

DREAD MURDER

GWENDOLINE BUTLER



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Gwendoline Butler



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Chapter One

The town of Windsor was wrapped in mist; it came up from the river to cover the town and the Castle on the hill.

In his set of rooms deep in the heart of the Castle, Major Mearns sat over his breakfast, drinking his tea while he read *The London Times*.

‘Drat the dust,’ said Mearns, shaking a powder of grey from the papers and, indeed, from his breakfast as well. He could hear the crashing and banging of stonemasons so he knew from whence came the dirt.

The Castle was being restored by the new King, who had found the edifice crumbling from a century of neglect; the King, who had a perceptive eye, was determined to return it to grandeur.

But for the lesser souls like the Major and Denny who lived in the Castle, it meant noise and dirt. The men worked harder when the King was in residence, as he was at present, so that all the residents were grateful when he returned to Buckingham Palace, which he was also restoring, and the Castle quietened down.

The smell of the dust kept bringing back an episode he would like to forget. A woman, of course. ‘All the worst troubles came from the female sex’ was the Major’s view. A duchess, no less. She was strongly suspected, so the message came from Mr Pitt’s staff, of having poisoned two people. ‘Do not let her do the same in Windsor’ was the message that came with her.

In this, alas, he had not succeeded. ‘She got away with murder,’ he said to himself, shaking his head as he always did when he thought of Madame La Duchesse. Then she had curtsied to the old Queen and gone off.

But where had she got to? That was the real mystery to interest the gossips.

Mearns went back to reading with a sigh, brushing a spatter of dust from his hair with his hands. To be sure all this work might rid the Castle of its bugs – a persistent and prolific population.

It was not his copy of the newspaper, as it was an expensive item which he preferred to read but not to buy. Sergeant Denny, his friend and supporter in his business as Watcher in the Castle, read the paper after him. They were both slow, careful readers, so this took some time. Then the paper would be folded, ironed and delivered to His Majesty King George IV – not so long ago his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, but still a drunken layabout even if a man of excellent taste in clothes and pictures. Not to mention women.

Mearns and Denny knew that the King rose late, very late, so that there would be no early call for his newspaper – if indeed he read it at all, which both men doubted. They were not admirers of His Majesty, although they appreciated his choice in wine, bottles of which sometimes found their way to their table. As soldiers both, they preferred rum or whisky, but wine would do. They had fought side by side in some of the wars against Napoleon, pillaging and sampling the wines as they went through.

They had served in Wellington’s army in various quiet ways so that when William Pitt looked around for someone to keep a watchful eye on the Royal household (an unfortunate necessity because of Mad King George’s illness, his wife’s foreign relations and the behaviour of the then Prince of Wales) these two got the task.

Watchers, spies, guardians – call them what you will; they did their work quietly and with such tact that they made friends in the Castle household rather than enemies.

That is, if they were noticed at all. Somehow they contrived to be just a bit of background furniture

William Pitt was dead, Napoleon was dead, the mad old King was dead; but these two Watchers were still here in the Castle, reporting now to Lord Castlereagh. There would always be someone something for the Watchers to report on while King George IV and Queen Caroline (only divorced and never crowned, but now on the scene again) lived, and also later, if Mearns and Denny themselves should survive, when the young Princess Charlotte grew up if heredity was anything to go by. The two men did a good job.

‘And if we hadn’t known how to behave ourselves, then we would never have survived the wars. No one noticed is how you want to be in a war if you are to get through it,’ Denny had observed sagely as he speared a slice of ham on to his plate.

‘The one thing we can say about the Castle is that the pay is poor but the food is good.’

‘So it is,’ agreed the Sergeant. It was his duty to go to the kitchens, of which there were many, each having their own functions, and bring back their food. He had always done this – in Portugal, in Spain and through France. He was a natural scavenger. The Major remained aloof from all this as officers do not do such things, but it was his function to point Denny in the direction of the foods they both wanted. Never ask how he got his information; it was part of being a Watcher.

‘Brew another pot, Denny.’ He watched while the Sergeant warmed the metal pot, put in the tea leaves, then waited for them to infuse. In the poor household in which he had grown up, Denny had seen the tea leaves used, and used again. He felt rich now in being able to be lavish. After a minute or two he poured a cup for the Major, waited for Mearns to drink and nod his approval, then drank himself. It was a ritual the two went into every morning.

‘I read in *The Times* that the King’s health is improving, and that he has had a “peaceful rest”. “His Majesty is making a good recovery and we shall soon see him restored to active life.” We know better than that. Not while he drinks the way he does. That’s his sickness.’

‘Active enough in some ways,’ commented Denny. ‘Too active. You can hear his shouting and swearing down the stairs and two floors away. Screaming like a dog with fits. ’Tis a fit.’

Mearns nodded gravely. ‘Madness, madness. Like his father.’

‘Mindy says that he is not so violent; not biting the doctors and kicking all who come near him. It is bad that they have to bind him up in a kind of dead suit.’ Thus had the mad old King been treated. His son had a touch of his madness – all his sons had – but mildly, mildly.

Charlotte Minden, now more fondly called Mindy by her friends, had come to the Castle as a very young, frightened girl — not even sure of her own name. She was to act as a maidservant to Miss Fanny Burney, the author, who was then In Waiting upon the Queen. Fanny called her Charlotte, and Fanny’s father, Dr Burney, had added the name ‘Minden’, after a famous battle. As Mindy had taken root in the castle and matured and flourished, she grew into a handsome woman. Meanwhile, Fanny had continued writing her novels, knowing her own success as a married woman. In time Fanny found that the trials of attending on the Queen were too exacting and exhausting, and so she had fled from the Castle. But the sturdier Charlotte had stayed and prospered.

Mindy had not married, although she had not wanted for suitors. The Major had watched the girl grow into a woman; he thought of his affection as paternal, but lately he had acknowledged some warmer emotion growing there.

Could you fall in love at his age? He was still denying it to himself; but Denny, watching him, knew he had. Sergeant Denny, himself, had a happy and good-natured lover in the town. Twice widowed, she had said that that was marriage and death enough. ‘Never ask me to marry you,’ she had said to Denny. ‘For I’d say “No”.’

It might be a lie, but Denny told the odd lie himself, and in fact had a wife in Cripplegate, London, whom he had not seen for years (and possibly some others elsewhere). For all he knew, she was looking for him. Not dead, for she had vowed to haunt him if necessary and he had never seen her.

ghost – although there were so many ghosts in the Castle that he might not have noticed one more.

~~Mindy, of course, was different, as was the Major. Not liars, either of them, although they might be haunted.~~

What was doubtful was Mindy's own feelings. She loved them both, but was it the love that the Major wanted? As for himself, Denny had no hopes.

In these same years, a revolution had swept over France while, without a revolution, the nature of society in Britain was changing too. Britain was slowly turning into an industrial nation with new riches in new regions: Wales and the industrial north of England, rich in coal and iron, and busy with weaving cloth for the workers and for the new markets across the seas.

