

Dead Lurk
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ABSTRACT**Dead Lurk****Craig Sinclair**

This first section of *Dead Lurk* recounts the growing relationship between Sergeant Samuel Straw, a Victorian police constable from Scotland Yard, and Skelt Penningdenful, a journalist for the London paper, *The Chronicle*.

The gas has its secrets, and I happen to know them. The gas has a voice, and I can hear it—a voice beyond the rushing whistle in the pipe, and the dull buzzing flare in the burner....I know the secrets of gas, but not all of them.

PART ONE



PENNY GAFF

One

"The Devil," Straw cursed, when Inspector Fields stepped from a skiff of fog to block his entrance into the Whitehall Police Station. Seeing the Inspector seemingly appear from nowhere, Straw shuddered slightly, for though the Inspector was slight in stature, standing little more than five feet, he was a figure of menace; so knife-thin, so angular in face, it seemed his very touch could lacerate skin. This chthonic image, conjured by Straw's curse, was strengthened, as the London night was bitterly cold, yet Fields was not dressed in a heavy woollen coat, as was Straw. Rather he wore a black swell's suit and a grey slouch hat pulled tight to his eyes, and not once did he shiver.

"The Devil, eh Straw?" he said, his gaunt, whiskered face splitting into a thin smile.

"Bugger," Straw said beneath his breath and tried to step around, but the Inspector halted him by placing a grey-gloved hand on his chest.

At this touch, Straw snorted violently. Many men before who had touched him in such a fashion found themselves with cracked teeth and bloody mouths. The Inspector, however, seemed unconcerned.

"I shall show you worse than the Devil, Straw," Fields said.

"Oh?" Straw said, wishing no part of this man's mischief.

"Indeed, Straw. I shall write you up in the Default Book. How would you like that? Eh Straw? Let's say a fine of two shillings."

“For what offence?”

“Improper use of language with your superior. Now, shall I have you for more? Well, come on then...”

Straw kept silent.

“Nothing, eh?” said Fields, laughing sharply. “Still. An admonishment on your record. A trifle...a trifle, but they do add up. Makes it difficult for one to get back to his previous status.”

Straw looked at the Inspector’s unctuous face and then looked over his head. He didn’t want to give the bloody pox before him the satisfaction of seeing his pale, angry eyes.

Behind the station house, a horse whinnied violently.

“Come on, Straw. Do humour me,” Fields said, lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper, imitating Straw’s famously low voice, which had sent many rough men in many dark places silent. “Not even a ‘Bugger this’ or a ‘God’s blood that’? Come. Indulge me, Straw. Such colourful language you lowers bring into the station.”

Silent, not lowering his gaze, Straw watched his and Fields’ shadows flaring on the damp grey stones of the station’s walls behind them. Their black doubles raced and loomed and the shadow of a gaslight swung back and forth on its chain like an empty gallows’s rope.

“I will warn you once more, Sergeant. You will meet my eyes.”

“I said good evening to you, Sir.”

In the gaslight, Fields’ eyes glowed unearthly. “I shall see you suspended yet, Straw. How would that be with the wife?”

“Leave it be, Fields.”

The Inspector drew his breath in sharply. "Inspector. You will address me as Inspector. Remember that it's not me who has lost that title."

"Leave it be, then, Inspector. My wife is"—

"Sick, eh? Problems with the medicine. Has bad dreams does she?"

Bad. They were full of terror.

The doctor called them "Horrors" and prescribed a nightly dose of chloral. Five grains mixed in a glass of water. With gin if the water too fouled. But, even with the medicine, 'the Horrors' still came, and in the night, she shrieked and kicked at goblin men only she could see. Without the chloral, she would go to the madhouse. There could be no more fines. No more ink in the 'Default Book'.

The Inspector coughed.

Easy peasy, Straw thought and slid a large calloused hand down to the wide leather belt fastened about the waist of his greatcoat. His hand touched the worn handle of his truncheon.

The Inspector stepped back. A second later, however, his smirk returned. "Yes, come now, Straw. Have a swing. But if I was you, Straw, I would save my strength for tonight. Put your stick away."

Straw fingered the truncheon's fire-blackened wood. "I have little occasion to use my stick, Fields. Most nights, I needn't even draw it."

"Is that so, Straw? Eh?"

"It is. Those on the walk know me. It seems that now my size is enough. Though I've heard that some others, those lesser in leg, need its use," he said, gesturing with a nod to Fields small bone-thin frame and then to the truncheon

The Inspector's smirk flickered and quite nearly died but then once again leapt into a broad grin. "Ha!" he said. "Exactly, Straw. Exactly! Most nights! This is not most nights though. No, it's much better."

"More so than bumping into you, Fields."

"Oh Straw, but it is. I've had word you're to go to Rats' Castle."

Dear God's Blood, Straw thought, feeling a fast, palsied tick rising beneath his red-splotched cheek. Before he could help it, he raised a hand to his mottled pink cheek, hoping to soothe it. The glove leather cooled his skin and the tick subsided, but not before the Inspector had seen this sign of distress. His lips curled further.

"Much better than most nights, Straw. For it's tonight—this very hour that you're to go."

"The bugger I am."

"Straw you will remember your station. And oh, I think you are. I do indeed. But you didn't imagine that, eh Straw? Couldn't have imagined it? How many were we the last time there? You remember, eh Straw? With that fellow Dickens. Ten, twelve. Inspectors. Constables, too. And still dangerous."

Straw remembered. The choking black smoke, the stink of urine. The hard men with their gin-slopped eyes.

The Inspector laughed. "Memories, eh Straw? Eh? But back to the business at hand. Seems a writer from the *Daily Chronicle* wants a peek inside that criminal's den and you're to give him escort."

Straw was thunderstruck. "The magistrate's orders or yours?"

“Great God, Straw—mine, of course. And some say it’s not a large leap between Sergeant, fourth class, and Inspector but I don’t see it. A chasm if you ask me. Of course, you can refuse if you choose. Say the word.”

Refusal would see him charged with insubordination. It would see him a Constable for the remainder of his working days. Always at the snap of a younger man’s whip. His wife, hospitalized.

After a long hesitation, he undid the leather chinstrap of his spiked blue helmet and took it off, tucking it beneath a massive arm. “Right, then. What am I to do and which lads are to come with me?”

“Lads? Come now, Straw. Surely, a big strapping fellow such as yourself doesn’t need more than himself.”

“Alone? I’m to go alone?”

“Not so long in the leg now, eh Straw?”

The Inspector scoffed. “Alone. Good God no, Straw. As you’ve just heard, you’ll be joined by a journalist. Name’s Penningdenful. Meet him at the Dials at ten.”

Caution Straw. The bugger’s waiting for you to slip up. The two men locked eyes: the Sergeant looking down, the Inspector up, his grey slouch hat nearly sliding from the back of his head. Straw eyed the hat and suit with envy. Not so long ago, he’d worn similar. Now he itched in the rough Blue and Buttons.

“Well, Sergeant?”

“The bugger I will.”

“Well then, Sergeant. Your choice. Your choice.”

A moment later, the Inspector was gone, whistling into the night.

Two

In the cold distance outside, St Giles' clock chimed the hour of nine and hay-strewn streets were lit with blazing, streaming gas. Inside, however, the Whitehall station house was dark and dead but assumed a lurid shape when Straw struck a great Lucifer match and lit four short tallow candles fixed to his great oak desk by the deformed feet of their own wax. The station clock chimed, echoing the larger one outside. Straw stiffened. He would have to act quickly.

With a broad arm, he swept some daguerreotypes into a drawer and pulled out his writing implements—an albatross quill, a crisp sheet of paper, a squared inkbottle. He was about to write when a photograph caught his attention. It was the image of the bloody murderer, Tom Bowles. A madman with dark leering eyes, who'd yet to be lagged and taken in iron to the Steel. In truth, no one wanted to. Recently a Constable had tried and had died for it. Grimly.

Straw shuddered again. Drawing this photo was the same as drawing an unlucky card from a sharper's deck.

"Tom Bowles," he said, his voice echoing queerly in the empty station house. He returned the sepia image to the drawer face down. As an extra precaution, he slammed the drawer shut and locked it with a small key that he kept hidden within the curls of his red, unkempt beard—a trick he'd learned fifteen years ago when he'd run with the Bow Street Runners.

What a sight he must have been back then, sitting high on his black horse, his head covered with his tall, varnished hat, his tangled beard full of burning twigs as if he was some fiery character from the Penny Dreadfuls. To the varmints, he was Death himself. Death? More like a bloody cock-a-ninny of a young fool, he thought, taking the ground glass stopper from the inkbottle.

Dear Standown, he began and then paused, looking up for a second to watch the candle smoke twist into the shadowy darkness above. Before him, the paper was alive with light and shadow. The quill scratched on the page.

Dear Standown,

This evening, being the 30th of December, in the year 1842, I find the station curiously empty & I wondered, when I first stepped in, where you might be. I then remembered that you had been sent north by mail-coach, though I do not know the reason for it. The whereabouts of the other men I know & should I look for them I would find them brandy-eyed in some dank gin place.

He wrote quickly and fluidly, pausing only to let the ink dry.

The station clock has just now rung the quarter hour & I must be quick.

Tonight, John, I find myself in some fear for my life & I am now v. certain the Inspector wishes me dead. Though I have long suspected this, tonight, he has found the means to act & is sending me to Rats' Castle & this with not even a single other Constable ; though, as you know, my mate, ten would not be enough in that viper's nest.

Not alone?

I can almost hear you saying these words, John & there you have some truth of it: I am not to go alone. Not truly. It is much worse. I am to accompany & offer protection to a journalist from The Daily Chronicle, a Mr. Penningdenful.

Blast Fields' eyes!

These fellows of the quill do little other than attract every rascal for miles, endangering not only themselves but the lives of the blue brotherhood as well.

John, do you remember how it was when we escorted C. Dickens to the v. same place? The amount of villains, who came to see the man & be written into one of his sketches. It was worse than the Bengal Plague.

But now, Listen! Time ticks & I must come to my business, which is this: Should I suffer fatality or grievous bodily harm, please, on your honour, look after my wife & keep her from the workhouse. She won't have the chinks to help, as our savings have dried up, gone to pay for her sickness.

Yours,

Samuel.

