cold as stone...’

‘This is not about me, Eugenia; I’m fully aware of what I’ve done. This is about you, my girl. Your final chance is at hand. Return the diamonds or you’ll suffer as I do. I’m

warning you, make amends now, before it's too late...

Out on the landing, Violet clawed the hat-pin from her bonnet then tossed the bonnet itself aside. She glanced at the sturdy metal pin in her hand. It was six inches long and sharp enough to gouge out someone's eye. She wrapped her fingers around the pearl-shaped head and held it like a dagger. Then she took a deep breath and hauled herself to her feet.

*

My head was pounding like a full twenty-one gun salute. The inside of my mouth felt like it had been painted with peroxide then packed out with cotton wool. All about me I could smell the claggy fumes of a bottle of cologne that had been smashed in the struggle.

Over by the dressing table, old Mrs Ledden was down on her knees, sobbing as she stuffed the photographs back in her tin. The stones were proving to be more of a problem for her. Her twisted, swollen fingers were shaking so badly that most of the pebbles fell from her grasp every time she tried to scoop them up. On the floor between us lay the shillelagh.

Mrs Ledden must have realised I was awake, for all of a sudden she made a dive for her club. But before she could manage to pick it up, the door flew open and in burst Violet. Old Mrs Ledden squealed like a pig, let go of the handle and darted back to her corner, frantically trying to pull the remaining pebbles under the hem of her night-

gown.

Violet advanced towards the closet with her hat-pin in hand, arm raised, ready to strike out at anything that moved. Finding no intruder there, she threw herself to the ground and began stabbing at the space under the bed instead.

‘Where is he, Mother! *Where’s my father?*’

‘Forget your father!’ the old lady screeched. ‘Just get that damned girl away from me! She’s the devil incarnate!’

‘But he has to be here somewhere! I didn’t see him leave!’

‘He’s gone, I tell you! *Gone!*’

‘Gone? Gone where? Out the window?’

‘Oh, *how should I know!* Back into her! Back to wherever he came from, I expect!’

‘Mother, you’re not making sense! And why do you keep pointing at Lizzie?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Violet, do try to understand! Alfred went back into her...because Alfred came *out* of her! I saw him *step* out of her! But how could he, Violet? How could he? He’s been dead for the past thirteen years!’

‘My father’s dead?’ Violet reeled backwards a step. ‘No! Surely not!’

‘Oh, Violet, are you going to do something about this demon child, or shall I just wait for all Hell to come slithering out and drag me away?’

For a second I thought Violet was about to faint. Immediately I tried to sit up, but in so doing my hand brushed against the side of the shillelagh.

‘My stick!’ Mrs Ledden cried pitifully. ‘*Violet, she’s going for my stick!*’

About to faint or not, Violet reacted in a flash. She brought the heel of her boot down hard upon the club’s handle.

‘Oh, no you don’t!’ she snarled, ready to do battle once more. I wasn’t going to argue; my eyes were now level with the six-inch pin in her hand. ‘You’ve caused me nothing but trouble with all your snooping and poking, *missy*, but this is the final straw! I haven’t worked out what’s going on here yet, but as far as I’m concerned I want you out of my house! Up you get and pack your things! This instant!’

She pulled me to my feet before I could get my balance, which sent me sprawling on to the bed. Cursing, she grabbed me around the waist and began to lug me towards the door.

‘You’re leaving even if I have to pack for you,’ Violet croaked, hauling me up to the attic. She sat me in a corner and forced me to watch as she threw one thing after another into my old apple-crate. I felt sick to my stomach and ached so much that I wanted to die. Oh, I must have looked a sight! Every time I wiped the tears from my eyes I ended up with dirty great smears of blood across the back of my hand—dark, clotted blood, still half-sticky.

Just as Violet finished packing, there came a frantic hammering at the front door. ‘Stay there,’ she snarled, disappearing to see what the commotion was about. When she finally returned, her face was flushed with embarrassment.

‘Do you know who that was?’ she asked, not waiting for an answer. ‘The police! Now, I don’t know what went on in my mother’s room—I don’t know what you saw or what you *think* you heard—but *understand this*: if one word of this farrago leaves my house, I shall be pressing charges against you, Lizzie Whatever-your-name-is, for assaulting my mother. Charges, yes? You know what that means?’