Political life, too, had changed, with the sickness of the old King, and the disinclination of the young one to be King – a factor which, together with the rising wealth and power of the middle classes, served to enhance the House of Commons while slowly depreciating the importance of land and farming.

Not much of this was felt in Windsor Castle, except for the illness of the mad old King – which had troubled the whole household, including Mindy whose closeness to the old Queen and the unmarried Princesses showed her their troubles at close hand.

'She's grown into a handsome woman,' said the Major, dwelling fondly on Mindy.

'Oh, you would notice that,' said Sergeant Denny to himself.

'She will catch someone's eye and be off to be a wife.'

'I daresay,' Denny replied to the Major.

'In fact I've heard that one of the coachmen, Joe Hilly, has his eye on her.'

'He's only got half an eye,' said Denny.

'Aye, his left eye does move around a mite,' agreed the Major.

'She deserves better than Hilly; he smells of horses.'

'So she does, so she does.'

'I reckon Mindy knows her own value.'

Mearns nodded, before going back to his breakfast. 'He is a warm man, is Hilly. You can do well in the stables if you know your business.'

It was true that a man with his eyes open could make a profit out of being a royal servant in the household of King George III, and his successor for that matter.

The subject of making money reminded him of a friend. 'Mr Pickettwick is back today,' he remarked to Denny.

'So he is.'

Samuel Pickettwick was a retired businessman experiencing good circumstances who divided his time between London and Windsor. He himself never mentioned money; he had no need to do so, for he exuded comfort and prosperous living. In any case, the Major — who had his own way of checking — had found out that he owned a manufactory in Manchester as well as several emporia in the poorer parts of London that sold any cotton or silk that failed in the richer world. A sensible arrangement, thought Mearns: sell to the poor what the rich don't want.

Mr Pickettwick's business was now run by his nephew who remained in London, living in Gray's Inn Road. Major Mearns had his own reasons for believing the nephew not to be a nephew at all, but a bastard son.

Mr Pickettwick was one of the Major's sources of London gossip, all of which was grist to his mill. There was a tacit agreement between them to exchange information: London items from one side and Court and Cabinet tips from the other. Probably neither party trusted the other completely but, they said, they enjoyed each other's company.

'Nice to see the old boy again,' said Denny, who licked no one's boots and had his own notion of

'Mr P', as he called him. 'We must give him a din-din. He likes his grub.'

'And his drink.'

'That's right, Major,' said Denny with a grin. Mearns had an officer's rank, won in war, and Denny was a Sergeant, but there was an equality of status between them – Denny was the Major's other self.

There was a sharp double rap on the door.

'Could be Tommy Traddles ... I heard he was around looking for you the other day, but couldn't find you.'

'He could have found me fast enough if he'd really looked,' said the Major. 'I'm glad he didn't find me – wanted to borrow some money, I expect. And you never get it back.' The Major went back to his reading.

'He spat at me last time I saw him,' reminisced Denny. 'And dang me if I know why.'

'No, he's not a nice man,' said Mearns, 'but he has sent more felons that deserved it to the gallows than you and I have.' Traddles was a Watcher and a Searcher who worked for the most important London Magistrates. He worked for anyone who would pay him; he had certainly worked for Mearns identifying and bringing in those suspected of crimes.

There came another rap on the door.

The Major raised his eyes from the paper. 'Open it, Denny ...'

But even as the Sergeant moved towards the door, it swung open and, not Traddles, but Charlotte Minden stood there, a long, striped shirt hanging over one arm.

'You were long enough opening the door.'

Denny shot towards her.

'Here, Denny, here is the shirt I mended for you, and it is time you got another.' Denny murmured that he could not afford it.

'Well, get that Mr Pickettwick to give you one cheap – he sells them, I believe. He sent one to the King and the King said it would do as a nightshirt, but no more.' Mindy gave a huge sigh and sat down. 'If there is tea or coffee there, give me a cup. Such a night we have had of it.'

A cup, as big as a bowl, blue and white, was filled and handed to her.

'The King?' queried Major Mearns. 'Bad with the drink again, is he?' Mindy took a long draught of tea. 'He has never been well, takes no notice of the doctors; he'll go like his father, but this night worse beyond anything.' She finished her tea then put the cup down where Denny refilled it.

Taller now, slim and handsome, she was hardly the girl any more who had come to Windsor to work with Miss Fanny Burney (with whom she still corresponded). She wore a simple shift-like dress with an apron tied around it; but it became her, as she well knew it did. She slipped her shawl from her shoulders.

'I believe the Queen, his mother, will leave Windsor and go to Kew. She is so cross with her son and he does not make her welcome.'

'Will you go?'

'I don't know yet. I may stay to be with Princess Adelaide. Lady Severn will stay. But the other Princesses will go with the Queen if she goes.'

'And his Majesty?'

'He will stay behind with his six keepers – or "Men" as they are called.'

Denny leaned against the window which looked out upon a covered way and then down to a small courtyard. 'His Majesty was very noisy again all yesterday.'

'He attacked his wife again last night,' said Mindy bluntly. 'Everyone in the Castle will know, so it's no secret ... He does not want to take up his part as a husband, but thinks he should be with her to get a son. Queen Charlotte says she has a disgust of him.'

'Understandable,' said Mearns.

‘Now when the old Queen retires, two of her German ladies and several of the Princesses go with her and stay with her until the King leaves ... But last night, divorced or not, he wouldn’t have any of it, or tried not to, and he attacked her. She should not have come back to the Castle. She liked Blackheath, but she was tempted.’

‘You saw him?’

‘Heard the screams and the noise ... Lady Lorimer saw. And the doctors – they rushed in. Lady Lorimer says that Dr Willis and his helpers wrapped him up again in a kind of shroud so that he couldn’t move – not a finger. They did it with the old King, you know. To think of it all happening again.’

‘Henry VIII would have had their heads off for that,’ remarked the Major.

Mindy finished her drink. ‘I must go.’ She wrapped her shawl around her. ‘You must never say. All is secret.’

Except from Lord Castlereagh.

‘It looks cold out there,’ said Denny from his window perch.

Although it was still early morning, he could see people moving around in the courtyard. He knew most of them by sight, men and women both. This was one of his uses to Major Mearns; he never forgot a face.

He watched Mindy’s graceful, strong figure swing out of sight. She had learnt how to bargain for a good wage from the Queen’s household since Miss Burney had departed. The Queen could be generous, even handing on clothes that had served their time. The shawl, for instance, that Mindy was wearing that morning had probably started life over Royal shoulders.

He turned to the Major. ‘Looks peaceful out there.’ ‘That’s how I like it.’ Like most old soldiers they preferred a quiet life. ‘Well — to work! What is it today?’

‘I will take our tray back to the kitchens and talk to Barber; he always knows what is going on. When the Queen is off to Kew, it would be best to know for sure.’

‘Do so,’ Mearns nodded. ‘And let him know we are short of ale. After that, if it proves the Queen is on the move, then you might ride over to Kew and make our dispositions there.’

Denny nodded. ‘And what will you be doing?’ he thought to himself. ‘Reading the King’s paper and smoking your pipe?’