When Straw was finished, he folded the letter into a manila envelope, which he sealed with a dab of brownish wax. He then delivered it to Standown's desk, hiding it beneath a bundle of constabulary reports tied together with rough string. Then, less than twenty minutes after entering the station, he was back over its threshold and into a night grown very dark.

Towards the Seven Dials he went—across damp hay-covered cobblestones, past windows lit by corpse candles, through a labyrinth of threatening streets, fast, fast, the entire time his great oak-trunk legs pumping him forward so quickly the tails of his mighty greatcoat flapped in the dark behind.

Three

Skelt Penningdenful was sitting on the small bed of his low lodging room, writing his latest sketch—*On the way to Millbank Prison*—when a knock on the door came, frightening him.

At another knock—tap, tap—he lifted his writing desk, a piece of wood stretched across his thin, sharp knees, and lowered it to the floor. He did this carefully so as not to spill any ink. Satisfied, he walked two short paces that separated him and his iron-cot from the door.

“You Punningdan-fal?” a small, dull-eyed boy said, standing before him with a letter raised in his hand. Without asking, he pushed his way into the room. “Come on, you are or you ain’t,” the boy said when Skelt didn’t answer immediately.

Steel yourself, Penningdenful.

“Yes. And it’s Mr. Penningdenful.”

“Well covey, here’s a letter from Mr. Lloyd. Said you were to have it quick.”

Skelt reached for the letter but just as the tips of his thin fingers touched it, the boy snatched it back.

“What’s the idea?” he said.

“The idea covey, the idea is that you’re to pay a ha’penny for my services.”

“I didn’t ask for it.”

The boy’s eyes twinkled with malevolent pleasure. “It’s all the same to me, covey. I’ll let my father know you refused it.”

Father? Lloyd’s son?

Skelt reached into his pocket. When the boy had left, Skelt returned to his cot, suddenly struck with a growing sense of dread. Sitting, he pulled at the envelope’s red wax seal. The letter inside had the smell of brimstone.

Dear Mr. Penningdenful,

This very evening, word has arrived that our estimable competition, The Times, is sending a man to make a sketch of a rough bar known as Rats’ Castle.

My sources tell me he will go tomorrow evening.

As you know, we at The Chronicle believe that the darker domains of this city belong to us and our writers; hence, you, Mr. Penningdenful. In plain fact, we cannot afford to let other papers write on those aspects that keep our readers ours. If we do this, finances will suffer and I will, unfortunately, have little in pocket from which to pay your wages.

So, Mr. Penningdenful, if you are to keep my payment, I want you to proceed in a vigorous fashion to the Seven Dials this evening. At precisely ten of the clock, you will meet a Sergeant Straw at the intersection of Lion and Little Andrew.

I've been assured by his better, Inspector Fields, that the Sergeant will escort you to that place and offer his protection until you have made sufficient notes of that infamous crook's den—Do not keep him waiting!

Now, Mr. Penningdenful—Remember: Our readers want titillation: To sit with murderers, to hear the snap of the hangman's rope, to walk the dark streets with the Swell-Mob.

You Are Not, Mr. Penningdenful, to forget that The Daily Chronicle has hired you to provide this type of fearful excitement, and only this!

I will warn you again. There shall be no more sketches about sweeping boys, flower girls, or the victims of fires (unless set with malicious intent, of course). No more! Besides, the city has its Sala and its Dickens and many more who, frankly, have the skill to bring such pedestrian things to life. Leave to them, Mr. Penningdenful, the baker boys and Duff-sellers, if they want them.

I must inform you, again, Mr. Penningdenful, (or call it a reminder if you will, if that sits better with your nervous disposition) I must remind you of your role as a hired writer for this paper—the writing and delivery of sketches as I see fit—and if I do not see the sketch asked for in tomorrow's paper, which means by 3 a.m. on the sub editor's desk, I will assume you can (and most certainly will) do without my purse.

I mean this most sincerely,

Owner and Editor-In-Chief of The Daily Chronicle.

Edward Lloyd.

Before reading the letter a second time, Skelt Penningdenful watched the bluish smoke of his candle collecting against his small smoke-blackened window. In his mind's eye, the smoke took shape, and there was Lloyd sitting in his Fleet Street office, reclined in his embroidered chair, his back to the hearth. Alive. The room was alive with thin racing shadows, but Lloyd's long, gaunt face was in darkness. Then, his head was thrown back in laughter: hack...hack...hack.

Four

The truth was, Skelt Penningdenful was a puppet attached to the strings of Lloyd's dark whims and he needed to free himself, for Lloyd was a dangerous keeper, a dark master who sent Skelt to the darkest crevices of London with no concerns for Skelt's safety—an opium den in Shadwell, a sailor's den near Madame Toussaud's. To Lloyd, these

excursions were exciting expeditions he envied Skelt for. He said once: "Remember Penningdenful, there's no fame without danger. Write it in blood if you have to, so long as it is writ."

And lately, these "little adventures," as Lloyd called them, had started to bear fruit: the readership of *The Daily Chronicle* went up, markedly, on the days Skelt submitted a sketch; and so too, in consequence, did the danger of the assignments. Already he'd been nearly garrotted in Wapping, shanghai'd on the Adelphi docks and, on one harrowing night, chased by starved-eyed children, who appeared from the river mud like wraiths. It was only time, he knew, before one of these "little adventures" would end with his life. As George Augustas Sala had said, The yawning mouth of the graveyard can always yawn wider.

He put his note journal into his pocket, dreaming of a time when he wouldn't have to fill its pages with such dark things. Outside his lodging house, he found Hyde Street curiously empty and touched with an air of threat. He could not say why, other than that when he nodded at some men, who were on their way to the shops and stalls of the Haymarket, they refused to return his gesture in kind. Instead, they fixed their gin-wet eyes on him and glared until he walked off.

When he stopped and examined himself in the lead framed plate-glass of a gin palace, he was not surprised at their hostile reception. Diseased. They took me for diseased, he thought, seeing how corpse-white his skin had become. Too long had he been living like a maggot in the dark, writing, always writing.

At least he could fix his sandy hair before meeting the Sergeant.

In the glass, he watched himself lick a palm and pat his tussled sandy hair flat to the sides of his head. From a front pocket, he took a black Kingsman and mopped dirt and flecks of ash from his thin, moustached face before returning it to his coat, which glowed a bottle green in the gaslight that streamed and flared from the Haymarket behind him.

9:30—a church bell rang and his heart lurched in his chest.

He hadn't realized the hour's lateness—*Do not keep him waiting*—and pushed his way hurriedly through the market towards the Seven Dials, nearly deaf to the proliferating market shouts that came from all directions. He stopped once when he heard a man shouting that he had an 'authen-tick gallows' confession for sale. "From this very evening mind you," the confession seller said to a gathering crowd.

Skelt moved on, but faint the distance behind still heard the seller tell the crowd that there weren't "Naught in a hanging but a wry neck."

"And a pair of wet britches," someone yelled back, inciting a burst of vulgar laughter.

Superior and unkind, the laughter reminded him of Lloyd. Oh, Dear God! How could he cut himself free? How? How? How? Already, he'd tried to write for other papers, tried to write what he, himself, wanted: sketches about the ordinary but universal moments of daily life; but every time he submitted one, even with a *nom de plume*, he received the same prompt replies—*Sorry, not interested*. Replies so prompt, he wondered if his sketches had even been read.

And always, the very next day, Lloyd would show up.

Five

How many?

How many strings beside his own were attached to Lloyd's long fingers? This thought had so preoccupied him he hadn't realized he was being followed, not until the figure behind coughed again. And then he heard the footsteps.

"Listen, you won't have an easy go with me," he called out.

Silence.

"Do you hear me? I can fight."

He was alert now, his eyes fixed on the narrow road before him—a street from a nightmare vision, long and narrow with dead shop windows and no other souls to be seen.

"Go on then," a rough voice finally replied. "Go on and turn then you little mandrake, and save us the walk."

Us?

With one there might have been a chance. Now, he would have to make a run. To where, he didn't know, everywhere looked bleakly the same, dark and unwelcoming. He supposed he could dash ahead, hope to find the Sergeant waiting for him—but if he wasn't? He eyed a side lane, but it seemed so narrow he was afraid that should he try it, he might get stuck between the two cabining brick walls.

Closer, another cough.

Skelt increased his pace to a jog, and the sound of his boots striking the cobblestones echoed back from the surrounding buildings, mostly low French shops. For some reason, this sound, and those behind, awoke a verse in his head:

*Like one who on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread, and having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.*

He wished he hadn't thought of it. These lines only served to tighten his heart, and like the traveler at the end of the verse, he dared not look behind him, not because he was pursued by some otherworldly fiend but because he might trip and stumble to the ground, which he nearly did when he heard ahead of him the short, sharp trill of a guttersnipe.

Towards him, a man broke from the darkness.

Skelt angled sharply to the left and made his way towards an opening between two decayed buildings, conscious, when he stole a quick look over his shoulder, of how slowly and controlled this new man followed. So leisurely, he could have been out for a stroll in the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens. When Skelt was almost swallowed by the dark, narrow mouth of the alley, a voice called to him:

“Go in that black jaw, Sir, and you shall be like a motherless cub with all of your miseries yet to come.”

Six

When Sergeant Straw saw the buggering fool was about to run pell-mell into a dead lurk, he thought, Oh lad, there will be no helping you, if you do. No help at all. Still, fool or

not, it was his duty to save and so cupped his large hands to his mouth and called to the man a second time:

“On your life, Penningdenful, do not go into that Dead Lurk.” His low voice rumbled through the night’s stillness. But whether or not Penningdenful heard him—who else would walk such an unsavoury street alone—the men following him certainly had. At his voice, they wheeled. “Bloody Christ.” He’d been hoping that at his voice they would have run. They came instead. Melting in and out of the night, they formed themselves into a wedge. A big man taking the lead. “This one’s ours,” the he called out. “Now fly back into the night you. Or we’ll surely effing do for you.”

He took a step forward.

Like a man not wanting to excite his dogs before the rats were dropped into the pit, Straw moved very slowly, and when he lowered his hand to his belt and drew his truncheon, he did it quietly, quickly.

“Yes. Run yourself off,” another said. “For if we lose our mark it’ll be you, gov’nor—you that is hurt. You understand me?”

This man took a step forward and so did his fellow. Now all three were in a line, facing Straw. He waited for their rush, wishing he’d lit his lantern this evening, but he’d been too anxious about the dangers of this rookery to light it, running it ‘dark’ instead, to avoid attention, to stop the moths gathering at the flame.

