A Tale of the Old City: Queering the National Narrative

by

Michael Bedo

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of English and Languages
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Supervisors: Dr Holly Luhning & Professor Diane Watt

© Michael Bedo 2016
Declaration

This thesis and the work to which it refers are the results of my own efforts. Any ideas, data, images or text resulting from the work of others (whether published or unpublished) are fully identified as such within the work and attributed to their originator in the text, bibliography or in footnotes. This thesis has not been submitted in whole or in part for any other academic degree or professional qualification. I agree that the University has the right to submit my work to the plagiarism detection service TurnitinUK for originality checks. Whether or not drafts have been so-assessed, the University reserves the right to require an electronic version of the final document (as submitted) for assessment as above.

Signature: ________________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________________
Abstract

The legitimacy of the historical novel as a means of interpreting the past continues to divide critics. The immense readership of such notable examples of the genre as Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* has led some academic historians to express anxiety about the potential of fictionalised histories to distort how the past survives in public memory. The novel is traditionally regarded as having less rigorous constraints in how it approaches archival material than academic history and greater freedom to invent when the historical record is deficient. But while these freedoms are alarming to many historians, it is the same lack of constraint and licence to invent for which the historical novel is also celebrated, along with its potential to challenge preconceptions of historical periods, characters and events. It is these factors that make the genre especially suitable for recovering marginalised histories where the historical record is impoverished. My thesis is both a critical and practical interrogation of how the novel can engage with marginalised history, specifically the historical experience of homosexual desire. I am looking at homosexual desire within the context of the late nineteenth century, a period that has received a good deal of attention from academics in the last 15 years; recent scholarship has focused on the more complex range of homosexual identities that have been overshadowed by the dominant Wildean archetype. My novel, ‘Among Christian Men’, which is the main component of this thesis, employs fiction as an alternative way of contributing to the historiography of male homosexuality. My critical chapters explore the significance of a creative rather than critical approach to historical sources. My novel dramatises the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889, which forced the subject of sex between men on public consciousness. Within the novel I explore the significance of homosexual scandal in relation to British imperialism and national identity. In foregrounding these themes I intend to show how homosexual desire was considered to be a threat to imperial prowess, which in turn accounts for why the experience of homosexual desire has been largely absent from how this period exists in public memory. ‘Queering the National Narrative’ is a project of reclamation.
It was as an undergraduate student that I first discovered the story of the Cleveland Street scandal through the means of H. Montgomery Hyde’s wonderful history. In my first years in London working on the Euston Road I was a stone’s throw from Cleveland Street and its proximity secured the impact of the scandal upon my imagination. As a gay man with a fascination with history, Cleveland Street has always been evidence of precedent. I have long laboured under the conviction that the story was great material for a novel. I would like to thank the University of Surrey for awarding me the Arts and Humanities studentship to realise my ambition to research and write this novel. I would like to extend my gratitude to my supervisory team: Dr Holly Luhning, Dr Churnjeet Mahn, and Professor Diane Watt for all their support, advice, and encouragement over the last 3 years. A note of thanks also to my many Creative Writing students whose talent and courage often inspired me during periods of creative immobility.

I am deeply indebted to the scholarship of Dr Matt Cook, Professor Matt Houlbrook, and particularly Dr Harry Cocks who personally directed me to the Home Office files relating to George Osborn, which added exciting layers to the story I was attempting to tell. I am also grateful to Gay’s the Word Bookshop of Marchmont Street; I have been pillaging their history section for years and it has been a constant source of inspiration.

A special thanks to my family, particularly to two extraordinary and hilarious sisters: my mother and aunt, who in different ways nurtured my love of reading that brought me to my love of history and writing.

I would like to thank Richard who alerted me to the PhD funding and gave me the confidence to apply. He has been a constant source of support these many years. My time at Surrey has also been enriched by Lucy Ella and Nathan, extraordinary academics and friends both.
It is no small thing to live with someone who is doing a PhD, so many thanks and lots of affection to Natasha and Catherine who started me off on this trajectory, and Rachael and Ben who have seen me through much defeatism with much good humour and constant support.

I am very lucky to have such an extraordinary base of friends, all of whom have been invaluable during this journey. I would like to thank Tom, Simon, Tim M, Chris, Ruth, Emily, Stew, Cat, Kate, Jules, and Steph (especially for all the pep). And, at the very centre of my world, Tim and Matt.
Contents

Introduction, 7
  1. The Scandal
  2. The Spectre of Wilde
  3. Pride of Place

Chapter One: The Novelist’s Arithmetic, 22

Chapter Two: Interventions in Silence, 37

The Novel: ‘Among Christian Men,’ 55

Conclusion, 291
Introduction

The novelist Toni Morrison once said when describing her impetus in writing historical fiction, 'I know I can’t change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite.'¹ In this statement, Morrison celebrates both the malleability of how history survives in public memory and the influence of the historical fiction writer in shaping and re-shaping perceptions of the past. This thesis responds to the freedom and opportunity identified by Morrison. Morrison was speaking in relation to her novel Beloved, which engages with the legacy of slavery. Her motivation in writing the book came from a personal desire to understand the experiences of her African-American ancestors and a need to supplement and invent where the historical record is inadequate to narrate those experiences.² My own work of historical fiction, the main component of this thesis, engages with the experience of male same-sex desire in history and its relationship to the British national narrative. This project is rooted in the conviction that the experiences of homosexual men have been given little claim to the national narrative of Great Britain owing to the historic tensions between male homosexuality and national identity and the silencing of gay history by what Matt Houlbrook calls the ‘defensive dominant narrative’.³

My novel is set during the latter years of Queen Victoria’s reign. Male homosexuality in late-Victorian England is usually understood in the context of Oscar Wilde and his trials for gross indecency. 21st century historians of sexuality have recognised the limitations of this dominant narrative and have focused their scholarship away from Wilde in order to engage with other possible homosexual identities. Matt Cook in his groundbreaking study of homosexuality in London during the period 1885-1914, acknowledges how the variety and complexity of forms of homosexual identity in the Victorian period

² Ibid., p.244. Morrison says in relation to the claims of fiction versus history, ‘I refuse to believe that that period. Or that thing [slavery] is beyond art.’
have tended to be masked by the attention paid to Wilde. Harry Cocks likewise observes how ‘such attention has tended to obscure other sources of knowledge and has concentrated on the [...] effeminate Wildean archetype as the epitome of the “modern homosexual”. Although Wilde has a place of enormous cultural significance in the British national narrative, I, similarly to Cocks and Cook, wanted to go beyond his example in order to arrive at a broader and deeper understanding of the experience of male same-sex desire in Wilde’s time. Within this introduction I engage with the complexities attached to recognising homosexual identities in a nineteenth century context and present my reasons for focusing on this particular period in history as a means to queer the historical narrative through a creative reimagining. I also interrogate what influence historical fiction has in shaping our perceptions of the past.

My novel opens in July 1886 and ends in February 1890. This period was one of massive destabilisation in British politics and society, beginning with the collapse (and division) of Gladstone’s Liberal Government over Home Rule. This period also witnessed intense challenges to the prevailing social hierarchy in the form of the Bloody Sunday riots of 1887 and the London Docklands strike of 1889. But despite the amplification of social discontent, it was also a time of pageantry and imperial prowess. Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee celebrations in 1887 presented the perfect occasion for Britain to demonstrate the reach of her glorious empire. The visit of the Persian Shah in July 1889 was another opportunity for pomp and extravagance. The Standard reports how on the 5th July, the Shah travelled from Buckingham Palace to Waterloo Station where he was met by an impressive coterie, which included the Prince of Wales, his son Prince Albert Victor, and one of his equerries, Lord Arthur Somerset. On exactly the same day, Detective Inspector Abberline of Scotland Yard was interrogating messenger boys at the General Post Office who had confessed to supplementing their earnings by going to bed with gentleman at number 19 Cleveland Street. Among the men who would eventually be named as clients at the Cleveland

---

Street brothel were Somerset and Prince Albert Victor, the very men exciting cheers from the thousands of onlookers lining Westminster Bridge. Here the history of male homosexuality intersects tangibly with the national narrative. It was through the Cleveland Street scandal that the taboo subject of homosexuality forced itself upon public consciousness through the avenues of press, parliamentary debate, and gossip. Yet the scandal has not survived in public memory. If it was as ubiquitous as the Wilde trials then it might have challenged popular preconceptions of what homosexual identities in late-Victorian Britain could look like. But throughout the critical chapters of this thesis I argue that it is the perceived threat that homosexuality posed to national identity and imperial strength that has marginalised the history of homosexuality. In discussing the national narrative I refer to the version of the past that exists in public memory.

The Scandal

By beginning in 1886 my novel opens in the wake of a significant piece of legislation that was to have enormous impact upon generations of men who had sex with other men. In 1885 a new law had been introduced under the Liberal Government that increased the state’s powers of intervention in sexual activity between men. Sodomy had been outlawed since the reign of Henry VIII and until 1861 had remained a capital offence in Great Britain (although the last recorded hangings for sodomy were in 1834). While other lesser sexual acts between men could be punished as attempted sodomy or indecent assault there was usually an emphasis on offences committed in public. Until 1885 there was no specific law that explicitly identified sexual behaviour between men. Section Eleven of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, commonly referred to as the Labouchere Amendment since its inception was attributed to Henry Labouchere, the Radical Member of Parliament for Northampton, criminalised all acts of gross

---

9 Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 42.
10 The impact of the Criminal Law Amendment Act has undergone much debate by 21st century historians. Cook argues that it ‘came as a direct reiteration of concern about sexual relations between men and about unbridled male lust in general.’ Ibid, 42-3.
indecency between men whether committed in public or private. This law identified and targeted the homosexual subculture that existed hidden from the public sphere. Labouchere, in response to criticisms which suggested that behaviour between consenting adults in private should be outside the province of the law, said that sexual intimacy between men was an offence that put men beyond the pale of privacy.\textsuperscript{11} This was the law that was exercised in 1889, during the so-called London Scandals or Cleveland Street Scandal.\textsuperscript{12}

Cleveland Street exemplifies how the Criminal Law Amendment Act could be employed to infiltrate the underground homosexual subculture and impact upon the lives of men who engaged in homosexual practices in private. The network of prostitution at Cleveland Street was uncovered when one of the rent boys, Charles Swinscow, was interrogated about money found in his possession following some petty thefts on the Post Office premises. In informing his interrogator how he came to be in possession of such a sum, Swinscow inculpated several co-workers including 19-year old Henry Newlove, who he identified as having procured boys for the brothel keeper Charles Hammond.\textsuperscript{13} It was Newlove who was to provide the evidence that caused a national scandal. On being arrested, Newlove complained that he was being made a scapegoat while his social superiors who had regularly visited the brothel walked free. He dropped the names of some of the most illustrious personages of the day including Lord Arthur Somerset, son of the Duke of Beaufort and an equerry to the Prince of Wales; also the Earl of Euston, son and heir to the Duke of Grafton.\textsuperscript{14} However as the investigation continued far away from the public eye, an even more prominent person was named as a Cleveland Street regular, Prince Albert Victor, eldest son of the Prince of Wales and second in line to the throne.\textsuperscript{15} The uncovering of the Cleveland Street brothel was now far more than just about criminal sexual behaviours. It was a challenge to the social order that

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Oscar Wilde.’ \textit{Western Mail} (Cardiff, Wales), 31 May, 1895.
\textsuperscript{12} Two studies of the Cleveland Street Scandal proved invaluable in the writing of this thesis: the previously cited H. Montgomery Hyde, \textit{The Cleveland Street Scandal}, (London: W H Allen, 1976), and Lewis Chester, David Leitch, and Colin Simpson, \textit{The Cleveland Street Affair} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977). Both were written in the aftermath of the disclosure of the Government files relating to the scandal.
\textsuperscript{13} Hyde, \textit{The Cleveland Street Scandal}, 21.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 55.
underpinned Britain, its monarchy, and its Empire. It left the highest in the land vulnerable to criminal prosecution for their criminal conduct.

It took some months for the discovery to become a public scandal. The brothel keeper Charles Hammond fled abroad before he could be arrested. Newlove and a fellow procurer, George Veck, were prosecuted but both submitted guilty pleas which reduced the revelation and publicity that a long trial would have generated. The fact that both Newlove and Veck received very lenient sentences has persuaded many historians that their guilty pleas were made as part of a pact with the Government to ensure their silence. But despite efforts to minimise the scandal, gossip began to circulate among such networks as the gentlemen’s clubs of Pall Mall. It was partly the prevalence of gossip and the connection of potentially innocent parties with the scandal that encouraged Henry Labouchere to begin a press campaign demanding a transparent Government inquiry into the police investigation. In November Ernest Parke, the editor of a radical periodical The North London Press, named both Lord Arthur Somerset and the Earl of Euston as having been identified as patrons of the brothel. Lord Arthur Somerset was already abroad at this point and a warrant had recently been issued for his arrest after much hesitation. But Euston was still in London and he sued Parke for libel. Arthur Newton, a well-known society solicitor, was also charged with perverting the course of justice when he tried to bribe key witnesses against Lord Arthur Somerset to leave the country.

16 Ibid., 27.
17 Ibid., 48-53.
18 Hyde suggests that there was no bargain made, quoting the statement made by Harry Poland QC, the Senior Treasury Counsel: I wish to say that I neither directly or indirectly made any arrangement with the prisoners’ counsel as to what counts the prisoners should plead to. See Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 49-49. Chester, Leitch and Simpson favour the conspiracy theory that a deal was warmly received by the Government. See The Cleveland Street Affair, 75.
19” Labouchere wrote in Truth, ‘Very possibly many who are suspected are innocent, and in their interest, as well as in the public interest, no effort should be spared to bring home the guilt to those really guilty’ as quoted in The Scandal of Cleveland Street.” Pall Mall Gazette [London] November 20, 1889.
20 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 106.
21 Ibid., 110.
22 Arthur Newton appears in my in my novel as the blackmailing Arthur Abrahams. Newton was suspended by the Law Society in relation to Dr Crippen in 1911 and in 1913 was convicted of fraud and sentenced to three years in prison. For an extended account into his dubious practices relating to Cleveland Street see Martin Dockray, 'The
Both prosecutions brought the scandal to public attention through extensive press coverage.\textsuperscript{23} It was the court hearings that gave many players in the Cleveland Street drama, including the professional male prostitute John Saul and the part-time prostitute, Algernon Allies the platform to share their experiences.\textsuperscript{24} Their recorded testimonies are invaluable to our understanding of the culture of male prostitution that surrounded Cleveland Street.

Henry Labouchere, with his personal investment in the application of his own law publicised what he regarded as the inaction of the Government in dealing with Cleveland Street through his periodical, Truth. He also led an attack on the Government from the opposition benches in February 1890.\textsuperscript{25} He demanded the appointment of a committee to investigate the Government’s handling of the case and accused the Prime Minister of interfering in the course of justice by leaking the information that a warrant was about to be issued for the arrest of Lord Arthur Somerset. Labouchere was suspended from the Commons for refusing to retract his claim that he did not believe the Prime Minister.\textsuperscript{26} But despite Labouchere’s efforts there was no investigation committee or any further arrests.

\textbf{The Spectre of Wilde}

My purpose in writing a novel about the Cleveland Street scandal was to present a counter narrative to that of the Wildean archetype and engage with other more complex forms of homosexual identities that existed during this period. The men sexually inculpated in Cleveland Street present extreme variations of men who acted on their sexual desire for other men. There were military figures such as Lord Arthur Somerset, a Major in the Lifeguards; also the Earl of Euston, a

\textsuperscript{23} Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 162.
\textsuperscript{25} ‘The Government and Mr. Labouchere.’ Pall Mall Gazette [London], March 1, 1890.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.,
notorious womaniser and ‘stage-door Johnny’. Both men represent traditional behaviours associated with hyper-masculinity including courage in battle and sexual prowess with women, far removed from the effeminate figure of the dandy, which Wilde personified during this period. For a while their respective reputations served as safeguards that discredited the accusations against them. ‘I would just as soon as believe it of myself as of him,’ was the response of Lord Arthur Somerset’s brother-in-law to the suggestion that Somerset was a frequenter of Cleveland Street. That Euston’s promiscuity with women was put forward as a means of dismissing the Cleveland Street rumours suggests that by the late 1880s sex between men was regarded as a type of behaviour incompatible with a virile heterosexual identity. This is not sufficient to identify understandings of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century that correspond to modern binary definitions, but it does suggest that traditional masculine roles of soldier and seducer were considered paradoxical with same-sex desire. The behaviours of Lord Arthur Somerset and the Earl of Euston were deeply challenging to Victorian society which relied on an altogether different set of signifiers to denote homosexuality. These examples are also at variance with the figure of the modern homosexual that developed throughout the twentieth century, informed by the aforementioned Wildean archetype; it is perhaps failure to recall these alternate homosexual identities in the popular narrative of the Victorian age that narrowed and restricted definitions of homosexuality in the ensuing century.

Prostitutes and extortionists are examples of men who had sex with other men who also complicate homosexual identities during this period. Both the Cleveland Street and Wilde scandals highlighted the culture of male prostitution and blackmail that grew up around the criminalisation of homosexuality. The men implicated in these scandals evidenced how sexual desire and romantic attachment were not always drivers for men who participated in homosexual acts. For those seeking to find representations of the heterosexual/homosexual

27 Ibid., 109.
29 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 102.
30 Ibid., 109
binary in this period, the subculture of ‘renters’ is one of the most complex of identities to comprehend. Matt Houlbrook observes,

To a twenty-first century observer, the most anomalous figure within queer urban culture in the first half of the twentieth century is the working-class man who engaged in homosex or ongoing emotional relationships with other men, at the same time as with women, and without considering himself – or being considered by other men – to be anything other than “normal.”

Some professional renters and blackmailers who had sex with other men regarded themselves as distinct from the effeminate type of sodomite known as the ‘Mary-Ann’. 'The prostitute John Saul in the 1881 pornographic novella, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, is resistant to the suggestion that he should call his memoirs ‘Confessions of a Mary Ann’, as Mary-Ann “was what low girls of his neighbourhood called him if they wished to insult him.”

What is Mary-Ann?’ is the title of an article in *Reynolds’s Newspaper* from October 6th 1889. The article reports a fracas at Her Majesty’s Theatre where Robert O’Meara assaulted William Allen with a beer glass. Allen is a figure who appears in the Wilde trials, he had sexual relations with Wilde and was eventually imprisoned for extortion. O’Meara in his defence said that Allen had followed him about all evening using insulting language and calling him a Mary-Ann. ‘What is a Mary-Ann?’ the magistrate Mr Hannay had asked. ‘Men who get their living by bad practices,’ an obliging police constable had enlightened him. Allen was certainly a man who made his living by bad practices but he clearly saw himself as distinct from the effeminate O’Meara whom he told to ‘go and wash the pain off his face.’

One of the most prevalent types of prostitute that was particularly destabilising to British notions of masculinity was the guardsman prostitute

---

33 'What is Mary-Ann?' *Reynolds’s Newspaper* [London], October 6, 1889.
36 'What is Mary-Ann?' *Reynolds’s Newspaper* [London], October 6, 1889.
37 'The Fracas at Her Majesty’s Theatre.' *Daily News* [London], October 3, 1889.
habitually to be found soliciting in London’s parks. Matt Cook observes how ‘the notoriety of the central London parks was ongoing and Hyde Park was well known for the soldier prostitutes who picked up clients there. In 1903, in recognition of the problem, the army issued an order forbidding uniformed soldiers from loitering without lawful purpose in the parks after dusk.’

Matt Houlbrook describes the paradox of the perverse and effeminising sexual acts with the traditional figure of the British soldier-hero:

...a potent image of the nation and its manhood, his iconic status was inscribed into the pageantry of metropolitan life through his role as guard at the royal palaces – symbolic heart of nation and empire. Given this powerful cultural investment, the evidence of the guardsman’s sexual practices that regularly appeared in the courts and press was profoundly disquieting.

Two of the key terms employed by Houlbrook are nation and empire. During this period, sex between men was perceived as a direct threat to imperial prowess and several major scandals between 1884 and 1918, including Cleveland Street, highlighted how homosexual desire was considered debilitating to both the English way of life and colonial rule. The Dublin Castle scandal of 1884 began as an attempt by the Nationalist newspaper United Ireland to discredit the English Administration in Dublin with accusations of homosexuality against some of its highest-ranking officers. In 1918, towards the end of the First World War, the Pemberton Billing trial (discussed in greater depth in the next chapter) saw the British far right argue that the prevalence of homosexuality in Britain was providing an advantage to the Germans. The British forces were not in a strong position in the early months of 1918 and the hostility perpetuated in Noel Pemberton Billing’s periodical The Vigilante gained currency.

Houlbrook identifies several competing narratives that described the perceived threat posed to Britain and British supremacy by the ‘queer’ figure:

---

38 Cook, London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 22-26.
39 Houlbrook, Queer London, 227.
40 For a detailed discussion of the Dublin Castle Scandals see Cocks, Nameless Desires, 135-44. Cocks compares the practice of the nationalist press to the street blackmailer.
41 For a detailed discussion of the Pemberton Billing trial see Philip Hoare, Wilde’s Last Stand, (London, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1997).
in broad terms sexual difference meant effeminacy – the queer challenged the ‘natural’ boundaries between men and women upon which Britain’s stability depended. Second: sexual difference meant uncontrolled lust, promiscuity, and a predatory character – the queer transgressed the characteristically British qualities of restraint and self-control and threatened to corrupt all ‘normal men. Third: sexual difference meant intergenerational desire, endangering Britain’s very future – her youth – and the family, supposedly the repository of national stability.42

It is these factors relating to gender roles, the narrative of the predator, and the threat to the family that provide the best insight into why British national identity has been historically incompatible with homosexual identity. Britain has a long history of being a hostile environment from which homosexual men have been forced to find refuge. As Robert Aldrich observes, ‘the colonies and other exotic places, beckoned as refuges from criminal prosecution and social persecution.’43 In the wake of the Cleveland Street scandal, Lord Arthur Somerset was condemned to a life in exile and described ‘the awful melancholy, when one has no one to speak to and nothing to do.’44 Upon his release from prison, Oscar Wilde went to the Continent and never returned to England.45 Britain’s rejection of her homosexual subjects, the centuries long history of criminal prosecution, the trade in blackmail that thrived on these criminal laws, have all contributed to the impoverished role of homosexual men in the British national narrative. So few identities and stories survive in public memory, so many ambiguities lie around the sexuality of key protagonists in history because of the restrictions upon expression and the necessity of secrecy. Both the critical and creative aspects of this thesis explore how the ‘defensive national narrative’ has served to silence the role played by homosexual men in history.

An Inclusive Heritage

42 Houlbrook, Queer London, 223.
43 Robert Aldrich, Colonialism and Homosexuality (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 185.
44 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 131.
45 Aldrich, Colonialism and Homosexuality, 185
In 2015 Historic England and Leeds Becket University launched the Pride of Place project. Pride of Place exists to champion a heritage that is inclusive of the history of the LGBTQ community. It invites the public to plot points of historical significance for the LGBTQ community on its online map. The project has come about at a time when the visibility and permanence of spaces with significance to the non-hetero community has been the subject of increasing concern. As a response to this anxiety of visibility, two historic institutions: London’s Royal Vauxhall Tavern and New York’s Stonewall Inn have both been granted status as listed buildings. The preservation of these two public spaces recognises the importance of historical precedent for the non-hetero community. The Pride of Place project is an exhibition of the wealth of historical precedent for the experience of same-sex desire among men and women. Both urban narratives and rural narratives are being curated. Contributors to the map have recorded sites such as the pillory on Old Gravel Lane where George Duffus was sentenced to stand after his conviction for attempted sodomy in 1721. There is also the Royal Strand Theatre where cross-dressing couple 'Fanny and Stella’ (Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park) were arrested in April 1870 and charged with attempted sodomy. The volume of spaces associated with criminal prosecution also bears testimony to a narrative that is inextricably interwoven with and dependent upon legal records and press coverage of prosecution to survive. The second critical chapter of this thesis, 'Interventions in Silence’ engages with the complexities of dramatizing lives that for the most part are only accessible to us through court proceedings and material with a strong bias against the subject. The messenger boys in the Cleveland Street case,

49 “Pride of Place: LGBTQ Heritage Project”
50 “Pride of Place: LGBTQ Heritage Project”
for example, emerge as characters only through their representation by Home Office files and their own official statements.51

My novel shares in the desire of the Pride of Place Project to succeed in creating an inclusive history and shared ownership of the national narrative. But it is worth contemplating what claims historical fiction can have in terms of influencing people’s perception of history. A recent example of historical fiction that has received much critical intention for the version of history it presents is Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2012).52 The novel’s interpretation of certain historical events and personalities has attracted contention and hostility among academic historians, with particular attention paid to the portrayal of the novel’s protagonist Thomas Cromwell. The historian Simon Schama complained: ‘It grates a bit to accept that millions now think of Thomas Cromwell as a much-maligned, misunderstood pragmatist from the school of hard knocks who got precious little thanks for doing Henry VIII’s dirty work’.53 The root of Schama’s contention is that the commercial success and currency of Mantel’s fiction will distort how Cromwell is regarded and understood. His anxiety and that of other leading historians such as David Starkey who called *Wolf Hall* a ‘deliberate perversion of history’ 54 acknowledges the potential of historical fiction to redraw the historical map. The fact that *Wolf Hall* has sold somewhere near two million copies in the UK, lends support to Schama’s anxiety that Mantel’s representation of Cromwell will have a far reaching influence.55

But despite the controversy and anxiety over misrepresentation, it is the promise of influence that makes the novel a powerful interventional tool in reshaping attitudes to the past and also recovering marginalised and largely forgotten histories and bringing them to public consciousness. This recalls Toni

---

51 Statements of Thickbroom, Wright, and Swinscow, 6 July 1889, DPP 1/95/3, The National Archives, Kew.
55 Schama, ‘What Historians Think of Historical Novels.’
Morrison's comment that as a novelist she cannot change the future but she can change the past. As well, as the possibility of influencing how the gay past is perceived I also want to engage with historical fiction as a means of connecting the past with the present. Of providing a continuum of what Laura Doan and Sarah Waters call 'the unbroken tradition of same-sex love'.

Doan and Waters have commented on how the suppression or absence of lesbian activity from the historical record has 'limited the constituency across which a lesbian genealogy might be traced, and made it difficult for women to imagine themselves as participants in an unbroken tradition of same-sex love.'

Waters' own historical fictions have imagined the experience of lesbian desire across several periods in history. Her early novels, *Tipping the Velvet, Affinity*, and *Fingersmith* examined lesbian desire in the context of the Victorian period; Waters moved into 1940s London for *The Night Watch*, and for her most recent bestseller, *The Paying Guests* (2014) she interrogates the possibilities for lesbian identities in the period immediately after World War One. By moving between time periods, Waters' oeuvre provides a continuum for lesbian desire across the last two centuries.

The Irish-born novelist, Emma Donoghue, echoes the importance of reclaiming an unbroken tradition of same-sex desire. Donoghue has explored lesbian desire within a historical context in her novels, *Slammerkin* (2000) and *The Sealed Letter* (2008). She also wrote *Passions Between Women*, a compendium of testimonies which is 'urgently committed to dispelling the myth that 17th and eighteenth century lesbian culture was rarely registered in language and that women had no words to describe themselves.'

Donoghue describes her motivation in revisiting these earlier periods:

> imagine living in a city where there are no monuments, no buildings from before 1970, no proof that you had grandparents or parents, no history at all. Wouldn't that make you feel like you

---


57 ibid., 12.

were just a passing fad, that you could be blown away like leaves? [...] for any community to feel substantial and able to change without losing themselves, a history is absolutely crucial.59

Donoghue’s concerns speak to the aforementioned need for historical precedent and for that precedent to have visibility for the non-hetero community. I would extend this a need to understand how the experience of same-sex desire has not existed as a separate and exclusive history but one that interweaves and intersects the national narrative, as exemplified in the instance of Cleveland Street. In the early twenty-first century, the possibilities of the queer past continue to be probed by a generation of novelists, biographers, and playwrights, reflecting the desire for a shared ownership of the national narrative by a wider community. History as it is remembered must now mirror the variety of experiences that contemporary society recognises as characteristic of the human condition. At the time of writing, the Royal Shakespeare Company has just announced a new play, *Queen Anne*, by Helen Edmundson. Edmundson’s play examines the relationship between Queen Anne and her confidante the Duchess of Marlborough.60 It suggests the possible romantic and sexual elements of a relationship that had enormous influence over Anne’s reign. Such an instance is representative of a national narrative that is just beginning to awaken to the whole variety of relationships that have shaped it and that are there for dramatists and historians alike to uncover.

The following two chapters that precede my novel ‘Among Christian Men’ critically examine my process for writing historical fiction that queers the national narrative. The first chapter, ‘The Novelist’s Arithmetic’ explores the complexities inherent in a creative rather than critical approach to historical sources. It examines the ethical responsibilities of the historical fiction writer in recreating actual historical events and personalities. The chapter also includes a case study of Pat Barker’s novel *The Eye in the Door* as an example of a

contemporary historical fiction that engages with the tension between the queer past and the defensive dominant narrative.

The second chapter, ‘Interventions in Silence’ engages more personally with my own craft as a writer and how I have extrapolated from archival material in the development of my narrative, characters, and story world. I present three case studies detailing how I have used public records to access the experience of three distinct types of men who had sex with other men in the 1880s: the casual prostitute, exemplified by the messenger boys inculpated in the Cleveland Street scandal; the extortionist, and the professional male prostitute. I look at the challenges of drawing characters from archive material that is by nature hostile to the subject and demonstrate the novelist’s arithmetic at work.
In a recent interview on BBC Radio 4, the historian Niall Ferguson and the Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Jane Smiley became embroiled in a heated debate about the merits of historical fiction and its relationship to academic history. Ferguson rejected the possibility that a novel could make any claim to authenticity and declared that even a fiction as highly regarded as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* must always be a lesser means of interpreting the past than objective history. Smiley developed her response in an article for *The Guardian*, in which she outlined the differing demands of writing history and fiction: ‘I suggested that the demands of history and fiction are slightly different – that since a novel is a story, it must be complete, and since a history must be accepted by the reader as accurate, it must be incomplete.’ Smiley resists the notion that literary forms exist in a hierarchy, ‘I think of them as more of a flower bouquet, with different colours, scents and forms, each satisfying and unsatisfying in its way.’

In disputing Ferguson’s hierarchy of form and also defending the historical research that is part of her creative process, ‘I certainly know more about that weird spot [Missouri] and its history than many historians do’, Smiley identifies the possibility of a space where traditional history and historical fiction can co-exist, both potentially contributing to historiography, but with both forms having shortcomings when it comes to claims of authenticity. The forms are unalike in their weaknesses but also their strengths. Where a source cannot satisfy the requirements of history it lends itself to the freedoms of the novel. When a historical event or character has bequeathed only silences to the archive, the historian is not able to legitimately fill the silences with

---

62 Ibid.,
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
invented truths nor does the historian’s integrity allow narratives to pivot upon educated guesses. The narrative is never completed. If the fiction writer approaches the same silence in the archive then they are equipped with the means to interpret that silence and a version of the story exists where none did before. The history that has inadequate verifcation has at least received attention. Whatever it suggests has been contemplated. This does seem especially pertinent to the history of homosexuality. When seeking what Sarah Waters refers to as the ‘unbroken tradition of same sex love’, the deficient sources can be probed to their very limits and a logical narrative fashioned with some educated guesswork. A partially invented past is better than none. Yet within this chapter I identify a tension between the novelist’s freedom to invent and what Maria Margaronis calls the ‘anxiety of authenticity’.

The anxiety of authenticity describes the responsibility that an author feels to the historical individual or the historical event they are attempting to recreate. Margaronis identifies how this level of responsibility can be conditioned by factors such as an author’s personal connection to the history they are reimagining. She cites the examples of Toni Morrison and Ian McEwan, who have written historical fictions that discuss episodes associated with their families and heritage. Within this chapter I will consider the question of responsibility and explore how different creative practitioners adopt disparate approaches to historical sources and experience different levels of freedom and constraint. I explore the approaches adopted by two leading novelists, Hilary Mantel and Ian McEwan. Mantel exemplifies the author who teases out the flexibility within the rigours of heavily researched historical fiction, while McEwan’s fidelity to his sources has seen him accused of plagiarism. I consider my own relationship with historical sources in the context of these paradigms and the ‘anxiety of authenticity’. I also offer a commentary on Pat Barker’s *The Eye in the Door*, an example of contemporary historical fiction that is particularly comparable to my project. Barker’s novel is set against the backdrop of the Pemberton Billing Trial, outlined in my Introduction. The Pemberton Billing trial

---

68 Ibid., 138.
was associated with issues of homosexuality and national identity with strong echoes of the national and cultural anxieties that grew up around Cleveland Street thirty years earlier. I interrogate Barker's portrayal of a homosexual scandal in a world still predominately governed by Victorian values. I explore how she characterizes men who experience same-sex desire and how she engages with the narrative of Wilde, which overlapped significantly with the Pemberton Billing trial. The Eye in the Door is a novel that attempts to queer the national narrative by offering an alternate reading of a much-reincarnated period in history.

**Anxiety of Authenticity**

Hilary Mantel believes fervently in the need for the author of historical fiction to know their facts thoroughly. She believes research should be as good as she can possibly make it, and guesses should be made only when there are 'no facts to be had.'\(^69\) She believes in probing sources to their very limits and that when gaps occur, the way you fill them must offer a possible version, based on the evidence in hand.\(^70\) Even when Mantel is inventing scenes for which there is no counterpart in the historical record, she is writing within the limits of plausibility, calling upon what she refers to as the novelist's arithmetic.\(^71\) Mantel states:

...absence of intimate material is both a problem and an opportunity. I have had to do my best with hints and possibilities. Did Cromwell really meet Thomas More when he was a small child? There is a coincidence of time and place which adds up (in the novelist's arithmetic) to an opportunity; his uncle, John Cromwell, was indeed a cook at Lambeth Palace when 14-year-old More was a page in the household.\(^72\)

\(^70\) Ibid.
\(^71\) Ibid.
In the scene described, Mantel appears to succumb to the novelist’s desire for pathos by providing an early encounter between the two adversaries. But despite the invented nature of this scene, its content is still plausible with reference to what is documented about the character’s movements and relationships. Mantel writes within self-imposed limitations dictated by deference to the past and sense of responsibility to the lives and events she is recreating. *Wolf Hall* falls into the pattern of historical fictions written at the end of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, identified by Maria Margaronis as sharing an ‘anxiety of authenticity.’

Margaronis addresses the moral dimensions attached to the fiction writer taking someone else’s experience and giving it what she calls ‘the gloss of form.’ In her article she foregrounds the ethics of dramatizing actual historical events and questions whether ‘imaginative language can discover truths about the past that are unavailable to more discursive writing.’ Margaronis engages with two case studies: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*. While Margaronis acknowledges the disparity of these examples of the genre (one is about war, the other about slavery), she finds common ground in that both novels recount traumatic episodes in history to which the author has a personal connection and that both writers are interested in how the past survives in the imagination. Toni Morrison as an African-American writer felt a desire to explore an unspoken element of her ancestry; Ian McEwan’s father had been on active service in WWII and was present during the Dunkirk evacuation.

Margaronis scrutinises the Dunkirk sequences of McEwan’s novel and finds within them a deference for historical accuracy and a method of storytelling that is stylistically different from the rest of the novel:

McEwan seems preoccupied here with doing justice to the experience of those who were at Dunkirk - his father among them ... it is easy to forget that we are reading fiction, let alone a fiction within a fiction: we are in the hands of a powerful writer fully

---

73 Maria Margaronis 'The Anxiety of Authenticity,' 138.
74 Ibid., 138.
75 Ibid., 138.
76 Ibid., 145.
absorbed in imagining something difficult, and there is no room here for narrative tricks or for ventriloquism. The sense of authenticity comes from the combination of imaginative empathy and precise detail.\footnote{Ibid., 145.}

McEwan’s preoccupation with doing justice to the realities of wartime and maintaining precision of detail led him to a strong reliance upon his historical source material, which he has fully acknowledged.\footnote{Ian McEwan, ‘An Inspiration, Yes. Did I Copy from Another Author? No.’ Guardian, November 27, 2006, accessed January 12, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3} A comparison made between the novel and McEwan’s sources by the critic Natasha Alden, showed how closely McEwan had integrated his research into the text. These discoveries exposed him to charges of plagiarism in the national press.\footnote{Natasha Alden, ‘Words of War, War of Words: Atonement and the Question of Plagiarism,’ in Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives, ed. by Sebastian Groes (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), accessed January 14, 2016, http://site.ebrary.com/lib/surreyuniv/detail.action?docID=10427266, 57-69.} McEwan defended himself and his approach in an article in The Guardian, stating: ‘The writer of a historical novel may resent his dependence on the written record, on memoirs and eyewitness accounts, in other words on other writers, but there is no escape: Dunkirk or a wartime hospital can be novelistically realised, but they cannot be re-invented.’\footnote{Ian McEwan, ‘Did I Copy from Another Author?’} In this statement, McEwan identifies his primary obligation as rendering the experience of those present at Dunkirk faithfully and accurately. At the same time he acknowledges that this deferential approach lessens the autonomy, freedom, and even the creativity of the author, necessitating a high level of intertextuality. Having grown up with eyewitness accounts also serves to strengthen McEwan’s deference. In a sense his father becomes the novel’s narrator, ‘When I came to write Atonement, my father’s stories, with automatic ease, dictated the structure.’\footnote{Ibid.} If McEwan does not acknowledge plagiarism, he certainly does suggest that the writer legitimately and necessarily relegates his own voice for ones better placed to tell the story. Margaronis also suggests in relation to McEwan’s defence that ‘one could read this piece of writing (and, by extension, the novel) as an attempt at another atonement: McEwan’s own, for
not having lived through the war with his father's generation.'\(^82\) This argument raises an important consideration in understanding the complex relationship between the historical fiction writer and the historical event they are describing. Does feeling a personal connection to the event, period, or people determine the level of the author’s anxiety of authenticity? Does it change the writer’s relationship with their source material?

In light of Margaronis’s suggestion, I contemplated the impact of my own anxiety of authenticity. Did I share McEwan's need to make atonement for not partaking of past suffering? In the process of writing I grappled with the tension between documented truth and the demands of art. The emotional response triggered by McEwan's familial ties is comparable to the responsibility I felt as a gay man towards the gay men that had lived through the criminalisation of homosexuality. This responsibility sent me back to the archives where I spent months attempting to form a deep understanding of these experiences. For this reason, my extensive archival research often had an immobilising effect upon my writing as I searched, often in vain, for testimonies that could support the characters and events that I was writing about. Consequently I shifted my focus to fictional protagonists rather than exclusively writing about the men documented as being associated with Cleveland Street. Pat Barker similarly chose to position the fictional protagonist Billy Prior at the centre of her own meticulously researched ‘Regeneration’ trilogy. Barker writes, ‘you have to treat historical characters with great respect. You take on the obligations of a historian. But I found it liberating to invent around them without changing anything about them or who they were.’\(^83\) Through Prior, Barker is able to explore the themes that are most interesting to her without compromising the authenticity with which she renders the real-life personalities that populate the pages. For my narrative to occupy the spaces I wanted to occupy and to dramatise the moments in history I wanted to dramatise, I required protagonists that I could move around without being inhibited by my own deference to authenticity. The movements and behaviour of my factual characters are largely

---

\(^{82}\) Margaronis, ‘Anxiety of Authenticity’, 145.

conditioned by what I know from the historical record. My fictional protagonists and other fictional characters can be present at any scene in which I wish to include them and also do not rely on the same level of intertextuality in order to exist.

When it came to my portrayal of such well-documented real-life personalities as Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Charles Dilke, or Henry Labouchere, I have lifted a good deal of dialogue straight from the historical record.84 This was out of a desire to render as faithfully as possible the political context of my novel since politics largely drives the plot and the motivations of my central characters. Similarly to McEwan, this reliance on records is at the expense of my creative autonomy, but I do allow myself the flexibility described by Hilary Mantel in her author's note for A Place of Greater Safety, her novel about the French Revolution. Mantel says, 'I have been guided by a belief that what goes on to the record is often tried out earlier, off the record.85 This is another instance of Mantel employing the novelist's arithmetic discussed in relation to Wolf Hall. This isn't merely an act of historical ventriloquism; we know that these words were spoken and representative of the thinking of these historical persons. What is being invented or re-invented is the context in which the words were said. This approach is an interesting hybrid of fiction and documentary realism. Examples of where I have quoted directly from the historical record but also changed the context can be found in my depiction of Henry Labouchere.

Labouchere was one of my greatest challenges in dramatizing a real-life personality. He was a complex and controversial political figure. He was a Home Ruler and a republican. He opposed imperialism and social inequality with the same vigour with which he opposed homosexuality.86 By today's standards he is both progressive and regressive. Labouchere revealed the strength of his

84 My best biographical sources for the life of Sir Charles Dilke were Roy Jenkins, Sir Charles Dilke, A Victorian Tragedy (London: Collins, 1958); also David Nicholls: The Lost Prime Minister: A Life of Sir Charles Dilke (London: Hambledon Continuum)
hostility to homosexuality in the aftermath of the Wilde trials, writing in his periodical, Truth:

There is no question that matter had reached a pass in London, which rendered it necessary for the law to be put in operation, unless it was to be treated as a dead letter [...] in view of the mischief that such a man does, the sentence he has received compares but lightly with those almost every day awarded for infinitely less pernicious crimes. The spectacle, however, of his [Wilde's] shame and degradation, and of the after ruin which has overtaken him, when at the zenith of his fame and popularity, should at least serve as a wholesome warning to others of the same class and still remain at large.87

Part of this editorial is spoken as dialogue within my novel although the Wilde trials happened outside the span of my novel's timeframe. I resolved that what Labouchere said in relation to Wilde would echo what he thought of the Cleveland Street scandal and all other incidents of homosexuality that came to his attention. In one scene I have him explain to his dinner guests that his original intention was that the maximum prison sentence for the Criminal Law Amendment Act should be as much as seven years. This instance of dialogue was produced almost verbatim from the same editorial in Truth:

As I had drafted it the maximum sentence was seven years. The then Home Secretary and Attorney General, both most experienced men, however suggested to me that in such cases convictions are always difficult and that it would be better were the maximum to be two years. Hence the insufficiency of the severest sentence that the law allows.88

Quoting dialogue directly from historical sources could be regarded as reducing the presence of the author in the text; it may invite criticisms similar in nature to those made to McEwan, but my decision is motivated once again by my anxiety of authenticity. By quoting Labouchere's anti-gay rhetoric direct from the historical record my portrayal is safe from accusations of invention. But it is vulnerable to suggestions of using historical material selectively. It could be

87 From Truth as quoted in 'Oscar Wilde.' Western Mail [Cardiff, Wales] May 31 1895,
88 'Oscar Wilde.' Western Mail [Cardiff, Wales], May 31, 1895.
argued that my portrayal of Labouchere suffers from a degree of myopia. Another characterisation of him might focus on the aspects of his career that would persuade the reader that he was a progressive figure deeply motivated by concern for those less fortunate. But for the purposes of a narrative written to resonate with a readership sympathetic to the experience of same-sex desire, other aspects of his career are of secondary importance. This example illustrates the temporal tensions between the historical novel and the period it is describing. Historical personalities are being reinvented out of the context of their own time for a readership that exists in another period, informed not only by different values but also by the trajectory of history since that has informed attitudes and outlooks. Hindsight is an unavoidable impediment to reinventing historical figures without an element of bias. Hilary Mantel emphasises that this is the reason behind her use of the present tense in her historical fiction as it forbids hindsight and she can reduce the distance between herself and history.

Natasha Alden observes how Pat Barker is also somewhat selective in how she employs sources to recreate historical figures in the Regeneration trilogy. She observes with regard to the portrayal of Dr William Rivers:

As unpicking Barker’s palimpsest of historical material and fictional interventions shows, the ethics of her representation of the past are complex, walking a sometimes ambiguous line between not trespassing on an individual’s privacy, and using facets of their lives to explore issues which interest her ...

Alden acknowledges Barker’s respect for archival material but at the same time recognises an inconsistency in how she engages with it. Alden continues: ‘her depiction of Rivers is focused on the aspects of his life that have particular contemporary resonance, in a way that allows the reader to gain some sense of what a man in his position might have experienced in 1917–18, emotionally and politically.’

Alden recognises the temporal tensions inherent to reinventing a historical personality for a contemporary readership and how the need to

---

89 Mantel ‘The Novelist’s Arithmetic’, 5.
91 Ibid., 196.
connect to modern sensibilities can shape the characterisation. My novel is
aimed at a readership interested in the experience of being homosexual in the
late-Victorian era therefore my characterisation of Labouchere foregrounds his
hostility towards sex between men rather than his campaigns against social
inequality. My readership would also evaluate Labouchere in the context of their
own time, rather than his, problematizing further any claims my novel has to
achieving an authentic understanding of the past.

The Eye in the Door

Chief among my literary paradigms for queering the national narrative is Pat
Barker’s The Eye in the Door (1993). The Eye in the Door is the second novel in
the Regeneration trilogy. It opens in the April of 1918, and although Barker’s
narrative is told mostly from the perspective of her fictional protagonist, Billy
Prior, the novel is immersed in the reality of what was happening at the time. In
the early part of 1918, the British army and its allies were suffering enormous
losses, morale was at its lowest and society was looking for a scapegoat. A
climate of intense homophobia grew up around the Pemberton Billing libel trial.
The Pemberton Billing trial came about after an article appeared in Pemberton
Billing’s far-right nationalist periodical, The Vigilante, which blamed the British
defeat upon homosexuals in high positions that were being blackmailed by the
Germans. The article claimed that the enemy had in their possession a notebook
that contained the names of 47,000 men and women who indulged in
homosexual practices. This ‘revelation’ coincided with a private revival of
Oscar Wilde’s Salome and another article appeared under the headline ‘Cult of
the Clitorises,’ which advised that the list of audience members would reveal the
identities of a number of the 47,000. The article inculpated the actress Maul
Allen who was playing the title role of Salome. Allen sued Pemberton Billing for

92 Hoare, Wilde’s Last Stand, 41.
93 Ibid., 1.
94 Ibid., 91
libel and his trial at the Old Bailey attracted enormous public interest.\textsuperscript{95} Because of the attention focused on the revival of Wilde's play and the fact that one of Pemberton Billing's witnesses was none other than Wilde's former lover Lord Alfred Douglas\textsuperscript{96} the spectre of the most famous of all Victorian homosexuals loomed large over the trial proceedings. Wilde died in 1900 but his name once again became synonymous with depravity and contamination.

In her fictional recreation of this period, Barker accentuates the associations with Wilde through her inclusion of real-life personalities who were part of his circle, including his close friend and literary executor, Robbie Ross. Among her fictional creations is Charles Manning, a high-ranking British officer with homosexual leanings. The novel opens with a casual, cross-class sexual encounter between Manning and Billy Prior.\textsuperscript{97} It emerges that Manning is a close friend of Robbie Ross. By invoking the spirit of Wilde through the Ross connection, Barker underpins her recreation of early twentieth century homosexual subculture with the threat of prosecution and disgrace. In 1918, Wilde had become a cautionary tale that permeated the conscience of men who have sex with other men, particularly in the early twentieth century when he remained very much within living memory, as was demonstrated by the constant evocation of his memory throughout the Pemberton Billing trial.

Despite engaging with Wilde's spectre so overtly, Barker is not employing Wilde as convenient shorthand for Edwardian homosexual identity: throughout the novel she presents a range of complex homosexual identities that challenge the Wildean archetype and by extension the reader's assumptions about homosexuality during this period. With the exception of Robbie Ross, none of the men who have sex with other men do so exclusively. Billy Prior is energetically bisexual and the novel opens with him attempting to seduce a young woman\textsuperscript{98}; it is only her eventual rejection of his advances that leads him into a sexual encounter with Manning. Prior fits perfectly into the type of homosexual identity described by Houlbrook, 'a working-class man who engaged in homosex

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 95.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 152-3. Douglas actually used this platform as an opportunity to attack Wilde calling him 'the greatest force for evil that has appeared in Europe for the last 150 years.'
  \item \textsuperscript{97} Pat Barker, \textit{The Eye in the Door}, (London: Penguin, 2008) 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 8-9.
\end{itemize}
ongoing emotional relationships with other men, at the same time as with women, and without considering himself – or being considered by other men – to be anything other than “normal.” 99 Nowhere in the novel does Prior really think about his sexual tastes in the context of preference or as a defining characteristic. Contemporary readers of the novel seeking a reflection of the binary sexual identities understood today would have their preconceptions challenged.

Through Prior and Manning, Barker also emphasises the significance of class in same-sex encounters of this period. Manning is an officer and a gentleman, and Prior, although he is also an officer, he is a non-commissioned officer from a working class background. Barker writes, ‘He [Prior] was beginning to suspect that Manning might be one of those who cannot – simply cannot – let go sexually with a social equal.’ 100 Barker portrays a version of same-sex desire that is inextricable from social difference. To combat Manning’s sexual reticence, Prior ‘transformed himself into the sort of working class boy Manning would think it was all right to fuck.’ 101 Prior also roughens his accent to complete the effect but is insulted when Manning takes him up to the servants’ quarters for their encounter. He is distracted by two housemaids’ uniforms hanging up, ‘looking almost like the housemaids themselves.’ 102 The significance of this image is heightened when we learn that Prior’s mother was in domestic service.

In the context of the early twentieth century, Manning and Prior represent the most dissonant and disturbing of homosexual identities. Their status as military men is inscribed with codes of masculinity and heroism, particularly during wartime. This is combined with the outward appearance of resolute heterosexuality: Manning is married (Prior discovers a photograph of his wife and two sons hidden beneath the folds of a dustsheet in Manning’s home) and Prior likes to pick up girls. 103 These attributes serve to identify them as ‘normal men’ that strengthen rather than disrupt the nation. By presenting their sexual interest in other men as part of a wider, less defined sexuality and by

99 Houlbrook, Queer London, 7.
100 Barker, Eye in the Door, 10.
101 Ibid., 11.
102 Ibid., 12.
103 Ibid., 10
portraying aspects of their personalities that conform to more traditional versions of masculinity, Barker exposes the myth of the homosexual ‘type’, and offers gay identities at odds with how history remembers homosexuality. Barker is queering the national narrative through subverting how the past has survived in public memory. The strong presence of Wilde in the novel serves as an archetype that Barker proceeds to deconstruct. She offers the reader alternative homosexual identities to Wilde and by doing so she increases the potential for discovering precedent in the past.

By widening the possibility of precedent in the context of the First World War, Barker also reclaims the conflict for homosexual men who have never seen it as belonging to their own wider historical narrative. The reaction to the Pemberton Billing trial demonstrates why the contribution of gay men to the war has been written out of history: the homosexual ‘other’ was perceived as weakening rather than solidifying to the imperilled national identity. Houlbrook has discussed this threat in the context of guardsman prostitutes in the first half of the twentieth century: ‘to engage in homosex while wearing “his majesty’s uniform” was to degrade the individual, his regiment, and Britain itself. It was to erode the masculine qualities upon which Britain’s strength depended.’

Houlbrook goes on to argue in relation to the cultural anxieties that arose around soldier prostitutes,

Facing these anxieties, many commentators simply denied the actuality of the guardsman’s practices. His iconic status made it inconceivable that the soldier-hero could have homosex … in striving to maintain the guardsman’s status as soldier-hero, his sexed body was inscribed within a contradictory set of silences and evasions. Never denying the actuality of these encounters, defensive dominant narratives constructed the guardsman as an innocent abroad in the city and vulnerable to the temptations placed before him.

It is exactly these ‘defensive dominant narratives’ that have served to make the national narrative favour heterosexuality and minimise non-hetero sexualities. But obscured examples show us again and again that complex sexualities have

---

104 Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 228.
105 Ibid., 231.
been found in the front lines of history and conflict. One of Robert Aldrich’s case studies in *Colonialism and Homosexuality* is Hector Macdonald whom he describes as a ‘paragon of military courage and imperial loyalty’. Macdonald helped conquer the Sudan in 1898 and was granted the rank of Colonel in the Highlands regiment. He was commanding the British army in Ceylon when he was recalled to London where he was to be charged with sexual misconduct with boys in a train carriage. Macdonald did not return to England; instead he shot himself in a hotel room in Paris. Following his suicide, a defensive dominant narrative seems to have been perpetuated: ‘not misconduct, but simply being brought under suspicion, had led Macdonald to take his own life [...] An unofficial commission set up after his death nevertheless seems to have cleared Macdonald of any impropriety.’

The novelist Jake Arnott has recently made Macdonald the subject of his historical fiction, *The Devil’s Paintbrush*. Arnott does not leave the reader in any doubt of Macdonald’s homosexual proclivities, but notes the incompatibility of imperial strength with homosexual identity. One passage in particular associates Macdonald’s desires with imperial decline:

> On my way back I visited Anuradhapura, the ruins of an ancient city in the jungle, which had once been vast and populous, but is now desolate and choked with vines. Overgrown shrines, scores of columns, statues, domed dagobas, fragments of palaces, labyrinths hidden in a thick tangle. It made me imagine London as a wilderness with St Paul’s Cathedral and the Albert Memorial merely confused heaps of grassy stone. I felt as if I had been asleep for centuries and had to returned to witness our long dead Empire.

Macdonald’s vision of a decimated London, with the symbols of imperialism reduced to rubble recalls Houlbrook’s suggestion that in the context of national identity, ‘the queer became a near-apocalyptic threat.’ Only through abstaining from his true nature can Macdonald embody one of the Empire’s

---

106 Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 187.
107 Ibid., 187-188.
108 Ibid., 189
110 Ibid., 259.
heroes: ‘He thought of all the lads he had loved and lost ... through decades of cruel and relentless guilt, love's loss had been Empire's gain.’

Arnott and Barker are examples of two contemporary writers who are queering the national narrative by exploring homosexual identities in the retellings of great lives and events. But because so much has not survived in the dominant narrative we can never properly measure the contribution of homosexual men to the national narrative. In *The Eye of the Door* there is a scene in which Billy Prior observes Manning waiting for a lift with Winston Churchill. Churchill is one of the most iconic figures of the twentieth century and his significance is embedded in the national narrative. But even by placing fictional characters next to historic leaders, by the very act of putting Manning on a pavement with Winston Churchill, there is shared ownership of history by the non-hetero community and the suggestion that gay men were also actively engaged with the pivots upon which the national narrative turned.

---

Chapter Two

Interventions in Silence

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between my novel and its historical sources. I will provide a case study of how a creative rather than a critical approach to historical material can tease out the muted experiences of marginalised characters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, an absence of sources can present both a problem and an opportunity to writers of historical fiction who are bound by a different set of conventions to the critical historian. Natasha Alden describes Pat Barker’s approach to sources as having a duty to try to be “accurate”, or to use her word, “fair”, where historical evidence exists.\textsuperscript{114} She also recognizes, and exploits, the novelist’s ability to project into ‘blank’ areas, where evidence does not exist, sewing sources together but extrapolating from them.\textsuperscript{115}

Opportunities to exploit blank areas are of course richest in lives that have been less well documented. My novel encompasses some of the most significant figures in public life at the end of the nineteenth century with Gladstone, Sir Charles Dilke, and Charles Stewart Parnell crossing its canvas. But it also engages with a subculture of people that have been all but written out of history: the Victorian male prostitute has left very little in the way of testimony and the

\textsuperscript{114} Alden, ‘Re-writing Rivers,’ 195
\textsuperscript{115} ibid., 195
defensive dominant narrative has not valued his story. In this chapter I explore what it is to make interventions into the lives of characters whom little is known about. Where there are sources I examine their usefulness in terms of where they come from, particularly if they are public records relating to the individual’s criminality. I present three case studies of the varieties of male prostitute that are encountered within my novel: the casual prostitute as typified by the messenger boys who worked at the Cleveland Street brothel; the hybrid of the prostitute and extortionist represented by George Osborn; and the full-time professional prostitute, John Saul. I will also examine how the creative writer employs the balance of evidence in inferring what the academic world is still debating: just how ubiquitous was knowledge of homosexuality and how widely was it spoken about? I open with a case study of the Wilde trials which provide an insight into how Cleveland Street was discussed in the immediate aftermath. This example demonstrates the impact the Cleveland Street had on the language used to describe both sex between men and homosexual identities.

Muted References

The first incarnation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in Lippincott’s Monthly magazine in June 1890, within a year of the discovery of the Cleveland Street brothel and when the scandal was still fresh in the minds of the reading public. One critic writing for the *Scots Observer* found correlation between the themes of Wilde’s narrative and the recent national embarrassment:

> The story deals with matters only fitted to the Criminal Investigation Department. If Mr Wilde can write for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph boys, the sooner he takes to tailoring (or some other decent trade) the better for his own reputation and the public morals.

116 John Saul, a full-time professional renter is credited as the narrator of the sexual escapades in the 1881 pornographic novel, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*. See this version *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, (London: The Olympia Press, 2006).


118 Ibid., x.
There can be no mistaking this critic’s allusion since he identifies the main inculpates in the scandal: the telegraph boys that were found prostituting themselves and their illustrious clients, among them Lord Arthur Somerset currently still a fugitive living out of reach of British justice. The inference is pronounced: this was a transgressive novel that engaged with that most taboo of subjects, same-sex desire and sodomy.

It is not hard to find references to Cleveland Street in the original Lippincott version of Dorian Gray. Basil Hallward chastises Dorian for his increasing debauchery:

‘Why is your friendship so fatal to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton who had to leave England with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent’s only son and his career [... ] What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got know? What gentleman would associate with him?’\(^{119}\)

The ambiguity over why Dorian’s friendship is so fatal to young men provides a space for interpretation, which for a Victorian readership would have been informed by recent events. Basil’s speech with its comments on ‘tarnished names’ and persons ‘no gentlemen would associate with’ are overt references to Cleveland Street. Lord Arthur Somerset becomes Sir Henry Ashton who is forced to leave England. The Duke of Perth could be a reference to the Earl of Euston (heir to the Duke of Grafton) who also had to clear his name when he was identified by several of the prostitutes as a visitor to the brothel.\(^{120}\) When The Picture of Dorian Gray was published in book form the following year, the ambiguity of this passage had gone. Wilde, probably in response to the hostility of some commentaries, provides concrete and overtly heterosexual justifications for the disgrace of his friends: ‘If Kent’s silly son takes his wife from the streets


\(^{120}\) Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 106.
then what is that to me? If Adrian Singleton writes his friend’s name across a bill, am I his keeper?’ 121

‘I deny the expression purged’

In Wilde’s infamous libel suit against the Marquis of Queensberry, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was actually used by Queensberry’s defence to prove Queensberry’s plea of justification. 122 Queensberry’s defence, Sir Edward Carson had undertaken his own close reading of the magazine and book versions of the novel and suggested that the book version was ‘modified and purged a good deal.’ 123 Wilde protested: ‘I deny the expression purged.’ 124 However it is also evident from investigations of the original manuscript that Wilde’s editor had already intervened to ‘purge’ some of the suggestive content. When Basil Hallward asked Dorian ‘What about your country house, and the life that is led there?’ Wilde had originally followed this line with: ‘It is quite sufficient of a young man to say that he goes to stay at Selby Royal, for people to sneer and titter;’ but the editor deleted the line in the typescript 125 (248). The connotations of visiting Selby Royal no doubt resembled those of visiting Cleveland Street. The Cleveland Street scandal had provided a language and set of behaviours denoting homosexuality, which Wilde employed in the context of his novel to suggest aspect of Dorian Gray’s nature. But Cleveland Street was too well known for his code not to be understood. Integrating narrative elements of Cleveland Street was enough to discredit his book in open court and consequently tarnish him as sharing in the same perversions that sent Lord Arthur Somerset into permanent

121 Ibid., 144.
122 In 1895, Oscar Wilde prosecuted the Marquis of Queensberry for libel when Queensberry left a calling card for Wilde at Wilde’s club with the words ‘To Oscar Wilding posing sodomite. Wilde brought a plea of justification. A full transcript of the trial with notes by Wilde’s grandson Merlin Holland can be read in *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2004).
124 Ibid., 86.
exile. But outside the courtroom, just how much a part of common discourse was the subject of sex between men?

The silence surrounding the existence and prevalence of homosexuality is a subject I wished to interrogate in order to accurately reflect the way same-sex desire was understood and discussed or not discussed in late-Victorian society. One of the most subjective elements of recreating this period lay in portraying how homosexual behaviour was understood and talked about across social demographics. I was also interested in whether gender, age, or social class were determining factors in the possession of knowledge. The sparseness of trial transcripts and the euphemisms employed by the press demonstrate the state’s determination to police knowledge. In order to grasp how successful this policing was I made several case studies which I have summarised below. These case studies discuss how knowledge could be influenced by factors such as class and gender.

‘You cannot have been in workshops without knowing what that [sodomy] means,’ said Dr Henry Juler to Horatio Cracknell, when Cracknell accused Juler of taking liberties with him, but seemed unable to define exactly what those liberties were.¹²⁶ This case reveals a general assumption that young working class boys in homosocial blue-collar working environments such as factories and workshops (Cracknell worked as a plumber and glazier), were expected to know that men did have sex with other men. None of the messenger boys inculpated in Cleveland Street mention in their statements that they were ignorant of homosexual practices before their basement encounters. What Horatio Cracknell knew, even if he didn’t fully comprehend the meaning of sodomy, was that accusations of sex-between men were dangerous and potentially empowering to the accuser.

What was deemed acceptable knowledge for working-class male youths was not appropriate for aristocratic young ladies. Lady Henry Somerset was convinced that her husband was keeping a rather extravagant mistress but was

shocked to discover that he was having sexual relations with her male cousin. She discovered this when her maid found incriminating letters in Lord Henry's writing desk. 'Milady if you had not been so young you would have known what this was long ago,' was the maid's sage response indicating that as a working-class woman of a certain age she was informed enough to be able to identify her master's sexual proclivities. The state was assertive in its attempt to screen women from knowledge of homosexuality. The Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons was cleared before the heated debate on the Cleveland Street investigation. The one woman in court during the trial of Veck and Newlove was ordered to leave. But women are found in records of this period that relate to male homosexuality, usually as informers but also as enablers as we will see in my case study of George Osborn below. Osborn's mother who was a laundress and part-time procuress, John Saul, one of the Cleveland Street prostitutes, named one Emily Barker in his statement to Inspector Abberline:

Emily Barker is a prostitute, whose address I can find who might have lived with Hammond for 3 or 4 years. She used to write all his correspondence, as he was a very bad scholar. She can give the names of all the gentlemen who used the house, as she used to write them and make appointments for their visits.