Mearns read his thoughts. ‘The King can have his paper back. I will deliver it myself.’

‘Not to him in person?’

‘He won’t be awake. No – in the tray to his dressing room. And then I will return here to write my report and get it sent off. Lord Tom is Messenger this week and I can trust him to deliver it.’

Lord Tom was not a peer, nor the son of one, but a rider from the stables who was sent on royal commissions by the Household. His name was one of those jokes that big households, like big families, spawn; his real name had been forgotten, but ‘Duke’ came into it somewhere. As the Major knew all the sins and crimes of everyone living in the Royal Household – knew of their lies, thefts, adulteries and even murders – someone he trusted with an important errand was not likely to betray him.

He knew in this instance that Lord Tom had killed an officer in the wars recently concluded. An unpleasant officer; a coward and a bully. But it would have been a shot in the head for Lord Tom and he was no more heard about him if he had been discovered. Even now, with victory and peace declared, it would have prevented him getting a job in the Royal stables, despite his skills with horses and guns.

The Major speculated that it had been some letters found in his victim’s pocket that had eased Lord Tom’s way into the stables, but on this there was silence.

‘And what do they all know about you, Sir?’ Denny had asked humbly at the beginning of their working relationship.

‘Nothing,’ the Major had replied in a sad voice. ‘There is nothing to know.’

This Denny did not believe.

After delivering the tray back to Barber, who, for once, was not informative, Denny took himself off for his usual early morning walk – which was in part a pleasure to him and in part a duty. He did not always take the same path because he must not be expected; but he always looked about him with observant eyes, ever noting and checking. This power of reading a scene had been invaluable to him as a soldier, saving his life more than once.

He walked out of the immediate Castle grounds towards the Great Park; then he debated whether to walk ahead or swing left to go through Shaw’s Farm and then push into the Park. He must be brisk anyway, as the Major would be waiting for his daily report. The Major had never got over his military way of expecting a succinct report, and quick too.

The park was heavily wooded, reminding him that this was once the hunting ground of the first Norman kings. Not an imaginative man, Denny did not waste much thought on the Normans. They had hunted for food – no need for King George to do that; but the monarch enjoyed a ride himself when fit and he still went out when he could escape his doctors, riding until the men of his Household were exhausted.

Denny looked about him, then decided to take a path through dense bushes and trees. He walked down through a leafy dell. He slowed his pace; he sniffed. He smelt death. Pushing his way through the bushes, he stopped suddenly. At his feet was a pool of blood. It was a kind of basin in the ground which was lined with dried leaves so hard and dense that the blood had not drained away.

Or not as yet, he thought – but soon it would, becoming thick and sticky.

Keeping his feet clear, he circled the bloody area. But there was nothing to see except the blood. He considered what he had seen as he walked back to the Castle.

Mearns was in his room, at his table, writing.

Denny spoke at once and bluntly: ‘I have come across a pool of blood in the Park.’

Mearns barely raised his head from his writing. ‘The remains of a fox’s kill,’ he said without interest.

Denny rapped on the table and stared Mearns in the eye. ‘You and I have seen plenty of blood. We know how it falls. This is no blood from a fox’s kill. Too much blood, and it would have fallen in pear-shaped drops, with a smear as the dead animal was dragged away.’

The Major stood up. ‘We must look around, Denny.’

All the time there was a parcel on its way to be delivered to Major Mearns.

A dead weight, he joked when it was handed over to him.

The London to Windsor Coach arrived on time in the late afternoon. It stopped in the Market Square in sight of the Castle; the High Street ran into the Square. Here the coach stopped in front of The Royal George, the big inn which was its staging post before going on to Ascot.

The coachman climbed down, slashing his whip in the air. ‘On time.’ Punctual to the half-hour, there was promptness enough. The clock was not watched to the minute. With horse, hills and foul weather you took what came.

The passengers descended from the coach, each one stiff and cold, glad to have arrived. The first to disembark was a woman. She was young and sprightly; she leapt down onto the paving stones, waved goodbye to the coachman and sped away.

‘Goodbye, Miss Fairface,’ the coachman called. She was an actress, about to perform in the new play at the Theatre Royal.

The three men who next appeared were slower, especially a plump, well-furred man to whom the others gave way.

‘After you, Mr Pickettwick.’

~~The coachman touched his hat and pocketed his tip. ‘Thank you, Sir.’ He shook Mr Pickettwick’s~~ hand. Then he began to turn the coach in the direction of the stables where he would change the horses.

‘Stop, stop,’ cried Mr Pickettwick. ‘Miss Tux is not out yet.’

Miss Tux. Tall, thin, more bone than flesh, bonneted and shawled, she was at the moment being lowered out of the coach by her maidservant who had a firm grip from behind on her elbows. ‘No don’t pull away, Miss, or I’ll drop you in the mud.’

‘Libby, Libby, handle me gently,’ a high, old voice was wailing.

Miss Tux was deposited, upright, on the ground, with Libby still holding on.

‘Come along now, Miss Tux; let me take you in and see you get a little refreshment. A hot one, I can advise. Mulled wine is good. And your chair is coming ... I think I see the men pulling it up the hill now.’

In a low voice to one of his fellow travellers, Pickettwick explained: ‘A lady of some substance from the town ...’

There was one other passenger on the coach, and as it lumbered round to the stables, he poked his head over the top where he had been sitting.

‘So you’re still there, you little varmint,’ growled the coachman.

‘Coming down, don’t you fear. Frozen, I am.’ It was a young voice, full of spirit. The lad was small with a shock of dark hair and an expressive face.

‘Took a free ride, you did, young ’un. What’s your name?’

‘Charlie.’

‘Right, Charlie, so you can pay for your ride by helping me with the horses.’ The coachman’s voice was gruff, but he was worried about the youngster. ‘Do it well and there might be a penny or two for you.’

‘Oh thank you, Sir.’ Charlie sneezed, then pulled a grubby rag out of his pocket to blow his nose. A small silver coin rolled out onto the floor.

The coachman looked at it, accusation in his eyes. ‘Where did that come from, lad?’

‘Miss Fairface gave it to me at the stage in London. She said it would start me off ...she’s a kind lady.’

‘And what was you a’doing at the stage in Holborn?’

Charlie put his head down. ‘Looking for somewhere to go ... Your Windsor coach had no outside passengers to tell on me ...’

The coachman grunted, and no more was said while the horses were freed of the harness and led away to be fed and watered, while fresh horses were coupled. Charlie did his bit, proving surprisingly strong and manipulative considering his size and age. Ten or so, the coachman had thought, judging him by the wary, adult gaze. Been at adult work for some time, he assessed. Child and adult all in one.

One of the ostlers who was helping muttered to the coachman: ‘An old ’umman came in here and left two parcels for the Castle ...asked if I could deliver them. Said she wasn’t strong enough.’

‘And you said “Yes”.’

The ostler nodded.

‘And she paid you?’

Another nod.

‘And you can’t do it?’

One more nod.