Still—by his helmeted silhouette—the men should have made him by now, that he was a London Constable. Yet times were desperate. Authority weak. Then, by pure luck, the lead man turned his head in such a fashion that Straw saw the dark outline of his face

and the deformed chin that belonged to it. He laughed. A cold and grim sound without warmth or humour.

“Come closer, lads,” he said. “It’s Sergeant Straw and, my lovelies, I know each one of you.”

What Straw said was true; he knew these three: they were brothers, the last of a great family of varmints moved by Straw’s helping hand on that great migration westward to New South Wales. A cousin or two, once or twice removed, had not gone that far, opting for that land occupying the front of Newgate: the scaffold where they were welcomed with the silk of Jack Ketch’s rope about their necks and a growing wetness down their legs.

“A bit of fun, Sergeant,” one of the men said. “The lads having a lark, Sir. No harm done. No harm done.”

If it wasn’t as dark as oblivion, Straw knew he would see the men wide eyed, their tongues wetting suddenly dry lips, their manner turned toadying, fawning, simpering.

He spat. “Off with you then. Or I’ll see you buggering lot shipped for your fun.”

“God bless,” one said and then all of them turned and ran. Straw watched them go.

Ink disappearing into ink.

Seven

When Straw saw the cock-a-dandy he’d just saved walking towards him, dressed in a green flash jacket, replete with a handkerchief tucked in his front pocket—the blasted

size of it—he decided to busy himself with lighting his lantern and thereby hide his frustration. A second later, an opaque yellow light spilled from the bull’s eye onto the boot-blackened cobblestones.

“Thank god,” the man said when he got closer. “They almost had me.” He stopped, noticing the uniform. “Sergeant. What good fortune.”

“Not for me,” he mumbled, too softly for the journalist to hear him. Then he unhooked the lantern and ran its flooding light over the man. He spat in disgust. The blasted Beau-Brummel would bring them ruin dressed like that.

“Skelt Penningdenful,” Skelt said, holding out his hand.

Straw examined the thin white hand and then raised his gaze to inspect the man’s thin red lips for the tale-tell sign of character defect, criminal or mental. When he saw they had the right thinness but lacked the downward curve at the corners, he grunted.

There was a long pause and then Skelt lowered his hand, un-shook.

“A blasted night to be out on the street, Penningdenful.”

“Quite. I’m afraid those ruffians nearly had me. They would have been rather disappointed, however, finding me a very poor victim. I think I’ve only a few pennies to my name,” he paused, about to say something else. Instead, he drew forth his handkerchief and mopped at his brow in a cool fashion.

In the lantern light, the kerchief’s gold threads twinkled like small rivers of fire.

Straw watched for a moment. “That foolish fop’s tool you’re wiping your noggin with, Sir, would’ve been more than enough for many of the likes around here to murder you.”

The black cloth stilled. “Murder? For this? Come now, you jest?”

“I am not, Mr. Penningdenful, a humorous man. The doctor says I’ve too much of the black bile for that disposition. And a life around here, Mr. Penningdenful, might be as cheap as a couple of shillings.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Do you indeed?”

“As you’ve my name, Sergeant. I take it you know who I am?”

Straw looked towards the alley. In the lantern light, it looked as inviting as a diseased mouth. “Had you walked into that place, Mr. Penningdenful, you would not have walked out.”

The journalist followed Straw’s gaze. The whites of his eyes glowing as sickly and as wet as a March hare’s. “Then I am lucky, Sergeant, that you were here.”

“That you are. Your life, Mr. Penningdenful, has tonight been saved by coincidence, nothing more.”

“Oh?”

“Oh, indeed. Of a truth, Mr. Penningdenful, even armed with a knife in one hand and a barker in the other, I wouldn’t go in such a place alone. A blind alley you would have found, a dead lurk. And more men waiting.”

“But your duty, Sergeant?”

“Aye?”

“Is it not to protect the citizens of London?”

“Protection—there you have the truth of it. But not at all costs, Mr. Penningdenful. Not at the risk of my life or any other. Not anytime some idiotic fellow of the quill

wishes to leave the safety of his district and come here or to Shadwell, or to so and such a place, just so he can record what he wants and invent the rest.”

“Is that what you think—we invent?”

Straw looked at the dark *flâneur* grimly. “I’ve read your puffs before,” he lied. To say a truth, his reading didn’t go much beyond penny liners. His wife had the culture.

The journalist opened his mouth then clamped it shut. He took a breath. “I am grateful you have saved me, Sergeant, grateful you have rescued me from some dire fate. Truly, I am, but I am confused by your hostility. Do you know me other than my ‘puffs’?”

“Not a whit. Other than you are a fellow who, by coming here dressed like a Swell, has brought great danger upon himself.”

“But...er”—

“A fellow who will bring a damned sight more if he doesn’t soon hide that bugging wipe.” Straw gestured to the handkerchief hanging limply in Skelt’s pale hand. “No I don’t know you, but I know your type. It’s enough.”

Eight

“Come,” was all Straw said to the journalist before wheeling and striding south into the darkness before him, moving himself quickly along the weak yellow wedge of light that his lantern cut into the darkness before him. The click of the journalist’s Nancy boots rat-tat-tatted on the cobblestone behind.

After a few minutes at this pace, he could hear the journalist gasping, and when he looked over his shoulder, he was rewarded with the sight of the man trying to disguise his run as a walk. The silly bugger. Write that in your papers.

Soon the two of them were at an intersection of seven equally bleak, crooked and dark streets—the Seven Dials. Here Straw stopped and waited. A second later, the journalist struggled up, wheezing and panting, but no worse for wear.

“Whew. For such a large man you can fairly gallop along,” Skelt said, unbuttoning his coat, revealing a waistcoat shot with yellow threads. “Well, which way now, Sergeant? Which way to Rats’ Castle?”

For an answer, Straw swung his lantern to the right, lighting a small brick building and some decrepit stairs leading up to a mean, filthy door. Long ago, its walls had been whitewashed but now everywhere dark patches showed through. It almost seemed a tomb.

“There, Mr. Penningdenful. We shall go there.”

“Oh?” the journalist said with surprise. “I’ve never seen Rats’ Castle but I thought it would be... different, bigger.”

“It is, Mr. Penningdenful. It is. But I figured in there you’d have something good for your puff”—

“Look...er”—

“Hold your thought but a moment, Penningdenful,” Straw said, raising a large hand. “In through that door you’ll find low lodgers as white and as many as maggots. A den of filth such as you’ve never seen.”

“But I don’t want”—

“The lodgers in that place, Penningdenful, sleep on a floor covered with muck and an inch of urine. It is as bleak a sight as any in God’s world. The Devil himself couldn’t dream of such horrors.”

Skelt looked at the building. He had seen many such places. The other day, he’d been in a squalid place where the truly desperate paid a couple of pennies to lean against a rough and knotted twine rope stretched across a foul room that stopped them from falling onto the lucky ones who slept on the floor.

“An image to print without a doubt, Sergeant,” the journalist said, raising his hand up in a gesture of placation. “But I was informed... Well, it was written in a letter that I was to have an escort to Rats’ Castle—that it was arranged.”

“Now Penningdenful. About that...”

“Sergeant?”

“Listen, Mr. Penningdenful. Rats’ Castle is oft filled with very hard men. Much worse than”—

“I am no neophyte. You may not think it to look at me Sergeant, but I’m not. Here, have a look,” he said, starting to unbutton his waistcoat. “I’ll show you where a sailor in Wapping ran a docking hook up my chest.”

Straw worked to keep his face grim. “I do not doubt your courage, Sir. But where we are going is much worse than the Wapping Docks. My uniform in that place might be like meat to flies. Go see that place there,” he said, pointing a thick finger towards the lodging house. “Record what you want in your book, and go home.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. You have a choice, Mr. Penningdenful.”

“No, I don’t: I would be dismissed. My employment, my means—gone. No. I am chained to this place. My sketch lies there.”

Straw, too, was tied to the same chain, though he didn’t let it show. He shrugged his massive shoulders. “What’s a life anyway?”

Nine

When Skelt had told the Sergeant of his predicament—that he would lose his financial means of support if he did not write a sketch of Rats’ Castle—he had sensed a softening in the hard shell of that man’s demeanour, for the bearded man who had not so far smiled and who’d barely acknowledged his presence set a much more reasonable pace when they resumed their march.

Now, Skelt needed only to trot to keep up, and he was desperate to do so, for even though the night around him was so eerily quiet, marked only with the occasional rough shout or call to break the stillness, he could sense figures moving just beyond the lantern’s reach.

Twice he whirled, thinking himself followed. Twice the Sergeant wheeled with him, muttering a ‘bugger this’ or a ‘bugger that’ each time, but his lantern revealed nothing other than a small empty yellow oval in the darkness.

This emptiness disturbed Skelt and inside, some deep fear flopped and turned and fluttered upwards towards his thin lipped mouth like a dying butterfly. When the Sergeant

broke the stillness to comment on the night's threatening strangeness, this fear gave voice in a yelp.

"Steady your bugging self, Mr. Penningdenful. I find your anxiety infectious."

Skelt coughed and then coughed again. He was trying to make it seem like the yelp was only a sound he made while clearing his throat.

The Sergeant looked at him with a smile on his face that said, Don't bother Penningdenful. I've already got you pegged for a Nancy. Then he gave his look a voice, "I've seen men, Penningdenful, strung too high on the hangman's rope who were less twitchy than you, and believe you me, those men danced well."

Skelt had been to a hanging, once, and he still remembered, all too well, the jerking kick of the hanged man's boot and how afterwards the hangman slapped the corpse on its back until it spun on the gallows' rope. Then, Jack Ketch stopped it and worked the corpse's jaw like a ventriloquist's puppet, making it speak and answer rude questions called up by the crowd, like some nightmare parrot. The crowd loved it, felt morally vindicated to love it.

"Tell me Sergeant, haven't you ever been scared?" Skelt said, turning his thoughts away from such a macabre remembrance. "Here, in such a rough quarter, I mean. Don't you worry of being attacked or killed?"

All of his concentration was now on the broad shouldered man beside him. It was time to start working.

"A constant dread, I have," the Sergeant answered. "A constant dread. And each night, I pray to Saint Francis I shall make it home in the morning."