These cases reveal that not only were women aware that sexual behaviours between men existed, but they even employed that knowledge towards financial gain and opportunities for exploitation. I have reflected these discoveries in my story world and narrative by making Mrs Osborn a prominent character that blackmails my protagonist Jack Worsley. I have also included a scene where the upper class Kate Worsley stuns the assembly of gentlemen by admitting to having heard about the Cleveland Street Scandal.

As outlined in my introduction, recognising homosexual identities in late-Victorian England is complicated by the presence of men who had sex with other

---

128 Ibid., 50.
129 'The Government and Mr. Labouchere.' *Pall Mall Gazette* [London], Mar 1 1890.
130 Hyde, 49.
131 Statement of John Saul, Aug 10 1889, DPP 1/95/4/2, National Archives, Kew.
132 Ibid.
men because of factors other than desire or romantic attachment. Men had sex with other men for financial reward, whether it was merely accepting payment for sexual acts or committing or promising sexual acts with a view to blackmail. Renters and extortionists fascinated Oscar Wilde; he was deeply curious about their motivations and feelings towards their unusual trade. He once asked the notorious blackmailer Robert Clibborn: ‘Bob, what I want to know is, did you ever love any boy for his own sake?’ Clibborn replied, ‘No, Oscar, I can’t say I ever did.’ 133(454). I was similarly fascinated by this subculture of men that have left so little to the historical record to aid us in understanding their lives. The three case studies below explore how I engaged with surviving historical records in order to depict these elusive figures.

The Extortionist

As has been observed elsewhere, blackmail was a prevalent threat to men who indulged in sexual encounters with other men. The laws legislating against homosexuality were called ‘the blackmailer’s charter’ and with strong justification. 134 The threat of criminal prosecution and social disgrace created a thriving trade in extortion with men often operating in gangs. An essential element of these gangs was the decoy. There was a particularly indeterminate boundary between the male prostitute and the extortionist. They were often one and the same. 135 Charles Hammond, the Cleveland Street brothel keeper, succeeded in extorting large sums of money from Lord Arthur Somerset following the discovery of the brothel. 136

Within the body of my novel I wanted to describe the threat of extortion but while my novel was about the victims I was also interested in the decoy as a character. He was both inside and outside the homosexual subculture. My research into the careers of extortionists operating in the 1880s and 1890s showed me that the courts exhibited little mercy and that sentences were severe.

133 Ellman, Oscar Wilde, 454.
134 McKenna, The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde, 243.
135 Ibid., 243.
136 Charles Hammond demanded £800 in order to begin a new life in America see Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 77.
One case in the Old Bailey records stood out to me specifically: that of 17-year-old George Osborn. He was prosecuted by twenty-two year-old William Marling, a gentleman of no profession. Every newspaper account of the case gave Marling’s age, his income of between 1 and 2,000 pounds a year, and his address in Jermyn Street. This was a code comprehensible to all readers that positioned Marling and Osborn in the context of the social fabric of the day. It was described how Marling had spent the night at the theatre, dined with a friend, and then visited his club, before returning to Jermyn Street via Albemarle Street. He was moving within the designated spaces of the bachelor gentleman of means. No trace of Dorian Gray about him. The social transgression belonged to Osborn who certainly had no business on Jermyn Street at such an hour.

In Marling’s version, Osborn had approached him and asked to be taken upstairs for a drink, all the public houses having already closed. For some reason that he never explained, Marling took Osborn upstairs and gave him brandy and water. Marling alleged that when he asked Osborn to leave, Osborn threatened to complain that he had taken obscene liberties with him unless Marling gave him ten pounds to buy his silence. There is something extraordinary in Marling’s way of recounting the episode; it is almost as if he had just read Robert Louis Stevenson’s recently published *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In his words:

‘there were two or three gas lights in the street but none immediately near ... I preceded him upstairs — there was a gas in the corridor, and when I faced round I was able to see his face fairly distinctly — I noticed a peculiar movement in it; he bit his lips rather corner-ways, and I noticed that peculiarity about him on Monday when he was arrested’.

Marling describes Osborn in the language of the gothic, his focus on the absence of street lighting is evocative of darkness and criminality, while Osborn is rendered almost vampire like through his tendency to bite his own lips.

---

139 Trial of George Osborn, OBP.
140 Ibid.
What allegedly followed also follows the pattern of gothic sensation. Marling was unable to provide the cash that Osborn demanded so instead Osborn demanded that he try on one of Marling’s suits to see if any of them fit. This demand threatened a confusion of their separate identities and further undermined class boundaries. The suits do not fit so Osborn takes other personal property in the form of a watch and chain, a pencil case and a ring, leaving at two in the morning. As menacing as Osborn’s behavior undoubtedly was, there remains some ambiguity around Marling’s behavior. What encouraged him to utterly abandon the social conventions of the day and take a working class lad up to his room to give him brandy? In his summing up the magistrate said,

there was no doubt that the prosecutor had acted very indiscreetly in listening to a stranger and taking him to his chambers to give him a drink, but he [Marling] appeared to have given his evidence very clearly and distinctly and like a gentleman, and the only question for the jury was whether the specific charge against the prisoner had been established by the evidence.142

The jury found Osborn guilty. In passing sentence, Mr Justice Day added his own gothic rhetoric stating that he quite believed the statement by the police that the prisoner was one of a gang of ruffians who haunted the streets (my emphasis), and who made a living by the practice of infamous crimes and by extorting money. He added that he was determined to stamp this practice out and sentenced the prisoner to penal servitude for the course of his natural life.143 While the severity of Osborn’s sentence suggests a reassuring lack of tolerance for the crime of extortion and a desire for the law to protect its victims, in view of Osborn’s youth it was regarded by some as objectionable and the Home Secretary was to review the case a number of times over the coming years, meanwhile Osborn spent his youth in prison.144

The trial and the newspaper reportage with their evident class bias characterized Osborn as a villain, but I wondered if his relationship with the homosexual subculture might be rather more complicated. A collection of files at

---

141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 'The Case of George Osborn', HO 144/173/A43930, The National Archives, Kew.
the National Archives at Kew adds several layers to this story. The files pertain to Osborn’s prison career and the debate about his life sentence. A number of connected and unconnected parties voiced their concern and wrote to the Home Secretary Henry Matthews imploring him to reduce Osborn’s sentence. His father wrote insisting that his son was ‘led into the crime by bad companions older than himself’ and lamented that the boy has been punished as if he was a murderer. James Munro, then Assistant Commissioner of Police, advised the Home Secretary that ‘the sentence is no doubt very heavy but by a criminal of such depraved character amply deserved. Osborn is a most dangerous criminal, and his permanent seclusion is a benefit to the public.’

The Home Office file also presents some background on the bad companions alluded to by Osborn’s father. When he was only 14 or 15 he became involved with a particularly notorious gang led by a man named Walter Glynn. Glynn used young boys as decoys to entrap men looking for sexual encounters. Glynn was particularly aggressive in his attempts at extortion, and when his victims eluded him he thought nothing of harassing and threatening their relatives. He was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1884. Several other gang members were sentenced with him, including a young decoy that got 15 years.

Another particularly illuminating document in the same file is a statement from a policeman who claimed to have been watching young George Osborn for over three years. He claimed to know something of his family. With regard to Osborn’s mother, he said that she was employed as a laundry woman at St Martin’s Public Baths, and that she was fully aware that her son was practising these offences and she has been for years suspected of inducing men to visit houses for the purpose of committing these acts of indecency.

---

145 ‘The Case of George Osborn’ (HO 144/173/A43930), at the National Archives in Kew cover a period of 17 years from Osborn’s arrest, through several petitions to reduce his sentence, his release in 1893, and a report from 1903 that he was a reformed character married with a child and working for the Paddington Vestry.
148 Ibid.
149 Police correspondence, ‘The Case of George Osborn,’ HO 144/173/A43930), National Archives, Kew.
raises the possibility of child abuse and suggests that Osborn grew up in proximity to the culture of male prostitution with his own mother potentially a procuress. The campaign for mitigation of his prison sentence was successful and after serving seven years he was released on probation. The probation period finally came to an end eight years later; by this time it was reported that he was leading a most respectable life, had been employed for years as a gardener by the Paddington Vestry, and was married with a child with no suggestion of taking up with his former companions.150

The case study of George Osborn in addition to being an engaging story, also reveals a great deal not just about the opportunities for exploitation of men who had sex with other men but also about the exploitation of youths within blackmailing gangs. From the Home Office files, George Osborn looks less like a villain than a victim of child abuse with his own mother complicit in his exploitation. His experiences remind us of the neglected children we frequently encounter in Dickens, described by the lawyer Jaggers in Great Expectations as ‘qualified in all ways for the hangman’.151 My research opens up deep moral complexities within the world I am dramatising. As much as my narrative wishes to address the evils of blackmailing culture as a threat to homosexual men of the period, within the blackmailing gangs themselves there is another layer of exploitation. There is a duality in the tragedy of the homosexual man who falls foul of the extortionist, but also of the young decoy that has been brought up to criminal enterprises, is used for sexual gratification by men of superior position within the social hierarchy, and ultimately ends up with a life sentence. It has no less pathos or tragedy than Tess of the D’Urbervilles.

The archival material presents only a partial history of George Osborn. It is incomplete in that there is nothing in his own hand or any transcript of his words. We do not know what his personal attitude was to his trade as either prostitute or blackmailer, whether either profession informed any kind of homosexual identity, or whether he regarded himself as anything else other than ‘normal’. As a fiction writer, I can go further than the historian in developing a

151 Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, (London: Oxford University Press,) 408.
characterisation drawn from supposition. The files are the foundation of my educated guesswork. George Osborn becomes a character in my novel (rechristened Tom to differentiate him from my protagonist Lord George Caversham) and he is depicted as less of a villain and more of a victim of a mercenary mother. It is an interpretation dependent upon a subjective reading of the available evidence – that he was the child of a procuress of male prostitutes and that after he was released from prison he went on to live a respectable life and did not return to his criminal confederates. His presence within the novel serves to make the protagonist Jack a morally ambiguous character. Jack as a man who has sex with other men is vulnerable to persecution by blackmailers but he has enjoyed intimacy with the young Osborn and in the aftermath of Osborn’s imprisonment questions his own complicity in corrupting the boy. This goes some way to destabilising the victim/villain dichotomy in a novel that seeks to probe the deep moral complexities of the late-Victorian homosexual underworld.

The Casual Prostitute

Dramatising the Cleveland Street scandal for a modern readership necessitates engaging with deep moral ambiguity with characters that defy classification as hero, innocent, or victim. Labouchere’s Amendment that criminalised homosexuality is a national embarrassment that caused decades of destruction and misery, but his attack on the Government regarding Cleveland Street was based largely around the unequal distribution of the law since none of the high-profile clients had been arrested and two low-class male prostitutes were the only inmates of number 19 that had been tried and imprisoned.152 While Lord Arthur Somerset was able to escape England before he was arrested; and while no other legal action was brought against any of the other Cleveland Street clients; the Post Office employees who also served as part-time male prostitutes were all dismissed from the postal service in the December of 1889.153 It must have been a harsh winter for unemployed messengers who had lost their

152 'The Government and Mr. Labouchere, Pall Mall Gazette [London], Mar 1 1890.
153 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 168
characters over such a scandal. So pathetic was their situation that a police constable working on the investigation that had originally felt quite bitter towards them risked the wrath of his superiors by trying to help them. The post office boys were presented by Labouchere and most of the radical press as victims of aristocratic defilement. However, it is evident from the boys’ testimonies that they were already engaging in sexual practices together on the Post Office premises before any of them visited Cleveland Street.

Similarly to George Osborn, it is difficult to know what the attitude of the boys was towards their secondary trade. All that is bequeathed to the historian or the fiction writer are the sworn depositions taken by the police on the 6th July 1889. There are statements for the messenger boys: George Wright, Charles Thickbroom, and Charles Swinscow. The statements are frustratingly limited in terms of providing any insight into the boys’ characters and emotional responses; they merely follow a pattern of official inquiry. Each of the boys describes how they were introduced into the house at 19 Cleveland Street, the practices they engaged in, what they were paid, the frequency of their visits, and also, rather tellingly, whether they were wearing the Post Office uniform at the time they were engaging in sexual practices. The significance placed upon the uniform of the messenger boys shares the same national and cultural anxieties discussed in relation to the guardsman’s uniform by Matt Houlbrook: ‘it was the guardsman’s uniform that symbolized his iconic masculine status and the national traditions it embodied.’ The uniform of the General Post Office, like that of the Guardsman, was Her Majesty’s uniform. It was an emblem of Queen and Empire and nothing could possible denigrate it more than for it to be worn during the commissioning of obscene acts.

Charles Swinscow’s account of how he came to be brought to 19 Cleveland Street is representative of the experiences of all the boys questioned:

---

154 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 27
155 Statements of Wright, Swinsow, and Thickbroom, 6 July 1889, DPP 1/95/3, National Archives, Kew.
156 Ibid.
157 Houlbrook, Queer London, 228.
About last Christmas and while I was a Telegraph Messenger I made the acquaintance of a boy named Newlove who was then a boy messenger in the Secretary's office and is now a 3rd class clerk. Soon after I got to know him he asked me to go into the lavatory at the basement of the Post Office building. We went into one water closet and shut the door and we behaved indecently together. We did this on other occasions afterwards. In about a week's time Newlove said as near as I can recollect 'Will you go to a house where you'll go to bed with gentlemen, you'll get four shillings each time?' I said at first 'it wouldn't do' but he persuaded me at last and I went with him to 19 Cleveland Street near the Middlesex hospital.¹⁵⁸

One of the most interesting details common to all three statements is that although the boys were all lured to Cleveland Street by Henry Newlove with the promise of four shillings per encounter, each boy had previously engaged in sexual encounters with Newlove in the Post Office basement for which no cash reward was received. Swinscow’s admission that ‘We did this on other occasions after’, is repeated by Wright:

On one or two occasions certainly more than once, Newlove put his person into me, that is to say behind only a little way and something came from him ... It is true what Newlove has just said in my presence that I also, on one occasion at least put my person into his hinderparts. I could not get it in though I tried and emitted. I was not in uniform except in my trousers.¹⁵⁹

These water closet assignations appear to have been engaged in for personal gratification and were independent of the Cleveland Street brothel. Even if it was Newlove’s intent to initiate the boys into sexual practices with the purpose of recruiting them as prostitutes, there is nothing to suggest coercion, particularly as they continued to have sexual relations afterwards. Wright and Swinscow did not arrive at number 19 as innocents to be defiled by aristocrats. How they perceived their own behaviour remains frustratingly elusive, but the Post Office already had a long history with male prostitution, suggesting that there was a possible homosexual identity attached to this institution. Katie Hindmarch-Watson has shown how the prevalence of prostitution among its male employees

¹⁵⁸ ‘Statement of Charles Swinscow, 6 July, 1889, DPP 1/95/3, National Archives, Kew.
¹⁵⁹ ‘Statement of George Alma Wright, 6 July 1886, DPP 1/95/3, National Archives, Kew.
had long been a concern of Post Office officials.\textsuperscript{160} In 1876 there had even been an official inquiry by Thomas Jeffery, Head of the General Post Office’s Internal Investigations Department. Jeffery’s report found the boys morally wanting, but also underpinned his judgement with an analysis of the factors that had contributed to their criminal propensities: ‘The sad effects of bad training, or of extreme poverty, or both combined, were seen in many of the boys, in an utter absence of truthfulness, except when falsehoods would no longer screen them, in a greediness for money, and a willingness to prostitute themselves even for very small sums’.\textsuperscript{161} Economic factors were thus identified as key to the boys’ willingness to supplement their earnings with prostitution, but Jeffery rather unjustly castigates them as greedy, despite alluding to their extreme poverty. As with extortionists and the professional renters previously discussed, the messenger boys had sex with other men because of financial reward. Thomas Jeffery’s report also mentions ‘the number of bad men who are always lying in wait, especially near Post Offices, to beguile the boys and bribe them with money, of which such men appear to have an ample supply.’\textsuperscript{162} But despite the corruptive influences blamed in Jeffery’s report, the behaviour of the boys in the basement still occurred independently of monetary considerations, which points towards still more complex attitudes towards sexual encounters with other men.

The defensive dominant narrative has portrayed the messenger boys like Houlbrook’s guardsmen; ‘the guardsman did not participate in homosex because he wanted to, but for money and the pleasures it could buy – his subordinate position seemingly precluding his capacity for moral agency.’\textsuperscript{163} While consideration of the boy’s youth and poverty still heavily influence my characterisations in terms of suggesting their motives, probing beneath the dominant narrative uncovers the possibilities for something too complex to be absorbed into a villain/victim dichotomy.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 607
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 609.
\textsuperscript{163} Houlbrook, \textit{Queer London}, 230.
The Professional Renter

The experience of the professional male prostitute in 1880s London proved as elusive as the blackmailer’s decoy and the telegraph messenger boys. One of the best sources can be found in the Home Office files for Cleveland Street and it is a statement made by the prostitute John Saul to Detective Inspector Abberline. This statement as well as being illuminating with regard to the habits of the male renter also adds a narrative layer to the Cleveland Street drama as it reveals Saul’s willingness to inform upon old friends and associates. It starts:

I know Charles Hammond who lately lived at 19 Cleveland Street, Fitzroy Square. The photograph produced is a good likeness of him and I have known him since 1st May 1879. He then lived at 25 Oxendine Street, Haymarket. I was on that day introduced to him by a man named Warrington, and two weeks afterwards I want to lodge with him at the above address. We both earned our living as sodomites. I used to give him all the money I earned oftentimes as much as £8 and £9 a week. I lived with him until the early part of December 1879 when I left him and went to Dublin where I stayed until April 1880 when I returned to London. He was then living at 17 Frith Street Soho Square. I lodged with him again. We stayed there for about a month and then removed together to No.4 Frith Street. I stayed with him till the following July and then left him as he was charging me 35l per week for my lodgings, which I considered too much, and when I was unable to earn any money he refused to give me food.164

What Saul describes in his statement can provide raw materials for my story world. He reveals a culture both nomadic and brutal. He gives actual addresses, an A-Z of the London streets that constituted the roaming ground of male prostitutes. He also indicates what a lucrative living the male prostitute can make. Saul exposes Hammond as a rather aggressive pimp who overcharges him on rent and denies him food. But as the statement continues there is something cyclical in Saul’s habit of leaving and returning to Hammond:

In the early part of 1881 we went to his at No.14 Church Street where he stayed for several months. His landlady’s name was Mrs Wright. He afterwards lived at 3 Wardour Street, 2 Brewer Street

164 Statement of John Saul, August 10, 1889, DPP 1/95/4/2, National Archives, Kew.
and 29 Great Pultney Street also at 35 Newman Street and about the latter part of 1885 he went to 19 Cleveland Street. I lived with him at the last address for about 5 weeks and then had a row with him (about two years ago) and have not spoken to him since.\textsuperscript{165}

Since Saul was clearly capable of earning his own living, his habit of returning to live with Hammond with whom he had always had such a tempestuous relationship, coupled with his willingness to inform upon him: 'I will meet you again at 3 o'clock on Monday next and give you more information,'\textsuperscript{166} reveals a rather complex relationship, one which Saul did not define. The clues in this document provide figures for the novelist’s arithmetic. I interpreted Saul’s pattern of separation and reconciliation with Hammond as being motivated by affection. I believed this disappointed affection and years spent in an exploitative relationship would also explain his willingness to cooperate with the police against Hammond and the other inmates of Cleveland Street. This is another example of supposition. But I found further evidence for my theory in the press reports of the Ernest Parke libel trial in which Saul was a key witness.

Ernest Parke was the editor of \textit{North London Press}; this was the first periodical to name Lord Arthur Somerset and the Earl of Euston as visitors to Cleveland Street. Euston sued Parke for libel and\textsuperscript{167} Saul appeared as a witness for the defence, claiming that he was acting from his own feelings and that he thought Mr Parke had been treated very unfairly. In appearing against Euston, Saul also had the opportunity to vent his hatred towards Hammond.\textsuperscript{168} The reporter for the \textit{Daily News} wrote that Saul spoke of Hammond 'with bitterness as having got Post Office boys to the house, and having paid him insufficiently. He also referred to himself as having nothing in his face but shame and here he took out a handkerchief.'\textsuperscript{169} He also complained that through his calling he had lost his character and could not get on otherwise. Saul emerges as a somewhat embittered figure and describes a somewhat hostile and abusive subculture built on exploitative relationships, while also acknowledging a sense of shame and defeatism at his irretrievable reputation.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 106
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
Despite the number of names mentioned in Saul’s statement it is significant that Abberline ultimately did not follow up on the information provided.\textsuperscript{170} There is no record that the persons he inculpated were arrested or even questioned. According to the \textit{Daily News}, the judge in the Parke libel case was equally dismissive of Saul in his summing up: ‘a more loathsome spectacle, a more melancholy object than the man Saul I have never beheld ... he marvelled that the latter had not been prosecuted.’\textsuperscript{171} It is interesting to observe how Saul’s profession rendered his statements useless in the courtroom, yet more than a century later his testimony has added greatly to our understanding of the homosexual underworld.

\textsuperscript{170} Hyde, \textit{The Cleveland Street Scandal}, 153.
Among Christian Men

"These are but shadows of the things that have been," said the Ghost. "They have no consciousness of us." (Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol)

Prologue

It is that hour on Cleveland Street when the shops extinguish their lights, the tradesmen pull down their blinds and when all but the most determined street sellers pack up their stalls. The purveyor of hot potatoes keeps his fire burning a little longer for the medical students leaving the Middlesex Hospital, and those who are arriving to begin their night's instruction. He moves closer to the blaze for there is a springtime chill in the air. The flames both lick and distort the scene in front of him as a hansom cab draws up outside number 19. A tall, broad-shouldered gentleman alights. The potato man has not seen this cove before. He watches as the gent rings the often rung bell and is admitted by the fellow with dark moustache and thinning hair who always comes out of the house with his collar turned up. The potato man nods his head knowingly.

On the other side of the road at number 22, Mrs Morgan the tobacconist is shutting up shop. The boy is putting up the shutters and as he closes out the last square of daylight, Mrs Morgan catches a glimpse of the house opposite, as a candle moves from one window to the next on the second storey.

From around the corner of Cleveland Street emerges Mr O'Laughlin, grocer of Tottenham Street and he meets Mr Smith the coal dealer; they stand on the pavement to pass the time of day. Their conversation is broken as the door to
number 19 opens and out comes a young guardsman in his red tunic. Mr O’Laughlin lowers his Irish brogue and whispers behind his hand to his companion.

Two medical students in somewhat boisterous spirits are not so discreet and passing in front of Mrs Morgan’s shop they stop, one points at number 19 and confides a secret to his friend who laughs raucously. The policeman always walks on Mrs Morgan’s side of the street and casts his bulls-eye lantern anywhere but in the direction of their merriment.

Blind Hannah who sells chestnuts just outside the old Cleveland Street workhouse knows more about the character of number 19 than any of those who walk by with healthy eyes to see it. She knows the footfall of all its inhabitants and she knows those of its many frequenters who hurry past her unaware of how minutely she observes them. She would make a fearsome witness in a court of law should the secrets of the house ever be revealed.

There is one footfall that she knows better than all the others. She likens it to the devil’s own walk. She hears it now upon the pavement. She shudders. Mr Veck, or the Reverend Daniel Veck as he styles himself, breaks his stride as he tips his hat to Mr O’Laughlin and Mr Smith. His cane scrapes across the ground. ‘Devil,’ mutters Hannah to herself, and follows it up with, ‘Bugger!’

If Mr Veck were ever really to be found in a pulpit he would unquestionably command a large congregation of ladies. His dark beard is trimmed to accentuate the fine jaw of a face that is still young and good looking, though he is closer to forty than thirty. The face is too handsome for the clerical collar. The green eyes are gentle, attentive, and solicit trust from whomever they rest upon. It takes an old blind peddler to see past these attractions to the cold core of this man who walks the streets of London keeping his eyes alert for that perfect combination of beauty and vulnerability. Veck spends his days befriending mothers with sons of 15 and upwards who cannot secure employment. He nods sympathetically and stirs his tea while they lament the lack of honest work for good boys.

Today has been a great success. He pauses outside the gates to the old workhouse building and cuts a celebratory cigar. What a fortunate thing that the stained glass window painter on Brewer Street has gone out of business, thus
Veck had seen the boy in the shop window and thought his beauty squandered. He had more than once hung about to engage the young fellow in conversation, but the boy had proved overly conscientious in not exceeding his lunch hour. On observing that the premises were to let he befriended the old shop owner and lamented with him about the times they lived in. He also secured from him the name and address of his young apprentice, Frank Hewitt. Mrs Hewitt had been quite delighted with the very nice reverend. She said he must have been sent straight from heaven.

Veck stares up over the high wall at the face of Hell. The workhouse does not exist in the form it once did; now it is only the infirmary for London’s poor. The smoke billows from the chimneys. But when the street noises diminish with the daylight he can hear the cacophony of want within. Why would any man living not extend his hand when something could be reached by holding it out?

Veck was born in the workhouse but he is determined not to die there. He stands back as the gates open, allowing the undertaker to pass through; his cart piled high with three newly filled coffins. Veck takes off his hat and makes a sign of the cross. When no one is in earshot he laughs at his own joke.

‘It is the Bishop of Clogher himself, back from the dead,’ says Hannah. It is time for their nightly altercation and both of them look forward to it.

‘There has only been one resurrection, Hannah,’ he says, ‘and I flatter myself I am much better looking than the late Bishop of Clogher was.’

‘Especially after they whipped him at the cart’s tail. They tore him to pieces because he was a sod,’ she says with a good deal of relish.

‘But he slipped the hook didn’t he? They didn’t hang him in the end.’

‘They will hang you for all the evil that’s in you,’ she answers.

‘No, not now, not anymore; they’ve found better uses for the hangman,’ and with that he helps himself to a handful of Hannah’s chestnuts.

She shouts and makes to strike him with her stick, but Veck only laughs. ‘I have great admiration for the Bishop of Clogher. He was a master of many disguises who could lie like the devil.’ He stops talking in order to taste the sweet chestnuts. ‘They say he watched a poor coachman he had sodomised being flogged within an inch of his life rather than incriminate himself.’

‘You would do no less,’ she says, warming her aged hands at the stove.
Veck gives the appearance of pondering this. But he acknowledges the truth of what she is saying. How miserable to be so transparent under the gaze of an old blind hag.

‘God Bless, Hannah,’ he says. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow unless the devil calls you early.’

She sends curses after him.

Veck walks towards number 19. He doesn’t ring the bell for he has a latchkey. As he unlocks the door he sings in low tones with the words stealing out just beneath his breath:

‘The Devil to prove the Church was a farce
Went out to fish for a Bugger.
He baited his hook with a Soldier’s arse
And pulled up the Bishop of Clogher.’

Veck opens the door just wide enough to offer a glimpse of his world. An onlooker might see little but the hall table and only closer inspection would reveal the strange assortment of hats lying upon it: the tradesman’s cap; the soldier’s pill-box, the gentleman’s top hat. To enter this house is to look upon anarchy. The fabric of London society is not observed here. Ranks are mixed, hierarchies leveled, and the laws of God and man are defiled.

Chapter One

The greatest city on earth is scorched by summer heat. It is such climates that relegate ambition below appetite and good sense is sacrificed for a snare in the gutter. Gentlemen hail hansom cabs to take them to their ruin while ladies put their unhappy endings in writing and send them by telegraph. The telegraph boy moves around London in Her Majesty’s navy blue uniform; he is the pride of the General Post Office. Every morning he is drilled and inspected like a soldier. He takes pride in his colours and when he goes down to the water closet to indulge
in unnatural practices, he is sure to remove the jacket and cap that are labelled GPO.

The boys have been in great demand these last few weeks. They run back and forth between the clubs on Pall Mall and the great houses of St James's and Mayfair. It is the general election that makes them swarm like bees. Summer days have been given up to counting votes but there have never been so many to count before. This is the age of reform. But Gladstone is out. Today the Grand Old Man manages to pass along Pall Mall unnoticed. He might be mistaken for any other gentleman of six and seventy bent over his cane, pulling the shade of his hat over his head.

Oliver Swinscow scurries past him; it must be his twentieth delivery along this stretch. He must fight his way through the onlookers outside the Carlton Club. The police have been called in to manage the crowds that have come to cheer for Lord Salisbury, the new Conservative premiere. The man elected to preserve the union of Great Britain and Ireland. Oliver stands back to watch the throngs and momentarily removes his cap to flick the sweat from his hair. He wishes he might remove his jacket too. His feet hurt and his stomach is empty.

He is on his way to Chester Square, to the house of Lord Roland Caversham MP. The houses in Chester Square make him want to rub his shoes against his legs for an additional shine. He peers down into the area where he meets the glowering eyes of a footman indulging in a furtive smoke. The butler opens the front door. Swinscow is scared to death of butlers but this one is even more alarming than most. He is right to feel intimidated. Fairbrother misses nothing and is not above reporting a GPO lad that he does not feel is up to the mark. He takes the telegram and instructs the boy to wait. He leaves the door ajar and Oliver peers forward to glimpse that other world. His mother enjoys descriptions of fine houses.

He is suddenly aware of footsteps behind him and he stands aside to allow the passage of an incredibly tall young gentleman in evening dress. Oliver expects to be overlooked but the young man's eyes fall directly upon him and search his face. They seem to trace his shape in the uniform. Those searching eyes retreat somewhat hastily. Guiltily. At that moment the butler reappears. 'Lord George,' he says at beholding the visitor.
‘Hello Fairbrother, I’m very early for dinner, is my uncle at home?’

‘He is in the library sir, with Mr Akers Douglas.’

‘Oh,’ says the tall gentleman knowingly. ‘Not to be disturbed then.’ He takes out his watch. ‘I’ll wait upstairs. I’ll visit the children. Perhaps you could let me know as soon as Mr Akers Douglas leaves?’

‘Certainly milord,’ returns the butler. Fairbrother then notices Oliver. He had forgotten him. ‘No reply,’ he says coldly and closes the door in his face. Oliver returns to the pavement. He has to report back now to the Post Office HQ in the city. It is such a long way to walk. He thinks about the way the tall young gentleman looked at him. He has seen that look in other men’s eyes before. There was that man he delivered to in the Albany who told him his face would be his fortune.

Upstairs in number 64 Chester Square, Lord George Caversham sits sprawled on the rug with his three young cousins. The youngest, the baby, sits upon his lap. George is honouring his promise to Arthur and Henry and is finishing his story of the Little Mermaid: ‘So every evening after the sun had gone down and all the palace had gone to sleep the Little Mermaid would go and soothe her burning feet in the cool sea.’ George turns in time to see nine-year-old Arthur make a face.

‘I should think,’ says Arthur, ‘that all the courtiers would notice if the little mermaid’s feet were bleeding all over the palace carpets.

‘Courtiers are well versed in only seeing what they want to see,’ George responds with a wink. Arthur frowns with disbelief. Perhaps it is folly, but George cannot help but connect Arthur’s scorn with his own failure. He didn’t win his seat in the election, even if he did reduce the Liberal majority. Another experiment gone awry. Another misplaced confidence in his abilities. He imagines Arthur picking through the fragments of his fallen idol. He will have heard the adults in conversation, ‘What will George do now? Not made for politics; perhaps he should have gone to Sandhurst after all. But he’s not really soldier material either.’

George is about to finish his story when Arthur interrupts with another question, ‘Did you know that father is downstairs with the Chief Whip?’

‘Yes.’
'Did you know that Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill are coming to dinner tonight?

George didn’t. He should have guessed it. His uncle and Lord Randolph were as thick as thieves these days.

'I heard Fairbrother say that he overheard father say that Lord Randolph will be Chancellor and Leader of the House of Commons.'

'You mean you overheard Fairbrother,’ says Arthur’s sister Isabel, entering the nursery. ‘You should not go about eavesdropping. Ten to one you only understand half of what you hear and then you make the rest up.’

I’m sure I understand as much as you do,’ responds Arthur. ‘Fairbrother says that Lord Randolph will make certain that Papa has a cabinet job. Something very important.’

Is this really ambition that George can see lurking in the eyes of a nine-year-old boy? The blood of ancient kings and king-makers weighs heavily in all Caversham veins.

In truth as George sits sprawled on the rug, he wishes he could be one of the children again. His little cousins are far more forgiving when he loses the threads of his stories. But he cannot escape politics even in the nursery. He has only found one escape so far and that was this afternoon in a house around the corner from the Knightsbridge barracks. He had lain fully clothed in unspoilt sheets next to his soldier companion and run his finger the length of the soldier’s naked torso. The soldier didn’t know who he was, nor did he care as long as he was paid. George had made one passing reference to the election.

‘Tory, Liberal, Liberal Unionist. What does it matter to me? I don’t even have the vote,’ was all that the soldier said. His indifference had the most oddly reassuring and stimulating effect upon George. He placed the soldier’s hand upon his cockstand and the soldier frigged him.

The guilty memory of that pleasure melts away now. It does not belong here in this house. This afternoon he had been Mr Brown and not Lord George Caversham, younger son of the Duke of Torrington. But he can smell the soldier still. He can taste the cheap tobacco that laced the soldier’s lips. Now he must go and break bread with the greatest men of his day.

‘Has Mr Akers Douglas left?’ asks Arthur eagerly.
'Yes,' replies Isabel. She is actually only Arthur’s half-sister and more than ten years his senior but she bites back as if they were contemporaries.

'Is father coming up tonight?'

'Oh no, he’s much too busy. He’s gone to dress. Did you not hear the gong? Cousin George and I must go downstairs. I suppose you may watch the guests arrive from the top landing but do not make any noise.'

'I saw the maids practising their curtsy,' says Arthur with some derision. 'They were giggling and being soppy about Lord Randolph. They think he’s good-looking.'

They are not the only ones, thinks George.

'I rather wonder at my being asked tonight?' George whispers to Isabel on the way downstairs.

'Why shouldn't you be?'

'Well I’m not exactly one of the victors of the hour.'

'Don’t be silly. Besides you’re sitting next to Lady Randolph and I think few men would forgo such a pleasure.'

George does not answer. Men all over London were frequently struck dumb by the loveliness of Lady Randolph while women went to the greatest lengths to imitate her. He has even watched Isabel standing before her looking glass wrapping her tongue around an American drawl. But he knows that at table, Lady Randolph could say something frightfully witty about Mr Gladstone while furtively placing her hand upon his lap and her lovely fingers would search in vain for that response she would find in other men. Her husband might enjoy more luck.

'And I am sitting next to Lord Randolph,' says Isabel. 'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing. I was wondering what these were supposed to be on your gown,' his fingers touch the lace embroidery.

'Hummingbirds,' she answers.

'And how will you like sitting next to Lord Randolph?'

'I will like knowing that I am the envy of all the maids if nothing else,' she answers. Isabel is not beautiful but always looks her best when she is witty. She is never afraid to laugh.
George looks up and waves at Arthur as he and Isabel enter the world of the grown ups.

Rollo Caversham looks uncharacteristically nervous. To paint his likeness just now would leave a false image for posterity. The staring eyes of dead Cavershams glare down at them from the walls. George does not care for portraits and had to suffer having his own likeness taken in the spring at his mother’s request. He chose Sargent. His mother had not approved of his choice of artist and so much the better. George found the result flattering. There was a look in the portrait’s green eyes that he recognised. The face lived. He had enjoyed his sittings immensely too. The two men had shared confidences by means other than words. Sargent had shown George work that would never be exhibited at the Grosvenor. In Paris he had found forms of the rarest male beauty and committed them to paper if not to posterity. Sargent had watched George’s face as George followed the lines of Sargent’s desire. It is that look that Sargent recorded. It was that look that the messenger boy Oliver Swinscow had also felt searing into him.

Lady Roland Caversham is also a fine subject for a portrait painter. Sargent could make a good deal out of her fine bone structure. Rollo would never entertain that. Sargent is far too avant-garde for his tastes. Rollo had married his first wife, Isabel’s mother, for so foolish a consideration as love but her early death had released him from his folly. His second wife he had married for reasons that suited the mood of this century. The money his second wife brought to her marriage has lubricated his ascent. But it is more than wealth that the second Lady Roland provides. The Prince of Wales dotes on her. She knows how to please. Rollo will no doubt find some opportunity tonight of suggesting that George’s campaign trail was hindered by his not having a wife. But the matrimonial miseries of George’s brother should be enough to make his family silent on the subject.

Fairbrother announces the first guest. It is that hero of the British Empire, Sir Dighton Probyn, Private Secretary to the Prince of Wales. It is difficult now to examine his bulk and trace the figure of legend who defended himself against six sepoys during the Indian Mutiny, but if his Victoria Cross is reserved for formal
events then the bayonet wound on his wrist is often displayed at dinner parties. Now he wears the scars of trying to keep the Prince within his income.

He is followed by Arthur Balfour, the new Prime Minister’s nephew, young, groomed, ambitious. Guaranteed a cabinet post. And in the hallway Lady Randolph Churchill is shedding her cloak exposing the immaculate whiteness of her shoulders and sleeveless arms. Lord Randolph observes only the expense of her dress, his eyes having long become accustomed to the light that dazzles the men that surround him in a web of envy.

Rollo is stuck fast in that web. His gravity turns to animation at the sight of Lady Randolph’s low cut bodice. He likes shoulders. Randolph Churchill owns the room from the moment he enters it and nobody who is already there and nobody who arrives after him will challenge his supremacy. Disraeli’s Heir is the name bestowed upon him by the press. He picked up Disraeli’s mantle as Gladstone’s most able opponent and yet he is half the age of the Grand Old Man. He has torn him to pieces from the opposition bench and savoured every minute of it. If Rollo gets a cabinet job it will be because Randolph wills it.

Randolph looks almost as well as his wife tonight, at least George thinks so. Sargent could have caught the flare in George’s eyes again. Perhaps it is the way that Randolph’s skin prickles with victory.

In the dining room, the curtains billow with the gentlest of breezes. What a sultry city night it is. The footman attempts to discreetly swat a fly while Rollo’s best glasses clink to the preservation of the union. George and Lady Randolph are discussing everything except the election while Isabel is breaking her stepmother’s first rule of not discussing politics over dinner.

“But how will it work, Lord Randolph?” she asks. ‘Lord Salisbury has sought a coalition with the Liberal Unionists. He has even offered Lord Hartington the premiership and he was refused. We wouldn’t have a majority vote without them and yet now you say they are to sit on the opposition bench next to Mr Gladstone?’

Randolph smiles. ‘Hartington knows, my dear Miss Caversham, that he can enjoy as much influence on the other side of the House as he would have squashed between me and Henry Matthews on the front bench. He holds the balance of power now.’
Nobody questions Churchill's arrogance in assuming his own appointment before it has been granted. The public would not entertain the possibility of anyone else as Leader of the House of Commons. But his words also carry the hint that he could make Henry Matthews Home Secretary.

'But are there to be no Liberals in the Cabinet at all? I don't need to ask Mr Chamberlin next time I give a dinner?' asks Lady Randolph

'No, my dear,' says her husband, 'we have to work with the Liberal Unionists but we don't have to eat with them.'

'You enjoyed a landslide in your new constituency, Lord Randolph?' interjects Sir Dighton.

'Yes. I have to say that canvassing in South Paddington was an agreeable change from Woodstock. Fewer unwashed hands to shake and dirty cottages.'

George realises too late that he is the only one at table who hasn't laughed. Perhaps that's why he caught Randolph's eye. Randolph keeps his eye on him as he continues, 'The Cabinet will be announced tomorrow at the latest. I don't think there will be too many surprises except of course Henry Matthews for Home Secretary.'

'But surely that can't be,' says Isabel 'He's a Roman Catholic?'

Her stepmother attempts to silence her with a withering look.

'But it was actually the Queen herself who requested it,' replies Randolph. 'Matthews may not have held ministerial office before but he must have the finest legal brain in Britain.'

'Her Majesty was very impressed with the way he destroyed Sir Charles Dilke in the divorce courts. She found it quite gratifying to watch the great republican being strung up,' adds Sir Dighton. But with these words he unintentionally displaces the mirth. Even Randolph's hand tightens around his wine glass at the mention of Dilke and he leaves a smear below the rim. Dilke's political enemies find it hard to triumph over his disgrace. There are too many among them who have also left calling cards at the homes of married women.

'But what will the Irish loyalists make of a Catholic Home Secretary?' asks Balfour. 'It might appear a provocative appointment in a government formed to protect the union.'
‘What do you think of Lord Salisbury appointing a Catholic Home Secretary, Lord George?’

The question is fired at George from Randolph Churchill.

All eyes in the room are turned on George.

But he enjoys the advantage of the resolute Caversham jaw. He does not betray himself or his uncle. ‘He would be the first Catholic elected to the Cabinet since the Emancipation Act. I think that it must be an excellent appointment to begin the new administration with. The party can show itself to be progressive. It will also demonstrate sympathy to the Irish Catholics. Surely that is our first consideration now we’re in? The Government must show its readiness to appease Irish discontent.’

There is a look in Randolph’s eyes that George cannot comprehend. He deliberately does not look at his uncle; he must not resemble a child seeking approval from his elders. Fairbrother withholds the wine. He dislikes the word ‘appeasement’ and suspects his master’s nephew of Radical sympathies.

‘We are a government only on sufferance you mean?’ says Sir Dighton, ‘As the Pall Mall Gazette so aptly put it this evening. But I see no hope of reconciliation for the Liberal Party. Gladstone and his Home Rule Bill will go down in history as the altar upon which Liberalism perished.’

Rollo does think that his nephew spoke well. The boy was a competent orator. But there is a handicap that Rollo cannot identify. George is too guarded, particularly on nights like this. George seems easy enough with Lady Randolph. She is smiling at least if not laughing. He wonders what means George has found to entertain her. Her dark eyes move softly and easily over the boy’s face and George looks and speaks earnestly enough but there was an absence of flirtation between his nephew and the most captivating woman in London.

Later in the drawing room, Rollo seeks George out.

‘A progressive party, eh? Your grandfather will be turning in his grave. I hope it doesn’t get back to my big brother either or I’ll get a summons. But I think you spoke well my boy. Randolph does too. I could tell. Watch him. He is the party’s future. It needs youth in it. Most of those prehistoric types in the Upper House have been there since something or other BC. If we adhere to their Conservatism we’ll go the way of the Liberals.’
'I agree, Uncle. We've been given a chance to modernise. Energy, new blood, and not forgetting empathy with the ordinary man now that so many have the vote.' He sips his brandy, 'Though I've made a fine beginning by not getting elected.'

'Don't be despondent George. I didn't win my first election either. For now, we must find you something to do.' The tone in Rollo's voice suddenly changes and he becomes grave. 'Now we are alone, I have to tell you something. Shortly before dinner, I received a telegram.'

'From the Prime Minister?'

'No, from Hargreaves, our family solicitor. I was regretfully obliged to acquaint him with your brother's difficulties.'

George does not answer.

'Hargreaves has been keeping an eye on one of the youths who was blackmailing Walter. A young villain named Tom Osborn. Tonight he sent me word that Osborn has been arrested and is to be tried at the Old Bailey on charges of extortion.'

George's heart all but stops. 'Who is prosecuting him?'

'A man named William Marling. Have you heard of him?'

'No.'

'No more have I. But if your brother's name should be introduced into the proceedings. If it should be mentioned in court—'

'Someone will have to go to the Bailey and watch the case.'

Rollo nods sagely.

'I will go,' says George.

'I'm not sure if that's wise.'

'I'll be perfectly inconspicuous in the public gallery. I'm not exactly a well-known figure.'

Rollo looks uncertain, but then again he doesn't want to involve anyone else in this putrid mess. His eldest nephew, heir to the Torrington dukedom, has fallen prey to dirty street renters. He has always suspected that there was something peculiar about the boy but never entertained the idea that his appetites could be so depraved. 'It is well the case goes on now. The press will not have much room for it,' adds Rollo with feigned optimism.
George stirs uncomfortably. ‘If Walter stays away there might be people who put two and two together. He looks guilty by his sudden removal. He cannot stay in Naples indefinitely.’

Rollo’s complexion changes and he speaks in whispered fury. ‘If anything in your brother’s letters ever suggests any intent to return to England, if he should drop the slightest hint, you must be sure to use the strongest language in dissuading him, or better still, come to me and I’ll write him a line. I’ll also send spies to every port. Your brother brought this family within an inch of ruin and I’ll not allow him to endanger us again. Here is Randolph, enough.’

George stares moodily into his glass. He does not agree but he will not gainsay his uncle. But Walter will have to return one day. He wonders at the courage of the man who is willing to prosecute the Osborn boy and brave the possibility of having such awkward questions asked as ‘how did a gentleman in your position in life make the acquaintance of such a person?’ As George watches his uncle and Randolph in conversation he wonders if Randolph knows about his brother. People always knew more than they were given credit for. Perhaps if he knew he had confided it to his wife. George looks at Lady Randolph. It was hardly a suitable topic for a lady’s ears.

On his way home George is haunted by thoughts of his brother. It has been weeks since he’s heard anything. His sisters, Juliette and Blanche, have likewise heard nothing of Henry. Their mother the Duchess looks constantly ill and her face says everything her husband will not allow her to speak. She has gone back to Torrington mid-way through the season. The girls have gone with her and Caversham House has been shut up. George has his own bachelor chambers on Albemarle Street now. A couple of boys of low character are skulking about outside when he arrives home. They give him a look that dares him to take one or both upstairs. He feels a longing that is exacerbated by the close atmosphere. But his brother’s example rises up to deliver him from the snare.

Inside his building there is nothing to light his way upstairs and he feels in the dark. There is the distant rumble of thunder. Good, he thinks. London needs something to clean the air, to wash down the streets that sweat with lust. He turns on the light in his room and takes off his hat.
His manservant has made up the grog tray but the grog is missing.
His things have been touched.
He can hear breathing.
It feels as though cold fingers are closing around his heart. He picks up his umbrella. The nearest thing to hand.

He turns around and there is his brother on the sofa. He looks ten years older than when George saw him last. His skin has yellowed and he has a long and unkempt beard. The eyes look hunted. He does not speak at first, only stares, almost reproachfully. At last he says, ‘I don’t think much of your arrangements here brother and your servant was very surly.’

‘Are you a fool, Walter? What do you think you are doing breaking into my apartments?’

Walter vanquishes the contents of his glass. ‘I am not a fugitive from the law you know. Only my family.’

‘When did you return to England?’

Walter looks perplexed as if counting days is suddenly outside his abilities. ‘A week ago, I suppose.’

‘And where have you been for all that time?’

‘Finding out who my friends are. Or rather who they aren’t. I’m much less alluring without the allowance I had from Lord Somers for marrying his stony-hearted daughter. So I have come here to throw myself on your charity.’

‘Are you drunk?’

‘I’m always drunk, brother. This is how I spend my days. Like any other vagrant on the streets of Italy. I eat, drink, sleep and smoke.’ He looks for cigarettes in his coat. ‘I seem to be out of smokes. Could I trouble you?’

‘I’ve given up.’

Walter chuckles hoarsely. It grates upon George. ‘You are such a prig. What about a cigar?’

George crosses to his dresser and opens a silver cigar case.

‘What in God’s name are those?’

‘They were a present from Uncle Rolo. He smokes them.’
‘Of course he does. You’re becoming a regular little Rollo yourself. Younger sons united against the world. Haven’t made him Chancellor though have they?’

‘They haven’t made anyone Chancellor yet,’ says George. He decides he will have a cigar too. It feels like a small service he can render his brother. He feels guilty and is not entirely certain why. ‘Are you hungry?’ he asks.

‘No.’

‘Why have you come back?’

‘To cast my vote,’ he says sneeringly.

Another rumble of thunder is followed by the reassuring sound of rain. George feels an immense relief as he cuts his cigar. He imagines the boys outside scattering to find refuge. It suddenly occurs to him that they might have followed Walter here.

‘I came back because I was tired of existing as if I had no life,’ says Walter. His face retreats aggressively from the smell of the cigar smoke that recalls his uncle. ‘I have a life,’ he continues, ‘more than that I have a name, a title; I’m the heir to a dukedom for heaven’s sake and if they threw me in prison tonight it wouldn’t change that. I have a wife. I have a child.’

‘But you made an agreement. I was there. Father and Uncle Rollo moved heaven and earth to get Somers to agree.’

The hunted eyes fall on the rain lashing against the windows. Walter is quiet for a moment. ‘Yes, they were both there when I signed away my rights to my son.’

George cannot help but feel indignant. He sits on the sofa next to his brother. He is still the spoilt, over-indulged child accepting responsibility for nothing.

‘I have come back for my son.’

‘Somers will not let you have him.’

‘He’ll be seven years old soon and then nobody will have any say in it.’

George is pained by the ramblings of the madman next to him. ‘Walter, all that has been done has been for your own good. If father and Rollo hadn’t intervened Somers might have made a public scandal. Who would have thought the Osborn boy would have had the audacity to call upon him at his own house.’
‘I thought his threats empty,’ says Walter. ‘I told him he would get no more out of me.’

But, there is something else you should know,’ says George. Osborn has been arrested and charged with extortion. He is to be tried at the Old Bailey.’

Walter’s ramblings dry up.

‘You must see how dangerous it is for you to be in the country now. If Osborn goes to prison and you’re name is kept out of it you might come back.’

Walter stands and walks to the window. Endless, merciless rain, so quintessentially English. He loves England. He loves his homeland. He loves his family. But he never enjoyed being a Caversham as much as everyone else. He wonders if that was why he had sailed so dangerously close to the wind with their colours? His in-laws agreed no prosecution, no scandal as long as he left the country and left his child to their custody. Now the little Ganymede Osborn was to have his own trial and his sacrifice might have been in vain.

One question repeats itself: could he have helped it?

He turns to look at the little brother he loves. He thinks if only George was more his own man and less eager to please. Soon Rollo will make him over entirely in his own image. ‘I have one request to make of you, brother,’ he says at last.

‘What is that?’

Your permission to stay here tonight.’

‘What will you do?’

‘I will be on the boat train at an early hour. I’ll go back to the Continent. For now. But I’ll return.’

‘As soon as you are settled I will come and find you. You are proving yourself an excellent father by doing this for your son.’

‘By taking myself away? It seems a pitiful way of trying to do right by him.’

The clocks strike the hour. The world is a day older.

Walter cannot finish the cigar that smells like Rollo: the man who advised him to blow his brains out to spare the honour of the family. Walter’s waking hours have become an endless chain of morbid fancies and sometimes he does imagine his brains spilled on the ground. He would not be the first to taste the sweet relief of an ending. He has tried to conquer those desires. At school, no law
of man interfered to sully those beautiful hours that he slept in the arms of his boy lovers. They had kissed and touched and whispered poetry. They had talked of love. But then one day the spell was broken. His lovers became men. But as he watched his former bedfellows in pursuit of actresses and chorus girls, he found those old desires haunted him still and no natural appetite flourished. He married Lord Somers’ daughter but her loveliness could tease nothing from him without the spectral assistance of old desires.

Then he had discovered those boys of the street.

Chapter Two

Sir Charles Dilke is the name on everybody's lips. Some lips pass it with utter contempt, others with a triumphant sneer. There are lips, some even belonging to his political enemies that can barely speak it, even in whispered tones. Not because of outrage or derision, but because of the silencing effects of shame. Shame can be as effective as assassination at sealing lips. Dilke’s example weighs too heavily. Few men, especially in the House of Commons, can judge him without recoiling from their own hypocrisy.

Jack Worsley, the newly-re-elected Liberal Member for Poplar-East, at not yet thirty is one of the youngest members of Gladstone’s fractured party but he has already accumulated secrets sufficient to destroy him. In the arrogant confidence of youth he assumes he will take these secrets to his grave. Jack was Dilke’s find. He was studying at the bar when Dilke overheard one of his republican rants on a winter’s night in the Reform Club. He had given the boy his card and told him to call on him the next day at ten. When Jack called at Sloane Square the following morning he found Dilke in his dining room with his fencing master. Dilke had challenged Jack and had found in him a more than worthy opponent.

‘Where did you learn to fence like that?’ Dilke had asked him.

Dilke’s powers of perspicacity showed him that he had asked a question that Jack clearly had some difficulty answering. The discomfort was momentary
and might have been imperceptible to anyone else. ‘In Ireland,’ Jack had answered with affected coolness.

Dilke liked his protégés to have ... something. He had found the boy a safe seat and paid for his election campaign. Jack had next to no personal fortune, for all his taste for finer things, and he became Dilke’s stipendiary. And so he would remain. Jack would be Dilke’s best means of doing anything for his party now. His career would be Dilke’s.

But Dilke is not quite reconciled to this fate yet. He has come here to the House of Commons to take his leave. He raises his eyes to the Strangers’ Gallery. The only seat he has any entitlement to now is up there. It is only a year since Gladstone took him aside at Hawarden and told him in the voice he only used at home that he hoped Dilke would eventually succeed him as party leader. The memory rises to choke him and he might have surrendered to tears but for the sound of Jack calling for him.

‘I was told you were here,’ Jack says as he approaches.

‘You arrived just in time. I was about to give way to self-pity.’

‘I’m sure no one could blame you.’

‘I feel almost spectral already.’

Jack sits down in the seat beside him and realises they are occupying the Government benches where they no longer have any right to be. ‘You’re not dead, Charles. You may be re-elected next time.’

Dilke produces a crumpled newspaper from under his arm. ‘You’ve read what they’re printing about me. Half the country wants to see me prosecuted for perjury now. They think I lied on oath about my relations with Mrs Crawford.’

He holds the newspaper out but Jack won’t take it. He vows never to touch the Pall Mall Gazette again. ‘It won’t happen,’ answers Jack firmly.

‘I could be facing a sentence of seven years.’

‘I think the new Government –’

‘Will be satisfied with my head? Perhaps you are right. They can afford to be magnanimous. Randolph Churchill actually wrote me a very sincere note offering his sympathies and his services.’ Dilke has thick dark shadows beneath his eyes. ‘Jack, you have shown me the greatest loyalty since this horrid business
began last year. Neither of us could have imagined where it would end. I don't want to insult your intelligence by telling you that I am innocent.'

It is difficult to make Jack feel uncomfortable but Dilke has succeeded. For Dilke to protest his innocence – even if guilty - always seemed perfectly reasonable to Jack. He doesn't need his confession. That would spoil everything. It had seemed disloyal to question whatever Dilke took as his official line. All the same, the peculiarity of those lacerations in Dilke's diaries had taken up disloyal residence in Jack's mind.

'No doubt,' continues Dilke, 'you have your own theories about what happened. When I say that I am not innocent, I mean that I am guilty of having had some very indulgent episodes in my life. There was one winter of madness in particular. And it is that winter that is extracting its premium now. Do you follow me?'

Jack nods.

'I have never been to bed with Virginia Crawford,' he looks Jack fully in the eyes as he says this. 'But the reports about her mother and myself are absolutely true. I do not speak of my association with Mrs Smith with anything but regret. It was passionate. But it was folly and when I ended it she swore that one day I would be as sorry as she was. I never thought that someone's grudge could live out so many years and that she would one day extract revenge through her grown-up daughter.'

'You think the conspiracy was hers alone?'

'I believe she showed both her daughter and son-in-law the benefit of incriminating me.'

'And that is why you didn't go into the witness box at the first trial?'

'The truth would have finished me.'

'But instead the fiction has,' returns Jack.

'Touché,' returns Dilke recalling that morning in his dining room. But his voice carries no enthusiasm. 'Even I cannot look into the future, Jack. I could never imagine it within any woman's power to fabricate such filth. The whole concoction about Virginia and the servant girl! What a mind.'

Dilke's eyes have moved beyond Jack and are addressing imaginary judges on the other side of the House, 'so that is the long and the short of it.
Innocent of charges relating to Mrs Crawford I may be, but I am not so innocent. I wanted you to know the truth."

Jack feels rigid with the injustice of it. The man sitting next to him could have been the greatest Prime Minister the country had ever known and because of some youthful indiscretion he will be forever denied the chance. After almost twenty years he will leave the House in disgrace. He does not know how to answer the man who made him. 'One day the country will wake up to its folly,' he says at last.

Dilke smiles. 'I wonder. Come I must not make this a long goodbye.'

Dilke picks up his hat but leaves the newspaper behind, folded over so he cannot see the headline carrying his name.

They walk out into the daylight but the air tastes like death. Like defeat.

'Jack, I am telling you this in part because you are young. When we are young we generally do things without much regard for the consequences. You should enjoy your youth. But if you are serious about a political career, and I've always believed you will have a great one, you will take warning of my winter of madness and the long shadow it left upon what could have been, well, my summer of greatness.' He stops to laugh at his attempt at poetry. 'Do not make enemies by accident, burn the written matter that will incriminate you, and preserve the stuff that will save you. Don't cut holes in your diaries, and be wary of going to bed with married women.' He puts his hand on Jack's shoulder. 'Just don't in winter or summer, or any other season, give way to impulses of the moment that might rise up to hurt you even twenty years from now.'

Jack has an instinct that he will remember this moment. He will remember it not for its poignancy but for its futility. If Dilke knew the smallest part of Jack's history his hand would shrink away and he would never speak to him again.

'At all events, says Dilke, 'my wife and I are going away next week. Her health is not good. I'll forgive the world its injustices to me but not to her. We shall go to the Continent but we will be in reach. I've had to cancel a dinner engagement with Labouchere for tomorrow night, but I said you would go in my place.'

Jack cannot keep the horror from intruding into his face.
'I know a lot of people dislike Labby but with me out of the picture he's the best ally for you in the Radical wing. I want him to see your promise.'

'I've always been under the impression that he can't be trusted. That he blabs confidences.'

'Then just don't give him any confidences,' returns Dilke. He turns to look once more at the Commons. 'Delays, just delays, that's all,' he says. 'The century is almost over and with it will go their precious Empire, starting with Ireland. Not overnight, but piecemeal it will disappear.'

In truth, Jack is barely listening. He is thinking about the engagement thrust upon him. He has very good reason to feel uncomfortable at the idea of dining with Henry Labouchere.

Chapter Three

Henry Labouchere, Labby, the Liberal MP for Northampton, is hosting a gathering of the Radical wing of the party, of which he is leader. He is not interested in discussing the Liberal defeat. No moment is backwards. He is strong in his conviction that the new Government can be brought down in a matter of months. He is scrutinising his dinner guests tonight and searching out his most able allies amongst them. By that he means the ones that are most easily parted from their scruples. Labby has no scruples. He knows he has insulted the throne too many times to ever become Prime Minister. But he also knows just how powerful a man can be even below the gangway.

The youngest of his guests, Jack Worsley, does not lend himself easily to scrutiny for he always averts his eyes, not out of shyness but because he dislikes being watched. He is watchful of others. He takes his wine in careful measure. This is a strategy Labby approves of since he never takes alcohol himself and contentedly stirs his milk at the head of the table.

'Someone,' says Labby, 'neglected to tell the voters in Chelsea that the issue before them was Home Rule, not home breaking. Well, they’ll come to know the extent of their mistake soon enough. There was still strong support for Dilke when he went to bid his ungrateful constituents adieu with some of them calling
out "Cheer up Charlie, we'll put you in next time." Labby's heavy-lidded dark eyes, always giving the appearance of being half-closed, travel down one side of his long table. 'Hartington has been elected leader of the Liberal Unionists and Devonshire House is the seat of their Unionism. I thought the very essence of Liberalism is that its leaders should not be elected at hole-and-corner meetings in ducal drawing rooms.'

There is a chorus of 'True' but Jack remains silent. Labouchere is attempting to overheat everyone's blood with resentment and red meat. 'The party must enter a new chapter in order to survive,' he continues, his eyes now scrutinising the other side of the table. 'It is time to toss out all noblemen who cannot reconcile themselves to the basic principles of democracy.'

The chorus echoes his sentiment again.

'I just cannot wait for the Opening of Parliament to see where everyone is going to sit,' interjects another wit.

'But our division must not make sport for the Government benches,' returns Labby.

'They will make plenty of sport for us,' answers Bellingham. Bellingham, not an old man, has already stepped down from politics but thanks to his rich American wife he is a large contributor to Radical funds and has as much influence as ever.

Labby's eyes come back to rest upon Jack. He watches Jack's fingers. They stir restlessly. For a gentleman with no personal fortune he is wearing a rather extravagant ruby ring. The cut of his suit is the finest at the table.

Jack cannot relax. He needs something to take the edge off. There is one place in particular where he has made up his mind to go as soon as he can make his escape. The days are shortening and Jack prefers to make these peregrinations in the dark. His mind is wandering dangerously and these are strange thoughts to entertain in the dining room of this man.

Labby continues, 'We should keep an eye on Rollo Caversham. He'll be snarling that Salisbury didn't give him Secretary for Ireland. I wonder if Salisbury considered Rollo a liability in light of recent gossip.'

'They say his nephew, the young Marquis, has been seen in London,' says the man on Jack's right.
Everyone is thrown by the change in conversation. Even Labby's butler is momentarily disconcerted and almost upsets the wine decanter. He is glad none of the housemaids are waiting at table this evening.

Labby’s eyes now open to their fullest and most animated. ‘He’s back then?’ If he’s back to stay then it will be a travesty if something is not done in the way of getting him off the streets.’ Labby says travesty with a good deal of spittle. ‘If he’s left alone, it is as good as saying that if you go by the name of Caversham you can get away with any perversity. That you are above the law.’

‘The young Marchioness has apparently quit London and taken the child to live permanently at her father's estate,’ adds the man on Jack's right who seems to be very well informed.

Labby tastes his milk. ‘The Duke will hate not having any influence over the rearing of his grandson. But the Cavershams have forfeited the right for the child to be raised at Torrington. Everything possible should be done to protect the innocent from evil influences.’

Labby's guests begin to move uncomfortably. There is unspoken alarm that their host might be about to embark upon his other favourite tirade. He is more virulent on the subject of inverters than he is on the topic of dukes.

Bellingham suddenly speaks up with a good deal of gravity. ‘But nothing has been proved against him. It’s a charge that should never be suggested of a man without the most concrete of proofs. It sticks.’ His tone becomes stricter, ‘It taints irrevocably.’ Jack finds Bellingham’s voice enviably strong. A match for Labby’s. ‘If a grown-up man in private –’ continues Bellingham.

‘But there are some offences which put men beyond the pale of privacy,’ returns Labby, resenting the reprimand in Bellingham's voice. ‘Or are we to return to the excesses of Ancient Rome?’

‘Or Dublin Castle?’ returns Bellingham. Jack thinks that a dangerous quip. The memory of the Dublin Castle scandals is too recent and too personal for the Liberals.