Not a man to talk much, thought the coachman, but he knew the ostler of old. ‘I can get it done.’ He held out his hand.

The ostler passed a few coins across to him.

'Is that all?' asked the coachman, still holding out his hand.

After a pause, the ostler passed another coin into his palm.

The coachman nodded. 'That'll do.' He turned towards the boy. 'Carry them up to the Castle gate.'

'They are labelled,' said the ostler.

'Leave them with the guard.'

The coachman sorted out a couple of coins from those he had been given by the ostler.

'Two more when you get back.'

Charlie picked up the parcels, which were long and sausage-shaped and wrapped in sackin

'Heave,' he said, hoisting one on each shoulder, then staggering slightly.

Slowly Charlie laboured uphill to the gateway with the soldiers on guard. They asked him his business, studied his burden, assessed the weight, and sent him on his way with directions. 'You can do it.'

More slowly now, and ever slower as he went down into the Castle. He thought he was lost, and was preparing to dump his burden and depart, when a pretty woman asked him what he wanted and where he was going.

'Major Mearns ...bundles to deliver.'

Mindy, for it was she, hammered on the door behind an archway. 'This is it.'

The Major himself opened the door. 'These are for you,' said Mindy. 'Give the boy a coin ...and a drink; he looks as though he needs it.'

The Major studied the boy and the bundles. 'What's your name, lad?'

'Charlie, Sir.'

'Well, Charlie, where have these packages come from?'

'Left for you, Sir. In the inn below.'

Silently, the Major handed over a coin and a small beaker of beer.

'Thank you, Sir,' said Charlie, drinking gratefully. Then he sped off. He had had enough of those two parcels. Another time, they could walk there, he joked to himself.

He ran down the Castle mound and back to the inn in the High Street. The coach was just departing for the rest of its journey.

Charlie held out his hand for his second payment. 'Did what you asked. Parcels for Major Mearns; he took them from me himself.'

As the coachman paid up, while protesting that it was none of his business and he had been obliged to a friend, he said: 'And where will you be tonight?' It was going to be a cold night, and he could not dismiss some feeling for the boy.

Charlie hesitated, then said, 'Miss Fairface said to come to the Theatre; she thought she could find me a place.'

The coachman nodded; this lad would go far. 'And what about your father and mother, do they know you are on the loose?'

'I have no one,' said Charlie.

Miss Alice Fairface might or might not have expected Charlie to come to the Theatre but, when he came, she greeted him with kindness. He reminded her of her young brother, at present on tour in the north of England. Her mother and father were performing in London at Drury Lane. She would like to go back there herself; she was hopeful – she knew she was good. But you needed a bit of luck. Still, you worked where you could and Windsor was a good theatre to which the old King had come. He was mad, of course, but better a mad king than no king at all.

She was sitting in the dressing room where she applied colouring for her cheeks and eyes, and the

put on her wig. She had blue colouring around one eye and had been doing the other when Charlie arrived.

‘You should have knocked on the door,’ she said mildly. ‘I could have been in a state of undress. Who told you where to find me?’

Charlie gazed in fascination at her face, one blue eye and one plain. The pink on the cheeks did not quite match either.

‘No, no. I came through the door on the side street and listened till I heard your voice ... You were talking quite loud.’ He looked round the room. ‘But there is no one here.’

‘I was running through my lines.’

She studied his small, sturdy figure. He was not fat, rather thin and under-nourished in fact, but the sturdiness was of the spirit. He was so young – half child, but half old man. What had happened to him in his short life to split him in two?

He was looking at her expectantly, but without trust, as if life had taught him hope, but caution with it.

‘Yes, I’m sure I can find a spot. But not for long, you know.’ She only had an engagement for a month in this theatre.

‘I will move on.’

The door was pushed open. Miss Fairface swung round. ‘Oh, hello, Beau.’

Beau was tall, handsome and only half dressed.

‘Alice, flower,’ he bellowed, ‘the costume girl has given me tights to fit a midget.’ Beau was his stage name, taken from the celebrated man of fashion, Brummell. Bertie was his real, never-used name.

Hanging over his arm was a pair of white-to-grey tights, meant to be worn with his handsome boots. They did look small.

‘Oh, put them on, dear – squeeze yourself in, then go to see her. Or put on a kilt – you wore one when you were Robert the Bruce last week.’

‘Good idea, my love ...’ He stopped. ‘Who’s the boy?’ Alice Fairface hesitated.

‘Bring him from London, did you?’

‘On the same coach ... He needs somewhere to sleep.’

‘I can pay my share.’ Proudly, Charlie produced his handful of coins. ‘I earned them carrying two parcels up to the Castle. Precious heavy they were, too.’

‘You can sleep back-stage ... And help with setting up the scene. So, you’ve been up to the Castle. Did you go in?’

‘Up to the gate where the soldiers stand guard and then right up the hill to the room where I had to deliver them.’

‘Where do you come from, boy?’ enquired Beau.

‘London,’ said Charlie.

‘That’s a big city. Won’t some person be looking for you?’

Charlie shook his head.

‘What about your family?’

‘No family.’

He was poorly dressed but not ragged, thin but not starved. A mystery here, thought Beau. On the other hand there were many new orphans. Death came easily and quickly.

‘Follow me, lad, and I will show you where you can sleep.’

Charlie bowed to Miss Fairface. ‘Thank you, ma’am, for your help.’

‘Come and see me again, Charlie. I am here for the next four weeks.’

‘I will indeed, ma’am.’

Then he followed Beau.

The parcels were left untouched overnight. Denny and the Major had other things to think about, one of which was a trip to Datchet to see a contact.

Next morning, back in his rooms in the Castle, Major Mearns was unpacking the two parcels. He used scissors to cut the wrapping. As he did so, he began to frown.

‘Open the window, Denny,’ he instructed.

Denny obliged.

‘By God,’ said Mearns. ‘This is a leg ... A man’s left by the size, weight and look of it. We have been sent a pair of legs.’

‘Is it ...?’ began Denny, then stopped.

‘Yes, of course, they’re dead,’ said Mearns irritably. ‘But whether they were cut off when the man was dead or alive I have no means of knowing.’

Denny felt sick. ‘You better send them to the Crowners’ Unit.’

The Crowners was a newly-formed unit of men, almost all former soldiers, The Crown Keepers for the Peace in Windsor – another sign of the changing times.

Mearns kept quiet. He did not like the Crowners. He particularly disliked Felix Ferguson, a young Scotsman, and the head officer. ‘Too cheeky!’ was Mearns’ comment – ‘blandness helps you more than John Farmer he liked a little better, and sometimes took a drink with him. He was a handsome young man. Felix was less handsome, but exuded power – which was what irritated Mearns.

No, in his most honest moments he admitted that he disliked Felix because Mindy liked the man. Also, Felix, unmarried, was showing that he liked Mindy.

Jealousy.

But it was agreed on all sides that the Unit was doing a good job in Windsor. It was small, but efficient. England was changing. Industry was spreading and cities were growing. The Unit was part of that change. Major Mearns felt that he was part of the past.