"But surely a fellow as big as yourself"—

“It’s the pack of wild dogs that brings down the bear, Mr. Penningdenful.”

Straw looked at the size of the man, how the buttons on his greatcoat threatened to come off. “But by God what a wounded bear you must be.”

Skelt waited for a reply, but none was forthcoming. He had gotten all he could—for the moment—from the barrel-chested man who seemed to walk one unrecoverable step ahead of him.

The Sergeant offered no more, and Skelt knew there would be no more sharing. He knew this with such a solid assurance that he would place money on it. It was his life’s occupation to know such things. It was his life’s occupation to get the particularizing inner details from his subjects that said, Reader if you only knew this or that about so and so then you would know what drives him forward to say the things he does or make the choices he makes. It was his life’s work to expose the inner clockwork and show the reader how the cogs turn into one another.

For the briefest of moments, Straw had opened up on his own accord. Now, he was closed fast, but the one piece of information he’d shared was enough. Skelt shivered to think that as big and as brutal as the Sergeant was, he walked the streets in a ‘constant dread’.

Suddenly, the three pounds Lloyd would pay for the sketch he was to do seemed a pittance, a trifle for a fool. Again, in his mind’s eye, he saw Lloyd in his darkened chair, laughing.

And, when they entered into an alley so narrow that Skelt was forced to move in behind the Sergeant and away from the comfort of the lantern light, he sensed things were to get worse.

In and around dim corner after dim corner they twisted until he soon found himself hopelessly lost; and once, when coming to a place where the alley branched like a nest, Straw seemed lost as well, back-stepping and nearly crushing Skelt with his large Hessian boots. "Back-up Penningdenful," was all he said.

But as they chose another narrow lane, he realized the Sergeant wasn't lost. He had changed his route because he didn't wish to disturb a band of old women and men who had set up a makeshift camp in the squalor of the narrow lane-way. In the brief moment that Skelt saw them exposed in the lantern light, he noticed these inhabitants were little more than skin and hacking coughs. Just as he was about to ask about these people, the Sergeant looked over his shoulder, his face a shadowy oval.

"Night-walkers, Mr. Penningdenful. Those without house, home or dirty cot."

Skelt pulled out his notebook.

"Penningdenful, I'd rather you didn't make notes."

"Oh?"

"Not on the subject of me anyway."

Skelt obliged and put the book away. In truth, he knew all about the 'night-walkers.' Indeed, it was hard to find a night sketch that didn't have a mention of these folks: the damned without skill, wandering bones without even the damned strength to do the unskilled.

Like most journalists, Skelt was a jack-of-knowledge and knew something of England's vagrancy laws. In his own experience, he had seen the homeless wanderers shooed off like flocks of troublesome birds and he had followed them, notebook in hand, to where they settled a few streets away, until shooed again.

“Are you not required by the law, Sergeant,” he asked, “to move these people along or charge them with vagrancy? Could you not, by law, be reprimanded?”

In truth, he didn't expect an answer, for an affirmative would be an admittance of dereliction, but after a long pause, the Sergeant replied:

“This is not to go in your book or your paper.”

Skelt nodded, glad his eyes were in shadow. “My word. You have my word.”

“The law needs discretion. Too often, the worker is blamed when it is the machine that is at fault. With these folks, if no harm is done, they should be let alone. There are many, those who run the machinery, who should be lagged in their place.”

The Sergeant took a breath and it seemed that he would continue. Instead, he resumed walking, his great shoulders brushing dust from the alley walls, which drifted behind into Skelt's eyes. *Had the social geographer Henry Mayhew been a London Constable, he would later write, his name might have been Sergeant Straw.*

Ten

“We found him the next day, Penningdenful, deep underground,” Straw said.

He was telling Skelt the story of a murdered Constable. “Yes, deep. Very dank and blackly dark, Mr. Penningdenful, and when we found him, it was too late: he'd been drowned in a cesspool. Bloated he was when I finally found him. Bloated and gnawed by rats. Very grim.”

“Whatever was he doing?”

“He was in pursuit of a pretty rough character. A fellow by the name of the Bludger Bowles. Of course, that wasn’t his Christian name. It was Tom, and having been to the Steel once he didn’t fancy going back, so he slipped underground when the Constable nearly had him by the neck kerchief.”

“Underground? If he went down into a cellar wouldn’t it have been a simple matter to hold him there and wait for reinforcements?”

“Aye, you have some sense to you, Penningdenful, but not here in the Dials. This whole district and all the way to St Giles’ church is connected roof, wall and cellar.”

Skelt shivered, imagining himself in the dark, lost.

“Some call it the Thieves’ Highway,” Straw continued. “But underground—God’s blood. Pray you never find yourself there.”

“Dangerous is it?”

“Dangerous? Humbugger your ears, Penningdenful. As I have just said, you must pray you never find yourself there.”

“You went to retrieve the body?”

“Private. He was a private. I can’t remember his name. Wasn’t around long enough to have one, I suppose. Alone he was. Alone. That was before we started walking such districts in twos.” He paused and spat. “Tonight’s an exception.”

“Indeed.”

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

“Indeed, Mr. Penningdenful. But I wouldn’t want to go under again. Not without an army. The place was dark. A blasted nether place filled with hard men with hard eyes. I was with some others so we were mostly safe. But alone. And the eyes, shining in the

lamp light. That's what I remember. The eyes, as if they had corpse candles burning in them. But not the privates' eyes. When we pulled him up—we found him with his head bobbed into a black pool thicker than tar; the criminals, Mr. Penningdenful, are very fond of setting traps down—when we found him his eyes were cemented shut with black sewer filth. Once when I was a child at the fair we stuck our heads in barrels of water to pull up quinces with our teeth. It were like that. Like he was bobbing for quinces in some dark hell. But we got him up and out. Later, it took the division surgeon to pry them open, and even then, they didn't shine. They didn't do nothing, as they'd been took out."

The Sergeant laughed, startling Skelt. He made a prying gesture with his thumb.

"Pop and the eyes come out."

Skelt raised a hand up to his face. "They took his eyes."

"So it would seem. Like I said before Mr. Penningdenful—hard men. Though I'm sure you know this, in some places, violence is more a currency than the pennies jingling in your pocket."

Skelt had an inkling, for he'd seen such a simian law at work when at Millbank Prison. There he had been told that whatever respect a fellow had on the outside could only be kept on the inside through the might of his arm and his willingness to be more violent than his fellows.

The Sergeant had trailed off into silence, but not before telling him how he had once followed an underground passage that went all the way to the place where they now headed. The Sergeant had opened a trap to discover himself behind the bar in Rats' Castle.

Once there, Skelt would have a look. This for the sake of his sketch:

And then Dear readers, I slipped down into such a foul, terrifying darkness that I dare not explain it to you in case I should stop your heart with fear.

He would not, of course, if he found the trap, go all the way. He did not have that type of courage.

Indeed, he barely had the courage to continue following Straw through the narrow corridor they now inched along. But just when the tight walls seemed about to squeeze the last shallow breaths from his lungs, the alley opened up and he found himself standing on a narrow street, gazing across it at a massive hulk of a building made from crumbling greyish black stone. Skelt had the impression he was looking at an enormous gravestone from another time, and it was.

Long ago, in the time of Matilda, it had housed lepers and madmen, and as Skelt approached closer, he imagined their pale decayed faces poking past cracks in the building's boarded windows. He felt their pale eyes, looking down, measuring him for some unnameable purpose.

But they weren't going to where the mad and sick were once chained. They were going into the basement where men in the past had been allowed a final drink before being hanged on the Tyburn tree.

"Ay, that's the Castle," the Sergeant said, as the two of them walked closer. With a motion of his hand, the Sergeant signalled Skelt to stop. He then checked that his truncheon was secured in his belt and then he fixed his grey-blue eyes on Skelt. "Now listen, Penningdenful. I won't fault you if you wish to back away. There'll be no dishonour in it."

Skelt hesitated. "No, Sergeant though I wish it were other, it's Rats' Castle I've come to sketch."

The Sergeant raised a bushy red eyebrow, but beyond this gesture, he said nothing; he didn't need to, for Skelt's own thoughts were saying it for him: *A bloody fool you are Penningdenful. A bloody Tom fool.*

Eleven

30th December 1842

Straw,

If this poor piss of a cat scratch ain't given me up already as the bloke who's scribbling these letters, it's your mate John Standown, and if yer cannot remember him, well then, he's the feller who's been sent across the whole bloody bollocking expanse of England chasing phantoms that our lovely Inspector Fields invents on account I am yer good mate.

"No Inspector," I tell him. "Not by one bloody drop of God's blood, I ain't."

"For Lo Inspector Fields, what would I want a do something like that for, for ain't there more sense in one of my horses legs than in all of Straw's misshapen head?"

And here, Samuel, is the pissing lark of it all; he says to me, "It weren't for nothing PRIVATE CONSTABLE STANDOWN THAT I WAS MADE INSPECTOR." Or some such thing.

**** I write 'em letters big like that 'cause that's how he said 'em. **** And redder in the face than a carriage driver's ass.

Now, as you know, Straw my mate, the tit's right; it weren't for nothing. It were to be a bleedin' gnat on my effing backside.

Evidence: no sooner had I got in the doors of the station this evening and read your letter when I found I was to be leaving on the next half-hour with the Inspector himself.

Where? To Sussex we are to go. And this on the account of coiners or bond forgers or some other cow's dribble. Not even am I allowed the time or courtesy to scrape the country muck from my broad boots.

Oh, the Inspector he did come, he did come!
And he looked so bloomin' glum
He can kiss my bloody bum,
Blast his eyes!

Still, the munny keeps me in spirits but I fear that's what's got me involved in this blooming mess in the first place – the drink. The drink – a dram of brandy, or a dozen's dozen more than my muddled brain could make proper sense with that night in the King and Cudgel.

Do you remember it, Samuel?

It were the night we were celebrating the solving of the Susan Lambeth poisoning case that this animosity between the Inspector and ourselves began.

Do you remember that woman? Oh, pure evil she was. Later, a month after the day of our celebration, I remember seeing her on the drop, Samuel, cool as brass she was. No shakes. No weeping. And when the parson asked her for a gallows confession, all she said were, "Innocent I am and fer that I 'ates yer one and all."

Never, even to this bleedin' day, have I seen a crowd go dumb and they did, even when she dropped and began her dance. Struck silent they were. Perhaps, they believed her.