‘Yeth, mith.’ My tongue was still terribly swollen.

‘You had better,’ she replied.

Without further ado, she thrust my overflowing box at me, bundled me down the stairs and pushed me out on to the pavement.

The sky had clouded over and it was coming on to rain. A small group of die-hards—children mostly—hovered outside by the steps, eyeing my every move as I attempted to hobble away.

‘‘Ere,’ one of them shouted, ‘was you in the ’ouse when it ’appened? Did the woman’s ’usband come home unexpected, like?’ Drooling at the prospect of scandal, he leered at me and winked.

I didn’t reply. I was too busy cursing Violet Ledden and her damnable mother to Kingdom Come.

My journey home was painful and slow. A fight had broken out at the corner of Lower Marsh, where a stallholder and one of his customers were coming to blows. Someone threw a punch that sent a set of scales flying, knocking them to the ground with a God-awful *crash!* As people scrabbled to pocket the onions they'd contained, I heard the clock across the river strike three. I was late. Dad and Mary would have been expecting me an hour ago. I crossed the road, barely managing to dodge the horse-drawn cab that careered out of nowhere, then turned the corner into Morpeth Place.

I ran into the landlady's husband on the doorstep. He held the door open for me, proudly informing me that he was off to the pub. Judging by the smell of gin on him, he'd been at the bottle for quite some time already. I don't think he could keep his eyes focused long enough to see what sort of state I was in.

I'd just about made it to the top of the stairs when, for no reason at all (or no reason I could think of), all the hairs on the back of my neck stood bristling to attention. Tiny little warning signals prickled across every inch of my skin. I stood in front of my door and did something I'd never done in all the years I'd lived there. I knocked.

I heard soft, hesitant footsteps approaching. A second later the door juddered open an inch. A stranger's eyes blinked out at me: eyes full of nothing but suspicion.

'Yes, dearie?' It was a woman's voice, all reedy and nasal. It reminded me of a flock of parrots squawking in a

cage.

‘Is my father here?’ I asked, trying not to sound panicked.

‘Your father?’ The door opened a bit further, allowing me to see the woman’s face for the first time. It was a grey face.

‘Mr Blaylock. Is he here?’

‘I can’t place the name, dear—but then my niece and I have only just moved in. Why don’t you speak to Mrs Ellis? She’s the landlady here. Maybe she’ll know.’

The way she rattled off Mrs Ellis’s name made the whole thing seem even weirder, if that was at all possible. I don’t know why, but I found myself thanking the woman.

In response, she poked a long, bony finger through the doorway and gave my cheek a little stroke—the weakest, frailest pat you could imagine. Suddenly I couldn’t bear to have her touch me. As quickly as I could, I retreated down the stairs.

‘Those are nasty cuts you’ve got there, dearie,’ she sang, twittering above me happily. ‘I’d get them seen to, if I were you. You can never be too careful with cuts...’

I found Mrs Ellis in her kitchen plucking a fowl. One look was enough to tell me what kind of mood she was in.

‘Left!’ she grunted, working away at the blood-speckled feathers of the chicken. ‘Owing me two weeks rent. Barrow job. Crept off in the night!’

‘But where did they go?’

The woman slammed the half-plucked bird down on the board in front of her. Her eyes had that cold, dumb look of a prize-fighter up for a challenge.

‘What about my rent?’ she muttered, taking slow, laboured breaths. Squinting, she parted her lips and brought her knuckles to rest on the table’s edge.

I reached into my pocket and fished out the coins that Violet had given me that morning.

‘Two weeks?’ I said. ‘Here. Here’s your ten shillings.’

Mrs Ellis wiped her bloodied hands down her apron-front and made a grab for the coins. They went straight into the purse she kept tied beneath her skirts.

‘So where did they go?’ I asked again.

The landlady smiled cruelly, and for an instant I was reminded of Dorrie Canning, the girl who used to bully me at school.

‘You don’t listen, do you?’ she said. ‘Told you they snuck off in the night, didn’t I?’

‘Yes...’

‘Owing me money, now, didn’t I?’

‘Yes...’

‘Well, it’s hardly likely they’d tell *me* where they were going, now, is it? And it looks as if they weren’t planning to tell you, either...’