But he had no intention of going near the Crowners with the legs.

The Unit was at that moment meeting. Felix was laying down the law. His law. He had strong proprietary feelings about the law and Windsor. But what annoyed Mearns was that Felix did not look fierce; he had a quiet, gentle face – almost feminine – with big blue eyes and a crest of fair hair. He had a good army record, though – as Mearns knew — and by all accounts was not one to leave a fight. Otherwise, too confident for anyone’s good.

Windsor, with the King in his Castle, was a town that needed the Unit to keep the peace, which, as Mearns admitted, it did well.

It was an efficient unit, and soon there would be units like it all over the country. England was changing. London was growing. Cities were spreading in the Industrial North.

Law and order should be respected. But all the same Mearns had no intention of consulting the Crowners’ Unit.

Chapter Two

‘Life must go on,’ said Major Mearns gloomily. ‘Take those legs away. They begin to stink.’

Dead meat, thought Denny. He was a strong meat-eater, but it might be some time before a leg of lamb had much appeal. ‘I suppose they are human?’

‘Look at the feet.’ Only one leg had been unwrapped, but they must match.

Denny had seen many dead feet, but they were usually booted and on the battlefield. The foot he could see now was dirty; it had a large corn on the little toe and broken nails – a foot that had seen rough, hard life.

‘I don’t know the foot,’ said Denny. Who could? One foot on its own was not easily given a name.

‘Take them down to the courtyard and undo the other leg. Then come back and I will join you ...’ He looked into Denny’s reluctant face. ‘I should smoke a pipe while you do it ... Come on, Denny, you did enough battle fieldwork.’

Denny grunted as he went out, carrying the pair of legs in the paper of *The Times*. The King would have to do without. The Major considered what he should do. A pair of legs was not a welcome present, and who had sent them?

‘And why to me?’ he asked himself silently.

He went to the door to shout after Denny. ‘See if there is a letter or such in the wrappings. Or if my name is written on the cloth ...’

‘And shall I look to see if there’s a love letter inside?’ Denny called back with heavy irony.

Mearns lit his pipe, and deliberated on what he was calling ‘the matter of the legs’. It was for him to take action. He was the master in this matter. Or so he thought.

The legs could be burnt. Or buried in the Castle grounds somewhere.

He stood up, making himself ready to go out and view the legs. The Magistrate, Sir Robert Porteous, should be informed, and he in turn would tell the coroner, Dr Archibald Devon. The Major knew both men well as he’d had cause to contact them in the past ... as when the mad servant girl had hanged herself and her baby. Except that the baby was not hers — just one she had ‘borrowed’ for the occasion.

He had found both men humane and reasonable. He did not doubt that good manners would prevail now, but something held him back. They would be interested, so very interested, and he had the feeling that he would prefer this not to be what happened. He was a man for a secret; all his training had reinforced a natural inclination that way.

He would not be breaking any law if he managed the matter of the legs in his own way. After all, he had the fountain head of all law in the Castle – mad and confined to his own rooms, but still the King and the source of law.

Because of this, the Castle and its environs were a specially protected place – a franchise. The Common Law ran here all right, but its officers, like the Coroner and the Magistrate, were not free to advance in to control what went on, as in an ordinary house.

The Major believed he could act as he thought best, behind this special liberty in the Castle.

‘I shall do what I think best,’ he said aloud as he walked out of the door. Always in his mind was what William Pitt, then Prime Minister, had said when he sent him to the Castle: ‘Remember you are responsible to me, and he who succeeds me. You are there to watch and report. Secret work, Major. As far as the Castle knows, you are there as an old soldier needing a home.’

And there are plenty of them about, Mearns had thought at the time – in the Castle and outside. The nature of society in the Castle was such that he and Denny were absorbed into the fabric in no time at all, and their presence taken for granted. They were old soldiers living in the Castle.

Mearns was a tall, upright man who still had a thatch of once-red hair – now grey – which he kept well cut by the barber who used to work for the then Prince of Wales. Denny was smaller and slighter and had lost his hair early on so that his bald head had a fine polish on it. But he and the Major had known each other so long that they matched, making a pair.

The Major was the senior partner and in charge; but Denny was clever – which Mearns admitted.

At the moment, he couldn't see Denny, but he could smell the way he passed. Along the covered way, down a flight of steps into the courtyard, and there he was.

He was sitting on a low stone wall, smoking; at his feet were the two bundles.

'Smelt you,' said Mearns. He was studying the foot. 'That's a working man's foot, not the foot of a gentleman.'

'Somehow I never thought he was a prince.' Denny drew on his pipe.

'He did a lot of walking.'

Their eyes met. 'You thinking what I'm thinking?' Denny spoke first.

The Major nodded. In a level voice, he said: 'A soldier's feet.' He took a pace up and down, then came back to where Denny crouched by his bundles.

'Unwrap the other leg, Denny; I want to study it.'

Reluctantly, Denny parted the sacking, using the knife to cut through the several layers. The smell of dead flesh grew stronger.

'It's stuck,' he complained.

'Dig away!' came the command.

Denny looked around him; he had chosen a spot where not many people came. 'What shall we do if someone comes along and asks us what we are doing?'

'We shall tell the truth – that the legs were delivered as a parcel to me and I am trying to find out whose legs they are.'

'Truth?' thought Denny – ever suspicious of his revered superior. 'I think you know or suspect who walked on these legs.'

The unwrapped leg lay before them, swollen and discoloured by decay. 'That leg was cut off first,' judged the Major. 'It has decomposed more than the other.'

'Or it was kept somewhere warmer,' said Denny. Mearns ignored this comment; he was staring at a long line of darker blue – almost black – that ran down the muscle of the leg like a seam. It ran in a curve down the leg.

'God save us,' he said under his breath. 'That is a scar.'

Denny covered the leg up. It seemed kinder somehow.

'I know that scar, Denny, and so do you.'

Denny frowned.

'There was blood on it when you first saw it. Blood on all of us.'

Denny looked towards the leg; he stood up from his kneeling position. 'What are you saying, Major?' But he thought he knew.

'A sabre wound. In Spain. You helped bind it up.'

'It's Tommy Traddles.' Denny remembered now; a fierce little fight – part of the main battle. Had they won? He couldn't remember. Afterwards they had been told it was their victory. 'I remember he hurt ... he was never as careful as we were.' Years ago they had all been young; but Traddles was older than Denny and Mearns.

The Major was remembering too. He turned away. 'Aye. Cover him up again. What we've got o

him.' Just in time, Denny performed this service for Traddles, as footsteps sounded on the flagstones

Mindy came across towards them. She looked neat and pretty in her print dress and soft woollen shawl. She had put on a little weight over the years – no longer girlish, but a mature, elegant woman. Usually both men were delighted to see Mindy; she was their friend for whom they felt a warm affection. Which was returned.