Sometimes, however, I believe that her poison somehow mixed with the Inspector's blood.

But whatever it was, it were the night of the celebration that the Inspector decided he had it in for me and still does, even though I didn't mean no lasting harm to the name and honor of his wife's

reputation. But when I saw her that night getting a
nit too friendly with you – shame! Samuel – I
shouldn't have encouraged the lads to sing that silly
babe's rhyme:

Goosey, goosey gander,
where do you wander?
Upstairs and down stairs
And in my ladies chamber

But I know it now, Samuel, that it weren't the
song that set the Inspector's teeth in a rage but the
goosey actions that me and the lads made to go along
with it. Thumbs up. Thumbs down. And so on.

Now, I dare not even crook an elbow when the
Inspector's around, lest he writes me into his Default
Book for rude and vulgar behavior unbecoming a
servant of the Queen.

But Samuel, and here I make a gesture that could
see my life difficult if the Inspector saw this
letter, some of the cock-a-hoop I made that night were
because I was angry.

Fuming, Straw, for Everybody knew, including the
Devil himself, that it were YOU and not the Inspector
who figured the woman's design. That she were
poisoning with arsenic her husband and her young mite
of a daughter, too.

And everyone knows that it were YOU not the Inspector who found that great amount of flypaper from which the arsenic came from shoved down the back privy, though it were ME who shoved my arm elbow deep into that barrel of shit and piss to pull it out.

A Constable 's bloody lot I tell myself. A Constable 's bloody lot.

I kept a clipping of the headline from The *Illustrated Police News*. And the drawing too. The rest were about you and found its way to the privy.

CASE OF DARK MURDER

SOLVED BY

DETECTIVE STRAW!!



But, Samuel, I weren't the only one left sorer than a hammered thumb. The Inspector, himself, weren't, I believe, struck too kindly with the fact

that it were you not him who brought the case to its conclusion.

But Lo Samuel: I hear the bastard now. Ah, there he is, outside the window walking about with his riding leathers already chapped-on. The silly duck-legged bastard.

Proputty, proputty, proputty

Dosn't thou 'ear my 'erse's legs, as they canter awa-ay?

Proputty, proputty, proputty -that's what I 'ears 'em sa-ay

Well Samuel, to use yer expression, Bugger him. Now, if it ain't obvious, I read yer letter and as I did I was thinking - Now here's a lad with an imagination that's gone a bit Bedlam.

Yet, I did get a rise and a chuckle from it, and thought it a bit of the old penny gaff you was writing. It were very grim indeed.

This evening, being the 30th of December, in the year 1847, I find the station curiously empty..

Very grim. Very grim, indeed, you cock's wallop. I confess, however, I did whistle - loud enough that Constable Meiklejohn who was picking his nose beside me put

down his Paris engraving, *tous nue. Tout seul dans la forêt sombre* – and looked at me until I told him to mind his adjectival business.

Oh, straight through me teeth I whistled when you told me you were escorting ~~some-writer~~ some writor fellow to the Castle on the order of Fields and that you were to go alone. Besides this above feller, of course.

Two things I thought then.

First Inspector Fields took that night in the King and Cudgel in a manner deadly serious and did not share in any of the joking and that he “‘ates yer” worse than the King of Prussia.

He must to send you on such a horse’s arse of an assignment. Yes, I think he wants you jiggered.

The second thing I thought was yer letter were an effing bad black joke and that you were stretching my legs pretty hard.

Samuel: it’s madness–madness!–to go into that place just yerself. No, not even that cock-a-hoop would do something so stupid.

But then I remembered how deadly earnest you took yer oath to Queen and Country and how if you were

Ordered into the flames of hell, you'd be the first to rush in.

But Samuel, if it ain't a joke, then yer charge to look after yer wife, Margie – well, I take it most seriously and in the eyes of St Michael I give you my word and my oath to do as you have asked:

I, being of the Christian name, John Standown, will do my best to keep yer Margie out of the workhouse.

If, however – if you are reading this letter, I must assume this oath voided.

Yer dear mate,
John.

Ps. I hoped you noticed that I have put yer book, *The Constable's Guide to Punctuation*, to a better use than privy paper.

Proputty,
Proputty . . .

Twelve

“As close as a shadow. Do you understand Penningdenful?”

Skelt nodded.

“See you do then,” Straw said and stepped into the darkness before them.

A moment later, after descending six damp stone steps, the two of them stood in a stairwell, looking into a small, shadowy room that smelled unbearably of urine and slopped gin. This wasn't how he'd imagined it. He'd expected soot-faced boys at their supper, old men playing shove-a-penny, but this place was queerly empty of any such thing. Where were the forgers and bludgers—the bug-hunters clinking drams together in toast or at each other's throat at the drop of a coin. Honestly, it was somewhat an anti-climax, like reading a penny dreadful only to find the best part cut from it.

Still as he stood a little longer, the Sergeant breathing quietly beside him, there was something terrible about the quietness. He trained his eye on the room's only visible occupants, though he sensed there might be more, in the darkness at the back.

Four.

There were four men only. They sat quietly at a small round table placed in the center of the room with their heads bent together in low conversation. Two candles burned on the table, throwing a ghostly orange light across the men's faces. But other than this play of candle flame, they sat nearly motionlessly, like actors waiting for the audience's silence.

Skelt shivered, for somehow it would have been better had the place been filled with rough men and harsh laughter; in the silence, his breath seemed loud and ragged. Then a man laughed and pushed himself back from the table, the legs of his wood chair scrapping across the stone floor.

Any second he would get up and walk towards them, Skelt thought, imagining the man yelling an alarm and more men pouring from the shadows. He'd seen enough. His taste

to see the trap, to look down into the underground tunnels, gone. He turned to Straw and nodded.

Are you sure, Mate? Straw's look said.

Skelt nodded again.

"Your bugging choice then, Mr Penningdenful. I have given you warning."

Warning?

Dear God, he's mistaken me, Skelt thought. He's mistook my intention. The Sergeant thought he meant to go in.

He reached for the Sergeant's arm but it was too late, his hand found only murky darkness. A fool I am, he thought, moving beside the Sergeant, who had stopped a few yards from the table, staring silently. Impossibly the men had yet to see them. This though they stood close enough that Skelt could smell the men's cold, sour sweat.

"Well, Mr. Penningdenful?" the Sergeant said in a loud voice that echoed from the stone ceiling above, and at his voice the men jerked their heads up, eyes burning like witch fire.

"Let us go, now," Skelt said, but his voice was in whisper, too low for the Sergeant's ear.

"I see now," Straw continued, "that you have not yet dared your quill"

"Sergeant, I"—

"Well, no matter. I welcome you, anyway, to this most notable of thieves' dens," Straw finished, spreading his arms in a wide gesture, a carnival showman revealing the set and members of his exhibition. To the men at the table he said, "Look alive, lads. Sergeant

Straw is here. And this with him is the most notable journalist from the *Chronicle* come to take your story.”

Thirteen

The men greeted this news—that they were in the munificent presence of a journalist, a snoop—with silence.

“Well, Penningdenful?” the Sergeant said, his tone impatient. “Make your buggering introduction, so these lads can get back to their suppers.” It was then that Skelt saw the tin plates.

“Evening, Sirs,” he said.

The men ignored him, save one, a bearded man, who spat and started to push his chair back. “Easy cove. Easy now,” one of his fellows said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He shook the arm off. Skelt saw a flash of dull metal disappear up the man’s sleeve.

“Now, lads,” the Sergeant spoke. “Your manners are your own, but when I’m here, you will show proper respect to a gentleman.”

“Not to that effing Nancy, I won’t,” a man with a thick forehead and sloped brows said. “Not so he can make a tumble of our lives in his paper.”

“Oh he wouldn’t do that. Now would you Mr. Penningdenful?”

Skelt shook his head side to side. In truth, he had no interest in their lives.

“You see, lads,” Straw said, almost jovially. “You see. He’s a rum fellow. Now a quick question and we’ll whistle back into the night. No harm done, lads. No harm done.”

The place became very silent.

Skelt hesitated.

The Sergeant looked impatient. "Come now, Mr. Penningdenful, ask away now. But quick. We can't let the lads' meat cool on the plate."

The men's eyes were on him like stinging nettles; he didn't know what to ask: Lloyd wasn't interested in this. Not this type of man, not if they weren't destined for the gallows. These were just men at their supper.

Not that one, Skelt suddenly thought, seeing the Sergeant look at the man who had pushed himself back from the chair earlier.

"You, lad," Straw said to him. "Name and occupation. Quick or I'll lag you on the spot."

"Is that fucking so?"

Skelt took a deep breath.

"Oh lad, you don't wish to make me cross," the Sergeant said and then took a step towards the man.

"No?"

"Oh, you don't indeed. But I am a generous man and will give you the chance to show your respect to this gent by answering my question."

Leave it alone, Straw.

"No papers," said the whiskered one. "You've been effing told."

"Oh, been told have I?"

With a look, Skelt tried to get the Sergeant's attention, to signal he was more than ready to leave, but the Sergeant ignored him.

“Ay, told,” the bearded man spoke again. He nodded his head towards Skelt. “Now why don’t you take fucking Judy home with you before you come to harm.”

Skelt tried to meet the man’s burning gaze but he found he couldn’t. His face hot, he looked away, past the reach of the candle light into the untouched shadows where he assumed the bar was. He was peering into the darkness when he saw it move. Startled, he yelped. It was a pathetic sound, even to his ears.

“Are you all right, Mr. Penningdenful?” the Sergeant asked.

“Watch yourself, Straw. There’s another one.

“Where?”

“Going towards the stairwell.”

“Aye, I see him. I see him. Keep an eye on him, will you?”

Skelt watched the figure darting towards the exit, but when the figure got to the stairwell where Skelt had stood with Straw a moment ago, the man turned and blocked the entrance, his face revealed in the candlelight.

Dear reader, though most of us are supposedly cut from the shining cloth of perfection, there are some among us who are not. These others, as few as they may be, are snipped from a fabric of the purest black and we call them many things, death, destruction, oblivion, but mostly we call them evil.

The man who would soon confront Sergeant Straw was one such—a demon dressed in the foul rags of a mad man.

“Penningdenful? What’s he doing?”

“He’s coming back. And quickly,” Skelt said, watching the man leaping towards the Sergeant’s unprotected back. Metal flashed in his hand.