Labby ignores him. ‘To be called tolerant must be the grossest accusation. Let the French be tolerant. The English will be resolute. This is why when we passed the Amendment Act I pushed for a prison sentence of seven years with hard labour. The maximum punishment of two years is woefully inadequate.’
‘There is punishment for these men beyond what the law provides,’ adds Bellingham. ‘There is no way back from that charge. A man should have the utmost conviction, the most irrefutable evidence, before he even murmurs it in relation to another man, whatever degree of enmity may exist between them. Before you know it you have a witch-hunt on your hands. No one is safe.’

‘Think what a weapon it might be,’ says Labby.

‘Not one a gentleman can employ,’ answers Bellingham coldly.

Labby stirs his milk. The spoon scrapes against the sides of the glass and is the only audible sound. The other men nervously nurse their wine with varying degrees of sympathy for Labby’s words and Bellingham’s. Labby says nothing. His face betrays little but his lips carry the shadow of a smile. He likes to shock.

The party breaks up mercifully early. Jack is not the only one prematurely tired of plots to bring down Devonshire House. He declines any offers of a lift. He is the only guest tonight not to have a private carriage at his disposal. So much for Radicals.

Summer days are dwindling and Jack feels a potent lust for every hour that remains. He inhales the smell of desire that permeates the hot pavements of Piccadilly. The women that throng there at this hour call out to him but what they offer has no appeal. He has never experienced a cockstand for a woman in his life. When it comes to men, Jack has eclectic tastes. Sometimes he has a dose of scarlet fever and prefers the company of guardsman but these are better found walking in St James’s Park. Other times he’ll happily pick up renters at the Criterion. He very seldom repeats encounters but there are exceptions. He has been fondling the notion of Tom Osborn all the way through Labby’s dinner.

His makes his way to the Strand and the narrow stairwell that runs down to the river and the ancient, forsaken inn that has no business being there. Jack pauses at the top and looks down into the darkness. He almost fancies that he sees Dilke barring his way. Imploring him to turn back. But Jack knows there is no way to quiet his desires tonight. He sometimes feels as though the residue of his youth is slipping away with the summer and that the days of his virility are numbered. He manoeuvres Dilke’s spectre out of the way and descends down, down. If he were to be robbed in this alley way he could never complain of it. He
can already feel himself harden and wonders if it is at the thought of Tom’s fine
tosser, or whether it is the obscurity of the place ... the danger. The river smells
particularly pungent here. It is just out of sight but he can hear it laughing softly
at his folly. Innocent men have come down here to make water and what sights
they have seen.

The gaslight burns above the old sign illuminating the windows that are
too thick with soot to betray the men who sit inside. Jack remembers his first
time here. He had often walked past the steps knowing where they led, he had
seen men descending in the company of their pick-ups for there were private
rooms in the inn that could be hired out. There are dim lights in the upper storey
tonight and shadowy figures moving behind curtains. Jack says a prayer that he
will find Tom within or someone who knows where he can be sent for. Before he
can push against the door, it is opened on the other side by a man as well dressed
as he is. There are frightened glances exchanged on both sides but no semblance
of recognition. Jack is uncertain tonight in a way that is strange to him. Perhaps it
is because the food eaten at Labby’s table still sits heavily in his stomach, or
perhaps it is the recollection of the folded newspaper discarded by Dilke which
haunts him.

The insides of the tavern are made for the exchange of secrets for the
seating is arranged in boxes and a ragged curtain forms a partition between the
pump room and another parlour. There are faces Jack recognises tonight but
many that are strangers to him. The barman knows him not by his name but by
the same ruby ring that Labby noticed earlier that evening. Here if Jack answers
to any name then it is Jonah Black. A renter named John Saul that he met on his
first night here gave him that alias. Saul had persuaded Jack to book one of the
private rooms. Jack had been absolutely mesmerised by the snake in Saul’s
trousers and was convinced that Saul must have something else stuffed down
there. He had been proved pleasantly wrong.

Tonight Jack sits out of the way in the manner of a spectator rather than a
participant. He might be a frightened undergraduate on his first night out as he
looks around.

A guardsman at the bar recognises him and winks. Jack raises his glass
but the red tunic is not enough to raise his enthusiasm. He is looking for Tom or
one of his associates. There is a group of four men speaking in low tones in the box opposite his own. One of them is very pretty indeed. A pearl among swine. The decoy of course; Jack understands the dynamic. They are extortionists. This is proven also by the strange assortment of objects upon the table – the usual portable, semi-valuable trinkets: pencil cases, cigarette cases, and a rather valuable looking pocket watch. One of the grotesque looking specimens handles the watch and pushes the repeater with the broken end of a dirty fingernail. What a strange kind of larceny this is, thinks Jack watching the thieves handle the artefacts of another man’s life that they have obtained, not through opportunity or violence, but through terror; through making him the victim of his own desire; through using nature’s generosity to their boy companion as a snare. And this is their living. And what had become of the unfortunate fellow whom they terrorised for the good of their own profit? Jack’s heart aches a little for him.

Some squabbling breaks out among them. One of the fellows makes a grab for the watch but his associate’s fingers close fast about it. The fellow complains that his situation is well known: he has a sick child sick and must pay the doctor. Jack marvels at the idea of these men having families and the incredible means they have found to nourish tender mouths and to pay the doctor’s fee. He cannot make out what is being said but his eyes rest upon the decoy. Which man possessed of unnatural appetites could resist such a siren’s call? He would destroy many before he was old. Jack wonders if he ever gives his pretty arse completely or whether before the act can be committed one of his ‘uncles’ or ‘brothers’ appears demanding compensation for silence. That is usually how it was done. These uncles were secreted under the bed or just happened to be passing the place of assignation. They hung about public urinals safeguarding the honour of their nephews and filled their own deep pockets with the gold of the men who attempted to defile their innocent ‘kin’. It was a centuries old practice now.

Jack’s eyes move from the blackmailers. In another box sit two boys wearing the uniform of Her Majesty’s Post Office. They look conspiratorial. They have stared in his direction more than once. In another box there sits a woman. It is not the first time Jack has seen a woman in here, though it is rare enough.
Their eyes meet and her stare glances off him coldly. She sits and watches the bodies in their little groups while her gin sits untasted in its glass. She is humbly dressed; her hair is white and her hands are roughened by domestic labours. Somebody should ask her what her business is. But nobody else is paying her any attention. Jack turns in time to see the barman nod knowingly at her. It is swift, subtle, but Jack’s eyes move quickly. He feels somehow as if the nod communicated something about him.

Jack does not look at the old woman again. He considers draining the contents of his glass and leaving. He does not hear the door open behind him or observe a once jarringly attractive face light up with recognition. The new arrival walks up behind him and places his hand upon Jack’s shoulder. Jack all but jumps out of his skin.

‘Christ,’ he says breathlessly. ‘John Saul.’

‘The very same,’ answers Saul. His look conveys more satisfaction than apology at having startled Jack.

Jack observes that Saul is not the very same. But his panic and surprise gives way slowly to genuine pleasure at the familiarity lurking behind those altered features. The penmanship of suffering, sin, and shame are scrawled all over that face. The auburn hair that once grew in such perfect waves now retreats somewhat limply from his forehead.

Jack gestures to Saul to sit down. Saul moves his stool as if to place himself outside the flare of the lamplight or the candle.

‘I was thinking about you only moments ago,’ says Jack. ‘I was thinking about the first night I ever came in here.’

‘And you stuffed me like a Christmas goose,’ says Saul rather too loudly for Jack’s liking. ‘I remember it too. What an athletic chap you were.’

‘I still am I hope,’ says Jack resting his hands upon his middle. It is true that he is not as firm as he was at twenty-two.

‘How long has it been since we last met?’ asks Saul.

‘I don’t know,’ returns Jack. ‘Two or three years at least I should think.

‘How do you make your living now?’

Saul’s tone is almost offended at the question. ‘As I have always made my living. How else could I get on?’ There is a crack in his joviality. The playfulness
of his voice, its practised effeminacy momentarily gives way to a tone somewhat more serious and slightly embittered. ‘But I don’t make quite as much as I did in the old days. I do other bits of work now. Whatever I can lay my hand to,’ he says staring at the unswept floor. ‘There was a time I could take home eight or nine pounds a week. I should have put a little of it aside.’

‘If I remember correctly you gave most of it away to that villain, Hammond.’

Saul stiffens upon his stool. He nods at the barman and asks him to bring two glasses of beer. ‘I know how much you like beer,’ he says.

‘Yes,’ answers Jack, ‘though I rarely drink it these days.’

‘Not quite fitting for a Member of Parliament. Even a Radical.’

Jack’s knees tremble beneath the table. He begins to open and close his hands. ‘How did you know about that?’ he asks.

‘I kept tabs on you. I always knew you’d go far. I thought at one time you would become a great lawyer. Oh, don’t look like that. I wasn’t planning to jump out at you of the shadows one evening. Blackmail isn’t my line. There isn’t much I wouldn’t stoop to, but that – that’s for villains of another type.’

Jack’s hands relax somewhat as the barman sets the beer down. ‘Real villains like Charley Hammond,’ says Jack.

‘There are worse even than him,’ returns Saul. ‘Charley isn’t as black-hearted as some of those fellows.’

‘Come now,’ says Jack. ‘He is one of the worst ruffians the streets of Soho ever knew. I’ve known him beat you, starve you, and take every penny you earned. I was glad when I heard he’d gone to Paris. He’ll be feeding off some poor Parisian urchin … what?’

Saul has leaned close enough into the candlelight for Jack to see the self-reproach that colours his eyes.

‘Charley isn’t in Paris,’ says Saul. ‘He came back when it was clear there would be no case against him. He is currently residing at number 19 Cleveland Street, just off Tottenham Court Road,’ he says. ‘I live there too.’ He hands Jack a rather expensive looking card that advertises the premises.

'That's just a cover in case one of these falls into the hands of the law,' answers Saul.

Jack looks for the faded bruises on Saul's face. Had any man ever been more of a victim to his devotion to a thankless object? Saul turns away from Jack's searching look for enough dignity remains in him that he cannot bear to be the object of any man's pity. There was a time when he could excite very different emotions in Jack. On the other side of the ragged curtain he had made Jack moan with pleasure, had perfectly applied pressures and produced sensations which any of the hundreds of renters running around Piccadilly could never conceive of producing. Whatever young piece of horsemeat Jack had come here looking for this evening, he would never find as much satisfaction in him as he could by trusting himself to Saul's practised hands. Saul looks at his hands, calloused and red; he's spent his afternoon scrubbing the baths of various whores who lived on Frith Street and washing out their soiled sheets.

'Besides,' says Saul, 'Charley Hammond doesn't rule the roost anymore. He's under a stronger influence. A man named Daniel Veck. Veck is the first man I believe Charley has ever been afraid of.'

'Who is this Daniel Veck?' asks Jack. He likes to know the names of dangerous men who make peregrinations in his world. He has long made it his business to avoid any enterprise connected to Charley Hammond.

'He's an odd fellow,' explains Saul. 'Nobody really knows where he comes from. He goes about in a dog collar pretending to be a vicar. He brings a big supply of pretty lads to the house. They follow him as though he were the Pied Piper. He has the devil in him. Should you ever encounter him...' Saul does not finish his sentence. 'She keeps looking at you.'

'Who?' asks Jack. He has all but forgotten about the old woman in the corner.

'Old Mother Clap over there.'

Jack doesn't turn to look. 'You know her?' he asks.

'Everyone knows her,' says Saul, lowering his voice to a careful whisper. 'She works at the St Martin's Public Baths as a laundress by day. But she has another occupation.'

'Which is?'
'Well young working lads go to St Martin's to have their clothes washed and mangled while they enjoy a second class bath. Mother Clap is always on the lookout for pretty faces and is in the pay of many a wealthy gent who trusts her to find nice boys who are clean both behind their ears and around their rim. She fixes the boys up and the next time they come to St Martin's they can enjoy a first class bath with warm water and soap provided, the better to cleanse themselves of the gentlemen's spend.'

'Couldn't she supplement her income by taking in mending instead?' says Jack with a sneer. He has lost interest in Mother Clap. She was just another pimp on the make who would no doubt offer him her services.

'Of course the jewels in Mother Clap's empire are her own sons. She's not above pimping them out. The youngest was only 13 when he started. He's uncommonly handsome. You wouldn't think it to look at her.'

'No you would not,' agrees Jack. He is growing tired of Saul. He did not come here to discuss old times and laundress pimps. There was still no sign of Tom.

'She'll have to do without his earnings now. He won't get off. The police have been after him for too long. You have to show the police proper respect if you wish them to leave you alone.'

'What do you mean?' asks Jack.

'Well young Tom is to be tried at the Old Bailey next week. Some young gent of Jermyn Street has charged him with blackmail. Very brave of him as by all accounts he'd taken young Tom up to his rooms. Now Mother Clap is coming here every night on the watch for every man of means who's ever sucked on Tom's goods. She means to squeeze them to pay for his defence.'

Jack drains the remains of his beer. He has to fight every temptation in his body to turn and look at Mother Clap. To attempt to trace that resemblance to the very creature he came here to find.

'Poor devils,' is all he can think of to say. 'Does Mother Clap have a real name?'

'Her name is Lizzie Osborn,' returns Saul. 'And I wouldn't get on the wrong side of her for anything in the world. What's wrong?'
'Nothing,’ says Jack. ‘I just have an early start tomorrow.’ He picks up his hat and his coat from the back of the chair. He hastens outside. It is cooler now. Summer is relinquishing her hold at last. Behind Jack is the Thames and in front, just up the narrow stairs and out of sight, is the Strand and the frenzied merrymaking working itself up to the midnight hour. The laughter and chatter no doubt fuelled by gossip and scorn. They jeer about Dilke tonight. Perhaps it will be him tomorrow. To walk towards the Thames might be a more sensible prospect. Saul has followed him outside. ‘Leaving without your fix?’ he says.

‘I didn’t come for...’ the attempt at a lie dies upon his lips. But he will not confide anything to Saul. He shares few confidences with any man. They move away from the tavern and are almost in pitch darkness. Saul walks closely behind Jack and Jack can feel his breath upon his neck. It doesn’t smell like he remembers it. ‘How about I give you one? On the house that is and I won’t ask for the change neither.’

‘No,’ says Jack firmly. ‘I don’t think so. Not tonight.’

‘Go on,’ says Saul. He almost has his tongue in Jack’s ear. ‘There is a part of me that hasn’t changed. That doesn’t get old.’ His hands are suddenly upon Jack’s waist and they dig into the fly of his trousers with the appetite of a starving man. But it is only reassurance that Saul is looking for. Jack wrenches Saul’s searching fingers from his groin and flings him to the floor.

‘I’m sorry,’ says Jack, ‘as he hears Saul scrambling about in the dark. ‘I said not tonight.’ With that he hurries up the stairwell and hails a passing cab. Once safely inside he listens to his heart which seems to beat with the force of a hammer. ‘Poor Saul,’ he says out loud. But there is not a man in London that could get a stand out of him just now.
is almost suffocating. Tom has not been brought in yet. Jack observes with some relief that the press benches are only sparsely filled.

There are a few clusters of good-looking boys of about Tom’s age; they all look a little afraid. The decoys of every blackmailing fraternity have come to discover how the hand of the law would use them once it possessed them. Their ruffian associates are also out in great number. There are one or two well-dressed gentlemen in the gallery who wear a similar expression to Jack. Perhaps like Jack they have come here in dread of hearing their own name thrown upon the mercy of the press bench. The noblest looking of these well-dressed fellows stirs restlessly in the seat directly in front of Jack. He wears an unassuming grey suit and moves in a manner that is designed to evade intrusive and questioning looks. Jack can see his profile but wants the man to turn that he might observe the details of his face.

There is a sudden surge of interest in the gallery as Tom’s prosecutor enters. William Marling is younger than Jack would have expected. He is no more than twenty-two, very boyish, but he carries himself with a good deal of self-possession. Jack looks for symptoms of guilt in the eyes or a suggestion of complicity in Marling’s mouth but finds none. He has come here to play the victim and he will play the part flawlessly. Jack has often imagined himself taking on a similar role in court.

Jack observes how the gentleman in front looks into the well with the same curiosity. No doubt experiencing the same fusion of admiration and alarm. The trial was supposed to begin ten minutes since. Jack, to occupy his hands and distract his mind, takes out his diary to remind himself of his week's engagements. He cannot concentrate. He sees Labby's name and the childish sketch of a hanged man beside it, which seems more appropriate than ever just now. The entry reads dinner with Lord Randolph Churchill. Yes, he had forgotten. He is to be a guest when Labby gave dinner to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was too peculiar an invitation to turn down. He puts his diary away. There is no sign anywhere of Mother Clap. Perhaps she is nervous that the details of her secondary trade will be revealed during the course of the day. He wonders how many men she successfully squeezed to pay for Tom’s defence. There can be no natural sympathy or mercy in a woman who uses her children’s
bodies to feather her nest. Her face has haunted him since that night. He remembers the points and folds of it: the fixed cold bird-like stare. He expects to see it everywhere he looks.

His attention is returned to the court with the entrance of the prisoner. Tom also moves steadily and wears a look of defiance that will not win him the favour of the jury. No doubt it was that same arrogance and cockiness that had annoyed the police. The only betrayal of his anxiety is in the way he bites the corners of his mouth. He lifts his eyes to the public gallery. He scans the faces of men that he has fellated, the faces of men that have buggered him, faces that he has seen crumple with fear at his threats and those that have begged him for mercy as he impales them upon the stakes of their desires. Jack was always too sure of himself in their encounters to give Tom the impression that he could ever have the upper hand. He also never took the boy home.

Tom catches someone's eye and a half smile ripples across his mouth as he is led into the dock. Jack scrutinises the prosecution and defence. Marling's man is hawk-eyed and has a voice for the Bailey. But Mother Clap has evidently rinsed the city's sodomites for all the cruelty that is in her hands, for Tom's defence looks well poised to cross-examine Marling to the point where his reputation lies shredded like a plucked bird. Jack would not trade places with him for anything in the world. Also at the solicitor's table is Mr Arthur Abrahams. Jack knows him by sight. He is famous for cleaning up many a social embarrassment. Labby had suggested him to Dilke during his troubles, but the other side had already purchased Abrahams's services. He was responsible for spiriting the servant girl Fanny out of the country.

The keeper of society's secrets is a fascinating creature to observe. Everyone about him seems to want to keep their distance; either that or he engages with no one. He is there to hold a watching brief for a client who is undisclosed. He sits very still. Not a muscle moves in his dark face. If one were to cut open his head and reveal what was inside then there would be sufficient material to start a revolution. Trafalgar Square would run with blood within a day.

The magistrate at last takes his seat. After the preliminaries and the entry of Tom's plea of not-guilty, Marling is first into the witness box. He gives his
name, his Jermyn Street address, and his income of between one and two thousand a year. He speaks slowly and with conviction, offering all three facts as proofs against any smear upon his character. He describes his movements that night: how he dined out, went to the theatre and then to his club, returning to his chambers at about one in the morning. It was there that he encountered the defendant outside the door to his building. He was just out of reach of the nearest gaslight so it had been impossible to truly discern his person or his rank in life. To Jack, Marling’s voice loses some of its conviction, perhaps because his narrative has strayed from fact to invention. Jack imagines an altogether different encounter than the one described, where the glare of the gaslight illuminated that devilish knowing face; the boldness of Tom’s eyes teasing out the desire of the inebriated Marling.

‘The defendant spoke to me,’ continues Marling and asked if I would give him a drink. Of course, I said no. But then asked again insisting that all the public houses were closed. At that I relented and took him upstairs.’ The calm in his voice breaks momentarily and the words tumble out a little faster and heavier. Jack imagines Marling ascending the staircase of his apartment building, stumbling but hard with excitement.

‘I took him into my rooms and lighted two candles. He took off his hat. I gave him some brandy and opened a bottle of soda water. I did not take anything myself. As he drank he looked about him. I asked him what he did to earn a living and he told me he was clerk to a solicitor in the city. I think he said on Fleet Street.’ Jack wonders if Marling’s details are too many. Murmurs of disapproval can be heard at the wealthy gentleman entertaining the city clerk in his Jermyn Street chamber.

The reporters have stopped scribbling.

They are waiting for Marling to undo himself.

‘It took him about six minutes to finish his brandy and then I said “It is about my time for going off to bed; you had better leave.”’ Jack imagines Marling downing his own brandy from the glass trembling in his hand. His cock firm in his trousers. Then the defendant replied, “I am not leaving. Not without some money.” I said that he would get no money from me to which he said, “I will have some money otherwise I shall bring my father here and tell him that you took
obscene liberties with me.”’ Jack can believe that. He imagines Tom inhaling the
fear and inexperience of the man before him, undone by drink and desire.

‘I offered him a sovereign at which he smiled and demanded ten pounds. I
said I didn’t have anything like that sum. I offered him one of my suits. He tried
some on but complained that none of them fit.’ The magistrate seems to find this
act particularly reprehensible as do the jury.

‘He then demanded my watch and his ring as surety for the ten pounds. I
promised to meet him the following day at noon outside the Alhambra Theatre
where he would hand over the property in exchange for the money. He put my
ring upon his own hand and left. I went to the police at dawn. I was too afraid to
venture out in the dark. The police were very kind. It was agreed I would keep
my appointment with Osborn and that they would be waiting out of sight in
order to watch him incriminate himself.’

Brave, thinks Jack, all very brave. He would have paid out. Anything rather
than come here, to the Bailey and reveal such details and have to observe the
flickers of judgement upon the faces of the jury. To Jack, Marling’s innocent
words speak of guilty actions. Marling asks for water. Jack looks down at his own
ring and his fingers search for his watch. These things are so easily parted with.

Tom’s defender rises to cross-examine Marling. He looks at Marling as if
his case was already made and that Marling had been exposed as a seducer of
working-class boys.

‘Mr Marling, you have given your name in court today as Mr William
Marling is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you benefit the court by explaining why when you made your
complaint at the Marlborough Mews Station you gave your name as William
Morton?’

There is some tittering at this among the pretty decoys. It was a good
beginning.

Marling plays with the buttons of his waistcoat. There is no answer in the
world that cannot incriminate him to some degree. ‘I was afraid –’

‘Yes?’
'Should any reporter be in court that my name would be mixed up – I didn't want my name to be associated with such a thing as this. My father is dead. It would bring dishonour to the family name. You know how people are. They make trite observations that there can be no smoke without fire and the like.'

The barrister nods energetically. 'You were afraid perhaps that your actions in taking a stranger, a mere lad that you found outside your door who certainly could not be described as belonging to your station in life, up to your room and giving him drink might be open to a most peculiar construction?'

'No. It's just that people always like to think the worst.'

'You admit your actions that night might lend themselves to a certain representation?'

'I was foolish.'

'Drunk perhaps?'

'No. Not drunk.'

'It was after one in the morning. A young man that in your own words you could barely make out in the dark asks you to take him up to your rooms.'

Jack feels a rush of compassion for Marling. He has had nightmares reminiscent of this and in those nightmares the magistrate looks exactly as Mr Justice Day does at this moment.

'Could you see nothing dangerous in that, Mr Marling?'

'I took him up on the understanding I would give him a drink.'

'But if you believed there was nothing guilty in your behaviour why then did you give the false name of Morton when you made your complaint? To lie in such a manner carries, you will allow, a suggestion of guilt. Why did you lie?'

'I lied because I know how the thing looks,' says Marling.

The lawyer smiles coldly. 'At the time Mr Osborn was committed for trial were you receiving counsel from a solicitor?'

'No.'

'But you have since felt the need to engage one?'

'Yes.'

The barrister nods again with the same sneering incredulity. Marling looks more flustered and frightened than Tom in the dock.
‘No further questions your Worship,’ says the lawyer turning to the jury with a raised eyebrow.

The two police constables that apprehended Tom are the next to give evidence. Marling’s case improves somewhat as neither has a good word to say about Tom. They tell the jury that Tom and his brother have been known to them since they were no more than children and that neither had done an honest day’s work in their lives. Worse than that they operated in a larger gang who haunted the streets for the purposes of extortion. Tom and his brother were practised decoys.

Tom does have the chance to speak at the end, although he is not sworn and the jury are advised that his words are not evidence since he is not to be cross-examined. He does not acquit himself well. He claims his arrest was a trap laid by the police to get him. That none of Marling’s personal property had been found on him. He insists that he knew Marling before and that he had gone to his rooms that night by appointment. That Marling had often sent him notes but these could not be produced because he had destroyed them.

Marling does not look at the jury. Jack thinks that it is a mercy that he has no parents to disgrace. Arthur Abrahams seems barely to have watched the proceedings but his eyes are now raised as though he were tracing the contours of Marling’s guilt. In addressing the jury for the last time, Tom’s defence says little but stresses again the strangeness of Marling’s position in taking the boy upstairs. What other purpose could there be but an immoral one?

The gentleman in grey has still not given Jack the benefit of his face. He too is watching very keenly.

Mr Day speaks and his voice is coated in disgust. His face appears to tremble with indignation. ‘There is no question,’ begins the magistrate, ‘that the prosecutor acted very foolishly in listening to a stranger and taking him to his chambers and giving him drink.’ He pauses and his eyes glance off the public benches. Slowly the contempt seems to drain from his voice as he adds, ‘but the prosecutor has given his evidence distinctly and clearly and like a gentleman. The only question for the jury is whether the specific charges against the prisoner have been proven by the facts.’
A heavy din of conversation breaks out as the jury retires. Jack is not sure what outcome he wants. He knows what Tom is and has always suspected that he did a nice line in extortion. Most renters did. Jack knew how to take care of himself but greenhorns like Marling were vulnerable. He imagines that the jury will have a difficult time of it. Yet within five minutes they are back.

Mr Day asks them if they have reached a verdict to which they all agree. They have without reservation.

They found Tom Osborn ‘Guilty.’

Tom doesn’t look altogether surprised or even particularly horrified. He expected the verdict. There is nothing remarkable in his circle about a life which is disturbed at intervals by a prison sentence.

‘The prisoner has been found guilty of one of the worst offences known to the law,’ begins Mr Day. There is a growing inflection of anger in his voice that unsettles Jack, even at his safe distance. ‘I quite believe from the statement made by the police that the prisoner is one of a gang of ruffians who haunt the streets and make their living by infamous practices and by extorting money.’ His anger and disgust seems to seep deeper and deeper into his words. ‘They are a plague upon our city.’

Several of these ruffians sit in proximity to Jack. Their arses sore, their cocks sick, and their fingers wearing rings and heirlooms they have no right to. The suits on their backs have been woven from their extortions.

‘I will,’ continues Day, ‘therefore demonstrate the law’s full capacity for stamping these practices out.’ His words fall out heavily enough to strike down every renter on Piccadilly. ‘The prisoner is sentenced to penal servitude for the course of his natural life.’

Jack is certain he must have misheard.

The rest of the court feels that it is under a similar misapprehension and silently and futilely awaits enlightenment.

The first symptom of acceptance comes in the form of a long low screech that might have come from a frightened cat. It is a woman at the back of the court. It is Mother Clap. It is the most disturbing wail that Jack has ever heard.

The men mutter in disbelief. It was too harsh. ‘He’s not a murderer,’ somebody whispers. The pretty decoys cry out ‘shame, shame.’ Jack looks down
into the well of the court, first to Marling, then to Tom, and back. Both have
turned white. The boy fears an eternity the extent of which he is too young to
comprehend, while Marling is ashen at the thought of his own sentence: a life
sentence of guilt.

‘Take him down,’ says the magistrate coldly. ‘And clear the court,’ he
adds.

A young man has come to the aid of the old woman covering her hands
with her face, parting her fingers somewhat to watch as Tom is taken from the
dock. Jack watches him too. He is terrified lest their eyes should meet. Jack feels
as though he should make some sort of stand. Some objection. But his protest
would place him upon the wrong side.

The reporters look rather disturbed but the papers are so full of Dilke and
Mrs Crawford that they probably won’t find room for Tom.

The well-dressed man in front of Jack stands up and at last turns. He is
incredibly tall. Much taller than six foot. His is a handsome face with a very
strong jaw. But the shadow of guilt darkens his features also. A momentary look
passes between them before the well-dressed man hurries out into the fading
daylight.

Jack goes to the washroom to try and compose himself. He must do
something for Tom. But what? Should he call upon Henry Matthews as he takes
over his new desk in the Home Office and plead for mitigation of the boy’s
sentence? Then Matthews would ask him why. He cannot meet his own gaze in
the washroom mirror and his hands are trembling as he places them in cold
water.

When Jack gets back to his chambers, more letters of congratulations
have arrived celebrating his re-election. He falls into the chair and absently
begins to break the seals. One of the letters calls him an ‘eminent man’. The same
letter champions the cause of the Radicals and talks about an end to the social
injustices that prevail. It wishes him every good fortune in bringing the new
Government down within six months. He pours himself a drink; he has never felt
less like an eminent man, nor for that matter like a Radical. His former bedfellow
will be back in his prison uniform by now and he may never wear any other kind
of clothing. But Tom was a dangerous blackmailer, a decoy existing within an
operation that exists to pursue men like him to the end of their wits. Jack's nightmares of discovery were meat and drink to boys like Tom.... boys. That's all he is after all. Tom could not be called a man at 17. Jack pours himself another drink and returns to his correspondence. If Tom had known his true identity then he would have set his premium for silence very high. It might never have ended. Perhaps William Marling and fate conspired today to spare him and everything he sought to accomplish. But all the same he takes his letters of congratulation and burns them all without exception. Men like him don't keep paper traces of any kind.

Chapter Five

The summer of uncertainty has passed into the autumn of security in the knowledge that nothing will change overnight. George hasn't found much to do today. He has still to find a place in the world. It is already noon and he finds himself still in bed. He remembers what his brother said about spending his days eating, drinking, smoking, and sleeping. There is not much to differentiate them at the moment. He wonders if Walter has found an occupation in Italy. He should write to him, but he has been saying that for many days now and the paper sits untouched upon the bureau. Guilt is too heavy a weight upon his hand to pick up the pen. He has shown Walter the cold face of judgement and selfishly kept his own sordid secrets. But he does judge his brother for his recklessness. Walter's behaviour had become so indiscreet that friends had started to cut him on the street.

He is at last roused by his servant who brings him a note brought by special messenger. It is from Lord Randolph Churchill. George is suddenly wide-awake. This is the last thing he had expected. Rollo had told him that Randolph had been impressed the night they celebrated their election victory. George tells his man to look out his best suit and fetch his shaving water. He would look the part for Rollo's sake if not his own.

Lord Randolph receives him in his large grey library. George is rather surprised to find the Leader of the House of Commons still in his dressing gown
and a great deal of paper thrown about the place. He looks like a man who has been up all night. The ashtray is filled with the ends of cigarettes. Randolph as if reading his thoughts says, 'Better crack open a window.' He opens a window and proceeds to light another cigarette. His movements are hurried and he carries an air of excitability.

'Smoke?' he offers George. George refuses and instantly regrets it. Both for his own sake and for the strange look Randolph gives him.

He picks up some papers that have slipped behind a sofa cushion so that George can sit down. 'It's all budget stuff,' he says.

'How is it coming along?' asks George.

'The budget? It will ruffle a few feathers and not just on the opposition benches. It will be considered anarchy in the Upper Chamber. Your father won't like it. Neither will my brother come to that. I dined with your Uncle Rollo last night at the Carlton and he raised his eyebrows over a few things. I hope he won't let me down.'

'I'm sure he won't,' says George a little more defensively than he intended but his sudden animation appears to please his host.

'He mentioned you and said he thought you were a little lost post your election defeat. You still haven't found a job?'

'No,'

'I thought I saw you in the Strangers’ Gallery the other day.'

'Yes, I often go.'

Randolph nods approvingly. 'Were you there the other day when Henry Matthews gave his first address as Home Secretary?'

'Yes.'

'You saw what he did to Gladstone then?'

George had. It had been quite a sad spectacle.

'Matthews was about to go easy on him but I told him to pitch into him as though he had Dilke in the witness box again.' This statement appears to amuse Randolph momentarily but he does not miss the sympathy in George’s face. 'Poor old Dilke. God knows what will happen to him now. What is your opinion of the affair?''
George moves uncomfortably on the sofa. ‘I don’t think he stood any chance of keeping his seat after the press turned against him. *The Pall Mall Gazette* was particularly pernicious.’

‘Willie Stead? For all his puritanism he knows nothing sells papers like muck.’ Randolph pauses and scrutinises George’s face. He recognises something. Self-denial and longing. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cigarette, Caversham?’

George falters, but yes he would like a cigarette very much. They might as well yellow the walls together.

‘You know what they are saying now of course? That it was all Chamberlin’s doing? That he convinced Mrs Crawford to name Dilke as her lover in order to undo him. That there wasn’t an actual grain of truth in any of the accusations. Even the episode with the housemaid was a fabrication from Chamberlin’s dirty mind.’

‘That seems a little unlikely,’ returns George.

Churchill smiles as though George had said something very naive. His moustache deepens its effect. ‘Never underestimate the dirtiness of politics or the hands people are willing to play. It’s our job to make the most of scandals. Kill or be killed. But however much one tries to keep one’s own nose clean there’s always an older brother to give us a nose bleed.’

George can feel his colour rising. Randolph appears to pick up upon his slip and quickly follows up with, ‘It looks like my brother’s name will be mixed up in the Campbell divorce. What a year it’s been for dirty laundry of the monogramed and aristocratic variety. Perhaps it isn’t over yet.’ There is something ominous in his voice. ‘Are you sure you want to be part of this?’

George smiles in response.

‘Politics are more of a gamble than other careers; but look what big prizes there are!’

George can tell that Randolph likes him but he can’t be sure why.

‘My first budget is a bit of a gamble,’ Randolph continues, ‘but it would be foolish to pretend we don’t have to consider the additional two million voters. Everything has changed. The only thing to do is to annoy the upper classes by increasing taxes on racing horses and gun cartridges.’

‘It doesn’t sound very much like a Tory budget,’ says George.
‘Good. I’m glad to hear it. I can’t wait to find out what Henry Labouchere makes of it.’

There is something in Randolph’s eyes that makes it appear as though he relishes the controversy ahead. He likes an argument better than any man alive. He is always anxious to provoke. That’s why he wore patent tan shoes into the House of Commons.

‘Actually I’m having dinner with Labouchere tomorrow night if you’d like to join us. He’s introducing a young protégé of his. It would be quite informal.’

George can hardly believe his ears. The Tory Chancellor was having dinner with the Radical Member for Northampton. There are some cross-party friendships that are beyond his comprehension.

Randolph smiles at his baffled face. ‘It will be quite the evening I promise.’

Jack isn’t late to Labby’s but he is the last of the evening’s small party to arrive. It is a chilly evening and the small group are gathered by the fire. What an instructive sight it is to see these fierce political opponents sharing a blaze, Lord Randolph Churchill and Henry Labouchere sharing a blaze. Jack cannot help but smile at the incongruity. There is something vaguely familiar about the third fellow who stands a head higher than either Labby or Randolph. He turns as Labby’s butler announces Jack’s arrival and his face mirrors the confused recognition that skims across Jack’s features. Then in unison they remember and Tom Osborn is in the room with them.

They are introduced. But the name Caversham invites an altogether hostile response in Jack. There is certainly nothing attractive in that. He despises Rollo Caversham as the most arrogant ass to ever disgrace the front bench. This is his nephew. The resemblance is marked and for all his intense dislike, Jack must now surrender to the unwelcome admission that Rollo Caversham is a very good-looking man.

George has never heard of Jack.

They go into dinner. Churchill and Labby are just as much fun to watch across the dining table as they are the floor of the House of Commons. But there is a good degree of warmth on both sides and they enjoy having the audience of their respective protégés for their sparring. When Jack asks Labby about the
origins of their unusual alliance he responds, ‘Randolph is a rebel among aristocrats and an aristocrat among rebels.’ But there is also something oddly paternalistic in the way he looks at the young Tory leader. Randolph is more than usually excitable tonight. More than usually careless. Even more intent on emptying his glass which causes Labouchere’s perpetually half-closed eyes to open wide.

The talk turns to Randolph’s address at the Tory Party conference in Dartford the week before. Ten thousand people had turned out to hear him speak and a great noise had been made across Europe with his stance on the Bulgaria crisis. He didn’t sound like a Tory. The crowds roared but there was no echo in the House of Lords. Every day since the Tories have been back in power, Randolph has exhibited a little more indifference to the support of his colleagues. Labouchere looks at him now as if he knows something that the younger men at the table don’t.

‘Iddlesleigh is conducting himself like a child,’ says Randolph aggressively proffering his glass once again to Labouchere’s butler who has become giddy with endless rotations around the table. ‘All his petulance and fussing. His appointment is Salisbury’s worst mistake. All he’s managed to do so far is annoy Bismark with his fussy suggestions. He’ll soon have us at war with both Germany and Russia.’

Jack is not impressed by Randolph but he can see that George is completely under Randolph’s spell. It seems to Jack that it is a dangerous spell.

The two young men leave the party before it breaks up. There is no way of knowing how far into the night Randolph and Labby will talk and their tones had become more confidential so it was often difficult for George and Jack to follow their shorthand. They walk towards the cabstand in awkward silence. They will either acknowledge their earlier encounter or never speak of it. Jack decides to end the silence by speaking candidly about George’s friend. ‘A lot of people think Randolph is ill,’ he says.

‘He has a lot of enemies ready to discredit him,’ returns George defensively.

‘Many within his own party.’
They walk silently for a moment. George walks a little faster than Jack. ‘He drinks and smokes a good deal too much,’ says George in an almost conciliatory way.

‘He labours under the impression that he will be dead by the age of forty five!’

Jack feels sympathetic to Randolph’s morbid conviction. He rarely looks far enough into his future to imagine himself in old age.

‘I know he can come across as something of a loose cannon but he is the only man who can guarantee that the Conservatives have any kind of future. He, like my Uncle Roland, is willing to embrace the fact that the landscape of politics has changed.’

Jack chortles. ‘But you cannot modernise the Tories; that’s a contradiction in terms. Trusting the country to your lot is like asking the cats to legislate for the mice.’ That sounds rather good to him but sadly it is a quip borrowed from Labby and not one of his own.

George accelerates his walking pace.

‘And what about Ireland?’ says Jack. ‘Won’t that be the rope by which your party hangs itself?’

‘I believe in the union,’ answers George.

‘And how well do you know Ireland?’

‘We have an estate there.’

‘Of course you do.’

George stops. He won’t be addressed with so little civility. Why did Radicals always feel that entitlement towards rudeness? If Labby and Randolph could be on good terms despite their differences, their protégés should find no excuse for bad manners.

Jack is not trying to make an enemy. He is merely attempting to rouse George to a defence. He will not visit the uncle’s sins upon the nephew. Indeed, a more engaging alternative presents itself: an opportunity to make some trouble. ‘Let’s have lunch this week, if you like?’ says Jack.

George looks somewhat taken aback. ‘Certainly. Anywhere you like. Except the Reform Club.’

‘I don’t think they’d let you in with your pedigree. How about the American Bar at the Criterion?’ Jack searches George’s face for some semblance of
recognition at the suggestion of the well-known pick-up ground. That was where Jack had first encountered Tom Osborn. He is with them again as they take leave of each other, but his name has not passed their lips.

Chapter Six

The first session of the new Government is already over and parliamentarians have scattered like the autumn leaves. Jack is glad to be free of both London and Labby and has removed to Ireland. He has taken George with him to give him an education. He wants to watch his eyes open. He watches him now on horseback as the darkness gathers around them. Both their mounts and themselves are spattered with the mud of the land that yields so little profit to its profiteers. They are a mess and they have a dinner engagement and no opportunity of changing.

‘You look worried, George.’

‘I’m only concerned that we won’t reach your friend before nightfall. I don’t like the lay of this land. Are you certain you know the way?’

‘Of course,’ Jack answers defensively. ‘Besides we’ll have a pretty full moon tonight. Don’t you think it’s rather beautiful?’

‘Yes and rather perilous.’

‘They’ve had nothing but rain these past months. It will not be a good harvest.’

‘No worse than England or Scotland,’ returns George.

Jack is somewhat less confident than he sounds. He doesn’t know the roads of County Longford as well as he thought and he had expected to arrive at the house before now. He is grateful to the fullness of the moon but the sky promises heavy rain.

‘Do you not like the dark, George?’
'It just feels like we are a long way from civilisation. And I am just waiting for you to admit we are lost.'

'But we’re not. Perhaps you are worried about being set upon by Irish rebels. Should we encounter any you had better not have anything about you that reveals you belong to the House of Caversham.'

'I wasn’t aware that revolution had begun.'

'Or perhaps you are afraid of the ghosts of rebel pikemen, brutally slaughtered in the Battle of Ballinamuck. We’re close to the site now.'

'I’ve never heard of the Battle of Ballinamuck.'

'It was during the 1798 rebellion. The English showed less mercy to the Irish rebels than to the French who had come to emancipate them. The slaughter was brutal and the rebels lay dead in their hundreds.'

George does not answer. He is stopped in his tracks by the sound of singing voices. He cannot see their source. 'Listen,' he says.

The disembodied voices are far enough away to make them sound ghostly.

Jack indulges an ungenerous laugh, the echo of which unnerves them both. He is somewhat reassured because he can hear the flow of the River Camlin. They are not lost.

Around the next bend the voices become louder. The singers soon reveal themselves in the form of farm labourers returning home from the fields. Jack halts their progress that George might observe them. But the glare of the moonlight illuminates their misery as mercilessly to his eyes as to his companion’s. He feels his own weight of guilt as they pass before them, looking thin, broken, defeated. He wonders if George’s skin does not prickle with the same sense of danger; the same premonition of disaster that haunts him.

Jack trots forward, wishes them good evening and asks them if they know the way to BallyShannon. George does not follow and is too removed to hear what passes. He is a little fearful but the men tip their hats to Jack as he bids them goodnight.

'We are a mere two miles away,' Jack says, gesturing north. 'As long as we stay close to the river we won’t go far wrong.'
‘I hope your friend is not entertaining a large party. I’m afraid neither of us will appear to any advantage.’

‘I imagine it will only be the three of us sitting down to dinner. Matthew has never been much of a one for company.’

‘He sounds like a most singular person. You’ve made me a little afraid of him.’

‘You shouldn’t be. I’m sure he’ll see something in you. He’s quite free from prejudice. Not like me. He paid for me to complete my education after my mother’s death and supported me at Trinity and afterwards at Oxford.’

‘But he is no relation?’

‘No,’ Jack returns hesitantly, ‘we had better get a move on if we want to beat the rain.’

The rain has just begun when Jack spies the lights of the old priory. ‘You look like we’ve reached the ends of the world,’ he says to George.

‘I cannot pretend to have much liking for this part of the country.’ He wonders why Jack likes to see him so uncomfortable, so far removed from familiarity and consolation.

The rain assails their approach to the priory and to George the grey-stone house looks quite without charm. A servant comes to take their horse and the master is in the doorway with a lantern. He lifts the light to illuminate his guests. Their host is younger than George expected, perhaps no more than forty-five. His eyes study George with curiosity but they absorb Jack with fascination. He ushers them inside in order to greet them under cover.

Jack embraces their host in a brotherly fashion, but there is something altered, even excitable in his manner. He adopts a very commanding tone and George observes that he talks a good deal, and quickly. His voice seems to awaken the house. The host, Matthew, seems somewhat uncomfortable in the embrace and Jack talks on and on without really looking at anybody. George stands by shivering and waiting to be introduced. The servant pulls his wet coat from his shoulders.

‘And you must be Lord George Caversham,’ says Matthew after abandoning all hope of Jack making the introduction.
Matthew is making every effort to recover himself. His calm has been displaced by the boisterous arrival of his old friend. George supposes that the sadness that mutes the brilliance of Matthew’s eyes must be symptomatic of a life that drives a fairly youngish man to live alone in such a wilderness.

'Matthew is my oldest friend in the world. My only family,’ says Jack. ‘George is the best of all my friends of only a few weeks’ standing so you must become devoted friends for my sake.’

'I'm sure we shall,’ answers George, 'Please forgive our appearance. Despite Jack's assurances to the contrary, I fear we did rather lose our way in the boggier regions.'

'It’s all bogs hereabouts,’ replies Matthew. ‘I never had a guest in any season who did not arrive the worse for a bit of mud. But you must go upstairs first and get warm. There are fires in both your rooms. Dinner will be served in twenty minutes.’

An hour later, George is less inclined towards bad temper. The dining room has a roaring fire and the dinner is one of the best he has ever partaken of. The only thing he cannot acclimatise to is the smell of burning peat. His host appears to notice his disdain.

'You are not accustomed to peat fires?’ he asks.

'No,’ says George. 'I daresay we’ve had them in Scotland...’

'We never burn anything else in the grates here.’

'Turf is the only thing that this land yields in any supply,’ answers Jack somewhat moodily. I daresay you've had very poor yields?’

'It is the worst harvest in some years. There was a time though when the land hereabouts yielded nothing. It is by nothing less than Herculean labour that we have oats and potatoes. But this year has been bad.’

'But you are not a farmer yourself?’ asks George.

'No. I have only the house. I’m of little use to the county except in the way of employing servants. I probably have too many of them.’

'Although there is altogether a dearth of female servants,’ says Jack, proffering his glass to the butler. He is not so much sipping as inhaling his wine tonight.
'Jack always did appreciate a good claret,' says Matthew as if by way of explanation.

'Do you know many of the local landlords hereabouts?' asks Jack. 'Do you think they'll extend their tenants much mercy when they can't make the rent? We've predicted that families will be evicted in their thousands this winter and the only means of protection that Parnell sought for them has just been thrown out by ... by George's uncle here.' He does not look at George as he speaks. 'The new Government are starting as they mean to go. And when the winter comes bringing protest and discontent, they'll introduce new coercion laws to stop all protest that they may silence the discontented.'

Matthew throws a brief and sympathetic look in George's direction. George begins to wonder what he is doing here. 'You talk as if Gladstone never introduced coercion measures into Ireland,' he says at last.

'Gladstone understands the error of his ways,' Jack snaps back. 'George's Uncle Rollo was among the most vocal opponents of the Tenants' Relief Bill.'

'He merely questioned some of the figures,' returns George. 'Where some of the prices of produce had fallen, wool has gone up for instance.'

'Wool!' laughs Jack. He is already quite drunk. 'Yes, well Ireland cannot live on wool alone.'

The air has become heavier than the rain, which lashes against the priory. Matthew tosses biscuits to the red setters curled up before the fireplace. 'Well let's have no more politics tonight,' he says.

'You started the conversation,' answers Jack petulantly.

'Well I am so remote in these barren lands that I feel quite detached from the real world. Lord George, Jack tells me you were unsuccessful in securing a seat this time; what will you do with yourself now?'

'We cannot be detached from politics here,' interrupts Jack who is displaying little appetite for conciliation. Another jerk of the glass brings the butler around again. George turns his head in time to see a flicker of contempt in the butler's eye. He has no liking for his master's young guest. George has never seen Jack behave in such a manner. Matthew appears unperturbed and gives the impression of having almost expected such a scene. 'Politics is in the peat,' continues Jack. 'In the ghosts that stalk this land where nothing grows. We are
only miles from the fields where Irish rebels were massacred in their hundreds for daring to accept the help of the French in delivering them from English tyranny.

Matthew tickles the chin of one of his dogs that has come seeking scraps. ‘Do you believe in ghosts, Lord George?’

‘Just George, please. No. I’m something of a sceptic.’

‘Uncle Rollo would consider it unmanly to believe in ghosts,’ says Jack attempting to coax the dog away from his master. The animal is easily purchased with scraps of fowl.

Matthew and George both ignore Jack.

‘My cousin,’ continues Matthew, ‘from whom I inherited this mausoleum told me that it was once honoured with a visit from Lord Castlereagh, of all people.’

‘One of your lot, George,’ says Jack. ‘

‘I believe he was still a young man,’ says Matthew, ‘long before he entered politics. He was a young army captain and on a night rather like this he lost his way and apparently came knocking looking for shelter. If the story has any credibility then it was my great-grandfather who offered him refuge for the night. I’ve been told that the house was already full to bursting and the servant did not know where to put him. There was only one room downstairs but that was always kept locked and had no furniture. A makeshift bed was provided and a huge fire lit in the grate. So immense was the fire that Castlereagh was afraid to go to sleep until he had removed some of the turf.’

Matthew has a fine voice for telling this story. It reminds George of his Nanny Jacobs. She knew the most terrifying ghost stories. ‘Castlereagh drifted into a deep sleep that lasted perhaps for an hour or two and when he awoke the enormous fire had quite burned itself out, but some strange light emanated from the fireplace and there appeared the phantom of a beautiful boy. Quite naked. But luminous in his beauty. Castlereagh was transfixed but as he moved closer the boy vanished.

‘Castlereagh was convinced he’d had a trick played upon him and was utterly indignant the next morning. My great-grandfather was most appalled that his guest had been quartered in that room but his servant insisted that there had
been no other accommodation and that he had lit an enormous fire in order to keep him from coming out. It transpired that this radiant boy was known to make occasional appearances across the years and the folklore was that whoever saw him always rose to greatness but always met a violent end ... I think we all know how that prophecy was realised with regard to Castlereagh.'

The story has a sobering effect upon Jack. He looks from George to Matthew. ‘It was radiant boys that hunted him to his death,’ says Jack.

‘What do you mean?’ asks George.

‘It’s pretty much known that Castlereagh slashed his own throat because he was being blackmailed by renters.’

George is visibly shocked. He has never heard this version of Castlereagh’s demise. The only story he’s ever been told is that Castlereagh had gone quite mad.

‘Well, that is not actually verified,’ says Matthew. ‘He was being blackmailed, but according to King George, the extortionist was a man who Castlereagh had accompanied to his rooms believing him to be a woman. It transpired that it was a man in a woman’s dress.’

Jack sneers. ‘Yes that is the better version for posterity. The man who brought about the union of Britain and Ireland must not be a known sod. Better that he was a fool who could not recognise a man in a woman’s dress than suggest he was possessed of unnatural appetites that degraded the national character.’

George sits in disbelief as the dogs begin to pester him as the only hand that hasn’t fed them.

‘Think what you may of Castlereagh,’ says Matthew, ‘It is a terrible end for a man of such abilities.’ He turns his eyes coldly upon Jack. ‘Do you not fear the ghosts of radiant boys, Jack?’

Jack replies with a look that speaks of some hidden terror. Jack needs no ghostly sighting for his apparition is always with him. He is haunted. He looks at George. He must be thinking of Tom Osborn too. He turns his eyes back to Matthew. He resolves not to let his conscience rest either. George sees something pass between them. He isn’t certain what. But whatever the look conveyed, it subjugates Matthew to his friend.
‘Of course,’ says Matthew, ‘every remote house in Ireland lays claim to Castlereagh’s story. I’m not sure he ever specified where he encountered this spectre. He must have really lost his way if he ended up here. But let’s not let this evening be stained with Castlereagh’s blood. I drink to the prosperity of my two guests.’ The wearied butler refills their glasses.

‘I’m not sure that prosperity for me can mean prosperity for George and vice versa,’ says Jack.

‘You see ours is a strange kind of friendship,’ says George. ‘It is based upon us having nothing in common.’

‘Oh we have one thing in common,’ says Jack suggestively.

Matthew raises his eyebrows.

George does not meet Jack’s look, nor does he look in the direction of the butler.

The rest of the evening is given up to cards. Jack is still drinking though Matthew has hardly touched a drop and the wine is having little effect upon George. Matthew looks at Jack a good deal. Jack talks a good deal on the subject of money and the need to find himself an heiress. Matthew for the most part ignores him. The evening is stained with the blood of Castlereagh and something else besides. George notices that Jack seldom extends due courtesy to their host and Matthew looks at him reprovingly but the reproof is never uttered. At least Matthew pours himself a very large whisky. George finds himself listening to the rain more than Jack’s prattling. His talk has turned again to the winter ahead and how blood lust is the only thing that grows in infertile regions. He wonders if Jack does not actually hate him, and all for the accident of his birth. Matthew offers him a whisky but George has no desire to stay. At the completion of the game he bids them goodnight, lights a candle and goes upstairs.

‘Watch out for Castlereagh’s radiant boy,’ Jack calls after him.

George is too exhausted to think much on the subject of ghosts. Though it is a perfect night for a haunting or to face a prophecy. He has no idea what his future holds. As he undresses he thinks about Randolph and all the certainty he carries in his ideas. There was a man with the world at his feet. He should spend more time with him and learn. Perhaps he should also find himself a beautiful
rich American wife and father a brace of sons. If he had been elected it would have made his friendship with Jack all the more peculiar.

His ruminations soon give way to sleep but an hour later he is woken; he was dreaming and now he isn’t sure what is real. The tortured moan that jerked him awake was surely not of this world. But the sound of breaking glass certainly is. He hesitates. He wraps his bed blanket around him for his fire has diminished to almost nothing. He gently creeps out into the corridor. He hears raised voices. Drunk voices. Matthew and Jack have still not retired. George descends just three steps.

The whisky has taken its effect upon Matthew. It is a horrible thing to hear his calm and kindly voice deepened by terrible anger. ‘You’ve done very well out of me,’ he hears him say. ‘You sound more and more like an accomplished street renter. Who have you been taking lessons from?’

‘Why did you keep me for as long as you did if it wasn’t from a sense of obligation?’ Jack slurs his words, but his voice is thick with fury.

‘You impressed upon me that obligation. There is little I would not have done for you in those days ... and now. The spell is broken. I have made reparation. If reparation we must call it. I have learned to sleep at night since and now you will know what it is to have your sleep disturbed.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well doesn’t that wretched urchin keep you awake at night?’

‘He’s a criminal who has been sentenced.’

‘Did he deserve his sentence? He is 17. The age you were when we first met in Dublin. The age you were when you first came here.’

‘And you were almost twice my age when you invited me here.’

‘I should never have let you come. But you have done very well out of me. What start in life would you have had if not for me? Your demands became more and more incessant. You preyed upon my guilt.’

‘You ruined me.’

‘Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that you ruined me. And this Osborn boy, who ruined him to begin with? You said he was a criminal who has been sentenced. Has he not been punished for doing the very thing you have been doing to me for these twelve years or more?”
'Don’t you dare compare our situations.'

‘This is just Caliban reacting to his own reflection,’ says Matthew, ‘And you are befriending this unionist creature just because you want to lead him astray, ruin him.’

‘You know nothing about it.’

‘Then why such a peculiar alliance? You hate and loathe his sort.’

George takes the fourth step but almost cries out as a light suddenly illuminates the staircase. It isn’t Castlereagh or his radiant boy. It is the butler with his candle. He barely notices George. He is listening to the loud drunken whispering that he has heard in this house many times before.

‘Can I get you anything, milord?’ he asks.

‘No, thank you,’ returns George. ‘I was just on my way back to my room.’

George returns, shivering, to his room leaving the butler immobile at the top of the stairs. He places another blanket over his bed. He has seldom felt cold like this. He wishes he hadn’t come. He lies awake; the smell of the burnt peat in the fireplace offends him. He thinks of Castlereagh and contemplates the truth of the story he has heard tonight. He also thinks about Jack and everything he doesn’t know about him.

---

Chapter Seven

The Commons has adjourned for the Christmas recess. Randolph has worn everyone out. His own party are more tired and scarred than the opposition. He has been summoned to Windsor to call on the Queen. Rumours circulate that she is not pleased. Meanwhile the grubby headlines swimming on snow-flecked newspapers are full of the Campbell divorce. Just the other day twelve jurymen were driven to the home of Lord Colin Campbell MP and one by one they knelt down before the dining room keyhole to ascertain if it were possible that the servants saw as much of Lady Colin’s indiscretions upon the table as they claimed.
George has just arrived at Torrington. He is greeted by the sight of the Christmas tree that stands more than twelve feet tall in the enormous entrance hall. It is beautiful. It moves him more than he would have expected. He thinks of his brother and imagines them again as two little boys. He would rather have stayed in London this year. Torrington feels lonely. It was as though Walter were dead, except no one wears mourning colours. George also dreads the inevitability of interrogation in the great dining room tonight. His father has been one of Randolph’s most vocal opponents in recent months. Even Rollo has begun to distance himself from his old ally. George feels compromised by his uncle’s betrayal. Rollo has elected not to bring his contingent to Torrington this year and instead they will spend Christmas in Chester Square. ‘It doesn’t feel like the right time to leave,’ Rollo had said. This had puzzled George. ‘What could possibly happen now?’ he had asked. ‘There will be nobody in London to make trouble.’ Rollo hadn’t answered him.

On the train journey to Somerset George has had the companionship of his young nephew. Lord Somers has reluctantly sanctioned that the Duke and Duchess have custody of their only grandson until New Year’s Day. He relented on the condition that Walter would not be there and that George would have charge of his nephew; he made a point of saying that he regarded George as quite a different creature than his brother.

‘He’s looking too thin. Much too thin. And pale,’ is his mother’s verdict on the child at dinner. ‘You and your brother were such robust little boys when you were six.’ Nobody yet has dared mention Walter tonight. The Duke’s face, as ever, betrays nothing. He doesn’t want to discuss family. He wants to discuss politics.

‘They were fat little boys, Mamma. I think Little Walter looks perfectly normal,’ says Lady Blanche, the elder of George’s two younger sisters.

‘Have Lord and Lady Randolph gone to Blenheim already, George?’ asks the Duchess.

‘No,’ he returns after a petulant pause. ‘They never go to Blenheim at Christmas. It is always Dublin. Lord Randolph is at Windsor tonight. The Queen sent for him.’

The Duke grunts over his claret. ‘Perhaps the Queen wishes to know exactly what he has got against the defence of her realm.’
George bristles. ‘Sir, I thought it was the job of the Chancellor of the Exchequer to find means of retrenchment?’

‘What message do his measures give out to the rest of Europe? Retrenchment at any risk? No doubt the Czar would love to see a falling off of our armaments. The Liberals reduced our navy to a shadow of what it ought to have been and when we got back in it was our duty to restore it to what it should be – the finest in Europe.’

‘And yet if his plans to reduce income tax come off he will be everyone’s hero,’ retorts George defensively.

‘I do think you underestimate him, Papa,’ says Lady Juliette, the youngest of the Duke’s children. ‘The Tories would never have got back in without him.’

‘Or Lady Randolph’s canvassing,’ says Blanche. ‘And his own constituents were only too happy to foot the bill of his election costs.’

‘You’re wrong if you think the party wouldn’t survive without him,’ the Duke says, refusing to look at his son. ‘Nobody’s indispensable.’

The Duke is like most of the rest of the House of Lords. He thinks Churchill is dangerous for the party; that he represents its demise and not its future. The Duke despises democracy. Particularly in his own household. But there is a change in him. A bewildered look intrudes upon his face from time to time even in the unremarkable and familiar setting of the family dining room. This is not the world he was born into. The woman at the end of the table resembles less and less the wife he married. His children are unknown quantities who may defy or betray him. This year he has dodged the shadow of his eldest son into places he little knew existed. He left those places a bereaved father. He has buried Walter deep beneath his disappointed hopes. His hopes for his family rest on his grandson for whom he must bargain with an unforgiving puritan to have the joy of seeing.

George and his sisters feel the absence of their brother tonight. There is terrible cruelty in mourning one who is still alive. He sees his mother’s sadness in her silence. Blanche and Juliette are making a great deal of noise in order to distract everyone from the vacancy.

‘How long are you staying, George?’ asks his mother.

‘Until the thirtieth.’
'You’re not staying for New Year’s Eve?'

'No,'

'Why aren’t you staying for New Year?’ There is dread in Blanche’s voice. She is resentful of her brother’s freedom to come and go and not to shoulder the burden of their parents’ unhappiness.

'I’m going to Dublin.’

'To see Randolph?’ demands his father.

'No Jack Worsley invited me away with some of his friends.’

'You’re missing the New Year’s Day shoot because you are going to Ireland with a gathering of Home Rulers?!'

'It’s not a gathering of Home Rulers, sir. Merely a small party of friends.’

'How is it you know this absurd young Radical? Who’d ever heard of him before he was elected?’

'I was introduced to him by Randolph.’

The Duke follows this with a contemptuous snarl. ‘And who else will you be breaking bread with? Perhaps you’ll be breakfasting with Parnell and discussing how best to hand Ireland over to the mob?’

'I don’t think introducing another coercion bill will do any good if that’s what you mean,’ answers George snappishly.

The Duke’s face reddens. It isn’t only anger at his son’s insolence. George has never spoken to him like that before. He used to think his brother Rollo a liability, but George is worse, infinitely worse. There is too much excitement in the boy’s voice. Passion he supposes he should call it. The Duke has a good deal of property in Ireland. Times have been hard over there, and he, like Randolph’s mother the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough, has extended a great deal of charity to the Irish poor. Just as his father had forty years ago during the time of the famine. He believes reports of Irish discontent are stirred up by troublemakers like Parnell who is himself an Irish landlord – a traitor if ever there was one.

George resolves to have his say. ‘If we don’t make concessions to Ireland we’ll lose the union altogether. The very heart of Empire will be broken. The landlord assassinations will be the least of it. There’ll be uprisings and bloodshed. Murder in the thousands. Revolution if you like.'
The Duchess shoots her son a pleading glance. Blanche tries to silence her brother with a shake of her head while Juliette glances nervously at their father.

‘It is Randolph that will take us to revolution. Make too many concessions and people always want more.’

‘But even Disraeli knew we had to court the common vote. Churchill knows it too. The country is under reform; there’s no going back now.’

‘So whatever the common man wants he should get? Is that your argument? And whatever the Irish want we should serve it to them on a salver?’

‘All George means, Papa, is that we may have to moderate some of the old ideas and that there is more to think about than there used to be,’ says Blanche.

But no conciliations are to be made tonight. The Duke demands that his eldest daughter hold her tongue. Things haven’t changed that much that her contribution is required.

‘All I mean Father,’ says George, ‘is that Randolph is the best chance the party has at lasting a full term and beyond. He may be young but he is the best man of either House. He has more energy and resource than anyone else. He’ll not only save the union and the party, he’ll save the whole Empire.’

‘He’ll destroy it with his Radical sympathies.’

‘He’ll save it with progress!’

George’s colour matches his father’s.

The Duke’s napkin is suddenly hurled into the centre of the table. The Duchess flinches. The girls don’t move. The servants don’t breathe. The Duke rises; he stumbles and falls on the arm of his chair for support. The butler moves forward to help him but the Duke curses him and pushes him away. He can be heard mounting the staircase screaming for his valet. Even the snow falling outside is more audible than any murmur of conversation as the family concludes their dinner.