Mindy liked and trusted them — which in the society of the Castle was not always the case. She was now an assistant dresser to one of the Princesses, which gave her a security she had not known before. She had one or two suitors, to whom she showed no favours and no preference. Perhaps as a child she had seen too much of the rigours and pains of marriage to be eager for it. Both men thought it would be a pity if she did not marry; she looked born to raise a family and run a neat household. But she must marry well, not for her the destiny of ten children and a basement room. They were looking out for a good husband for her. Denny had thought of her wistfully for years as someone he would love to have did love; but he was a humble man and did not rate himself worthy of her.

'So that's where you are. I've been looking for you.' Denny placed himself in front of the covered up legs so that she could not see.

But she was quick. 'What are you hiding?'

'Not the crown jewels,' said Denny. 'Nothing you need to worry about.'

The Major said nothing.

Her laugh died away. 'It is a dead ...' She moved towards the bundles. 'I saw these yesterday when the boy delivered them.'

Mearns spoke up. 'Better not look.'

'It's not an animal, is it?' she said slowly. 'You haven't killed an animal.'

'As soon as you kill the King,' said Denny with an attempt at lightness. He had no intention of letting her see inside the bundles.

But on the left leg the wrapping, hastily put back by Denny to mask the sight and even more the smell, fell away to reveal the foot.

'Leave it,' said the Major hastily.

Mindy gave a little cry, then put her hand to her mouth.

'Told you not to look.'

Mindy, frozen by the sight, went on looking. 'Mindy,' he admonished. 'You must learn your manners. A lady would not have looked.'

'I'm not a lady.' She had her handkerchief to her nose.

'And before you lose a bit more of your manners, Miss – no, we did not kill him. The legs were present to me.'

Mindy had gone pale. 'Was he dead when his legs were cut off?'

'I judge, yes.' He hoped he sounded more convinced than he was.

'And they were sent to you? Are you sure they were meant for you?' But she had seen them arrive herself.

'Sent, delivered, given – call it what you like.' He was terse and cross.

'Came yesterday,' volunteered Denny.

'I know that already.'

'We've only just opened them.' Giving them an opportunity to get really ripe, he thought savagely.

The trouble with having Mindy as their friend was that she was also their conscience. 'Have you told Sir Robert? Or Dr Devon?'

The Major answered his dear conscience smartly: 'I do not think it is necessary for a member of the Household.' Especially for one who was secretly in the pay of the Cabinet, Whig or Tory, as they came and went. Major Mearns was not a political man himself, and had no vote and no influence; but

he recognised power when he saw it.

‘Can’t be hidden,’ said Mindy. She was as conscious of the smell, stench even, of decay as the two men were.

The Major shrugged. ‘Who knows?’

‘I know. And the person who sent the legs to you knows. And who can tell what other ...’ she hesitated, ‘things he may have to send?’

In the Theatre Miss Fairface was shaking out the dress she must wear later as Carmina in *Escape from Spain*, a farce with songs that she was doomed to perform that night as the end of the programme.

‘No, Beau, dear, no outing for me today. I must run through my songs ...written by a man with a tickle in his ear, I vow.’

‘The Theatre owner,’ said Beau, ‘whose slaves we are bound to be while he pays us to perform.’

‘You didn’t mind playing Falstaff.’

‘Oh Falstaff. That was different. That was Shakespeare.’

‘Pot belly and all?’

‘Belly and all.’

He had been a very good Falstaff – funny, passionate, with a hint of violence, which, after all, was often there in the background with Shakespeare.

Beau Vinter was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room while he trimmed his fingernails. He took up a piece of chamois leather to begin polishing them.

‘Yes, Beau, you have very fine nails indeed; but as tonight you play a groom, they might as well look rough and stained.’

‘Ah, only “pretend groom”, playing at it so I can get close to you, my love, and whisk you off to Spain. It is Spain, isn’t it?’

He stopped buffing his nails and went back to cutting one on the right hand which had got badly torn.

He saw Miss Fairface looking. ‘It’s that fight in the last Act of *Escape ...*’

Miss Fairface shook her head. ‘You take it too seriously, that you do.’

‘It’s Harry Burgeon, not me. He takes it too seriously, Harry does. Can’t act it. I have to fight him off.’

‘I wish he took making love to me in Act Three seriously,’ complained Miss Fairface. ‘I have to do it all myself.’

‘Not interested, you see ... He’s interested enough in that lad you brought in, though,’ said Beau with a laugh.

‘What?’ cried the actress with alarm. Broadminded in many ways, as actresses were obliged to be, she was prudish in others.

‘Oh, he can look after himself, can that one. He’s got a tongue on him ... “Oh, Mr Burgeon,” he said out loud, “you’ve got one hot hand and one cold. You must have a fever. Shall I call out for the doctor ...?” Harry sheared off pretty quick, I can tell you.’

Beau stood up. ‘Must be off. I have to check my wig for tonight. Leave it too late and Harry will have my wig and leave me his.’

Miss Fairface went back to brushing her dress, but her thoughts were with Charlie. He was a one, a right. One of a kind.

‘Bother,’ she said, after a bit. ‘Too dark in here for anything.’

She went into the corridor, the better to see how her dress had fared; the light was better by the small window, so she stood there examining her dress carefully.

From there, she saw the boy.

The back of the Theatre opened onto a sidestreet by means of a heavy iron gate. Through the bars the gate she saw the lad, back towards her, in conversation with a very tall, thin woman; she could see the swirl of the skirt and the edge of her bonnet. Not a fashionable bonnet, so Alice Fairface judged. She stared at the couple for a long minute. It had been a hard year, with widespread poverty, so there were many children like Charlie on the streets, trying to live.

Then a voice called her and she moved away from the window.

Meanwhile, Charlie laboured up the hill from the Theatre, going slowly because he was carrying a basket that was heavier than he had expected when he accepted the errand. He put down the basket while he stood there, thinking and breathing deeply. Then he turned around, sniffing the air.

Food, hot bread, and sausage and bacon.

He was standing at the head of a small court. The smell of food came from a cook shop in the court. He fingered the coins in his pocket, then made his decision. He picked up the basket and went toward the delicious smells.

The cook shop was dark and warm, with a counter running across the back behind which stood a man wearing an apron, which had once been white but was now blotched with stains of many colours. A small fat woman stood by his side.

Charlie looked around. 'Mulled wine, please, with a hot sausage and bread.'

There was a silence. Then the woman said: 'Are you one of those midgets from the circus?'

'No.' Charlie was indignant.

'Has that basket got an animal in it?'

'No.' He thought this was the right answer; nothing moved in there – that was sure.

The woman considered. She looked at the man and gave a nod. 'Show us your money first,' said the man.

Charlie held out his palm with a few coins in it. Not all he had; he had that much caution.

'Give it 'im,' said the man to the woman.

Silently, the woman pushed a beaker and a plate with a length of dark sausage resting on bread.

'And bread,' said Charlie. 'Fresh bread. Not that stale stuff.'

She obliged, giving him a smirk. 'You're a one, you are.'

Charlie moved away with his plate. From an inner, darker corner came a small figure, even smaller than Charlie, and thinner and older.

A little old man, with grey hair flowing from a skull that was bald at the top, over a face that was wrinkled and shrivelled up into something too old to count. He was wrapped in a cloak, many sizes too big and so old that the stains and dirt of years had settled on it like a shroud.

A whispered croak issued from the lips: 'The wine's all right, but I shouldn't touch the sausage. I think they put dog in it.' A claw-like set of fingers reached out for the sausage. Charlie beat the hand away and started the meal. Then he turned back and handed over half the sausage without a word.

He finished the drink and the bread, picked up the basket and set off again.

He hadn't gone very far before he heard a shuffle behind him, then a bony hand gripped his shoulder. 'Don't hurry away ... Be careful; they're after you.'

Charlie stopped, letting the basket hang over his arm. 'Who is? Who is after me?'

There was a pause. 'Don't know. Not knowing them, can't say.' Behind the drunken mutter was the hint of a voice that had known education – the ghost of an earlier life. Charlie sensed this without understanding it. One truth he had absorbed in his short journey through the London undergrowth was that what you couldn't understand it was best you moved away from fast.

He did this now, his feet tripping over the cobbles as he prepared to deliver his basket. 'Seems to get heavier every minute,' he said to himself. 'Wonder what it is?' He had a strong, active imagination, so he could call up several pictures.

Books? Heavy enough if you carried enough of them. Boots? Yes, boots and clothes are heavy. Food? He often thought about food. He could think of worse things to be carrying, but he decided not to. He didn't believe he was being followed, but there was no sense in thinking frightening thoughts and giving yourself a nightmare during the day. He had got enough of those at night: hands grabbing sticks raining sharp, hard blows on his back; a kick; a slap.

Without meaning to, he put his hand to his ear, as if he felt the slap now.

He looked round, but there was no one there. No one following him. People passing up and down the same path, but not following him. Or even looking at him.

He was observed, however. A sharp pair of eyes was watching Charlie from the window on the top floor of a tall, narrow old house that overlooked the Castle and its hill. 'Oh, I wish I could be there with him – there when the basket is opened,' came the muttered sentence.

Muttered, but audible to the woman sitting on the bed, unpinning her hair. She was not very young but still comely with pretty, fair hair curving in thick waves. These she fixed with hot tongs, but what was to know?

'Oh, go to ... You!' she said with irritation. 'I think you only come here to look out of the window.'

They knew each other well, these two; but it was not a continuous relationship. They met as it could be managed.

'Not just that, Dol,' said the man swinging round.

'Not just that; you too.'

Dol leaned back on the bed with a welcoming smile. She controlled her smile – not too wide. There was nothing personal about this restraint, it was just that she liked to make sure not all her teeth were on show. Some signs of age had to be hidden. Like a gap.

Just between herself and the wall, she wished he'd get all this over with and go; she did have other people in her life.

'Don't take advantage,' she said presently, half languorously, half sharply. 'Not of me.' She knew her way about men. But at times, she lost it.

'What a tongue you've got, Dol. You ought to watch it.'

'Just a little warning.'

Charlie marched up to where the soldiers stood at the guard box — which was what the boy called it to himself. One of the soldiers recognised him.

'You again.' He looked down at the basket. 'For the Major again?'

Charlie nodded.

'Well, take it up. You know the way.'

Charlie had been thinking of leaving the basket here, and then walking away. But now, faced with the soldier, whose face he did not like, it was not so easy. He was not a nervous boy, but he was certainly imaginative.

Little scenes darted in and out of his mind. Now, he seemed to feel the soldier digging his gun into his back to push him on. Or the soldier might open his mouth wide — and wider and wider. Charlie could almost hear the shouts and feel the soldier's hot breath on his own face.

Somehow this steadied him, because he knew that this scene was horrible, but not real; and horrors needed to be real to be truly frightening.

He did not put this into words, but he knew inside him that true horrors were solid and walked around this earth on two feet.

So he picked up the basket and laboured up the path. He certainly did know the way, and if he did

not, there was Major Mearns walking towards him, another man with him.

~~They were not looking at him, but talking quietly to each other. The legs they had been puzzling over had remained unburnt and unburied and were hidden in a wood store outside where they lived but they could not stay there long ...~~

‘We could get Mindy to help us. What do you think, Denny? No one knows the inner cellars and caverns of the Castle like she does ... We could bury the legs and no one would be the wiser ...’

Denny thought about it. ‘We would know.’

‘You’ve buried men before, Denny. This is just legs.’

‘Then where is the rest of him?’

Charlie spoke: ‘Please Sir.’

The Major looked down at him, recognising the boy. ‘This is for you, Sir.’

Charlie put the basket down before the Major.

Mearns looked from the basket to Denny. ‘You shouldn’t have said that, Denny. I think that Traddles is coming home to us in bits.’

Charlie stood there, waiting. Neither of the two men seemed to take in that he was there, or that he had carried the basket up a hill.

He had not been paid very much for his labour. Not enough.

Charlie stood there, legs apart, four square. He held out his hand.

‘Please Sir, I want some more.’

Chapter Three

The head stared up at them, eyes open but cloudy.

‘I knew it was a head inside that basket,’ said Denny.

‘Knew it at the first look. Round, heavy, what else could it be?’

A cannon ball, a load of coal, a piece of statuary?

The Major said nothing for a moment while he studied his undesirable and unwanted presence.

‘Where did the basket come from?’

‘From the fishmonger in Market Street. Joliffes ... He uses such to carry his fish around. He sells them when they get too smelly.’ He added gloomily: ‘Poor Traddles, dead like that and dished up like a stale fish.’

He looked accusingly at the Major. ‘He was a good soldier once. Think of him.’

‘I do think of Traddles,’ Mearns said. ‘But I also think of me. What have I done to deserve this for honour?’

Into the silence, he said: ‘I think it’s a case for Tosser.’ Denny looked doubtful. Tosser, as he knew him, was drinking more than ever. Not that Denny wondered at this or begrudged him the relief from his life.

‘He’s buried more than one body. Burnt as well, I daresay, other things too – ways we’d rather not think about,’ said the Major grimly, remembering a story about hungry dogs and rats. ‘And not on the battlefield like you and me. He can put this one to join ’em.’

One of Tosser’s jobs, although not his only one, was to manage the town mortuary – a task he performed silently but efficiently on his own lines; the dead were not allowed to inconvenience him. Rather otherwise – as a stiff arm could support a beaker of ale or a ham sandwich.

Denny shook his head. ‘You’d hate to leave even a dead body with Tosser.’

‘Which we are not about to do,’ Mearns reminded him.

Denny thought that the sad bits of a man that they had were worse. He had liked Traddles – not a good man, but honest in his way.

Tosser, the old villain, lived in one room in a house tucked away not far from the Castle. This room was squalid, but comfortable nonetheless. It made you realise, Denny thought, that the Major was right when he said, ‘Never underestimate Tosser; he is cleverer than he looks.’

‘Don’t bang on his door,’ ordered the Major. ‘Better to take Tosser by surprise.’

However, they were the ones to be surprised; Tosser was not alone.