‘But my father wouldn’t just *leave* me!’ I screamed.

‘The way I see it, it’s been five long years since that la-di-da mother of yours ran off—and all because she couldn’t bear the sight of you! And now your slow, dim-

witted father's finally followed suit.'

'Don't you dare say that!'

'Oh, this is my house, you little maggot, and I'll say whatever I like—especially to an uppity thirteen-year-old who doesn't know how to respect her betters! Now, be off with you before I box your ears!'

Speechless, I stared at the woman, desperately trying to hold back the tears.

'I mean it,' she said. 'Go on! Get out of my sight!'

Unwillingly I made my way to the door. I hadn't a clue what I was going to do next. I no longer had the money for proper lodgings and the idea of spending the night in a doss-house frightened me more than I cared to admit. I'd heard such terrible stories about those places—like how, if you were a woman, you got issued with a knife the minute you walked in. I didn't know if this was true or not, and I wasn't too keen to find out.

I sat outside on the pavement and tried to think. Oh! What the hell was my father playing at? What had he done with the money I'd given him?

Where was he now? Why had he left me?

It was getting dark as I made my way back to the Waterloo Road, still carrying the splintery apple-crate with all my possessions in it. The welt across the bridge of my nose was aching. My lip had split again. I saw that the gaslights leading south from the station had all been lit, and I just began to follow them. *Perhaps*, I thought hopefully, *perhaps if I keep walking I might find myself*

back at my beautiful green hill. Now that night was falling, it wasn't so hard to imagine. Waterloo by night doesn't seem half so solid or real as it does by day. *Why, anything could happen,* I tried to convince myself. *Even good things.*

Fog was rolling in off the Thames. I passed courting couples, children carrying home flagons of beer to their thirsty parents, men out walking their dogs. None of them seemed to notice me. I felt like going up to one of them and waving my hands in his face. Then a thought came to me. Perhaps they couldn't see me. Perhaps I'd ceased to exist.

I was just toying with this idea when I caught sight of the chapel on the Waterloo Road. It was the same gray building that I used to pass every day on my way to school, but now it looked totally transformed. Lights blazed in the windows and I could hear singing coming from inside. I staggered up to the iron railings and grasped hold of one of the spikes. Setting my crate on the ground, I stood watching from the shadows as small groups of people went in. It was certainly an odd mix. There were a number of toffs in their elegant finery, but there were plenty of ordinary folk too.

When the rain started falling in earnest, I edged up to the doors and took a peek. A sign in the vestibule informed me that this was the weekly meeting of the Parakletos Society. I'd never heard the name before, but from what I could tell, it seemed to be some kind of

Church fellowship group. Since there was nobody guarding the door—nobody to tell me that I couldn't rest my aching body till the rain passed—I took a chance and went in. What was the worst they could do? Throw me out?

Inside, the hall was packed. I stood hovering for a moment in case someone came and asked me to leave; when nobody did, I stowed my box on a seat in the back-row and sank down beside it. The congregation was halfway through the hymn: 'Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise'. I didn't have a hymn-sheet, but I joined in the bits I could remember, just to try and blend in. As the last chord died away, I heard some kind of commotion coming from the street. Turning my head, I peered out through the open doors.

A horse-drawn cab had pulled up and was waiting for its passengers to alight. The rain was still falling, sending great shafts of steam billowing off the horse's coat. I saw a gentleman with an umbrella trying to help his lady-friend out of the carriage, but she was having difficulty squeezing herself through the narrow doorway. She was dressed from head to toe in black, with a surprising number of beaded necklaces dangling from her neck. The two of them were arguing hammer and tongs.

'Really, Simeon,' the woman crowed, 'I tell you Miss Otis *is* the real thing! I can't imagine why you wouldn't want to see her. She's the spinster daughter of a judge, you know—practically one of *US*—and that should count

for something, even in these trying times!’

‘For pity’s sake, Lady Caroline, I’ve heard the old girl’s seventy if she’s a day. What’s the poor dear going to think when she sees *me* walk in? I can picture the headlines now! ‘Fraudulent Old Biddy Dies of Fright When Confronted by Well-Known Psychic Investigator and Man-About-Town, Mr Simeon de Florence, Esquire’.’

The man who was speaking was much younger than his lady-friend. He had piercing green eyes and an absolutely wolfish smile. His thick blond hair came with a central parting—but, if you asked me, the messy-on-purpose locks were just a little too long.

‘You’ve missed the point, Simeon; Miss Otis *doesn’t* see. She’s blind, poor soul. Finds her way about with a stick.’

‘Oh, better and better!’

‘Laugh if you will, young man, but my Miss Otis *is* the genuine article! Lord knows, there are quite enough hoaxers in this business, all out to con gullible rich widows—’

‘Never one in *my* stable, Lady Caroline; I can assure you of that!’

‘Yes, yes; but isn’t it refreshing to find someone *outside* our little circle who has genuine powers? That’s why I want you to see her for yourself. You know, they say her guides talk to her constantly, passing on messages and telling her things as they actually happen. *As they actually happen!* Can you believe it?’

‘Wouldn’t it be a sight more useful if they warned her about things *before* they could happen?’

‘Oh, *pish!*’ scolded the woman as the man tried to hide a smile. ‘Just you make sure you keep an open mind! Now pay the cabby, dear boy; we’re late—I’m sure the meeting must have started ages ago!’

And with that, she grabbed the umbrella from her friend’s hand, rattled the masses of beads in his face, then came sailing through the doors towards me.

— CHAPTER 5 —
THE GENUINE ARTICLE

I KEPT MY eyes fixed on the stage so as not to appear nosy as the two of them perched themselves directly in front of me, the gentleman in the aisle seat and the woman to his left. The hymn-singing had finished and the minister was now ploughing through the passage from the book of Acts, something about the Holy Spirit appearing as tongues of fire above the heads of Jesus' disciples. As he drew to a close, people finally stopped fidgeting and settled themselves properly in their seats. On the stage two men were helping an elderly lady to her feet. The old dear looked so fragile, I thought they might snap her in half.

‘Look,’ whispered the woman from the cab, ‘that’s Miss Otis now.’

‘What a fossil!’ the man sneered. ‘Just look at that dress! Why, it belongs in a museum! And the white cane! Lord, even if it does match the colour of her hair, don’t you think it’s a tad excessive?’

‘Now, now, Simeon, don’t mock!’

‘I’m not mocking. The effect is delightful. She’s like some craggy old harpy—a carrion crow preparing to swoop upon its mouldering prey. Perfect scene-setting, and that’s half the battle.’

‘It doesn’t sound to me as if you’re keeping an open mind. Now promise me!’

‘Oh, very well. But ten-to-one, she’s a fraud.’

‘Hush, dear boy. Look! She’s about to start!’

Silence fell across the room as the old lady cleared her throat.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome. My name is Miss Otis. Some of you will know me, but for the benefit of those who are new, perhaps a few words of introduction are appropriate. When I was a girl, the good Lord took away my sight. In its place he endowed me with a special gift. It is this gift I would like to share with you tonight. Shall we begin? Yes? Is there a Joshua Pine in the audience?’

‘Here!’ called out a young man, leaping to his feet.

Miss Otis raised her head and tilted it to one side, almost as if she were eavesdropping on someone’s private conversation. Finally she nodded.

‘Your uncle Richard wants you to know that he is opposed to your intended marriage,’ she announced primly.

‘Oh!’ said the young man, looking clearly taken aback.

‘This girl you are seeing is nothing but a gold-digger. She doesn’t love you, Mr Pine; she’s only cultivating a

relationship with you in order to get her hands on your inheritance. You must put an end to this folly at once. Is that clear?’

‘Oh!’ repeated poor Mr Pine, now blushing every shade of scarlet. ‘Yes, that’s perfectly clear,’ he muttered, shrinking back into his seat.

‘Mathilda Etherington?’

A woman on my right stood up.

‘Mathilda, your mother says she loves you dearly and so she is sending you...*this*—’

‘Good Lord!’ the woman gasped as an object dropped into her hands from above.

And suddenly the whole congregation gasped too as the most glorious scent of roses filled the hall.

‘Look!’ she cried, holding up her trophy. ‘I swear it’s one of the climbing-roses from the house that I lived in as a child! They used to grow up the trellised wall in the garden. Can you smell it? They always had the sweetest perfume! I’ve never smelled another rose like it. Oh, thank you, Miss Otis, thank you!’