“Sergeant, he’s got a knife!”

Fourteen

“My god. You!” the Sergeant said “Tom Bowles.”

“My god,” Skelt echoed, hearing the fear in Straw’s voice. In a flash, he saw the young private of Straw’s story, his head forced down into blackness by the very villain who now raced towards Straw. He saw the private’s legs bucking, kicking, slowly, weakly.

Pop and the eyes come out.

Skelt turned to look at the Sergeant’s face, but reluctantly. He didn’t want to see fear there.

Watch yourself!

The bludger was closing in, much faster now, grinning like a man in Bedlam’s most violent ward.

The Sergeant back-stepped, nearly into the arms of the men behind, who were thrusting their chairs aside. Straw drew his truncheon. In the candlelight, its black varnished wood glowed wickedly.

When Tom spoke again, it was in a near whisper: “Maybe I is that fellow you called Tom and maybe I’s ain’t.”

“Oh, I know you, Tom Bowles,” Straw said, his voice very low. “Much as I would know any degenerate pox.”

“Maybe,” Tom said, “maybe,” testing the point of a large curved knife on his thumb, “but whether I’s or I’s ain’t, I’s the cove who will spill your bileing guts on the floor and then sup ‘em up like a hungry hound. Ain’t that right my coves?”

“You are,” the men replied as one.

“There ain’t nary more than that,” Tom said.

“Hold steady, now, Penningdenful. Hold steady.”

Hold steady for what? He was about to ask when Tom struck, swinging the knife at the Sergeant’s chest. It’s over now, he thought, seeing the speed of the swing, but somehow the Sergeant managed to lean back and the blade whispered past. From the decapitating force of the blow, Tom was spun around like a whirling dervish, his blade catching one of his fellows in the throat.

“My dear god,” Skelt said, watching the man clutch at his throat. He was little more than a whisker-faced boy. In the uncertain light of the place, the blood poured around the boy’s fingers like India ink, washing down his throat, staining a kerchief about his neck dark. The boy fell to the floor.

“Murder!” Skelt said in a hush. He’d never seen anybody killed, and his legs went numb beneath him.

Tom looked at the fellow on the floor and then looked up, his eyes burning through the wild strands of hair that curled down his lean face.

“That ain’t murder, my cove. I nary cut him another smile. See there. See there,” he pointed to the black gash on the boy’s throat. “A smile to make him fond with the ladies.” Tom, still grinning, bent down beside the body and dipped a finger into a pool of the boy’s blood. He lifted the finger up and then popped it in his mouth.

Skelt stared in horror, shivering when the madman spoke.

“Now, my lovelies. After these two and spill their bileing guts on the floor. And if any ask, it were the peeler who killed poor Billy.” The men to whom he spoke seemed in momentary shock as well.

Tom started to get up.

“Now Penningdenful. At my back like a shadow.” Straw said, but Skelt didn’t hear for he was fixated on the dark ink that pooled about the boy’s head and how the candle light played upon it. Only when Straw yelled “Damn you, Penningdenful, run” did he notice the Sergeant sprinting away into the darkness of the room’s far corner.

To the trap. He’s going to the trap that leads underground, Skelt thought numbly, though he couldn’t remember how or why he knew this.

“Run Penningdenful. Or your life is forfeit,” he heard the Sergeant yell, but when he tried, his legs refused to move.

Fifteen

Not knowing Straw’s design, Skelt felt himself abandoned. It was a feeling he had intimately known since he was a child of ten when his father had gone into the Debtor’s Gaol for a debt of ten pounds.

For a clerk, it was a terrific sum, an ungodly sum, but what the debts were for, Skelt never knew. What he did know was that his father never returned, that he had never settled his debts fully, and that the day after his scheduled return other men came in his place. Grim faced men, dressed in black suits, who, in less than a half hour, had loaded

into a waiting cart what remaining possessions he and his mother had—some furniture, some carpets, even his father's stack of Newgate calendars and his leather bound Thackeray novel, *Sarah*.

For Skelt the confiscation of these last items was the hardest, for they had become for him both a source of inspiration and escape. One day, he too would write such things, though not in their dark vein. People saw enough of the dark as it was.

Abandoned, he and his mother did their the best to keep payment on their small residence on Agar Street, she by taking in handkerchiefs to repair, him by taking a job with a boot maker, working 14 hours a day, mostly 'blackening' the finished pairs. Together they earned enough to pay rent and eat a real dinner of fried herring every second Sunday.

For a while, life proceeded as such—in a precipitous, but steady fashion that saw the rats kept at the door (for in truth there wasn't a crumb to be had inside). But as so often happens when fortunes begin to change and life begins to take a shine, the great dimmer, Death, comes. And on the third week before his eleventh birthday, Skelt returned to a darkened house to find his mother blue-lipped and shivering, and by morning dead.

Kindly, his employer gave him the half day to make arrangements with the coffin-maker and find a space for his mother in the poor man's graveyard, Potters Fields. It was on his way back from making these macabre arrangements that he saw behind the small, blackened panes of a shopkeep's window a delicate vase, the kind designed to hold a solitary flower, a lily or an orchid, but in this one stood tall yellow-feathered writing quills.

He walked past and then returned and went in. A mere moment later, he was back on the street with a quill, an apothecary bottle of ink, and a notebook. He'd spent the money just promised to the coffin-maker.

Ashes to ashes.

Two weeks later, he had written his first sketch, a dark examination of death's price: the coroner's, the coffin-maker's, the gravedigger's. It would be his last sketch (or so he had vowed) to deal with those things not of light. He wanted to write about creation and permanence.

"Run Penningdenful. Or your life is forfeit," the Sergeant called again. "Quick."

Before Skelt, Tom circled the dead body on the floor like an animal, and then stopped. He drew the flat of his knife across his own throat, smiling at Skelt grotesquely.

Skelt's first steps were slow and stiff. Soon, however, the wire between thought and movement pulled tight and he was jerking forward in a fast, but poorly tuned, mechanical fashion.

He ran, fast, fast, and in an instant, he saw Straw standing behind a wood structure that looked like a pulpit, though he knew it to be the bar. Indeed, on top of its counter was a wood hogshead of gin. With a few feet to go, he stumbled and had Straw not lifted him up and over the bar by the back of his less than adequately starched collar, he would have crashed into the bar counter with his head.

"Fuck," he yelled, for Straw pulled him bodily across the counter, made of splintery wood, and then threw him hard to the floor at his feet.

"You're all right lad," Straw yelled, throwing him into the shadows on the floor.

“We nearly had the bile-ing dandy, my coves,” Skelt heard Tom yelling from somewhere on the other side of the counter. “Now my coves, do for the big one if you are men. And if you nary are! Old Tom will cut you all a new smile afore he finishes the bileing business at hand.”

Skelt looked up. He saw movement in the dark, the jab of blades, arms trying to strike Straw, who was bent back at the waist and swinging his truncheon wildly. He was keeping the men from leaping over the wood, barely, but then a man nearly got across and Straw was pushed back into Skelt. One of his boot heels caught Skelt in the ribs and, like a bellow pumped of all its air in one go, his body was drained of all its breath. I’m going to die of suffocation, he thought.

“Penningdenful. Find the trap. Quick,” Straw yelled, his voice full of desperation.

Holding his ribs with one hand, Skelt searched the floor. It was covered with thick shadow. What was he looking for? Cracks on the ground, he supposed, the outline of a door.

He heard a loud thud and looked up.

Another man had tried to dive across the counter and Straw’s truncheon had struck him in the mouth. The man was stretched over the counter, looking down at Skelt, but if he was dead or alive, he didn’t know. Then the man was gone, pulled back. Frantic, Skelt returned to his search. His hand touched a metal ring on the floor.

“Straw, I’ve found it.”

A second later, he was on his hands and knees, staring down into utter black. The air that came up was cold and damp and smelled like the bloody drainage of a medical operating theatre.

“Into the hole, Penningdenful,” Straw shouted. “Down and left. Keep left through the cellars. Go now.”

The dark would suffocate him. How would he see?

“Bleed your buggering eyes! Penningdenful. Go. It will see you out.”

Sixteen

Skelt descended a short wood ladder and found himself in a close cellar, standing in a weak beam of burnt-umber light that came from the trap opening above. He looked up but could see nothing. He called Straw’s name, doubting Straw could hear him as the noise above had reached a frenetic crescendo.

Then, quicker than the flow of spilled ink, silence.

No yells, no screaming.

Run Penningdenful. Or your life is forfeit.

Down and left Penningdenful, Straw had said. But what did this mean? Was it left facing the ladder? Or away from it?

Away, surely.

He moved in this direction, using his hands before him like one newly blind. Around him everywhere was the whisper of water. Everywhere, damp, crumbling earth, small chunks of it falling into his eyes, down the collar of his shirt.

He moved and his head bumped the ceiling. Something fell. It crawled to the back of his neck. On his ear now, racing towards its opening. He swatted it off, shivered violently. Something else, down his collar, scratching, stinging.

Run.

He leapt forward, crashed into a wall, scraped his chin. He was sent to his back. He was up, feeling wildly about him.

Not in the dark underground—please no. Not a feast for insects and rats.

Disorientated, his hands scrabbled, his nails filled with dirt.

Which way was back?

Calm yourself man.

A moment later, he found the way forward, a small opening through which he would have to crawl—the *Thieves' Highway*. He heard the chirp of rats, hesitated. Go, Straw had yelled. It will see you out. Again, he crawled forward. Soon the passage narrowed until he was wiggling forwards on his stomach like some pale earthworm.

“Straw don’t leave me alone,” he screamed suddenly, but the closeness of the earth swallowed his plea. Then, he heard shouts down in the cellar. Then silence. He held his breath. Blood banged in his ears. But —there! Listen! A faint scratching behind him.

“Straw?” he whispered. “Straw?”

He waited.

A minute passed. And then another.

But it wasn’t Straw.

It wasn’t anything other than the dark whispering of his imagination. He would have to go on alone. He pulled himself along, his hands clawing into the sour earth. More dirt

fell and the damp ground became wet and then splashed beneath his knees, foul smelling and greasy, clinging to his hands like tanning fat.

Time passed and he continued, but for how long he didn't know. Behind, far in the distance, he heard a sound, the slamming of a door. What this might mean, he didn't know, his mind was inwards. He saw Lloyd, waiting for the sketch. He was tapping a feathered quill against his oversized teeth. Behind him, a fire was burning in a stone hearth.