A small, shabby figure was crouched by him, holding a beaker to Tosser’s lips while drinking from his own. A bottle by his side suggested that he had brought with him what they were drinking. Run Mearns thought, by the smell. Both men were well on the way to being drunk.

Tosser was drinking and at the same time stirring a pot on the fire. He was not pleased to see Denny and the Major.

‘Not at home,’ he said. ‘Only stew enough for two.’

‘We haven’t come to eat.’

Tosser gave a flourish with his wooden spoon so that a strong savoury smell floated out.

‘What is it you are cooking?’

Tosser thought for a moment. ‘Hare,’ he said.

‘That smell is never hare,’ put in the knowledgeable Denny. One of his army tasks had been to score

for food and then see it cooked. He would cook it himself if necessary. He and the Major knew the value of provender to the foot soldiers. The Cavalry could always eat horse — of which in any battle, victory or defeat, there were always a few dead around.

‘Rat, cat and squirrel for flavour,’ said Tosser with a rum-inspired giggle.

The Major looked at Denny, then studied the room. There was a bloodstained roll of newspaper in one corner that reminded him unpleasantly of what had come to him that morning.

‘I’ll cook *you* for flavour if you don’t tell me what you are up to,’ he said crisply.

Tosser’s little friend put down one of the drinks. ‘One of the King’s pheasants,’ he said.

The Major looked sceptical. Not a likely marksman, he thought.

‘Not shot, caught. They are tame.’ He stood up and introduced himself. ‘William Wisher.’

‘Willy Wish,’ said Tosser. ‘Old friend.’

‘Mearns,’ said the Major, giving Wisher a bow.

‘Ah, you got your parcel? I spoke to the young lad who was delivering it,’ Willy announced.

‘How did you know where it was going?’

‘Read it on the parcel: “To Major Mearns”. Did it say “with love”? I forget that bit.’

‘Do you indeed.’

‘Can read. Tosser can’t. I can. And write. Latin, French ...’ It sounded like Willy was beginning a list.

‘I *can* read and write!’ protested Tosser. ‘My name. No more indeed.’

The Major ignored Tosser; he wanted to draw more out of Willy. ‘Did you see who gave the basket to the boy?’

‘No,’ said Willy. ‘Didn’t see. The boy came from the Theatre though.’

‘He’ll be in trouble there then,’ said Tosser with an evil smile. ‘One or two down there are partial to lads.’

Willy shook his head. With a chuckle he said: ‘He knows how to deal — he knows how to deal!’

There was not much doubt what he meant. The Major turned away; he had his prudish side.

‘Tosser ... Outside if you please.’

Tosser considered, then stood up. ‘Willy, watch the stew and don’t let nothing burn.’ He handed the wooden spoon over to Willy.

Outside the door, he was less amenable with the Major. ‘You are getting on, old man; not so young as you were.’

The Major ignored the pleasantry. ‘I have something I want you to look after.’ Carefully, he handed over to Tosser the basket and a bundle — two bundles, in fact, bound together into one — they were the limbs that had been sent to the Major.

‘To bury?’ Tosser had performed this service before. Always charging, of course. Nothing came for free in Tosser’s world.

Except death. That very often came when you were not expecting it, in Tosser’s experience.

‘No, not yet; just to keep somewhere chill and quiet.’

‘It’s dead then.’ Tosser spoke with gloomy foreboding. ‘What is it then? A baby?’

‘Not exactly. No need to go into that. Just keep it safe for now.’ The Major turned to leave.

‘Not a baby, then,’ thought Tosser, meaning to open up the bundle and take a look inside as soon as he was alone with it.

‘Don’t dig into them, Tosser!’ called out Mearns over his shoulder as he left. ‘I shall know!’

Tosser was silent — and cross.

‘And if you do feel you must look, then wash your hands afterwards.’ Mearns warned.

‘You’re in a mood,’ said Tosser. ‘In love again, are you?’

‘I’m never in love.’

‘Saw Mindy with Felix down by the river.’ Tossler, no longer able to stay silent, was still cross. Major Mearns marched off with a straight back.

Tossler summed up the situation. ‘He’s jealous of Felix and Mindy. Know the signs,’ he said to Willy Wish. ‘Seen it before. Makes him bad tempered.’ He gave Willy a slap on the shoulder. ‘Let’s eat the stew, then have a look at what Mearns has left us.’

‘He won’t like it.’

‘Shan’t tell him. Thinks he can give orders, Mearns does.’

They ate quickly, both of them hungry and both curious to see what the Major had left with them.

‘Do you trust him?’ Willy Wish had his mouth full, but he got the words out.

Tossler thought about it. Finally he decided, ‘Well, you have to.’

‘You don’t think he’s killed someone?’

Tossler thought again. ‘He could have.’ He knew something of the Major’s military career (gossamer passed freely inside and then out of the Castle), and guessed what he would do to defend the King. ‘He’s a soldier.’

‘It’s his job? But not all the time and everywhere, Tossler.’ Willy was earnest. ‘Even soldiers can just kill.’

‘He works for the King in his Castle,’ said Tossler with the air of one explaining much.

Willy gave a nod. ‘Have you ever killed anyone, Tossler?’

Tossler considered what to say. ‘Not sure. Might have done. A fight. But I think he got over it. Think I saw him in the market.’

‘It was a man?’

‘You don’t kill women,’ Tossler said simply.

‘Oh.’ Willy considered again. He thought he could have killed a woman if he felt obliged to. ‘I think you are a nicer man than I am.’

Silently, the pair went outside to the courtyard where the parcels lay.

‘He wanted us to have them,’ said Tossler.

‘You do look after the dead.’

‘Only till they are buried ...and not in bits. It’s been years since we’ve looked after oddments. And then it was a suicide in the Great Park that the foxes got at.’

‘Let’s see what we’ve got.’

Silently and with some care, the two men unwrapped the bundles.

The legs came first; by this time the flesh was blue and swollen – decay had set in.

They stared, then passed on. You cannot, after all, identify a dead leg. One of the stray dogs that hung about the mortuary, forever in hope, began to howl.

Without a word between them, they went on to the round object in the basket, which proved no harder to undo.

The face stared back at them, swollen, stained with decomposition, the lips twisted. Willy did not know the features, so he turned to Tossler.

Tossler didn’t lose colour or show much emotion, but his expression showed fear. At least, Willy thought it was fear; it might just have been unhappiness.

‘It’s Traddles,’ whispered Tossler. ‘My friend Traddles.’

Willy crossed himself in a throwback to the habits of his childhood. ‘You know him?’

‘Traddles,’ repeated Tossler. ‘Would you say he was smiling, Willy?’

‘No.’ Willy had no doubt. ‘No, I wouldn’t.’ It would be worse if he were smiling. It was a death grimace – movement of the mouth as he died. But it was better not to say this to Tossler. He touched Tossler gently on the shoulder. ‘Come away, friend. I’ll wrap ...’ he hesitated for the right words. ‘What about him? the bits? ...What should he say? So he said nothing, but pushed away the hopeful dog, and got on.

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