George barely sleeps that night. He goes to his window. What would Walter make of his behaviour tonight? The Duke and his eldest son seldom quarrelled and usually only over money. Walter had the luxury of not being interested in politics. His destiny was carved out for him; at least it had been. But George cannot help but be proud of having championed Randolph tonight; though he is
ashamed at picking a fight with his father when he knows that he is heartbroken. The whole house is stale with the taste of loss.

He wonders if Randolph is still at Windsor and what the Queen wanted with him. He wonders what Jack what make of his performance tonight. His talk of Ireland grew from everything Jack had shown him out there. The half-starved peasants scratching a living in sterile earth; the drenched bog-lands that yielded nothing. He paces up and down and no rest can be had though a terrible premonition drains his body of energy.

George finally goes to sleep about five thirty and consequently sleeps in until gone ten. His mother will be annoyed at his decadence. His father will assume he is hiding. Outside the ground is a perfect white and the air is crisp. Sometimes things really do look better in the morning. He begins to concede that he might have needed a rest from London after all.

There is a knock at the door. 'Come in,' calls George absently. His father's valet Mandeville enters. He is carrying The Times. Mandeville never comes to dress him; besides he hasn't rung.

'Begging your pardon milord but his Grace asked me to bring you this.'

'I'm in no hurry for it if my father hasn't finished with it.'

But Mandeville has already brought it close enough for George to see Churchill's name in the form of a headline sitting on top of the word, 'Resigns'.

It is the worst thing he has ever read.

It is shock that pulsates through him. But it is not shock alone. It is betrayal. It is the pain of infidelity. His heart breaks and breaks again. He wants to shut out the noise of the world. He wants an amount of laudanum potent enough to quieten the pain of a hundred wounded men. One thing is certain. He will not stay here to listen to his father gloating. He will travel back to London today. His parents will be angry. His sisters will be furious and jealous of the liberty that allows him to come and go on a whim. He will use the excuse that everyone will be returning to London after this news. It could lead to another leadership crisis. The pack will be reshuffled and new hands dealt.
Jack is at the Knightsbridge skating rink. The ice is a hunting ground for good-looking athletic boys looking for a rich gentleman to take them somewhere to warm up. Jack is quite adept on his skates. He enjoys the admiring looks he gets from young ladies. It would be very easy for him to marry he thinks. Perhaps he should think about finding himself an heiress. He wonders if he could pull it off.

There was probably somewhere very important he should be right now. Labby would be in some hole-and-corner meeting discussing the opportunities afforded by Randolph’s resignation. But Jack cannot tear himself away from the promise of the afternoon. As he does another lap around the rink he is suddenly aware of his being watched.

His observer is a lad of about 18 or 19. He has a devilish and knowing grin. Jack is stationary while the boy skates in a figure of eight around him before finally stopping.

‘You skate well,’ says Jack.
‘I love to skate. I’m here all day every day,’ says the boy.
‘All day? Every day? How is that? Skating won’t make your fortune you know.’

‘I have other means of making my fortune.’
‘I’ve no doubt,’ returns Jack.

One more exchange of smiles and a bargain is struck between the Radical MP and the nameless renter as London Society whirls around them and the name of Lord Randolph Churchill frequently rises in the air like sparks thrown from a fire.

‘It’s getting rather cold,’ says Jack. ‘Have you somewhere we can go?”

‘Come with me,’ says the boy.

They turn in their skates. Jack hails a cab and the boy gives him an address in Victoria.

As the cab rattles on Jack observes the boy closely. There is something vaguely familiar about him. He half wonders if he has paid for his services before. Every jolt on the icy roads threatens to jar a recognition. But nothing comes.

The hansom finds its destination in an unassuming little backstreet not far from Victoria station. The address is a rather ugly accommodation house but Jack
has had assignations in worse places and it is safer than taking his pick-up home. The boy lets himself in with a latchkey.

The stairwell is cold. Jack wishes he had a strong drink to take the edge off. Other rooms are occupied. He hears a baby’s cry and the noise of a rough man shouting. The renter opens a room at the top of the house. There is no fire in the grate and the sheets look dirty. Jack decides that this will be a very brief encounter and shuts the door abruptly behind them. The boy stares at him coquettishly until Jack pulls him forward and devours his face, biting his bottom lip and putting him on the bed, removing his trousers. His blood is up. The boy makes no effort to touch him and merely stares at him with lifeless eyes. Jack is undeterred. He has one hand on the boy’s cock when he is suddenly aware of an icy draught stealing upon his neck and a presence behind him. The boy has seen it too. Jack turns slowly into the stare of Mother Clap.

Her terrible face betrays her triumph for only a moment before it is contorted with feigned outrage. The boy springs up off the bed covering himself with false modesty.

‘What is this?’ she says. ‘What foul assault were you about to commit on my son, sir?’

Jack can hear his own heart. It is beating with such ferocity that it threatens to burst out of his chest. The recognition seeps into his soul. The devilish and knowing grin upon his pick-up’s face is the same that haunts his nightmares. This is Tom’s brother.

Lizzie Osborn closes the door behind her.

‘This is entrapment,’ he says.

‘What if it is?’ says Lizzie. Her voice sounds like wheels upon gravel. ‘If I were to scream this house down how would you explain your presence here and your intentions towards this boy?’

‘I will not be threatened,’ says Jack and makes towards the door but she bars it with her stick.

‘Not too hasty,’ she says.

She holds his stare while waving her hand at the boy. ‘The letters,’ she says. From the inside of his jacket he produces two folded pieces of paper and places them in her hand. Jack recognises his own scrawl upon them. They were not
much. He knew better than to pen anything too revealing. One was little more than address that he'd scribbled down for Tom. But they might be enough. He will not prolong the agony of this and reaches for his purse but before he can open it, Tom’s brother snatches it from his hands and pours its measly contents into his palm. The woman sneers. ‘That won’t go far!’ she says. ‘The ruby ring for starters.’

Jack is horrified. It is the last worldly possession that he would willingly surrender.

‘I’d have thought that poor Tom’s example would be enough to deter you from these practices,’ he says.

‘I have the proof of papers in my hands. I know who you are Mr Jack Worsley, the Honourable Member for Poplar East. I know where you live. Who you see and speak to. You will find your way to obliging us.’ The woman has no mercy in her face. She might not be content until she has stripped him of everything he has. The fingers of his right hand close around his ring. He has a choice. He either surrenders or like Marling he goes to find a police constable and puts everything at risk. He has left residues of his secret life all over London. He imagines Labby stirring his milk and talking about the insufficiency of Jack’s prison sentence and how he has discredited the party.

‘I will give you the ring only in return for those letters.’

‘The ring is your insurance that I will not scream the house down. The letters will have to be paid for by other means. I want a hundred pounds for them each.’

Jack involuntarily laughs. The worst thing he could do to inflame her wrath. Lizzie Osborn hates to be laughed at. Two hundred pounds is half of his yearly stipend. He is already in debt by that much.

‘I could not raise such an amount,’ he says. ‘Not if my life depended upon it.’

‘Three evenings hence we shall meet you on Waterloo Bridge where you will bring the money. If not I cannot answer for what will become of those letters.’

‘How do I know that it will be the end of the matter?’ he asks.

‘I suppose you can only take my word,’ she says. Jack feels as though had they been alone he would have beaten the residual life out of her.
The boy holds his hand out and receives the ring. He puts it upon his finger. To Jack it feels like watching someone assume his identity.

Jack walks home. He has no cab fare after all. There is mockery in the sound of the carollers that are gathered outside Victoria station. A girl steps forward to shake her tin at him but he has nothing to put in it. A few hours since he might have made as merry a Christmas as any man in London. He needs advice. Legal advice. He knows many lawyers. And he knows just as many who will have nothing to do with the matter if they suspect Jack's guilt.

But in London at this time there lives a lawyer whose name has passed the lips of many of nature's inverts. He has made quite a lucrative career out of rescuing the sodomite from the blackmailer. He is not afraid of their guilt. Indeed he thrives on it. It is meat and drink to him. A visit to Mr Arthur Abrahams is as commons among wealthy sodomite as a visit to the clap doctor.

Chapter Nine

Mr Abrahams's offices are situated opposite Marlborough Street Police Court. Jack's is a strange kind of business for Christmas Eve. He doesn't know how he will possibly pay for Abrahams's assistance either. This man has the reputation of charging the most exorbitant fees. The paperboys are growing hoarse from calling out the name of Lord Randolph Churchill. He wonders what it is like to become so notorious. So much the subject of speculation and gossip. This is the first shred of sympathy he has felt for Randolph since the news broke.

He believes he has slept for all of an hour. When he finally did drift off he had been awakened by the cry of 'Poor froze-out gardeners,' from the destitute fellows gathered on the pavement below. He imagines himself among them – a poor froze-out parliamentarian with a character so blackened that even the hand of charity is closed to him.

The morning traffic has made a perilous ice-rink of the streets. Jack hails a cab. It might be Christmas Eve but tempers are frayed and curses rise into the air
as freely as seasonal salutations. His own driver is given to a good deal of swearing.

The lights are burning in the windows of the police courts. There will be much business conducted there before the day is done. Most trades truncate their working hours and the young apprentices pour into the public houses with their Christmas bonuses. Trains are missed, dinners are spoiled, and heads are broken.

The roar of Oxford Street is only one street removed but Jack feels that his cab is retreating further and further from civilisation. It comes to a sudden halt. The court narrows ahead and the cabbie realises that he will not have sufficient room to turn. For all his penchant for filthy language he is very attentive to his young gent alighting safely.

Jack watches the cabbie leave with a sensation of regret. He feels like the little mermaid going to seek the help of the sea witch and God only knew what premium she might want in return for her help. In the fairy tale, he remembers how the mermaid could only reach the witch’s lair by swimming across barren lands where the fingers of polyps reached out and attempted to entrap her. She saw languishing in their snare the debris of sunken ships, the bones of drowned sailors, and the skeleton of another little mermaid that had been strangled in their tentacles. Jack almost expects to find the court strewn with strangled sodomites. Men who could not pay the wages of their sins and ended up as corpses in the coils of their blackmailers. He imagines navigating a forest of hungry renters wearing the watches, rings and bank notes of their unhappy victims. This fog-choked Christmas Eve where most men are out buying presents for loved ones finds Jack here. He cannot help but feel perverse.

The lobby of Mr Abrahams’s office is silent but for the scratching of the pen of Mr Abraham’s clerk and the clock that measures his toil. A young foot soldier is seated in one corner. His pill-box hat is peppered with snow. He looks up at Jack with some interest. A smile spreads across his smooth face. Jack knows a renter when he sees one. He does not return the smile. At this moment he feels as though he might not touch another man as long as he lives.

The clerk looks up. He is too dark to have been born on English soil but there is nothing foreign in his accent. His eyes pass slowly over Jack and a flicker
of interest is soon extinguished. Jack gives him his card and asks if Mr Abrahams could possibly give him ten minutes. The clerk replies that Mr Abrahams is currently with a client but Jack is invited to wait.

He does not sit down. He wishes to put as much distance as possible between himself and the soldier. He studies the young private's reflection in an obliging looking glass. His teeth are yellowed but the jaw strong and the face remarkably handsome. The doom of any number of unfortunates is etched into those features.

The soldier stands suddenly as his companion emerges from Abrahams's inner sanctum. This fellow has none of his friend's physical attractions; indeed he is ugly and wears the marks of a life spent in ugly pursuits. There is an absence of teeth but the face is jovial and satisfied. He waves a thick envelope under the soldier's nose. The soldier looks upon it with the same gratification as the butcher's boy looks upon his Christmas box. He snatches the envelope and counts the bills. There is at least ten pounds. Between them they are no doubt sucking the lifeblood of some old gentleman who has been no more sensible than Jack.

'I knew the old feller would come through for us in the end,' says the soldier. 'It looks to be a Merry Christmas after all. I hope you gave Mr Abrahams my best regards.'

His ugly companion turns to the clerk. 'Season's greetings, Mr De Gallo. Tell Mr Abrahams I shall bring him plenty more business in the New Year.'

De Gallo does not answer. The soldier signs for his present, dusts the snow off his hat, and the two fellows leave to commence a day's hard drinking. It is difficult for Jack not to look upon that scarlet tunic without some measure of lust and he hopes the soldier doesn't take it into his head to wait for him. The biting cold and the anxiety of this meeting would be enough to ensnare him into a brief encounter before any consideration of the soldier's brawnniness and jaw ... his good skin. De Gallo brings him back to the moment. 'One minute if you please sir and I will see if Mr Abrahams is available.'

An old sensation rises within Jack as the clerk goes into Abrahams's office. It is like being sent to the headmaster for a flogging. But there is no knowing how severe the strokes of Mr Abrahams will be.
De Gallo reappears within two minutes and says that Mr Abrahams has half an hour before he has to cross the road to the police courts, but he can see Mr Worsley now.

Mr Arthur Abrahams is sitting at his desk. He must be at least six-foot-four, and rather imposingly built. Indeed Jack finds it almost impossible to calculate the man's age. The face is young but the eyes are not. His hair is jet black and grows thickly upon his head and his temples. There is a smell in the room familiar to anyone who spends his days in the House of Commons. It is the smell of ambition. But there is something mixed with it. The politics in here are even dirtier. This lawyer has found an unusual road to prosperity and it is paved with the sodomites' soul.

Abrahams sits among files, masses of them and boxes with padlocks. It feels more like a bank than a lawyer's office. The analogy is a good one as a good many assets are secured in these boxes. Not in the way of deeds or bonds, but love letters. Letters of love (or lust) that have passed between men. Men who are not wise enough to burn after reading. Men who have lost the originals only to receive copies in a poor scrawl accompanied by demands for cash. So many terrified men who have sat in the chair now occupied by Jack.

'I came to you Mr Abrahams,' begins Jack, 'as I have heard something of your reputation for discretion when dealing with cases of a most difficult and delicate variety, especially difficult and delicate for a man in the public eye.'

Jack thinks he can see the tremble of a smile on Mr Abrahams's mouth.

The truth is that Jack is very far from being the first Member of Parliament who has sought the help of the sea witch.

'I have recently been the subject of some annoyance from a most unpleasant class of person,' says Jack. His eyes will not leave the lawyer. They will not betray complicity or anything resembling shame. 'A woman of my acquaintance is trying to extract money from me. She and her son...’ In his concentration on Mr Abrahams's mouth he loses his train of thought. 'They are threatening to accuse me of an abominable crime.'

'Abominable crime?' repeats Abrahams with a forced note of inquisitiveness.

Jack wonders if he is really being called upon to say it.
‘They mean to accuse me of sodomy’ says Jack.

Abrahams receives Jack’s admission coolly. His face betrays nothing. ‘Perhaps you can tell me the sum of your association with these people?’

Jack’s eyes roam the office and take in the padlocks and other curiosities including a rather ancient looking prayer book coming apart at the seams. ‘It is a story I’m certain that you have heard many times before. I made the acquaintance of a young man at the Knightsbridge skating rink. We fell into conversation when he asked me for the time. He was a pleasant companion and we talked for a bit before he suggested a drink. It was when we were on our way to a public house where we encountered, no doubt by appointment, a rather elderly and hysterical woman. It was she who implied I was about to commit some obscene assault on the young man.’

Abrahams’s face conveys neither belief nor disbelief. ‘What position in life did this young man hold?’ he asks.

‘I did not ask him,’ Jack replies with a note of annoyance. ‘We had literally just met upon the rink.’ He is in danger of stumbling over his words like William Marling in the Old Bailey.

‘But which walk of life would you place him in? From his dress and manner of speaking did you deduce that he was an educated man? Was he a gentleman for instance?’

There was something jagged in the way Abrahams said gentlemen. Like words treading on broken glass. ‘No,’ says Jack. ‘I would not say he was a gentleman.’ He is momentarily quiet. ‘But he struck me as being most respectable.’ He inwardly cringes. Respectable was the term housemaids gave their followers when the butler caught them arm-in-arm in the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. ‘He seemed a most respectable sort of person,’ she said as she bled to death on the abortionist’s table. ‘I picked the boy up with the intention of buggering the life out of him,’ is what Jack wants to say. He cannot tell if Abrahams would like him the better for it.

‘You suggest there was a conspiracy between the young man and the old woman. Had you encountered either of them before?’

‘Well,’ says Jack. ‘I had seen the woman before. It occurred to me later that I had observed her some months ago when I attended a trial at the Old Bailey.'
'Did you speak to her?'

'No. But I was aware that she had noticed me.'

'And which trial did you attend?'

The clatter of Oxford Street pierces their conversation. Such festive joviality is running up and down the streets and they sit here discussing such business. Now Jack has to say the name of Tom Osborn. 'I knew him as a boy who used to run errands for me,' he says. 'He was charged with extortion by means of threatening to accuse a man of the same ... offence. He was found guilty and sentenced for life.' He speaks quickly and his words convey nothing but irritation. He wants to say, 'I saw you there,' but thinks better of it.

Abrahams nods in recognition. 'Are you aware of the relationship between this woman and the young convict?'

'I believe she is his mother.'

'Adoptive mother,' Abrahams corrects him.

'You know her?' asks Jack, astonished and rather frightened by the look of gravity that bleeds into Abrahams's face.

'I know of her. She is one of those characters that fate has conspired to spare from falling foul of the law time and time again. There have been short spells in prison but she has never been tried for her greatest crimes.'

'Her son has not been so fortunate. She is surely the most unnatural creature by way of a mother that ever walked God's earth?'

Abrahams looks rather pensive. Almost as if it were a story he would rather not tell. Almost as though the woman was before him now, filling his face with terror. 'Mrs Osborn did not marry early,' he says. 'She worked for many years in domestic service before marrying a groom. When it was clear there would be no children they adopted two boys. Two peculiarly handsome children. It was early in their childhood when their father was kicked by a horse and severely incapacitated. He was confined to his bed after this with no means of providing for his family. Mrs Osborn was employed then as she is now as a laundress at the St Martin's Baths. But it was precious little to keep her family and the husband required much in the way of medical attention. When they were no more than 13 or 14, she found that her best means of putting bread on the table and paying for the doctor lay in the uncommon attractiveness of her
children. She was a woman of the world and she knew that there was an income to be had there. A trade...’ His eyes meet Jack’s and there is something accusatory in them.

Jack’s own stare melts like butter under Abrahams’s glare. He looks at the mark left where his Ruby ring had been. He looks at the hands that had handled Tom. What had Tom’s life been but a series of men who touched him?

Abrahams continues, ‘The boys made prostitution their profession but also began to run with companions of the worst sort who also saw the value in their faces and used them as decoys in their entrapments.’

‘Mrs Osborn used her other son in such a fashion. She spoke to me with such hatred and yet it was she who led her children into such practices. No doubt she strikes at me out of a sense of guilt.’ There is too much emotion in Jack’s voice. He is incriminating himself.

Mr Abrahams looks at him very directly. ‘I must ask. Was there anything in your relationship with either son that would make you vulnerable to blackmail?’

‘Tom used to run errands for me,’ Jack says, proffering once again the line that he rehearsed into the small hours of this morning. ‘Mrs Osborn has notes in my hand that could be open to misconstruction.’

‘I see,’ says Abrahams. To Jack, the lawyer looks almost bored, as though he were contemplating how honesty in one of these endless cases would lend them more of a novelty. These blackmailing types understand the premium attached to public life and they mean to make the most of it.’

‘I understand the danger as well as you do, Mr Abrahams. It is the premium of my situation, as you call it, which made me come to you instead of the police. I want this put away for life without having any tongues wagging behind my back. I don’t need to tell you what the other side of the House would do if they got hold of it. I have the good name of my party to think about as well as my own.’ He stops himself. He is making his own case for an exorbitant fee.

‘I always find in these situations that it is best to find out exactly what this class of persons wants. There is usually something finite that can persuade them to go away.’

‘If I could only get the notes back then that would make an end of it.’
'There is much a lawyer can do in the way of frightening,' says Abrahams. 'I suppose you have made an appointment to meet these people again.'

'Yes.'

'I will go in your place and see what offer they will accept. It may not be cheap.'

'I expected as much,' returns Jack, although he has no idea how he will pay for it. He gives Abrahams the time and day he was to meet Mrs Osborn and her son on Waterloo Bridge.

Mr De Gallo suddenly appears. It is time for Mr Abrahams to cross the road to the police courts. Abrahams observes how keenly Jack stares at the old prayer book.

'It's a curiosity isn't it, Mr Worsley? I inherited an assortment of odd things from my grandfather's practice. This prayer book belonged to one of the last men in this country to be hanged for sodomy. He was a young fellow of six and twenty. It was said that he did not make a good end and that the crowd jeered at his effeminate screams as he was put upon the scaffold.' Abrahams speaks slowly and watches Jack as the words take hold on his imagination. He builds a scaffold for him and watches Jack climb it. But Jack stops short of the drop.

'That is a most peculiar curiosity to keep in your office, Mr Abrahams,' he returns with gentle disgust.

George has also risen early. He has been to call upon his uncle to discover why he has turned his back upon Randolph, the man who secured his cabinet post. But he is not at home at Chester Square and nor is Lady Roland. It begins to snow again. The day is dark. He walks home by way of the market and observes small children scavenging for orange peel. He has no small coin on his person to toss them. There is little mercy to be found in this city and the carolling is a conspiracy to silence the sounds of want. The snow hardens and it is aided in its assault by a battering wind.

He is on the point of turning his key in his front door when he becomes aware of a presence hurrying up behind him. He turns his head to the left to
observe the approaching figure. It is a boy holding on to his hat and running against the wind with great purpose.

‘Beg your pardon sir,’ he says as soon as he is within speaking distance. Are you Lord George Caversham?’

‘Yes,’

‘I have a note for you from Lord Caversham.’

‘Lord Caversham?’

‘Lord Roland Caversham.’

‘You’d better come in,’ says George, with both fate and wind conspiring that it should be so. The boy shuffles in behind him. Between them they walk a good deal of snow into the carpet. The naked hand of the errand boy passes the note into the gloved fingers of the gentleman. The note is damp despite it having been in the inside pocket of the boy’s coat. It has been addressed from the Marlborough Club.

‘I cannot read it by this light,’ says George. ‘You had better come up. There may be a reply.’

In the improved light of his sitting room where his elusive manservant has already laid the fire he can better take in his uncle’s communication. It is merely a summons to go to dine with the family that evening. He goes to his desk to write the reply and notices the errand boy standing nervously on the threshold of his chambers.

‘You’d better come in and warm yourself at the fire before you catch your death,’ he says.

‘Thank you, sir,’ says the boy. A vague Suffolk dialect is suppressed in his manner of speaking. He moves in the manner of a country boy that has just arrived in the city. He stands before the fire. His winter coat is far too thin. He removes it to reveal his sodden Marlborough livery. His cap he also removes to reveal a mess of wet black curls. He moves his hands though them shaking water droplets upon the carpet. He takes another step nearer the fire, almost dangerously close George thinks to himself, and the flames illuminate his unusual beauty. George scribbles without looking at the paper for his eyes are watching the flickering shadows on those expressive brown eyes. George has been transported straight to Hell. This is what it is to come alive with desire. If he
were Jack ... if he were only Jack he'd have the boy over this desk. The boy would leave only when George's desire had been sated.

The young fellow feels his stare; perhaps he also feels a heat beyond that thrown out by the fire. George returns to his note. He is not Jack. Jack writes with a far finer hand. 'Please give this reply to Lord Roland,' he says. He cannot trust himself to look at the boy as he hands him the note. 'What do they call you?' he asks.

'Allies. Algernon Allies.'

Algernon Allies bows and leaves but not without taking a lingering look at George's rooms and the crested ring upon his finger.

Chapter Ten

A terrific snowstorm on Boxing Day night has left London paralysed all day. The snow, which this morning lay eight inches deep, was a belated Christmas offering, a bounty for the unemployed as hundreds were suddenly in the pay of the city, clearing the streets and tossing snow into the Thames.

Arthur Abrahams walks a long way before he finds a hansom. He waves it down but the cab is slow to stop and the cabbie is non-communicative. His face is almost entirely concealed by layers of scarves. The floor of the cab is dirty with discarded newspapers and blackened snow.

Down upon the Strand, the great thoroughfare is deserted. The memory of its furore is ghost-like for nothing is louder here than the crunch of black ice beneath the horse's hooves and carriage wheels. Snow drops in little thuds from street signs and lamp-posts. Even Charing Cross station gives all the appearance of having fallen permanently out of use. The cab stops at Waterloo Bridge. Abrahams wishes the cabbie would exhibit some symptom of life for the long desolate stretch of bridge makes him feel lonely. Loneliness and unease of any kind are uncommon enough sentiments for the lawyer. He asks the cabbie to wait but somewhere beneath the myriad folds of his scarves, the cabbie mumbles his disinclination to do so and drives away in the direction of Fleet Street.
No figure or vehicle breaks the monotony of the crossing. There is not a living soul to respond should he be set upon. He stares towards Westminster but even the familiar chimes of Big Ben will not offer those strikes of comforting familiarity for the clock’s hands were stopped by the cold at twenty-five past nine this morning. All communication has been cut off as telegraph lines have been felled in their hundreds, making great webs of wire in the streets. Time is suspended. The heart of the city has ceased to beat. Abrahams shivers and pulls the corners of his great coat over his mouth. He stares into the darkness and listens for her footfall but he expects to be disappointed.

He will certainly charge Mr Jack Worsley a very exorbitant fee for this. He is about to give up when suddenly he can hear her. He can hear her cane scraping upon the floor before he sees her. She is alone. He doesn’t go half way to meet her but watches as she traces his silhouette and her movements respond to her recognition.

‘You,’ she says. ‘I should have known it would be you. The keeper of the bugger’s soul.’

‘And there’s you that understands the trade better than the devil himself,’ he replies.

She laughs almost greedily, savouring the humour in the tragedy of her life. She does understand the trade as well as any city merchant understands his. ‘Yet I still haven’t made my fortune,’ she returns with the menace of a person who isn’t giving up.

‘Mr Worsley won’t make your fortune,’ says Abrahams. ‘From what I can tell he hasn’t get a penny to bless himself with.’

‘He’s a Member of Parliament.’

‘But he’s not from any great family and is quite alone in the world from what I can tell.’

‘I shall squeeze whatever I can from him.’

Abrahams traces the outline of Cleopatra’s needle. ‘You would squeeze more from a riper fruit,’ he answers.

‘What do you mean?’ she says. Her defences are strong against any attempt to weaken her resolve. The woman does not appear to feel the north-easterly wind that whips their faces.
‘I mean,’ says Abrahams, ‘if he gives into your demands now the best he can offer you is twenty pounds, but if you wait, only wait ... they say he will be an eminent man. I would not imagine that he is much more than thirty. He is at the start of his career. The first flush of his life has not faded. That fruit will ripen and then squeeze him. If he rises to be at the heart of political life then who knows which hands might contribute to a fund to purchase your silence? Do you take much interest in politics, Mrs Osborn?’

She rolls her eyes contemptuously.

‘I would read the newspapers, Mrs Osborn. Read how favourably young Mr Worsley is written about in The Pall Mall Gazette. That periodical predicts great things for him. As he grows in power, you will be more powerful than him for you have the means to destroy him utterly. Keep those means close to you for they are the most precious things in your keeping. If we were to carve him up between us now there would not be a morsel fat enough to satisfy either of us. But when the time comes I will show you how to strike.’

Lizzie Osborn inwardly writhes at the assault of his wisdom. She yields unwillingly to the truth of his words and her starving body retreats from the immediate gratification of the morsel that would sate her now. She will follow Jack Worsley and watch him, praying that he will be touched by the hand of good fortune, for in his prosperity lies the promise of her own.

‘But what if he should not prosper?’ she says. ‘What if others should find him out and take what is rightfully mine, or expose him to the world for the pervert he is making the papers in my hand worthless?’

Abrahams must now acknowledge the possibilities in her reservation. But he sees the same potential in Jack that Sir Charles Dilke had also recognised. ‘We must have faith in his cleverness. We must believe that he is too intelligent and brilliant a man too put himself in harm’s way again.’

Lizzie turns away as if she has no faith in the brilliance or abilities of men, especially when they are at the mercy of what they keep in their trousers. No man is brilliant enough to withstand those demands and she and many others have lived off such weakness. It is beginning to snow again. Abrahams offers her his arm that they may return to the street together but she won’t let him touch her and tells him to walk on ahead. So Abrahams leaves her there. He looks back
with fascination. For twenty years she had been impaling men on the stakes of their own desires, and Abrahams had come to watch them flail. He turns his head just one more time to observe the strange solitary figure presiding over the stagnant city, opening and closing her hand as though calling in a debt.

Chapter Eleven

Jack and George have mutually agreed to cancel their plans to spend New Year in Dublin; both find themselves in altered circumstances. Jack has Abrahams's assurance that he succeeded in frightening Lizzie Osborn off; he was not able to retrieve Jack's ring, which Jack would have been forced to pawn in any case in order to pay Abrahams's fee. He must find something else to sell. He is tired of the poverty that is grinding the life out of him. A half-written begging letter to Matthew sits upon his bureau. He can no longer dress his extortions up as professions of friendship; Matthew had called him Caliban, and he was right. When Jack did at last look at his own reflection he traced his resemblance to Tom Osborn. His own methods were gentler, but it was blackmail. He was no less guilty than the boy walking around and around the prison exercise yard. Jack often walks with him; even when he is seated in the Commons, he is making that same endless rotation, and he imagines that he leans in to Tom to offer some words of consolation but the prison guard always silences him before the words can be spoken. Just as well really for Jack does not begin to know what those words might be that could make some atonement for the semi-starvation wasting the beauty from that face; for those hands being bloodied and broken by the picking of oakum; for the body being broken by the treadmill; for the loss of youth that could never be reclaimed.

He destroys the half-written letter. He must find other means to supplement his stipend from Dilke. But where? He feels the anger rising within him: the injustice of not having an income of his own, of his not having a pedigree, of his not being George. George suddenly arrives as if summoned by Jack's bitter turn of mind. He carries two bottles of champagne. Damn him, thinks Jack. In his own pious way, George has insisted that they stay in tonight and toast
the New Year with champagne of George’s providing. He means well, Jack
supposes, but his grudging forbearance is short-lived. As George uncorks the
champagne, Jack steers the conversation towards Randolph’s resignation with
every intention of wounding his friend by crowing over his fallen idol.

‘Did you know that he didn’t even tell his wife?’ says George sadly. ‘He
was at the theatre with Lady Randolph and during the interval he ran around to
Printing House Square and gave the editor of The Times a draft of his letter of
resignation.’

‘Complete breach of etiquette,’ says Jack with an air of boredom, ‘He’s at
least supposed to make the Queen privy to his intentions even if he does not see
fit to share them with his wife.’ He finds George’s devotion to Randolph more
irksome than ever tonight. The resignation might serve his party well. Randolph
was the Tories’ main attraction and his departure might well lead to another
ministerial crisis. Labby is of the opinion that Randolph might now cross the
floor and join the Liberals, but Jack doesn’t find this any more plausible than
Rollo suddenly announcing his conversion to Home Rule.

‘Cheer up George,’ he says, filling their glasses. He decides that the only
way to survive until midnight is to get them both drunk as quickly as possible.

‘I fear that Uncle Rollo means to turn his back on Randolph. He hasn’t
been near him since the announcement. I asked him to accompany me to
Connaught Place but he said if the press saw him it would give rise to speculation
that his resignation would follow.’

Jack scoffs into his glass. ‘I can’t imagine sentiments such as loyalty and
friendship are rated particularly highly by your Uncle Rollo.’

George does not acknowledge this last comment. He knows that he and
Jack are bad company for each other tonight. They should have joined another
party yet Jack is a liability among his friends and George knows that Jack’s set
despise him. ‘It’s nothing personal,’ Jack had told him, ‘they would hate anyone
who held even the most tenuous connection with Rollo Caversham. Even a fourth
cousin would not be safe.’

‘When I got to Connaught Place,’ continues George, ‘there were throngs of
press outside. I had to fight my way to the front door. I could see Randolph’s two
boys, Winston and Jack, looking down from the nursery window. I thought what a terrible thing for them to be exposed to so much bitter talk about their father.’

‘The sooner they get used to that the better.’

‘What do you mean?’ asks George somewhat defensively. He can tell that Jack is spoiling for a fight.

‘I mean their father does nothing but caught controversy. He is making a spectacle of himself. Salisbury is calling his bluff; he’ll be back in the Cabinet before Twelfth Night.’

“He resigned for reasons of principle.’

Jack pulls a face and throws a log upon the fire.

‘Besides you’re a fine one to talk about courting controversy and living dangerously,’ says George angrily.

‘What do you mean?’ asks Jack.

‘Well look at the hot water you’ve landed in. It’s all due to recklessness and the vain assumption that you wouldn’t get caught.’

Jack leans forward in his chair, ‘You’re not above picking up the odd Criterion renter yourself.’

George knocks back the remnants of his champagne ‘I know where to draw the line. There is a large difference between ... I’ve seen the sort of trade you indulge in. The rougher, the more dangerous looking the better. I am astonished that it has taken as long as this for you to fall into the hands of blackmailers.’

‘And didn’t your brother fall foul of blackmailers too? I know his story. You seem to have conveniently forgotten the occasion of our first meeting. You were only at Tom Osborn’s trial to be sure your precious family name was kept out of it. When the great Marquis of Cliveden got in trouble there was plenty of Caversham money to bail him out. Not all of us are so fortunate.’

The firelight gives Jack’s face a terrible glow. George is afraid of it. They have had angry words many times but Jack has never turned on him quite like this. A chasm seems to open up between them. There is a spike of the enmity that always lives below the surface of their friendship.

‘Besides,’ says Jack. ‘At least I am reconciled to ... what I like.’
George goes to pour himself another glass but Jack tears the bottle from his hand.

‘What gets your blood up, George? What do you like?’

George’s silence only serves to antagonise Jack.

‘I’ve seen how your eyes grow large at the sight of a red tunic ... or even a GPO uniform.’

George remains firmly silent.

Jack puts his glass on the top of his bureau and his fingers search among his papers for something he is not entirely sure he has kept. But then he finds it. He hesitates, takes another sip of champagne before throwing something into George’s lap. George picks it up.

‘Poses plastiques?’ he asks, bemused. It is not a term he is familiar with.

‘That’s just the cover,’ says Jack. ‘It’s really a house run by a very respectable chap. Just the kind of thing you’d like.’ He hears himself lie. The most fatal lie he has ever uttered.

George moves his knee and the card falls to the floor.

‘Have it your own way,’ says Jack. ‘We both seem so terribly out of humour that one or both of us won’t make it to midnight.’

George acknowledges the truth of this. He is tired of Jack’s bad humours. He regrets his words already: it is the same face of judgement he showed his brother. He was jealous of both of them in his own way; he was too careful of himself. Far too careful. Before George takes his leave of Jack, he kisses him tenderly on the top of the head. The last week has clearly worn his friend out and the marks of terror betray themselves in his face and the anxious movements of his fingers. George’s conciliatory gesture catches Jack off guard. The moment the door is closed, Jack feels a surge of regret at sending his friend away. If George was bad company for him then he is worse company for himself. He looks for Saul’s card. But it has gone.
Part Two

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves, By each let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!

(Oscar Wilde)

Chapter One

Oliver Swinscow stands between the porticoes of the General Post Office; he has completed his shift but he cannot move for the torrent of rain that has opened up across the City. He feels the spray of dirty water upon his face and watches the bank clerks dashing about with the evening papers as their only protection. He turns his eyes up to the Dome of St Paul’s, barely visible in the heavy mist. One of the city clerks steps beneath the neighboring portico and shakes out his umbrella. He is young, perhaps no more than twenty-five; he has a sandy moustache and wears spectacles which he proceeds to wipe down. He leans back against the pillar and watches the dirty water cascading along the gutters. Then he notices Oliver. He half smiles. Oliver looks the other way; when he looks back the fellow with the sandy moustache is staring at him. His smile broadens. Oliver does not think it a nice smile. The clerk crosses over to him. ‘Can I offer you a smoke?’ he says producing a packet of cigarettes.

‘I can’t smoke when I’m in uniform,’ he says.

The clerk nods. ‘Would you like to go somewhere dry where we can get you out of that uniform? You can smoke as much as you please then.’
Oliver has no time to answer for just then PC Hanks, one of the Post Office constabulary, emerges from the main entrance. The clerk notices him and looks rather urgently at Oliver. ‘Another time,’ he says and pulling his hat down over his head he puts up his umbrella and rushes out into the rain. Hanks watches him go. He then comes and stands alongside Oliver. ‘Do you know that man?’ he asks quietly.

‘No. Never met him,’ he answers.

‘What did he want?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Hmm,’ says Hanks, ‘Haven’t you got a delivery to make?’

‘Just finished my shift.’

‘Hmm,’ says Hanks again, ‘Well get yourself home. Don’t hang about attracting bad sorts. You’ll leave yourself open to suspicion.’

‘Suspicion of what?’ he asks.

Hanks looks as though he doesn’t quite believe in Oliver’s naivety. ‘Just get yourself home,’ he says.

Oliver runs out into the rain. He will find another doorway to take refuge in. The rain is the least of his deterrents in going home.

Hanks watches him until he is out of sight. One to keep an eye on, he thinks. It is difficult to know if some of the boys really are as green as they pretend to be. The perverts that lurk about outside are easy to see off; what worries Hanks are those influences on the inside. He knows there are boys corrupting boys. He has asked his senior constable about finding the source and stopping it. He had merely shaken his head. ‘Where do you think these boys are from?’ he said. ‘Have you ever been further East than here? You should take a walk up the Commercial Road one day. You’ll see in what ways and manners these boys have been educated. They do not come here to be corrupted. It is too late for that. The Post Office does much in providing them with honest employment, the integrity of a uniform, some means of bettering themselves, an escape from other ... trades. But the reach of that improving influence has limitations. We can drill them, inspect their hands for dirty fingernails but we cannot split their heads open and scrub their minds clean. Stop corruption at its source? We get them too late. A boy, like a girl, learns early that his body can be
taken to market like a piece of horseflesh. The very best you can do Hanks, is see off the tempter that waits for them outside.’

‘Can’t I arrest them?’ he had asked.

‘No!’ the officer had said emphatically. ‘Just give them the impression you know what they’ve come for and they’ll go.’

Hanks has stayed true to that directive. But it frustrates him. Just like the sight of the old soldier sitting on the roadside with only the rain filling his cup. It is just one more thing London has no wish to own.

The rain falls as heavily in the West-End of London as it does across the East. For Blind Hannah, every drop feels like being burned by the end of a cigarette. But she sits resolute as the elements continue their assault. It has not stopped the traffic that comes to the door of number 19. She has heard the bell ring several times and has counted at least two cabs which have pulled up outside. She has heard the wheezing of the horses, the slamming of the door and the voice of the gentlemen settling their accounts. One of the gents arrived alone. She has heard his footfall many times this winter. He comes here as many as four times a week. The other cab brought two men: one older, one younger. Tonight is not their first visit either. On the occasion before, the younger man had bought a pennyworth of chestnuts from her.

Blind Hannah is not stone blind. She can see the flames that roast her chestnuts dancing inside the stove and the lights burning in Mrs Morgan’s shop window. She can see the flare of the gas lamps. She can see the outline of figures as they approach her. She knows the height and gait of all those that visit Cleveland Street with regularity. Sometimes she enjoys greater moments of clarity, and can observe faces especially if they come close enough to her stove. The young man had bent close enough to her fire that she had observed his features. It was a noble, slim face with a finely drawn nose and a moustache that curved up from the edges of his lips. But it was the eyes she saw with the greatest clarity: enormous blue eyes that penetrated her darkness and seemed to enjoy her blindness. He had waved his hand in front of her gaze and laughed at her inability to see him. Neither he nor his companion trouble her tonight as they
hurry to be out of the rain. Charley Hammond stands on the threshold and welcomes them in greedily.

He takes their coats which he will go through later. It is somewhat troubling to him that he has yet to discover the names of these two gentlemen. He expects every visitor to the house to use an alias, but he also expects that they will betray themselves sooner or later. Veck is the most able at discovering their identities. He can frig a man with one hand while going through his wallet with the other. It was Veck who discovered that their noble Mr Brown was really Lord George Caversham when he used Mr Brown’s lace handkerchief to wipe the remnants of his spend from the sides of his cock and spied the Caversham monogram.

Lord George is upstairs now. Hammond is most pleased by his aristocratic clientele. It gives him the promise of a comfortable retirement. He does not mean to make his living through blackmail, but it never hurts to have insurance. He brings wine for his new guests. The young man with the large blue eyes always looks eager, but the older gentleman who accompanies him looks ravenous. The boys they have used have told Hammond afterwards that the older gentleman doesn’t participate. He sits and watches and instructs his young companion in how to use the renter. Theirs is certainly a most peculiar dynamic. The elder man gives his young companion little opportunity to speak before Hammond. A great care is taken to guard his tongue. He does not allow him to partake much of the wine either.

Hammond uncorks the bottle of claret. He knows nothing of such things and leaves it to Veck to select the wines. There is a generous fire in the grate; Mr Smith brought their coal delivery this morning and had demonstrated his usual curiosity about the house. Half afraid of it, half aroused by it. But the coal cellar does not give much away. Hammond feels that his neighbours should be glad of the business his establishment brings them. He has coal fires burning in every room at this time of year and his gents frequently send the boys to Mrs Morgan for their cigars. Hammond pours the wine and observes that the crystal glasses have been very poorly cleaned and that sticky finger marks remain on the stems. He will have to speak to Saul. He has sent Saul out tonight much to his protests. ‘Don’t come back without a pick-up,’ he had called after him. Hammond knew
this was as good as sentencing Saul to sleep in Trafalgar Square. He fills the two
glasses before him; the older gentleman puts his hand out to indicate when his
companion’s measure should be stopped.

Hammond wonders why John Saul teases out such cruelty in him. It has
always been the case. Even when he thought Saul one of the most beautiful
creatures he had ever seen, the only one of his organs that Saul had ever
hardened was his heart. But was not the whole enterprise at number 19 built
upon the back of Saul’s labours? He had been worth hundreds of pounds over the
years. There were times when Hammond had almost gone too far. Saul had left
him, he had even returned to his mother in Ireland, but he had always found his
way back. Very little was required to induce him to return other than to leave the
front door open. Now Hammond was beginning to resent giving Saul houseroom.
He brings nothing of any charm to the house and Hammond is very proud of
number 19. He likes everything just so. He doesn’t want sticky finger marks on
the crystal. He doesn’t want the waft of Saul’s defeat polluting the aroma of the
incense that he burns in every room (useful in disguising other smells).
Hammond is proud of the wallpaper which will not be faded by exposure to the
sun for little sunlight penetrates here. As his gentlemen guests taste their claret,
his thoughts steal to the other acquisitions he would like to make for the house:
art, gilt mirrors, even a piano. And it all depends upon sating their desires.

For their pleasure tonight he has Harry Newlove. Newlove is another of
Veck’s finds. Veck met him when he had been taken a late stroll in St Paul’s
Churchyard; that night he had been looking to gratify his own needs rather than
those of the business. Newlove was on his way home having finished his shift in
the General Post Office. He was looking for a scrap of adventure and he had
found it among the graves. Self-interested though the encounter had been, Veck
was too entrepreneurial not to recognise an opportunity. Veck had talked to
Hammond for many months about the boys of the General Post Office as an
untapped resource. Veck was too well known in St Martin’s Le Grand to be able
to walk around there with impunity; it was best to have someone on the inside
and that’s what Newlove could provide.
Hammond awaits eagerly the end of the hour when his gentlemen return downstairs. They both look rather flushed and he wonders what state they have left Newlove in. The younger gentleman as usual says nothing. Hammond hands them both their hats and their other possessions that have yielded no clue to their identities. 'I hope everything was to your satisfaction, sirs?' he says.

The older gentleman smiles, 'He was as companionable as you said he would be. He's the kind of boy that suits us. I wonder, are there anymore like him, of his age and size? There is also something charming in naivety. The boy upstairs was almost too knowing, too cocksure.'

Hammond commits to a promise that he can find boys to match that description. But all the same it makes him uneasy. He knew there was a premium attached to naivety. But he was not trading in girls where virginity always fetched the best prices at market. Most of his clients preferred practised hands and that's why some still came knocking on his door looking for Saul. They knew that even if he no longer had a physique to marvel at, they could still be sure of an excellent spend. But naivety holds other concerns for him. Boys talk. They become consumed with guilt and feel the need to make confession. Messenger boys seem like an uneven foundation to build their empire upon. But Veck always knows best.

---

Chapter Two

Oliver Swinscow is between deliveries but has an urgent need to piss. He hastens down into the bowels of the Post Office building where the lavatories are. He pushes against one of the cubicle doors, which opens to reveal a young man sitting on the lavatory with his trousers around his ankles, smoking a cigarette.

Oliver mutters an apology and makes to retreat when the young man grabs him by the arm. He is bigger, stronger.

'Don't go,' he says. 'You've seen it now. I suppose you'll tell them I was smoking?'

'No,' says Oliver. 'I don't even know who you are.'

'No?' says the taller lad. 'I know who you are. You're new aren't you?'
'I've been here a few months.'

In the dim basement light Oliver’s eyes follow the jeweled end of the cigarette that illuminates the boy’s prick. It also illuminates his wide grin as he observes Oliver’s accidental curiosity.

'Did you ever see a finer tosser than that?’ he says.

Oliver makes to back out of the cubicle again.

But the lad laughs. ‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of in looking. Though it hardly seems fair that you’ve got a peek at mine and I haven’t seen yours.’

Oliver doesn’t answer.

‘I won’t tell anyone that you were looking just so long as you return the favour. That seems to me a fair bargain.’ The lad stands more than a head taller than Oliver. His voice is gentle but there is something threatening in his manner as he puts his hands upon his naked hips and lets the cigarette hang from his mouth. ‘Or are you ashamed of it?’ he asks.

Oliver begins to unbutton his trousers. He wonders if it is not some joke that will be all over the boys’ kitchen before the end of the day. But to show he is not ashamed he takes out his own.

‘Who’d have thought it? A boy of your size? You need not be ashamed of that.’

Oliver feels something like pride. It would not have occurred to him that it was anything special.

Then the boy does something especially extraordinary: he touches Oliver.

‘I want to see what it looks like at full strength.’ He begins to stroke it. Nobody else has ever touched Oliver’s cock before. It is a strange sensation and it grows and swells as much as it does when he puts his own hand upon it.

‘Yes,’ says his new friend. ‘You could make your fortune with that.’

Oliver’s naivety is apparent even in the poor basement light.

‘I know a gentlemen I go with sometimes who would like a game of spooning with you and pay you generously for it.’

‘Spoonling?’

‘Don’t tell me you don’t know what it means?’

‘I know what it means for a man and a girl.’

‘Then you don’t know the better half of it.’
As if to demonstrate, the boy's hand tightens around Oliver and begins to frig him. He watches with satisfaction as Oliver's discomfort and noises of protest begin to quiet. All the while he keeps on talking: 'Very easy money,' he says, 'four shillings a time and all for barely half an hour's work.'

Oliver doesn't answer. He tries to think of other things: where he has to be next, what his father asked him to pick up on the way home. If he feels like he is indulging in criminal behaviours it is because he is.

'Lots of the boys are doing it and earning very well. Blimey you're an easy nut to crack aren't you!' he says as Oliver shoots onto the tails of his jacket. 'Better hope that comes out of Her Majesty's uniform.' It is the worst thing he could have said to Oliver in terms of deepening his shame. He can hardly believe what has just happened. The pleasure was momentary and even if the stain ever does come out of his friend's jacket, he will never be able to sponge away the guilt.

***

Blind Hannah has a great sense of time; she knows the hour of the day without the aid of the clock. She knows the footfall of the doctors that go to attend at the Middlesex Hospital. Many of the medical students stop and talk to her but they do not interest her as much as the sodomites that call at number 19. There is a chill this evening and she sits closer to the heat; she stirs the nuts and tastes the coins that have been pressed into her hand. It has been a slow day. She hears footsteps in the distance: there are two people approaching, both men, young men. One walks with great confidence while the other shuffles with nerves or perhaps reluctance. She recognises one of the voices. It is the boy they call Newlove. She doesn't care for him; he only speaks to her to swear at her. Veck told her that he is their prettiest and best earner. He'll be dead of the clap before he's twenty-five, he said. 'If God knows any mercy,' she had agreed. She strains to hear the other voice. It is younger, less knowing. Not a child's but not a man's. A new recruit. She laughs piteously.

'It's just here,' says Newlove. 'Number 19.'

'It looks just like any other house,' returns the younger voice.
‘Of course it does. What did you expect it to look like? Oh, come on. It will be all right. You’re expected. I’ve told them all about you and Mr Hammond’s looking forward to meeting you. Easy money like I said. I’ll take you for a drop of beer afterwards.’

Hannah sits very tight. Newlove is carrying a stick or an umbrella which he scrapes against the railings outside the house. ‘Are you hungry?’ he says. ‘I’ll stand you some chestnuts.’

Hannah is delighted. She picks up the ladle once more.

Newlove asks for a pennyworth. ‘Swinscow come and get them,’ he calls to his friend who comes to take the paper cup from Hannah’s hand. Her aging, shaking fingers reach out and feel Swinscow’s face. ‘The last innocent touch upon an innocent face,’ she says. ‘All that’s good in you will dry up the minute you step foot in that house,’ she says.

‘Just ignore her,’ says Newlove. ‘The mad old hag should be locked up.’ He pushes Oliver towards the house. Hammond is there to greet them. He has been waiting.

Hammond takes Oliver into a room on the ground floor where there is a porcelain washbasin newly filled with steaming water.

‘Let’s give that face and neck a good wash,’ he says rinsing out a great sponge.

‘I’m not dirty,’ protests Oliver.

‘No,’ says Hammond, ‘but a lot of our gents are very particular. He scrubs Oliver’s neck as though he were a piece of shoe leather to be buffed and polished. He is just as rough with his face and inspects while he washes, pulling his head one way and then the other, scouring behind his ears and running his hands through his hair. ‘Ever had lice?’ he asks.

‘Once or twice,’ says Oliver.

‘But you haven’t got them now? Always resist the urge to scratch when you’re with the gents. It makes them nervous,’ he says. ‘You’re clean everywhere else? Around the rims? Both rims? You know how to clean down there?’ He points towards Oliver’s front, ‘Better have a check. Pull the foreskin back and give it a rinse. Be quick. I should have a gent arriving in ten.’
He is about to leave the room but then he notices the alarm in Oliver's face. 'Don’t worry. This punter’s a real gent, a gentle man in every way, quite young; he’s a student at the hospital around the corner. Won’t give you any trouble.’

Hammond closes the door and leaves Oliver alone. Droplets of warm water run down his face and onto the carpet. He looks at himself in the looking glass. He doesn’t know how he got here.

Newlove told him that the Post Office rarely kept boys on after 17 and very rarely promoted them; though Newlove at 18 was recently promoted to a 3rd class clerk. ‘Never hurts to have another trade,’ he had said, ‘and if Hammond likes you he will reward you. You’re just the type of boy he told me to be on the look out for.’

Oliver touches his own face in the place where Hannah touched him. Would what happened in this house show itself in his face? Would his mother know by looking at him where he had been? But the four shillings would be his alone to spend. His wages he tips up at the end of the week but whatever he made here would be his and his alone. He unbuttons the front of his trousers and cleans himself.

Chapter Three

The seedlings growing from the earth are in danger of being sapped by a discontented climate. Lord Randolph has hibernated the winter away licking his wounded pride in warmer climes. He sees less of George now or rather George sees less of him. George doesn’t care to watch Lord Randolph’s principles retreating into the shadows.

Jack is at the house of Lady Frederick Cavendish. It is his first time of being invited to her table. He must have been brought to her attention by Labby. The Grand Old Man is there too. Jack is mesmerised by his hostess. She is more than forty but still remarkably handsome. But her beauty is softened by the grief that encroaches upon her face every now and then when some chance observation steals her concentration or the melancholy chimes of the clock alert
her to the happiness of past hours She is still dressed in full mourning attire but how many years has it been since her husband’s murder, four? Five? Jack isn’t sure.

The dining room still carries the mood of a missing presence. The blood spilled in Phoenix Park that fateful night seeps silently into every conversation about Home Rule. But despite the sacrifice of her husband, Jack is stunned to discover that Lady Frederick is still a Home Ruler. They have met here to discuss the Government’s new coercion bill. Jack watches Lady Frederick as Labby attacks Lord Hartington, leader of the Liberal Unionists. Her situation is a strange one. She might be Mrs Gladstone’s niece but she is also Hartington’s sister-in-law. She wears widow’s weeds for her dead husband but her butler replenishes the glasses of the people wishing to advance the interests of those who murdered him.

Jack thinks he heard the doorbell but it remains unobserved by the company until a servant appears. Lord Hartington has arrived and is in the library wishing to speak to Lady Frederick. What a deliciously awkward meeting, Lady Frederick looks more annoyed than embarrassed at this unceremonious intrusion by her dead husband’s brother.

‘Forgive me, Uncle William,’ she says to Mr Gladstone. She rises from her chair with a great deal of grace and leaves the room hurriedly.

‘He should have joined us for dinner and we could have continued the Round Table discussions,’ chortles Labby. Even Gladstone looks uncomfortable.

Jack is sitting beside a very pretty girl. He has been so distracted by his hostess that he has barely noticed her and she wins his attention now with a smile but the smile is not for him and it is not the smile of a coquette either; she appears to be enjoying this evening on an altogether different level. Her name is Kate. She is almost twenty-one years old and she lives in Lady Frederick’s house as her ward.

‘I think Lady Frederick is a most remarkable woman,’ begins Jack quietly in her ear. ‘She is a true victim of the fight for Home Rule but her loss has only strengthened her resolve to support us.’

Kate looks at him rather suspiciously. There is something penetrative in her stare. ‘As partial as I am to my guardian, Mr Worsley, it is hard for me to
think of her as a victim of the struggle for Home Rule. She is an Englishwoman living comfortably in London as far away from the realities of the struggles as can be.'

Jack is taken aback by her coldness.

'But you will allow she has suffered? That she must suffer still? She doesn't even have the consolation of children.'

'I don't dispute that her lot is an unhappy one. I never knew Lord Frederick but everyone speaks well of him.'

'Do I detect something Irish in your accent?'

'I am what they are pleased to call Anglo-Irish. But I spent the first 16 years of my life in Cork. I'd barely spent any time in England before my father's death.'

'Your father was an Irish Landlord?'

She stares at him icily. 'Not in the way you mean. My father was a good landlord. I only hope I can be as good and attentive to the needs of his tenants as he was.'

Jack looks at her quizzically. 'You have the charge of his estate?'

'I am his only child. I come into my majority soon and I will claim my destiny as an absentee landlord.'

'You have no desire to live in Ireland again?'

She turns her head in the direction of Gladstone. There is no fondness in her manner of looking at him. 'I'm not sure it is a safe place for a woman alone. A landlord at that.'

'The Tories are making it next to impossible for England and Ireland to ever be on good terms,' says Jack.

She is still looking at the Grand Old Man almost contemptuously. 'You speak as though Mr Gladstone's Government never had anything to do with coercion measures and the restriction of liberties.'

Jack watches her with fascination. Her hatred brought life to her face. And in that life there was remarkable beauty.

Lady Frederick suddenly reappears in the room. Hartington is behind her. He greets the assembly coldly. The split of the Liberals can be seen in miniature around Lady Frederick's dining table. Lady Frederick has the general appearance
of having been rebuked. Labby is carried away by an opportunity for mischief. ‘We were discussing how many ordinary men of Ireland’s criminal class might soon find themselves made martyrs simply by virtue of their being hanged in England.’ he says.

Hartington does not rise to the bait but the mention of hanging sees the ripple of emotion over Lady Frederick’s eyes. The expression was momentary but Jack saw it. They say she sent a crucifix to one of her husband’s killers the night before his execution. A token of forgiveness. Jack isn’t sure that he believes that such benevolence of the human spirit is possible.

Gladstone says nothing. He does not look at Hartington. There is unease lurking in those ancient eyes. They are not in the House of Commons now. They are in the house of their shared relative. He is also the man that sent Hartington’s younger brother out to Ireland as Under Secretary.

Labby feels none of their discomfort ‘The Government appears to have the funds at its disposal to ship lawyers and witnesses over from Dublin for every little act of petty villainy,’ he says.

‘What would you suggest instead, Mr Labouchere,’ says Hartington, ‘when Irish courts are so unwilling to convict even when presented with the most irrefutable evidence?’

‘You speak as though no Irishman is ever convicted in an Irish court,’ returns Labby tersely.

Gladstone still says nothing.

‘Memories around this table are very short,’ says Hartington. ‘Five years ago it was us, the Liberal Party, who brought in another Crimes Bill and before it came in we couldn’t get a shred of evidence against my brother’s murderers.’

Jack tries not to look at Lady Frederick but fails.

‘There was no assistance to be had over there. Only obstruction. Only lies and chaos. Don’t you remember William?’ says Hartington looking directly at Gladstone. ‘We were all so desperate for justice. Desperate to bring to trial the thugs that stabbed my brother to death. Now we want to give Ireland a free hand. We want to drop arms against the Land League and give the bloodiest nation on earth the right to intimidate, to murder, to terrorise at will.’

‘Hartington, please,’ implores his sister-in-law.
‘You would prefer a nation of serfs?’ says Labby scornfully.

Lady Frederick addresses Hartington in a soothing voice, ‘You know that Fred always tried to bring moderation to the Crimes Act. He said he found it sickening to have anything to do with coercion. He wanted to bring about peace in Ireland. He didn’t want aggression.’

‘And aggression is the only outcome there will be if you and your misguided new friends back Bloody Balfour’s Bill. You’ll incite the very wrath you mean to control,’ says Labby, his face turning the colour usually reserved for his attacks upon sodomites.

‘And instead we finally give in to Parnell’s bullyboy tactics? After every threat and insult we hand him his crown on a silver platter!’ Hartington is not afraid to address Gladstone as he speaks. In his eyes is a look that dares him to defend Labouchere. Jack realises this is about more than politics. Hartington is still chasing his brother’s murderers across the Phoenix Park.

Lady Frederick looks at Hartington with a good deal of sadness. His brother’s murderers have long since been tried and hanged but he acts every day as though there was one that had gotten away. If he were asked to name that fugitive he would probably have called him Charles Stewart Parnell. But with weariness as he looks from familiar face to familiar face he observes that nobody is on his side and with that realisation they all become strangers.

He rises with a look of defeat, ‘And this,’ he says, ‘is justice to the Protestant subjects that we will hand over to the tyranny of the Catholics; justice to the men who have been wilfully murdered. Good men like my brother, like this girl’s father,’ he says looking at Kate.

Kate hasn’t looked up once and her eyes remain fixed upon the table.

‘That’s enough Hartington,’ says Lady Frederick. Her voice is stern. ‘Will you deprive me of my only consolation? What is the point of my darling’s death if it is only cold-blooded murder? The only will I have left to me comes from the belief that his suffering will have some good. It is only the prospect of peace that keeps alive in me some semblance of faith. Would you cast me entirely into darkness? Will you make me return to that night over and over again and find nothing there but savagery and loss? Some wicked, brutal act that took his life for
no greater purpose than to inflict upon me the agony of a death that lasts the remainder of my life?’

Hartington will not press the point. He should not have come. He did not mean to cause pain, only to curb his own.

Later in the drawing room, Jack watches Kate. She sits at the piano but does not play. He steals across the room and stands beside her. ‘I regret that when we were speaking of your father earlier I had no idea of the circumstances of his death. I hope I wasn’t insensitive.’

‘No, on the contrary,’ she says earnestly. ‘It is relief to meet someone not acquainted with my history. I thought my reason for being here was known pretty well all over London.’

‘Are you a relation of Lady Frederick Cavendish?’

She smiles thinly. ‘Not a bit of it. Lady Frederick took a great deal of interest in me after my father’s murder which happened only six months after her husband’s.’ The confidential lowering of her voice invites Jack to sit down close to her.

‘She wrote me some letters condoling with me. I was very bitter at first and I resented her piety and her benevolence in the way she wrote about her own husband’s killers. All I knew was that my father was dead, shot through the head, and that I was alone in the world.’

‘Did you answer her letters?’

‘I did and despite their brevity there was enough of my temper in them to persuade her that the only way she could help me was to visit in person. She came and found a very angry girl and she decided to take it upon herself to bring me out of it. She never stops looking for good causes to justify what happened to her. I came to live with her after I completed my education. She’s been trying to bring me out of it ever since.’

‘With any success?’

‘We are alike in that I have no hatred for Ireland. I love it. If I harbour any measure of hatred then it is for English politics and the hypocrisy of it. It used to be Gladstone that Ireland hated and now he’s their friend. Gladstone was in power when my father was killed.’ She looks at Jack. ‘My father was a good man
and a respected landlord for many years but his interests required him to be in England more and more and he seemed to fall out of love with Cork after my mother died. He hired an agent to run things and the agent was unforgiving and brought about many evictions and a good deal of suffering. I was witness to some of it. One night they came for the agent but one of the men thought that if the agent was accountable then so was the man who engaged him.'

Jack finds it hard to speak. He is not sure that as a politician that he is welcome by her side.

'I'm sure you wished you hadn't asked now, Mr Worsley,' there was a greater degree of warmth now in her manner of speaking. 'If you don't mind my saying, you seem awfully young for a Member of Parliament.'

'I suppose any man might seem young in the company of Mr Gladstone. I am just thirty.'

'And you are committed to Home Rule?'

'Yes.'

She looks doubtful.

'You're a regular Parnellite?' he asks her.

'I admire Mr Parnell certainly. Never more so than now when he must endure the blethers printed about him in The Times.'

'But you plan to be an absentee landlord upon your coming of age?'

'I shall be as present as I can be. I take a good deal of interest in my tenants. My new land agent I believe is an honest man. There have not been any evictions during the time he has had control of the estate,' she speaks defensively.

'And the estate is being run at a profit?'

'We are in a good deal of trouble. My agent is in favour of evicting one family who haven't been able to pay their rents for some time. It's the last thing I want. It has been suggested to me that I sell the estate but it could only be sold at a terrific loss –'.

She stops talking. She is rather disconcerted by Jack's new way of looking at her. It is almost as though he is looking through her at some faraway moment. Now he is smiling at the far off thing that Kate cannot see. He would do better to look directly at her and see the intelligence in those blue eyes which would have made his new design altogether less credible.
‘Has something distracted you, Mr Worsley?’ she asks.

‘Forgive me.’

‘No I must ask you to forgive me. Lady Frederick is tired and asked me to deputise for her and I’ve been neglecting her guests. She would be distressed to see her uncle still standing in that agitated manner.’