'You can't invent this kind of madness, Penningdenful. This story will make your name. Your name, my fortune. Pay the price, Penningdenful. Pay the price.'

"There are other ways," Skelt said into the darkness.

But the figment was right: the madness of tonight's events would sell. It could be the story, the sketch that raised him up—"No," he said violently into the darkness. He slammed a hand into the earth. The price paid—being paid now—was too steep a wager: himself nearly murdered; the Sergeant possibly dead; and still the unknown. The last was a lie: the men would come for him. They would.

But if... just if he made it out, he would write the sketch. It would, however, be the last. *Rot Lloyd's soul.*

As he thought this last, he did something he had never done before: he clenched a fist in raw emotion.

What this gnawing feeling was, however, he was unable to give it a tongue, for he—who had allowed so many to direct his life as if he was a puppet and he, who wanted nothing more than to take the funny little moments of daily existence and build a city of

words around them as Dickens and others had done—he, Skelt Penningdenful, had never felt the stirrings of true hatred.

And so, as he crawled forward, down and to the left, through the wet and muck like some primeval form of man, he could be excused for being unaware of how quickly violent hatred could grow within a person and when he came to a place where the tunnel suddenly ended and he could go no further, he felt the speed of this emotion twisting through him.

Seventeen

31st December 1842

Attention: Inspector Fields

Sir,

The excursion to Rats' Castle has come to naught but disaster & I am afeared to say that the journalist, Mr. Penningdenful, is missing.

Please inform.

Sergeant S. Straw.

Eighteen

The moments of stillness were diminishing, giving way to a wind strong enough to push an abandoned barrel down Gaunt Street. With the tang of winter ocean waves, the wind came fast, blowing in violent, shrieking bursts that had but a hint of the true storm closely following. Windows rattled. Houses groaned. Gaslights flickered, gurgled, expired.

Throughout the night, it came, damp now, carrying rain, now, growing in strength now; yet in the dream of Sergeant Samuel Straw all was calm until he sensed movement, sensed that figures stood around his bed in the darkness.

Who let you buggering in here?

No answer.

I warn you.

There was a bang of a hammer—clank, clank—and, suddenly, the smell of turpentine, of polished wood. A courtroom. Then light. Everywhere—light and curious faces, peering at him from every inch of space; from the rail before the dock, away into the sharpest angle of the smallest corner in the galleries. Before him and behind, above, below, on the right and on the left—all were looking at him and he found himself surrounded, or so it seemed, by a firmament all bright with beaming eyes.

It was familiar.

He laughed. He knew he was in a dream. A moment ago, his wife had been reading to him from *Twist*. This was Fagin's court. He looked up into the galley. He could see spectators. The same people in Dickens's book, all rising above each other to see his

face: some hastily applying their glasses, others whispering to their neighbours with looks expressive of abhorrence.

Hush!

Then...in the courtroom there was a sudden death-like stillness.

Straw turned to see the judge donning his black cap. The prisoner shall face the bench.

Vaguely, Straw wondered where Fagin was. Perhaps, he was already swinging on the drop, the hangman sprinkling the floor to cool it. This was Fagin's trial. Not his. He turned to search for the varmint but found he couldn't for a thick chain manacled him to a wood rail that ran before him. The iron burned his skin.

The judge's hammer banged again. Clank. Clank.

For, the last time—the Prisoner shall face the bench, from where then on he shall keep his eyes steadily fastened. I warn you! We shall suffer no varmints in this court. None!

At his ear, another voice One sickeningly familiar.

I would listen to him, Straw. It's your life if he takes a dislike to you.

Fields? It couldn't be.

The courtroom darkened.

Straw tried to look behind him, but the cold chain held him firm.

The judge spoke again and a deeper, more dreadful hush descended over the courtroom. The only sound for a long moment was that of a court-journalist's pen scratching on his note pad.

Is it not true, Sergeant Samuel Straw, 4th class, that you stand here charged with murder?

Murder?

Of the family man, Tom Bowles.

Straw swore beneath his breath.

Tsk. Tsk. Straw. Swearing and in the Court. Answer the question, Straw.

Inspector Fields?

Yes, it is I.

The journalist—have they found him?

I shall ruin you yet, Straw. Didn't imagine that, eh Straw?

Can we have a bit of light?

Clank. Clank.

Do you hear that? said the judge. The prisoner demands light. Accused of murder. Of leaving his charge alone in the dark. I need not remind you that if guilty he will be hung. His wife, too.

Well, very serious, Straw. Do you have any words?

Have you found the journalist?

Do you want him found?

Outside, the wind which had hitherto contented itself to blow its havoc close to the earth now began to leap up and attack rooftops and chimneys. The bleak night filled with iron grating which was soon joined by the clamorous din of hundreds of London church bells. Together they made enough noise to keep at bay the very Devil himself.

Nineteen

1st of January 1842

Sgt. Straw,

Returning tomorrow.

Upon arrival, I shall want a full description of your night with the journalist, in writing, of course. I need this to better enable me on what course of action I should take and what disciplinary actions I shall need to take against you, if any.

You can, I trust, manage that at least, eh Straw?

Sincerely,

Inspector Fields.

Ps. Pray to god the journalist is found unharmed. His master, Lloyd, prizes him like a son. We do not want his wrath, nor the eyes of his writers on our department. With the problems as of late, corruption and bribery, I trust you can understand this last. We wouldn't want Scotland Yard dissolved before it is begun.

Twenty

The clock at St Giles had some time ago struck midnight and still Straw remained at his desk, composing a police report of the events of two nights past.

Once, the wind, which had been steadily shrieking about the door of the Whitehall station, rattling the house's small-paned windows, broke his concentration and half woke a man sleeping on a cot in the back of the station. He looked up, cocking his ear to one side. The man mumbled. Unable, however, to make sense of his words, Straw turned his attention back to the report. What had he left out?

"God's blood," he cursed, quietly. He shouldn't have played the Inspector's blasted game. There was no winning. Not against the Devil. And now—now, he was in a bloody mess.

He spat in disgust. It wouldn't do. The report had been composed in such a violent state of mind that his quill had torn the page in several places, and it was filled with angry words and with admissions better left secured in the vault of his own memory. This type of carelessness would undo him. He pushed these papers aside and grabbed some clean sheets. At least this time, he could leave out the part about Fields' brain being the same size as a dog's arse.

On the 28th of December, I, Samuel Straw, Sgt. 4th class, was given over to the assignment of escorting a journalist, a Mr. Skelt Penningdenful, through the district known as St Giles (hereafter marked by the initials SG). My duty was to guide him to the establishment located at 123 Castle Street, a run-down building known in local parlance as Rats' Castle.

After finishing my preliminary duty, station cleaning, report filing, etcetera, which I had commenced at 8 p.m., I left the station.

By approx. 9.45 p.m., I was traveling north down Mercer Street towards the place where I was to rendez-vous with the journalist I came across a man in the process of being robbed by three men.

Being alone & assessing that apprehension would pose unnecessary risk to me, I did not attempt arrest, electing, instead, to hook the men along: and faster than rats did they melt back into the night.

As it turned out, the nearly-robbed man was the v. same I planned to meet not a block away. This, of course, being the journalist, Mr. Penningdenful. A peculiar fellow, v. nervous in disposition.

After we made introductions, I, at this point, walked him to a safer place & informed him of the v. real dangers of the SG district. Then I informed him of the official guidelines that needed to be followed for such an excursion, meaning, of course, our soon to be sojourn to Rats' Castle.

When sure he understood these rules & dangers fully, I asked if he wished to continue, whereas he assured me he did.

*** (As regulations require, I followed the above procedure a second time, receiving the same response: That he was fully aware of his responsibilities - to follow orders without question, etc, and that, in pursuant of this adventure, he was acting of his own free will.) ***

After the above sharing of information, we then proceeded to Rats' Castle & whence inside, we discovered approx. 4 men at their supper & watched them unobserved for approx. 2½ minutes.

After this period, the journalist informed me with a firm nod of the head that he wished a closer examination & so we walked closer.

Obviously, the men - all v. hard looking - then saw us & being disturbed from their meat were deeply displeased. I, at this point, endeavored to keep the mood calm, but despite my efforts the men soon became aggressive.

Understanding the hostility of the situation, I then warned Mr. Penningdenful that it would now be wise to leave the men to their conversaziones. He, however, had other intentions & v. firmly insisted, against my expressed wishes), of his right to ask these fellows some questions.

"Well, then, ask away," I said, knowing then he was a man who cared not a whit for the well-being of others.

But, on the account of anxiety, he couldn't, for one of the men, an angry-looking fellow, had taken a dislike of him & stared at him in such a menacing fashion that it disrupted his concentration. The lack of nerve Penningdenful displayed was enough, as they say, to make a cat speak.

But aware of my duty to keep a good rapport between the Police and the Press, I said again, "Go on then, Mr. Penningdenful. Ask away, now. But be quick. We can't let the lads' meat cool on their plates."

But again, he couldn't: fear had taken his tongue & he was as silent & as stiff as a gallows' pole. A moment later, he turned away & stared into a dark corner.

I nearly spat. Not because the journalist was a coward (this I knew from v. early on) but because I could see — in the v. nervous way the men fiddled with their supper forks — that they thought 2 against 4 were odds too steep for them to attempt resistance or violence against one of her Majesty's servants (or so I thought) & when the Nancy-boy journalist turned away, I saw immediately that the odds had changed.

Still, I felt the matter in hand. Obviously, I did not then know that the men were in such a nervous state not from any anxiety introduced by my presence, but because a fellow of theirs was sneaking behind me in the darkness. They were hoping he would stick me in the back before I marked his presence.

*** Inspector, this new fellow was known to us. ***

He goes by the name Tom Bowles & it was he who uttered the night's first violence, promising, in his words, to "spill our adjectival guts on the floor" & , in truth, had the journalist not alerted me to his presence with a frightful squeal, he would have v. likely succeeded.

Though he didn't manage to stick me like a coward, the dynamics were, nevertheless, rapidly changing (remember, the odds were now five to one).

And believing Tom Bowles intended our murder, I decided on the $\frac{1}{2}$ second to lead Mr. Penningdenful towards the bar, where I knew existed, from a previous excursion, a trap-door, through which we could use to make our escape: the trap leads to tunnels which in turn lead to outside. That is, if one chooses correctly. Some go only deeper into the earth & have no exit.

Once behind the bar, I ordered Mr. Penningdenful to open the above mentioned trap, while I kept the men back by threatening them with my truncheon.

While so engaged, one man — an ugly bearded mutt — came too near & my stick caught him hard in the mouth, cracking his teeth & spilling his blood.

What happened next was v. desperate, for my blow to their fellow had the opposite effect than what I was hoping for. You see, I was hoping to take their sting but now the whole bleeding lot of them were desperate to be the first one to stick their twine-handled knives into my ribs.

As said, it was a desperate moment. There was much yelling & cursing. Indeed, the place had become like Babel. All were caustic tongues & none were ears, but above the yelling I managed to hear the high-pitched voice of the journalist: he had the trap open.

"Into the hole, Penningdenful," I shouted. "Down and Right. Keep Right through the cellars. Go now," &, like a demon vanishing in a penny play, he disappeared into the ground. Disappeared to what I hoped was his safety.

To give him time, I remained above.

Down and stay right.

Straw stilled the quill in his hand and looked up. The same man who had been mumbling before was now dream-talking.

The wrong path. He's on the wrong path.

Had he said that?

Straw felt the chill of the room and clapped his arms about his chest. A shudder curled around his spine like a cold clock spring. For a second, in his mind's eye, he saw the journalist clawing at damp earthen walls. Blind in the chthonic dark.

The sleeping man spoke again and Straw relaxed: he'd misheard. The fellow had not said 'wrong path' said but 'strong man.'

Still.

"I'm a strong man, Matilda," the man mumbled again. "It's all the walking they make us do. Gives us good legs it does."

The silly bugger was only talking of some dream Judy. A randy dream, nothing more. Straw bent back to the page.

The next few moments I don't remember v. clearly. Other than that my brain buzzed as if I'd managed to trap it full of angry, stinging yellow-jackets. Oh! what an angry hum coursed between my ears as I struck out with my truncheon.

And what a violent crack sounded when my wood caught Tom Bowles in the forehead. And how his eyes glazed over & how he staggered about in such short circles after that, his mouth working like that of a landed fish, open & closed.

His last movements were so exaggerated that I felt I could have been at the Penny Gaff watching an actor playing a drunk man, for so v. thespian & so nearly comical Tom's movements were.

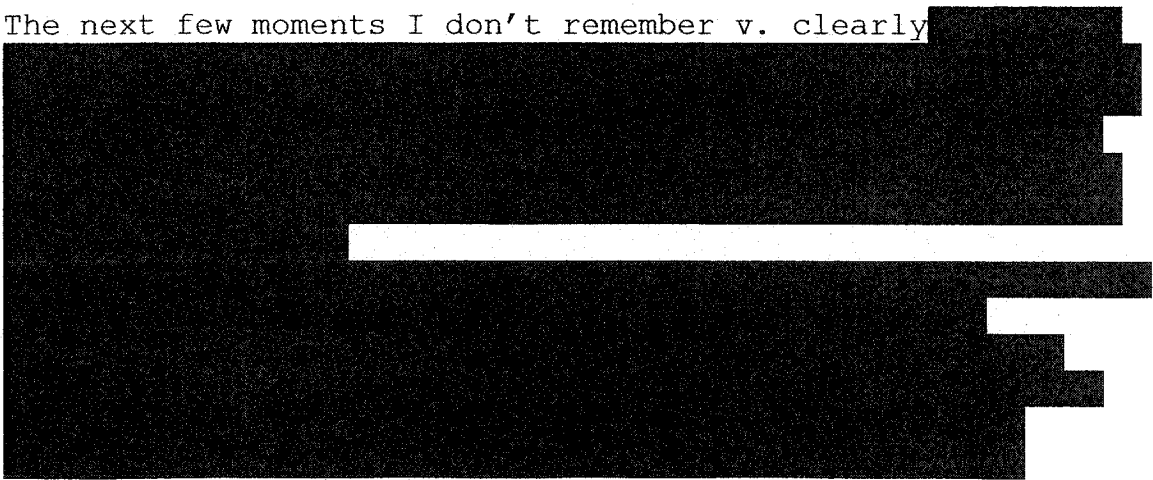
Shortly after this, he fell dead.

As Straw remembered the surprised look on Tom's lean face, he stopped writing. After a long hesitation, he reached for an ink-soaked blotting sponge. He couldn't keep Tom's death in the report. Not in these days.

"It's not how it was Straw," he heard the Inspector's voice lecturing in his head. "A death now, Straw, no matter how vile the one dead, no matter how low or how despicable, is still a death. Still a murder, still a killing. You don't agree with it, eh Straw? Eh? Neither do I but such is the way of the world. Questions to be asked, now. Answers to be given—even for us, Straw. Even for us."

So, with the sponge, he erased the death of Tom Bowles. With a bit of care, he would later make it look like an ink spill.

The next few moments I don't remember v. clearly



[REDACTED]

other than that when I went down the trap I found myself in a darkness so stifling & so dark that had my hand been painted with whitening & waved directly before my eyes, I would not have seen it. (For obvious reasons, I could not dare my lantern.)

Above me, though I could not see them, I heard the men arguing about whom would be first to come down after me:

Man One: Go Mad Charlie, after him.

Man Two: I won't. Not first. Not down that hole.

Man One: Come on.

Man Two: What if he's waiting for me? I won't be first.

Man One: You must.

Man Two: Why I must?

Man One: Well, it ain't me who's always on about how mad he is, and how he doesn't give an eff this and an eff that, and how he would tell the Devil an effing thing or two if he ever saw him. Ain't that so?

Man Two: Well, I reckon yer words might be dead on the nod and usually -

Man One: usually, what?

Man Two: Usually, I would. Give me two Devils or what you will, but tonight - well, I'm feelin' a bit under tonight. Got the sniveling pox, I do.

Man One: You don't.

Man Two: I do and I ain't goin' and yer can't make me.

(Etcetera)

Even though it wasn't of my design, I used this above diversion to make my escape & must confess here, knowing Mr. Penningdenful safely away & myself soon to follow, I was feeling v. nearly joyful.

Right, keeping right, whenever my hands found an opening in stone or brick, I soon came up and out into the SG's Churchyard.

Straw stopped writing, his quill frozen above the page. Half closing his eyes, he saw an image of himself scrabbling up a dirt hole towards his safety, while far in the tunnel behind him, men yelled and cursed. Their voices, distorted and unearthly.

Suddenly he was up, and around him was tall grass, swept by a cold wind and wet with rain. The grass shimmered sliver from moonlight.

Immediately, he looked for the journalist and saw the place in which he stood had been long untended. Standing before him was St Giles' church, imposing, tall, lifeless. Dead save its narrow gothic windows which were full of pale moonlight and streaking clouds.

Thanks to St Francis, he was alive. Now for the journalist. He cupped his hand to his mouth, thinking to call to him but decided he would search first. He couldn't be far. In

truth, the poor bugger was probably cowering behind a bush or laying flat in the grass somewhere.

Straw walked towards the blind front of the church. As he went, he searched behind sallow-colored tombstones that broke the earth like rotten teeth. His heart beat in his chest.

The journalist wasn't here. Perhaps, he had scaled the walls. "But not bloody likely," he muttered when he saw their height and how they'd been capped with a *chevaux de frise*, the spikes of which glinted and flashed in the dark night air.

"Come out, Penningdenful. It's Straw."

No good. This place was truly lifeless. Both of spirit and flesh. Besides, had the journalist come this way, the grass would have been trampled, marked by his safe passage.

Had the journalist gone in the wrong direction? This thought struck him faster than a galvanic current. Had he misguided the journalist—set him on the wrong path?

Straw's dread increased when a Constable rushed-in through the station door, bringing with him a gust of cold wind that made Straw's remaining candle flicker. Long vulpine shadows raced across his desk. It was a new man, the overly fat, Meiklejohn.

"A bugger of an evening to be out, Constable," Straw said to him as the man came closer. He's here about the journalist. Straw's heart began to beat a veritable tattoo in his chest.

Having the look of one who has come a great distance very fast, Meiklejohn's chest heaved and his cheeks were marked with red circles the size of florins. He nodded at the

spluttering candle on Straw's desk and gasped, "We do, Sir, if you don't mind me saying, now live in a world of gas."

It was an attempt at humour.

"Catch your breath, Constable."

"Meiklejohn...Sir.... Thank you.... But I haven't time. There's..."

"No rush, Constable, nice and slow. A good Constable will always keep a steady pace. Second rule in the Police Book Catechisms, Meiklejohn."

"Yes ... yes, Sir. I've read it, but..."

"This is particularly true when it comes to walking the beat," Straw said, spouting this jiggered nonsense to give Meiklejohn time to recover. "The preferred speed is a steady two and a half miles per hour. There are, of course, certain situations where this speed needs to be accelerated. Such instances as those involving"—

"Murder," the Constable gasped. There's been a murder."

Straw's heart sank. He had failed. He had failed the first rule in the Police Book Catechism: the protection of England's citizens.

"Sir? Sir, did you hear me? As the Inspector's away, I was told to fetch you."

"Yes. You did right, lad. Now, who was it that sent you?"

"A bobby from another station. I don't rightly know him. He found the body. I heard his rattle and now... well here I am—ran all the way from Tower Street. The body's there in an alley."

Straw did the calculation. It was about right, considering the time. They could have carried a body that far unnoticed. But why not leave the body in the Castle?

"What was he wearing?"

"I don't rightly know. I didn't see him, Sir."

"Bloodied beyond recognition. Is that it?"

"No... well, I don't rightly know. I didn't see the body."

Straw's brow furrowed. He disliked squeamish men. "You didn't look?"

"The bobby on the scene was doing a good job of blocking the alley mouth with a corpse-blanket. No. Not even a peek, I'm afraid. Besides, I thought it best to inform you as quick as I could."

"Right. Go fetch the division surgeon, now. He'll need to pronounce the body before we move it. And Meiklejohn?"

"Sir?"

"Next time something like this happens, don't be such a fool's arse by running yourself near to death."

When the Constable hurried back into the night, another rush of wind entered the station, carrying with it the dampness of rain. After reaching for his greatcoat and shoving a notebook and a shortened quill into its right pocket, he brought his gaze to the report sitting on his desk. He would destroy it. A moment later, after making sure all the men were still asleep, he put the report to a candle and watched the papers curl in the flame.