‘You’re welcome, my dear. I’m glad to have been of service.’

I noticed the man in front of me squinting at the ceiling and frowning. ‘You’re right,’ he whispered to his lady-friend. ‘She *is* good.’

To tell the truth—good or not—I was deeply shocked. As far as I could make out, this Miss Otis appeared to be talking to the dead: a thing that my church would have

considered extremely wicked indeed. Yet, for all its wickedness, it was certainly entertaining. I'd hardly thought about my cuts and bruises since she'd started, let alone the fact that I had nowhere to sleep that night.

'I'm getting two names,' the woman announced, making her way down into the audience. She moved with such confidence now that I could hardly believe she was blind. 'A Lily and a Jenny.'

'Well, I'm Lily, miss,' volunteered a young lady to her left. 'But I can't think who Jenny is, not for the life of me.'

Again Miss Otis stopped and listened.

'Your neighbour's child,' she replied. 'The one you were so kind to when the girl was taken ill last winter. You gave her some of your old books, I believe, and brought her oranges each day from the market. Now, you mustn't be angry with her—'

'Angry? Why would I be angry with Jenny?'

'Because it was Jenny who stole your cameo brooch, my dear.'

The young lady frowned. 'I don't believe it for a second! Jenny's such a timid soul. I'm sure she'd never do such a thing!'

'Oh, but she did,' Miss Otis insisted. 'She sneaked into your room when you went to fetch water and she took the brooch from its case on the dresser.'

'But why?'

'Because it reminded her of *you*. You're the only

person who's ever been kind to her and she's never forgotten that.'

'Oh!'

'Of course, she's terribly ashamed of what she's done—and she wants to give it back, but she's simply not brave enough, I'm afraid.'

'Miss Otis, I love that brooch. It's the only thing my grandmother left me when she died. I must have it back...'

'Then go and say to Jenny, 'Do you remember that piece of jewellery I told you you could *borrow*?' You may find that she's so relieved at the idea of your *loaning* it to her that she actually says—' Miss Otis froze in mid-sentence. 'Charles? Henry?' she called out in a small voice, while the bewildered Lily eyed the old woman doubtfully.

Several men in the audience immediately sprang to their feet with exclamations of 'I'm Henry, miss!' and 'I'm Charles!'

'No, no,' the medium clucked hastily, waving them aside, 'not *you*. I was talking to my—' And then she gasped.

I felt my lip split again and licked away a coppery trickle of blood. As quietly as I could I rummaged about in my crate for my hanky.

'Oh, God!' Miss Otis cried. 'Oh, my dear God! Can it be? Franny? Franny Wills? Is that you?'

As my head shot up from dabbing my lip, I could see

her staring directly at me—though this was clearly ridiculous; she was blind for Heaven’s sake. For the briefest of instants, I got a whiff of that dreaded smell again: *pears*—

‘Franny,’ the woman stammered, ‘Franny Wills, is it really you? I can feel you there, Franny, but I don’t understand how this can be...’

She started hobbling towards me—slowly at first, with a great deal of effort—quite the opposite of how she’d been moving just a few seconds before. Her cane tapped ceaselessly in front of her, guiding her faltering steps.

‘I would know you anywhere, Franny! I haven’t a clue how you’ve managed this terrible thing, but it’s a violation of all God’s laws! A travesty! You must go back! You must go back now!’

She pointed her quivering finger at me and I sank lower in my seat, conscious that nearly everyone in the audience was beginning to stare.

I’d just made the decision to leg it when the woman in front of me jumped to her feet, crying, ‘It’s me, Miss Otis; *it’s me!*’—and in a moment of genuine confusion, I actually thought she was claiming to be this Franny Wills person. Her hand shot out to grab the elderly medium as she drew nearer. ‘It’s Lady Caroline, Miss Otis! Lady Caroline Dabney. Have you had any news of Billy? Is my little boy happy?’

Miss Otis batted the woman’s hand from her shoulder and took another step towards me. She was now so close,

I could hear her mumbling the Lord's Prayer beneath her breath.

'I'm not Franny,' I whispered, grabbing my crate and sliding myself out of my seat. But moving proved to be a mistake. The old woman's cane came slicing through the air and caught the fingers of my right hand. I yelped with pain as my crate crashed to the ground, sending everything in it flying.

I bent to retrieve my bloodied handkerchief, but just as I did, the whole world seemed to turn on its head.

As powerful and unyielding as the north-east wind, that hateful taste of pears was back, invading my throat with its suffocating fumes. I gasped and fell to my knees.

To Mathilda Etherington, the woman gave roses. To me, she brought those blasted rotting pears.

*

This is an account of what followed, as it was described to me the very next day:

As I began to lose consciousness, Miss Otis hurried forward and knelt by my side. She ran her fingers lightly over my face, trying to read the structure of my bones.

'No,' she gasped as the fit finally took hold of me, 'not Franny Wills! And yet it felt so much like her...so very much like her...'

Tentatively she stretched out one of her hands, allowing it to rest above my jerking chest. She kept her palm face-down, holding it there as steadily as she could. Steeling

herself for action, she closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath.

Hardly a second had ticked by before her eyelids shot back open.

‘Step back!’ she cried, tearing herself away from me. ‘This girl is a conduit! Even now she is forming a bridge to the other side!’

‘Oh, enough of this twaddle!’

It was the man who’d been sitting in front of me: the man whose name was Simeon. In the time that it takes to strike a match, he’d risen from his seat and was beginning to take control of the situation.

‘This girl is having a fit, that’s all; just an epileptic fit! Has anybody got something we could put in her mouth—something she could bite on—?’

‘Why would you go putting anything in ’er mouth?’ challenged an indignant voice from the front. ‘Surely that’d choke her!’

‘We need to stop her from biting her tongue off, man! Something like a handkerchief will do. Has anyone got a handkerchief?’

‘Look, the girl’s holding one in her hand,’ one of the onlookers pointed out.

Simeon stooped to pick it up.

‘Please!’ Miss Otis wailed. *‘Please!’* For the love of God, *step back!*

And suddenly the man did. A murmur ran through the crowd.

‘Did you see that?’

‘It looked like a hand!’

‘No, not just a hand: an *arm*. I saw a whole arm!’

‘A young girl’s arm!’

‘Yes! *Reaching right out of her! Out through the poor girl’s chest!*’

‘You mustn’t touch her!’ Miss Otis screeched over the din. ‘She is a bridge! She is a bridge and people will cross!’

‘A bridge?’ murmured Lady Caroline slowly. ‘*A bridge to the other side?*’ Light dawned in the big woman’s eyes. ‘*Billy,*’ she whispered as she clawed her way out of her seat. And even as she dropped to her knees, something small and grey and shadowy was already rising out of my chest to greet her.

The crowd gasped! People clambered back in horror.

‘*Mama? Mama, is that you?*’

‘Oh, Billy! My darling boy! My little William! How I’ve longed to see you again.’

‘*I’m so sorry, Mama.*’

‘Sorry? What on earth have you to be sorry about?’

‘*I shouldn’t have run after the ball, Mama. Not into the street.*’

‘Billy, what are you saying—?’

‘*It was the new one Papa bought me. I thought he’d be angry. I wasn’t looking, and it happened so quickly. I didn’t see the carriage, or hear the horse’s hooves...*’

Lady Caroline gasped. ‘Your governess could never tell

us what possessed you to run into the street like that. Who'd have guessed it was a God-damned ball!

'I'm sorry, Mama; I'm so sorry.'

'Hush, now, darling. All is forgiven; just promise me one thing.'

'Anything, Mama, anything. Just you say.'

'Promise that you'll never leave me again—that you'll stay here—that you won't go back...'

'Oh, Mama! No! You know I can't do that!'

'Why not? Surely God can't need you more than I do?'

'It doesn't work that way, Mama. That's just not how things are...'

Lady Caroline bit her lip and groaned. 'Oh, Billy, can I touch you? Can I hold you?'

'Yes, of course. I'd like that very much.'

The woman reached out hesitantly and traced a finger down the boy's face. Shadows swam for an instant then settled into something more solid.

'Lord, I've missed you! I still look out at the garden, you know, expecting to see you running and playing. Sometimes when I'm walking through town, I'll pretend that you simply got lost, and that if I search for you long enough, with enough love in my heart, one day, *one day*, I'll turn a corner and find you there waiting for me. Isn't that silly? Your mother's so silly! But now here you are! My boy is back! My darling boy is back! William, did I ever tell you, you were the best thing that ever happened to me?'

‘Oh, Mother, I love you.’

‘I love you too, Billy.’

Lady Caroline cradled the head of her son tenderly in her arms. Gray melted into flesh and flesh joined perfectly with shadow. Then, as the big woman buried her face in the boy’s hair, she finally shut her eyes and started to cry.

‘I have to go now, Mama.’

‘I know.’

‘Goodbye, Mama.’

‘Goodbye William. Think of me, won’t you?’

‘Always...’

*

Of course, I knew nothing of this—*absolutely nothing*—when I came to and found myself surrounded by a sea of astonished faces.

‘Can you hear me? Blink if you can hear me.’ It was her, Lady Caroline, the woman who’d been trying to get Miss Otis’s attention. She was kneeling by my side, her black beads clacking softly above me as she stroked my face. ‘You’re safe, my dear,’ she crooned. ‘You’re here, amongst friends.’

‘W-what h-happened?’ I asked, choking as I tried to speak. My throat felt like old tack and my tongue had swollen to twice its normal size.

‘A miracle,’ the woman replied, smiling down at me with the most saintly smile. She supported my neck and helped me to sit up. ‘My, you have been knocked around,

haven't you? Here, drink this,' she said, 'it will make you feel better.'

She held a flask to my lips and I took a sip. I think it was brandy.

'What's your name, child?'

'Lizzie Blaylock, ma'am.'

'Well, it's very good to meet you, Miss Blaylock. I'm Lady Caroline Dabney, and I owe you an enormous debt of gratitude, young lady.'

'Hello there, Lizzie,' the woman's male companion chimed in. 'I'm Simeon de Florence. I'm a friend of Lady Caroline's, and I'd like to offer you a job.'

'A job?' I said, trying to pull my wits about me. 'A *live-in* job? Where I'd get my own room?'

'Of course you'd have your own room,' said Lady Caroline, giving the man a scandalised look. 'Don't you worry, dear, there's nothing improper about my friend's suggestion; you'd never be in the house unaccompanied. There's always the dreadful Meakins woman (though Lord knows why he keeps her on; it's not as if she can cook!)—and you'll have young Albert for company. You'll like Albert. He's a bit of a rough diamond but he does have his charms. No, all in all, I think you'll be quite safe with Simeon. I imagine you'll find that he's horribly respectable when you get to know him better.'

I was glad to hear it, but that wasn't what I'd meant. My main worry was making sure I had a roof over my head for the night.

‘Here’s my card,’ said the man, handing me a crisp, brand-new business card. ‘I don’t suppose you could start tomorrow, could you?’

‘*Tomorrow*—? Oh...!’

‘I realise it’s awfully short notice...’

‘That’s not the problem,’ I said, glancing at the bits from my crate that were still scattered across the floor.

The man looked at Lady Caroline. She pursed her lips and nodded back.

‘Then perhaps you could start right now?’ he suggested gently. ‘If Lady Caroline will help you pack your things, I’ll try to hail us a cab.’

People were beginning to leave. One by one, they each came forward to bid me goodbye. Some of them patted me on the shoulder; others shook me by the hand. Only young Mr Pine refused to come anywhere near me, which made me think that I must have offended him in some way. In the midst of all this, I noticed Miss Otis sitting a few rows away with her head cradled in her hands. As soon as I was able to, I made my way over.

‘Miss Otis? I’m not Franny Wills, whoever she is... truly I’m not. My name’s Lizzie Blaylock.’

‘Oh, yes, my dear, I really am most terribly sorry about that. It’s just that you felt so awfully like Franny that, for one brief moment, I actually thought you *were* her. Tell me—have you had the gift for long?’

‘Gift?’ I was about to ask her what she meant when I heard Lady Caroline calling. Simeon had found us a cab.

‘I have to go now, miss. I’m...I’m sorry if I spoiled your evening.’

The old lady gave my hand a pat. ‘But you will come to see me again, won’t you?’ she asked anxiously. ‘Really, I do hope that you do. You see, I believe... I believe...’ Miss Otis looked decidedly embarrassed.

‘Yes?’

‘Well, dear, I believe you may have been *sent*.’

*

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