Before she goes Jack must secure some hope of seeing her again – soon. ‘I spent a good part of my childhood in Wicklow. I’m no expert but if I can ever be of any assistance – I hope I have permission to call and see how you get on?’

‘I hope you will, Mr Worsley,’ she says. There is nothing flirtatious about her and he likes her the better for it. Kate studies him in the looking glass that hangs behind Mr Gladstone. He is clearly suffering from a bad case of self-infatuation. But he’s not bad looking. If she must be courted then it might as well be by someone as marginally interesting as Jack Worsley MP and if it emerged that he knew nothing whatever about the running of estates then she would have all the fun of exposing him.

Chapter Four

George is watching Algernon Allies demolish a hot supper brought from the cook shop. There is little restraint in the way he eats meat off the bone; the juices run down his chin. He takes what’s left of the bread and runs it in cycles around his plate soaking up every morsel until there is nothing left. George has never watched anybody eat like this before. He was taught from the cradle that one always left something on one’s plate. One must never appear to be in need. But he is in need now. He needs someone to knock some good sense and fortitude into him. George has no appetite; his recklessness has quite taken the edge off. Allies, finally sated, pushes his plate away.

‘You were hungry?’ is all George can think of to say. It suddenly occurs to him that he has never sat at table with someone of Allies’s class.
'Well the slop they serve up at Gerard Row Police Station don't provide much sustenance,' answers Allies. There is none of the former deference in his manner of speaking.

'No,' says George, clearing the table. There was something offensive in the dirty cleanness of Allies's plate. George wonders how it is possible to feel both gentle disgust and terrible desire in the same moment. If Nanny was here she would box Allies's ears for his table manners and then she would box George's for so forgetting himself as to sup with a servant.

'It was decent of you to stand surety for me,' says Allies. The words are spoken almost reluctantly. This is the first gesture of thanks he has given his benefactor. George can tell by the way Allies is looking at him that he wants to know why George went out of his way to negotiate his freedom. Since Christmas Eve when Allies brought him Rollo's note, they have often seen each other at the Marlborough Club. Rollo had taken a liking for the boy, often excusing his mild occasional insolence with the recognition that he was dependable and quick. Many nights as his uncle went on and on about the fractures in the Liberal Party and Randolph's awkward position, George would find himself searching among the liveried bodies for Allies.

It was Rollo who told him that Allies had been arrested for having his hand in the till as it were. This was hot on the heels of one of his housemaids having been found with silver teaspoons under her mattress. 'Polishing the silver into nothing,' was how Fairbrother described it. 'What cunning there is in these people,' had been Rollo's response. How little he suspected how his favourite nephew's mind had been seized and that he had gone straight from Chester Square to Gerard Row Police Station to speak up for the boy. That wasn't just cunning, thinks George, that's caddish. He wanted Allies to regard him as a friend, a protector, a cavalier.

'Have you had enough to eat?' asks George.

Allies appears to stop and think about it before answering that he has. He is full, but he is also reluctant to turn down the offer of food since he doesn't know when he will eat again after tonight.

'Have you many friends in London?' asks George.
Allies shrugs. ‘Only at the club but they won’t want anything to do with me now.’

‘And I suppose the loss of your position means the loss of your home?’

‘The loss of my bed, yes,’ answers Allies. ‘I don’t think anyone calls the Marlborough Club home.

‘What about your family? Where do they live?’

‘In Suffolk,’ answers Allies, playing with the buttons on his cuffs. The mention of his family seems to have provoked some annoyance.

‘Will you return to them?’

‘No,’ he says irritably, as though George were already extracting a large fee for his favour through asking such a question.

But George is not deterred. ‘What do they do?’ he asks.

‘My father’s in service; he’s a coachman at the big house. My mother was in service. She was a personal maid. Likes nice things. That was until she married. Now she takes in mending.’

Allies watches George’s face as he provides his history. He doesn’t enjoy its narration anymore than George enjoys listening. Both feel the incongruity of their sitting down together. How should George reply? ‘My mother is the Duchess of Torrington; her maid sends all her mending out, perhaps to a woman like your mother who sits by poor candlelight, blinding herself with the intricate stitching on a fine lady’s evening gown.’ Then he could follow it up with, ‘and I want her son for my own pleasure.’ Yes, George feels every inch the rake. But Allies will come to him freely or not at all. He must fulfil his promise to help him.

‘I won’t go back to them,’ says Allies.

‘Because they wouldn’t forgive you for losing your position?’

‘No,’ answers Allies as if he felt only contempt for their forgiveness. ‘Because I don’t want to end up like my brother. My mother is beside herself with pride because my brother has become a clerk with a local solicitor. It is beyond her wildest imaginings that one of her children could achieve so much.’

‘You don’t regard that as an accomplishment?’

‘He’ll never go beyond that. He’ll take his bicycle to work every day. He’ll marry his sweetheart. They’ll have a little house. A handful of brats and he’ll do his garden on a Sunday in his shirtsleeves,’ says Allies as though he were
describing the process of being hung, drawn, and quartered. ‘He's never even been to London,’ he adds as though this were the most piteous thing of all.

Allies’s indifferent eyes suddenly grow attentive to his surroundings. They roam from the pieces of furniture that nobody had wanted at Torrington, to the ring on George’s finger. His face betrays more than a little lust at the fine things he covets. He would make a fine subject for Sargent just now, thinks George.

Allies suddenly yawns. It is a deep yawn and he stretches, displaying his fine frame to full advantage. George cannot decide if he is showing himself off deliberately or not. ‘Have you anywhere to go tonight?’ he asks.

Allies shakes his head.

‘And you are quite determined that you will stay in London? It won't be easy finding work without a character,’ he says. ‘What kind of employment will you look for?’

‘Anything,’ says Allies, ‘just to tide me over until my ship comes in.’ He is not specific as to the cargo this ship will carry. ‘Perhaps you know someone who wants a boy?’

George nods. ‘I may know a tobacconist who requires help,’ he says. But there is not a shred of truth in this statement. He cannot think beyond the immediate reality that seems so fantastic. Algernon Allies will sleep under this roof tonight. But where? If he were Jack, Allies would probably be in his bed already.

‘I'll fetch some blankets,’ says George. ‘It’s a warm night. You won't be cold on the sofa.’ He knows Allies cannot stay here beyond tonight. He knows the folly of having a thief under his roof. But what to do with him? Where to find him a bed where he can continue to keep an eye on him, to keep him close?

He crosses into his bedroom to fetch some cushions from his bed. He will find Allies a nightshirt in one of the drawers of his dresser. The mirror that sits upon his dresser reflects the other room and to his horror and his delight it affords him a perfect view of Allies pulling his shirt over his back. It is a fine back. Allies is still talking to him but George is barely sensible of anything he says.

‘Do you know of anywhere respectable where I might find lodgings? Somewhere cheap I mean?’ asks Allies as George returns with his blankets.
‘Yes,’ says George, yielding to the last encroachment of lunacy. ‘I know a place.’

Allies has never been on Cleveland Street. He looks now at the tall narrow houses: those silent bystanders to the strange and unnatural passions that flock to number 19. He observes the ugly building that was the old workhouse. George observes how his eyes dim at the sight of it. He turns his back upon it. Since arriving in London he has made it his business to ensure that he has never been forced to pass the night in one of these establishments, never joined that line of desperate souls that he has observed waiting outside the casual ward in Charing Cross.

Allies observes Mrs Morgan’s establishment at number twenty-two. ‘Is that the tobacconist’s that wants a boy?’ he asks.

It takes George a moment to catch up with his train of thought. ‘No,’ he answers absently.

There is Mr O’Laughlin and Mr Smith passing the time of day with their cheap cigars, and there is blind Hannah. Allies observes the strange old creature, muttering away to herself about sods and buggers.

George pays the cab driver while Allies looks unimpressed at his surroundings. London makes strange noises tonight. It rumbles with the excitement that will become the week’s Jubilee celebrations.

‘This way,’ says George.

At least three lights are on in number 19. George rings the bell and a figure moves one of the curtains on the first floor. It is Hammond that receives them. Hammond had received George’s note and Veck had read it. Veck had deduced much from the scant few lines and the shaky hand that had written them. For an old Etonian Lord George had a very poor scrawl. George’s secret had betrayed itself in the large and uneven letters.

‘Mr Brown,’ says Hammond hospitably. He opens the door to allow Lord George to enter and behind him is Allies with all his worldly goods in a single bag. Veck is lurking at the top of the stairs, listening; he can just about see Lord George toying nervously with his coat buttons.
'How are you tonight, Mr Hammond?' asks George. 'Inclement weather for the season.'

'Indeed, Mr Brown,' says Hammond. We must hope things improve before Monday. Her Majesty cannot drive in an open carriage through such inclemency.'

Allies looks strangely at George. It is the first time he has heard the alias.

'Mr Hammond, may I introduce Mr Algernon Allies.'

'Very pleased to make your acquaintance I am sure, Mr Allies,' says Hammond touching Allies upon the arm. 'You are very welcome. Any friend of Mr Brown's may be sure of a night's refuge here.'

'Thank you,' returns Allies. 'It is just until I can be fixed up with a job.'

'Well we'll have to see what we can do. In the meantime I think you'll be very comfortable.'

Allies doesn't care for the way this Hammond fellow with the thinning hair is looking at him, weighing him, as though he were calculating what price he would fetch at market. The price he arrives at seems to please him as his eyes travel the length of Allies's body. Allies takes off his hat and examines his new surroundings: the green walls, the gilt mirrors, the door to a reception room is ajar and he can see a cage containing three canaries. The smell of burning incense is strange and overpowering. He doesn't like it.

Veck cannot contain his curiosity and he emerges from the top of the stairs just as Mr Brown's young companion moves into the glare of the gaslight. Those black curls and enormous eyes cast their strange spell once more. The pulse of Veck's shrewd mind ceases to beat. His powers of cunning that require all of his concentration are distracted. Hammond is as susceptible to the unnatural wants of the flesh as any man in London but he is a businessman first. He recognises that what has been brought to him tonight is his pension. He must welcome Allies in and never let him go until he is fat, grey, and unusable, like John Saul.

Allies is staring at something. Hammond follows his eyes to the coat stand and the silver-headed canes that are the discreet betrayers that might testify against their owners.

This lad is mercenary thinks Hammond with some satisfaction.

'May I have a quiet word with you Mr Hammond?' asks George.
‘Come into the office,’ he says.

Hammond almost closes the office door but leaves it sufficiently ajar that they can observe the boy. ‘A great beauty,’ he says.

George looks both suspicious and jealous. Hammond realises that he will have to tread carefully until young Mr Brown’s desire is sated. Until that look was quite gone from his face as it inevitably would be sooner or later.

Poor George is no match for Hammond. Every line in his face conveys his torture to a man who knows how to make the most of it. ‘The boy was a waiter at a club,’ George explains. ‘He has recently lost his position and has no friends in town. I have promised to help him find honest employment but until then there is nowhere I can put him. I will pay you well for his board so you need not be out of pocket.’

They both study the unsuspecting boy as he moves into the drawing room and circles Hammond’s birdcage

‘But I should like it understood,’ says George, ‘that the boy should not be …’ he struggles to find the words.

‘Accessible,’ suggests Hammond.

George smiles thinly.

‘How long would you like the boy to remain?’ The word crosses Hammond’s lips and it is an obvious question but not one that George has considered. George has not dealt with the ‘until’ nature of this unusual transaction. He has been detached from the clocks and the calendar. If he thought beyond the narrow confines of today then he would not be here now. The reckless and self-destructive do not measure time beyond the length of moment it takes to gratify themselves.

‘Until I can make other arrangements,’ says George. ‘If you will just make sure he stays out of trouble. I shall be much occupied over the next few days what with … I shall be much occupied.’

‘And I am to be his guardian?’

‘If you like … you will be rewarded for your services.’

Meanwhile Veck treads softly into the drawing room. He is not in his clerical garb but is dressed for dining out. He looks like a gentleman, the cut of his suit is expensive and his cape completes the effect.
Try whistling at them; they like that,’ he says. Allies is somewhat startled.

‘Do you like birds?’

‘I’m from the country,’ he offers as explanation.

‘I have no great affection for them myself. In fact the more they chirrup, the more I want to break their little necks.’

Veck does not sound like a gentleman. Allies worked at the Marlborough long enough to know a pretender. But he admires Veck’s suit and the manner in which he carries himself.

‘My name is George Veck. You must be our new house guest?’

‘Yes. I’m Algernon Allies.’

‘Welcome, Mr Allies.’ Veck searches the boy’s face. Allies’s manner is surly but he is beautiful in his surliness. An emotion ripples through Veck that he is not familiar with. It leaves him vulnerable; he dislikes that.

‘This is a strange sort of lodgings,’ says Allies.

‘Nonetheless we hope you will feel at home. We’re all very friendly here.’

‘It will only be until I get a job. Lord … Mr Brown thinks he may have something for me.’

Veck raises his eyebrows. ‘I’m certain that he does. Some wine?’

Allies looks surprised at the offer but there is a bottle on a tray with two glasses. Veck uncorks it and fills one glass. The surliness disappears from Allies’s face as he tastes it. The flicker of animation makes him even more attractive.

‘I should love to drink a glass with you in honour of your arrival, but alas I have another engagement. Have you ever been to the Café Royal, Mr Allies?’

‘No,’ he answers.

‘Indeed. I shall have to take you one day. I hope I shall have the pleasure of making your better acquaintance tomorrow.’ He leaves Allies, studying him once more in the looking glass before taking his own silk hat and elaborate cane from the hall table.

Allies sips his wine. There was something strange about this house. The wine and the smell of incense combined to have an almost intoxicating effect.

Hammond and Mr Brown have finished with their business transaction. George comes into the drawing room to bid him goodbye. He doesn’t particularly
like leaving him behind. 'I will come and see you in a few days,' he says. He looks set to say something else but something in Hammond’s face quietens him.

Hammond is left alone with his new protégé. ‘Now, Mr Allies. I will show you to your room. It is right at the top of the house I’m afraid. It’s the only bed vacant tonight. Do bring your wine.’

Hammond lights a candle and guides them upstairs. All the doors they pass are closed. The house is quiet. Hammond talks as they go. 'You have quite the friend in Mr Brown,' he says.

'I suppose I do,' answers Allies.

'He is a generous man and it is clear he likes you very much. A man can go far with a friend like that.' Hammond’s voice is cut off by a most extraordinary sound on the second landing: an anguished sound, a cry, no it was more of a moan. It comes again. ‘Just one more flight,’ says Hammond.

The room at the top is bare but comfortable. There is a bed and a washbasin; even a closet. The window faces the street. There is no gas, but there is an oil lamp.

'It’s a little basic,' says Hammond, stroking his thinning hair as if he were envying Allies’ curls. 'But it should give you a good night’s rest.'

'Thank you,' says Allies coldly.

When Hammond is gone, Allies lies down upon the bed. It is no worse than his accommodation in the Marlborough Club and better than another night in Gerard Row. But he doesn’t really understand how he came to be here. His eyes slowly adapt to the darkness. He stares at the naked beams above him and the whitewashed walls that surround him, but is then that he notices the drawing scratched on the left wall. He picks up the oil lamp and illuminates the lines that represent two cocks. He lowers the lamp to read the words scrawled beneath: ‘Prick-to-prick-so-sweet,’ it says. He shudders. He puts down the lamp and crawls into bed without undressing. The house has given up its secret. He should have suspected something like it. The Hammond fellow had that way about him. There was something marked about that Veck creature too; but it was a different quality all together. It frightened him. He wouldn’t like to make an enemy of Veck. He would sleep there tonight but tomorrow he would leave at first light.
He does manage to drop off tonight but he is woken more than once by the sound of doors opening and closing, a deep laugh, and a repetition of those moaning sounds. He also dreams a good deal. He dreams that he is woken by a candle’s flame brought very close to his face. He dreams that he opens his eyes to see Veck standing over him with a somewhat fearful expression. He also dreams that he is in the workhouse. He dreams that he shares a bed with five other men and that there are rats and mice crawling all over him.

Chapter Five

The early hours of Jubilee Day find Veck in Trafalgar Square foraging for scraps of beauty. He has found buried treasure here before. It is not yet four but dawn is breaking. It is high summer but there is a distinct nip in the morning air. He looks around at the wretched hundred or so souls who have made their beds around the Square; some sleep on the benches, others on the steps, or at the feet of the great stone lions. Most of the faces are obscured from him. He should show Allies this – it might make him less reluctant to stay at number 19.

Since Allies announced on Sunday morning that he wouldn’t stay another night in the house, Veck has persuaded him to stay an additional two. The boy declared himself disgusted, and it was quite probable that he meant it. But he wasn’t the first to start out that way.

There is already a good deal of traffic about this morning and people that are lucky enough to have beds have already left them to secure a good spot to watch the procession. The air is charged. It reminds Veck of the wedding day of the Prince and Princess of Wales. That was twenty-four years ago and he would have been all of 14. That day lives on in his head; he can smell it. It was the day that he began his apprenticeship.

Allies has spent the last couple of days cooped up in doors watching out of the window for ‘Mr Brown’. Veck knows that Lord George, like the rest of the aristocracy, will be beset by engagements this week. He won’t come today for sure, therefore Veck can take Allies out. He will show him a tale of two cities: he will show him the beauty of the metropolis for those that can afford to buy it and
he will bring him to Trafalgar Square and show him what happens to the friendless.

Allies does not know what to make of Veck’s invitation. It is true that he is bored to death with sitting and staring at the cocks drawn on the attic wall and the house is seized with merriment today. There has been more coming and going than usual, with people running up and downstairs. He doesn’t want to remember Jubilee Day for long hours spent in self-imposed captivity. But he has no money. That need not been an obstacle, Veck says, for he has sufficient for both. Allies doesn’t know what Veck wants of him but to submit at least offers the day some promise of adventure. Veck is also right about Lord George; he will not be coming today.

Allies washes his face and puts on his last clean shirt. If he stays any longer he will have to ask for the means to do his laundry. Next to Mr Veck he feels underdressed. He plays with the frayed cuffs of his jacket and misses the smartness of his Marlborough livery.

They are just on their way out of the door when Hammond comes in. He stares at Veck accusingly as though he were making off with the family silver.

‘I thought Mr Allies could do with a walk,’ says Veck.

‘Indeed,’ returns Hammond. His eyes glance from Allies to Veck and then back again.

‘After all, Mr Allies is not a prisoner in our castle. We don’t want him to feel like one.’

‘To be sure; to be sure he is not,’ says Hammond injecting some mirth into his suspicious tone. Some silent communication passes between Hammond and Veck.

‘We’ll take an omnibus to Trafalgar Square and see if we can’t see something of the procession as it passes by.’

‘Now Mr Veck, you’re not planning to assassinate her majesty as she drives by and use our guest here as an accomplice are you?’ asks Hammond jovially. ‘Or are you on your way to plant a bomb in Westminster Abbey?’

‘No I’ll leave that to the Fenians. Don’t worry Charley, we’ll be back before dark,’ says Veck.
‘Yes,’ says Hammond, ‘but it is the longest day of the year with ample opportunity for mischief before sundown.’

Veck winks at Hammond, while almost shoving Allies out of the door.

The omnibuses are so full to bursting with merrymakers that they do not even stop. Veck and Allies walk all the way to Trafalgar Square, but it is a fine day for it and they can stop and admire the colours and pageantry. Allies is sulky and says very little, but every now and then his attention is piqued by something and he lifts his brown eyes to take in some display. Veck watches as the warm wind plays with the curls gathered upon that sun-browned face. It is some act of witchcraft that has turned the son of a Suffolk coachman into a Greek demi-god.

They are caught up in the throngs upon Charing Cross Road. Union Jacks hang in abundance from every upper-storey and figures move about among chimney pots waving and calling out to the people below. Mounted police push their way through the crowds that are being help up by the slow progress of a brass band.

‘Keep your wits about you,’ warns Veck, placing his hand firmly on Allies’s shoulder.

‘What for?’

‘Pickpockets of course. They’ve set sail from all corners of Europe to take their pickings from today.’

‘If they can find anything of value on me then they deserve it,’ answers Allies morosely.

‘But you have much about you that is worth a great deal,’ says Veck.

The air wafts with the smell of alcohol. So many people are already inebriated. Veck produces a hip flask from the inside pocket of his jacket. He takes a swig and offers it to Allies. ‘Whisky,’ he says. Allies takes it enthusiastically. Veck laughs. The boy isn’t all moodiness; he has spirit too.

The crowds are making poor work of singing the National Anthem in rhythm. Veck adds his voice to the masses:

‘Lord help our precious Queen
Noble but rather mean,
Lord help the Queen.'
Keep Queen Victorious
From work laborious
Let snobs uproarious
Slaver the Queen’

He is getting funny looks on either side. People think he is a foreigner. Or Irish!
He takes another dram of whisky and belts out another verse.

To her fresh blessings grant,
While starving millions want,
Long may she gain
May she defend her screw,
Helped by a favoured few
With sinecures in view,
God help the Queen.

The setting of Allies’s mouth betrays a desire to laugh.
'There’s another verse,' says Veck passing him the flask.
'You'll get arrested for a breach of the peace. Do you hate the Queen?' asks Allies.

'I have a revolutionary spirit,' says Veck. 'When the day comes I will drive
the tumbrils and fill them with aristos. You can help me.'
'I'm not sure I want to. I don't mind the Queen, me.'

The Charing Cross Road curves around the National Portrait Gallery and
opens out onto Trafalgar Square. It is as busy as Veck has ever seen it. Allies is
completely awe-struck in spite of himself and it amuses Veck to see the wonder
animate his face. Wherever there is a space it has been occupied by a human
body. Grown men hang from lampposts calling out lewd suggestions to pretty
girls. Cadets from Woolwich and Sandhurst move about, the sun glistening on the
brass buttons of their tunics. Veck cannot recall when he has been so aroused by
any spectacle. It must be the most perfect day he has even seen but even he is at
a loss to explain why he should be so utterly seized by the loveliness of it. It takes
a good deal to move him. He turns to his companion and whispers rather intimately in his ear. 'Why did you break into the Marlborough Club?'

'How do you know about that?' asks Allies, a shadow of fear passing over his eyes.

'You had a good job there. But the bowing, the scraping, it all began to grate didn't it? The tips weren't enough. You wanted more. So you risked everything, you took a gamble; you knew where the cash box was. And you got caught. That was your mistake. Luckily for you, you had a rich friend to bail you out. Why do you think he did that? Because he was a kind man? No. It's because he wakes at night with fantasies of you with one leg each side of him riding his cock.'

Allies's face contorts with disgust.

'Did you honestly think he wanted something for nothing?'

Veck hands him the flask and Allies takes a very long drink.

'We won't get any closer to the procession than this,' says Allies as they are pushed up against the backs of people outside St Martin's church.

'Won't we?' returns Veck as he pushes Allies up the church steps. Allies has no choice but to move for the force pressed into the small of his back is heavy. Veck is a large man and shameless with it. Courting couples and fathers with children upon their shoulders swear at them as Veck drives them to the best vantage point for watching the procession.

Not far away, Jack also has an excellent view in the private enclosure outside Buckingham Palace. He is part of Lady Frederick Cavendish's party. It is a momentous day as he plans to announce his engagement this evening. The lady sitting next to him has already accepted. Kate looks completely untroubled by her new-found happiness as her eyes drift impatiently between the new arrivals entering the enclosure and the upper storey windows of the Palace where various royal babies and princesses show themselves at intervals. The Queen's cooks have escaped the palace kitchen and peer down from the roof in their white hats. How blue the sky is. Jack, like Veck, is carried away by it all. He is no monarchist but the cheering and the peals of the bells of St Martin's find a pleasant echo in his soul. Besides it is a fine thing to see the officers of the
Lifeguards walking about with their helmets and sabres glittering. He hasn't spent much time thinking about how he will curb or not curb his desires when he is married. He does not question whether or not he will be able to perform his duties as husband. He imagines it to be a purely mechanical thing or perhaps an experience that will tease out a hidden nature within him.

Kate has spent significantly more time thinking about that side of things. She is thinking about it now as her eyes follow the same striking forms that occupy Jack's vision. She also observes how his eyes trace the grace and form of the figures in uniform, but she has not had sufficient time to question her observation when the flare of trumpets signals the opening of the procession and the first of the royal carriages begins its drive along the Mall.

'Closed carriages,' observes Kate. 'Rather disappointing for the masses. But no doubt a necessary precaution.'

Jack pretends he has not heard her. The crowd is strangely silent and not a murmur is heard as the foreign royal princes pass by; this is a patriotic crowd and they are saving their throats and their enthusiasm for their Queen.

Jack feels something more penetrating than the sun on his face and he turns to find himself under the scrutiny of George's enquiring eyes. George is seated with his cousin Isabel ... and Rollo. Some silent communication passes between George and Jack that is imperceptible to anyone else. They have met little in the last two months since Jack has been devoting his energies to wooing Kate, while George has become an ever more regular visitor to Hammond's. Too regular, for Jack's ease. He bitterly regrets being George's means of introduction to 19 Cleveland Street.

Jack's attention is called back to the procession by a sudden roar which begins to sweep across the crowd. Any number of Fenian bombs could go off in the city and they would be utterly drowned out by the noisy adoration that screams the length of the Mall to be taken up again in Trafalgar Square. A police horse rears up almost dismounting its officer but the officer holds fast. The Queen does not disappoint her subjects and hers is an open conveyance pulled by six cream horses.

Veck observes how even Allies has lost most of his solemnity. To be sure he is not waving, but his eyes watch hungrily. Veck's whole being is awake with
desire in a way it hasn't been in years. The thickness of the crowd legitimises his proximity to the thing he craves, his face almost resting in Allies's curls; the excitement that penetrates every body present gives his own pulsating heart an alibi.

Then at last she drives into view; the last thing in the world that could bring Veck to such feverish excitement and yet how he waves and shouts at the little old woman in the white bonnet who gives the impression of feeling nothing but discomfort at the heat. Her sons and grandsons ride on horseback behind her. A knowledgeable clergyman who stands in earshot of Veck and Allies points out the riders to a group of schoolchildren. They are indifferent enough as they wave their flags. 'There is the Grand Duke Serge of Russia, Prince William of Prussia, Prince Albert Victor ... one day he will be king and you will come and cheer like this for him when he is crowned.'

Veck is barely mindful of the clergyman's words. He is a plain man and therefore he is of no interest. But the echo of his commentary marries with a recognition that is taking hold of Veck. A recognition too fantastic that he can barely credit it: the recognition of a long slim face, and finely drawn nose, and the moustache that curves up from the end of the young man's lips. Even Allies is momentarily forgotten as Veck elevates himself as high as he is able in order to observe the young man on horseback who is following the retinue so quickly and steadily; one slight turn of his head would be sufficient to confirm Veck's sighting but the prince does not oblige.

For Veck it seems that London itself is suddenly possessed of a heartbeat and it throbs from some unseen place deep within the folds of earth that keep so many of its secrets. Now he is in possession of perhaps the greatest secret of his age. He is not certain whether it is fear or excitement that is taking hold of him; perhaps it is a measure of both. But there is something else which he struggles to identify amidst the cheering and shouting. It isn't the aggressive pleasure of triumph, but the sweeter sensation of vindication. All his life he has been pursued by laws and rhetoric that have named all men who share his tastes and habits as the scourge of this great nation. But now he knows that his blood is no more guilty than the royal blood which will coarse through future generations. All men were susceptible. If it is a disease then it makes no distinction between
the highest and the lowest; indeed it might be the very force that flattens out the hierarchy, that strips them of their clothes and false virtue and renders every man an equal by way of his shared sin.

People begin to move away from their seats in the enclosure; Jack asks Kate to excuse him for a moment. George has likewise moved away from his own party and they meet by an appointment made with a furtive glance.

To Jack, George appears tired. His face is blotched and the eyes haven’t slept. It is a face that betrays a life devoid of any useful occupation. He lives now only for the pleasures he finds at Hammond’s.

‘What is it you wish to tell me?’ asks Jack. ‘It must be a truly radiant boy who discomposes you so.’

‘You know me too well,’ answers George. ‘It is Allies. Algernon Allies. The boy from the Marlborough Club.’

‘You’ve had him at last have you?’

‘No,’ says George. ‘But he came to me and sought my help. He was charged with stealing but I stood surety for him. He has lost his home and his job.’

‘Don’t tell me he’s living with you?’

‘No. Charley Hammond has given him a bed until I can find something permanent.’

‘I’m sure he has. You must be out of your senses.’

‘Perhaps I am,’ returns George. ‘I don’t recall ever being seized with such an intense desire for anything.’

‘Does Mr Allies understand what is required for his bread and board?’

‘He isn’t a slave, nor a prisoner. But at least at Cleveland Street I can visit him and be sure of privacy. I will only ask something of him if I feel that he is inclined to give it. I’m not exactly the bounder sort. But when we’re together ... I believe there is an understanding between us.’

Jack’s eyes search those of his friend for a trace of that intelligence he has come to cherish. A year ago he had befriended him on a whim because he saw an opportunity to make a fool of him and to punish him for being Rollo Caversham’s nephew. But those designs have since evaporated and George is perhaps the only person he truly cares for in the world. The pity and fear that quicken his blood
are real. ‘George, by giving Allies into Hammond’s care you place yourself entirely in his power. You must know what a dangerous thing that is?’

‘Hammond is a businessman,’ answers George, annoyed at his friend’s lack of enthusiasm for his good fortune.

‘Yes,’ says Jack. ‘And he knows men and how to exploit their weaknesses.’

‘Does that person want you?’ asks George through gritted teeth.

Jack turns to see Kate watching him. He smiles and nods. His wife-to-be is rather too watchful for his liking.

‘Who is that?’

‘Who indeed?’ asks Jack in a manner designed to elicit George’s curiosity.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t I tell you? I am to be married.’

George cannot speak. He suddenly feels terribly cold. But is not the breeze that stirs the trees upon the Mall for the breeze is warm. The cold he feels comes from inside. The loneliest feeling he has ever experienced rises to snare every word he tries to speak.

‘Will you not shake hands and wish me well, George?’ asks Jack. But the pain in George’s face drains Jack of any resolve to hurt him. ‘I cannot speak now,’ he says. ‘I shall call upon you tomorrow. Just take my advice regarding Allies and get him away from Hammond as soon as possible.’

George is left quite alone. He feels sensitive to solitude in a way he never has been before. Could it be possible that Jack was actually going to marry? His own appetite has never known any edge where women were concerned. His school friends boasted of intimacies and seductions but he had no narratives to offer; he didn’t even have imagination enough to invent them. He would not presume to offer an account of how a woman felt when touched because it was never an image that occupied his mind. He thought all the time of the physicality of men. Beauty was in lakes and the way the light fell on the city from on top of Parliament Hill – it was also found in the figures of soldiers, of cavalrymen astride horses, of labourers, of the working men who went swimming in the Serpentine. It was in Jack’s saddened and defeated eyes, and in the black curls of Algernon Allies. Pretty women he could and did admire but there was not a
Helen alive today that he would launch a thousand ships for. The beauty of
women did not live in his head or heat his blood. Were he and Jack such
disparate creatures that Jack could value and appreciate the attractions of both
sexes?

Today was inevitable. He thinks back to Ireland. To the smell of the
burning peat and the pawing of the dogs as Jack drained one glass after another,
his eyes growing wilder and wilder. Matthew had flashed a warning at George in
his own guarded way. Jack was always going to hurt him. Jack’s announcement
wasn’t a betrayal and yet it was and George cannot properly account for why.

Jack and Kate find themselves temporarily separated from the rest of their party.
It is strange to be walking in St James’s Park with a woman on his arm; he often
comes here at dusk looking for pick-ups. He doesn’t always know how to behave
with his fiancé and is rather nervous about the engagement announcement later.

‘Who was that man you were talking to?’ she asks.

‘An old acquaintance,’ he answers indifferently.

‘An acquaintance and not a friend? You seemed to know him quite well.’

Damn her for her impertinence, thinks Jack. He does not like the idea of
having anyone to answer to and does not regard it as one of the necessary evils
of marriage. He intends to have his secrets. ‘His name is Lord George Caversham,’
he says coldly. He begins to look about for Lady Frederick; he does not care to be
alone with Kate and her questions.

‘Caversham?’ she answers. ‘That is not the name of someone I’d expect you
to know.’

He is about to play down his friendship with George when he realises that
they are being observed. His explanation dies upon his lips at the sight of Lizzie
Osborn looking more than a little inebriated and waving a gin bottle at him.

‘Well look who it isn’t,’ she calls out to Jack. Her gravely voice made more
hoarse by the drink.

He isn’t certain if Kate has observed her. He spies Lady Frederick. ‘Come
along,’ he says to Kate and pulls her rather aggressively by the hand.

‘That person seems to know you,’ she says.

‘What person?’ asks Jack, all but dragging her across the grass.
'That woman; I think she's following us.'

Lizzie Osborn is following Jack and Kate but the crowds conspire against her and she cannot keep pace. She is calling out after them. Kate distinctly hears the word 'bugger'.

***

When George arrives at 19 Cleveland Street it is after two in the morning. But Hammond has received many latecomers tonight. The sun's long reign in the sky has ignited a most lucrative supply of lust. He has just let one room to a soldier and three of the medical students from the Middlesex hospital. He was also surprised to have a visit from the young gent who came for the first time without his white-haired companion. He has been upstairs for an hour or more. Hammond has been feeling generous tonight and has paid the boys five shillings instead of the customary four. 'As good as Christmas,' he told them. It will not hurt his profits too much, besides there is a carnival atmosphere tonight. The bell rings once more. He goes to the door, and is rather perturbed to encounter Mr Brown. He little thought that Lord George Caversham would find his way to them tonight; Veck and Allies still have not retuned home. He inwardly curses them, particularly Veck. He brings George inside; that he is more than a little inebriated works to Hammond's advantage. Hammond pours him another drink. 'Now,' he says stroking the remnants of his hair and praying that Veck does not bring the boy back until he has got rid of George. 'It's very late, Mr Brown. I'm afraid our young friend was not expecting you this evening. He's already retired for the night.'

George looks disappointed but not in an angry way; he appears to appreciate the good sense in this. In coming here he wanted a distraction from Jack's revelation. Just to speak to Allies might have been enough. Hammond offers him another boy but George declines. He is retrieving his hat from the hall table when he hears the stairs creak beneath the weight of another latecomer to the house, the gentleman who still has not betrayed his identity to Hammond. He turns and he and the gentleman look upon each other. It is an exchange filled with terror upon both sides. Outside, Cleveland Street seems to swim in George's
vision. He finds himself walking in the direction of Euston Road instead of Oxford Street. He stops in the doorway of the old workhouse. He is drunk; he is not even a reliable witness to his own vision. He gladly relinquishes any claim to sobriety. He'd rather be mad than imagine he could swear to what he had seen.

***

By the time the morning light creeps upon them, Veck has shown Allies the London that only money can buy. He has taken him all over Soho. They have eaten in the best cafes and Veck has pointed out the rich and famous. They have feasted on the variety, the colour, and the excitement. Allies has never experienced a day like it. He has tasted more of the luxuries of life in a few hours that his parents have in a lifetime. This is what he came here to discover. It wasn’t to wait at table, even in the best hotels and clubs. It was to be waited on. It was to be measured for suits and buy expensive gloves. It was to sit in theatres and drink champagne in the finest restaurants. Veck has dazzled him and almost bankrupted himself in the process. But as the fireworks exploded over their heads, Veck knew he had won.

But the day isn’t quite over yet. They are back at Trafalgar Square as the sun rises, illuminating that other London. Veck studies Allies as he takes in the contrast. As his eyes fall upon the men, women, and children left to the mercy of the sky.

'Now,' says Veck in a tone devoid of all the warmth and mirth that have permeated his voice today, 'I can leave you here now and you can make your bed amongst them. Or you can come back to Cleveland Street with me and make your fortune.'

Allies does not look at him. 'I wouldn't know where to begin,' he says.

'I could show you how,' says Veck.

'I have a sweetheart. I said I'd marry her as soon as I had enough put by.'

'And so you may. We all have to make a living somehow.'

He leads Allies down to the Embankment to a spot where it is quite deserted.
Veck undoes Allies's trousers and his hand brushes against Allies's cock. It is cold. But as Veck's fingers nudge against it, it begins to swell and warm. Veck can hear the change in his breathing. As the roar of the drunken night fades, all goes quiet for them both.

Chapter Six

One Year Later

In the ironing room of the St Martin's Public Baths, poor men's shirts hang in dense rows and the steam obscures the daylight that is turned away like an uninvited visitor. Elizabeth Osborn is here six days a week and is usually to be found by herself with her heavy iron. The sweat of her honest labours pours off her. Her dishonest labours have never brought her hands and back such pain. She drops her work momentarily that she might stand erect.

The other laundresses leave her alone here. They whisper that she has another trade, yet none of them could guess what it is. They also know her son has been put away for life and that he was guilty of making his living by means of his mouth and his arse. Not one of them suspect how he was led into such practices. No one here knows how Lizzie Osborn nourishes unnatural appetites and how even in the obscurity of the room choked with steam, she can search out the finest forms of male beauty and weigh their value just as a fishmonger might price an eel. She sits down only momentarily defeated. Few women of any station in life living in this city have Lizzie's resourcefulness. On the day it was declared her husband would never walk nor work again she looked around their house and measured the value of everything they owned, but their possessions, even those she was proud of, totalled very little; then her eyes fell upon the two faces that looked at her to provide butter for their bread. From now on they would be the means by which there would be bread upon the table. She knew enough about men to know that such a trade flourished all but unseen. She knew where to take her pretty boys, aged 14 and 13, to market. There were fraternities glad to adopt them and teach them the ways of the renter and also the blackmailer. Tom was always the most adept. He might have turned their
fortunes. Now both her boys are gone. William sold Jack’s ring and bought his passage to America. He had no desire to follow his brother to prison. Now Lizzie scratches her living without her best earners. She would smother her husband as he slept were it not for her fear of the hangman. Yet the doctor keeps calling and he must be paid. And Jack Worsley MP keeps four servants. Abrahams tells her that he is still not as ripe as he could be. But Abrahams be damned. He too has a fine house and fine things. He will not surrender the missives she placed in his care. She should never have given them up to him.

Lizzie fears she will be found dead, her iron cold in her hand before she has tasted the cuts of meat that Jack Worsley has at his table. She has spent sufficient time watching his house to know who purveys his beef and poultry, who delivers his wine (and in such quantities) and where he gets his coal. She can barely afford coal in winter and has often burned rags. Winter is returning now. She can feel it stoking her avarice. She does not feel that she has life enough left in her to wait for Jack’s fruit to ripen anymore.

On her first wedding anniversary, Mrs Jack Worsley is in the East End. She spends most of her days working at the reformatories of Whitechapel; some of the women she teaches to read and write, and then there are the Polish and Russian women to whom she teaches the basic rudiments of the English language. It is all to get them off the streets, the streets upon which the world’s eyes have suddenly been turned. It is no chore for her to come almost every day. A thousand other things could occupy the wife of an MP but given her husband’s position as a prominent Radical, nobody could find her pursuits objectionable.

But some question the intelligence of her unaccompanied peregrinations and as the nights draw in she will invariably be finding her way back home in the dark. Kate has no fear of the dark. The Whitechapel murderer, whomever he is, is a coward who stalks the poor and defenceless in the dead of night. Besides, her work is important. If women can choose honest paths then they will no longer be obliged to walk abroad in dangerous hours.

Kate is astonished at the number of women who come into the reformatory wearing wedding rings. She had always thought that the broken woman must be a single woman, poor and defenceless against the world. But for
many it seemed that marriage had been the beginning of their problems. Marriage, not loneliness, had broken their wills and driven them to an immoral life. There was one Russian woman who had admired Kate's ring. She wept when she told Kate her story and kissed Kate's hand and told her, as best she could, that she hoped God had sent her a husband to cherish her. Kate had guiltily withdrawn her hand.

Kate's husband had never hit her. Indeed he had barely touched her. She could not say on oath that her marriage had not been consummated. There were bruises of discomfort as well as embarrassment in the week after their nuptials. But Jack had seemed contemptuous of her. He had made her feel at fault, ugly, inexperienced. She shudders to think about it. He made no pretence of sharing a room with her now and she was glad. But it also feels like having a life sentence. What promise of escape would present itself? Escape only comes through death. Hers. She has thought about it. His. She has contemplated and imagined that more.

She is lost in her own thoughts, useless to the women she has come to help. A hand touches her gently on the arm and she looks down into a pair of genteel brown eyes and the face of a pretty young woman about her own age.

'Sorry, you seemed very engrossed. I didn't mean to disturb you but you are Mrs Worsley, aren't you?'

'Yes,' says Kate.

'I'm one of the new volunteers and I was told to come and find you.'

'Oh. Yes, do forgive me. I was doing some sums in my hand. I'm not the thing today. I didn't catch your name?'

The young woman was simply dressed but had a natural elegance and confidence in her poise. She would be regarded as a well-born lady anywhere. She wears no wedding ring and Kate is filled with a pang of envy.

'My name is Virginia Crawford,' she says, and as she speaks she looks directly into Kate's gaze as if searching out some recognition.

Kate does recognise the name but cannot for the moment remember from where. She is certain they have never met. 'Do forgive me,' Kate says amiably. 'I didn't know that we had anybody new starting today. You are very welcome, Miss Crawford.'
The young woman looks at her somewhat strangely, ‘Oh, do call me Nia,’ she says. ‘I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you. I have heard so much about your work from Cardinal Manning.’

Kate feels again that this should jar some recognition. But she is not equal to it at the moment. ‘The women are currently at breakfast,’ she says. ‘Afterwards I will be taking a group in reading instruction. You’ll find it depressingly basic but if you’d like to help me?’

‘I’ll be your shadow for the day then perhaps I can ease your burden rather than adding to it tomorrow,’ says Nia.

Kate likes her. All the other volunteers are so old and fussy. Nia is young and companionable. There is something in her self-possession that intimidates Kate. As the married lady of the two, Kate believes that the confidence should be hers. But it isn’t.

They sit for the course of the morning with three girls, two of which are no more than children. None of them can spell their own names. The girls like to talk as much as they like to study and Nia is more adept at this part than Kate. Kate watches Nia. The things that are shocking to Kate and make her colour do not make Nia colour. When the youngest, a girl of 13 or 14 describes how she was used by a neighbour in the shared lavatory from the age of ten, Nia does not lose her composure. She merely listens very earnestly and her eyes are filled with natural sympathy.

At lunchtime Nia takes her soup and goes and sits among the women. They regard her suspiciously at first but within a few minutes the level of chatter is restored to what it was. Kate takes her dish and takes her usual place among the charitable matrons who are also studying the new volunteer with keen interest.

‘Thank you for looking after Mrs Crawford, my dear,’ says Mrs Palmer. ‘It is very good of you.’

Kate thinks that Mrs Palmer is over-stressing her goodness. Her tone is deliberately confidential and gossipy.

‘It was no difficulty,’ she answers. ‘Mrs Crawford,’ she finds herself emphasising the Mrs as the discovery takes her by surprise, ‘was very helpful.’
Mrs Palmer does not seem particularly pleased at this remark. ‘Of course it was Cardinal Manning who insisted that we should let her come here. “A reformatory is a place for reclamation not judgement,” he said. Though I do think he might have been more considerate of the ladies that will have to associate with her. Mrs Turner asked if he meant we should take her as a volunteer or as an inmate. Very droll.’

Kate looks from the judgemental matron to the object of her judgement. Nia puts Kate in mind of Dorothea Brooke whose beauty was thrown into relief by poor dress. Mrs Palmer continues to discuss the annoyance of Cardinal Manning’s interferences, but Kate is deaf to it for she has just realised who Nia is.

In some respects it is like turning the page of a novel and encountering an illustration of a character totally at odds with one’s own creation, for Mrs Crawford is not at all as Kate has imagined. The young wife of good family who stood up in court and sank her teeth into the fabric of society. Who told the world that Sir Charles Dilke had educated her in every French vice. Yet there is no trace of the scarlet ‘A’ upon her forehead. No marks of depravity about the mouth. The face is honest and kind, as though it had been nourished by only good conduct. Now she gracefully courts the trust of society’s outcasts. She is one of them, thinks Kate. She knows better than any here who call themselves a lady what these creatures have fallen to. Her fate is worse for she is notorious while they are just obscure. They do not know what it is to hear their names shouted by newsboys on street corners.

Virginia Crawford feels Kate’s glance and smiles. Kate blushes. She is blushing at the memory of the fascination with which she read the newspaper accounts of the Crawford divorce. She had stolen the newspapers and taken them to her room and by candlelight she had scoured them as though they must surrender the mysteries of life. When she heard of the more prurient and detailed versions being circulated by the newspapers that were never found in Lady Frederick’s library, she went out to find them, not trusting a servant. What were these mysterious French vices? What was the significance of Fanny, the missing servant girl? She was wanted to corroborate Mrs Crawford’s story that she had joined her and Dilke in bed. Three people in a bed. Kate could barely guess how that might work. Even the more sensational papers had not been
descriptive enough. Kate averts her eyes from Mrs Crawford, not out of disgust but out of fear. Mrs Crawford is her own age exactly and yet what a chasm exists between their experiences. She had gone willingly and discreetly to men’s bedrooms for her own pleasure. When Kate had met Sir Charles Dilke at her wedding she had blushed too, and as Jack lifted her veil she had wondered if Dilke had imparted all his knowledge to Jack.

As she had waited for Jack to join her in bed her imagination had run away with her and she half wondered if he too might bring the scullery maid to share in their wedding night. But she waited and waited for him; she heard him moving about the house. She had heard the clock strike one and still he didn’t come. More than half an hour later he had materialised. He asked her if she was tired. She was. She had almost fallen asleep. He had crawled into bed behind her and kissed her goodnight. After that she was wide-awake. He snuffed out his candle and she listened as he got into the bed beside her. She waited for his hands to touch her, but he didn’t come near her. She didn’t so much as feel his breath. She listened as he lay back. Then all was quiet. He lay still. His breathing softly changed. He was sleeping.

Later in the week it was done. Jack had been looking at her strangely all evening as though his eyes were accustoming themselves to the dark. Later without aid of a candle he had undressed her. His hands were cold; they made her shiver. He’d let the fire in their room go out. She could see nothing. She had been frightened but his breathing was frightened too, and urgent. Then he cried out almost in frustration. It all went very quiet and then she knew pain. Pain that did not become pleasure. They didn’t exchange a word. When it was over he left the room and did not return until the morning. She was glad and she had wept silently. They had never loved each other; they had both been very frank about that, but there had still been some expectation that some purpose to marriage, to life, would be revealed after her wedding. Whatever secrets Dilke knew, he had certainly kept them from his protégé.

She is preparing for afternoon study when she observes a policeman standing somewhat awkwardly about. Like the rest of the country she does not have a particularly high opinion of policemen just now.

‘May I help you officer?’ she asks with cold civility.
‘Can I speak to the superintendent of this establishment?’
‘You can speak to me.’
‘I,’ he hesitates. ‘I don’t want to be responsible for a panic.’
‘Then you are addressing the correct person.’

His face is the pallor of milk and he looks as though he’s seen something that will haunt his sleep ever after. He begins, ‘I’m afraid to report that there’s been another murder. The body of a young woman was found this morning in a room in nearby Miller’s Court.’

That was indeed very close by.

Kate looks around at the room full of women. It could have been any one of them and still might be yet.

‘The women should be informed but not alarmed,’ he says. ‘It would be as well to impress upon them the dangers of going out after dark. Advise them to stay indoors.’

‘Always assuming they have a door to close behind them,’ mutters Kate.

‘Has this poor woman been identified?’
‘Yes Miss.’
‘And I suppose no one has been arrested in relation to her death?’ she asks rather acerbically.

The policeman answers her with a look of defeat. A look borrowed from his superiors. There is something in his manner that is far too innocent for these streets. Had one of his superiors been here they would have checked him. He will either harden or he will crumble, thinks Kate.

‘The investigation is in hand, Miss. Be assured the police are doing everything in their powers. In the meantime we practise what preventative measures we can.’

‘We shall do our best here.’
‘Miss, I would urge you also to get home well before dark.’
‘Back to my safe West-End address?’ she says. ‘Yes, to be sure officer. And God help these women.’

Kate does want to go home. That’s the worst of it. And the thought of being here beyond twilight terrifies her. If only they could make sure that each of these women had a bed that they could afford without bringing a stranger back
to share it. The women are shaken by the news. There is a close community between them, but none have heard of Mrs Kelly. Perhaps she was only new to Whitechapel. Perhaps she came from Ireland, cast out of her home, she threw herself on the mercy of England: the kingdom that likes to consider itself the mother country. Mrs Kelly came to find its maternal instinct asleep on the night that her throat was cut from end to end.

Just then Mrs Palmer informs Kate that a cab is at the door, sent for and paid for by her husband to ensure her safe return. She considers this unusually thoughtful of Jack. Then it occurs to her that Mrs Crawford may have no such means at her disposal. It would be the Christian thing to suggest that she accompany her. Jack would never approve but then so much the better. The thought of riding from East to West with Mrs Crawford makes Kate feel that old sensation of hurrying out to buy the disreputable dallies. The world would think them ill-suited companions. Mrs Crawford is reluctant to accept her help at first and insists she will be quite safe on trams and omnibuses, but the fading light outside also seems to unnerve her and she agrees. Besides she has pressed so much of her change into the hands of the women that she must have given away her fare.

The two ladies stand together and watch those that society terms ‘unfortunates’ walk out into those streets where their fellow unfortunates have been spilled like offal. The cab, as they climb inside, seems over commodious for their needs. Neither of them looks out of the window as they are carried away to safety.

The two women sit in silence as the cab passes along Fleet Street.

‘Where do you live?’ asks Kate.

‘I have a little flat in Marylebone,’ answers Nia. ‘It is very good of you to give me a lift, Mrs Worsley, but I’m not sure what your husband will think.’

‘Well I couldn’t just leave you to find your own way home. Besides he does not need to know,’ she answers.

The two women exchange a smile.

‘I know the difference between having a husband to answer to and a husband to answer to who is also a Member of Parliament,’ says Nia.
‘Of course. Society becomes more pious than ever when it comes to a politician’s wife.’

‘Nobody knows that better than me,’ says Mrs Crawford with a thin smile.

‘Forgive me I didn’t –’

Nia puts up her hand to fend off Kate’s apology. ‘People who do not despise me tend to feel very sorry for me. It is not necessary. I sometimes think I have a very enviable life. I have an independence that women seldom enjoy. Oh, it’s true I am rarely if ever invited anywhere. I get some callers but they do not belong to the most interesting sort. They are mostly do-gooders intent upon reforming me. Cardinal Manning has been very kind; I do not mean him.’

‘But you are never lonely?’

‘Are you never lonely?’

The words catch at Kate. She is constantly lonely. The veneer of her life was intact but under the surface nothing was in its proper place. Before she began her pilgrimages East, who did she converse with but the servants? She had no right to pity Mrs Crawford for her own situation was no more enviable. She isn’t sure if Mrs Crawford isn’t actually better off.

It is hard to make much progress for the city is spilling its workers into the street and they are constantly held up. Kate listens to the evening’s cacophony, but there was something invigorating about the lives that were happening all about her. Most of the life belongs to men. The paperboys are selling the news fast tonight and there is a vendor on every street corner. Another woman brutally murdered in Whitechapel. Mrs Crawford knows what it is to hear her own name hawked about. To see her name in large black letters. But she also knows what it is to shut her own front door upon the world and live entirely upon her own terms. Did she receive men to her Marylebone apartment? There was no one to stop her doing that either.

‘I am frequently lonely,’ says Kate. ‘I wish I came East purely in the spirit of altruism but my work gratifies a more selfish desire to fill my days – to give me a sense of purpose.’

Mrs Crawford nods. ‘Yes, for the woman not content to spend her days being driven about the park, and her evenings on her husband’s arm, the hours of the day are lengthened by a constant struggle to prove useful. I believe it is a
struggle that belongs most particularly to childless women.’ Mrs Crawford stresses the word in such an interesting way that Kate wonders if she means to imply something more than the absence of children.

‘I hope,’ says Kate, ‘that the events of today have not put you off coming to work with us again, Mrs Crawford.’

‘Certainly not. The women need more help than ever and I believe educating them and giving them skills will be genuinely useful.’

‘I agree.’

‘And I hope you will call me Nia,’ she says.

And in the beginnings of friendship with the decade’s most infamous woman, Kate feels a rush of life that she hasn’t felt in a very long time. It was the promise of something happening. The rest of London was feeling alive to something dangerous that evening and pure minds with a desire to be sullied, scrambled for the less reputable newspapers. That evening as Kate washes the East from her hands she smiles broadly at the novelty of having a secret from Jack. He is sensitive to a change in her mood but he is no more able to penetrate her mind than he is able to penetrate her body.

Chapter Seven

Tonight London is lost under the influence of a vicious and unyielding fog. She plays a merciless game with the city’s inhabitants: shifting and clearing and lulling its traffic into a false sense of safety before returning with a vindictive ferocity. Jack has already had a report of one of his constituents found drowned at the Millwall Docks after he lost his way.

It is early in the evening. Fog signals have frightened the cattle and sheep being herded across the city from the North London markets. Many have fallen beneath the heavy wheels of phantom cabs. There are five bullocks currently being held at Bridewell Police Station. These are hours to sever links and chains unseen.
The theatres will soon surrender their merrymakers to the perilous streets. It is not a night to be abroad but the determination of the English reveller should never be underestimated. A drunken mob is already gathering on the steps of St Paul’s to be there at the death of the old year.

What great trade this will be for the pickpocket. But the fog is the enabler of more than one kind of sin. This is the night for a man to flaunt his secrets. The fog both feeds and cloaks vice. When the gutter is invisible a man may easily lose his way there. The burning lamps at 19 Cleveland Street cast a terrible hue. Hammond, always drawn to the fog and all things hidden there, opens the door and tries to look out but he can see nothing.

Something precious to him has gone missing and it is not the kind of night that will give up its stolen goods. His cigarette provides another speck of light. He hears the rumble of wheels and a torch floats towards him. He hears the pattering of feet. He stares hard into the gloom and at last the link boy approaches but his flare illuminates a very ugly face. No grace touches his youth; poverty has left only the marks of emaciation. No profit to be found there. Indeed if anything Hammond considers it an ill omen for the New Year.

‘Allies,’ he screams into the street. But the cry is lost and makes a mockery of him. What will Mr Brown say? Pray God he does not find his way here tonight. Brown’s enthusiasm for the boy has outlasted Hammond’s expectations. But Allies grows in handsomeness and Hammond recognises a long-term investment. Yet the boy has become independent and unruly. He walks about for long hours and tells nobody where he goes or where he has been. He has discovered the power in his face.

Jack Worsley is a long way from Cleveland Street. He is dining very respectably at Labby’s house. He is a husband among husbands. Since his marriage, his wife’s interests have not improved. The estate is sinking. Her tenants cannot pay their rents and he cannot drain the land to make it profitable. He can conclude he knows nothing about farming. But tonight they look the part at least as far as their costumes go. He sits a long way off from Kate who is deep in conversation with Lady Dilke. It is easier to pretend to like her when he is not standing next to her. She looks pretty tonight he owns grudgingly. In the 13 months since his marriage he has been told many times that he is the subject of
much envy. Yet the only response she stirs in him is hatred. He has humiliated her of course. There are many single women of their acquaintance that have a better understanding of married love than she does. The wedding ring weighs heavily on both their hands.

‘The Ripper might look upon it as a missed opportunity if he doesn’t strike tonight,’ says Labby. ‘I’ve never known a fog like it. They’d never catch him.’

All eyes on the room are now turned on Jack as though he might at any moment revel the true identity of the killer in the form of some kind of grotesque parlour game.

‘Do you think that unfortunate girl that was murdered in your constituency could be the latest victim?’ asks Lady Dilke.

‘By no means,’ returns Jack, defensively.

It is ten days since the Mylett woman was found dead in Clark’s Yard off Poplar High Street. She was almost certainly a woman of the street. This was the first victim that had fallen on Jack’s side of the constituency border but suspicion had lingered that bloody footprints trailed from Whitechapel through Poplar to the docks and went away on foreign vessels. No Englishman could very well perpetuate such atrocities. It could only be the work of a foreigner.

‘The inquest begins the day after tomorrow,’ he says. He can tell they will want more.

‘Will you attend?’ asks Mrs Labouchere. ‘She was one of your constituents.’

‘I don’t know if she could rightly be called one of my constituents,’ he responds. ‘These girls generally have no fixed abode and might drift between Whitechapel and Poplar East without calling either home.’

‘Still I’m sure you know a great deal more about the investigation than any of us,’ says Bellingham.

‘I am sorry to disappoint but I don’t know anything.’

‘Then you know as much as the Home Secretary,’ retorts Labby. ‘But now he’s finally got rid of that incompetent Warren and has installed his pal Munro as the new Commissioner of Police. They say he’s a capable man. I wonder if it’s in him to catch the Ripper.’

‘He’s lame after all isn’t he?’ says Mrs Labouchere.
‘Yes, but it isn’t as though he’ll be chasing him over the walls of Scotland Yard, my dear.’

Bellingham has not removed his eyes from Jack. ‘Have you ever met with the Scotland Yard Inspector?’ he asks. ‘This Abberline fellow has become something of a celebrity.’

‘I have met him once or twice.’ Jack is so tired of this conversation.

‘And what is he like?’ asks Mrs Labouchere.

‘A little rough around the edges, I suppose. But he speaks with a good deal of experience.’

Jack doesn’t want to share what he thinks of Detective Inspector Abberline. In truth he is somewhat afraid of him. It is a detective’s job to probe of course but that man has such a penetrating gaze that Jack felt completely exposed under it. Abberline understood Jack as a potential enemy. If the investigation could be proved to be inept then that was ammunition for the Radicals. A rising body count could only benefit the opposition. The Ripper had become political.

‘We hear the strangest things about him. Is it true he goes about the streets giving away his own money to streetwalkers to get them into lodgings for the night?’ asks Mrs Bellingham.

‘He has seen a good deal more of the realities of East End life than most of us ever will,’ says Jack. He likes to sound profound sometimes.

‘Even the Right Honourable Member of Parliament for Poplar East? Surely not?’ says his wife.

If Jack were not under such intense scrutiny he would give her a look to shoot her down. She has clearly taken too much wine. He has become accustomed to the signs.

Labby comes to his defence. ‘I’m sure Jack spends a good deal more time in his constituency than most of us who sit in Westminster. I couldn’t tell you when I was last in Northampton.’

‘I think Henry Matthews must offer a reward at last,’ says Bellingham. ‘The Lord Mayor is offering one, as is Samuel Montagu your colleague in Whitechapel; he is promising £500 for any intelligence.’

‘He’s a wealthy man,’ returns Jack.
‘He’s Jewish,’ adds Mrs Bellingham as if by way of explanation.

‘Well,’ says Labby somewhat triumphantly. ‘Henry Matthews may well prove to be the noose by which the Government hangs itself. A fitting –’ his voice trails off. He was going to say a fitting revenge but Sir Charles Dilke is standing next to him.

Jack steps towards the curtains and pulls it partially back. The conversation descends into a murmur behind him. This is his world and yet it has so little charm for him. He does not count a single true friend among them. He is condemned to always be false.

It is the morning after. Hammond stares out of the window but the fog has not cleared. Lamps illuminate the windows opposite as though it were still the depths of night. Cabs creep along and the noises of the street are muffled. Somewhere a foghorn sounds. He will go out as soon as the fog clears but nothing can be found in this. He hasn’t been to bed. It is just after eight in the morning but he will not let the last dregs of whisky go to waste. He has sent Saul out to find what he can and has told him not to come back until he has tidings. Saul had been indignant, said he might be crushed under the wheels of a hansom or robbed and left for dead in an alleyway. No great loss. Nobody wanted him now. They wanted boys and boys they could have the fun of taking out of uniform, whether they were soldiers or GPO lads. Then there was Allies, the most valuable asset of his whole empire. Gone. No, he would and must be brought back. He blames Veck for this. If only Veck had left him alone. The sound of the front door makes him jump. He stands hurriedly, but pauses and listens. Someone throws a cane down on the hall table. It is Veck.

He comes into the drawing room and takes his hat off. He can barely stand. He drops into a chair and buries his head in his hands. ‘My head,’ he whimpers. His fingers part in front of his eyes and he takes in the room and Hammond with his staring red eyes and the remnants of his jet hair gathered wildly on top of his head. ‘Have you been having a private party here?’ he asks. ‘You look worse than I do.’

Hammond is silent.
‘I never thought I’d make it home alive. I don’t believe everybody will. Accidents on the railway. Accidents on the river. Even the underground isn’t working what with fog choking the tunnels. The whole city is captive. I would not have made it home if I did not know these streets as well as Blind Hannah. People will be poring into the Middlesex. A night to commit unspeakable deeds.’

‘Or to lose precious things,’ says Hammond. The thin rasp of his voice too subtle to impress Veck with his meaning.

‘Yes the pickpockets and housebreakers will have a time of it tonight. I saw several lads lurking about up to no good and not one of them belonged to us.’

‘Sometimes valuable things go missing of their own accord.’

‘What do you mean?’ Veck looks at the sweaty finger marks upon the whisky glass and the black shadows under Hammond’s eyes; he notices that Hammond’s bottom lip is bleeding from incessant biting. ‘What’s happened, Charley?’

‘Allies has bolted,’ he says, his eyes assailing Veck; he strikes his target and the drunken self-assurance is drained from Veck’s face. ‘He took all his things last night and left,’ says Hammond, watching as his words dribble like molten candle wax over Veck’s body. Veck flinches with every drop that scalds and singes. His desire has left him unclothed and exposed; Hammond brings his burning candle ever closer to expose in Veck’s face what Veck is least inclined to show him. To betray his own suffering to Hammond matches the carelessness of the gentleman of means who commits his desires to paper and places that paper in the hands of the pitiless renter.

‘Didn’t anyone try and stop him?’ Veck says at last.
‘Saul took after him but lost him in the fog.’
‘Where could he go on a night like last night? He has no friends in London.’
‘Perhaps he’s made a few along the way?’
‘Has he pinched anything?’
‘Nothing obvious. He seems to have wanted to travel light.’

Veck walks to the window. He can see the green glare of a lamp in Mrs Morgan’s shop. He reaches into his pocket. He has run out of smokes. ‘As soon as
it clears a bit I’ll go out and look for him. You can’t see your hand in front of your face in this.’

He leaves Hammond and walks slowly up to Allies’s room. The stairs seem to give way before him, but his throbbing head and his own heavy fog is dispersing. The shock is sobering him up. He pauses on the threshold of Allies’s door before going in. The bed is made, the closet doors are open and everything is taken, suits, shoes, and underwear. He hasn’t left a trace of himself. But the room smells of him. Veck can smell something else. Allies did not bother to empty his piss-pot before he left. On the nightstand he has discarded some old calling cards and a cigarette lighter.

The room is pitilessly cold. Even the water in Allies’s washbasin has developed a film of ice. He shivers. It reminds him of Allies’s body. Veck plays with the lighter, igniting and extinguishing the flame. Everything is silent. No noise reaches him from the street below. The pulse of the city has ceased to beat. He sits down upon the bed. Something creaks behind him. Hammond has followed him upstairs. He has not had his fill of tormenting Veck. His discovery of Veck’s weakness gives Hammond’s ageing frame a new majesty.

‘You should have left him alone,’ says Hammond. ‘You should have treated him like you would any of the others. But all the flattery, favouritism and encouragement created a monster. And to what end? He’s made a fool of you. You turned him into what he is. He was as green as holly when he came here. He was my fortune, brought to me that July night and you have lost it for me.’

‘I meant him no harm.’

‘But you have harmed us!’

Another distant foghorn pierces the silence.

‘He knows too much and he has heart has nothing in it. Could there be a combination more destructive to our livelihood?’ Hammond’s fingers scratch obscene outlines on the frozen windowpanes. The gentle delivery of his words does more to wound Veck than a torrent of anger would. ‘There is nothing in his heart,’ he says again.

‘But shame,’ says Veck at the memory of how Allies’s body used to crumple up after every copulation, how he would shrink away into the coldest corner of the bed. Veck wants to gather Allies’s sheets and search for any trace of
his scent that lingers on, but he cannot do this in front of Hammond. He does not want to do it in front of God.

‘He was here for Lord George’s pleasure not yours. I remember what was in your face the first night you laid eyes on him. It made you almost human. I warned you to stay away from him. Had you been like me and seen only the profit to be got from his charms.’

‘Of course I saw profit in him,’ says Veck discreetly placing the cigarette lighter in his breast pocket, ‘what else was there?’

‘You wanted him.’ says Hammond. His voice carries the reproach of a man who has been robbed. ‘Get him back, Veck. I am giving this entirely to you. You must find him and make him come back. Convince him there is no other trade for him now. No other home in the world than this. If you can’t find him then God help you.’

An hour later the fog has slowly begun to uncloak the city. Down by the river the dock gates open and trade can resume once more. Time is money. Cabs cautiously navigate the streets. People venture out onto the pavements and shops open, though lights still burn bright despite it being after nine in the morning. Charley Hammond was right. The hospitals are filling up with more wounded spilling in all the time.

At the Middlesex, a young medical student catches his reflection and wishes he had drunk less the night before; he spies the young reverend searching somewhat frantically among the beds and approaches him. ‘Are you looking for someone?’ he asks. He notices that the reverend also looks somewhat worse for wear. He can barely speak and only after some hesitation does he summon words to his mouth.

‘I am looking for a young man. His name is Algernon Allies.’

‘What does he look like?’ asks the student.

‘I suppose he’s about 18 or 19. He has black curly hair. Brown eyes ...’ the voice looks for adjectives that don’t exist to convey how unusual the boy is. Veck’s fingers move to the dog collar and pull it away from the throat as though it choked. ‘Good looking ... he’s a good looking boy,’ he says.
The medical student nods. The fellow is strange. He seems almost possessed. 'I'll speak to one of the orderlies but I'm not aware of seeing anyone answering to that description.'

'No,' says Veck, his eyes scanning the chaos. 'He's not here. Thank you for your time.' He fears the youth has observed his desire seeping from him like blood from a wound. 'God bless, young man,' he says, but the student looks rather unconvinced, almost as though he were observing the behaviour of a madman.

Outside on Cleveland Street, the dispersing fog reveals frosted trees and rooftops. Veck pulls his coat tighter. He turns into Tottenham Street and encounters a police constable he has never seen before. He is usually not shy of addressing officers. But there is something missing from his disguise this morning. It's not that he is not carrying his tracts or prayer cards; it is something more necessary. But the constable notices no deficiency. 'Good morning, Reverend,' he says. 'A bad omen for the New Year, wouldn't you say?'

At first Veck is at a loss to comprehend the constable's meaning. 'Oh, the fog you mean. Yes, Constable.'

'Not seen one like it. Accidents all over London. You will have heard about the crash at Loughborough Junction?'

'No,' answers Veck. 'Serious?'

'Eleven badly injured but none dead.'

'Most unpleasant,' answers Veck. He looks ahead and sees the approach of Blind Hannah and the boy that carries her things. He must be quick.

'I suppose you haven't heard of any misadventure concerning a young fellow by the name of Algernon Allies?'

'An unusual name,' says the constable. 'No, I'm sure I haven't.'

'Have you heard of any mishap concerning any young man?'

'There were two lads taken in for an attempted housebreaking.'

'Really?' Veck's voice quickens with possibility.

'One of twelve. One of 13.'

'Ah, then no. Thank you Constable and a very Happy New Year to you.'

He crosses the street and intercepts Blind Hannah. He walks so quickly that she almost does not recognise his step. Almost.
‘It’s the Bishop of Clogher,’ she croaks.

‘It is the Witch of Endell Street. Who would have thought that you would live to see another year? I’m surprised you should brave such weather as this.’

‘Fog don’t make much difference to her,’ says the boy.

‘But should she walk out in front of a cab who would see her?’ he says almost protectively.

‘I know these streets better than the men who built them. I know what’s above and even sometimes what’s buried below.’

‘You’re as old as the river,’ says Veck. He remembers that she made a friend of Allies. Why not ask her? ‘You have not heard or seen anything of the boy, Algernon?’

She leans upon her stick. ‘Not come back then?’

‘You knew he had gone? Have you spoken with him?’

‘I might have.’

More blackmail. But he has to admire her for it. He isn’t altogether certain she has anything to tell him. ‘How do I know that you have anything to impart that’s worth the purchase?’

‘I suppose that’s the risk you take.’

He gives her a shilling and watches her feel it in her gloved hand. ‘That won’t go far.’

He gives her another.

She bites this between her jagged old teeth: ‘He said he was leaving. He said he was going back to the place it all started.’

‘What?’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘Where what all started?’

‘I could tell you but it would cost you another shilling.’

Veck isn’t going to be duped. He leaves her and is so disorientated that he almost steps out in front of a hansom. The driver swears at him and the Reverend George Veck swears back just as viciously prompting a peculiar look from the constable on the other side of the road.

He turns Hannah’s words over in his head. He astonishes himself by placing enough value upon them that he hails a cab and he takes the hansom all
the way down to the Embankment. The journey takes forever but it is strange to watch the city slowly revealing itself and he watches everywhere for the fog to give up Allies. The clearing mists show him the faces of boys and men, some ragged, some genteel, depending on providence, as Christian men would have it. He doesn’t believe in providence. He never has. He believes in getting on and he feels no guilt at donning the dog collar. In one pocket he has his prayer cards and in the other those cards that promise services other than religious. It amuses him. If there was a God perhaps he cloaks the city in fog to be spared the visibility of its transgressions.

Veck looks for beauty in the faces shown to him but he sees none. He closes his eyes tightly and imagines the greatest embodiment of beauty he has ever seen, and imagines it walking through the fog and then being crushed under the wheels of a cab, face down in a mass of blood and black curls. The beating heart of his avarice stopped forever and Veck would be ... free.

He never thought of himself as a man given to obsessions. When he felt desires he’d sated them. He was quenched and seldom if ever did they return to take possession of him again. He’d travelled forty years in this life and nothing had snared him; he’d always been the snarer. Boys had just been boys and cocks to handle. Even as a young man working at the Post Office it had amused him to seduce as many of his fellow messengers as possible. He often felt that there was a greater measure of lust in him than twenty overheated men together.

Damn Charley Hammond too in daring to imagine that he knew his secret. There had been triumph lurking in his eyes. What kind of world had they made where the possession of another’s secret was a currency?

But why had he come here? Had he fallen so low that Blind Hannah had duped him? Or worse, that he’d duped himself? Did he honestly believe he would find Allies down here skulking about tracing the bend of the river and admiring the frost covered boughs of the trees that overhung the waters? He didn’t have soul enough to appreciate such things.

Veck remembers coming down here to watch them build the Embankment. It seemed to take forever. He had watched the men black with mud heaving heavy barrows, the cranes, the smoke, and the noise. It had fascinated him. The men had aroused him. He’d always had a thing for the stench
of labour. Those hands had fashioned this walkway that had become a playground for men like him. A place for pick-ups. A place for entrapment. It was here where he had ensnared so many others that he finally and fittingly walked into his own trap. The teeth of the trap had sunk into his flesh and drained him of every little certainty he possessed of himself.

‘Algernon,’ he calls out but the river offers nothing; it is too indifferent to echo his words back. They are drowned out by scavenging seagulls. London looks back at him blankly under the white sky. Meanwhile Blind Hannah laughs coarsely over the easiest two shillings she has ever made.

Chapter Eight

It’s July again. The return of the heat that stirs forbidden appetites is also stirring unrest at the docks. The sailors are striking. They resent the number of jobs that don’t go to Englishmen. Jack has spent enough time in his constituency this week to taste the discontent spreading among the dockworkers. They will be next.

Meanwhile Labby is preparing an address to the House of Commons about the proposed grants to Her Majesty’s grandchildren. Those that live in plenty want their stipend increased while starvation waits outside the dock gates. Jack is looking forward to Labby’s address. He will enjoy watching the opposition squirming with their feeble justifications. Jack’s own greatest opponent sits in the morning room with the household expenses laid out before her: a catalogue of reproaches that he thinks she cannot wait to share. He pretends not to notice, ‘Sticky outside, sticky in. This heat’s too much even for me. It does rather exacerbate the stench of the river too.’ He groans as he drops down onto the sofa. ‘It’s also not helping tempers. In Paris they are commemorating the revolution of 1789, In London a century from now they’ll remember the great English revolution of 1889.’

Kate pushes a loose strand of hair away her eye. ‘I honestly don’t know how the Queen has the nerve to take her begging bowl out again. The woman has three hundred thousand a year and she cannot raise her granddaughter’s dowry
on that? If Princess Louise requires advice on household economies they can always send her to me.’

She picks up one pile of bills and lays them on the table in front of him. They are all final demands. How poorly they are written, he thinks. What unattractive hands. Lord Randolph Churchill was right – England has lost its passion for fine calligraphy.

‘How am I to pay these?’

‘Well, if we are successful in reducing the civil lists that might mean a reduction in tax...’

‘Don’t laugh at it Jack. You who know so much better than I do where our money goes. There is so much I cannot account for. You cannot shut your ears to it anymore. How would it look for the Radical MP for Poplar East if his tailor should turn up at the House of Commons to serve a writ upon him?’

‘Well,’ says Jack irritably, ‘I will not go cap in hand to Labby again. If we need ready money it will have to come from the estate.’

She laughs almost coarsely. ‘You know as well as I do there is nothing to be had from the estate. Or do you now propose we begin evictions?’

‘We will have to sell off some of the land.’

‘The place will just disappear piecemeal. Perhaps it had better go all at once?’

‘Perhaps it should. We could use the cash.’

‘What about your great plans to make it profitable? It was all we discussed before we married. The project no longer engrosses you?’

‘I have a good many other things to contemplate. Who knows what the next few weeks might bring? Labby means to bring about absolute carnage in the House tonight.’

Kate is looking at him as if she hates him. Perhaps she does. I’m going up to change,’ he says.

Kate picks up the bills again. There is so much expense that she cannot account for. But then she never knows where Jack is. He comes home in the early hours of the morning and claims to have been at the House, but she has caught him out on more than one occasion when his account of proceedings failed to corroborate with that in *The Times*. It must be a mistress. All well and good, she
thinks. Such information cannot hurt her. But she resents the fact that she is paying for it and that she must feed her servants offal as a consequence. Two cooks have already given notice, objecting to her kitchen economies. She does set a very mean budget, even on nights when they are entertaining. She is certain nobody ever says they enjoyed a fine repast at Mrs Worsley’s house.

If Jack is keeping a mistress, Kate knows that this alone will not be enough to set her free. Nia had explained that to expose Jack as an adulterer would never be sufficient to obtain a divorce, not unless she could also prove cruelty. If he deserted her then it might be a different story. But that path he would never take for he cannot live without the miserable little income that trickles in from her sterile property. ‘Are they really the only grounds on which a woman can divorce her husband?’ she had asked. Nia’s brow had furrowed and she had smoothed out the creases in her day dress. ‘Yes, I believe so,’ she says, but there was something in the way she glanced nervously at the clock face and stood up to stir the fire that convinced Kate that there was something else. That there was an additional possibility that could set her free but that even Nia, who though she had confessed to sharing Dilke’s bed with a housemaid and keeping assignations with officers at bawdy houses, still could not bring herself to impart what such a circumstance might be.

Kate has since speculated. Her imagination has taken her to a variety of destinations but she knows that the innocence that Jack has done little to spoil is her impediment to discovery. Kate walks to the window. She can hear Jack moving about upstairs, opening and closing drawers and cursing, drumming on the walls of her cell. It is then that she sees the old woman standing on the opposite pavement staring at the upper-storey of the house. Kate has seen her before. It was the same woman who frightened Jack on Jubilee night. She thinks back almost two years to that night when her engagement was announced, to those extraordinary illuminations that cast so little light upon the contract she had entered into. The old woman had followed them about and made Jack so uncomfortable. His face had turned white and his voice had quickened as he had tried every means to distract Kate from what the woman was saying. He had kissed her to confuse her. ‘Bugger,’ that’s what she had called him. The word judders inside her head, threatening to expose its meaning.
Kate tells the servants she is going for a walk, puts on her hat and slips out the front door. Lizzie Osborn smiles as she approaches. She’ll take hush money from the husband or the wife: it’s all the same to her. Kate wouldn’t give her a farthing to keep her mouth shut; but she is more than willing to pay her handsomely if she will tell her everything she knows about her husband,

Chapter Nine

Revolutionary whispers cannot be heard above the mirth of the London season. The bunting that flutters the length of the Mall is reminiscent of the Jubilee celebrations two years since. But this time the cheers that rise are for a foreign prince. The visit of the Shah brings with it all the mysticism of the Arabian Nights. There are innumerable peculiarities among his customs and his extensive retinue; not least the lad of twelve who accompanies him everywhere upon whom he has showered honours and titles. It has been said that the boy is of no more than peasant stock but the Shah has raised him high as though enslaved to him by some genie’s mischief. His devotion to the boy raises as many eyebrows here as it did during his visit to St Petersburg.

The hospitality he receives at the British Court must surpass all the courtesies extended by the Czar. The police have been busy in curbing the socialist disturbances that rally against the expense of entertaining the Persian Prince. But when the great unwashed went down to Westminster Pier to voice their discontent, their cries were hushed by a more hospitable offering as The Duke of Edinburgh came into harbour and the Prince of Wales brought his guest ashore.

The excitement is transcendent and a holiday atmosphere has swept through the streets. But the long days of festivity are quickly running out. Leaves turned autumnal colours are already scudding across the ground.

Oliver Swinscow is sat in the messenger boys’ kitchen of the General Post Office cutting out pictures of the Shah from the illustrated newspapers. One image sits alongside a full itinerary of his engagements for the remainder of his visit to London. He is to go to the theatre on his last night in London and then
have dinner at the Belgravia home of Lord Roland Caversham MP. The approach of footsteps causes Oliver to look up from his page. It is Harry Newlove. Oliver pretends not to notice and continues to cut. He cuts out a picture of the Shah with the Queen. He cuts with great care and concentration and does not look up when Newlove places his sandwich and cocoa on the table and sits directly opposite him.

Harry says nothing but Oliver can feel his eyes burning into him. There is a bruise darkening beneath Harry’s starched collar. He has no appetite for his sandwich. ‘Why do you never speak to me now?’ he asks.

Oliver does not answer but his scissors make an unfortunate nick in the neck of the Prince of Wales.

‘You know you’re being a prize idiot,’ continues Harry in his gentlest tone. But Oliver’s indifference and the chafing of his collar on the bruise put there by Veck drains him of his patience and he prises the scissors from Oliver’s fingers. Oliver looks around but nobody is paying them any attention. Most of the boys are gathered around PC Hanks who is showing them some kind of card trick.

‘I tell you Charley Hammond is taking it very personally. He asked me especially to get you back. Mr Veck even writ this note.’ He slides the letter across the table and amongst Oliver’s cuttings.

‘Tell him I’m sorry but I won’t be going back. That’s final.’

Harry would like to beat him around the head. ‘I know something happened last time you were there. You can tell me? If one of the toffs was a bit rough ... I know what that’s like. Or was it something he wanted you to do and you didn’t fancy it?’ He slides the scissors back across the table in a conciliatory manner.

Oliver turns the page of his newspaper and there is a picture of the Shah with the two young princes: Prince Albert Victor and Prince George of Wales. ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ he says. ‘I won’t say anything to anybody about the house but I’m not going back there.’

‘Just once more. Charley could make your fortune.’

‘No.’

Oliver thinks of the 14 shillings still stashed in his locker. Dirty money that he is too afraid to spend.
'You’ll be sorry,' hisses Harry. ‘You can’t pretend it didn’t happen you know. I know you like it too.’

‘I don’t,’ says Oliver. The fear rises in the back of his throat to choke him.

‘I broke you in, says Harry. ‘I know you liked that.’

‘Newlove!’

Both boys look up somewhat alarmed. It is one of the clerks. ‘I’ve been looking for you. You’re wanted on a job.’

‘Coming,’ answers Harry. As he gets up he whispers to Oliver, ‘Even though it makes you sick to the pit of your guts, you know you like it.’

He walks away without looking back. If he looked back he would have caught the eye of PC Hanks who is staring after him.

Oliver picks up his scissors once more and cuts carefully around the frame of Prince George. But the scissors do not cut with equal care around George’s older brother and with a single snip the second in line for the throne is blinded.

Oliver is putting his scrapbook back in his locker. This is also where he keeps his earnings from Cleveland Street. He reaches for the sock at the back in which he secretes his ill-gotten gains. Looking briefly over his shoulders he empties the coins into the palm of his hand. ‘Better to spend it,’ he thinks, ‘to be rid of it.’

‘What’s that?’

Without looking behind him, Oliver knows it is Constable Hanks. He has spoken to him on several occasions over the last couple of weeks.

He slips the coins into his pocket.

‘Nothing,’ he says. He turns to look up at Hanks who is not angry. If anything he looks rather afraid.

‘Take your hands out of your pockets he says. ‘

Oliver obeys.

‘You put something in them. Some money. You know it is strictly against Post Office regulations for you lads to have money on your person.’

Oliver does not speak.

‘Well, don’t you know that?’

‘Yes, sir.’
'How much do you have there? Take it out and show me.'

Olive does not move.

'Give it to me,' says Hanks outstretching his hand.

Olive digs deep into his pocket and gathers the coins. He places them in the policeman's hand. Hanks puts his palms together and slides the coins between them as he counts. 14. 14 silver miniatures of Her Majesty. 'How do you have as much as this? It would take you a year to save this.' he asks.

'I got it for doing work outside. Private work'

'What kind of work?'

'Work for a man named Hammond.'

'And where does he live?'

Oliver wishes he could die; just drop down dead. 'Cleveland Street,' he says. If only he could stop his heart at will, but it is more alive in his chest than it has ever been.

'And what work did Mr Hammond pay you for?'

To Oliver Swinscow, the face of Police Constable Hanks begins to transform itself into that of his father. Not that any trace of resemblance could be said to exist between them. His father would have already cuffed him about the head and shaken the truth out of him.

'Are you going to tell me?’ asks Hanks, the last vestige of patience disappearing from his voice.

'Will I get into trouble if I don't?'

'Most certainly. I got it for going to bed with gentlemen.'

Detective Inspector Frederick Abberline arrives at the General Post Office in St Martin's-Le-Grand at one minute to six, as does the rest of London or so it seems to him as he steps between the porticos of the great entrance. He should have known better than to arrive at the point of closing. In his company is Police Constable Sladden: young, green, a little too green for this business perhaps. Abberline has been told very little but he can guess what he does not know. Messenger boy and renter are almost interchangeable professions in his experience. But he knows the East and the homes that many of these boys go
back to and it is no surprise to him that they find other places to be at the close of their shifts. But the dangerous thing to his mind has always been that he can never tell a sodomite from any regular swell. He knows the peril of getting it wrong too. And that was why he had arrested so few. His thoughts had turned to the possibility that the Ripper was a sod. In those mutilations there had been more loathing for women then he had ever seen, and yet no symptom of them having been interfered with.

‘Watch yourself, mate’ says Sladden as an errand boy in a yellow cap crashes into him with his stack of parcels.

‘Sorry Constable,’ he says, ‘it’s more than my life’s worth to miss the last post.’

‘I’ll never understand it sir,’ says Sladden, ‘people behaving as if it were life or death if they don’t get their parcels and letters out by six. As if one more day meant the end of the world.’

‘Commerce,’ answers Abberline. ‘We’re in the heart of the city, Sladden. Speed of transaction is its lifeblood.’

Sladden looks unconvinced. ‘It’s a wonder people aren’t crushed to death every day,’ he says.

Abberline pushes his way through the crowd. He has the kind of face and bearing that makes people stand aside for him. He is a well-known terror on the streets of East London. No pickpocket would try his chance if he or she knew that Abberline was in half a mile. He can sense crime in the way that Charley Hammond can detect desire. If he were ever to be painted he should be standing upon the Holborn Viaduct with all the furore and chaos travelling beneath him. He is separate from it, an onlooker, almost God-like. But this past year it has been said that his powers have diminished. Cruel sketches have been drawn of his men stumbling around the streets of Whitechapel in blindfolds. Abberline tastes his own failure. The Ripper will haunt him to his grave.

PC Hanks is waiting for them. He knows the gait of the figure who resembles Moses parting the red sea. If Scotland Yard have sent Abberline then he has correctly calculated the magnitude of his own discovery. It frightens him. He escorts Abberline and Sladden to the Receiver General’s office where Harry Newlove is waiting.
Harry does not retreat from the gaze of the Ripper hunter. He is all but past the reach of shame. He is not snivelling in the manner of Oliver Swinscow or any of the other boys that Oliver has incriminated.

‘Mr Newlove, I am Chief Inspector Abberline of Scotland Yard and this is Police Constable Sladden. I am here to ask you some questions regarding statements that have been made by employees at the General Post Office that implicate you in the serious offence of procuring and inciting them to commit the abominable crime of buggery.’

For all the intensity with which he observes the muscles of Newlove’s pretty face, Abberline does not fail to notice the contempt that folds and scrunches Sladden’s features.

Harry Newlove observes Sladden’s discomfort and seems to enjoy it. His eyes watch the constable as he answers Abberline’s questions. Yes he has been to the house at 19 Cleveland Street. Yes he knows Charles Hammond. Yes he has taken Swinscow and other boys there. Yes the house is visited for immoral purposes.

Does he understand the seriousness of these allegations and where they could lead him?

Harry yawns. ‘Yes,’ he answers. ‘I think it very hard that I should get into trouble when men in high positions are allowed to walk about free.’

‘What do you mean,’ asks Abberline.

‘Why the Earl of Euston is a regular visitor to Hammond’s. So is Colonel Jervois. So is Lord George Caversham.’

———

Chapter Ten

The Shah leaves London tomorrow to make a tour of the Northern counties and tonight will be his last night in the metropolis. A gala performance has been arranged at the Covent Garden Theatre but from the theatre it has been decided
that the Shah and his entourage shall progress to the home of a prominent Cabinet Minister. His very last social engagement of his London season is to be at the home of Lord Roland Caversham at the suggestion of the PM.

The evening is to begin with a dinner for most of the Cabinet. George has been invited to his uncle’s table. He arrives early at the request of Isabel to ‘watch the fun’ and it is rather disconcerting to enter the house to the Persian national anthem. The expensive little band is practising ahead of the Shah’s arrival; in truth the hall can barely accommodate such a spectacle. The house hardly seems big enough for such a grand reception but his aunt has clearly made the most of it. George arrives to find a hive of activity and Fairbrother reprimanding one of the footmen. Fairbrother has been badly shaken by a delayed ice delivery.

George has never seen the staircase so elegantly adorned. Palms, flowering plants, and ferns, all from the hot houses at Torrington presumably. There is a fine line to walk between tasteful and vulgar and he isn’t certain that his aunt has not crossed it. ‘I am looking for Miss Isabel, Fairbrother,’ he calls out as an army of extra chairs is brought up from downstairs.

‘Up here,’ she calls out from over the banister.

She looks quite jarringly beautiful in a dress that Princess Louise would not be ashamed of. He has never seen his cousin looking quite so pretty. Surely there was nothing in her appearance that even her stepmother could criticise though Lady Roland will certainly have a try.

‘Smells awful in here doesn’t it?’ she says. ‘Come up to the drawing room and see what we’ve done in there.’

‘I’ve never seen that necklace before,’ he says admiringly.

‘Retrieved from the family vault just for the occasion,’ she says.

‘You look very nice. You should keep your wits about you. The Shah might want you for his harem.’

‘I’ve often wondered what the inside of a harem looks like,’ she responds hoping to impress Fairbrother with the unsuitability of her remark.

George marvels at his surroundings. ‘Quite an expensive show. I hope the Shah isn’t just popping in for ten minutes. He’s truncated at least one engagement because of fatigue.’
‘Ten minutes or not, it’s his last night in London. A faux pas on our part could send him spinning into the arms of the Russians. At least that’s the impression Papa’s been giving all week.’

George is beginning to share in the excitement. It is too contagious not to. If only it wasn’t so hot. Isabel is right; it does smell ‘It all hangs on tonight,’ he laughs.

‘No diplomatic incidents if you can help it, George.’ It is Rollo, looking immaculate but for the perspiration on his brow. ‘A family is made or unmade on nights like this evening. Then there’s your aunt ordering lobster pate for our late supper.’

‘What’s wrong with lobster pate?’

‘The Shah doesn’t eat lobster.’

‘Are the Prince and Princess of Wales coming?’ asks George.

‘No, but the young princes are, not to mention half the court and an escort of the Royal Horse Guards.’

‘Both the princes?’ asks George.

‘Yes,’ returns his uncle.

George picks at one of the fern leaves and crushes it between his fingers.

‘It’s going to be a bit of a squeeze,’ says Isabel. ‘We’ve never done anything on this scale. Not even for the Jubilee. If only Uncle had opened up Caversham House.’

‘We’ll manage,’ returns her father somewhat defensively. ‘Why not go and see if your stepmother needs any help.’

‘No fear. I’m not letting her see me until it’s too late to do anything about my dress. I’ll take George up to the nursery. It will be some consolation since the boys are not allowed to come down tonight. Which seems a bit mean. It’s not every day we entertain foreign royalty.’

The festivity has reached the upper-floors of 64 Chester Square and young Arthur is teaching his brother Henry scraps of Persian. Goodness knows where he has got them. ‘The Shah actually goes by a good many titles,’ says Arthur. ‘It is best to go by Alahouzenet.’

‘What does that mean?’ asks his half-sister.
'Majesty,’ he answers proud to possess knowledge his elders do not possess. ‘But I prefer “kaebleh atium” which means “point toward which the earth inclines.”’

Isabel rolls her eyes. ‘In future you may address me as kaebleh atium,’ she says slipping easily into one of the nursery chairs.

‘Who is coming to dinner?’ he asks. He is more curious than ever, and no doubt frustrated that he has been banished from proceedings.

‘Everybody,’ says Isabel gloatingly. ‘The PM, most of the Cabinet; ‘I’ve been put next to the Home Secretary. Again. Despite the fact that Papa knows I’m terrified of him.’

‘Is Mr Matthews definitely not resigning now, like Lord Randolph Churchill?’

‘Of course not,’ Isabel snaps back. ‘I don’t know where you pick these things up. I can only imagine it’s from eavesdropping on private conversations and not understanding half of it. You should not repeat things until you are certain of their accuracy.’

Arthur is not moved by Isabel’s rebuke. At half her age he is easily a match for her.

‘We are going to watch the Shah’s arrival, Cousin George,’ says young Henry solemnly.

‘It will be most exciting,’ George responds with a wink. ‘He’s coming with a large retinue. Larger even than when the Prince of Wales came to dine.’

‘Does the Shah speak English?’ asks Henry.

‘No, he has an interpreter who goes everywhere with him,’ replies Arthur, always eager to show off his knowledge.

‘But what if the interpreter doesn’t tell the truth?’

Henry’s question seems reasonable enough to his cousin. ‘Yes perhaps he’s working for the Tsar,’ laughs George.

Arthur does not share in the laughter. He seems distracted. ‘Tonight is very important isn’t it?’ he says at last.

‘For the family? For your Papa? Yes,’ answers George. ‘It is a great honour to be asked to entertain the Shah on his last night in London.’
‘But it must be important for more than us? Isn’t it very important for England?’

‘Yes,’ answers George. He supposes it is.

Just then his aunt sweeps in. ‘George, Isabel, Roland said you were up here. I need you downstairs. I want to see what you think of my table.’ She stops her step-daughter. ‘I’m not sure if that necklace isn’t a little too much after all.’

‘It’s hardly going to notice next to the Shah,’ she answers. ‘He’s always bedecked in jewels wherever he appears. It’s positively rained stones and head pieces all season long as a consequence.’

This seems to pacify Lady Roland. At least she has had her say.

‘It’s a pity about the lobster pate,’ says Isabel on the way down. Now she’s had hers.

The table is exquisite. But this isn’t for the Shah. This is for the Cabinet. George wanders the table and scrutinises the place settings. Randolph hasn’t been invited to dinner. But then he isn’t a minister any longer, nor is he in favour with the PM just now after publicly criticising him the other day for excluding the press from his address in the East End.

His aunt has placed George next to Lady de Grey. Isabel is between Arthur Balfour and the Home Secretary. He understands her unease with regard to Mr Matthews. His eyes are so stern, as though they are perpetually in the process of cross-examining one. His aunt must give Isabel more credit than her stepdaughter will allow if she thinks she has it in her powers to amuse Henry Matthews. George isn’t certain that he has ever seen him smile. His reflections are interrupted by Fairbrother. Her Ladyship requires him in the drawing room where the rest of the family are gathered.

‘Isabel, come away from the window,’ says Rollo sharply. He is more nervous than George has ever seen him. His father never gets nervous on such occasions. But then he is the Duke and not the younger brother on the make.

‘There’s such a crowd outside,’ she responds gaily. ‘I don’t know how the Shah will make it through. Or anyone else come to that. I’m almost certain I’ve just had my photograph taken.’

‘There are police to keep things under control,’ returns her father.
'But the police are only for ornamental purposes now are they not, George?' she says.

'You can ask Mr Matthews when he takes you in to dinner.'

'Enough both of you,' hisses Lady Roland.

A cheer begins its ascent outside and not one of the four Cavershams assembled do not feel the wave of excitement that started in the street.

'Must be the PM,' says Isabel.

'He'd never be here first. More likely Arthur Balfour,' says Rollo.

It is the Rothchilds. But Arthur Balfour is not far behind them. Then the de Greys. Then it is the PM and Lady Salisbury. Still no sign of Mr Matthews.

In fact, the Home Secretary still hasn’t arrived when dinner is announced. Nor he has sent word. There is no Mrs Matthews extant to convey his apologies. Not the ideal situation for the agitated hostess. But they will not wait. The clear turtle soup will not wait either. Isabel will have to go into dinner unaccompanied.

But what can make him late on such an important evening?

'I suppose he had to attend mass,' is the smart remark Isabel means to pass on to her cousin later.

But the dinner progresses with a vacant seat next to the daughter of the house. She will have to make do with Mr Balfour. She knows better than to discuss Ireland tonight. Or the Parnell Commission. They will talk of what a success the Shah’s visit has been. Or the impending royal wedding. A love match rather than a diplomatic one. That will make a nice change within this royal family. Though the Earl of Fife is considerably older than Princess Louise. But his lands and estates are his own and not subject to any horrid entail; but surely if he is so well financially endowed, why the need for the royal grants? Isabel stops herself from asking this question. Even Mr Gladstone has defended the right for the Queen’s grandchildren to be provided for. It is Mr Labouchere who is making all the trouble as usual. ‘And is it true’ she asks, ‘that Prince Albert Victor is soon to be betrothed to Princess Victoria of Prussia?’ Mr Balfour has heard no such rumour. Isabel believes she can see a dark look in the corner of her father’s eye and knows she must change the subject. Though nothing feels safe tonight.
George is having slightly better fortune with Lady de Grey. Was he at the Shah’s reception at the Royal Opera House the other day? No he wasn’t. That was a great pity. It had never looked so beautiful. And so strange to stand for the Persian National Anthem. Madame Melba was in fine voice. She sang the mad scene from Lucia. It was the Guards that made a particularly splendid show. Mrs Labouchere looked rather queer in pink.

Rollo is not as successful in keeping from politics. It is not widely enough known that the Conservatives have reduced the national debt by one hundred million and taxation has been reduced from £2 1s to £1 19s. 6d. His wife cringes to overhear him say that the fate of the Empire rests entirely upon the next election. ‘But the days between now and the general election present a golden opportunity,’ he says and his optimism stirs unanimous approval around the table. George would like to look at the PM, but he dares not. He never knows what the fellow is thinking. He is never sure if he actually approves of Rollo. Rollo was after all Randolph’s man.

And yet still no word of Mr Matthews.

Should they be concerned? It must be something to intrigue. Another Whitechapel murder. Or perhaps they have finally apprehended Jack the Ripper? George at last steals a glance at Lord Salisbury. He is scrutinising the empty seat and saying something in low tones to Mrs Rothschild.

Meanwhile crowd outside has thickened and the number of police has increased but the mood is jovial. The people have come not only for the spectacle of the Shah and his entourage, but also for the princes. The presence of English royalty is enough to enthuse Fairbrother who otherwise might not be too enthusiastic about entertaining an Eastern Monarch. But then royalty is royalty. And it is an honour for his Lordship to be asked to host such an evening. He doubts whether Mr Getty, the butler at Caversham House, could have done much better – although at least there they had the advantage of that enormous ballroom and the large red drawing room. There was something to be said for being a butler in a ducal residence.

Fairbrother is at the entrance to the drawing room to announce the after dinner guests. The Home Secretary did at last send his excuses and he will be here to receive the Shah. He’d better hurry. The Shah is expected just before
eleven. The first guests are arriving now. Everyone is greatly charmed by the oriental trappings in the hall, the palms and creeping ferns. Fairbrother preferred the hothouse flowers sent down when the Prince of Wales dined. There was something un-English about the smell wafting through the house tonight.

'The Marquis of Hartington,' is his first announcement. He likes the Marquis. He is every inch both the gentleman and the nobleman, even if he was on the wrong side. Tonight the invitation has been extended throughout the Liberal Unionist camp. Fairbrother doesn’t mind. They are good Englishmen at least and they believe in the Empire. The Marquis is received as warmly by Lord and Lady Roland as if he were an old and trusted family friend, though the enmity between the houses of Caversham and Cavendish is long standing. One Tory and the other Whig. But this is the hour they live in and old rivalries must be put away for the better preservation of the United Kingdom and Ireland, just as they were once swept aside for the Glorious Revolution.

Fairbrother smiles with satisfaction for the room is steeped in history tonight. All the greatest families will be assembled and in their blood they carry the continuity of the past and the promise of the future. This house of which he has charge is tonight the great thumping heart of the Empire. The Cavershams have come into their own again.

The guests are coming thick and fast. Next comes the Lord Chancellor whom Fairbrother admires immensely: 'The Earl and Countess of Halsbury', then comes 'Mr and Mrs William Henry Smith', 'Lord and Lady George Hamilton', 'Mr and Mrs George Goschen,' 'Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill.' Lord Randolph’s butler told Fairbrother informally that all was not well between his master and mistress and hadn’t been since Lord Randolph’s resignation. Count Kinsky has become a frequent visitor to Connaught Place. Fairbrother wonders if Lord Randolph should not be on his guard. That Mrs Maybrick currently on trial for murdering her husband was an American. Better, like his master, to choose a wife from an ancient and respected English family than contaminate bloodlines.

‘It is so disgustingly hot,’ murmurs Isabel to her cousin. ‘Papa should have limited the guest list.’

‘Yes, but who do you risk offending on such an occasion?’
'Doesn't Lady Randolph look beautiful?'

George nods and looks from Lady Randolph to her husband. He looks tired and uncomfortable, twitchy as if someone had taken his cigarettes off of him. He must speak to him later, but about what? He never knows what to say to his fallen idol these days.

'I'm not wearing nearly enough jewels either,' Isabel whispers in his ear, 'look at the Duchess of Manchester making a bee line for Lord Hartington as usual.'

Just as George turns to follow her gaze, a great roar ascends from the street. The royal party. He looks for his uncle. He is looking at his wife. She is looking at Fairbrother. Patriotic cheering gives way to the Persian National Anthem. George notes that it sounds a good deal better than it did earlier.

A hundred aristocratic voices are silenced; no more talk of Russians, Germans, Princess Louise’s trousseau. The Shah enters. George's first impression is that he looks tired. But rather splendid. He cuts the finest figure. Elderly now but resplendent in full uniform and an enormous emerald glittering on his belt and his jewel encrusted sword. George watches as his uncle and aunt step forward to claim their prize.

Behind the Persian king comes England’s future. The two young princes in the uniform of the 10th Hussars. George hangs back behind Isabel and the PM. But he must study his uncle; isn’t he the man he aspires to become? The younger son for whom the shadows hold no appeal. The younger son with a prominent public position who entertains royalty. Rollo is the embodiment of charm. As is his aunt. They have more natural abilities of pleasing than his parents. The interpreter is on hand to translate his uncle’s sycophancy. Prince Albert Victor is the next recipient of their gratitude. His mouth smiles but his eyes remain unmoved. He looks bored and barely has the enthusiasm to scrutinise the room. The Shah’s eyes however are everywhere and move quickly. The band starts again. The return of music and chatter provides some relief.

Outside the crowd swelters on the hot pavement. But the atmosphere is generous and the police are not suspicious of any trouble. The only murmurings of discontent tonight are those aimed at the telegraph boy who has pushed to the front of the crowd. But the boy carries no telegram. Indeed his face is dirty, his
cap is crooked, and his uniform somewhat dishevelled. He is wearing a uniform he no longer has any right to for he has been suspended from his duties on full pay until further notice. He wants to access the house. He wants to see Lord George Caversham. But a policeman bars his approach. Where does he think he is going? Doesn't he know that the Shah of Persia is being entertained in this noble house?

The small ruckus has attracted the attention of a self-important footman who is smoking the remnants of Lord Salisbury’s cigar that he found when clearing away the dining table.

‘This fellow claims to have a message for one of Lord Roland’s family,’ says the policeman.

‘You may give it to me,’ says the footman, ‘I’ll pass it on.’

‘It’s private,’ says the boy.

The policeman and the footman snort in unison.

‘Jus’ give ‘im my name. Tell him it’s Oliver Swinscow. He’ll speak to me then.’

‘You’ll get a thick ear in a minute,’ says the policeman. ‘Go on be off. All this just to get a look at the Shah. Away and tidy yourself up before I report you to the Postmaster General.’

The boy looks pleadingly at Rollo’s footman but he is every bit as unwilling to help him.

But now their attention is distracted by the arrival of another carriage. The policeman recognises the single occupant. It is the Right Honourable Home Secretary, Mr Henry Matthews. He is not much liked in the force. The crowd pays him very little attention; most do not recognise him. Just as well for the common people do not hold him in particular esteem either.

Oliver finds himself shoved aside as the crowd makes an avenue for Mr Matthews. Mr Matthews doesn’t smile. He almost hesitates on the threshold of his colleague’s house. Somewhere a clock strikes eleven. It serves to remind the footman that he is neglecting his duties. It is time to serve supper. He can expect a fair whacking off Mr Fairbrother.

‘Tell him it’s all over. They’ve pinched Newlove,’ the boy calls after the footman as he descends the area steps. But the footman does not hear.
Upstairs in the drawing room, George and Isabel are waiting their turn to be introduced to the Shah. Isabel is swept into conversation with the Duchess of Manchester who admires her necklace. George turns the other way and finds himself face to face with Prince Albert Victor.

There is a look of death in the Prince’s face. The fathomless blue of his eyes are as cold as the stones in the Shah’s belt.

‘Have you met my nephew, Your Highness? My brother’s youngest son, Lord George Caversham?’ says Rollo.

George bows.

There is no time to say anything as the Prince and Rollo are swept away into conversation with the PM and his wife.

George is left alone. His heart is racing. He needs a drink. Anything to take the edge off. He crosses to the punch bowl. He stands there for a while and watches the scene unfold. Has the Home Secretary arrived yet? Yes. There he is. Fairbrother is just announcing him now. His eyes are searching the assembly. Looking for the Shah, thinks George. How can you miss him? Ah, spotted him, well done Home Sec. Now go and ingratiate yourself. The statesman’s eyes rest only fleetingly on Rollo’s royal guest. That’s not who they’re seeking out. Their search continues. They move with a good deal of urgency. Something’s up thinks George. He’s not here for pomp and ceremony. They glance off Prince Albert Victor and Prince George. They touch upon Isabel, and move from her to her father. Who is he scanning for? There is colour in his face. He looks as if he’s about to apprehend a criminal there and then. He doesn’t seek Lord Halsbury, or the PM, nor Lord Hartington or Mr W.H. Smith. George and Matthews lock eyes for a moment. George looks away. Then he looks back. The Home Sec is still looking at him.

Half a minute later he is still looking at him.

George returns his stare nervously but it is Matthews who looks frightened. He is terrified even. As though some act of anarchy might be about to engulf the whole drawing room.

George’s heart begins to thump. The room spins. His aunt whirls about. His uncle laughs and Isabel nods in vigorous conversation.
At last the Home Secretary steps into the shadows. George feels his aunt come up behind him. She wants to make an introduction. His hands sweat. He has been found out. This house of cards will collapse upon his head. He turns around to be introduced as a presentable member of the highest echelons of English society. A privilege that he might now consider borrowed. He wonders if he is still being scrutinised. He wonders if the Home Secretary has found his way to 19 Cleveland Street and how many law officers have already been there before him?

Rollo spots the late arrival. He makes for him across the drawing room. Where has he been? What business can have kept him from the Shah's arrival?

Henry Matthews manages a half smile at his host and colleague. Something resembling congratulations passes from his lips. The evening would appear to be going splendidly. Rollo is not put off. 'What's happened?'

'Not now. Later.'

'Is it home or abroad?'

'Later,' hisses Matthews. 'Trust me.'

Matthews doesn't know how he will convey to his friend what he has heard not three hours since. What was imparted to him by his old friend James Munro, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police who had described his intelligence more hesitantly than if it had been a Fenian plot. It was of course no secret that houses like 19 Cleveland Street exist. They stand undisturbed under a perpetual night where no fragment of moon or policeman's lantern illuminates them or the foul lepers that frequent them. But now someone has lit a candle too close to the slumbering city and it stirs restlessly beneath its flare.

Matthews looks again for George. There he is laughing nervously with Lady Roland and the Duchess of Manchester. There is something singular about him. Not exactly effeminate as one might imagine. Indeed he has the Caversham jaw and his uncle's eyes if not his talent for using them. Matthews cannot remember having ever been in conversation with George. Didn't he stand at the last election? Thank God he was defeated; otherwise this might be the instant death warrant of the party. The PM is looking at him now and beckons him over with an almost imperceptible tilt of the head. He will want explanations. Not tonight. It cannot be discussed in ear shot of the Shah. Even if he doesn't speak
English, this scandal could be interpreted throughout Christendom and beyond. They would laugh about it in Russia and Germany. The Czar would sneer. Bismark would dismiss the English as a nation of perverts. The greatest imperial power weakened by a canker at the very top. No nothing must happen tonight. Tonight they will prosper and the Shah will leave London impressed only by the reaches of the Empire’s unassailable power.

Chapter Eleven

Rollo has not enjoyed the last hour of the Shah’s reception. He has listened intently for the stroke of the clock. He wants it done and his guests to depart. Matthews has such a look in his eye and no pretended merriment can successfully steal it. He will surely not leave his house until he has imparted the business that kept him from Rollo’s table on such a night as this.

The great drawing room begins to empty of its illustrious guests. The servants, even Fairbrother, stifle yawns behind their hands. The room can be set to rights tomorrow. He will send them all to bed. Matthews is in conversation with the Rothchilds; they are the last of his guests remaining. At last they announce their intention to leave. Isabel and her stepmother say goodnight immediately after their departure without any prompting. Rollo beckons to George; he is somewhat surprised at how his agitation manifests as anger towards his nephew, ‘A word,’ he hisses. ‘You have not been good company tonight. I have barely seen you engage in conversation with anyone. Even if you cannot see what might be gained for yourself, you might at least think of the family.’

George is caught off guard. He was fine until the Home Secretary destroyed him with a look. Rollo breaks off his reprimand as Matthews approaches. ‘You know my nephew, Lord George Caversham?’ he says. Matthews barely turns his eyes upon George before averting them contemptuously.

‘We’ve met at this house more than once, Uncle,’ interjects George to distract Rollo from his guest’s hostility. He will leave. ‘I will follow my aunt’s example,’ he says. ‘I shall go home to my bed.’
His uncle does not prevent this. George’s misconduct can wait. State interests must come first.

‘Where does he go now I wonder?’ asks Matthews.
‘To his rooms I should think. He has chambers on Albermarle Street.’
‘I wonder if he goes straight there?’
‘I do not understand you.’
Matthews takes out his pocket watch. ‘I imagine he’s no stranger to late hours.’

‘He’s young ... what have you heard against George? And more urgently will you tell me now what you would not reveal to me earlier?’

Matthews’s lips curl protectively around their disgusting secret. If only it might be kept. The world would be better for it he is certain. He feels like Circle pouring poison into the river. It cannot be filtered out. There was nothing to be found in the Thames that was dirtier than this.

Matthews studies the tired and handsome face of his colleague and wonders if they are truly friends. They both owe their positions to Randolph Churchill and both have turned their backs on him. It is difficult ground to share. But Matthews doesn’t want to share in this. This must be Rollo’s disgrace alone. He has the sodomite nephew. But there is some debt to be acknowledged. There has been an alliance of sorts between them. ‘What I have heard about George and what kept me so late at the office tonight I’m afraid are one and the same.’

‘I don’t follow.’

Of course he doesn’t. How could he?

‘Tonight I received a filthy business scribbled on a piece of paper. It described an investigation at the General Post Office. Some of the boys were being monitored for spending beyond their means. One of them admitted to supplementing his earnings by going to bed with gentlemen at a house in Cleveland Street.’ Matthews says gentlemen with the greatest reluctance. The word sounds contemptuous upon his grudging lips.

‘Cleveland Street?’

‘In Fitzrovia. Just off Tottenham Court Road.’

‘How horrid,’ says Rollo. He has heard the key details: messenger boys prostituting themselves at some grubby little Fitzrovia den, but his eyes defy
Matthews to make any connection with any member of his family. 'It's not the first time GPO lads have been found prostituting themselves. It's quite as common amongst them as it is guardsmen in the Park.' Rollo speaks quickly and confidently but he knows he has not heard the worst. He does not urge Matthews to continue. Nothing more will come out because he has requested it.

‘Rather alarmingly a number of boys employed in the telegraph office were found to have been recruited to these practices at this address. And these practices were also carried on between the boys on Post Office premises – in the basement – without any idea of profit.’

Still Rollo does not urge him to continue.

‘The keeper of the house is a man named Charles Hammond. When the police went to apprehend him they found that the house was shut up. Hammond has escaped the country and been traced as far as the Continent. At the present time only one of the boys, a fellow named Newlove, has been remanded in custody. It is Newlove who has been naming names. The intelligence came to me with little pieces of paper pasted over one name in particular. I pulled the paper back and it was George's name they concealed.’

Rollo’s flesh prickles with fury at this left-footer’s impertinence in his own house. ‘You want to send my nephew to the hangman on the testimony of a grubby little street renter?’ he demands.

Matthews is not startled by this rudeness. He expected nothing more than a burst of Caversham pride.

‘It is no longer a hanging offence,’ says Matthews and almost pauses as if he wishes to suggest it should be. ‘And the danger is that we are not dealing with the testimony of a grubby little street renter, but an employee of Her Majesty’s Post Office. An institution which employs hundreds of boys from the poorest districts in London and we discover that a large number are being trafficked from headquarters into prostitution, and that members of the nobility, close relations of men in Her Majesty's Government, are using their services. Some of the boys questioned were as young as 15!’

Matthews looks at his ally who must surely now regard him as his enemy for what friend could bring such tidings to a man’s house? It is a death knell on Rollo’s peace ever after. But is it? Rollo is no lawyer but it doesn’t sound as
though there is a case to answer. 'There has only been one arrest then?' he says. 'Only one of these boys, this Newlove creature has been apprehended? He is the only one who has mentioned my brother's son?'

Matthews nods. 'But the other boys talked about a Mr Brown. The description they gave matched that of Lord George.'

Rollo stands suddenly. 'This is no evidence. You're the lawyer, not I. Therefore you know, better than I do, that there is nothing in this that would stand up in a court of law. Nothing that would make a good deal of mischief but could never secure a conviction were you to pitch the most able prosecutor against the poorest defender!'

'I agree with you up to a point,' answers Dilke's destroyer. 'There must be untainted evidence. We need a witness who does not claim to have been seduced, who cannot be said to be complicit and this the authorities do not have. But they may yet find one. If the keeper of the house is apprehended at any time...'

'What steps are being taken to that end? You said the ponce had gone abroad?'

'Munro's agents have traced him as far as Paris."

'Is there to be an extradition order? Are such offences even covered by the extradition treaty?'

'I shall consult with the Foreign Office tomorrow."

'The PM is the foreign office,' says Rollo. The fear is telling on him now, thinks Matthews. He is standing in a room that tonight has entertained not only Persian royalty and the Prime Minister, but also a future king of England.

Rollo cannot bear the knowledge that within a day the PM will be privy to this scandal. 'If this Hammond fellow cannot be brought back then it will be next to impossible to make a case. He would never run the risk of coming back of his own accord."

'You mean let sleeping dogs lie?' says Matthews. 'And the reputation of the police, the department, the Government if this thing were ever to come out?'

'I am not asking you to enter into a conspiracy."

'Yes, that's exactly what you are asking. You want to meet to sit on my hands and let the wretched brothel keeper escape so there is no witness against
your nephew. But goodness knows where else a testimony might come from? We will have to go ahead with the prosecution of this Newlove boy. He is anything but reticent. He is angry at being in custody when no one else is. He will plead not guilty and he will have his say in the witness box. I can hear Labby sharpening his pencils. You must let go of any fancy that we can contain this.’

Rollo needs a drink. He pours himself a whisky and soda; he doesn’t offer Matthews one. Matthews can hear the decanter trembling against the glass in Rollo’s shaking hand.

‘Matthews I am not an enemy to justice. But you are in error if you imagine I think only of my own neck and my family’s reputation. But my shame is the party’s shame. Every so often a scandal like this rises to the surface and does untold mischief. To many this crime is more henious than murder.’

‘I know,’ answers Matthews and his rebuke is both defensive and angry. The tone of his voice says, ‘don’t blame me; it is not I that has the perverted bloodline. Both your titled nephews have been gossiped about in relation to this offence. Perhaps it is in your blood too; perhaps it is in your sons.’

They are quiet for a moment. ‘I give no credence to the accusation against my nephew. I know him better than anyone. I should just as soon as believe of it of myself as of him. But I suppose other names have been mentioned?’

‘Yes,’ Matthews nods. ‘Colonel Jervois, The Earl of Euston –’

Rollo laughs. ‘Euston is the most notorious stage-door Johnny in London. I wish you had told me that before. You must see that this starves the story of any credibility. This Newlove boy is out to make fools of you all.’

Matthews does not laugh and the stern setting of his mouth is more resolute than ever.

‘You are resolved to imagine what is most foul?’ says Rollo accusingly.

‘You must see the dark possibilities if this case is deemed not to have been seriously dealt with. It is no longer a matter for the Metropolitan Police. They would never have the funds to pursue a prosecution. It must be a state matter from now on. That is why it has been escalated. And now it must be escalated even higher than the Home Office.’

‘Yes,’ says Rollo, almost as if he derives some comfort from that. Then the idea starts in him. Matthews can see its germination. The PM will side with Rollo.
He will not advocate the possibility of any scandal. Lord Salisbury will pull rank. He will not order extradition for the pimp. Matthews can bloody well take his scruples to confession. He can be as morally upright as he likes alone amongst the incense candles.

He will go and see George in the morning. His word will be enough for him that he has never heard of this Newlove fellow and never been to this house on Cleveland Street, wherever that may be. It might be that he can shed some light on this business. Perhaps he has made enemies. This was a favourite charge to discredit a man and hunt him from the best houses. Perhaps it is Rollo's own enemies at work. He has loved this boy from his cradle. At worst he can believe him tainted by his brother's scandal. He will go to hear his innocence from George's own lips and it will be sufficient for him.

His resolve strengthens his voice. 'Yes, go to the Foreign Office. See what the PM says about it. I'm sure he will be of my mind. Let the Post Office sort out their own disgusting affairs quietly. The Postmaster General should be advised to implement a better strategy of recruitment. We don't want buggery in the basements of our finest institutions. We'll end up the laughing stock of Europe,' he says.

Matthews is suddenly very tired. It is as though he has glimpsed the fray ahead and the length of its reach. Rollo will place the family honour before any other consideration and even should he discover a household traitor amongst his own then the traitor will be dispatched the Caversham way. The PM, despite all that is distasteful connected with this matter, will surely support him.

The Home Secretary takes his leave of his host stepping over the relics of the most prosperous evening the house will ever know.

Part Three

'Nothing could have been otherwise, and Life is a very terrible thing'
Oscar Wilde

Chapter One
George can only moderate his heart beat by imagining he has been over sensitive to the scrutiny of the Home Secretary. Isabel has often remarked upon that man’s cold eyes and the hand that has the authority to spare or suspend from the hangman’s rope. It has just gone ten. George rings for his shaving water. He will not attempt to sleep in; the room feels oppressive. He will walk in the park. The sky is an inviting blue. He will walk in the opposite direction to Cleveland Street. He suddenly wishes he was at Torrington for there he might go riding and Matthews’ withering look could not keep pace with him. It is London that has done for him.

When the door opens it is not his shaving water but Uncle Rollo. His shaving water follows behind.

‘Uncle, you are up and about early. I should have thought after last night...’

‘Yes,’ his uncle says. His voice is amiable enough. ‘It was rather a late one but I mustn’t get behind today. There’s a good deal to be done. Your aunt has slept in. I haven’t crossed paths with Isabel today.’

George looks anxious.

‘Don’t let your shaving water get cold.’

They are silent for a moment.

‘Are you pleased with last evening?’ asks George

‘Don’t you think I should be?’ says Rollo somewhat sternly.

‘Of course. It was a great success. The Shah looked very pleased and now he heads to our Northern counties. I cannot imagine there will be much to excite his curiosity there. Just a lot of striking and stagnant mills.’

Rollo is consumed with an inordinate amount of sympathy for any man who has had to ask his nephew outright if he is a sod. ‘I think the PM was pleased. And it is a rare enough thing for a Caversham to entertain a Cavendish. Brave new world. It’s a pity the Home Secretary was so late.’

George evades his own reflection in the looking glass.

‘That was quite a mystery much discussed at dinner,’ says Rollo.

George cannot hold his razor steadily.

‘A mystery that has been somewhat resolved.’
If George puts the razor down it is almost an admission of guilt but to put it to his throat is suicide.

Rollo continues. ‘Matthews was in a bit of a state over a nasty business he has uncovered in the postal service.

‘The postal service?’

‘Yes; telegraph boys have been found prostituting themselves at a house in Fitzrovia.’

George feels the blade catch at his throat. A nick. But how it stings. Rollo does not notice. He is looking in the other direction.

George suddenly thinks of Lord Castlereagh cutting his own throat with his unspeakable sins betraying themselves on jabbering, dying lips. Wicked men had learned of his desires; they drained him of his peace and made a corpse of him. Castlereagh, Foreign Secretary, died and took his scandal with him, where it was buried in consecrated ground for he was proclaimed mad and thereby earned a Christian burial.

Castlereagh who was troubled by the phantoms of radiant boys emerging from fireplaces. Yes, there was madness in their shared condition. If his hand should emulate Castlereagh’s now, would he be afforded the same consideration and be quietly put to rest in the Torrington plot?

At Eton, George played Iago in a performance of Othello. He played the liar with a good deal of integrity. He would revive the performance now. It was better to play the part of the deceiver than the part of the sodomite who cut his jugular before his uncle.

‘Sounds a bit sordid,’ he says with perfectly measured indifference.

‘It's certainly not fit for the Queen's ears,’ returns Rollo. ‘But I haven’t told you all.’

‘No?’

‘No.’ Rollo slowly turns his head to examine George’s face. ‘One of the boys that has been questioned has named you as a visitor to this house. Two others have also described a man that fits your description and claim to have identified you outside your club.’ Rollo observes the small cut that George tries so hard to secrete. ‘Do not be alarmed, George,’ he hears himself add hastily. ‘No man will believe such abhorrent falsehoods.’
George dabs the blood away but it will not be cleaned and the wound continues to weep. ‘Who would spread such obscene slanders?’ he says. He turns to look at his uncle. He looks him in the eye. ‘How can we have such enemies that they would enter into such a conspiracy against me?’

Rollo lets his eyes rest upon his nephew’s earnest face. He smiles.

‘Why do you smile?’

‘Why? The last time I saw you make such a bloody mess of yourself was when you were a small boy and I used to take you out rabbit hunting with me and you’d run and fetch their carcasses.’

George wishes he were that small child again, picking up Rollo’s dead rabbits, before he had grown up and everything got spoilt.

‘Do you know of anyone who might wish to discredit you?’

‘I assure you I have little enough to do with GPO boys, except in the way of sending and receiving telegrams. I am not aware of making any particular adversary.’

Rollo looks thoughtful. It could all be a plot against him, he thinks. Yes, this possibility takes hold and has the strange effect of easing him.

‘Have there been arrests in connection to this matter?’ asks George.

‘It would seem that the Director of Public Prosecutions is reluctant to act until they have apprehended the brothel keeper. A man that goes by the name of Charles Hammond. He was on the first boat to Calais. Matthews is going to ask the PM to make out an extradition order.’

‘Do you think he will?’

‘He might well be reluctant to involve the French authorities. These cases always have such a stench attached to them. Convictions are hard to come by. There is also the potential for innocent men to be ruined; once a man’s name has been associated with something like this –’

‘Quite,’ says George.

‘Now George, I didn’t tell you to worry you. My advice is to sit tight and I will keep you informed. It’s not like they’re going to suddenly clap you in irons. They have no case and they’re not going to get one.’

George looks back at the looking glass. ‘But a good deal of mischief might be done to a man’s reputation by something like this,’ he says.
'I'll take care of it. In the mean time, say nothing of this to anyone. If anyone communicates anything to you, be sure to tell me.' He lays his hand upon his nephew’s shoulder. ‘It is an ugly thing, but it is so devoid of credibility that it cannot hurt you.’

Rollo leaves George to his bloodied shaving water. George has proved himself a consummate artist. It was a finer performance than his Iago. But there were no accolades this time or change of costume either.

He displays a curious kind of inaction. His world has come to an end and he sits not certain what to do about it. His uncle has put the image of him, a grubby, bloodied, inordinately happy child in his head, searching his father’s acres for his uncle’s felled rabbits. Now he is hunted. What can he do? Who can he go to? He doesn’t want to turn again to the spectre of Castlereagh. He feels no desire to so abruptly terminate his life. Unlike Castlereagh he has yet to achieve anything, let alone anything great.

Jack. He will go to Jack. He gave him that calling card. He gave him the address. Besides, he was in trouble and found a way out. Surely he will recognise some semblance of responsibility and will offer some words of comfort for old time’s sake.

***

Jack wishes he hadn’t returned to the House of Commons after dinner. He is leaving now. He tired, appalled, and bereft of optimism. If Gladstone endorses the increased royal grants what hope have they? Meanwhile he can all but smell the unrest coming off the river. He could follow it all the way down to his constituency where the cadavers of hope lie outside the dock gates. ‘Why do these people court disaster?’ he says to no one in particular. He does not realise that he is in earshot of Samuel Montagu, whose constituency, Whitechapel, sits beside Jack’s own and the plentiful supply of nomads move one way and the other across the border on a daily basis. Montagu has joked more than once about their shared constituents. ‘When so many have no fixed abode, yours and mine are interchangeable,’ he says.
Jack stops on the stairwell. He turns, barely having enough energy to be civil. But he respects Montagu. He must speak to him. ‘I thought the line you took with the Home Secretary quite admirable.’

‘But he proved immovable as ever. Cold fish isn’t he?’

Jack grunts in agreement. ‘Even colder and more immovable than usual tonight. I still cannot believe his reluctance to put up a reward for the Whitechapel killings. I know you’ve been fighting for it since the beginning.’

‘He thinks it a better use of funds to put more plain clothes policemen on the streets.’

The Jew Montagu, thinks Jack. That is what the Moscow authorities called him when they tried to expel him. At least he’s not afraid to talk about money. ‘If he’s sure the Shah can spare them,’ Jack returns amiably.

‘Meanwhile we have hysteria returning to the streets. Anti-Semitic attacks, riots, goodness knows what else. Mr Matthews should visit one or other of our constituencies at some point. Just to witness the over-crowding, the fear … but also the solidarity which could take a dangerous turn.’

‘Yes,’ agrees Jack.

‘I thought your friend Mr Labouchere especially witty tonight. Not very respectful of the Queen though. He has no aspirations to become Prime Minister I take it?’

Jack smiles though not affectionately. The two Liberal members emerge outside and both are relieved to find that it is still daylight, albeit only in streaks across the darkening sky. Jack decides to walk along the Embankment after he has taken leave of Montagu. ‘Do you really think this McKenzie girl is the work of the Ripper?’ he asks.

‘I know you’d rather I said I didn’t. People would rather think he was dead or returned to the foreign climes he came from. It was the same at Christmas when that woman was found on your side of the border. I know Munro believes it is the Ripper at work again but I gather Inspector Abberline does not.’

‘Really?’

‘But, he’s been taken off the investigation as of this week and put on something else. Something decidedly sordid I’ve been told.’

‘What could be decidedly sordid in comparison?’ answers Jack.
‘I’m just being an old woman, as my wife would say. I honestly know none of the particulars. I just overheard that it was something dirty and that he had been sent to the Continent to tail someone. Can I offer you a lift anywhere?’

‘No thank you,’ answers Jack absently.

Jack lights a cigarette and watches Montagu drive away. He stands quite still. For the time it takes to smoke it he will be indifferent to the chaos of the moment in which he lives. He will enjoy watching the night-time activity on the water as the sun is extinguished. His vision is obscured by the billows of his own cigarette smoke as the wind blows off the river. Then emerging from his cloudy periphery, like Castlereagh’s ghost of a radiant boy, is a manifestation of beauty that was once so familiar. It has been so long since he has seen George that he had almost given him up for dead. Since Jubilee Night when he told George he was to be married and reprimanded him for his recklessness, they have met infrequently. At first they had tried to continue as if nothing had changed, but the alteration was painfully present. They saw nothing but reproach in each other’s faces and the reproach had served to extinguish any natural joy in each other’s company.

‘Hello Jack.’ The ghost can speak. ‘I thought I’d have to wait later than this.’

They shake hands. It only seems right.

Their eyes cautiously search the faces and the bodies of the other. Jack is somewhat portlier, he knows it. He has come to appreciate the comforts of good food and drink since they last stood as close as this. George, though he has grown in looks and his beard accentuates his fine jaw, might have appeared to more advantage yesterday. Now the bottom has fallen out of his world and the anxiety shows in his face.

Both say that the other looks well.

‘Do you have time for a drink?’ George asks.

‘Well,’ Jack hesitates. But yes, George has sought him out for a purpose and although he feels a danger in the reunion that has yet to reveal itself, he will not turn George away and be haunted ever more by renewing the reproach in those eyes. There is a rather ramshackle tavern nearby that will afford them some privacy.
They are largely quiet on the walk. Small talk and basic rudiments of conversation are a painful necessity. It is only inside the tavern when they are seated with a jug of beer that George asks after Jack’s wife. Jack looks at him contemptuously in response as though George has betrayed him by having a laugh at his expense.

Their eyes lock in silent communication. They understand one another. They are better than this. They have a history that permits them to speak with greater candour.

‘That’s quite a weight, Jack,’ says George discreetly taking Jack’s hand and touching the gold band. The action first works like a balm to soothe branded skin, but just as quickly it feels forward and George releases him. He has violated their old unspoken code: they never touch. A look from Jack’s eyes has always forbidden that intimacy.

‘George, as pleased as I am to see you and as often as I have regretted our estrangement, I believe you have found me out tonight for a reason. I can see the concern in your eyes. Tell me what it is.’

George hesitates. He wonders if he has the right to drag his respectably married friend into his mire. It seems to him that he sullies everything within reach. ‘You know Hammond’s house in Cleveland Street?’

“Well, I know of it.’

In the poor light, Jack observes a look of anger. He deserves George’s wrath. He had answered as indifferently and cavalierly as if it he had not given George Saul’s calling card on New Year’s Eve. Poses Plastiques!

‘Last night my uncle gave an At Home for the Shah’s last evening in London. Everyone was there. The Home Secretary was somewhat late. No one seemed to know what was keeping him.’

Jack takes two sips of his beer in rapid succession.

‘The truth was he’d been told all about the house. They’ve arrested one of the boys, a shameless fellow named Newlove, and he’s been providing them with names. Including mine...’

Jack’s tired body is suddenly alert with fear. That feeling of helplessness rises up again to make his stomach sick. He should be relieved that this is George’s trouble and not his own. But he is surprised by a complete absence of
selfishness. Perhaps George's trouble was his own. Perhaps it was collectively theirs.

'Uncle Rollo came to see me this morning. He didn't even ask me if I'd ever been there. It didn't seem to enter his head that there might be any truth in it which makes it altogether worse.'

'And what did you say to him?'

'I said I'd never heard of them. I showed the sort of audacity that would make you blush.'

They are silent for a moment.

'I suppose,' George continues hesitantly, 'I should have foreseen that this day would come. But I do not think I ever imagined it would and in this way.'

'The need was greater than the fear. The moment more pressing than the future,' says Jack. 'Do you think deep down your uncle has any suspicion?'

George shakes his head. 'I thought bearing in mind my brother's situation ... but no I saw no trace that he believed it.'

Jack smiles. How blind is lineage. 'But whatever he thinks he will act as though it were false. I wonder what other names they have.'

'Uncle Rollo says Lord Euston.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Ever seen him there?'

'No,'

'Have you ever seen anyone there or been seen by anyone?'

'No,' returns George with the hint of too much protest.

Jack leans forward to better examine his face. Something in George's voice makes him suspicious. Jack has always had a quick ear for deceit. 'Are you sure?'

'I told you no one.'

'So the only witness is this Newlove fellow. Have they traced Hammond ... or Saul?'

'Saul's name wasn't mentioned. Hammond has been traced as far as Paris.'

'Paris?'

'Yes.'
Jack recalls his conversation with Montagu. Could this be deemed so important that Scotland Yard had sent their best man? He feels in grave danger of being irrational in his conjecture. Yet some distant thunder is threatening the somnolence of this city.

'The Home Sec is going to apply to the foreign office for a warrant,' says George. 'That won't all be settled by Tuesday. In the old days I would have gone to the river and paid a waterman to row me down to Gravesend tonight and I would have boarded a steamer and been away.'

'Will you go?' asks Jack.

'Go where? Uncle says there is no case to answer. If I were to do a moonlight flit wouldn't that be rather an admission of guilt? If they can't get at Hammond then...'

'What about Algernon Allies.'

'I don't know where he is.'

'Well this would be the perfect moment for him to crawl out of the woodwork. Can you not go abroad on some innocuous pretext? To be just out of reach in case things go bad. Until we find out how the land lies with Hammond and if they are going to arrest anyone else?'

George looks suddenly child-like in his despair. 'If I go I might never be able to come back.'

There was truth in this. He must be thinking of his brother ... yes, his brother. 'Could you not go and stay with your brother for a short while. No one would take that amiss.'

'What a fine pair of exiles we'll make. I'm not sure I can face him with all the hypocrisy I've shown him. I never told him we were the same. Exactly the same.'

Jack is not following George's self-reproach. His mind is working furiously. 'We must find Hammond before the police do. He knows Paris. He has lived there before. There will be no shortage of people to hide him. If we can get Hammond out of reach then it will be very hard to make a case. But this will be expensive.' Jack looks about himself. 'We'll have to enlist some help. I will do my best to discover Hammond's whereabouts, and those of Algernon Allies.' He knows whom else he must speak to. He must find Saul, if he too hasn't skipped
abroad. They must also have the legal standpoint. He must return to the lair of the sea witch, Arthur Abrahams.

Chapter Two

Jack has been down at the docks to inhale the unrest that lies among the moored shipping. The shipping lanes are filled with vessels heavy with cargo for there is no one to unload them. The disruption is great in Jack’s constituency. He has been much among the people and commended their peaceful protest. Their demands are reasonable enough. They want an additional penny an hour and a guarantee that they will be employed for a minimum of four hours at a time. How many men, after days of waiting at the gates, have been taken on at eight only to be discharged at nine? But more men are joining the fight. The streets of Poplar are overrun with them. They lean with their backs against the walls of public houses and the murmurs of discontent grow louder. Jack is their representative in Parliament. He is familiar with their difficulties but now he is witness to a new depth of despair. He can taste it. This is where a revolution might begin. The stagnancy before the storm.

It isn’t just the London dockworkers either. The discontent is spread among the lacemakers in Nottingham, miners in Durham, the bricklayers in Dublin. Want is keenly felt across Great Britain who is not so generous with her greatness as she might be. Greatness was on show at Lord Roland Caversham’s reception for the Shah. But here stomachs are empty. Rollo would say that great profits are not being made and he would be correct. But don’t tell the men here that their demands are unreasonable. They want to be reasonable in their fight but the strike has already lasted a full eight days and now every day at the docks resembles a Sunday.

As Jack moves among his constituents he wonders how many of them recognise him and how many dismiss him only as a toff. He talks to them. He introduces himself. They have been generally polite but there was one conversation which frightened him. There was a group of men playing cards on the pavement. Jack not knowing how else to approach them offered them each a
cigarette. The men assumed he was a journalist; this had affronted him. Their manner became somewhat more hostile when he told them he was an MP. He assured them he sat on the Radical benches and had a good deal of sympathy with their fight. He asked them if they were confident they would secure their aims. One young man who had not yet spoken, not even thanked him for the cigarette, put his cards down on the ground and said, 'We'll get what we want. Every honest working man in the city will join us before long. There is enough fight among us. We could cut off the Queen's head.' His comrades did not share in his sentiments and silenced the young revolutionary. His words made Jack uncomfortable, as did the black look in his eye. Jack wonders if he is less of a republican than he thought.

It has rained throughout the night and it looks as though it might rain again. A welcome reprieve on the sweltering August pavements but it would render the strikers somewhat pathetic as they marched in sodden caps. He picks up his pace. A child waves a tin at him. But he pretends not to notice. He has actually given very little to the strikers' fund. He is not a rich man but he has to save his money now. A great claim has been made upon his purse in scraping together the money for George's defence.

The heavens suddenly open as if to chastise him for his meanness. A doorway affords temporary shelter. He looks at his watch. He has an appointment to keep with Abrahams at one thirty. One of his agents has found Hammond in Paris. But unfortunately so have the police. Nothing has been done in the way of extraditing him. The PM has not disappointed Rollo. He has refused to endorse an extradition order. He said it is not an offence covered by the extradition treaty. Jack laughs as he watches the rain. They don't want to touch it. They want it to go away. If Labby knew, what wouldn't he do with this? It is everything he has been waiting for. Oh the damage it could do to the Government if their inertia was revealed to the world. Documents were being passed around the Treasury with George's name covered in small pieces of paper. Meanwhile the wretched Newlove was remanded in custody for yet another week complaining of one rule for the poor and another for the rich. He will be growing in bitterness with every hour of incarceration. Given his day in court what wouldn't he say?
There was a deep injustice to it. Jack cannot deny. George the seducer is safely on his way to meet his brother in foreign parts while Newlove is left to languish. He thinks of Tom Osborn. He would be what age now – 19 – twenty. Each day he must grow in hatred for Jack and every man that ever used him. All of them walking free; some pursuing brilliant careers. No shackle imposed upon them or penalty for their pleasure. What if three years ago Osborn had stood up in court and said Jack's name? What then?

Through the rain he observes another figure sheltering in the doorway opposite. He has a newspaper over his head. He is not a docker. He is well (and tightly) attired; he carries a silver-headed cane. He waves. It is Saul. Elusive Saul. Jack has been trying to find him these past two weeks. He suddenly races across towards him. Jack pulls him into his refuge.

‘This is a bit of a chance,’ says Saul. ‘I've been walking the streets of Poplar looking for you. Your servant said you were down here today.’

‘You've been to my house?’

‘Yes. I had the audacity to go to the front door. Your servant gave me sharp shrift but he said you'd be in your constituency. I was hoping to catch a glimpse of your wife. No such luck.’

‘I've been here every day but nothing has changed,’ says Jack regretfully.

‘I didn’t know what to expect when I got off the omnibus. Thought I might be taking my life in my hands. It's very quiet. We were held up a long time on Bishopsgate while the marchers passed by. Do you think they'll get what they want?’

‘Lord knows they deserve it. An honest day's wage for an honest day's work,’ he answers.

‘I wouldn't know much about an honest day's work,’ says Jack. ‘Though goodness knows I’m thankful for any kind of work that comes my way these days be it honest or otherwise. I was told a gentleman fitting your description had left word at the Windsor Castle that I was to get in touch. He left a name I haven’t heard in many a year.’

‘Yes, I knew you'd remember who Jonah Black was. I didn't know where to find you. I didn't even know if you were still in the country. Where have you been living since the house at Cleveland Street was shut up?’
Jack looks at him somewhat astonished. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘Never mind that I know. It’s safe enough with me. Why didn’t you go to Paris with Hammond? Wasn’t it dangerous to stay?’

‘I wasn’t given a choice in it. The bastard took off and left without so much as a by-your-leave. I would have gone with him but he ... he took everything he thought valuable with him including his spooney boy, but left me behind with a list of instructions of course. Things I’m supposed to get rid of, sell, or put into safekeeping. He never thought about safeguarding my tongue.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well who else knows more about Hammond than I do?’

The rain intensifies. The doorway is suddenly poor relief.

‘But,’ begins Jack. ‘You wouldn’t ever speak to the police about him? Peach on him I mean? Wouldn’t it be rather as bad if not worse for you than him? You’ve both been making your living on the streets these ten years or more.’

Saul looks out into the rain. ‘What choice did I have? Once you’ve started on that life there’s no way out of it. I’ve lost my character and cannot get on by any other means. Even now I tramp the streets all night to earn a crust from what’s left in my face. There is little left.’ He pulls his hat down lower over his face. ‘I used to ask him what would happen when we got old. He said he would look after me. That we’d go to Ireland and live on the coast.’

There is something terrible in Saul’s face that Jack hasn’t seen before. Since Saul met Hammond on that day in May, more than ten years since, he has not known what it is to have a day without hurt or humiliation. He has left him on too many occasions to number but Hammond’s indifferent silence was enough to lure him back to whatever obscure hole he had hidden himself in and whatever alias he went by. When two people can identify each other by their intervals between breaths, an alias is no hindrance to the other’s discovery.

The misery of his captivity has aged Saul prematurely. It was love, thinks Jack. What else could have brought him back time and time again? But never was a man more roughly treated for having fallen foul of that emotion. Jack can see that all Saul has left now is the recognition of his wasted and destroyed life. All possibility of repair and redemption is gone.
'It doesn’t really matter what becomes of me now,’ says Saul. ‘I haven’t much to lose. But it would be a gain to see Charley taken. To see him taste defeat. He should know what it is to make a bad end before he dies. He has never done anything good for anyone.’

Jack is frightened by the determination in Saul’s words; it spells danger for George and every other bugger who crossed the threshold of number 19. ‘You have always known that I hold him in the greatest contempt. But you cannot betray him without betraying a great many more. If they mean to begin a witch-hunt then you cannot know – not one among us can know – where it will end. You must say nothing to the police.’

‘But I already have,’ returns Jack indifferently.

‘What?’

‘I made a full statement to Inspector Abberline of Scotland Yard just the other day. I told him everything. The whole saga of my illustrious career with Charles Hammond from the day we met to the day of my abandonment.’

‘And the names of all the supporting players along the way?’

‘Never fear. I didn’t mention your name. But I gave them a good few others. We’ve all done a long and terrible dance and now it’s time to play the musician.’

Jack takes Saul by the throat and almost breaks his head against the brickwork. ‘You contemptible little Mary-Ann,’ says Jack. ‘Thinking of your own rotten lot in this world and never imagining the danger you could be bringing to others. You’re a traitor. Whose names did you give to Abberline? Whose?’ he demands.

Saul breaks free from Jack’s hold. He is surprisingly strong. ‘I dare say all will be revealed in time. I gave them the address of Daniel Veck. Charley being illiterate it was him that always undertook the correspondence. He used to make the appointments at Cleveland Street and knows the name, both real and invented, of every gent whoever went there.’

Saul straightens his collar. The old friends are on different sides now and look hatefully enough upon one another.

‘May God forgive you for all that you are and for what you have just done,’ says Jack. ‘No one else will.’
At Marlborough Street Police Court, Veck has conducted himself like a gentleman. He has said little except please and thank you and he flaunts a smile as he sits in his cell leafing through the bible provided.

‘Why does he behave like he holds an ace up his sleeve?’ asks Sladden, who has been watching him with morbid fascination as though Veck was something from the Chamber of Horrors ‘He should be terrified. If the law permitted, I think he should be locked up for life. He should be whipped.’

‘I agree he would make a very good case for bringing back the pillory,’ replies Abberline. In the course of his enquiries, Abberline has discovered that Veck was once employed by the Post Office but that he was quietly dismissed when it was discovered he was leading boys into a life of immorality. If he had not been quietly dismissed and brought to justice instead, how many more innocents might have been spared? There is something about Veck’s calm that makes Abberline’s blood run cold. Ice cold. He is used to engaging with the calculating minds of the city’s worst criminals: thieves, blackmailers, and opportunists of all varieties, but those that have exhibited this much indifference to their plight have tended to be imbeciles. Veck is not.

Abberline returns to his office and pores once more over the letter that were found on Veck’s person. It is signed Algernon Allies. He refers to putting a squeeze on a Mr Brown. In the next line the same Mr Brown is referred to as ‘the Duke’. Abberline goes to the basin and scrubs his hands. Veck has sent for his lawyer, Mr Arthur Abrahams. Abberline knows Abrahams and he knows what he charges for clearing up embarrassments in high society. Veck who they arrested in grimy lodgings in Howland Street could not afford Abrahams’s services. Not on his own.

He writes a brief line to his superior, Munro, informing him they have got Veck and that he has been much quieter than Newlove who still name drops and calls out against the injustices heaped on him. He asks why he is incarcerated when great men walk free. ‘Why indeed?’ thinks Abberline. He paces up and
down. He will look in on Veck again; he cannot resist it. He will find a way to frighten him.

'Mr Abberline,' says Veck, laying down his Bible, 'I hope this means I am to be released? You will not find that I bear a grudge. These mistakes happen. How many innocent men did you pull off the streets when you were looking for the Ripper?'

Abberline sits down. 'I made few arrests because. I'm not in the habit of pulling innocent men off the streets. We have done our homework on you and we know who or rather what you are.'

Veck does not answer.

'We know you style yourself the Reverend Daniel Veck; we know how you walk the streets of Camden with your dog collar and your bible promising poor mothers that you'll find honest employment for their sons. We know the kind of situations you've been procuring for them. We know where they find their bread and board.'

'It is true I have helped a good many families in desperate circumstances,' says Veck, 'these are troubled times Inspector Abberline. They are striking down at the docks as we speak. Peacefully they tell me, but who knows? Did you see the riots two years ago? I did. The stones of Trafalgar Square stained with blood and the police losing all order and governance. It's the thin end of the wedge. The cracks are showing.'

'And out from these cracks crawl creatures such as yourself.'

'Let's not begin name-calling.'

'We know you have a long history of inciting young men to these kind of practices. We know you were once employed as a clerk at the General Post Office and that you were dismissed for immoral conduct with messenger boys—'

'You know the Post Office is rife with it. I couldn't tell you how many of the lads were out prostituting themselves of a night. Very few of them go straight home after a shift. Why has nothing ever been done about it?'

Veck's eyes dare an honest response from Abberline.

'And how did you find Paris?' asks Veck. He knows how to turn the screws on Abberline. 'Did you call upon my friend Charles Hammond? And why when you must have had my name for weeks has it taken you so long to scrape
together sufficient evidence for this arrest? Why have you kept Newlove all this
time and still not committed him for trial? It is because you do not have a case.
Though I do greatly admire your tenacity, Inspector.’

‘You are very cool, Mr Veck. It is a pity that your young friend Newlove is
not so composed.’

‘Tell Harry from me that he can dry his eyes for he’lI be sent back to
mother soon enough. They won’t risk putting him in the dock, dribbling and
blubbering the names of the great men of our age all over the Old Bailey. They’ll
be a bloodier Sunday.’

‘Who is this “they” you speak of?’

‘Why your masters, Inspector Abberline. I know you have your masters,
just like I have mine. They will never let this go to trial for the same reason that I
was quietly asked to leave the Post Office: the scrutiny is unwelcome, the
embarrassment too great. British men, especially of high birth, do not indulge in
the vices of ancient Greece. Do you remember the agreement God made with
Abraham when he was asked to spare the city of Sodom?’ Veck picks up the Bible
again and turns to Genesis. ‘Here it is. I shall paraphrase: The Lord promised
Abraham he would spare the city if ten righteous men could be found within its
walls. But for all its number, ten could not be found and the city burned. Could
you find ten here? Could you find them amongst your masters?’

Abberline rises.

‘When this city burns inspector, be sure not to look back lest ye be turned
into a pillar of salt.’

‘Who is Algernon Allies?’ asks Abberline.

Veck’s expression immediately changes. Abberline is quick enough to
observe the momentary alteration in his face before he recovers.

‘He is the devil incarnate,’ returns Veck. ‘I wish you joy of him.’

Abberline leaves Veck. He is just on his way back to his office when he
encounters Sladden who already has a reply from Mr Munro. Abberline snatches
it up greedily.

Sladden watches his superior’s face with the same appetite, but it
crumples up as he reads. Abberline can barely contain the rage in his voice and
the words come out in a strangled fashion. ‘Munro tells us to hang on to Veck, but
that the final world has come from the PM: no extradition order is to be made for Charley Hammond. Even with Saul’s evidence.’ He screws the note up in his hand. ‘Ten righteous men,’ he mutters.

‘Sir?’

‘Never mind for now, Sladden. We have got Veck. He won’t be going anywhere even if we don’t have Hammond.’ Abberline returns to his desk attempting to shake off his defeat. This is why Veck’s complacent smile haunts him. Veck knows that the heavy chains of hypocrisy fetter his movements. But as for the look that stole into Veck’s face at the mention of Algernon Allies: a man with the powers of detection of Frederick Abberline could not miss such a breach of another man’s peace. There was something in that ripple of pain, that stroke of bitterness that might prove to be Veck’s undoing.

Arthur Abrahams arrives at Marlborough Street police court. If asked by any of the few people in this world with whom he shares confidences, he might own to being somewhat alarmed. He had not thought that after this lapse of time that Veck would be taken. If anything ugly appears in the papers he hopes it may be this week so that the strike will limit its reportage. If the Empire’s trade is stagnant, who will care about the arrest of a lowly renter? As long as Veck keeps his mouth shut. Abrahams hasn’t met the fellow yet but Lord George has informed him that he is the man to watch out for.

He finds the contemptible creature laughing at a passage in the Bible. Veck looks up and sees the infamous Abrahams, the defender of the bugger.

‘Mr Veck, I am Arthur Abrahams.’

‘Of course; our friend Mr Brown’s solicitor. It is very good of him to go to so much trouble and expense.’

‘I never found much in either testament to make me laugh,’ says Abrahams gesturing towards the bible.

‘No? Well they are not very liberal with their reading matter here. Someone should remind Inspector Abberline that an Englishman is innocent until proven guilty.’

Abrahams sits down. ‘You are aware of what the charges against you are? Is it likely you could be proven guilty?’
‘Surely that is for you to tell me?’

‘If there is evidence already found or likely to be found, it will be helpful for me to know it.’

There is something in Abrahams that makes Veck feel vulnerable. With Abberline he can taunt and be evasive, but with Abrahams he must make a confession of sorts and lay down all his sins. ‘I know you have been to see Hammond in France; you know exactly what was happening at number 19 Cleveland Street. If you truly think I have anything to hide then don’t you imagine that I’d be long gone too?’

‘I have spoken to Hammond and that’s why I am asking: what do they have on you?’

‘They have spoken to my secretary.’

‘Secretary?’

‘The boy that lives with me, George Barber. They found him in my bed.’

Abrahams writes this down.

‘Then when they arrested me they found some correspondence.’

‘Incriminating? Who from?’ There is agitation in Abrahams’s voice.

‘One thing from Charley Hammond; another letter from a creature named Algernon Allies.’

‘Who is he?’

‘He’s a person who can say a good deal.’

Abrahams detects a strange note in Veck’s voice. The name passed his lips with great bitterness.

‘He’s a clever fellow,’ Veck continues. ‘Your Mr Brown brought him to lodge at the house after he lost his job. Mr Brown was obsessed with him but Algie wasn’t altogether receptive. Not his natural calling, but once he discovered the profit to be got from his pretty there was no stopping him. It can grab some of the boys like that.’ Veck’s voice trails off as if his words could not keep up with his thoughts.

Abrahams scribbles ‘mercenary’ next to Allies’s name.

‘Where is he now? In London?’

‘No. He left Cleveland Street very suddenly last New Year’s Eve. That particularly foggy night. We heard nothing for months and then I received a
letter from him suggesting we try and bounce some cash out of Mr Brown. He wanted the passage to America and some money down. He was back living with his parents in a place called Sudbury in Suffolk. His father is a coachman in service; his family are hard-working, respectable types. Not the kind of place that Allies would feel comfortably. The letter told me he was returning to London. I was supposed to follow Hammond to Paris … but I stayed.’

Abrahams, like Abberline, observes Veck’s weakness: the one vulnerability he has in this world. But it only serves to make Veck more contemptible in his eyes. Why are so many hours of his life given up to these creatures? What a strange kind of trade his is. They usually crumple up before him like incriminating proofs in the fire, but occasionally there were the defiant ones who dared to look him in the eye. It was these that he always made it his personal business to shame. Veck is so far resistant.

‘The letter from Allies will go a long way in affirming your guilt. The police will have things against you they haven’t shared. If you plead guilty they will show more leniency. I do not think it would be possible for you to get a sentence lasting more than two years under the current laws.’

Veck’s eyes narrow. ‘You are not dealing with our friend Newlove now, Mr Abrahams. I can see the advantage to our Mr Brown to my not being subjected to cross-examination by the crown. But I am not sure why I should be sacrificed for him, or for the noble family of Caversham. If one of theirs likes to put his cock inside a coachman’s son, it does not follow that I should not have a fair trial. Besides I don’t believe there is a case against me.’

‘Inspector Abberline doesn’t arrest men for nothing.’

Veck leans into Abrahams confidentially. Abrahams wants to move away: the fellow’s closeness offends him.

‘They will never want to try this case in open court,’ says Veck.

‘You think so?’

‘I know so.’

‘What makes you so certain?’

‘I know the name of every man, high and low, that ever crossed that threshold. The nephew of a prominent Cabinet minister is almost enough to ensure silence, but he is small potatoes compared to another name I could drop.’
Abrahams looks sceptical. But the evil in Veck's eyes quietens his scepticism. He is not dealing with a fool. He opens up his ears and his mind as Veck shows his hand.

Twenty minutes later Abrahams leaves the police court, but he doesn't know what to do with himself. He doesn't go home. He can't. His wife is too perceptive. She knows little enough about his work; little enough about the wretches that drag themselves into his office looking like hunted stags. She would also never suspect how he breaks bread with the men who hound them. Extortion feathers their nest. He doesn't want to show her his troubled soul. Better share it only with God. He doesn't take a cab but commits an unnatural act of his own: he walks. He walks all the way to Trafalgar Square.

It is dark by the time he arrives there and the stones glisten with the afternoon rain. He stands there and looks in a way that he hasn't since he was a boy. He looks now with what feels like corrupted eyes. He used to stand here hand-in-hand with his grandfather and listen to his stories of the Battle of Trafalgar. Abrahams has had Nelson's column pointed out by one who was honoured to serve under him. War makes heroes of man. Perhaps if he'd had his own Trafalgar he would have led a more honourable sort of life. British men were sailors first.

He loathes the knowledge he possesses. He looks in the direction of Westminster and then he turns his eyes toward the Mall. His thoughts leave him and drift up that long stretch, arriving at the gates of Buckingham Palace. Abrahams shivers. Yet it is a warm August night. The mighty hold of that vast square seems fragile, as though all its strength could be given up. As though the world was about to be woken up.

He turns suddenly and catches the eye of a man hovering between the columns of the National Gallery. The man does not move but drops his glance. He carries an air about him that Abrahams recognises. He employs private detectives all the time. He knows what it is to watch but to be watched is a new sensation. To carry a secret such as his is enough to make a man paranoid. He must be careful not to give in to it. But for the first time in his life, he is afraid.
The strike is over. Jack has been at Dock House all afternoon with the Lord Mayor, Cardinal Manning, Mr Ben Tillet and Mr John Burns. Negotiations were completed and the men have most of their demands met. The dock workers will have 6d an hour, 8d an hour overtime, and will not be taken on for any period of employment that does not afford them two shillings for a day's work. Jack is relieved. But his mind has been divided throughout the day's negotiations. Even Cardinal Manning observed how often he took out his watch. The truth is that Jack is suffering from something of a presentiment. Abrahams scribbled him a note this morning that has requested they meet on the Surrey side of London Bridge at nine this evening. His hand was even more than usually illegible. 'Don't come to Marlborough Street. The office is being watched,' was his last line.

The hours in Dock House pass slowly and Jack's mind travels in many directions but seldom meets the business in hand. Dark circles are appearing around his eyes and everyone attributes their blackness to the anxieties of his constituents. He should feel their pain more acutely than he does but the river of his professional concern is at low tide and the shipping permanently moored. All his energies are consumed with one interest. The talks are progressing well and a deal is on the table that must be gratifying to all. The strikers are to have their victory. But he has to know what Arthur Abrahams knows. He has never in the course of his life been so distracted. No personal interest has ever dictated the experience of his hours in quite the same way. But what drives him, he wonders? Is it George alone? Can it really only be George alone?

It is just after five when the agreement is met and all terms are signed. Jack makes his way to his constituency, to the Wade Arms on Jeremiah Street where an immense crowd is gathered. A notice is pasted to the side of the building that the men will return to work on Monday morning. The cheer that rises into the air is more than Jack could have ever have imagined. It is rousing; it is the sound of relief. It is hopeful.

He addresses the crowd quickly and passionately and isn't quite sure where his resource of passion comes from me. Perhaps it is projected from them.
From the men, women, and children who are staring up at him with a shadow lifted from their faces. Some still heckle and pockets of discontent show themselves. The changes are not to be brought in to effect until the 4th November and some murmur that before that time the companies will take on permanent workers, that the wool sale will be over, and the Canadian and Baltic timber trades almost closed. However real these concerns, much of the discontent is caused by troublemakers and loafers. The jubilation that follows his address is sincere. There are many hands to shake and many more private words to be spoken, and he is touched by the gratitude of the throngs who assume their interests are foremost in his mind. But he takes out his watch and notices the lateness of the hour. He will be tardy for his appointment. He looks about him. His part has been played. The street revellers have no more need of him and he may escape undetected.

He walks a good distance before he finds a cab to take him to London Bridge.

It is some seven or eight minutes after nine when he looks for Abrahams on the Surrey side of the bridge. There he is. He is staring down pensively into the dark waters. He barely looks up as Jack approaches.

‘Forgive me for being late. I have just come from my constituency in Poplar. The strike is over.’

‘So I have heard,’ answers Abrahams slowly. ‘It is an impressive victory for the strikers. I never thought they’d manage it. They might not if it wasn’t for the generosity of Australia. The colonies have made the mother country look decidedly tight-fisted,’ he closes his hand as if for emphasis. ‘But what a cost there has been.’ His eyes follow the gentle tide. ‘This great city was after all built around a port. Now we shall be weakened forever in the eyes of the world.’ His words are laboured. His sentences struggle to find their ends.

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Oh yes. They are saying this strike might have cost the country almost two million pounds.’

‘That seems an excessive calculation.’

‘Not a bit of it. So many costs one doesn’t think about. The goods for the Australian Christmas markets will now have to be sent by steamship in order to
arrive on time; demurrage will have to be paid by ship charterers; then there are
the lawyers’ bills. I wish I were in shipping law. There would be a rich harvest to
be reaped now.’

In the dark Abrahams cannot see the contempt upon Jack’s face. Was he
not reaping a harvest now? The biggest case of his career and he was growing fat
upon it. But Abrahams moves his cane nervously from one hand to another
and seems consumed by something that Jack cannot see.

‘What kind of lawyer would you describe yourself as?’ asks Jack. ‘Yours
seems a very unique kind of practice.’

‘In my practice I carry a great burden of unwanted knowledge. I know too
much about what goes on in this city unseen. Whichever party is in government,
be it Tory or Liberal, they never open their eyes wide enough. They’ll lose their
great Empire one day. They’ll lose control of it from its very hub. Piecemeal, but
the losses will come thicker and faster until there is nothing left but…’

‘Why did you request I meet you here and not the office?’

‘My office is being watched and I believe that my correspondence is being
interfered with. We must be more discreet than we have been.’

Jack nods his approval. ‘I appreciate your discretion.’ They are quiet for a
moment. Abrahams is hesitant. He has gone beyond merely a professional
interest in this case. That much is evident. He has overstepped the mark
somewhere and now he thinks of his own neck.

‘I am nervous now that Veck and Newlove have been committed to trial.
So far George has been kept out of it with no mention of his name in public,’ says
Jack.

‘As to that, I think there may be the possibility of a bargain.’

‘What kind of bargain?’

‘The Government will want to do everything they can to reduce the
publicity of this trial. So many names are being whispered along Whitehall. In a
courtroom there is no way of knowing what might come out. Veck is experienced
enough to understand that it is in his best interests to keep his mouth shut. I do
not trust Newlove. He is angry and excitable.’

Jack feels the anxiety emanating from Abrahams. ‘What bargain would
they make?’
'I think they will drop the conspiracy charges if Veck and Newlove plead guilty to the misdemeanours. I believe I can convince them both to do this, even Newlove, as it will secure more lenient sentences.'

Somewhere a firework goes up into the air. People will be wondering where Jack is and they will want to shake his hand. He is not sure if he believes in Abrahams’s scheme. ‘I’m not sure that the Government will expose themselves to such a risk. If they were found to be making deals with the defence...’

Abrahams laughs. ‘The way I see it, they won’t have a choice.’

Another firework celebrating the victory over the old order. Jack barely notices. ‘There is something you have discovered that you are not telling me,’ he says. ‘You know a good deal more about this than I do. Why do you think the Government is suddenly so pliable? It cannot just be because George is Rollo Caversham’s nephew?’

‘Let’s walk,’ says Abrahams. He looks over his shoulder. They head in the direction of Blackfriars Bridge. ‘If they go on with this then a very highly placed person might be inculpated.’

‘George Caversham, the Earl of Euston, other members of the nobility have been named already. Who can you possibly mean? Lord Salisbury? The Prince of Wales?’

One more firework serves to illuminate the gravity in Abrahams’s face. He is not amused by Jack’s flippancy.

‘You don’t mean –’

‘Not the Prince of Wales. But his son. Prince Albert Victor.’

Shards of colour fade away into the night sky and they are left in the dark again. Jack feels all the weight of compromise that makes Abrahams mutter so irrationally under his breath. The heir to the throne in Hammond’s house. It defies belief. He won’t believe it. ‘On what authority do you have this information?’

‘Your friend. Lord George.’

The last vestige of disbelief dies. Jack knows the integrity of George’s word. George might be the only man living that Jack actually could trust. He knew there was something he wasn’t confiding.
‘So you see,’ says Abrahams. ‘I believe the Government will make terms and do everything in their power to avoid loose tongues wagging in open court when they know the name I have on my lips.’

‘Surely they will never sanction an arrest warrant for George now. Once Newlove and Veck are put away, and with Hammond gone there can be nothing – except Allies.’

‘Abberline has Allies,’ says Abrahams.

Chapter Five

Veck is looking tired. There is more than the shadow of defeat. His beard is red and matted; the face is ill; the lips are feathered. Abrahams finds him altogether more manageable. He cuts to the chase. ‘I have secured the promise of leniency; the recorder will strike off all charges of procuring if you will plead guilty to acts of gross indecency with Barber … and Allies.’

There is a sudden rush of colour to Veck’s pallor. He does not answer.

‘They are the least serious of the charges,’ continues Abrahams. ‘The maxim penalty under the new law is two years with hard labour. But I am fairly confident that you won’t get half that.’

Veck doesn’t appear to be listening. He leans back in his chair and his eyes concentrate on something Abrahams cannot see. He smiles. ‘So it is him. Allies is to be the noose by which I am hung.’

‘Nothing quite as drastic as all that,’ says Abrahams.

‘I should have known that a heavy penance would be extracted one day. I knew it would be my ruin to taste –’. His face changes, ‘There is nothing good in that boy. Not that there’s much in me. But in him there is nothing he would not put a price on. I watched his avarice take hold. I watched the spread of his cunning, his twisted –’.

‘You twisted him?’ says Abrahams

Veck laughs. ‘No. I will not take responsibility for what he is.’

‘Nonetheless since you are twice his age the jury will undoubtedly see you as the guilty party; the source of corruption.’
‘Perhaps they should put him in the witness box,’
‘You don’t want that.’
‘Anymore than Mr Brown does,’ says Veck. ‘Do you honestly think you’ll be able to keep him out of this even if I do agree to these terms?’
‘The fact of the matter is that the best bargain you could make has already been made for you. The alternatives are not particularly attractive. Allies has given himself entirely to Abberline. He will do whatever is asked of him by the police.’
‘Is there no chance he can be got at? I’m sure his silence could be bought with the Caversham purse. You’ve never seen how his eyes open at the glitter of another man’s gold.’
‘I have no idea where he is. Besides he is a witness for the crown now.’
Veck sneers. ‘I didn’t think you were fettered by such considerations?’
‘I’m a lawyer. I must respect the law.’
‘And yet you make these backdoor deals?’
Abrahams sighs impatiently. He can feel his anger rising. ‘Will you plead guilty?’ he says.

Veck tugs at the collar of his prison uniform. ‘If I say no that would mean Allies would have to go into the witness box. He could be utterly destroyed in cross-examination … it would not be hard to show him for what he really is: a contemptible liar. The case would crumble.’

Abrahams slams his hands upon the table. His violence startles Veck. ‘You will be the most indefensible wretch that was ever placed in the dock at the Old Bailey. Your judgement is poisoned by desire for revenge on that boy. Serve your revenge cold another day. Save yourself as best you can now and take this opportunity before it is too late.’

Veck has tears of frustration crowning in his eyes. The hatred he feels for the boy makes claws of his hands. He wants to strike. ‘Yes,’ thinks Abrahams to himself, ‘You would be a danger in the dock,’ He feels every sinew in his body relax when Veck says ‘Very well,’ and flicks the anguished droplets from his face.

Abrahams will not give him a moment to change his mind. It is done. Veck will plead guilty.
Chapter Six

Henry Matthews has summoned Rollo to the Home Office. The note was marked ‘urgent’. The ink was still wet and has left a mark on Rollo’s hand. Matthews has a corresponding mark on his own finger. Rollo greets him confidently enough as he strides into Matthews’ office but the door opened to capacity reveals Akers-Douglas sitting on the other side of the desk.

‘Good afternoon, Chief Whip,’ says Rollo.

‘Caversham.’

‘I hope I have not detained you. I came as soon as I received your note.’

Rollo searches Matthews’ eyes for some semblance of reassurance, generosity … friendship. But they yield nothing. Akers-Douglas only looks embarrassed.

‘What a relief that the strike is broken,’ says Rollo. ‘Goodness knows what it may have cost. At least it passed without any real violence.’

‘Yes,’ answers Matthews, ‘and that’s despite every effort of certain Radical Members to stir it up. It’s made them hungry. Hungrier than ever. They must not be fed.’

‘And presumably you wish to discuss something that may nourish them?’ answers Rollo.

Akers-Douglas intervenes at this moment. ‘I believe you have been acquainted with certain rumours concerning a close relative of yours? These rumours have been gaining currency at an alarming rate. I myself heard about them from my brother-in-law. Names are being carelessly and criminally dropped on the House terrace, the smoking room, and every club in London. People have been speaking in whispers but they are starting to speak up with one name in particular being audible.’

Rollo throws an ugly look at Matthews, though he speaks to Akers. ‘I believe these grubby rumours have gained currency but I don’t know how they have gained credence. Even the PM knows about them and has dismissed them quite rationally as the word of a grubby renter out to make trouble. Forgive me but it seems rather irrational to regard it as anything else.’
‘But,’ begins Matthews, ‘another witness has been found who has mentioned Lord George as a frequenter of the house on Cleveland Street.’ He rests his hand upon his chin and his eyes fix upon Rollo. ‘More than that, he admits to having been introduced to the house by Lord George. Of having made his acquaintance and being on terms of intimacy before and of having been “kept” by him since he removed from that address. Kept like a man would keep a woman.’ Matthews sweetens his words with contempt.

How you hate me, thinks Rollo. You who were excluded from Eaton and Oxford. You who know nothing of honour between gentlemen. But all he can say is, ‘Can this witness claim any more credibility than the messenger trash?’

‘I believe he is known to you,’ says Akers-Douglas. ‘Do you remember a boy named Algernon Allies?’

Rollo at last notices the ink smudge upon his own hand. Black, dirty, how had he not noticed it? Then he thinks of George as a child with hands covered in blood. There had been one occasion when he thought George had been shot. His heart had stopped. He’d never felt that sensation again until this moment.

‘Algernon Allies,’ Rollo repeats the name out loud. After a momentary blankness the embodiment of that memorable name manifests in his head with its black curls and rather insolent stare.

‘He was formerly a waiter at the your club, the Marlborough,’ adds Matthews.

My club where you would never gain admittance, thinks Rollo.

‘Do you recollect him?’ asks Akers-Douglas.

‘Yes, yes,’ says Rollo his tone changing with a sudden burst of excitement, ‘an irreverent, insolent boy who was found to be stealing from the club and prosecuted for attempting to break in to the premises. This is your witness?’ He laughs.

‘He is the police’s witness,’ says Akers-Douglas ‘and he is under their protection.’

‘He is making fools of them. If they have no proof beyond his word.’

‘But,’ says Matthews. ‘When he was arrested on charges of house breaking it was Lord George who stood surety for him. Also, three postal orders made out
to Allies have been traced to a post office in Knightsbridge and were made out by Lord George Caversham.'

Rollo hears the gun shot. He hears the child cry out. That moment when he thought that George was dead resurrects itself before his eyes. His heart had never known a sensation like it until this hour. He is searching for ways to refute what has been told to him. Not for the benefit of these judges. But for himself. He watches himself as a young man running through the woods at Torrington. He remembers the conspiratorial trees that blocked the light and mocked him for his negligence. That was the longest minute of his life but it was being superseded now and he doesn’t know where to look or what to do with his hands. The greatest relief had come when he’d found the child alive. He’d scooped him up and said “thank you.” But now Rollo realises his mistake of twenty years standing. He imagined good forces had saved the child but really it was Nemesis that spared him for the purpose revealed today. Oh what a far better thing had the fading light revealed only the child’s corpse and Rollo would have carried him back to the house weeping and handed him over to his brother. The child would have been interred and regret would have been spoken from everybody’s lips. Rollo’s own life would have been blighted but not finished. It would have been just another tragedy for future generations of Cavershams to say ‘Goodness, how sad,’ when they read the inscription on George’s tombstone.

Rollo’s eyes are watering. Matthews can see it but then he has never scrutinised anybody so closely before in his life. Not even when he had Dilke in the witness box. ‘What do you want of me?’ Rollo says at last.

‘Caversham, do not think us unsympathetic,’ says Akers-Douglas. ‘We realise this is a delicate and distressing family problem and that the good name of your family is of great concern. But the integrity of the party must always be my first concern and we must be above suspicion of impeding the law. Should the time come when a warrant for your nephew’s arrest is issued, we need two assurances from you.’

‘Which are?’

‘Firstly, that you will do nothing that could be construed as interfering with the course of justice. Secondly, that should the time come when your duty to
the party is incompatible with your duty to your family, that you will act in a matter best suited to party interests.’

‘Resign you mean?’ says Rollo. He can feel Matthews’ eyes piercing into him but still he will not look.

‘I’m sure that nothing will necessitate so drastic an action. But there is no way of knowing where this thing will end up.’

‘Or who will be implicated. Lord Euston and Colonel Jervois have also been implicated. If the scourge reaches both to the aristocracy and the military then there will be a national scandal beyond anything experienced in living memory. I would advise the Home Secretary, the Attorney General, and the DPP to do whatever they can to keep all that is vile coming out,’ says Rollo.

‘That cannot be,’ says Matthews.

‘Well then do everything you can to minimise the publicity,’ says Rollo. ‘And I say this as much for the party’s interests as my own.’

Akers-Douglas has something like sympathy in his eyes. Rollo will not tolerate sympathy. ‘Forgive me,’ he says. ‘I have another appointment.’

He takes his leave of them. He swears at the young clerk who gets in his way. He would like to wring Matthews’ neck. To have to entertain the idea of resignation in front of him when half the country had asked for him to go.

Rollo walks outside. Across the street he observes Lord Randolph Churchill outside the Admiralty building. He has his two sons with him. Rollo would like to cross over and speak to him. He would like to confide in Randolph and enjoy the benefit of friendship. But Rollo keeps walking because he has forfeit that right. He can make no claim upon Randolph’s time.

He resolves to walk home. The weather was changing quickly. As the dead leaves scud across the pavement he thinks of his first wife. He remembers the icy reception she received from the rest of the family. Younger sons who want careers must marry money. Only little George, he couldn’t have been more than five, defied the collective hostility and took her by the hand and led her to look at the pond fish.

Rollo isn’t very good at describing his emotions but just now he would call himself bitter. Bitter at life for all its shortcomings and wretched tricks. He seldom thinks of his first wife as it is not practical to do so. But for the walk home
he enjoys her company. She allows him to feel loss. For he does mourn. His heart breaks with each and every step. But before he crosses his threshold at Chester Square he must harden his heart.

On entering his house he finds that his second wife has been waiting for him. She is full of excitement at the rather imposing Persian vase they have received. A gift from the Shah. It revives the memory of that night for her. He thinks it hideous and tells her he doesn’t want it in the hall. But she thinks it beautiful. His first wife would not have cared for it either but then nor could she have hosted such an evening. He has not taken his hat off when he relents. Let the Shah’s gift be on display. They must send a thank you note, he says. But of course she has already anticipated him.

Lord Salisbury and the Tory party hold the balance of power in the Palace of Westminster. Bismark dictates to the world from Friedricksruh. But power is not just found in great halls and castles. In the drab and deserted dining room of a coffee house that sits atop the carcasses of forsaken canines in the stretch they call Houndsditch, a young man who holds a great deal of power plays with a deck of worn-out playing cards. He places the four kings down on the table. He is the ace that is suddenly high. The son of a Suffolk coachman has some of the highest in the land at his mercy. He only half knows it. If Hammond were here to coach him, what scandal might they not wreak together and what prizes might they not demand? Algernon Allies has sat in this room since the end of August. Since the day he returned from cashing his postal order to find PC Sladden in plain clothes taking tea with his mother.

‘Algie, this is Constable Sladden, from London. He has come about your old employer, Mr Hammond.’
As far as Mrs Allies knew, Mr Charles Hammond was a gentleman of some importance who gave a great many dinners and employed her youngest son as a footman in her house. It was when she went to the kitchen to fetch more hot water that Sladden told the shaken Allies to be seated. He leaned forward and whispered, ‘If you agree to leave with me now and return to London, we can leave your mother under the illusion that you were the waiter in a fine man’s house rather than a filthy little renter on his knees sucking the pricks of noblemen.’

By the time Mrs Allies returned with the kettle the agreement had been made. Now more than a month later, here he was and he has been interviewed many times. But no action has been taken. They are more interested in the gentleman they call Mr Brown than Mr Hammond. This dirty little renter is bored. He is as much a prisoner as Newlove or Veck, and shame is his jailer.

Abberline knows how to shame him. To make him afraid to stare at the looking glass. He has no reflection now in the dirty windows as he runs his fingers along the width of the pane. He can just about see down into the street but there is nothing comforting to behold there. Just poverty. And he is sick to his stomach of that. His own clothes are well worn; all the gifts he ever received have been pawned. The glitter Hammond had shown him has not led to gold. How he hates the charlatan. He means to hurt him if he can.

He returns to the table and sweeps the deck of cards onto the floor. He looks up and there is a man watching him that he has never laid eyes on before. The eyes know him and they fearlessly and triumphantly rest upon their object.

‘Mr Allies?’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘Never mind who I am. Be assured I am not your enemy. I come from friends who have heard of your predicament. They want to offer their help.’

Allies treads the kings into the carpet. ‘Who says I need help? I’m not a prisoner here.’

‘No,’ answers his well-dressed visitor, as he looks about pointedly turning his eyes to growths on the ceiling that can no longer be described as mould. ‘I gather you have been confined to these lodgings for a long time? I might have demanded better ones in your situation. I’m sure they wouldn’t deny you.
Considering your usefulness to them, the police ought to treat you with more respect.’

‘I think it will be worth my while in the end.’

‘Really?’ says the gentleman with pronounced disbelief. ‘I can only speculate on the sort of promises they have made to you. What if after all this you should just be thrown out onto the street below like the carcass of a mongrel. Or worse you might still end up under lock and key. Wouldn’t you rather make a clean break?’

‘What sort of break?’

‘I can promise your boat fare to America with money down.’

‘How much money down?’

‘15 pounds and with an allowance of a pound a week until you find employment.’

Allies looks at the pocket watch that his caller produces. He gives the impression of having very little time to waste.

‘Who is paying for this?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Someone who wants to keep my mouth shut?’

His caller puts his cane down upon the table and sits. ‘I think you have a straightforward choice before you, Mr Allies. You can stay in this godforsaken little hole and place your misguided trust in the officers of the law who have as much credibility as Bill Sikes, or you can begin afresh with money in your pocket and a new suit of clothes upon your back.’

Allies feels the indignity of having his visitor’s eyes examine the signs of mending in his jacket.

‘My offer is a genuine one. The police are leaving you to rot and have nothing good in mind for you. They despise you for what they know you to be.’

A flicker of fury sweeps across Allies’s face. Why does every man he encounters try to make him feel dirty? ‘I’ll need new clothes to go with me.’

The gentleman nods almost approvingly, as though he respected the nature of a man who knew how to make the most of a situation. He takes out a smart pocketbook and pencil. ‘Just tell me your demands,’ he says.

‘I need two new suits, underlinen, a pair of boots and a hat.’
‘These can be provided.’
‘When would I go?’
‘You will start for Liverpool tonight. Be at the A1 Public House on Tottenham Court Road at 9 o’clock. Someone will be waiting for you. Communicate your movements to no one. Not even family members. Do you give me your word?’

Allies doesn’t answer. He is contemplating whether he can extract anything else from this bargain.

‘Your word?’ The man’s voice sheds the last of its patience. He is so tired of making bargains with these creatures. He wishes he had turned Jack Worsley away and never accepted this brief but the promise of the Caversham purse had been too great. He wants to end the business tonight and this boy is the last hope that the police have of making a case against Lord George.

‘You have it,’ answers Allies petulantly. ‘But if I am to travel tonight I shall need a new shirt and tie to go in.’

His visitor opens up his purse and drops six shillings onto the table. ‘There,’ he says. ‘I wish you joy of it.’

Allies restrains himself from gathering it up until he hears the visitor’s heavy tread on the stairs. Then one by one he slips the shillings into his pocket. The money feels heavy as he stands and walks to his temporary room where he finds another temporary bed paid for by a man who wants something from him. Now he has the promise of a new life: an escape from Abberline’s remarks and Sladden’s eyes that pin him to his shame. If he leaves tonight his parents may never discover just how he’d earned his living for that year he lived at number 19 Cleveland Street. ‘It is your profession now,’ that had been Charley Hammond’s judgement upon him. ‘The only one you’re fit for. Once a man has lost his character in that way there is no way back.’

Charley, Veck, Lord George, they had all conspired to contaminate him. Allies had left Cleveland Street that night in the grip of the terrible New Year fog. He had gone to St Martin’s and paid for a first class bath. The water was warm and he had sponges and soap and he had scrubbed. But the spends of every man who had ever finished on him seemed to stick to his flesh. He lay in the water that was turning ever colder and he tried not to think of their faces. Veck had
been the first, then George who seemed afraid to touch him at first, but as Allies encouraged him with tricks taught him by Veck, George had come to life in a fit of ecstasy. Other men had followed; there was that young doctor from the Middlesex that had been obsessed with him and wept at his coldness. But the power Allies had felt in his own attractions had relegated the shame and discomfort. These things only came back to haunt him now. Damn Sladden and damn Abberline. But Abberline claimed that all he wanted was justice. He wanted George behind bars with Veck and Harry Newlove.

Nothing but anonymity could make him feel clean and 15 pounds down wasn’t bad. But it was George that has brought him to this. George would be free and Allies would always belong to him in a way. To run away was not to end this but to have his fate decided once more by George’s purse.

He empties the contents of his suitcase upon the bed, takes the money from his pocket and leaves it upon the dresser.

It is just after nine at the A1 Public House on the Tottenham Court Road. No sign of Allies yet but a heavy rain is making people late for engagements as they duck into doorways and coffee houses. Arthur Abrahams’s clerk pulls his collar up to his chin and stands aside for some eager drinkers. He fears that if he waits inside he will miss the boy. He has only what seems to him to be a very peculiar description to go by. He is not in the habit of thinking of young men as extraordinarily handsome. Abrahams had assured him that he would know the boy when he saw him. It is twelve minutes past nine when Allies finally appears. Two or three black curls hang from beneath a sodden cap and water trickles down his face. He carries with him a small satchel. De Gallo does know him. The boy is extraordinarily good looking, especially for his station in life. They seem to recognise each other.

‘You don’t suspect anyone of following you?’ asks De Gallo.

Allies shakes his head.

‘My instructions are to take you first to great Great Marlborough Street,’ says De Gallo. ‘We’ll get a cab from there to the station to catch the last boat train to Liverpool. Your passage is booked for tomorrow noon. Exciting isn’t it?’
Allies doesn't have time to answer for just then a cab passes. Mr Abrahams's clerk hails it. 'Great Marlborough Street,' he says. The cab begins its journey along Oxford Street. Another cab closely follows behind it.

There is a solitary light burning in the office of Mr Abrahams. Abrahams looks out into the night and his relief paints a mist over the window glass as he sees the cab approaching. He didn’t have the boy come straight here just in case he took it in his mind to impart the address to someone. This is the first time in his life that Abrahams has ever feared losing. But now they have Allies. This time tomorrow the mercenary little bugger will be shipped out of Liverpool; his type was so easily and cheaply bought.

Allies walks into the sombre apartments and sees the strange arrangements where sodomites come to seek aid from the sea witch. Many a scandal has been averted between these walls but never a crisis like this. Abrahams looks at the large brown eyes taking everything in. This frightened country lad does seem a very small cause for so much chaos.

'You have not brought the new shirt?' says Abrahams.
'I have not had the time,' answers Allies defensively.
'You have told no one of your intention to quit London tonight?'
'No,' he answers.
'Good. There will be time enough to write your goodbyes. I'm sure you will agree that it is a very generous offer laid out for you.'
'I don't know that 15 pounds is especially generous.'
'But a new beginning? A chance to reclaim your character. You know it is entirely lost here. Extraordinary rumours are being whispered about you in your home town. Perhaps out of the 15 pounds you could make some provision for your father who has lost his position because of the stories being circulated about his son,'

Allies is visibly shaken. 'Lost his job?'
'Yes,' answers Abrahams, savouring the shame that seems to run off Allies's features with the rainwater. 'Now we haven't much time but I have a few conditions to impart to you before my clerk escorts you to the train -'

It is just as Allies forgets that they are coming that Abberline and Sladden burst through the door.
'What are you doing with that boy?' demands Abberline. 'He is a police witness.'

Abrahams has spent his life ensnaring others. The padlocked boxes all about him are testament to that: other men's passions have been his currency. He has watched them squirming in this office, sweating with the terror of exposure with faces darkened by the shadow of suicide. Some of them have taken that step. Now he looks and feels like one of them: trapped, the sweat gathering at his pores and prickling on his body. But he knows from his own trade that the very worst thing he can do to depreciate his power is to exhibit fear. The presence of his great mind does not abandon him. 'Has Mr Allies been subpoenaed?' he asks coolly.

'Mr Allies knows he is of great importance to a criminal investigation,' returns Abberline.

'Ah, but has he been subpoenaed? From what I understand he is perfectly at liberty to come and go whenever and wherever he likes. It is you that have made unreasonable infringements upon his freedom. He has been living in the manner of a prisoner in miserable squalor in the East End, intimidated by your police officers, and no doubt by your own threats. In a sense he is there under duress. I represent the boy's parents who are keen for me to deliver him from your hands.'

'I know whose interests you represent and they have nothing to do with the boy's parents. You are out to defeat the ends of justice.'

'Am I to understand that you make some charge of conspiracy against me? I am fairly confident I have firmer grounds for a charge of abduction against you. This boy has been kept a virtual prisoner these many weeks. You have no grounds for taking him away again.'

'By God, I have grounds,' answers Abberline. For months he has dodged the footsteps of these boys and the high-born minotaurs that use them. He has found that ball of string woven throughout this cursed labyrinth and it has caught in gutters and sprawled in mansions. It connects part of the city that ought never be connected. What he has discovered of the habits of men has chilled him more than anything he found on those blood-soaked cobbles in
Whitechapel. It has disturbed his sleep. And yet that fellow Veck, who posed as a clergyman and

'I will go with the inspector,' says Allies.

'Why don’t we arrange an interview with your father and see what he has to say?' asks Abrahams.

'I don’t care to see my father,' Allies returns hastily. Indeed he never intends to set eyes on any member of his family again: his father least of all.

'You see,' says Abberline. 'He is far from being under duress. You have overstepped the mark Mr Abrahams. Now I will have the satisfaction of seeing you struck off the rolls and clapped into irons.'

Sladden steps forward with a pair of handcuffs. Abrahams does not resist but he displays all the defiance of Veck. 'I know what you are about, Inspector,' he says as Sladden locks the cuffs around his wrists, 'but I will not be made a scapegoat for the Government’s refusal to act. Perversions of the course of justice, as you call them, are starting from the very top.'

Abberline steps forward. He feels the pull of indiscretion. He hates the corrupt lawyer only slightly less than he hates the lawmakers who are stopping his own hand. His face is so close to Abrahams that it looks as though some act of indecency might be about to be committed between them. 'I am not going to stop until justice is done and all those perverts of privilege that are your meat and drink are where they belong. Locked away and separated from good people with their names forfeit and irredeemable. It is only a matter of time.'

'What a Radical you are, Inspector,' says Abrahams. 'Perhaps you are less obsequious to the old order than I thought.' Sladden takes him outside where the cab is still waiting. Abberline remains to search the premises. The ancient tattered prayer book is certainly a curiosity but the padlocked boxes are of especial interest to him. He instructs De Gallo to fetch the keys; De Gallo performs this task with great reluctance for he knows what is kept in them. He has read the contents of these boxes, made copies, and has shuddered in the act of replication. Not because the content was disgusting to him but because with every stroke of his pen he felt that he was trespassing on another man’s soul. He turns his head away as the lock clicks. Abrahams lifts back the lid of the first box and discovers that it is full of papers and, once again, hands for which this
correspondence was never meant begin to touch and rifle; Abberline's eyes scan
the lines for meaning. These are love letters. Abberline reads the outpourings of
another man's passion. He follows the curves of another man's tenderness
committed to paper. These are not sentiments belonging to an afflicted nature,
but those of a man in turns enraptured and tortured by his desires and longing.
Abberline, like De Gallo, finds some familiarity there. But these letters had been
intercepted, stolen, or bought from some unworthy recipient and the laws of the
land, which Abberline upheld, had created a trade where a man could profit from
the ownership of what was not rightly his. Abberline closes the box. He has no
more will to trespass; no more will to be complicit.

Chapter Eight

The greatest city on earth is getting a bad name at home and abroad. The danger
lies in the silence which is a breeding ground for rumour. Rumours travel in
boats leaving from Dover and Newhaven. They arrive in Paris and start by train
across Europe. Whispers of scandal speed across the Atlantic via telegraph wires
and the New York press prints stories that no British periodical would dare.
Prince Albert Victor's portrait has even appeared in dangerous proximity to the
narrative of corrupted messenger boys and perverted noblemen.

At home there are fears that London could be plunged into darkness at any
moment. Now it is the gas workers who are threatening to strike. The unusually
mild December days are making for rapid thaws and heavy fogs, and gas is
required in plenty. Constable Sladden is certain that the gasworks have already
reduced their supply in readiness for the fray; the lamps along Tottenham Court
Road burn very dimly tonight. Friday night. His beat has been a quiet one; for all
that it is the Friday before Christmas.

A phantom clock strikes the half hour. It is later than he thought and he
has an appointment to keep at the Euston Arch in 15 minutes. Even down by the
great terminus, the gas does not burn brightly enough to illuminate the towering
archway. The last traffic drives between the columns and the gates are locked.
There will be no more trains tonight. Sladden paces up and down nervously as
the clock of the St Pancras Parish Church chimes the quarter. The boys are not here. He curses his own foolishness. Abberline had told him to forget all about the boys. Veck's paltry nine-month sentence was the best justice they could hope for. Abberline had not looked up from his papers when Swinscow and the others had come to the Yard to tell him they had been discharged. I am too busy to see you just now,' he says addressing the desk. The remnants of Sladden's bitter feelings towards the boys had melted away as his eyes followed their solitary figures dragging their feet along Whitehall.

Sladden is just about to give up and bless providence for sparing him in his hour of madness when he sees two familiar forms approaching him. Only two. It is Swinscow and the one they call Perkins. Both with their hands in their pockets.

'Take your hands out of your pockets,' he says sharply. 'And walk. Why only two of you?'

'The others wouldn't come,' says Oliver.

'Have you brought my note?' he asks.

Oliver hands it to him and Sladden tears it into tiny pieces, which he scatters upon the pavement. He immediately relaxes somewhat. 'I know you went to Scotland Yard yesterday,' he says.

'We went to see Mr Abberline on account of us being turned off from the Post Office. They won't have us back. They said we are not fit to wear Her Majesty's uniform.'

'I never thought they'd do such a dirty thing,' says Sladden. 'There's men a lot higher up who are a bigger disgrace to their stripes. Come, keep up.'

'Where are we going?'

'You'll see.'

He hurries them up the Euston Road. It would be just as easy to walk along Cleveland Street, but this seems in poor taste.

'Have any of you found situations?' he asks.

'No,' answers Oliver.

'Did they at least pay you off?'

'Not a farthing and Perkins's dad has threatened to throw him out.'

Perkins says nothing. He is usually quiet.
They cross Oxford Street and Sladden leaves the parameters of his beat far behind as he marches them into the heart of Mayfair, arriving at number 64 Chester Square.

The group stands upon the opposite pavement. The gas lamps seem to burn brighter here. Fairbrother has just extinguished the lights on the ground floor before retiring.

‘Do you know whose house that is?’ he asks.

‘No,’ they answer.

‘That is the home of Lord Roland Cavesham.’

The boys look none the wiser.

‘Lord Roland is the uncle of your very own Mr Brown. He is also a distinguished member of Her Majesty’s Government.’

A light goes on in the upstairs window. It is only Isabel. She cannot sleep. She can feel the tension in the house. Her father shuts himself up in the library. He allows her to go out very little and never ceases to ask whom she is writing to. He has forbidden her to write to George. He won’t tell her why. The housemaids are full of the things that the footmen have heard from butlers in other households but they put away their gossip and their buckets whenever Isabel approaches. Fairbrother looks positively heartbroken. Isabel comes to the window.

Sladden gestures to the boys to step away into the shadows. All three of them watch Isabel’s motionless figure. ‘If you were to come here and demand to see his Lordship,’ says Sladden, ‘If you were to come here and tell him that you’d lost your positions at the Post Office. If you were to tell him what you know, then he will do something for you. All of you.’

Sladden tells them to go home. ‘I can have no more part in this,’ he says. ‘And nobody must know that I’ve seen you again. But take my advice, for your own sakes, be sure to drop in on Lord Roland at a most inconvenient time.’

Jack has been sufficiently preoccupied that he has been spared acknowledging the encroachment of Christmas. Tonight he cannot miss it for London is wearing its Christmas hat. Illuminations accompany them all the way along the Embankment. He wishes he could have got out of tonight but Labby has procured
them tickets for the royal performance of the new Gilbert and Sullivan at the Savoy.

Immense crowds are gathered on Somerset Street to wait for the arrival of the royal party. 'Poor devils,' says Kate. 'It would take more than Teddy to get me out in such weather. Sights like these do dampen my hopes for a republic.' Jack does not answer. Her voice is as biting as the cold. He is dismissive of her yet he should stop and see the way she is looking at him. He might take warning from it. She has paid Lizzie Osborn well to impart everything she knows. Lizzie was glad to help and has even promised to testify should the day ever come. Nia has also confirmed, reluctantly, that proof of buggery is the one other circumstance that could set Kate free. All Kate requires is fresh evidence.

As cold as it is outside, the Savoy lobby is oppressively hot. The Laboucheres are already inside and in line to check their wraps. Labby spots them and waves. 'Did you see the crowds outside?' asks Mrs Labouchere.

'They'll catch the Russian flu if they're not careful,' returns Kate.

'Henry is terribly upset that none of them recognised him or cheered for him.'

'Can you wonder at it?' returns Labby jovially. 'When I am their champion and the Prince of Wales would keep them forever in serfdom. I remember saying to you last New Year's Eve that 1889 would be the year of the British Bastille, well here we are almost at Christmas and I seem to have been most tragically mistaken.'

Kate removes her wrap revealing a rather impressive silk green evening gown. Jack hasn't seen it before. It looks expensive. It suits her though. It makes her look older, imposing. Labby certainly thinks so. It has caught the lobby off guard and in a sea of matrons, Kate, youthful in her green, certainly stands out. She moves without any awareness of the stir she is causing. She agrees to accompany Mrs Labouchere to the powder room.

Labouchere claims two programmes and gives one to Jack. 'Your wife looks enchanting tonight,' he says.

'Yes,' answers Jack absently. It would never occur to him to take this as a compliment to himself. Labby is always surprised by Jack's indifference to his wife. He supposes that the precariousness of their financial situation must be a
great strain upon their relations. 'By the way,' he continues in a stage whisper, 'why the ladies are absent, I have the latest scoop on Cleveland Street.'

'The latest rumours you mean,' says Jack not lifting his eyes from his programme. 'Half the men in London have been implicated,' he adds moodily. 'Any man with an enemy seems to feel at liberty to connect that enemy's name to that address.'

Labby looks disappointed that Jack does not share in his appetite for grinding the names of good men into the dirt but the appearance of Jack's indifference is not sufficient to dissuade him. 'I have it on very good authority that a warrant is finally about to be issued for the arrest of a very highly placed person,' he says.

Jack has the presence of mind to flip over the page of his programme. 'Which authority is this?'

'Oh I couldn't possibly tell you that. Not yet at least.'

Jack fails to stem the impatience in his voice. 'And the name of the man who is to be arrested?'

'I do not have it. But I am informed it will be sufficient to make enough of a scandal that it will cripple the Government.'

The lobby begins to swim in Jack's vision. He absently scrunches the programme in his hand. 'And when does your source say he is to be arrested?'

'By tomorrow at the latest.'

'Are you certain?'

'It seems the Government has run out of excuses not to. There will be a day of reckoning. We might see our Bastille yet. But Jack, you look as though you are not pleased. It is a contemptible business I know.'

'I wish you would confide to me your source,' he answers urgently.

Labby glances behind him. With a little cajoling he will betray his source. He cannot keep a secret.

'I wonder if you can guess it,' says Labby. 'I had a most unexpected offer of assistance. Wherever I sent agents, I found this person's agents had already been there.'

Jack would like to break Labby's neck.

'Were you not surprised by the announcement in The Times?' asks Labby.
‘Which announcement?’

‘The Times was requested to refute the statement that appeared in many of the less reputable periodicals that his royal highness Prince Albert Victor is to cut short his tour of India.’

‘I do not understand the significance,’ says Jack.

‘Since the New York press insinuated that PAV might be implicated in Cleveland Street, everybody has been speculating that he will return in order to discredit rumours that his Indian tour is a means of getting him away from pointing fingers and wagging tongues. The Palace has been getting somewhat nervous.’

Jack follows him. Labby’s source is someone at the Palace. He must be content with that for now. That makes it credible. But he needs to act. He is just about to ask Labby to excuse him when he observes Kate and Mrs Labouchere approach. Kate looks bored. She is always at her most vicious when she is bored. She twists her wedding ring.

‘We should go in,’ says Mrs Labouchere. ‘You both look conspiratorial. What have we missed?’

‘Topics not suitable for a lady’s ears,’ returns Labby.

Kate rolls her eyes. ‘Really,’ she says. ‘Most of the ladies in the powder room were discussing Cleveland Street.’

Jack bites his lip to hide his amusement. He has never seen Labby open his eyes quite so wide.

‘Jack, what have you done to our programme?’ Kate says hatefully.

Jack stares down at the programme all twisted and damaged at the seams. ‘I’ll get you another one,’ he says. He wonders if it is enough of a pretext to allow him to sneak away and find someone to take a message to George.

‘Here have mine,’ says Mrs Labouchere.

Jack inwardly curses her. They begin their ascent to Labby’s box and Jack feels like he is a prisoner walking between jailers. Kate observes how he rubs his thumb and forefinger together.

‘Goodness,’ says Mrs Labouchere. ‘We are directly facing the Royal Box.’

‘Did anyone remember to bring a pistol,’ says Kate.

‘Really dear Mrs Worsley you are quite a revolutionary.’
Jack stares down into the great well of the theatre. He needs somewhere to hide his hands. They always give him away. ‘Might I have a look at your programme?’ he asks Kate.

‘No fear,’ she says.

‘I don’t even know what the play is about.’

‘I suppose you’ll find out soon enough.’

He stares ahead at the yellow satin curtains drawn across the stage. His life suddenly feels like a play and he is none the wiser with regard to how it will act out. It certainly doesn’t feel like the right subject matter for Gilbert and Sullivan.

Jack is dead to the rush of excitement that begins in the orchestra pit. There is a rousing applause for Sir Arthur Sullivan as the great composer makes his entrance. Even he has just been discussing Cleveland Street with one of the cellists. Then everyone stands for the National Anthem. Kate stands before Jack does which is unusual enough. She watches her husband and wonders why his eyes grow so large and alarmed. She follows his gaze to the royal retinue taking their seat. Among them are Lord and Lady Roland Caversham and their daughter. This doesn’t seem so very remarkable to her. There is no more opportunity to scrutinise her husband’s face as the electric lights are extinguished.

The curtains open upon a Venetian backdrop. A brilliant blue sky. Sunshine. Colour. None of which have the power to transport Jack to anywhere but his present moment. A dozen peasant girls run out upon the stage. They have come to meet the two gondoliers who are to choose a wife among them. In order to make their selection a fair process, the two gondoliers are blindfolded. Jack looks at Kate and wonders if she would not have enjoyed more success in marriage if she had taken a similar approach. His eyes travel back to the Royal Box and Rollo Caversham. If only Rollo wasn’t so engrossed in the charms of the dancing girls then he would see the warning being flashed at him from inside the enemy camp. So brilliant is the flash in that warning light that Kate does not miss it. She can see the perturbation strangling her husband’s lips. Isabel Caversham has caught Jack’s eye. Isabel half smiles before directing her eyes down into the orchestra pit.
Isabel feels compelled to glance again at Jack. He is still staring. She can feel his urgency like an electric current. It is almost as if there were a telegraph wire between them. Jack feels a tantalising possibility that he could make her understand. Isabel is distracted by the Prince of Wales whispering in her ear. Jack observes how her face momentarily betrays her discomfort at the nearness of his cigar soaked breath. Kate saw it too.

Jack will send her a note during the interval. He'll manage it somehow.

The curtains at last close and the verdict is unanimous. The opera is everything the critics said it was. But Jack could not tell you anything that happened.

‘Do you have a pencil about you?’ he whispers to Kate.

‘What?’

‘A pencil?’

‘What for?’

‘I suppose I want to write a note.’

‘Mrs Labouchere do you have a pencil about you? I’m afraid I don’t and my husband wants to write a note?’ she says loudly and pointedly.

Even Labby notices her acerbic tone.

‘It is of no importance,’ says Jack.

He cannot see his wife’s face but there is something in the way she moves that reminds him of the evening they first met. She comes alive with hatred.

‘But,’ he says, ‘I regret I cannot stay for Act II. I have no wish to break up the party, but I’ve had the most excruciating headache since I arrived.’

‘Goodness,’ says Mrs Labouchere. ‘The Russian Flu.’

‘Oh I don’t think anything so dramatic,’ says Jack. ‘But I know how much my wife is enjoying the play. Would it be a terrible imposition if I were to ask you to bring her home at the end of the performance?’

Kate still does not turn to look at him but the figure stiffens in the green dress. Only her face softens as she says, ‘I would not hear of you going home without me. My place is with my husband if he is unwell.’

‘Why should you have your evening spoiled?’ he says. ‘I know how much you are enjoying it.’

‘I’m not enjoying the performance very much.’
‘I was referring to your scowling at the Royal Box. You won’t be far behind me. I shall go straight home to bed,’ he says insistently. ‘There is precious little you can do.’

‘We would be more than happy to bring Mrs Worsley back with us,’ says Labby. His eyes begin to dance between them as though he were watching a tennis match.

‘There really is no need. I am more than happy to go now,’ says Kate.

‘I would prefer you to stay!’ Jack renounces calm, politeness, and convention in the way he addresses his wife. It is enough to make Isabel look up from the opposite box. Kate turns to look at Jack and her eyes shine brilliantly in response. It is not difficult to make Jack incriminate himself.

Mrs Labouchere drops her programme. Jack hastily picks it up before wishing his party an urgent goodnight and runs downstairs to retrieve his coat. He asks an attendant how long the performance has to run. The second Act runs for an hour. This seems ungenerously short for Gilbert and Sullivan.

He looks for a clock in the lobby and in doing so catches the eye of a policeman standing at the entrance. There is another at the foot of the stairs to the stalls. His eyes seem to glower at Jack. Abrahams’s paranoia over his office being watched is infectious. Jack almost expects to be apprehended. But his rational senses restore themselves sufficiently to remind him that the policemen are there for the protection of the royal party.

The cold air hits him when he steps out into Somerset Street. He wonders if it is madness to go in person to find George. Yet another policeman is trying to control the pavement gawpers. They are shivering. Jack looks at them less with pity than with contempt. Braving illness just to get another glimpse of a corpulent cigar-poisoned cad. Would they have the same devotion if they really understood how their betters behaved? Or would Labby get his glorious revolution at last? Yet even now he is running to stem the tide that would engulf the royal parasite. His life makes no sense to him.

Jack shares Sladden’s observation with regard to the gas lamps. The supply has been reduced. His driver makes slow progress. His watch is at the menders so he must rely upon London’s clocks to tell him how time is working against him. He must be home before Labby returns with Isabel. His behaviour
has aroused her suspicions, but what does she suspect? She claims knowledge of Cleveland Street, but can her inexperienced mind ever really comprehend what went on at number 19? No, the threat is empty. Jack’s face falls into the palms of his gloves as he contemplates what George can do and where he should go. He will have missed the night train that would take him to Newhaven. There was another one from Victoria at nine tomorrow morning.

The hansom arrives at Albemarle Street. Jack alights and looks about him. The street door of George’s building is unlocked so he hurries inside and proceeds upstairs. He knows the way so well. He knows the steepness of the stairs. But it was another life in which he used to tread them. His mind wanders back to that New Year’s Eve almost three years before. The drunken row. What had it been about? What it was always about he supposes: the hills of Empire that rose up to divide them. And he had so carelessly and perversely and deliberately dropped Saul’s calling card into George’s lap. That action had brought them both here. To this night. He knocks gently on the door. He knocks again. ‘George?’ he says. ‘George are you at home?’

Jack tries the door and it is unlocked. Once inside he fumbles for a light. He turns on the gas to reveal a mess. It is more than the mess of a bachelor who keeps an unreliable manservant. It isn’t just dirty glasses, discarded letters, and flattened cushions. There are the marks of haste here. Several books that had formed George’s bedside library are missing. Most of his clothes are still hanging in his wardrobe but there are more empty coat hangers than there should be. Jack sits on the edge of George’s bed. It is cold in the room. He wonders when there was last a fire in the grate. He hopes against hope that George has gone. ‘Intelligent. Very intelligent,’ thinks Jack. ‘He was wise not to try and communicate with me.’ He lifts his head as the emptiness of the room crowds upon him. ‘I am not so wise,’ he says out loud. He sits for ten minutes. Possibly 15. He feels inside his pocket for his watch but remembers that it is not there. He should go lest the rooms are being watched and he is incriminating himself. Perhaps he should take something to remember George by? But what? He extinguishes the light and returns to the street empty-handed.

He doesn’t have to walk very far before he finds another cab waiting. The driver for all his bulk and his great coat shivers. His teeth chatter and the reins
tremble in his hands. Jack asks to be driven home. Hopefully the interval was a long one and it always takes Labby an age to leave anywhere. Kate will want explanations. Damn her. Let her want.

Back at the Savoy, Jack has left his own badly damaged programme on the seat. Kate picks it up and runs her fingers along the tears and creases as though they formed a kind of braille that would allow her to discover the reason for her husband’s agitation. It must be something serious to warrant such behaviour in front of Labby. Jack, whatever his faults, always behaves impeccably in public. Labby refrained from quizzing her during the interval. Now he drums his feet out of tune with the music and joins in the chorus of ‘Take a pair of sparkling eyes...’ Kate decides that she hates him. But there is something false even in Labby’s joviality. Some of the notes that come from his throat are thick with anxiety. He looks again at the Royal Box and at one point she observes him exchange a look with the Prince of Wales. Something passes between them. A confidence.

She must insist that Labby take her straight home. There was talk of supper but she must protest. She can be ill as well. She fans herself with the damaged programme. She is perspiring. This Cleveland Street business is creating a strange mood and she wonders if the whole theatre is not whispering about it, with names being passed from box to box, scribbled on the back of programmes. The scandal was simmering and ready to blow. The Prince of Wales must certainly have it on his mind and Labby and Jack were discussing it when she returned from the powder room. Her agitated hands have finished what her husband begun and have pulled the programme open at the seams. Perhaps Jack’s disappearance has everything to do with London’s great secret. At last the curtains close and the audience climbs to its feet demanding an encore.

‘Please God no,’ thinks Kate as she brings her hands together in an imitation of applause. Labby claps furiously. So does the Prince of Wales. So does Isabel Caversham. Isabel looks from one to the other. She looks anywhere but at the stage. She has come close to many secrets tonight, she is sure of that, but she has not penetrated any.

As everybody filters out to the lobby she grows exhausted as Labby holds court. She steps away to have a moment to herself but remains close enough to
be in earshot. She is feeling intensely hot and longs for some air. Labby is talking to Mr Bellingham. Occasional words rise above the cacophony. At first she thinks they are talking about the strike, but then she hears that address. She hears Labby talking about an arrest: arrest that will embarrass the Government and one of our great families. This is surely what he imparted to Jack. She doesn’t have time for further reflection as Mrs Bellingham compliments her on her green dress.

‘Are you quite all right, my dear,’ asks Mrs Labouchere.

‘I’m just a little overheated,’ she says. ‘I’m afraid I just need some air.’

‘Henry, Henry,’ says Mrs Labouchere. ‘When you’ve quite finished gossiping like an old woman, I think we should get dear Mrs Worsley home and into bed. She’s not looking at all well. I fear she’s following her husband’s example.’

Labby looks annoyed at being interrupted but he knows better than to argue with his wife.

Jack arrives home. The only light is in the basement. Isabel has not come home early. There was no reason that she should. He pays the driver and watches him drive away. He does not go into the house. He can’t. He’d rather feel the cold than suffer the false comforts of ... home. It wasn’t that. It was a dolls house. No real living creature existed there. The moment he walks through the door he will cease to be, for if there is the slightest chance of him going on in this world then the feelings that he carries with him now must be left outside. These feelings make him question the worth of everything. They threaten his peace and his ambition. They trample over his convictions. They cause him indifference to the things he has hated. All will is gone. He will indulge them for a few moments more. Any further immersion is suicide. His thoughts turn peculiarly to Castlereagh’s ghost. To spirits and apparitions. He is so lost in discourse with spectral suicides that he is deaf to the figure that approaches him from behind and touches him on the shoulder.

Jack’s cry is lost in the fold of a strong hand across his face. Every instinct tells him that this is death brought about by his closeness to scandal. Since that night with Abrahams on London Bridge he has felt like a marked man. He and
Abrahams had that terror of knowledge in common. He has seen it in Abrahams’s eyes and it stole the calm from his voice. But Jack’s struggle is momentary though and the first thing he recognises is George’s smell and the leather of his gloves.

‘George! I was just at your rooms.’

George has a valise with him and his umbrella. ‘I’m not sure how wise that was?’

‘You think your rooms are being watched?’

‘I don’t know for sure.’

‘But you do know they’re going to release a warrant?’

‘Yes,’ he answers. His lips tighten as a defence at the next inevitable question.

‘How?’ asks Jack.

George’s eyes retreat as the cold air is staled by old rivalries. ‘Lord Salisbury sent word to Uncle Rollo. He doesn’t want a scandal.’

Jack scoffs in the familiar way. ‘I’m sure he doesn’t. Let the wretched agents rot in...’ but he doesn’t finish the sentence. The PM has done exactly what he left the theatre to do.

‘I thought it best to get out of Albermarle Street immediately but I’ve missed the night train to Newhaven.’

‘Of course,’ says Jack. ‘Why have you come here?’

‘It seemed wrong to go without acknowledging my debt of gratitude to you. Without saying goodbye. Forgive me, perhaps you’ll think this ill advised...’

Jack does but he is suddenly distracted by carriage wheels and the lights of the approaching vehicle. It must be Labby’s carriage.

‘Hurry,’ he says to George. Jack takes his latchkey and unlocks his door. Pray God none of the servants are walking about. He pushes George into the library. ‘No one will trouble this room tonight,’ he says. ‘Don’t make any noise. I’ll come back for you later.’ His heart throbs and he cannot keep the tremble from his hands or his voice. He leaves his hat and cape in the hall and walks back out to meet Labby’s carriage as though he had been waiting for it.

Both Labby and Kate look rather surprised to see him.

‘Mr Worsley I thought you were going straight to bed,’ says Mrs Labouchere.
‘I was on the point of turning in when I heard the carriage,’ he says.

‘We came away from the theatre very promptly. Your wife was feeling the heat,’ says Labby as he hands Kate down from the cab and gives her to Jack. ‘Pity you missed the second half. But I insist you go again. There are some very catchy tunes. Infernal things will be going around in my head until next Christmas.’

‘Labby hurry and close the carriage door. It won’t do either of their constitutions any good to stand out here in this. We'll see you at our party on New Year's Eve,’ says Mrs Labouchere.

‘We shall look forward to it,’ says Jack.

Kate barely speaks as Jack gently pushes her towards the house. She flinches away from the touch of his arm. ‘You might have turned a light on,’ she says. ‘What an extraordinary piece of theatre.’

‘And I thought Gilbert and Sullivan left you cold,’ he says.

She walks into the drawing room and puts the light on. ‘I was referring to your performance,’ she says. ‘What business can have been so urgent that you had to charge out at the interval?’

‘No urgent business. I had a pounding headache. You should not be so suspicious.’

‘You’re honestly telling me you came straight home from the Savoy?’

He pours himself a whisky before answering. ‘Yes,’ he says indifferently.

‘It is a terrible conceit to think you can keep secrets from me Jack. I don’t miss much.’

‘No.’

‘I didn't miss how you were staring and staring at the Royal Box for instance.’

‘Put that down to morbid fascination,’ he says.

‘And staring at Lord Roland’s daughter.’

‘She’s a pretty girl,’ he answers somewhat surprised. He looks at her with an antagonistic smile in his eyes.

‘Don’t flatter yourself that I’m jealous, Jack ... though it is rare enough to see you take an interest in a pretty woman.’

This remark sounds peculiar and pointed upon her lips. It was unintentional on her part. The last thing she wanted to do now was to pique his
curiosity. She has no proofs yet and does not mean to lose by showing her hand too early. But how he looks at her. How his searches for meaning in her words. There is nowhere to hide from those eyes that are alive with terror and yet flash with contempt. Her hand tightens around the arm of her chair as she waits for him to break the silence. He doesn't so she must: 'Though I beg you not to indulge in anything that may cause us embarrassment. Choose your mistress wisely.' It is a strong recovery. But it takes a while for the flames in Jack's eyes to extinguish. He vanquishes the contents of his glass.

She rises. She will not risk saying anything further. Not tonight. But she has a new enthusiasm for securing her freedom. 'I'll leave you to your whisky,' she says. She lights a candle and goes up. He says nothing to acknowledge her departure. His skin prickles with all the oppressiveness of being trapped. He pours a second whisky for himself and another for George. He carries the glasses into the library and shuts the door.

He puts on the light and at first he cannot see George who has wedged himself in between two bookcases. 'George,' he whispers.

George steps out. 'I heard raised voices. I thought perhaps your wife had seen me.'

'No. We were lucky.'

'All the same I've put you at risk in coming here.'

'Never mind that now. It would be more of a risk for you to leave. You must stay here tonight and be gone before the servants are up.'

He hands George the whisky. George accepts it gratefully. He is also glad to have the offer of a hiding place. The house of Jack Worsley, Radical Member for Poplar East would surely be the last place anyone would look for him.

'Your wife sounded very angry all the same,' he says.

'That wasn't anger as much as hatred. She more or less accused me of making eyes at your cousin tonight.'

'Isabel?'

'Yes. She was sitting in the Royal Box.'

'And were you looking at her?'
'I wanted to get her attention. I thought if I could somehow impart the need to speak to her ... it was idiotic but I didn't know what to do when Labby told me.'

'Labby knows?'

'Only that a warrant is about to be issued for a highly-placed person. He knows nothing beyond that. So many names have been put about in relation to this case. They’ll be a trial for slander before this is all over with.'

'If it is ever all over with,’ returns George.

'He didn't mention you and I have no reason to suspect that he would think it was you.'

George shivers. There hasn’t been a fire in this room since this afternoon. Jack gets on his hands and knees to light one. He barely knows what he is about.

'If I’m lucky enough to get out of England tomorrow morning then I’m not sure I will be lucky enough to ever come back,’ says George. 'I shall be like my brother. What a fine pair of exiles we’ll make. But my position is worse because I am a wanted man.'

'Perhaps,’ begins Jack, ‘perhaps if you stayed ... they’d have to prove it. And with Hammond gone and if Allies really is the best they’ve got against you ... what are their hopes of success?’

'I could not do that, Jack. I could not do that to the family. Even if I got off then who knows what will come out? I hope by going away I can spare them at least some of the scandal that must ensue if I stay ... and then there's the Prince.'

Jack at last gets the fire to ignite. He watches it up close for a moment and its shadows dance upon his face. He is afraid to look at George. He curses Allies. If only Abrahams had got him out of the country. That greedy-eyed pretentious little renter of a waiter! But as his eyes steal back to George, he can no more exonerate him of all guilt than he can forgive himself for Tom Osborn. Perhaps the loss of George is to be the premium extracted from him.

Jack turns from the fire and looks at his sacrifice. He looks at the tired eyes, so frightened, looking at a future he cannot begin to imagine. A future of which Jack can have no part. ‘Can I get you another whisky?’ is all that Jack can think to say.
‘No,’ says George and he sinks down upon the sofa. ‘Just sit by me for a minute.’

Jack is somewhat surprised by this request. He is not used to being an agent of comfort. But the proximity helps them both. The only sound in the room is the crackle of flames. Neither can think of anything to say. Jack feels uneasy in a way he hasn’t since he was 17. He once sat in a similar attitude next to Matthew with the same foreshadowing that something was about to happen. Something criminal. Something that within living memory might have put a rope around his neck. He thinks of the tattered bible in Arthur Abrahams’s office.

What happens now is agreed upon without so much as a look. It is initiated by the gentlest of frightened caresses by George. And together they violate Labby’s law and there is nothing indecent about it.

Jack, for the first time since his boyhood, feels satisfaction without the grubbiness afforded by an encounter that he pays for with money. He doesn’t think of the brass buttons on a soldier’s tunic, of placing his hand beneath the rough red cloth and feeling the hardness of firm flesh, or any of the things that drive him wild. This is a different sensation. He is not sure that after tonight, and long after he has retreated to his old habits, that he will ever feel this again.

There is another party privy to this scene. Kate’s eyes stare unblinking at the scene unfolding on the other side of the keyhole. They focus on every detail of the criminal activity as her mind works furiously to articulate what she is observing knowing that one day she will be called upon to put it into words in the witness box when all the other ladies have been cleared out of court. The first person Kate thinks of is Virginia Crawford. Surely what Kate is watching now matches her as being as worldly and knowing as Nia. Their minds similarly dirtied. Kate imagines herself sketching the layout of the library as Nia once drew Sir Charles Dilke’s bedroom and Kate would show where her husband copulated with Lord George Caversham. She knows that for a sodomy conviction she must witness emission of seed. That is what she is watching for. Waiting for. She understands what that means as a form of words but can scarcely imagine what it will look like. Jack has only touched her in the dark and she is not convinced that he left anything in her.
The urgency of their moaning fixes her eyes upon Jack. She believes this will be it. The moment she is waiting for. The moment that will set her free while making her an outcast forever. How will she describe it? The look of anguish upon Jack’s face. The filthy language that seems to ejaculate in an involuntary fashion from his mouth. He looks and sounds unlike himself. She has seen passion in his face before, but not the kind that darkens his eyes and seems to grant him a temporary blindness. And then it is over amidst the frantic gasping of both men. She almost cries out in unison with them.

She watches long enough for see Jack wiping himself down with a handkerchief. She has seen enough for tonight. She has what she requires. No court in England would believe she could invent the details of such a thing. Kate’s candle has gone out and she feels her way upstairs, but for all the absence of light she has no fear of the dark. She thinks of the strange images she has already encountered in her life. Things most women go the full span of their existence without seeing. The night she watched her father bleed to death upon the kitchen table. Struck down by the very hand he had once defended. And tonight when she saw her husband using a man as he had never used her. The threads of her life diverged from everything that was the natural passage of living as she had been taught. Perhaps the world was being badly taught. Everybody trapped within the blueprint; trapped by the fear of the fallout. She lies completely motionless in the dark and listens to the thud of her own heart.

Jack does not sleep at all. But he is relieved that George can. George will need some rest for God knows what the next hours will bring. Visions of George being arrested at the dock at Newhaven sweep across his mind, followed by visions of George circling the prison exercise yard with Newlove, the wretched Veck, and even Tom Osborn. Surely the sneering Home Sec means to give him half a day to get away if they have taken the trouble to alert Rollo. But then there was Abberline; he was not of one mind with the PM. The hypocrisy of it all should make Jack shudder. He would bring down the Government with any other weapon but this.

It is not merely the nightmares. There is another reason that Jack does not wish to sleep. He does not wish to be cheated of these minutes. And time
marches on. These hours will be his life’s measure of real happiness. He won’t ask for any more for these feel generously given when weighed against his own offences. But he would like more. Everybody deserves more. Like the dockworkers walking the streets of Poplar in rain-drenched shirts. They deserved more. Handouts of joy were mean, even for men with better hearts and cleaner consciences than his.

His feeble fire has burned out in the grate. Then it occurs to him that the maid might come in to make it up. There is the sound of cartwheels outside and the clink of cans. The milkman has arrived. Jack hears the screech of the area gate and the light of the milkman’s lantern dances through the chink in the curtain. It cast an incriminating glare upon the floor where he and George surrendered to their criminal urges. But Jack has never felt less like a criminal. There is someone at the gate to receive the milkman: it is Maddy the kitchenmaid. He calls her by her name and she calls him Sam. She giggles a good deal. He asks after cook. ‘She’s been at that gin again,’ was the reply. ‘Then she sits up crying and wailing for half the night and keeps me talking until the small hours.’

‘What makes her take to drink so?’ asks Sam. His voice is thick with desire. Jack imagines him large and lecherous. It is the lilt of an experienced seducer. Poor little Maddy. The thought of the milkman’s virility is enough to give Jack a cockstand that pushes against George.

‘She thinks this is a bad house to work in,’ explains Maddy. ‘She’s very sensitive to the upsets upstairs.’

‘What upsets are these?’ asks Sam.

‘She says the master and the mistress have no liking for each other. She said we’ll never have use for a nursery. And then she drinks some more.’

Jack loses his stand. The impertinent little witch, sharing his private business with tradesmen on the area steps. When Sam fucks her and leaves her with a belly full of shame then he will have great pleasure in showing her the door. Jack never stopped to imagine what the servants thought about their arrangements. What liabilities they are. He feels a new urgency in getting George away. When he looks down at George again, George’s eyes open momentarily and then they close again extinguishing their brilliance. His body stirs restlessly. The
nightmare of his pursuers follows him into his wakefulness and his face conveys his terror. Jack's fingers move in unfamiliar patterns of tenderness upon George's face.

Matthew had once prophesised this very moment: the moment when Jack would know the pain of parting with what he was least inclined to part with in this world. He warned that the pain would work its way into Jack's soul and starve him of his sensitivity to the beauty of life. It has taken years and the warmth of George's sleeping body upon his, not just to recall Matthew's words, but also to understand them. He is pricked with stabs of remorse. George flinches in his arms and his breathing changes. Jack holds him a little tighter.

'What time is it?' asks George, opening his eyes.

'It is early,' Jack responds. 'It is still far too early.'

Chapter Nine

'Take a pair of sparkling eyes ... damn tune!' curses Labby. Gilbert and Sullivan have not relinquished their hold open him. When he's not singing along to the songs of last evening his hands are drumming them upon his bureau. But it was an exciting night. The whole theatre seemed abuzz. It was all about Cleveland Street. It was all anybody was really talking about: from the attendants who took their wraps, to the ushers that showed to their seats, to the musicians in the orchestra, to the Prince of Wales, and even, most unsuitably, Mrs Jack Worsley. It was going to be a national scandal and it was going to sink the Tories. All the perverts belonged to their camp after all. The change of year would see a change of Government. With everything he has done to bring this about there must surely be a cabinet post for him at last. He is just about to launch once more into the chorus of 'Take a pair of sparkling eyes,' when his butler enters the library with a telegram just delivered and to announce that Mrs Jack Worsley has called and would like to speak with him.

'Mrs Worsley? Show her in,' he says. There was another reason why yesterday evening had been so exciting: the strange tension between Jack and
Kate. There was definitely something amiss and if Kate had sought him out to confide in him then that was certainly very flattering. He is so carried away by this that he almost forgets the telegram. He breaks it open on the assumption that it is all to do with the great scandal. It is actually entirely unconnected. Instead it informs him that Captain William O’Shea, a member of his own party is to begin divorce proceedings against his wife Katherine, and that his petition names Charles Stewart Parnell as co-respondent. All desire to receive Kate Worsley or to sing about sparkling eyes, quickly deserts him.

By the time Kate is shown in, Labby is barely aware of her presence. He instructs his servant to bring him a glass of milk. He rises from his chair to greet Kate but can barely take his eyes off the telegram. But Kate is not put out by his lack of civility. She wants to get to the point.

‘Good morning, my dear,’ says Labby absently. ‘Forgive my not receiving you in the morning room. I’m afraid my wife has gone to visit our daughter. I do hope your good husband is not worse?’

Kate does not answer. She felt bold on coming here but now she doesn’t quite know where to begin.

‘Is Jack ill?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ says Kate. ‘I’m afraid he might be quite dangerously ill.’

Labby looks alarmed. A genuine concern fills his face. ‘Not the Russian influenza? I hear they’re dying in their hundreds in Paris. The papers reported this morning that there were one or two cases reported on the coast.’

‘No,’ says Kate. ‘It’s not the Russian influenza. Jack might recover from that. I’m not sure a man can recover from this.’

Labby has never found Kate Worsley warm. But this morning there is a terrible coldness in her way of looking at him.

‘I overheard you at the theatre last night telling Mr Bellingham that a warrant was about to be issued for the arrest of a highly placed person who would cause the Government much embarrassment. But that you didn’t know who it was.’ She stops speaking as the servant arrives with Labby’s milk and sets it down upon the bureau.

‘I know who it is,’ she says.
How do you know?’ asks Labby, sweetening his milk with sugar. He does no care for her tone.

‘After you gave Jack your intelligence I saw how intently he was staring at the Caversham party. Almost as though he was trying to communicate something to them. That’s why he excused himself so that he might go and alert – this person – Lord George Caversham.’ Kate watches Labby’s face intently as her words take effect. ‘Lord George slept concealed in our house last night,’ she continues. ‘He left at daybreak. He will be half way to the Continent by now.’

Labby has always enjoyed scandal. He has a not-so-secret relish for it. He enjoyed Nia’s evidence in the witness box; it had all been terrific fun until he realised how black it really was for Charlie Dilke, and for the party. Cleveland Street has also been great fun until now. He also finds her want of loyalty quite contemptible. ‘Mrs Worsley, it seems to me that you have come here with the intention of implicating your husband in some interference of the course of the law. I will at present refrain from any observation on the customary loyalty that one spouse owes to another.’ He stares at her very earnestly and all the warmth with which he usually regards her is drained from his face. ‘If you understood the nature of the charge you are discussing. If you had the first real comprehension of what this scandal entails and what it could mean for those accused –’

‘I do understand,’ she interrupts him. ‘I fully comprehend what went on at number 19 Cleveland Street. I know the characters of the men who went there and why they went there.’

Labby’s face is tainted by the blush that Kate’s features defy. ‘You can’t understand these things. It’s not possible that a woman’s mind could associate itself with anything so subversive.’

‘We are already long since cast out of Eden, Mr Labouchere,’ she says.

‘To attempt to taste such an apple would choke any truly respectable woman.’ His eyes flash a warning at her not to continue. ‘I am convinced that if you truly understood the depravity of these habits you would not accuse your husband of aiding their practitioners. To suggest a man with the abilities of Jack would so compromise his honour as to associate with perverts.’

Her face is suddenly luminous. The world thought her beautiful at the theatre last night but to see her now in the stronghold of hatred is to see her
radiant. ‘But he is one of them, Mr Labouchere. He is as much a pervert as Lord George Caversham. They are more than mere associates.’

Labby finds there is too much anarchy in this, even for his tastes. The lady who calls upon him in his library to speak on such a matter, who accuses her husband, his protégé of being a sodomite: there is something both repugnant and dangerous about it ‘You mean to accuse your husband of criminal practices that could send him to prison?’ he demands. ‘Practices that would destroy his career and do irreparable damage to the party? Would evidence do you base your foul supposition on?’

‘I saw them with my own eyes,’ answers Kate. ‘I saw them through the keyhole of the library door. My husband is a sodomite and I mean to divorce him for it. A woman can you know. The law does not give us many options. But that is among them.’

Labby is frightened of the determination in her voice. ‘This is the most contrived method of disposing of a husband I have ever heard of,’ he says with a dismissive sweep of his right hand, which upsets his glass of milk all over his desk. Amidst a great deal of swearing he snatches up the telegram as the milk begins to soak its edges. He stares silently at the mess before him as milk begins to trickle upon the carpet. But he cannot ring for his servant just yet. ‘What do you intend to do with this and why have you come to me?’

‘I know what an interest you have taken in the case. I thought you also deserved to know that you harbour a viper in your nest. As you say such revelations will have ramifications for the party.’

‘It will destroy us,’ he returns. ‘Is that what you want?’ He holds up the telegram. ‘Do you know what this is? William O’Shea is going to divorce his wife. He names Parnell as co-respondent. Do you have any idea what this will do to Home Rule? When a nation of Catholics finds that the man leading their fight for freedom is an adulterer who has fathered illegitimate children on another man’s wife? The Government wants revenge for the Pigott humiliation. Nothing could exercise their malice with quite so much animation. The animosity against Parnell will be deeply personal and all the more vicious for it. But we have Cleveland Street. We are accumulating evidence of a Tory cover-up. The Prince of Wales of all people is supplying me with funds to look into it. You look surprised.
As was I. The Prince and I are unnatural allies but he wants me to get to the bottom of this for the sake of his son.

'I thought he’d be in favour of covering up for his friends,' says Kate recalling the peculiar look she had seen pass between Labby and the Prince at the Savoy.

'Not at the risk of the crown.' He stands directly in front of her and rests his face upon the tops of his fingers. 'You must recognise how high the stakes are. This scandal could be a fight to the death for the two parties. Parnell and Mrs O'Shea will not be a breath upon the water compared to the magnitude of Cleveland Street. And we have the assistance of the Palace, an advantage never to be repeated. If you implicate Jack in this then we are powerless to attack the Government. We won't survive two scandals together. If the party goes, Home Rule will be annihilated. Don't you care about that?' He has never spoken to a woman like this. He has never bargained and given confidences in the manner he would to a man.

'Of course I care about Home Rule. Don’t you dare put that to me as a question. I only married Jack so I could have a part to play in progressing the cause.'

'And now you seek to destroy it! Do not proceed with this. Tell no one about it.'

'And what do you suggest I do?' There are anguished tears crowning in her eyes as she tries to ignore what he is telling her. 'If I spend another night under a roof with him then I shall invalidate any complaint I have. After what happened last night I must act today or never.'

'Then,' says Labby in a gentler tone, 'let it be never.'

'So I should stay with him knowing what I know? If I was your daughter would you ask that of me?'

He takes out his handkerchief and wipes the tears from Kate’s eyes. 'In this instance, I would have to,' he says, thanking providence that Kate is not his child.

'And what kind of life shall I look forward to?'

'It is a sacrifice. But if you hold your tongue you will be doing more for the cause than you ever imagined possible. Isn’t that what you wanted?'
Kate had felt so close to freedom that she could almost touch it. Now the promise shrinks away. It is like looking upon her own death. It is like watching herself bleed to death on the kitchen table: another casualty of Home Rule.

After Kate leaves, Labby sinks down into his chair. His world has retreated into chaos in the space of a morning. He knows he must move heaven and earth to keep Jack’s name out of it. To see his protégé fall foul of his own law would be stepping into his own trap. It would be the death knell of everything he has devoted his life to. No, Kate must sleep under her husband’s roof tonight and her silence will be assured. He pities her. But pity has limitations. It is a useless emotion for it prefaces inactivity. He has no idea how he will ever entertain Jack’s presence again. He has the comfort of knowing that he wasn’t the only one taken in. Dilke was too. Jack was Dilke’s discovery: a young man of extraordinary promise. But there was a canker in his soul. A contamination of evil that ran deep beneath the boy’s surface that both his mentors have missed. ‘Unfortunate lunatic,’ says Labby out loud. He sends for the servant to clean up his milk and asks him to bring up a brandy.

Chapter Ten

The lights of Westminster Palace glimmer faintly through the wet evening mist. Winter has not yet relinquished her hold upon the city. Indeed she clings more fervently than ever. She has left her white finger marks upon the face of Big Ben and the spires of the Abbey. The Thames is black and the city is swept beneath the folds of a menacing sky.

Jack is standing on Westminster Bridge finishing his cigarette; he turns to look at the Commons. It seems aware that something historic will take place within tonight. He should go and claim his seat but he seems mesmerised by the waters that have often baptised and buried with the same wave. He sometimes wishes that he’d already experienced both.

Tonight Labby is to stand up and denounce the Government for conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice. The culmination of his long planned attack. It is perhaps the moment he has been waiting for the whole of his political
life. He's certainly been counting the minutes since their defeat in '86. There is no anticipating what the consequences might be and where this might end. Jack tosses his cigarette end into the waters and thinks again of that sad Danish fable, the Little Mermaid. What becomes of the nature's invert when he dies? Does he have an immortal soul or does he become like foam around the base of Westminster Bridge?

He is about to light another cigarette when he observes a figure approaching him on the bridge. The figure stops amidst the pedestrian traffic upon the pavements, hesitates, but continues his approach. It is Rollo Caversham. The long winter has aged him.

'Worsley,' he says and joins him, both of them are looking out at nothing. They have not exchanged one word about George until now. Rollo is not one to waste time on civilities. 'Why didn't you use some of your influence with Labouchere to curb his tongue?'

'I have very little influence with him. If any.'

'But I know how active you were in attempting to defeat the case against my nephew. Does he know he has a double agent sitting next to him?'

'Oh, you mean I should have offered myself as a sacrificial lamb to spare the Tories?'

'Aren't you afraid of what might come out tonight?'

'This is not about George, he is safely away, they won't extradite him, they can't touch him. This isn't a personal attack on the Caversham family either. Labby wants to bring about a committee to investigate the Government's handling of the Cleveland Street affair.'

'Well if he succeeds, God help you,' answers Rollo. 'You have been running with the hare and now you seek to ride with the hounds. Thinking only of your own neck.'

'The name of the game is one of survival, is it not?'

'Well,' says Rollo slanting his head to take in the full expanse of the Palace. 'This might well turn out to be a fight to the death.'

He withdraws and is lost in the crowd. Jack's teeth chatter inside his skull. He doesn't need Rollo to tell him that he doesn't know what side he is on anymore. The bells of Westminster jangle out of tune and the heart that beats
pathetically in his chest is a stranger’s for Jack does not remember feeling so many clefts and crevices in it before.

Inside the Commons, the Ladies’ Gallery is empty but for Mrs Jack Worsley. The seats have been cleared by order of the chairman. Tonight’s debate is not fit for a woman’s ears, but Kate sits determined. She has a vantage point from which she can watch her husband squirm at his own hypocrisy. She has sacrificed her life for such a night as this and she wants to measure the value of that sacrifice. She wants to see the Unionists annihilated. She looks down into the gangway. The lobbies have never been so packed with members. It resembles Budget Day or the Queen’s Opening of Parliament. There is her husband. Jack watches Rollo as he exchanges a few brief words with W.H. Smith and then with Lord Randolph Churchill before taking his seat.

The two seats either side of Rollo remain vacant. He will be the subject of whispering and scorn, even amongst those whom he called friends. After tonight he might never be elected again. Rollo’s eyes steal across at Jack. They are matched in the destruction they can wreak upon one another so both will remain silent.

Kate is looking everywhere for Labby. She does not observe the orderly who comes to address her once again. It is the chairman’s order that no ladies be admitted to tonight’s debate. Her body turns violently as if she might fly at him, but she remembers herself just in time. She gathers up her skirts and allows herself to be led out. What a foolish conceit it is in men, thinks Kate, that think they can keep us forever locked in the dark with regard to the realities of this world. They little imagine what we have seen. She looks once more at her husband. He looks beaten already. His face betrays perfect indifference to the noise around him. Men speak to him and he seems not to hear them.

Arthur Balfour takes one of the vacant seats next to Rollo. He surreptitiously turns his head to address him. ‘I never thought things could get this dirty over a by-election,’ he says.

‘What do you mean?’ asks Rollo.

‘Well it’s no coincidence that Labby should be dredging all this up now just as we’re going head to head over North St Pancras. But I fear very much he
has misunderstood the mood of the moment if he imagines people will be impressed by his dirty scandal mongering.’

Rollo would like to shake him by the hand for this kindness. But he knows the North St Pancras by-election plays no part in this.

Here is Gladstone. The Grand Old Man looks tired. He has just reached his eightieth birthday and in the many long nights he has spent in this House he has never witnessed one such as this. The great chamber has never felt so charged with party animosity. Not even when he rallied across the floor at Disraeli. What would he have made of this awful, dangerous business? Even Gladstone wishes he had some power to curb Labby tonight.

And there is Labby. The man who means to expose England as a pit of vice. To make it a subject of scorn for his own political ends. And none of them know yet exactly what he knows or what he means to impart.

Labby does not acknowledge Jack. He knows where he sits. He knows the colour of his waistcoat. But Jack remains a shadow in his periphery and so he must remain ever after. Jack’s liberty chokes the credibility from Labby’s words and he must be credible tonight.

The chairman invites Labby to stand.

He gets to his feet.

He walks to the corner of the gangway. One hand is thrust into his pocket, the other takes a scrap of paper from the inside of his hat. He clears his throat. This is to be a performance after all. ‘In the year 1885, Parliament armed the guardians of public morality with full power for dealing with certain unnameable offences recognising that they were on the increase and desiring to stamp them out. It was however meant that the law should be put in force against high and low alike.’

Jack suddenly thinks of Harry Newlove. Newly at liberty, destined to join his disgraced protégés on the winter streets.

‘If the Government cannot absolve itself of charges of conspiracy a heavy blow will be dealt at the good name of this country, and at that respect which ought to be felt for law and order.’

Jack can hear the venom beginning to quicken in Labby’s voice; he can feel the juddering of Labby’s body as he tries to contain it but it is too much and it
erupts. ‘Is it not scandalous that the Government should allow painted men open
to parade, for vile purposes, the streets of London?’ He throws half a
dozen scraps of paper out of his hat at once. There are houses given up to the
indulgence of unnatural appetites. Men who go by the names of Violet and Queen
Anne.’

All the homelessness and inequality; the thousands that lie every night
under the sky, the starving dockworkers on the streets of Limehouse, even the
Queen with her begging bowl: none of these make the blood rush in Labby’s
veins like nature’s invert.

‘It is not desirable that these horrible vices be brought too much under
the notice of the public; but it is still worse that the law should be so unequally
distributed. In the case of the wretched agents, if ever a man deserved the full
penalty of the law it is Veck. I put it to the Treasury bench that if it were not for
the insistence of the Postmaster General and the Secretary of the Post Office,
Newlove and Veck would never have been prosecuted. When the odious brothel
keeper Hammond fled the country the police desired his extradition being,
unlike the Treasury, perfectly in earnest in the matter. The police received a
letter from the Treasury from Lord Salisbury saying that the Government could
not ask for the extradition of Hammond. I put it to you, what right did Lord
Salisbury have to mix himself up in these matters?’

There are cheers from the Irish Nationalist benches. Labby waits a few
moments for their enthusiasm to subside.

‘Yet he did involve himself. Particularly as regards the obstruction of
issuing a warrant against Lord George Caversham; who happened to be the
nephew of one of his own cabinet.’

Jeers rise up across the opposition benches.
Labby discards another piece of paper on the floor and takes another
from his hat.

‘Two men were imprisoned for these scandals. They were poor and
obscure men, and their confederate was let alone. Would the Government have
acted in the same way were it a Mr Jones or Mr Smith rather than the younger
son of the Duke of Torrington and nephew of its own distinguished Lord Roland
Caversham?’
Angry calls come from the Tory benches.

Rollo looks straight ahead.

‘Nobody was more virulent in their insistence that Mr Parnell was a conspirator in the Phoenix Park murders than Lord Roland. He accused the Honourable Member for Cork for having given Mr Frank Byrne the sum of £100 to enable his escape. Yet he sees nothing wrong in Lord Salisbury giving him advance warning that a warrant is to be made out for his kinsman’s arrest thus providing ample time to spirit said kinsman out of the country.’

The Nationalists roar for their champion.

Gladstone grows pale under the din. He is uncomfortable. He whispers something to Sir Charles Russell.

‘Now looking around for a scapegoat for their conspiracy, they fixed upon Mr Abrahams, who acted as solicitor to Lord George Caversham. Who incidentally also represented Newlove and Veck. And what about the employees of Her Majesty’s postal service? What will the nation think of the action of the Government with reference to the children in public service to whom they should stand in loco parentis? Instead of making every effort to shield these children, every effort was made to hush the matter up.’

‘Shame’ is the call from the opposition benches.

‘If the Government refuses an investigation they admit their guilt. I call upon the House to disconnect itself from these abominable crimes, and to see equal justice done between man and man. If these charges and allegations remain unanswered in the face of the world, a heavier blow will be dealt to the good name of England than has been inflicted upon it for many years.’

One side of the house roars with excitement. The other shakes its head in contemptuous disbelief.

Labby takes his seat next to Jack. He does not address him. Jack likewise cannot speak. He fears that Labby has not yet played his trump card. The other side will want to know who his informant is. He would love to know what other secrets he has in that hat.

Sir Richard Webster, the Attorney General, rises amidst the furious support of the Tories. But Webster's palms are almost trickling with sweat. Labby's speech has impressed. Webster almost feels that the Prime Minister
should be brought here to justify their inertia in arresting Rollo's nephew when
there was so much evidence against him from the moment Newlove betrayed his
name. But he will not falter; he has never been in the habit of faltering. 'I am here
to answer the claims of the Honourable Member for Northampton and to prove
that there is no foundation whatsoever to the charge that Lord Salisbury
conveyed an information to Lord Roland Caversham to enable his nephew to
escape from justice. Will the Honourable Member first give the name of his
informant?'

'No,' answers Labby jovially. 'For the same reason Mr Balfour gives when
he is asked to give the names of persons boycotted in Ireland – he would be a
marked man.'

A wave of merriment sweeps across the opposition but the dark
atmosphere is too heavy to disperse.

'With reference to the interview between Lord Roland Caversham and
Lord Salisbury, it was true that the Prime Minister had had an interview with
Lord Roland, but the account given by Mr Labouchere could not have been more
erroneous. Why should the Honourable Member not give the name of his
informant?'

Jack feels Labby shift with excitement in his seat. 'I'll tell you what,' he
answers Webster, 'I'll write down the name of my informant, and leave it to the
Honourable Member to read if he likes.'

Groans of angry disapproval emanate from the Tory benches but Labby
scribbles the name down and crosses the floor to hand it to Webster who rejects
it with his face turned away. Labby returns to his seat triumphant.

'On the day that Lord George left the country,' continues Webster, 'Lord
Roland met the Prime Minister at King's Cross Station and asked if there was any
truth in the rumours being circulated about his brother's younger son.'

'What about the elder?' calls a voice from the Nationalist benches.

Webster does not respond. 'Lord Salisbury was of the opinion that there
was no evidence in the possession of the police that could convict Lord George. It
is untrue that at that moment a warrant was being prepared. The warrant for his
arrest was not issued for another week. After this interview Lord Roland
Caversham never communicated with his nephew in any way. He never saw him
again. Why should the Honourable Member now not publicly name his informant and identify his source who provided such misleading information? Without that admission we will be forced to deduce that Mr Labouchere has founded his case on nothing more than newspaper gossip.

The Tories cry out victoriously but they are matched by shouts of ‘shame’ that are particularly loud and lusty from Irish throats. A handful of Tories are abandoning their seats. The air has become putrid. But it is not just the Conservatives who are disgusted by Labby. The Grand Old Man rises as the rancour rises about him. Jack watches as he leans on his stick and withdraws in the most dignified manner. Jack is among the few who actually observe him go. He goes shakily but without so much as looking behind him. He remembers the dignity of earlier hours. Even at the times of worst opposition, politics were never as dirty as this. It has ceased to be a gentleman’s game. Jack imagines him looking for the ghost of Disraeli. Tonight must make him feel that he has lived too long.

The Tories are deserting because of the dangerous speculation as to whose name is scrawled upon the unread scrap of paper. Labby feels empowered. The answer that frightens thirty of them from their seats is that it is the Prince of Wales. It is has been speculated that he is none too happy with the handling of the case and that the appearance of conspiracy having given rise to unhappy rumours about his eldest son has made him receptive to Labby’s campaign to unveil the truth.

Webster sits down and Labby stands. He waits for the rafter-shaking hurrah to come to an end before beginning.

Labby stares at the front bench.’ I do not believe Lord Salisbury,’ he says. He is met with a stunned silence.

The shock soon gives way to the outraged response from the Government benches. Balfour leads the cries of execration at the man who has called his uncle a liar.

The Chairman rises but his calls for order are swamped. He calls for Labby to withdraw his statement. It is in breach of every courtesy due to the members of the Upper House. Gladstone left just in time.
But Labby's good humour is gone. There is nothing of the joke left. Jack feels something boil over in Labby as he jumps to his feet and brings his hands together with an almighty clap. 'Yes,' he says. 'I repeat the expression. I do not believe Lord Salisbury.'

All order is forfeit. This is what anarchy looks like. The Tories call for him to withdraw.

A vote is taken. Labby is suspended. He tears the scrap of paper naming his informant into pieces and scatters them over the floor of the House. The Nationalists wave their hats in the air.. Jack runs his heel over the small pieces that have fluttered down beside his feet. He knows Labby has over reached himself and that his own excitement and breach of etiquette has cost him the exposure he sort. Number 19 will be left alone to keep its secrets.

Number 19 stands empty tonight. No lights are being carried from room to room. The medical students no longer laugh as they pass by. Mrs Morgan looks across at the shell of a house that can no longer harm the integrity of Cleveland Street. Blind Hannah listens in vain for the footfall of the sodomite. She misses her nightly altercations with Veck. She imagines his bloodied fingernails as he picks at oakum and the oakum picks at the residue of his soul. Mr O'Laughlin confides to Mr Smith that there is talk they might tear the house down. No one decent will want anything to do with it now. They watch the house as they smoke their cigars on the corner of Tottenham Street, seeming to distrust that it could really be as empty as it pretends to be.

It is well after one in the morning and Jack is the last man left in the House of Commons. Its chambers still echo with George's name. How horrible it was to hear it shouted back and forth by both sides. To hear George spoken of as the rot at the heart of Britain that might one day break her. All the while Jack sat in silence. It might just as easily have been his name that they used. But providence has spared him. Perhaps fate is just biding her time. Like Dilke, he might one day pay for his offences at another hour when great glory is close to hand. Now he must return to Kate.

Rollo has driven home to be greeted by a collection of extortionists. Oliver Swinscow first came here a little over three years ago with a telegram for Lord
Roland Caversham. Now he comes bearing him threats that sound uncertain in his mouth. The snow has left the boys drenched and they shiver as they make their demands. They were not born for this trade but the state has made them slaves to it. Their threats are futile now for the name Caversham is already disgraced; there is nothing more they can do to harm it. But Rollo gives them coins, not out of fear but from pity. He watches the boys slink away, goes into his house and shuts the door. The boys continue to walk. Oliver knows a warehouse where a furnace burns all night. If they stand close enough to the wall they can have a warm.

**Conclusion**

One of the preoccupations of contemporary neo-Victorian fiction has been with engaging with aspects of Victorian life that their antecedents could not touch for reasons of propriety. Examples of this include the portrayal of the sex trade in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and the exploration of lesbian desire in the novels of Sarah Waters, including *Tipping the Velvet* and *Fingersmith*. Reviewers of these fictions frequently describe them as the novels that Dickens could not have written.\(^\text{172}\) This is accurate to a point but even Dickens’s writings feature allusions to characters associated with and criminalised for homosexual acts. In *Sketches By Boz*, Dickens describes a visit to Newgate Prison. He makes observations about the felons kept in the condemned ward awaiting the hangman, but he also alludes to

---

\(^{172}\) Kathryn Hughes calls *The Crimson Petal and the White* the novel Dickens would have written had he been allowed to speak freely. See Kathryn Hughes, ‘Whores, Porn and Lunatics.’ *Guardian*, September 28, 2002, accessed December 3 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/28/fiction
three men, the nature of whose offence rendered it necessary to separate them, even from their companions in guilt ... the fate of one of these prisoners was uncertain; some mitigatory circumstances having come to light since his trial, which had been humanely represented in the proper quarter. The other two had nothing to expect from the mercy of the crown; their doom was sealed; no plea could be urged in extenuation of their crime, and they well knew that for them there was no hope in this world. 'The two short ones,' the turnkey whispered, 'were dead men.'

These 'dead men' reduced to a whisper by the turnkey were the last two men to be hanged for sodomy in England. Although Dickens does not name their offence, for the trained eye the very namelessness of their crime and the act of separating them is sufficient to form a supposition that can then be supported by the records.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed the impoverished nature of the archives and silences surrounding sex between men, but as the example above suggests, the history of homosexuality has seeped into works as popularly read as the writings of Dickens. It is hiding in plain sight, but in this context its very namelessness is sufficient to disclose it to one who can interpret this signifier. As this project has progressed I have developed the same eye for close readings of Victorian texts as the barrister Edward Carson when he was searching for sodomitical allusions in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. More problematic and obscuring than silences and coded allusions in the search for precedential experience is the defensive dominant narrative. This thesis has discussed a broad range of men who have sex with other men, taking in examples as diverse as decorated military heroes Lord Arthur Somerset and Sir Hector Macdonald; the working class soldier hero who had sex indiscriminately with both men and women as represented by the fictional Billy Prior in the *Regeneration* trilogy; the exploited blackmailing youth George Osborn; and the sexually precocious messenger boys exchanging sexual favours in the basement of the General Post Office HQ. Yet it has suited the purposes of the national narrative to obscure

---

174 Ibid.
these types behind the degenerate and emasculated archetype of a misrepresented Oscar Wilde. Wilde was over six foot, athletically built, and was married with two children, by no means a fit for any stereotype of effeminacy. But Wilde’s non-conformity, aestheticism, and extravagant personality lent him too easily to identification as ‘other’. This was the version of homosexuality that lent itself to what Houlbrook describes as ‘the construction of sexual difference and queer urban culture as disturbance, immorality, and threat’. More disparate, complex, masculine versions of homosexuality were too contradictory to the defensive dominant narrative and have remained invisible in public memory. This deliberate cultural amnesia has obstructed the search for genealogy among gay men seeking precedents outside of the mythologised Wilde. It was desire to protect a certain view of Britain and Britishness that suppressed and confused the truth about Sir Hector Macdonald’s suicide; that allowed Lord Arthur Somerset to flee the country before a warrant was issued for his arrest; and which saw the Cleveland Street messenger boys discharged from their employment at the General Post Office to fend for themselves on London’s hostile winter streets.

It was in order to properly interrogate the relationship between homosexuality and national identity that I set my novel within the context of British imperialism. The novel opens in the wake of the Home Rule crisis that topped Gladstone’s Government. Concern over the preservation of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland had split the Liberals into the opposing camps of Home Ruler and Liberal Unionist. This was a time of great anxiety about Britain’s imperial future and Cleveland Street was to the 1880s what the Pemberton Billing trial was to World War One, a crisis of national confidence that undermined ideals of national identity just as the British way of life was under threat. Earlier drafts of my novel dealt more overtly with Home Rule politics; chapters dealing with events such as the Mitchelstown Massacre and the Piggott forgeries were removed from the novel for reasons of pacing. I hope that what

176 Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 221.
177 Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 187.
179 Ibid., 180.
survives in the body of the novel is an exploration of the tension between nation and male homosexuality.

In order to widen the context of these tensions beyond the limited time frame of my novel (1886-90), I have both prefigured the future and echoed the past. In addition to engaging with the issue of Home Rule, my novel alludes to the growing threat of Germany as an imperial power and the expansion of Bismark’s army, also the increasing unrest in Russia. All these factors are destabilising to Britain’s future imperial prowess and her place in the world. But in addition to engaging with what will become the national concerns of the future, it also references how the national narrative of the past has suppressed the perceived threat of homosexual desire. This is invoked through the presence of Castlereagh. The example of Viscount Castlereagh, the former British Foreign Secretary (1769-1822), becomes a ghost that haunts George and Jack. It is on a visit to Ireland that Jack makes George acquainted with the possibility that Castlereagh the great statesman took his own life because he was being blackmailed over an alleged homosexual indiscretion. Historians remain divided over what drove Castlereagh to sever his own carotid artery. John Bew’s recent biography argues that there is insufficient evidence that Castlereagh experienced any homosexual proclivities. However Bew does state that Castlereagh complained to King George V that he was being blackmailed for homosexual crimes, but for the most part he maintains the defensive dominant narrative that has been perpetuated since 1822, that Castlereagh was suffering from a severe delusion of the mind and was subject to bouts of intense paranoia. This was the finding of the official inquest into his death which spared him the ignominy of being labelled as a suicide. A state funeral and burial at Westminster Abbey also helped to eradicate any suspicion of deeper, more scandalous contributory factors to Castlereagh’s death. If we engage with the possibility that Castlereagh was being pursued by blackmailers, it is interesting to reinterpret Sir Henry

\[181\] Bew, Castlereagh, Kindle, Ch.21.  
\[182\] The best source for the counter narrative which deals with the possibility of Castlereagh’s blackmail is H. Mongomery Hyde, *The Strange Death of Lord Castlereagh*, (London: Heineman, 1958).
Hardinge’s expression of feeling upon Castlereagh’s death, ‘he died a martyr to his country.’ In my novel, when Lord George Caversham faces the threat of exposure he feels an affinity with Lord Castlereagh and contemplates the possibility of terminating his own life. Lord Arthur Somerset, upon whom the character of George is based, also mentioned suicide as one of his possible alternatives. Sir Hector Macdonald’s termination of his life in a Paris hotel room likewise allowed for a counter narrative that secured his status as a hero of the British Empire. These examples suggest that the men who found themselves implicated in homosexual scandals knew what their nation and its narrative required of them.

Queering the national narrative means looking beneath the defensive dominant narrative and discovering the lives and stories that have been suppressed because of the perceived incompatibility between homosexuality and British national identity. The Cleveland Street Scandal epitomises the tension between homosexual desire and the requirements of Britishness. It was a violation of every precept of the British way of life at the end of the nineteenth century: it inculpated the highest in the land, possibly even the monarchy, and saw them accused of unnatural sexual transgressions with General Post Office boys, symbols of a Great British institution, while they were wearing Her Majesty’s uniform. These transgressions undermined the social frameworks upon which Britain depended. The discovery of the Cleveland Street brothel also threatened how Britain was perceived globally. There is much we don’t know about the scandal and most of the human drama has not survived Through fiction, it is possible to invent around what we know from the public records and to reimagine what the Victorian dominant narrative wanted us to forget.

---

183 Bew, Castlereagh, Kindle, Ch.21.

184 Hyde, The Cleveland Street Scandal, 87.
Primary Sources:

**Home Office Files**

DPP 1/95/3  
DPP 1/95/4/2  
HO 144/173/A43930

**Old Bailey Proceedings**


Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 6.0, 17 April 2011), June 1886, trial of George Osborn (t18860628-2).

**Newspapers** (I have used many newspapers, both national and regional, in my research into both the Cleveland Street scandal and its historical context)

Daily News  
Freeman's Journal
Secondary Sources:


