Marley Was Dead

A Christmas Carol Mystery

Lenny Everson

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By Lenny Everson

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Chapter 1: December 19

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Inspector Ian McFergus had not been satisfied; not in the least satisfied. He had inspected Marley's body using all the due processes and checklists upon which the police division insisted and in which he had been trained. And he was not satisfied.

Marley's body had been found at the bottom of the stairs, dead. The inspector had walked around the body as required and had drawn a sketch as required. And however much it looked as if the old guy had simply tripped, Inspector McFergus had not been satisfied at the time and had been no more satisfied after the coroner had hauled the corpse, clothed in a shabby nightgown, away. Eating kippers and potatoes that evening, McFergus had barely concentrated on the food or upon his wife, Amy.

About midnight he had got up, had lit the stub of a candle, and had made a list of things to do;

1. Ask the coroner again if there was anything unusual about the body.

2. Talk to Marley's housekeeper.

3. Talk to Ebenezer Scrooge, Marley's partner, the man who would now own Scrooge and Marley, Incorporated.

4. Talk to Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit. (Sometimes underpaid clerks knew more than they let on.)

As he had written his thoughts down, even more thoughts had followed, unbidden. The candle had been short, however, and the winter nights in London were long and cold. Inspector McFergus had gone back to bed and had finally able to sleep, snuggled up against Amy, his last thoughts about the case were that Marley was dead. There was no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

The next day McFergus was told by his superiors that there were other things he should be working on, so he never got to talk to Scrooge or Cratchit. He tried to forget about the incident of Jacob Marley.

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Seven years later McFergus woke up early, as was his habit. For years the knocker-upper had tapped each morning at the McFergus bedroom window with his long pole before moving on. Finally, when McFergus had retired, almost six months before, he'd told the man to skip his house, and thereby saved two pence a week. But long before that date, McFergus had always been awake when that tapping came.

As usual, he nonetheless checked the watch he had been given. 6:35, of course. Some things didn't change, although he suspected that one of these days he'd actually be able to make it to seven o'clock before getting up. Maybe then he'd buy a cigar to celebrate if he did. Not that Amy liked cigars much.

McFergus turned to his wife, still asleep beside him. It was December 19th, by the calendar with the queen's picture on it, it was cold in the bedroom; and Amy was down so far under the blankets that not much more than her grey hair showed. He smiled, then set about the slow, careful process of trying to get out of bed without waking her. He'd succeeded just once last week, which encouraged him. Or maybe, he thought suddenly, she'd just pretended to be asleep that morning. The thought made him frown; he'd been good on the police force, being unusually able to tell when a suspect was lying or hiding something, but he'd never been as successful with his wife. Must be, he thought, that she knew him much better than the crooks did.

Quietly, he put his slippers on, then reached for the clothes hanging from a chair. Carefully laying the garments over his arm, he tiptoed towards the door. He'd lubricated the door's hinges latches with whale oil two days ago, so it was bound to be a bit quieter. As he reached for the handle, Amy said, "Call me when the tea's warm."

The former inspector smiled ruefully. "I'll do that, Mrs McFergus. I'll do that," and went down to the kitchen.

He got a fire going in the coal fireplace and ran some water from the tap into the old black kettle. He stopped and looked at the tap again. To McFergus it was still a minor miracle. Up until the year before Amy had hauled water in a bucket from a communal well, three blocks away. McFergus had always supposed he'd be doing that chore now that he was retired and Amy's back hurt her so much. But the piped water line had come through their neighbourhood in the summer, with a branch line coming right into the kitchen. Now it cost money to get water, even if it was available only two days a week, but they could just afford it, and it was so very much easier than navigating the slippery, manure laden area around the communal well.

He didn't try to prepare any breakfast; Amy demanded her right to do that, but when he was sure his wife was finished with the chamber pot, he took it down the three flights of stairs then out behind the row housing to the toilet area, where there was a short line of people who, to judge by their sour expressions, obviously hadn't yet had their morning tea. After emptying the pot (with its picture of Napoleon staring up at him from the inside bottom) into the outhouse, he used the outhouse himself.

Someday, he thought, even this will be something people will tell their grandchildren about. The new sewer system, a massive public project, which was being built over the objections of the richer classes (those who had servants to empty their chamber pots every morning), marched closer to this street every month. But then, the richer classes usually complained about the tax burden of any construction used for the good of others.

On his way back to Amy he stopped to chat with a couple of neighbours about the weather and some politics. Generally, he found people friendly, but reserved. The older people weren't quite sure what a inspector did, since the occupation hadn't been created until a few years before. They knew it was something to do with the police, so no one was willing to mention anything that might be illegal. And there were more than a few who had trouble grasping the fact that McFergus was retired. They didn't know anybody who'd retired unless he was very sick, so they suspected the ex-cop was on the take somehow. Maybe they could sense McFergus's unease. "Now what the heck are you going to do with the rest of your life?" they asked.

"Visit people, walk, read…," he told them, but he never seemed sure of it.

By the time McFergus got back to his own door, Amy had the tea served and a washbasin full of heated water on a counter. As he sat down, she served him a bowl of oatmeal and two slices of bread, with tea. Halfway through, while he was drinking his second cup of tea, she said, "What's on your plate for the day?"

He knew what she meant. They had no children now and McFergus's plan to read a lot had been limited by his failing eyesight. He could see well enough to read the latest instalment of A *Tale of Two Cities* in the daylight, but he was getting headaches now when he tried to read by lantern light.

"Might go down to the local and talk to Arthur," he suggested.

"Hm," Amy said, and he knew what she meant about that.

"Or," he said, "I might start on that painting again."

"Sure," Amy said, and he knew what she meant about that.

"I could go for a walk."

"Your leg's hurting," Amy said. "I can tell by the way you're walking. And it's raining."

"Hm," McFergus said. It was one thing to go strolling down the avenue on a sunny day in June with the spirit of a young man, but entirely another to walk the streets of London in a December rain, when the streets had been turned into a slop from the city's thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. The surface of the street was perpetually covered with a thin coating of straw, horse manure, and horse urine, soot from the chimneys, and a fine powder made by iron wheel rims on granite blocks. Crossing a street meant stepping into that soup while dodging various combinations of public and private horse transport. London was installing its first subways and steam-driven subway cars, but it would be months before even the shortest subway line was in operation.

That left the option of taking the train to the country and looking for a hiking trail in a cold rain. But, of course, the country roads were like London streets, except with more mud and nobody to haul the horse products away every day or two. "Hm," McFergus said again.

"Remember the Jacob Marley case?" Amy asked.

McFergus looked up from his tea quickly. "I do, my love," he said. Then he tried to change the subject. "What will you yourself be doing today?"

“Tilly would like me to do a few hours worth of filing.”

McFergus nodded. That was good news. Amy’s part-time job at the insurance company didn’t pay very well, Amy being a woman and all, but any money was a help, and Amy seemed happier when she got out of the house to meet other people. “I remember the Marley case. If you can call it a case,” he added.

“You were,” she noted, “bothered by it at the time.”

“I was.” He studied his tea. “”Had not Superintendent Tayford told me I had better things to do, I might have pursued it.” He looked her in the eyes. “I tried a couple of times after that, but we were so busy….”

She put her hand on his. “You’re not busy now.”

He put his other hand over hers. “That I’m not. That I’m not.”

She withdrew her hand and poured him some more tea. “There were a number of cases you had to give up on, for lack of time.”

McFergus shook his head. “None bothered me so much as old Marley. I’d like to have followed up a few thoughts.”

“Nobody else seemed to think his death was suspicious. Just a careless man falling down a flight of stairs.”

“Ah, my dear. Nobody else on the force was warned in advance.”

“Pardon?” Amy paused with the tea pot in her hand.

The former inspector smiled. “A week before his death, I was told by a snitch that someone was going to kill Jacob Marley. of Scrooge and Marley. It would probably look like an accident, the fellow said.”

“You never told me that,” Amy said. “I never knew why you were bothered by it.” She got up to rinse the teapot and her teacup. “I often wondered if you told me all the events of the day.”

“Some things were not suitable for a woman to hear, ” he said. “And in some things I was too embarrassed.”

“I remember you and the new superintendent didn’t get along. That was obvious.”

“He’s a right bastard,” McFergus said.

“Language!” Amy said.

“I misspoke. He’s a right *awful* bastard.”

Amy just shook her head in despair. “Who told you Marley was to be killed?”

The ex-copper took a final sip from his cup, then closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. “I was patrolling up towards Smithfield,” he said.

Amy nodded. “I don’t think there’s ever been enough police for that place.”

“You’re right about that. Anyway, I came around a corner and I saw three lads, no more than twelve years old, looking at a silver watch on a chain.”

“I suspect,” Amy said, “that their ownership of that watch was rather recent. Or were they the duke’s sons, in town for a spree with the flash girls?”

“Well disguised, if they were anything but ragamuffins. The accent of two of them was south Smithfield all the way. The other was fresh from Edinburgh by the sound of him.”

“You enquired where they might have obtained the watch?” Amy smiled, knowing her husband better than that.

“I wrapped my arm around the neck of the lad who had just been handed the item, and scooped up the watch before he could toss it to the others. I told him I was a policeman.”

“And what did they say?”

“The others took off down the street, holding their pipes in their hands. The one I had in my arm didn’t say a thing. Apparently, I’d cut off his supply of air somewhat.” McFergus smiled. “Then I dragged him over to a quiet area, stood on him, and checked the watch.”

“Stolen, of course.”

“A theft, but not a pickpocket theft. It had the owner’s name in it, and it was from a hotel room that had been robbed the night before.” McFergus massaged his face with both hands, a habit he’d long had. ‘Stolen goods,’ I told him. Then I asked him if he wanted to talk, or would prefer the jail.”

“I’ve seen that jail,” Amy said. “Most things in life are better than that. Unless you’re a mudlark in winter, I guess”

“He offered me two names. Neither was a surprise to me, and I told him he was just trying to point me off. I told him to give me something I could check.” McFergus paused, then went on. “The lad was in a right panic by then. That’s when he told me he’d heard that someone bragged that someone was going to do something to Jacob Marley at Christmas. He said he didn’t know what it was. It was all pretty vague,” McFergus admitted.

“Did you know who Marley was?”

McFergus shook his head. “I knew the name but couldn’t place it, so the lad told me he was part of Scrooge and Marley. That place I did know.”

“Is it still there?”

“Still there. Scrooge runs it, but Marley’s name is still on the door, too.”

“Marley died of course.”

“A fall down the stairs. Two weeks later, on Christmas eve. I was at the investigation, but the coroner decided that Mr. Marley had died in an accident and the case was closed. I was put onto other problems.”

Amy looked pensive for a bit. Then she looked at her husband. “Did that lad add anything at the jail?” There was a pause. “You didn’t take him in, did you?”

McFergus raised his hands a bit. “The jail was full.” He hesitated. “And I had the watch back.”

“You didn’t think you might learn who else was involved in the theft, if you took him in?” She didn’t sound hopeful.

“He wouldn’t dare. It could mean a beating at least, if word got out. They’d be watching him anyway, after I let him go.”

"And?"

"He'd told me *something*. I figured I'd remember his face, and maybe someday I could use him again."

"And?"

The ex-copper smiled wryly, and slumped a tiny bit. "He did remind me of… Charlie. A bit. Somehow."

"Thought so," she said quietly. "Did you ever see him again?"

McFergus straightened up. "I didn't. I watched for him, but he never crossed my path again. Maybe some other inspector caught him somewhere else and he's breaking rocks in Australia."

"Did you ask the coroner to check it out?"

"I did that. I did that. But old men are always getting up in the middle of the night, and if they don't light a proper candle or if they get weak in the knees, well, it's down the stairs and onto the noggin at the bottom."

"You told them about the warning?"

"I hinted. If the lad I caught could have been involved in any way, the superintendent would have had my neck in a wringer for letting him go. He was in one of his rampage moods at the time. He'd have sent his own mother off to Pentonville for stealing a scone." McFergus sighed. "And he was convinced I was favouring Scots on the streets."

"So it all just… faded away."

McFergus shifted in his chair. "There was no sign of foul play. At least there was no knife sticking out of Marley's back or anything like that. The door was locked from the inside. And I talked with the housekeeper. She said she hadn't noticed anything unusual in the week before. Said Marley hadn't changed in years. Like Scrooge, she said, but a little more inclined to smile on a sunny day."

"Well, now's your chance to look into the whole thing. Maybe talk with the housekeeper some more."

"It's been seven years, Amy. That's a long time. I was younger then, you know. I wonder where I'd start, now."

His wife waved a hand. "Oh, you know where you'd start. You'd start by talking to everybody, wouldn't you? And taking notes?"

McFergus brightened. "That I would." He looked Amy in the eye. "It'll get me out of the house, anyway."

"I'll make you a sandwich to take with you." She stopped. "Take your badge."

"You think so?"

"It might be useful at some point. That hat, less so." McFergus wore a hat, like almost every man in England; the style and type of a man's hat told others much about his status and occupation. There was no hat, however, exactly appropriate for an ex-inspector of police, and

he'd decided several months before to wear a "bohemian" hat. Suitable, he told people, for his new freedom in retirement.

Half an hour later McFergus was walking down the sidewalk, occasionally jostling other people and keeping the usual eye open for pickpockets and people acting suspiciously.

There was a steady flow of people, including costermongers (named after people who once just sold large apples called coasters but now sold everything anyone would buy) with their colourful barrows and carts, and distinctive clothes. They bought fish, meat, vegetables, and fruit from central markets and sold them throughout the city, crying out their wares of hot eels, fried fish, pickled whelks, baked potatoes cough drops, cat food, ginger beer, and a hundred other specialties. Theirs was a separate society, and if they had one enemy, it was the police, who tried to keep the carts from blocking the streets or the entrances to stores. Among them flowed a separate, usually poorer society of people, selling stationery, manufactured items, second-hand items, and live animals.

Then there were buyers, collecting old clothes, bones, bit of cigarettes, broken glass and anything that might bring in a few pennies for a meal for the evening. There were collectors, assembling discarded ends of cigarettes, dog dung for tanners, or bits of coal or even sifting through the sewers along the edges of streets or the ash that was collected from homes. There were street show people, dragging curiosities behind them, and street entertainers, singing, dancing, or putting on games. And there were people who repaired things, from pots to watches.

Trying to push them all aside were the cabs, buses, and wagons, all pulled by horses, making their slow passage along streets that were far too narrow to contain them, and were constantly under repair as new water and gas lines came to the city, and ancient wooden-sided pipes under the streets collapsed and had to be replaced.

Rainclouds were hovering in the sky and it was cold enough to see the breath from the horses. This, McFergus thought, is probably a fool's errand. But he realized he was feeling better than he had in months. *I wonder how long I can drag this investigation out*, he thought. He contemplated having tea and the occasional beer, and talking to people he'd never talked to. It might be difficult, now that he wasn't with the police any more, or it might be easier, just because of that.

Marley's house hadn't changed in seven years. McFergus wasn't surprised; he'd had occasion to walk past it many times in the seven years since Marley's housekeeper had found the old guy at the bottom of the stairs.

He leaned against a lamp post, booted away a small dog that wanted to mark both him and the post, and took out his note-pad and pencil. His friends on the force had given him a fountain pen as a retirement present, but he kept it at home; it was just too hard to fill and was too likely to leak into his pocket. As well, the steel nibs were expensive to replace. He sharpened the pencil carefully with his pocket knife, then paused, the pencil hovering above

the paper. After a moment, he wrote, “People to Talk to” on the paper, in the small, fine letters that people of his time had learned to use, considering the cost of supplies.

Realizing that he couldn’t remember the name of Marley’s housekeeper, he thought a bit, then wrote, “Any housekeeper in the area.” He frowned. Anyway, it was a start. With a sigh, he decided to find a place to sit down, which, of course, meant the local pub. He moved down the street, and his copper’s eye did not miss the thin youth following him.

McFergus leaned against a lamp post for a minute. His right knee hurt, the result of years of walking the streets of the city and a nasty kick by a troublesome Irishman during that time. The sooty English mist turned to snow for a moment, then eased up. The thin youth passed him, crossed the street between a couple of hansom cabs, and went into a pub.

Down the street, two cleaning women came out of one of the row houses, adjusted their rough clothing and headed his way. McFergus eased his knee back into action, and stood as tall has he could, waiting until they were close. Then he stepped in front of them, and said, “Excuse me, ladies. May I ask you a question? Police business.”

One of the women looked frightened, but the other had the scepticism towards authority that was common to the redheaded Irish working class. She looked straight at him. “Copper, are you? Got a badge to go with that?”

He sighed and showed them the badge Amy had insisted he take with him. The redhead snorted derisively. “I can buy one of them anywhere on the street.”

“I just want the name of the woman that cleans number 67.” He pointed across the street.

“Hoping to catch Scrooge cooking and eating little kids, are you, or selling secrets to the French?”

“He does that?”

“Not likely,” the cleaning woman said. “Just joking. He’s mean, I hear, but not a crook.” She shifted her load of cleaning equipment. “You’ll want Sally Detwood. She’s been and gone there already and is probably over on Marden Lane by now.” She watched as McFergus wrote the name down, then stepped around him. “We’ll be going now. Time won’t wait for us, you know.”

She left before he could get her name. He shook his head; the fact that she’d questioned his authority left him less confident of his quest. He’d always been able to use weight of the police force to back him up, but he wasn’t a policeman any more. If the superintendent found out that he’d been pretending to still be a copper, things could go badly fairly quickly. He shook his head again, and crossed the street. A couple of street urchins with heavy brooms swept the larger pieces of horse droppings ahead of him, and he tossed the taller one a farthing. This was met with a, “Thanks, govn’r” and a grin.

He walked into the pub, waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then looked around. The thin youth who had been following him was sitting at the back. The youth waved at him, beckoning.

McFergus pulled up a chair by the small table. The room was poorly lit by a few candle lanterns and by what little light seeped in through a small, dirty window from the gloomy sky outside. Most of the voices had a strong Irish lilt, which didn't surprise the inspector; it had been more than a dozen years since the start of the potato famine, but Irish labour was still cheap throughout the Empire. By keeping his head down, he was able to avoid most of the tobacco smoke that hung just below the black beams.

A server, male and middle-aged, showed up at once. "A half pint of porter," McFergus told him. The youth asked for a lager.

"Ah, inspector," the youth said. "Porter. I'll note that."

"We've met?"

"Never before."

"Then?"

"You have the coat and shoes of someone who spends a lot of time walking the streets. Policemen get shoes like that as soon as they can. You have the air of one who's used to carrying authority, so I can surmise you're an inspector. A superintendent would have got a better class of shoes. And I can guess that you're no longer with the force, or your shoes would have a better shine. The slight limp you have isn't enough to remove you from the force, but your age is. You must be retired. My compliments to your wife's sense of thrift; not everyone can afford to retire." The youth waved his arm around. "These gentlemen of the shovel will work until they can work no more, then hope their children can afford to care for them."

McFergus paid for the beer.

After a sip, the youth went on. "I saw a glint of unease in your eyes when I mentioned children. I extend my sympathy and will not bring up the subject again."

"I suppose you know my name, as well."

"How could I do that? Probably Mac-something or other. You have the accent of the Edinburgh Scots, but much less of it, so you must have come to London when you were younger, or you've adapted to the local accent very well."

The ex-copper pondered the question, looked at the well-made clothes of the young man across from him. "Ian McFergus," he said, extending his hand.

"I'm…" There was a slight pause. "Sampson at your service. Sampson Hill."

"You deduce very well," McFergus said, "but you don't drink much. You've had only a sip of your lager."

"I fear I may have an addictive personality," Sampson said, "but I was thirsty, and I doubt the water here is trustworthy."

"Probably right on that one. There seems to be a consensus in this place that alcohol is the safer choice, but not by much." McFergus paused. "And why were you following me?"

Sampson laughed. "Just a final test."

"Most people have to watch out for people following them. The place is alive with pickpockets." McFergus took a big sip of his porter, his eyes scanning the room again.

“But,” Sampson said, “most people would have dismissed a well-dressed young man like myself as a threat. Only professional criminals and policemen keep track of everything.” He took a small sip of his beer. “And the same for watching the room like you just did.”

“But you decided I wasn’t a criminal.”

“To be honest,” Sampson said, “you don’t dress well enough to be a successful criminal.”

McFergus laughed. “That’s true. So why this meeting?” He’d waited for Sampson to ask him to deduce a few conclusions about Sampson himself, but it didn’t happen and McFergus didn’t feel like offering.

“I thought you might need a bit of help in your quest.”

“I have a quest?”

“A retired man with a spring in his step such as you have is on a quest. Or he’s off to see a woman.”

“I could have been off to see a woman.”

Sampson shrugged. “You wouldn’t have been so careful about watching the street, you would have dressed a bit better… and you wouldn’t be in here talking to me.”

The Scot spent a while looking at the young man. “And what help could a man of… your age be?”

“I’m eleven years old, almost twelve.”

“And you think you can help me?”

“I am a prodigy of observation and deduction.” Sampson held up his palms to forestall objection. “I’m not bragging; it’s just something I discovered about myself and have tried to take advantage of it. I go to a private school and am by temperament less athletically inclined than most. Bullying is very much taken for granted there.” Sampson took a sip of beer. “At the moment, I can say there are none who would harm me, lest certain revelations about themselves or their family surface. Most people have concealed skeletons in their closets that they must keep hidden.” Sampson looked around. “Mind you, an unfortunate and fatal accident to myself would be cause for celebration among some of the students, as well as among the staff.” He smiled at McFergus. “You looked like a worthy companion, and talking to me might bring out a few details you’d otherwise overlook. I myself have been looking for a person to share deductions with.”

“But not observation.”

“I am,” Sampson said, “often confined to a classroom, so at this point I can help only with deduction.” He paused. “At this point most people I could talk to would just roll their eyes.”

“Would you like some food?”

“I would.”

McFergus ordered a pork pie for each of them. Then he signalled to a vendor who’d come in from outside and bought from him a few whelks. Sampson didn’t want any, so the vendor scooped a few from a glass jar onto the table in front of the former inspector. McFergus took time to look around the public house again. He could see a couple of men glancing at him

suspiciously. They'd have referred to his companion as a "hobbadehoy," a youth who has ceased to regard himself as a boy, but is not yet regarded as a man. They probably wondered about the relationship between the himself and the young Mr. Hill.

He didn't know the men, but they'd probably been involved with the police enough to recognize a copper. Further across the pub was Bill Sikes, his back to McFergus, his dog at his feet. The Yorkshireman had been hauled up before court several times, but never found guilty, perhaps because witnesses tended to disappear or to abruptly discover the value of silence. McFergus would have been happier to know Sikes was safely in Australia, cutting gum trees under supervision, especially since the crook was undoubtedly aware McFergus no longer carried a badge. He turned back to Sampson, and put his hands together on the table.

"Thanks," said the youth. To McFergus's raised eyebrow he added, "Your body language tells me that you've decided to trust me, but not too far. Yet. I hope to establish more trust as we go along, if you approve."

McFergus sighed, then wondered what Sampson was reading into that. "I'm Ian McFergus," he started. "I was Inspector with the London force up until six months ago. My dear wife is tired of falling over my dour presence, and has suggested I look up an old unsolved case or two." Then he described the warning about Jacob Marley being targeted, followed, a few days later, by the finding of Marley's body at the bottom of his stairs.

"Did you report the threat…." Sampson started, then shook his head. "Irrelevant. Let's get to the real business."

"Okay". McFergus was relieved.

"This will be pretty elementary, of course. The two most obvious questions we can ask are: did anyone hate Marley enough to kill him, and who benefited from his death?" He paused. "Was Marley rich?"

"He was half of a company called Scrooge and Marley. Bankers, with a seat in the Exchange."

Sampson nodded. "He was worth money then. Was there any sign of a robbery?"

"None."

"What happened to his money?"

McFergus shrugged. "That's a bit of a mystery. He left everything to Scrooge. But it was rumoured that he was worth a lot more than that." He ate another whelk. "Or that he smuggled money to finance a railway in Canada. Or that he didn't trust Mr. Scrooge and paid money to the mistress of a cabinet minister in the government." McFergus set aside a suspicious-looking whelk. "But there are always rumours like that when a rich man dies."

"So maybe he had some hidden in the house"

McFergus shrugged. "If someone was planning to break in afterwards, they may have missed the chance; Scrooge took the apartment for himself in less than a week. If there was a hidden safe somewhere in the house, it must have been Scrooge himself who did the deed."

"Did he seem like the type?"

“I don’t know; I’ve never talked to him.”

Sampson smiled. “Then that’s where we start.” He drew a piece of paper and a pencil from a pocket. “Here,” he said. “We’ll list some of the reasons a man like Mr. Jacob Marley might be murdered.”

McFergus was a bit dubious, but he started. “For his money, of course. Which would make Mr. Scrooge the prime suspect.” He watched as Sampson wrote that down.

“Vengeance,” he said next. “Perhaps his clerk or someone that worked for him had a grievance.” Sampson wrote that down, too. “We should check out the family of the employees, too. Sometimes a wife has a grievance at the treatment of her husband.”

“And the housekeeper,” Sampson said, “if only for the opportunity for access. Perhaps she’d stolen something valuable and was about to be turned over to the police.”

McFergus had done some thinking along those lines over the years. “We cannot,” he said, “dismiss that fact that a rich man is a powerful man, and people and institutions are affected by his acquisition and use of that power.”

“If so,” Sampson said, still taking notes, “it must have been something that was not true of his partner, since Mr. Scrooge was not attacked. That fact could be helpful.” Sampson pushed the list over to McFergus . “It’s a beginning. We’ll see what you think of Mr. Scrooge ”

“Makes sense,” McFergus said, feeling a bit pressured, although talking to Scrooge had been high on his list of things to do anyway. “And what shall I ask him?”

“Oh, I suppose you policemen have your methods of judging people’s demeanour. I assume you talk to a person and are able to tell whether the fellow is telling the truth or all of it.”

McFergus nodded. “We think we do, although I’ve known a few that were hopeless at the job.”

“And you?”

The retired cop smiled at the very young man. “All of us cops suppose we’re good at it, but not all of us truly are. We’re seldom good judges of our own abilities.” He looked around the room. Bill Sikes was looking his way.

McFergus smiled at Sikes and Sikes smiled back, mouthing something unheard, but it looked a lot more like a threat than a Christmas greeting.

“You can probably ignore him,” Sampson said, his back to Sikes.

“You think so?”

The youth nodded. “However many times you tried to get him, you obviously didn’t succeed or he’d be in Australia or in the ground by now, so he’ll be feeling a bit superior. And he probably doesn’t know that you’re a bit alienated from the rest of the force. He’d have to assume that you still have lots of friends there.”

McFergus stared across the small table.

“As I mentioned,” Sampson said, “I am good at observation and deduction.”

“Does it get you beat up a lot at school?”

“It did, until I had enough information on the leaders, and had it in an envelope where they couldn’t get at it.” Sampson smiled, his eyes distant. “But the school’s headmaster could, if necessary.”

The copper considered things for a moment, then reached out and shook Sampson’s hand. “Your offer of partnership in this enterprise is accepted.”

“Thank you again. My guess is that you are about to be accosted by the man you smiled at, and perhaps one or two of his friends. If they’re true to character, they’ll be hostile to me, just to annoy you. I’d prefer you distracted them from such an idea.”

McFergus noted that Sikes had arrived with a bully pal named Jack Finch who was indeed reaching for the back of Sampson’s head.

Perhaps, thought McFergus, Sampson had some vision of him rising and smiting the two rough men. Then he corrected himself; the youth had already noted his new friend’s age and slight limp. In any even, McFergus merely looked Sikes’s companion in the eye and said, firmly, “That would be a very bad idea, sir.” The man hesitated, looked at Sikes, then lowered his hand.

“You’re not on the force any more,” Sikes said, without smiling.

“That I’m not,” McFergus said.

“You’re retired, and not on the best of terms with the force.”

McFergus nodded. Sikes then broke into a wide grin. “Maybe I should buy you an ale?” When he got no answer, he motioned to his companion, and they walked away and out the door. McFergus noted that the place had got noticeably quieter. He also noted that two large men had paused, then returned to the bar to put away the cricket bats they’d been carrying. Broken tables and glasses did not come cheaply.

Sampson ignored the stares. “There’s a tea shop around the corner on Baker Street, where they’ve got a rather large hole in the road for putting in the underground railway. Shall we meet there tomorrow at noon?”

McFergus nodded. “Bound to be a bit safer than here. I’m to report to you, am I?” he asked, smiling.

“Oh, not that! We’ll just see if there are any deductions I can help you with. I,” he said, “am your humble and unpaid servant.”

“Is not an unpaid servant a slave?”

“Your humble slave, sire.”

“I rather doubt the humble part, young man,” said McFergus, getting up.

On the street, McFergus watched Sampson catch a cab, thinking, I didn’t even ask which school he was going to. He shrugged, dodged a couple of boys either chasing each other through the crowds or running a pickpocket routine – it was hard to tell unless you watched their eyes – and made his way towards Scrooge’s house. The rain had let up and the odd ray of sunshine touched the city, lighting up the smoke that curled from thousands of chimneys.

It was still damp and cold, and McFergus wondered why he hadn't volunteered to serve a few years in some warmer climate. God knows, he thought, the empire accumulated enough warm places to ship more than criminals to. The thought of serving as a minor functionary in some British colony had its appeal, and he could probably have got a job there. He pictured bright colors, endless sunshine, heat, and happy natives with wheelbarrows of fresh fruit by his door, then he sighed. He was just as likely to end up in Canada, he and Amy in some log hut in a raging snowstorm huddled over a tiny wood fire under a pile of moose-fur blankets. Amy, he thought, was happier now that she had the part-time job and people to talk to.

It took him most of an hour, moving slowly and watching the street scenes, to get to Scrooge's house. He looked around, saw nothing happening, and decided to wait, sitting himself on the stone step. A street vendor sold him a fresh roll.

A couple dozen more costermongers, packmen, and vendors of miscellaneous goods, made offers, but, obviously knowing him as a policeman, didn't persist. For most of an hour he sat patiently on the steps, watching the street people and trying to decide whether or not to take to one of the alleys and relieve his bladder when a street conjurer wheeled his small table up in front of him. "Paul Ledwitch Dwan," McFergus said. "How is the magician business these days?"

Dwan laughed and sat down beside the policeman. "No magic, as you know," he said. "Just tricks and quickness of the hand. Are you ready to buy my book, yet? Tuppence for most folks, but a penny for you."

"That's the same offer you've been making me for ten years now."

"But now your curiosity is getting better of you, isn't it. Wouldn't you really, finally, like to learn how I do some of my tricks?"

"Some?"

The conjurer laughed again. "Some. No point in telling people all of it. In fact, if they know some of the tricks, they'll come back because they're sure they can figure out the rest."

"And you make money on that. I suspect you'd sell the tale of one of those last tricks for money?"

"Of course. A man's got to earn his supper."

"Has anyone ever bought them all?"

Dwan shook his long curly locks. "I save one. I know a man who thinks he knows all of them but hasn't figured out how I cut a hole in his hat, then make it complete again. He shows up regularly, but doesn't give much any more, he's so angry."

Both men waited until a marching band and some people towing a truly large sign advertising a local show had passed by, and McFergus ignored the calls of the Irish kids trying to sell him small articles. When he'd first arrived in London, such kids had been almost entirely Jewish, but that was before the potato famine in Ireland. The Irish lads had a poverty and desperation that drove all their rivals out of business. Many were homeless, sleeping

under stairs, and some didn't have shoes, even in winter. "And how did you end up in the magician business?" McFergus asked.

"No magic to that, either. My father held a good position, a very good one, with the Customs, and we lived very well. But I was six when he died of the cholera, he did. Some say we get it from bad wells, but a lot of us drank from the same well and never got it."

"More likely the sewers," McFergus said, pointing to the sewer channel at the edge of the street that carried people's waste to the Thames. "That can't be good for a person. I'll be glad enough when the underground sewers get here."

Dwan nodded, then continued. "My father hadn't saved any money, and it had never occurred to my mother to do so. We sold the flat and lived for a while on the money, but a fire took that one night. Barely escaped with our lives." He lit a very smelly cigar, then continued. "My father had a cousin in India, and he sent us enough money to make the transit, my mom and me."

McFergus watched the scene passing by. Some of them took a quick glance at him; some a long glance. He'd walked this beat for the first few years of his employ in the constabulary. It seemed like a long time ago, or a moment. He'd arrested a few, and given a lot of warnings. A few times he'd hauled a miscreant off to the nearest local and explained the rules of his existence, and what his boss would do to him if he didn't enforce those rules. Usually, the man opposite him would accept the glass of ale, and acknowledge that the two of them were on different sides of things. Sometimes, the other fellow, especially if he were a costermonger, had an anger or need too deep to ever acknowledge that the rules were fair, and the other guy would part with a sneer.

"What are you thinking?" Dwan asked, suddenly, interrupting his own narrative.

"Sorry," McFergus said. "My mind wandered back a few years."

Dwan nodded. "There are a lot of people here who knew you when you were a beat copper here. But not many had it in for you, even then. You were known to be fairer than most."

"There are a few who would wish me harm."

"Dwan shook his head. "Things have changed here. You're just the old guy who let Jamie Whittle go when you had every right to haul him in."

"They remember that?" McFergus turned to look Dwan in the eyes.

"They do." Dwan blew out a cloud of smoke. "He was close to losing his kids when you collared him, and he was pretty grateful when you let him off. Did you get in trouble for that?"

McFergus shrugged. "Just a warning, and a lecture."

"And a note in your record, no doubt. Well it wasn't forgotten. Most people here don't mean you harm." He looked around. "I can sit beside you and not have any – well, not much – explaining to do."

"Most people."

"There are a few blokes," the conjurer said, who can't be reasoned with."

McFergus nodded. “I interrupted you. How’d you get back from India?”

“Sure you want to hear it?”

“Actually, I’m enjoying it. I always wondered about the street people.”

“Well, my mother died in India, of some tropical disease or other.” Dwan went on quickly. “Me and my uncle didn’t get along right well, so I worked my way on a boat back to old Blighty. Got a job on the street working for a medicine man.”

“Selling stuff that didn’t work to desperate people.”

“More or less. A few of our products worked. Some were downright dangerous. The guy I worked with had potions from the Amazon to Borneo. You need something to make you happy? I can get it.” He stared at McFergus. “I can make these people feel better. Sometimes I can heal them. It’s worth while.”

“I’ll pass for now.”

“Well, I got into the conjurer business because it’s… less dangerous to people. I just entertain them for a few pennies at a time.”

McFergus bought an orange from a costermonger, although Dwan turned down the offer of one for himself. “I can be seen talking to a copper,” he said, “but accepting something from you isn’t going to be a good idea. How’d you end up in the police business?”

“Came from Glasgow,” McFergus said. “My father was a parson. I did that myself, but I never took to it, which caused a break between myself and my father. Then I worked as a gamekeeper for a few years before I lost my respect for rich bastards who owned the land.”

“And then you came to London, like me?”

“With my wife. It was hard for the first few years. Got so hungry I almost became a mud lark.”

“Feeling through the river mud with your bare feet? That’s pretty low.”

“Then,” said McFergus, “a friend told me the constabulary was looking for blokes, and they took me, even if I was a Scot.” McFergus fell silent for a few minutes. Then he asked, “Do you know anything about Scrooge, the guy who lives here?”

“I don’t,” the conjurer said, getting up, “but here comes someone who might.” A washerwoman was approaching the steps. “Good day, and merry Christmas.” Dwan said, smiling at the women as he got up and wheeled his cart back into the throng in the street.

“It’s not Christmas yet!” McFergus called after him. It annoyed the inspector when people wished him a merry Christmas before it was actually Christmas day.

The two women stopped on the street in front of Scrooge’s house and looked McFergus up and down. The redhead, who McFergus judged to be in her mid twenties, tilted her head in the direction of the departing conjurer. “What’s Dwan talking to the likes of you for?” she asked, in a lilt so Irish that McFergus wished for a translator.

“Don’t know,” McFergus replied, honestly. “Maybe he just needed conversation.”

“Off his regular beat,” he is. “Must have a reason.”

“Ah, is he? I wondered about that.” Scrooge’s house was half a block off a larger street, and only a few vendors came down it. “He didn’t try to sell me anything, anyway.”

“I can believe that. Aside from his conjuring, he sells a few potions, mostly for female problems.” She smiled. “And for men that need some boosting.”

“Do they work?” McFergus raised his eyebrows.

She shrugged. “All the way from the Amazon jungle, you know, or so he says. Liars, like all men. You going to let us in? We got work to do.”

“Of course.” McFergus slid sideways so they two could get up the steps. “I was hoping to find out who was doing the house when Marley lived here. Sally Detwood, perhaps.”

“What for?” The older washerwoman looked decidedly less friendly than the younger, and had a south Devon accent.

“Got some questions to ask her.” McFergus shrugged. “I’m curious about a few things that happened the night he died.”

There was a silence, then the older woman said, “Those questions should have been asked back then.”

“I’m a slow man,” McFergus said. “Or so my wife says.”

“You want Virginia Boyle, not Sally. She was here when Mr. Marley was, when he died.” The woman was looking less happy every second.

“Do you know where I can find her?”

She laughed. “Millbridge Abbey. Long way from London town, she is. Long way.” She got out a key and opened the door. The two women went in. McFergus could hear them locking the door from the inside.

McFergus wrote down, “Virginia Boyle. Millbridge Abbey,” into his notebook. He looked up to find a couple of young boys watching him. They carried baskets of nuts under their arms; a common enough sight, he knew. Boys like these would buy items such as onion greens or apples in the Covent Garden Market before dawn then spend the morning trying to sell them to housewives too poor to have servants. Such boys would return to the market in the afternoon to get nuts to sell in the public houses until after dark. McFergus thought they must be doing the side streets door to door, but they turned and ran as he stood up. Odd, he thought, that they should be on a small street like this at this time of day. A small chill ran down his spine.

The streets were in shadow now, with only the tips of chimneys lit by a momentary sun, so McFergus knew it was almost four in the afternoon. Sunset, he thought, in a northern country. Maybe someone in the Barbados colony needed a retired policeman to check the quality of the rum supplies. He pictured himself and Amy on the beach, watching a sunset. Then he headed home as the gaslighters were starting up the coal-gas streetlights. Amy would be expecting him.

He followed the main streets as far as he could. Seeing his breath told him it was getting cold, and he suspected there might be snow by morning. A few of the costermongers, still

trying to sell their wares from barrows or donkey-drawn carts, nodded at him. A policeman didn't make friends in the city, but many of the street people were at least aware that he'd gone against the department standards in sympathy with them.

He found himself walking beside a man and his donkey, moving silently in the same direction. McFergus patted the donkey gently. The costermonger smiled. Donkeys were prized and loved among the street people. Then, as they parted ways at a street corner, the man said something surprising. "Talk to Desmond," he said. "At the Great Blackfriar's market. About the Marley murder." And he was gone.

For a moment McFergus stood there, stunned. Up to that moment he'd thought that he alone in all of London, or the world, for that matter, had even considered the possibility that Marley's death wasn't the accident it seemed.

While he stood there, the gaslighter showed up and began lighting the lamps along the side street that would take McFergus home. It was almost symbolic, he thought. A sudden light among the shadows of doubt. Something to tell Amy when he got home.

Having been a policeman in the city, he thought it unwise to go too quickly into dark areas, and paused in the doorway of what he first assumed was a penny-gaff theatre. Like most people except the bottom levels of society, McFergus considered penny-gaff temporary theatres immoral and degrading. Even the street sellers avoided them, but they were profitable. One penny would get a person an hour of clothed people simulating various sexual acts while someone else read a raunchy poem or sang a song that made the audience laugh. Most of the audience was made up of women from the ages of seven to twenty, something McFergus never got used to. They certainly learned things McFergus hadn't known at seven.

But instead of rude pictures on the front supposedly showing what the entertainers inside would do onstage, there were pictures, not nearly as well drawn, of rich men in top hats standing on what was obviously a ragged working man. The door was open, so McFergus walked in. Onstage a man in clean working clothes was lecturing a small audience on the evils of the capitalist system. McFergus tended to rather agree with him, from his experience with Scots society, but he didn't think the Communists would get very far in central London. Desperately poor as they were, the majority of the costermonger street vendors either owned their barrows and stalls, or were looking forward to they day they could. They were capitalists, just not very rich ones.

The copper was about to leave when the speech ended to a small round of applause, and a blonde girl came on stage with four members of a band. Judging by the hooting and applause, this was what the audience was waiting for. The girl was singing beautifully about the oppression of the rich factory owners and the useless upper classes when he recognized her. Molly Lambert, daughter of a metal worker from the Great Blackfriars' Market. Her father sold and repaired various metal items. She'd grown into a beautiful young woman with a commanding voice.

After four songs, all of them done to Irish or Scottish folk-song tunes, the lecturer began again, and McFergus left the building. *Shame*, he thought, *that they don't have a bagpiper*.

It took him a most of an hour to get home. The streets were lit most of the way, but he kept, where possible, to the center of the street unless there were people around him. On this cold night, some of the streets were getting deserted.

He unlocked the door and let himself into the dark hallway. Upstairs there was the light from a tallow candle. Amy greeted him with a big smile; he always liked that about her. "Sit down," she offered, "and I'll get you some supper." She served him potatoes with bacon fat, with a piece of bread, and a mug of ale. "Now, tell me about your day," she said, sitting down across the table from him.

Amy listened attentively, without interruption, drinking tea. McFergus didn't leave anything out.

As usual, she spoke when he was done. "Do you think this Bill Sikes is any danger."

McFergus shook his head. "He's got away with so much for so many years. Why risk attracting the attention of the police now? For all he knows," McFergus lied, "I might have a lot of friends on the force who would come down on him. He's a bully, but a canny one." It was dark outside the window, now, with only a little glow coming from a streetlamp on the corner. The two candles on the table lit Amy's face. *How old we've grown* he thought, *but she's still a beautiful woman. When spring comes, maybe we can take the train to see her cousin in Cornwall. Walk some quiet hills. Go down to the beach. She hasn't seen her cousin in two years. How long since she's breathed clean air?*

"Do you think the young man will be any help to you?" Amy poured another cup of tea.

"Unlikely." He paused. "But it'll be nice to be on the street and have someone to talk to."

Amy nodded. "You always used to talk to Brian." Brian was a constable who'd never been promoted, despite his intelligence. He and McFergus would meet in the Old Jerusalem public house for a beer many afternoons, and discuss the activity on the street and the progress of various cases.

"That's probably what I was thinking of. We'd fill each other in on what we picked up walking the streets. Where the pickpockets were, and where the street sellers were about to get into fights because somebody new was pushing his way in. Things like that. I miss him."

"Considering the turnover in the force, it's a wonder we know as many people as we do." She looked at her husband. "And now there's even fewer, since Bannim became superintendent."

McFergus nodded. The constabulary was a pretty tight group. Members were encouraged to share their spare time together, and to hang out in public houses together. But when Bannim became chief superintendent, he and McFergus just didn't get along. Probably had an ancestor slaughtered by some Scot in the old days, the inspector figured, some highlander pulling a sharp skein dhu from his sock while others played the great highland bagpipes to drown his screams. Yes, all of that plus the golden sickle knife for that most infamous cut. He

smiled at the thought. In any case, the coppers who'd shared the police life with him, McFergus noted, tended to avoid him now, perhaps afraid of Bannim, or fearful for their pensions. The force had some of the first pensions in England, but the rank and file always believed that, even after retirement (at sixty percent salary, for McFergus), a pension could be taken away with a bit of political pressure.

"Are we thinking of moving out again?" he asked, taking her hand. It was an old subject.

"We thought we had so many friends," she said, almost in a whisper.

He nodded. They'd talked about moving out to a village somewhere. London, especially central London, was more and more a place for young people. "There's your job," he said.

Amy nodded. "We can use that money, and I like getting out to meet people. Not likely to get a job in a village."

"Some living costs might be cheaper there. Or we'd get more room." He didn't have to say that the police didn't pay well even if someone in the village wanted him on the local force, at his age. Or that most older people needed to have money from working children just to keep going. But with Charlie, their only son, now dead, they were barely in the position to even have a servant to help Amy, even if she'd wanted one.

So now what are you going to do? Amy asked him.

"Well," he said. "I didn't get a lot accomplished today…."

"You did, though," Amy said, looking intently into his eyes. "You got started on something. That first step can be the biggest. You are on the way to finding out if the death of Mr. M. was an accident or not."

He smiled. "Perhaps you're right, but I think the only reason the police were called at the time was because Marley was rich. I imagine the superintendent decided it worth checking out, not only because there might be a reason to kill the old man, but because rich people all over London are always nervous about criminals and relatives ogling their money. Did you know that that Marley's house became Scrooge's house within a week of Marley's funeral?"

"Meaning?"

"If there's a meaning to that, I don't know it yet."

"It's a start," Amy said. "It's a start."

They lit the lantern and read books by lantern light until it was late enough to go to bed. McFergus read the communist pamphlet a couple of times, then returned to reading a wild west adventure that was entertaining, if not well written. The mesas of Kansas seemed a long way from the streets of London.

McFergus lay awake long after Amy was snoring gently beside him. He'd grown up in a village and had spent much of his childhood in the woods playing Cheyenne raider. He'd learned to dodge gamekeepers long before he'd become a gamekeeper himself. His years in the police in London had finally left him longing for something more, but he didn't miss the village he'd grown up in, he finally decided, as he fell asleep. He missed only the youth and optimism he'd had in those woods.

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Chapter 2: December 20

The next morning was sunny and somewhat warmer, and he found himself at the office of Scrooge and Marley early. When he knocked at the door, Bob Cratchit let him in, and led him to Scrooge's desk, before returning to his own desk by the window. McFergus suspected the window light was just Scrooge's way of saving money on candles.

"Good day," McFergus said to the sour-faced old man who eventually looked up.

"A fine wish, I suppose, but little good it'll do me to hear it," Scrooge said in a grating voice. "Corn's down, the city wants to buy my biggest warehouse for a pittance, and half the people who owe me money are going to ask for an extension on their loans by week's end. Do you suppose your wish is likely to help any of those issues?" Scrooge looked up briefly, then returned to his ledger, his pointed nose following the lines like a pen.

There was something cold, McFergus decided, about Mr. Scrooge. Something that chilled even the air around him, although that could hardly have been more than a degree above the outside air. Maybe, McFergus thought, it's that he looks half dead already, with his blue lips and hollow cheeks. Only his red eyes reminded one that Scrooge wasn't a walking corpse. "I suppose it couldn't hurt. Can I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Is there any profit in it for me?" Scrooge squinted in the dim light. "Ah, I can see by your expression that there isn't. Well;" he shuffled a few papers and dipped his pen into the inkpot. "Well, you know where the door is."

"This is about an investigation into the death of Mr. Marley." McFergus had faced worse, but then he'd had his badge to rely on.

"You're police? Badge. Let's see your badge." Scrooge's stare was something in itself.

McFergus wasn't going to bluff a man with this many connections and this much money. "Former inspector. Retired six months now." It wasn't likely Scrooge was going to offer him a chair, he decided.

Scrooge tilted his head down and looked up through his eyebrows at McFergus. "Former inspector; former right to ask questions."

"It's about Marley, your former partner."

"It appears your job and your subject are both done, gone, suitably decaying. Can you suggest any reason I should go digging in the graveyards of ghosts such as yourself." Scrooge waved generally at his papers. "When I have living work to do?"

"Curiosity about Marley, perhaps?"

"My only curiosity is about the market. That, and just how long it will take my clerk to show you the door. *Cratchit*!" Scrooge stood up, and looked at McFergus. "I am not without influence with this city, and I can talk to Superintendent Bannim, should you persist in interrupting a working man." Scrooge sat down as Cratchit arrived. "You have my permission to spend as much of your time as you want asking questions about Jacob Marley. Just," he

tapped his desk with the a finger, “don’t use up my time or my clerk’s in doing so. Good day Mr. former policeman.” Scrooge dipped his pen into the ink again, and began writing.

“Can I talk to your clerk?” Cratchit was beside McFergus, nervous.

“On his own time, you can do whatever you want. Good day, sir.”

Cratchit and McFergus walked to the door. As McFergus exited, Cratchit whispered, “He’s away at the market first half of the afternoon.” And the ex-policeman found himself on the street, almost knocked over by a man pushing a barrow of books and newspapers for sale. The man was obviously on his in a hurry, away from someplace to someplace. McFergus took a quick cop’s-eye view, then moved on. A person usually didn’t get run down by bookmongers; they were among the noisiest people in the street, constantly trying to impress people with their use of big words, even if most of their income came from selling old newspaper clippings for a farthing or two, rather than from political tracts, stationery, or books.

McFergus took his watch out of his pocket to check the time. It was a miracle, the thought, that he had one; in his childhood a person had had to be quite wealthy to have a watch. McFergus’ kept his on a strong chain – watches were still an important part of the pickpocket’s living.

Almost ten in the morning, and he was a bit depressed by the interview, or lack of it, with Scrooge. His badge had been a shield against people for years, and relying on people to talk to him out of the goodness of their souls wasn’t going to be as easy as he’d hoped. He ignored the people who tried to sell him apples and fried foods, and stepped into a tea shop inside a departmental store. A tea room, or a departmental store, for that matter, was another item he’d never dreamed of as a child, but he was learning that public houses were filled with people who didn’t want him there because he’d been a copper. There were of course, the old police hangouts, but the last time he’d gone to one of those it was clear that he was no longer part of the conversation about daily life, and he’d felt rather excluded. Perhaps, he thought, it is time to get out of London.

He looked around at the other people in the room. They looked contented, or as much as they could with British reserve, but a bit restless. Many interrupted conversations with polite coughing. *The air*, McFergus thought. *Humans aren’t meant to breath soot all day*. Not that there was much anyone could do about it; coal fuelled the city. When the coal-soot fog settled into the streets, few people ventured outside unless they had to.

After tea a baked sweet dusted with sugar, he used the toilets out behind the establishment, then tried to decide what to do.

He had a meeting with the Hill kid in the afternoon, and a try at an interview with Bob Cratchit if he was lucky. Other than that, his only direction at the moment was to try to find someone called Desmond, selling something in the Great Blackfriars market.

Since it was Saturday the streets were busier than usual, and the sunshine and warmth, unusual for London in December, had brought more costermongers out to sell their wares. McFergus paused to buy a used small brass-and-elm-wood-scraping tool from a street

ironmonger, then wandered down to the docks. At King James Steps he could see that the tide was out, with many ships and boats canted over on the mud and many more well out in the deeper water, waiting for high tide and an available berth to come in. Work crews on some of the ships were repairing rigging or scraping barnacles off the sides. On a good day in summer as many as six hundred sailing ships might be docked along the Thames, but on this cold December day there were far fewer.

He sat on the steps for a while, watching the mud larks wading through the cold water. Every now and then one of them would feel something to investigate with his or her toes, bring it up, and if it had any value whatever, put the object into a basket or kettle. He saw one of the smaller children slip, and come up wet. At this time of the year there were only a few out in the water, hoping for copper nails or pieces of iron, but most often finding only bits of bone or rope. Even that was saved; enough could be sold for a penny or two, and that would mean food for another day.

Cold work, he thought, watching one of the old women with a metal pot; children and old women made up most of the mudlark group. The ragged clothes they wore didn't cut the breeze much. He wondered if they were better off than those who searched the sewer drains for objects. Probably not, he decided; it was the mudlarks who sometimes committed nuisance crimes just for a few days in a warm jail in the winter.

He watched as a woman waded out of the water, came through the mud flats and slowly climbed the stairs, then he moved over to meet her as she got to street level. She was, he could see, getting too old for the mudlark trade, and was limping. He held out one hand to help her on a step. "Did you cut yourself,?" McFergus asked, pointing to her foot. A small pool of blood was forming under one toe.

She looked at him suspiciously. "What's it to you?"

McFergus dug a handkerchief from a pocket, and handed it to her. "Broken glass," he noted. "Always a danger underwater."

"You're a copper, aren't you." She wrapped the cloth around her foot.

"Not any more. Retired."

"Must be nice." She looked around in case anybody was watching, but no one seemed to be paying any special attention to them. "Thanks."

He took the tool he'd purchased from his pocket and passed it to her keeping the transaction out of the sight of people passing by.

"What do you want?" She looked hostile, but desperate, which, McFergus thought, was probably an apt description of everyone out on the mud.

"Your name?"

"Betty."

"I'm Ian. You were with the costermongers, weren't you?" He thought he remembered her among the street sellers, but wasn't sure.

"Might have been."

He sighed. “I want you to find out something for me.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Will you do it, Betty?”

“Might.”

“I want you to find out anything you can about Jacob Marley. He was a businessman who died seven years ago. I want to know if there’s anybody who’s heard stories about his death.”

“And?” She was starting to shiver, but she kept looking at the tool, now in the bowl she carried.

“Just tell me. I’ll get you something else, if you can.” The tool, worn as it was, was worth enough to keep her in basic food for most of a week, if she were careful.

“When?”

“I’ll be back here in three or four days.” He straightened up and walked away, not looking back.

It was getting close to noon, so McFergus took a bus to the market. It was one of the newer buses with an upper, uncovered level, but he paid the extra couple of pence to sit on a wooden bench inside. He was glad he did, since a passing cloud dropped a scattering of rain halfway there.

It was a slow journey, and he wondered if the first subway, still under construction, would make any difference. *The big question*, he thought, *is whether people will trust a steam-powered engine to take them underground*. While it was underground, the soot from the engine should be even worse than the usual London smog, if the soot-storage plan didn’t work. And if the engine stopped while underground…. Well, he could only imagine the consequences. Trains had got stopped once or twice on rising lines in tunnels across the countryside, and the results had been most unfortunate for the passengers.

But the subways weren’t far underground; the engineers just dug a big ditch down a street, put in rails, then bricked the top over. *They’ll probably provide escape ladders*, he decided. Besides, sometimes when the subway line had a long way to go, the city of London expropriated a building above the tracks. Then they’d leave the walls, and remove the interior. That way, the train could come into open air briefly, inside the walls of the building, before going back underground.

Might work, he thought. It’s bound to be faster than this. The slow passage of the bus left him lots of time to look out the window. When he got off near the market, he paused to pat one of the horses. Horses pulling buses didn’t last more than a couple of years. It was best not to ask where they went after that, but the rumours always mentioned the meat pies sold by the street vendors. The street vendors’ donkeys were usually loved – McFergus had been to a funeral for a donkey, once – but the horses used for transportation seldom got the protection they deserved.

The market was doing just fine on a Saturday morning in December. It was down a bit from summer, but, McFergus knew the costermongers, whatever they sold, still needed the

income when it was cold, if not more so. Trade would pick up as the day went on. On a Saturday evening, the workers of the factories and shops in town would get their weekly pay, often in a public house, and the shopping would be at its best of what was left when the worker got of those pubs.

There were sellers of raw fish and shellfish, of game, and of poultry. There were people selling vegetables, and people selling flowers. And, should someone be hungry, cooked food included fried fish, hot eels, pickled whelks, sheep's trotters, ham sandwiches, peas' soup, hot peas, penny pies, meat puddings, and baked potatoes. There were vendors of baked goods like spice cakes, muffins and crumpets, Chelsea buns, sweetmeats, brandy balls. Some sold coffee and tea, hot wine, asses' milk and milk fresh from a cow, and even water.

And that was just the food. Other vendors sold new or second-hand articles, live animals, printed material, or curiosities.

Among the crowd were the buyers, looking to find someone to sell them old clothes or tools, hare skins or rags, broken glass, waste paper, or drippings.

At the bottom of the scale were those who picked up what others dropped, from dog's dung to cigar ends.

It was, McFergus, mostly a seller's market. And why not? A growing city like London absorbed prodigious quantities of goods every day, coming in by ship, by railway, and by cart. Servants of rich households could shop at the big markets for their masters or order goods to be delivered to houses. Vendors might make their way to some of the other houses by cart. And a million cattle a year were driven into London through the narrow streets, to be butchered as necessary.

But throngs of poor people bought at the street markets. They bought food, but they also bought their soaps and cosmetics, their rat poison and matches, their jewellery, boots, and pet squirrels. They bought new items if they could afford them and second-hand items if they couldn't.

And if you needed something repaired, there were always people who would repair a clock or kettle, remove grease from a coat, or sharpen your knives.

McFergus stepped aside as a band of "Scotch girls" pushed by, almost tripping over a small girl selling a few old pans. The street was always noisy with performers and the sound of the vendors hawking their wares. You could tell the true costermongers: they wore long sandy-coloured corduroy waistcoats with brass and mother-of-pearl buttons with a picture of a stags head on them and green, red, or blue neckerchiefs with yellow flowers. The neckerchief was most critical to a costermonger, and none would be seen without one. For pants they wore corduroy bell-bottomed trousers. Boots often had motifs of roses, hearts and thistles.

You wouldn't think, he knew, *that it could get busier*. But it did, in warmer weather, although every year the markets got smaller. At the urging of shop owners, the city had passed laws ordering vendors to keep moving, so buyers could get through to the shop doors. That law, among other things, had put the street people into conflict with the constabulary.

McFergus was glad he'd gotten promoted to inspector before that had happened. There were enough people contemplating "accidentally" elbowing him just for once being in the force as it was.

It was natural, McFergus thought, that the costers and the coppers should come into conflict. Perhaps the costers knew that, as London became more crowded and more wealthy, their carts would more and more stand in the way of both traffic and a store-based commerce. The stores paid taxes and taxes paid for policemen. Owners of the large new buildings, known as "departmental stores" had no love for the donkey carts that slowed traffic and sold items on the streets outside their doors.

At one point he saw the famous Henry Mayhew interviewing a seller of flowers for another article in the *Morning Chronicle*.

McFergus bought a piece of smoked eel, still sizzling from a Dutchman's cart, hoping he wouldn't get indigestion. Amy refused to have the greasy fish in the house, but he'd picked up a taste for it in his youth. "Have you seen Desmond today?" he asked the Dutchman, but the man just gave him a blank look.

A boy standing nearby, however, overheard him. McFergus figured the lad for a pickpocket, given his swagger. "Desmond. Tuppence and I'll take you to Desmond."

"Seems a bit high," McFergus said. "A couple of farthings, maybe."

"Then you'll have to find him on your own, I guess." He paused. "A penny."

"Done, but payment after you get me there."

"Fine." The lad was off, and McFergus had a hard time following him among the crowd, given his larger size and limp.

It was less than a minute before the boy stopped. "You can hear him from here. Pay me."

"I hear a lot of things."

"The bookmonger." The boy looked up, suspiciously. "Didn't you know he was a bookmonger? Are you police?"

"Just wanted to buy a book. The penny's in my outside pocket."

The boy brushed by and was gone, but when McFergus checked his pocket, the penny was also gone. He shook his head; they were getting faster all the time. He moved slowly along, pretending no special interest in the bookseller's patter. A crowd was listening, carefully, to Desmond reading from a small book of horrors.

"How can I describe the strange and horrible sensation which oppressed me as I woke from my first slumber? I had been sleeping soundly, and before I quite recovered consciousness I had instinctively risen from my pillow, and was crouching forward, my knees drawn up, my hands clasped before my face, and my whole frame quivering with horror. I saw nothing, felt nothing; but a sound was ringing in my ears which seemed to make my blood run cold. It was the sound of water running along the halls and seeping through the spaces under the doors.

I could not have supposed it possible that any mere sound, whatever might be its nature, could have produced such a revulsion of feeling or inspired such intense horror as I then experienced knowing that there was no escape for myself nor those other unfortunate beings chained in these basement rooms. It was a cry of terror that I heard that had roused me to action and the moaning of those in anguish and despair at their fate."

He had a good voice; McFergus had to grant him that. But then, that was the point of being a bookmonger. Famous for their patter, a bookmonger would get a crowd of people, fascinate them with readings from horror stories, scandal sheets, or daily news, then sell as much as he could. In an area of people who couldn't read, this was one form of education and entertainment. Some would buy, if only a page of an old newspaper, or a picture from one of the "special" books. Bookmongers looked down on the costermongers around them. "Haristocrats of the market," they called themselves.

When those who were willing to purchase, or only curious, had mostly left, McFergus edged in. "What can I do for you today? the vendor said."

"You must be Desmond! I've heard of you." McFergus recognized the man who'd pushed by him at Scrooge and Marley's earlier.

"I am. I have things you'd like to buy," Desmond said, reaching for a worn book."

"Actually," McFergus said, "I'd like to buy a Communist pamphlet, if you have one. Or something about Jacob Marley."

Desmond didn't blink an eye. "Communist goods. Well, I'll have to see if I can get some of those. Come back in a few minutes or so. Now, would your missus like a picture of the queen and a story about the latest goings on at the palace? Only a couple of farthings."

McFergus paid or the slightly tattered newspaper clippings without looking at them: he knew Molly would read them in detail.

"Merry Christmas, Desmond said.

"It's not Christmas yet," McFergus said.

McFergus moved away, looking at other wares, until a red-faced sailor stepped in front of him. The man was obviously drunk and a bit unsteady, or perhaps just off the boat and not yet used to standing on something that didn't move all the time. McFergus was about to move aside, but the sailor had his eyes fixed on the cop. "You're the man wots been going with my Hester," the man said, quietly, with a smell of rum on his breath. McFergus would have been more comfortable if the man had shouted; a quiet voice implied purpose and direction.

"You have the wrong man." McFergus wished he could look around for an avenue of escape, but starting straight at the sailor seemed a better option.

"McFergus. Used to be a copper. That's wot I been told."

This was getting dangerous. "I haven't been with any woman but my wife. Never."

"Hester. Hester Gouldrick." The sailor paused, seeing the confusion on McFergus's eyes. Then the sailor turned redder, rolled up his sleeves, stepped forward, and put one hand around McFergus's neck.

“I have never heard of this Hester,” McFergus said, just getting the words out. It was true, but someone it seemed was deliberately trying to put him out of the way. He was just about to try twisting loose and making a dash under an ironmonger’s cart when a police baton came down on the back of the sailor’s neck. It was a good hit; the sailor sank to his knees and put both hands onto his injured neck. Then he threw up, barely missing McFergus, and went on to his hands and knees, panting.

A large constable leaned over the sailor and said, “Time to go home, sailor boy.” They watched as the sailor got up and staggered into the watching crowd.

“A long way from home, aren’t you, Ian?”

“Just thought I’d check out the market… Gus,” McFergus said. Seven months ago, they’d have addressed each other as “Inspector” and “Constable.” It rather surprised McFergus to be called ‘Ian,’ but he didn’t let it show. Augustus Corbally Oftan was bigger than most of the policemen on the beat, which was a help dealing with the sailors and most of the vendors in a street market. But he was too rigid on minor infractions for the liking of most street sellers or, for that matter, for McFergus himself, who rated the constable as a bit of a bully when not being watched. “Thanks for your help.”

“Always glad to help a fellow officer,” Oftan said. “Can I help you find anything?” He stood, legs apart, in the stream of people moving through the market, and let them flow around him like a river.

“Oh, I have nothing in mind. Just thought I’d see if anything caught my eye, and get out for a bit of exercise.”

Oftan smiled a broad smile, and replied in his East Anglian accent, “Well, if you run into any more sailors, you might want to limp away as fast as you can. I’ll try to keep an eye on you, but…” he indicated the market bustle around him.

McFergus knew that there wasn’t much that could be seen at more than a few feet away nor anything heard above the cries of the vendors hawking their products, so he just shrugged. He watched as the constable elbowed his way through a street band of Irish tin-flute players. Ten minutes later, he was back at the bookseller’s cart. He looked over the contents of the barrow until Desmond’s latest reading – from an illustrated story about maidens being captured by Scandinavian trolls – had come to an end.

“Back again,” the bookseller noted.

“That I am.”

Desmond reached under an old bible and withdrew a pamphlet identical to the one McFergus had got the previous evening. “Ah, that’s fine,” McFergus said. “How much is it?”

“It’s worth more than you can afford,” Desmond said. He winked. “Just don’t come back here,” he added in a low voice. “Give me tuppence.”

With the exchange made, McFergus made his way to the edge of the market, and caught a bus away from the place, sitting again on the lower section. It wasn’t much after noon when he arrived at the Empress tea shop.

He sat at a table at the far end of the shop, then ordered a cup of tea and a scone. The room was small, but mostly full, as he might expect on a Saturday afternoon. Almost a third of the customers were women, dressed for the day, and watching each other and the street. Half the street people of London were women and girls, of course; they lived near the markets. Upper-class women had servants to do the shopping for them. McFergus saw only a couple of these; a servant woman's time was usually too closely regulated to allow any of them to meet with each other, except when actually waiting in the shops for service. These two young women were happily chatting to each other, having acquired enough time and a few pence for a sugary treat and a cup of tea that wasn't made from the house mistress's leftover leaves.

Most of the women were obviously housewives, probably having taken a cab or bus "downtown." Each would have several servants at home working, of course. (Amy had refused a servant several times, but now that she had that filing job, they might be able to afford one, McFergus decided.) The chief constraint on women venturing outdoors wasn't safety – not during the day, at least – but convenience; there were few places a woman would consider using for a toilet in central London, and most men used an alley for urination, rather than face the facilities behind a public house. He was, therefore, startled to see a woman come out of a small room at the back of the shop. As the door opened, he could see a wooden bench with a chamber pot under it. Obviously, the shop could afford to have one of the staff take the chamber pot out back to empty it every now and then. There was a sign on the door that said, "For Women Only."

Smart idea, he decided. *Perhaps they should bring flowers into the shop to encourage more women*. Even then, he decided, that might not work. Women's dresses were ground length, and cleaning the dress after even a small sojourn into public spaces took most of an hour, removing the rough strip along the bottom, heating water for a laundry, washing the strip, then sewing it back onto the dress. Until that problem was solved, women would be reluctant to go any distance.

He looked around, to see "Sampson" standing by the table.

McFergus reached over and pulled out a chair. Sampson sat in it about the time a waiter arrived. The waiter took McFergus's order for a cup of tea and a hot cross bun, although the bun was pretty cool by the time it arrived. Until then, nothing was said. After the youth had sipped tea and tasted the bun, McFergus looked at him.

"You should move," Sampson said. "You and your wife will be happier out in a smaller village, and your inspector's pension will go further."

The policeman's look of surprise must have shown. "Oh?"

"You're still wearing the pants and shoes of an inspector. But you're not hanging around one of those public houses that policemen frequent. And yesterday, you saw a policeman on duty, but turned away. That implies a personality conflict with someone in the department. If it was with another officer, you'd still have friends. Since the other policemen seem to be avoiding you, you must have had problems with the superintendent."

McFergus nodded.

"A retired policeman, all alone among the people he used to watch, means there's a sense of boredom. You're probably dredging up an old case that you were never satisfied with, but aren't sure you'll get anywhere, which is why you're desperate enough to talk to someone young enough to be your grandson." Sampson sipped his tea. "The stain on your sleeve tells me you had a piece of eel; they're a greasy fish. You've traveled some distance, but you went by omnibus. You rode inside, with your back to the vendors, since there's more soot on your back than on your hat. That tells me you didn't want people to recognize you. The view from the top of the bus is better and the ride is cheaper.

"I'd say you went to the market, and bought a pamphlet from a bookseller. A Communist pamphlet, by the corner sticking out of your pocket." He smiled. "Shall I ask about the docks? Or who attacked you?"

McFergus was starting to look uncomfortable.

Sampson continued. "Your wife must be lonesome from missing the social contact she used to have with other policemen's wives. I know the department actively promotes after-hour events in the force; obviously members of the force don't want to associate with you or you'd be talking to one of them now. But you must have some friends or you wouldn't have lasted so long." He paused. "You might want to try Oxford or Chatham. I can assume," Sampson said, "that the donkey hair on your pant cuff indicates you've been around a costermonger other than the bookseller, and you must have gone to the river, probably near the St. James Steps for some reason. It would make sense that you've visited Marley's old house and office, of course…."

McFergus stopped him. "Perhaps I can just tell you what I've done." He smiled. "I might even tell you why, if you'll listen."

Sampson merely nodded.

"Scrooge and Marley is still operated under that name, although Marley's been dead almost seven years…."

Sampson raised a finger. "Exactly when did he die, and of what cause?"

"I might have been getting to that, you know." McFergus waved for another round of tea and cake for both of them.

Sampson said, "I've found that minor brains blather on too much, with irrelevancies, while many intelligent persons make too many assumptions about what the other person can know. Or deduce."

"A compliment?"

"The truth. I seldom do compliments, and then, not well. Let's go over the facts about Mr. Marley again."

"Good enough." McFergus did another scan of the room, as was his habit. "Marley died seven years ago as of this Christmas. Or, at least he was found Christmas day at the bottom of his steps. Inside the building."

"Not inside his house?"

"Sort of a house. Marley lived in a building with several business offices. His apartment was in the same building, on the second floor. Scrooge, Ebenezer Scrooge, lives in Marley's apartment now."

"You have been in there?"

"Not yet."

"And the coroner ruled it accidental, but you haven't been satisfied."

McFergus nodded. "I have my reasons, but it always bothered me."

Sampson nodded. "Then you're probably right. But I think there was probably more to it than that."

"You do?"

"It's logical. You must have had a lot cases not to your satisfaction, but you chose this one."

"Okay then…." McFergus sighed. "A fellow I arrested, then let go. He told me someone was going to 'do something to Jacob Marley' at Christmas. And, of course Mr. Marley died Christmas eve."

"Ah." Sampson actually smiled. "Guilt at having let the fellow go."

"Then, on my way home last night, a costermonger with a donkey said, 'Talk to Desmond at the Great Blackfriars market about the Marley murder.'"

Sampson sat up, and said, "The game is afoot."

"I know the phrase from my days as a gamekeeper. It meant that whatever creature you've been hunting has left its hiding place and is now leaving tracks."

"It's from Shakespeare. Henry the Fifth. The meaning may be more general, and we can take it that things are happening after seven years of slumber. What else are you willing to tell me? What did you see at Scrooge's house?"

"I saw nothing. Talked to a street conjurer."

"Why?"

"He came by. I knew him. He started a conversation." He thought. "Desmond, the bookseller, went by."

"Was there any reason for the conjurer to stop? Was there any reason for him to be talking to a copper?"

McFergus thought about it. "No, there wasn't. Yet he seemed in no hurry."

"Could he have been checking you out for somebody?"

"It's possible." McFergus thought over his tea. "I talked to the cleaners, but they weren't there when Marley was killed. They gave me the name of Virginia Boyle, who *was* there when Marley died. They told me she was now working at Millbridge Abbey."

"Tomorrow is Sunday,"

McFergus nodded.

“Servants,” Sampson said, “get very little time away from their work. But on a Sunday, many are allowed to go to church in the nearest village.”

“I thought of that, too. I could go to the manse and ask for permission to talk to Miss Boyle.”

Sampson shook his head. “You’d have associated a policeman with the poor servant. She might well be sent away on suspicion alone.”

McFergus nodded. “You’re right. I’ll think of something, though.”

“Now tell me about the market and the docks.” When McFergus raised his eyebrows, Sampson added, “I can smell tar on you, you know.”

Sampson had nothing to say about McFergus’s episode with the mud larks, but at the end of the description of the communist party meeting that night, he commented, “communism threatens the existing order and challenges the very capitalist system that has made Britain the leader of the world.”

McFergus nodded.

“Attending the meeting, or even picking up that pamphlet isn’t going to endear you to the administration of the police force.”

“You think so?”

“The police force has a mandate to uphold the existing order,” the youth said, drily. “Have you to talked to Mr. Scrooge himself? He has, after all, motives. He did seem to inherit all of the Marley estate. And, for some reason, he took up residence in Marley’s apartment .”

“You are suspicious?” McFergus looked up from sipping his tea.

“There is no need to be suspicious at this point. We merely accumulate facts until facts lead us to the logical conclusion. If and when that happens,” Sampson added. “Tell me about your visit to Scrooge and Marley, Incorporated.”

McFergus decided to forgive the young man his bossiness, for a while longer, at least. He described the visit in as much detail as he could.

Sampson did not comment on Scrooge’s incivility. “You’ll be going to talk to the clerk, of course.”

“I can assume Mr. Scrooge is at the exchange in the afternoon, so I’ll wander by in an hour or so.”

The youth nodded. “I can assume you went to the King James Steps to hire a spy.” Before McFergus could confirm this, Sampson went on, “Tell me who tried to strangle you at the market. Yes, I can see the marks on your neck.”

McFergus described his encounter with the bookseller, Desmond, and the attack by a drunken sailor.

“You didn’t know the sailor?”

“No. Never seen him before.”

“An unprovoked attack on you. Was the constable a friend?”

“Not before today. I always thought him a bully who resented my lenience with the costermongers.”

“Perhaps we’ve entered the realm of theatre.” To the copper’s inquiring raise of eyebrows, Sampson went on. “We must consider the possibility that the whole thing was staged.”

“For what purpose?” McFergus smiled.

“Either to frighten you away, or to give you the belief that Constable Oftan is a friend.”

McFergus thought about it. “You could be right.”

“Did you know the bookseller? Had you seen him before?”

“I didn’t know him, but I saw him briefly as I left the Scrooge and Marley building.”

“You have a good eye for detail. That will serve us well.” Sampson pointed to the pamphlet. “Shall we open it”

“I haven’t looked at it,” McFergus admitted. He unfolded it. Across the top, in the only blank space, were written the words, “Scrooge is next: Christmas eve.” He handed it to the young deductioneer. “Things are looking up, I guess.”

“The game is indeed afoot.” Sampson smiled. “Although, to be honest, you yourself may be he game.” He clarified a bit. “It does look as though someone’s watching you.” He pointed at the pamphlet. “I understand one good way to catch a predator is to toss out some bait. You might have to be very careful.”

“Point taken,” McFergus said. “I plan to talk to Mr. Cratchit, as I said, and maybe tomorrow I’ll scout out Millbridge Abbey.”

“When shall we meet?”

“Well,” McFergus said, “I’ll be gone all day tomorrow, so maybe Monday?”

“That would be fine,” Sampson said. He paused. “If that note is accurate, we have four days left.”

McFergus shook hands with the young man, and they left the tea room. Four days.

McFergus took his time. If he and Amy actually left London, there was a lot they would be missing, and who knew if they’d ever get back to the city. He shook his head; he was thinking like the provincial kid he used to be. There were railways now. He made a mental note; make sure to settle in a town that has a railway link to London. That, of course, probably meant higher prices for housing. He wondered if Amy could get employment in a town outside London; there was a lot of prejudice against working women, other than the vast amount that were servants. But, he argued, with himself, Amy had some skills that would be hard to duplicate in a small town, and even if she were paid considerably less than a man, she might get some shift work.

He considered the chance that he’d get work on the local police force. On the one hand, locals in towns and villages were often suspicious of “outsiders”. On the other hand, a modern police force often considered outsiders an asset; outsiders were less likely to let off people they were related to, and less likely to take payoffs from cousins in trouble.

But, of course, he could end up supporting the rich against the needy. Abruptly, dodging a coster with a cart of hot tea and coffee, he snorted; not much chance of getting worthwhile work, anyway. He looked up; he was most of the way to Scrooge and Marley, Incorporated, for a chance to talk with Bob Cratchit.

Part of McFergus's mind regretted not talking to Sampson more about possible motives for the murder, but another part figured the young man had already been through most of the obvious ones and had decide the youth would just have been annoyed by talking about it. He shook his head: it might be easier if he could find someone a little less bright than the Hill youth.

Assuming that Jacob Marley had indeed been helped to go headfirst down the stairs, the first question would be, "who benefits?" And the obvious answer to that one was Ebenezer Scrooge. For one thing, virtually all Marley owned went to Scrooge. But if so, Scrooge didn't seem to be enjoying his additional wealth very much. Word on the street was that, crabby as he was, he was fair. Totally ungenerous, but fair. He bore no rancour against anyone that bested him in finance, though, truth to tell, few actually managed that feat.

Possibly Scrooge had had a first -rate quarrel with Marley. and killed his business partner. Perhaps Mr. Cratchit would be able to tell him something about that. McFergus was less than a block away.

Perhaps he could determine whether or not Mr. Cratchit had boosted Marley over that first top step. God knows, clerks had eliminated their nasty bosses often enough, and had been hanged often enough for it in the public square. If Marley had been worse than Scrooge, murder might have seemed reasonable to a poor clerk. What if Marley had been about to fire Cratchit? Seven years before, at the height of a recession, Cratchit's family might have been off to the poorhouse.

Then again, neither Scrooge nor Marley could have attained their wealth without bankrupting, quite legally, a lot of people who'd borrowed from them and been unable to pay the loan back. That was just the way finance went, and, of course, at the time of his death, that recession would have put quite a few people into jail for non-payment of loans. McFergus frowned; that trail would be a long one.

Less likely, he decided, was murder by housekeeper. Some were desperate enough to do that, especially if they'd been caught stealing from their rich employer. Another path to follow.

As he came up to the window by which Cratchit sat writing, McFergus calmed his mind. Then he pulled his hat low across his face. In an afterthought, he took off his coat and carried it, rolled up, under his arm.

The streetside window of Scrooge and Marley Inc. was open a bit. It may have been dubious whether the outside air was any better than that inside a building, but at least it was a change, most people figured. There was no light inside the building, making it hard to tell if anyone was in.

McFergus looked around for characters appearing more suspicious than himself, then decided that if a London street weren't full of suspicious-looking people, that would be, in itself, most suspicious. But at least he saw no one that he recognized. He leaned against the wall by the small, window, then coughed gently.

The voice of Cratchit came back through the bars. "Are you the police inspector that was here this morning?"

McFergus hesitated. There was nothing in that sentence that told him whether Scrooge had gone or not. But he took a chance. "I am. Ex-inspector Ian McFergus. Mr. Cratchit?"

"Yes. Mr. Scrooge is off to the exchange this afternoon."

"And I'm not taking you away from some important work?"

"Thank you for asking. Yes, Mr. Scrooge always makes sure I have work to finish when he's gone, but I can work faster than he knows, and can talk to you for a few minutes."

"Thank you, Mr, Cratchit. I'm making inquiries into the death of Jacob Marley."

"Ah. It's been a long time, you know. Is the police force looking into it again."

McFergus laughed. "The case is as dead as is Mr. Marley. I am retired now, and indulging a bit of my own curiosity."

Cratchit chuckled. "Hanging around the house and getting in your wife's way, perhaps?

"Perhaps," McFergus said drily. He could see, through the glass darkly, Scrooge's clerk making notes in a ledger. The clerk in the dark, he thought, making up a rhyme.

"And," Cratchit said, "you think the death of Mr. Marley might have been other than an accident? Why?"

"My instinct, let's call it."

"And your instinct is seldom in error?"

"It is often, in error, but…."

"Well insp…Mr. McFergus, there is a possibility that you may be right." There was a long pause, marked by the scratching of the pen. "I saw, myself, no reason to doubt that the old man had got up to chase a rat, and, being old, had tumbled down the stairs, thereby breaking a neck that was excessively scrawny from age." Another pause. "But after that, several people asked me if his death weren't suspicious, and…."

"And?" McFergus looked around. A couple of street urchins approached, saw his glare, and went off in search of other prey.

"When one listens to suspicious people one can become himself suspicious, seeing conspiracy in the mating of sparrows on the window ledge."

McFergus nodded, knowing Cratchit could see him better than he could see the clerk. "That happens more often than most people would give credit to. Did you believe them?"

"There was no reason to. People's tongues wag without the slightest wind to stir them. Until…."

"Until?"

“Until a former police inspector showed up at my window.” He must have noticed McFergus looking around. “Mr. Scrooge will not be back for several hours.”

“Do you know anyone who might have wanted to kill him?”

“Mr. Marley?” A laugh. “Mr. Scrooge and I are the first suspects, are we not? We knew him best. We would have been most affected by his personality, and would have known Mr. Marley’s habits.”

“If you had killed a rich man,” the cop said, “you might have profited more.”

“More than continuing to work my life away trying not to freeze in this little office? I should think so. And if I had joined with Mr. Scrooge in such an evil endeavour, he would have had to reward me, or to kill me with other than overwork and low wages. Neither of which, you may observe, has happened.”

It was McFergus’s turn to laugh. “But Scrooge himself? I understand he profited nicely by his partner’s death.”

“You would not have know it at the time, with all the complaining he did.”

When McFergus said nothing, the clerk continued. “There was a lot of paperwork, and there was the matter of Mr. Marley’s funeral. And, of course, Mr. Marley’s accommodations. Mr. Scrooge moved into Mr. Marley’s rooms.”

“Did he say why he did that?”

“Oh, yes. Mr. Marley’s accommodations were larger and more convenient than Mr. Scrooge’s. And, more importantly, the lease was less. That’s what Mr. Scrooge told me, although I don’t know the truth of it.”

“And Mr. Scrooge got the bulk of Mr. Marley’s estate?”

“Got it all, as far as I know. Neither of them were on speaking terms with their relatives, and they had an agreement from the time they founded this company to that effect.” A pause. “Feel free to visit my house at 9025 Marlbank Lane to see if I’ve now got a golden pot to piss in from murdering Mr. Marley.” He chuckled again, and handed McFergus a piece of paper introducing the inspector to his wife.

“Might you know of any other person who would have wanted to kill Mr. Marley?”

“Mr. McFergus, there were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people who might have wanted either of those misers dead, having lost everything to fate and an inability to pay loans, but all any of them could have known was the name of some company or other that issued money through some other company. The link to Scrooge and Marley would have been difficult to find.”

“And you know of no other reason someone might want Mr. Marley dead?”

“There are ten thousand people in London for whom a silver candlestick would mean a month’s food and lodging, but you’d have known if there had been a robbery, of course. And if Mr. Marley was doing things that are unspeakable, then they were never spoken of.”

McFergus sighed. “I thank you, Mr. Cratchit.”

“Let me know if you find anything you can tell me. I worked with Mr. Marley for many years and am curious. Merry Christmas.”

“Of course. Although it’s not Christmas yet.” McFergus moved away from the window, watching the street. He could detect no one that was watching him.

It was still early in the afternoon, and although the air was damp, it was neither snowing nor raining. Still keeping an eye out for drunken sailors, he walked slowly towards the train station at Victoria. The only suspicious thing that happened was a glimpse of Bill Sikes, making his way in the opposite direction. Their eyes met briefly. Bill Sikes was a good reason not to be in the police any more. The man had an animal energy that attracted interest from women and kept most of the rest of the criminal element away. It was something in his eyes that let a person know that there was an instability there. A person always had the impression that someday Bill Sikes would be the ruin of Bill Sikes, but that another person or three would be harmed in the process.

Victoria Station was, as usual, crowded, and the queues were long, but eventually McFergus got to the front. He hesitated a moment, then bought a ticket for second class. Third class, or “Parliamentary Train” class, was an open box, sometimes without a roof; acceptable enough in summer, but just a bit rough in winter. The British government had mandated the use of these, at less than a third the cost of second class, in order to enable the poorest people to travel, however uncomfortably. Without a higher social class, McFergus would have felt quite out of place in first class, so it was into second class, with rich men’s servants, he would travel. He tucked the ticket into a pocket, looking forward to the morrow’s train ride.

Suddenly he wondered if he should have saved the money and gone in the open car. He mentally shrugged; he had no doubt Amy would tell him whether he’d made a wise choice or not.

The early dusk was settling in as McFergus pushed his way out of the station and onto the street. As he did, he crossed the path of a man with a dog on a light chain. The dog, a large black mongrel, lunged at a smaller dog, and, in doing so, wrapped the chain partly around the inspector’s legs, then stared into the eyes of man above him, and growled. McFergus stopped, and looked up into the angry face of a man he knew well.

“What the devil do you come in between me and my dog for?” said the man, with a fierce gesture.

McFergus didn’t smile. “Well, well,” he said. “Mr. Bill Sikes, if I’m not mistaken.”

Sikes slid into a practiced sneer. “Well, if it ain’t the local former constabulary. I should let my dog have at you, I should.” He pulled at the chain, which McFergus managed to step over. “Sneaking around places you aren’t wanted are you?” He dragged the dog roughly. “You don’t usually go in this part of town, do you? Looking for me, maybe? Be careful if you are.”

“Or?” Both men ignored the people moving by them.

“It’s a dangerous part of town.” Sikes tried to stare McFergus down.

“Dangerous for me?”

“Even coppers disappear sometimes when the tide goes out. You ask too many questions hereabouts and I ain’t going to be able to help you.” He tilted his head. ‘There’s hard people here.”

“I stand warned.” McFergus smiled, but didn’t move. Sikes half-dragged his dog into the crowd, giving it a kick to encourage it.

It was dark by the time he unlocked his own door. He climbed the stairs slowly, his bad leg hurting more than usual. Amy, at the top of the stairs, welcomed him with a candle and a smile. “You’re tired,” was all she said, serving him a bowl of hot stew and a cup of tea. The stew was more than the basic food he and much of England subsisted on, root vegetables with a piece of pork fat for flavour. It being the weekend, she’d added a small piece of salted beef. It was always a treat to McFergus, but faster ocean ships and the railways in Britain and in North America had brought down the price of meat considerably. *If this keeps up*, McFergus thought, *it could undercut the poor man’s need to poach from the rich landowner*.

On his second cup of tea, unasked, he began to describe his day to Amy.

First, he told her about his interview with Scrooge. She listened, and asked, “Isn’t he the only one who definitely benefited from Mr. Marley’s death?”

“Scrooge got the company,” McFergus acknowledged. “But he doesn’t seem to have done much with it.”

“When you’re wealthy,” Amy noted, “the acquisition of more wealth is often all one wants, however foolish it seems, and however little it seems to affect one’s happiness. Then again, Marley had not, you told me, been in good health for some time. All Scrooge had to do was wait.”

McFergus nodded at the truth of the observations. “Then,” he noted, “are not some people killed for vengeance? The acquisition of wealth by one man may have resulted from the diminishment of wealth from several others.”

“A man who seeks vengeance,” Amy said, shaking her head, “is more likely to beat his victim into shapelessness and leave a message than to make a careful plan to have his victim die in a seeming accident.”

“Maybe….” McFergus hesitated.

“I know what you are thinking,” said his wife, “but vengeance for such crimes would most likely involve mutilation of the… appropriate parts.”

“Nothing like that was done,” he said, firmly.

“And after you talked to Mr. Scrooge,” Amy prompted.

He told her about Bob Cratchit's morning offer to talk to him again in the afternoon.

“And he did?” Amy lit another tallow candle from the stub of the first one.

“He did. He said he knew of no reason to murder Mr. Marley, but asked me to keep him informed of any developments in the case.”

“You would do that?”

"I will," Ian said, "unless I learn of some reason to suspect him." He raised a palm to Amy's enquiring eyebrow. "He is more likely to be of help than of hindrance, and sometimes one must play the odds."

"And the rest of your day?" Amy asked her husband, quietly.

He told her next about the gift to Betty, the mudlark, and how he'd asked her to enquire about Jacob Marley.

"You think she will?"

"There is the chance I will buy her another present," he said. "And it's cold in London, now, and she's getting to old to be mudlarking." He noticed Amy's look. "I tried to make sure it would look like she found the wood-scraper. I do hope she isn't in any danger for asking about Marley, although I'm less sure than I was." Then he told her about the bookseller and the sailor at the market.

"Interesting," was all Amy said, until he showed her the pamphlet with the words, "Scrooge is next: Christmas eve."

She looked at it in the candlelight. "What did the young Mr. Hill have to say about this?"

"Not much that was useful. And you?"

"It changes everything, doesn't it?"

He said nothing, then nodded. "Unless it's a fraud, it does." He looked into her eyes. "It means the person or persons I'm looking for must have a reason to kill both of them." He sighed.

"Doesn't that simplify it?"

"I do hope so. I really do." He didn't feel confident. "I have four days, he added."

"And," Amy went on, "it had to be someone for whom waiting seven years was acceptable. And someone who knew both Scrooge and Marley." She paused.

"I bought a train ticket to Millbridge Abbey," he said, "or at least to the closest station."

"A good move," Amy agreed. "Are you taking me?"

"Of course," he said. "We can pick up another ticket in the morning."

"So," she said, changing the subject, "aside from Mr. Sikes, drunken sailors, and Constable Oftan, are there any other people out to get you in London town?"

"Well," he said, "I ran into Bill Sikes twice. Haven't seen him in a long time."

"You seem to have a lot of enemies out there. Is Sikes dangerous?"

"Mr. Sikes is a very disturbed man, but not very intelligent. That makes him dangerous."

"I'm surprised he isn't in Australia."

"He isn't intelligent, but he has some cunning. And he has had more luck than most men deserve. We know he's closely associated with a man named Fagin, who deals in stolen goods –."

"'We?'" Amy asked.

"Sorry. The police know of the association between the two."

"But that's outside the scope of your investigation, I presume."

"I imagine so." McFergus looked at the candle, now almost gone. "Bedtime, my love."

It was only when they'd snuggled down in the dark and he was looking out the frosted windows that McFergus remembered that he hadn't asked Amy how her day at her job had gone.

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Chapter 3: December 21

"It is possible," Amy said, that there is something in common with S and M, you know."

McFergus looked at her blankly, for a moment before he figured out that she meant. They'd acquired another ticket early in the morning without trouble and he'd insisted his wife pay the toilet fee before the train left the station.

It was McFergus's position as a former inspector, and his willingness to dress properly (tall hat, bow tie, and three-piece suit), rather than his available funds, that allowed them into the second-class carriage. There were one or two other men of the lower middle class in the carriage, but most of the men, as well as the three other women, were servants to those travelling in the first-class carriages.

Since Amy wanted to talk more about the case, obviously without sharing everything with the other passengers, and since the inspector knew better than to try to stop her, he nodded. "But that doesn't mean we yet know, or can know, what that common item is." Outside, the last of the seemingly endless stretches of shacks the surrounded the city gave way to farmland and some small forests. That many poor people, McFergus thought, and sheep in the meadow and grouse in the forest. They'll need gamekeepers here. He smiled that the thought of himself as a youth, setting traps for the poachers.

"Perhaps the clerk, Mr. C," Amy suggested. "He knew both of those misers, and might have taken to drink."

"Possible." A factory, still under construction, passed by on a hill.

"Or perhaps Mr. C's wife thinks he should have a better salary after all his years of service and is trying to pry him out of his current position. You might check out his circumstance."

"I will do that. That's a good idea." McFergus watched men at work in the distance, building a water pipeline towards the city. The world never stops changing, he thought. a little wistfully. He realized how long it had been since he'd been out of the city.

"Perhaps someone spent seven years in jail," Amy suggested. "Perhaps he's returned to finish the job."

"A patient fellow," McFergus said. "But one who's so foolish as to let his plans circulate in London and so disliked that people are notifying the police."

"Unlikely," his wife agreed. "But if S dies, who gets the money?"

"That," McFergus said, "is something I do have to investigate. A personal motive would be easier than one directed against the company."

He looked out the window, watching the country landscape go by. There were a few farmers up already, and once he saw a young boy asleep under a hay rick. The lad, McFergus figured, was probably a runaway, heading for London. That wouldn't be unusual; only twenty percent of the people in London had been born there. In spite of the cholera and typhus epidemics, there was always hope. It would have been a cold night, he realized, for the boy had only a rough shirt and pants to keep him warm. He hoped the boy made it to shelter. Lord knew, Ian McFergus had thought often enough of running away to Edinburgh in his own youth.

He looked around at Amy, who had grown silent. "You are remembering your childhood," he said. "You do that when you leave the city."

"I was seven when my father brought me to London," she said. "Before we moved again to Manchester."

"And we found each other there."

Amy smiled. "Yes, we did." She watched the fields go by. "I was happy in those early years. Weren't you?"

"I played Cheyenne and Apache games out on the hills," McFergus said. "I'd say I was happy, although some in the village thought I was bam." He reminded her, "I stayed in a village longer than you."

"You did."

"It gets less of an idyll as you get older, especially for girls. The local women gossip all the time, even if they have to invent things."

"I know that," Amy said. "The city's a more private place, if you want that sort of thing."

"I did, for years," McFergus said. "Are you thinking of moving away from London?"

"It's not the city we knew when we came there," she pointed out.

"It's not."

"Don't you get the urge to walk the hills and forest again?"

McFergus sighed. "I do, my love. Sometimes I wake up dreaming about it. But it's been a long time, now."

"It has, Ian; it has."

Altham Grange was a town. In the last century it had grown from a country house with attached farm buildings to a place with a main street, a market square, and, since the railway had touched its northern edge, some new factories by the track.

Amy and Ian McFergus got off the train with Ian carrying a small bag over his shoulder. He'd suggested a lunch at one of the public houses Altham Grange was likely to have, but Amy had insisted on packing some bread, pickles, and boiled eggs, "just in case."

There was little activity that early in the morning; most people were either sleeping in on their one day off (those that got one day a week off) or preparing for church. McFergus was

surprised to note the brick road into the town; he remembered mud as the introduction to the places he'd visited outside major cities. *Someone's got money*, he thought.

For a moment, the two stood there as the other passengers collected their luggage and headed into town. Some were walking, especially those still shivering from the open third-class carriages, but others had people meet them with horse buggies or pony carts. There were no cabs waiting. Obviously the local churches were still strong enough to enforce a no-work-on-Sunday rule, at least outside the walls of a home.

"What now, inspector?" Amy asked.

McFergus pulled out his watch. "The churches should be letting out in an hour."

"And you expect to find Miss Boyle there?"

He smiled. "Well, I hope to. Or at least we might find someone who knows her."

"The Anglican church, you think?" She looked towards the tall Elizabethan tower peeking out from behind smaller buildings. "Maybe she doesn't go to church."

McFergus nodded. Only one in two people in England still went to church anymore, even in the villages, and even those people were as likely to go to the newer Methodist church as the traditional Church of England. If McFergus were to go to church with Amy, he'd have chosen Methodism, simply because the social order was so strong in the Anglican church, or the Presbyterian church in which he'd been raised. He'd been in a few Anglican churches, and had seen how the people sat in pews according to social standing. At the back, the working class people seemed to feel that the sermon was often delivered in a language that wasn't theirs, mocking their lack of education and promoting the feeling that God really preferred the upper classes.

"If she's working at Millbridge Abbey," he said, wrinkling his nose, "the squire will make sure she and the other servants go to the Church of England."

"Probably right," Amy acknowledged. They walked into the silent town; those people who didn't go to church generally had the sense to stay indoors on Sunday morning. "Aren't you glad I brought something for a lunch?" Amy asked.

"I suspect the public houses will open for a couple of hours after noon," he said. They walked past the old church, then down the main street of the town. "This isn't London," he observed, looking into the closed stores.

They finished eating the lunch on the steps of a closed greengrocer's shop. McFergus wished he'd brought some water until he found the community pump on a side street. He rinsed the cup attached by a chain, inspected the water, tasted it, and drank. It wasn't bad, and the flavour was better than what was available in London, so he passed the cup to Amy. She drank sparingly, as women did when away from home.

They were there when the church doors opened. The priest came out and waited on the steps. One of the next people was a policeman that McFergus recognized. The man looked at McFergus, moved close, and smiled. He tilted his head towards McFergus and whispered, "Inspector McFergus. Undercover, or just on a holiday?"

McFergus said, “Constable Bowe.” Then, inspecting Bowe’s outfit, said, “Ah, Inspector Bowe. Very good! Can I tell you later? Right now I’m looking for a Virginia Boyle.”

“Drop by the office this afternoon, if you will. Miss Boyle is the woman in the red dress and pink hat.” Bowe touched his hat and walked off, not looking back.

“We’ll be neighbours of her cousin, if anybody asks,” Amy whispered to McFergus.

McFergus smiled. “I like that.” Suddenly he was glad he had brought his wife. Several people were looking at the Inspector and his wife, obviously curious as to why two strangers had been talking to the police.

Amy stepped up to Miss Boyle. “Virginia Boyle?”

The servant looked around, obviously frightened. “I have some news about your brother,” Amy said, loud enough for others to hear. “He’s got himself into some trouble. Can we talk?”

“Of course!”

McFergus led his wife and the servant away from the crowd, along a side street. “Miss Boyle,” he started, when they were alone.

“Which of my brothers is in trouble?” Virginia interrupted calmly in Bristol accent. “Not that it matters, since I haven’t seen either of them in more than ten years. Both are overseas, in Canada and in the United States.”

“Actually,” Amy said, “it’s nothing to do with your brothers. My husband is a police inspector, and he would like to ask a couple of questions. Do you mind?”

“Am I being charged with something?” Virginia Boyle asked, giving them a cold look.

“No, no,” McFergus said, waving his palms in front of him. “I’m a retired Inspector from London. I’m just looking into an old case.”

“And that case would be?”

“Jacob Marley’s death.”

“I was asleep in bed at the time.”

“Yes, of course you were. I didn’t think otherwise. I just wanted to ask you if you knew anything that might help me.”

“They never solved his murder?”

“They never thought it was a murder,” McFergus said.

“They didn’t ask *me*.”

“You think someone killed him?”

“I do,” Virginia said. “I can’t imagine him leaving his room after dark.” She looked at McFergus. “He wasn’t senile when I knew him, and he often told me he was afraid of the street after sundown. He didn’t change his mind even when they put the gaslights into the streets.”

“You can’t think of a reason he might have gone out?”

“Not in his night clothes. I think they said that’s how he was dressed when they found him at the bottom of the stairs.”

Amy broke in, “He might have….” She hesitated.

Virginia said, “He had his flash girls. But only in the afternoons, and only outside his house.” She noticed McFergus blushing and laughed. “And no, he never made any offers to me.”

McFergus covered his embarrassment with a question. “Was there no one who wanted him harm? No one who wanted his money?”

“Well,” said Virginia, “a fortnight or so before he died there was a man he argued with. I’d just come in to do the cleaning and Mr. Marley was still in his rooms.” She paused to think. “They stopped when I came, and the man left.”

“Do you remember what he looked like?” McFergus was hopeful for the first time.

“Medium height, medium weight. Dressed like a banker.”

“Do you have any idea what they were arguing about?”

Virginia hesitated again. “It’s been seven years. I think it was about a property.” She looked up at McFergus. “But I wouldn’t swear to that.” Suddenly she looked panicked. “I won’t have to swear to anything, will I?”

Amy shook her head. “You just continue with our story about your brother. You can make up the details of what our concern was. We know you don’t want to be seen talking to a policeman, even a former one.”

They all knew that, McFergus was sure. Even the hint of suspicion could well get a servant dismissed from her position. He nodded without saying anything.

“And you came all the way from London to ask me that?”

Amy laughed. “We felt the need to get out of London for a change of scenery.” She looked at her husband. “Ian’s retired now, and I wanted him to remember what sweet country air smells like.” She turned back towards Virginia. “How long have you worked here?”

“More than six years,” the servant said, looking down.

“You’re not happy here?” McFergus asked.

“It was steady work, and London was scant living.”

“But?” Amy raised her eyebrows.

Virginia turned to her. “It’s not as good as it sounds, Mrs. McFergus. It is constant work, from four in the morning until well after dark. There is no one to say, ‘You’ve done a fine job, Miss Boyle.’ And little opportunity for advancement.” I work steadily all day, and am tired when I get up.” She smiled wanly. “I remember London, and the people I knew there. Friends, sir. I had friends.”

“That,” said McFergus, “appears to be the way it is in England. It wasn’t much different in Scotland, you know.” He knew that servants worked long hours with little reward except for a bit of money to send back to their parents. Without servants, the upper classes, and even the middle classes, couldn’t maintain a home. He wondered if that would ever change; the coming of piped water, even if only in the cities, cut down on a servant’s work, but the employers always found more to do to make up for the time.

Without servants, the upper portions of the pyramid couldn't keep their lifestyle. Without the payment the servants sent to their parents, a hard life in the villages would be even harder. McFergus shook his head; it had probably been the same since biblical times, but that didn't make it right. It was a social contract with no lawyers to enforce it; too may servants were paid less than had been agreed upon and worked for longer hours than they were supposed to. Too many people treated their servants with contempt when compassion would have got them a better employee.

"My mother died last year," Virginia said. "My father died from the consumption last week." She looked at Amy. "I want to go to London." She hesitated. "I want to be…. more free. "

"The factories of London won't give you a bed or food," Amy noted. "You lose a finger or refuse the boss a favour and you'll be out in the cold with the mudlarks, wishing for a warm cot."

"I will be able to go where I want on Sundays," Virginia said. "I will be able to dance with young men to the music in the street."

They had circled back to the business section of the village, by the greengrocer's store. There was a cold wind blowing. "There are no young men who like you?" McFergus asked.

"They are slow, and they despair too much," Virginia said. "They beat their wives and spend their money in the public house." She shook her head. "The master's youngest son is the only one who wants me, and I don't want to be his mistress."

McFergus took out his notepad and pencil. He wrote his address onto the top sheet and handed it to her. "I have no money to help you," he said, while his wife watched him with raised eyebrows. "But who knows; I maybe able to do something, however small, if you get to London before we've decided to move to some village such as this."

The young woman smiled, stuffed the paper into a pocket, and headed towards a group outside the church.

"Was that wise?" Amy asked her husband.

"I've been too wise for too long," the inspector said. "It's getting late in my life."

Amy just patted him on the shoulder. He wondered what she meant with that. They watched people leaving the churches, their coats flapping in the cold wind. A few snowflakes fell from the sky, then stopped. "Not much like London," Amy said.

"Not much." Ian looked at the street; it was paved in brick for a short ways, before turning into mud again. "There's not a lot to do here."

"It smells better, though. We could have a small cottage. And a garden. I could lean over the fence and talk to the neighbours."

"It sounds nice, but you must remember that the locals would regard you as a stranger for at least the first fifty years," Ian said, smiling. "I grew up in a place like this."

"You grew up," his wife reminded him, "in a place like Altham Grange used to be. It's changed, I suspect, with the railway. And those factories" – she pointed to some new

structures by the track – “must have attracted some outside workers. Don’t I see some new houses beside them?”

“We could join a group of other ‘outsiders’ and gossip about the inbred locals. Have our own corner of the local public house where locals would scowl at us and the pub master would serve us bad ales.”

“We could grow roses on vines on our fences. And raise our own carrots. Maybe have a few chickens and a duck.” Amy was watching the last of the people leaving the Methodist church.

“You have your filing job in London.”

“I’d miss that. I liked getting out of the house.”

“And I might miss walking through the crowds, wondering what to do with my day,” Ian said.

“And wondering when someone you threw into jail six years ago will try to chuck you into the nearest sewer,” Amy reminded him. “Here, they’ll just ignore you.”

“That’s true.” He sighed. “Maybe we’d better see the local constabulary.”

“You’re sure?”

“I promised.”

The office of the local police wasn't hard to locate; it was near the middle of the main street, next to a bakery. Constable Bowe called, "Come in," when McFergus knocked. "Thank you for coming," he said, when they'd seated themselves on hard wooden chairs in front of his desk. He tipped his hat to Amy.

"A pleasant enough town," McFergus said, after he'd introduced his wife. "It's been a few years since I've been out of London, except on police business."

"This isn't police business?" Constable Bowe raised his eyebrows and put his hands together on his desk.

"I'm retired now." He paused. "For six months."

"Ah. I see." He leaned back, and filled his pipe, taking his time about it. "Can I offer you a cigarette?" he asked McFergus .

McFergus declined. "I get enough food for my lungs in The Smoke, as you can imagine. But I may have a pipeful in a while.”

Bowe laughed. "I can imagine it. It's been almost four years since I left the force there, and it was bad enough then. I bet it's got worse."

"It has.” He scratched the back of his neck. "Must be different here."

"Oh, it was, when I got here. If your family hadn't been in the Grange for at least a century, you were just a stranger passing through. Of course," he added, blowing smoke, "that was changing even when I arrived, with the railway and the new factories. But the factory part of town kept away from the old parts. So it's changed a bit, but not a lot."

"I'm surprised they didn't want a local for constable."

"That," said Constable Bowe, "would have been a really bad idea, and they knew that from experience. Far too many family connections there would have been, and too many ways to get to the policeman through his family. My wife comes from Bath," he added.

"I can understand that. There are advantages to dealing with strangers all day."

"Maybe we'll hire you someday. The town's still growing." He raised one eyebrow at the inspector.

"I walk with a limp, and I'm too old to throw farm boys out of the public houses." McFergus gave a wry smile, and looked at Amy.

The constable spread his hands out. "The council probably wouldn't go for it anyway. I was thinking of a part-time detective, working full-time at a pitiful rate of pay. They're thinking of someone bigger than the farm boys." He sighed. "And you wouldn't come with a recommendation from Superintendent Bannim, either."

"You heard about that."

"It's about all I know about you. I still know a couple of men on the force and get the odd letter. A good detective but one inclined to go easier on the small miscreants than the Superintendent would."

"It had its advantages and disadvantages." McFergus rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Bannim waited until I'd given a break to a Scot, then accused me of favouring my countrymen."

"Did you?"

"Probably. A bit. Anyway, I still have my pension, so Amy and I can stay alive. And Amy's got a part-time job at an insurance company." McFergus realized he was starting to sound a bit depressed.

"Well, a pension would go further in the Grange than in London. Might even be able to afford a servant for part of the day." He frowned. "I was told that one in three young women in Britain is in the service these days. One in three women and girls who should be seeing young men and getting married and raising children is working for richer people."

"Most of those young women," Amy broke in, "have no choice. Their parents would starve without the money the children send home."

The constable nodded. "That's the truth," he said, "but there are just too few laws against underpaying and overworking them. Every year we run across a situation in which the girl isn't paid at all."

"That's illegal," Amy said.

"It is, but part of a servant's wages can be withheld for damages, for example, and who's to argue against a rich person? Who's going to take the side of a servant who's made to pay for clothes, or travel expenses when they go to London?" He raised a finger. "Not that I've heard anything about our Miss Boyle's situation, except that she's a laundry maid and likely to stay that way if the housekeeper has her way." Abruptly, he changed the subject. "Have any parts

of the city fallen into the earth yet? I hear so much about the tunnelling. Underground trains, even."

"Well," said McFergus, "we haven't had many actually fall into the tunnels they're making for sewers or water or the underground trains, but quite a number of buildings have cracks, and there's a constant stream of lawyers hired to prove that every cracked foundation in the city is a result of the tunnels."

"Will you go on one of those underground trains if they ever get one finished?" The constable shook his head. "I keep imagining being in the pitch black, moving at a frightening speed, surrounded by soot and sparks. Not to mention running out of air."

"I would try one," the inspector admitted, "but not for the first few weeks. They claim they've figured a way to pump the smoke into big tanks of water that they carry with them."

The constable sat up. "Really?"

"True. When they get to a station, the smoke is released into the air. And they also have small tanks of gas on the roof of each carriage, to provide a gas light for that carriage."

The constable shook his head. "I'd like to try that. But," he added, "how will they get air for the passengers?"

"There are ventilation shafts coming to the surface. And, if part of the route is long the train comes to the surface then goes back down again. Sometimes it comes up within a building which has been expropriated and hollowed out for that purpose. Sort of like porpoises coming up for air."

"And people will be brave enough to ride on one of those?" The constable shook his head. "I was scared silly first time I took a train."

"As was I," McFergus admitted. "But if you've tried getting through the streets of London, you're apt to find them more dangerous from the horses and people jammed together and the pickpockets everywhere."

"Caught Fagin yet?"

"Not yet, but he's bound to make a slip someday. And the force is still expanding control into parts of the town we used to go into only in groups."

"How was the Big Stink? We heard about that one even here."

"Pretty bad," the inspector admitted, and Amy nodded in agreement. A couple of years before, the human sewage had become too much for the cities creeks and rivers, and the smell had even forced the closing of parliament. Most people were to poor to flee the city, and so had no choice but to walk around with perfume-soaked cloths over their noses. "They've very much accelerated the digging of underground sewage drains, to try to get the sewage into the Thames as quickly as they can. Do they still ship a lot of the human waste out to the farms around here?"

"Not so much," Bowe said. "Our farmers have been offered more than they can use for a couple of years already. London's just going to have to put more into the Thames. That'll be

interesting if you get a high tide and a good east wind. What went down may well just come back up. They'll have to take their drinking water from further upstream in the Thames."

"We're getting some pumped in by pipe from outside the city," McFergus noted. "Those who can afford it don't have to use the water vendors or the wells. There may be a connection, but the rate of cholera is down."

"More underground digging," the constable noted.

"It never stops."

There was a long pause. "And what did you want with Miss Boyle, if I may ask?"

"You may," McFergus said. He paused to light his own pipe, after changing his mind and getting permission from the constable. "Do you remember the death of Jacob Marley?"

Bowe shook his head.

"A rich and old businessman. Seems to have fallen down his stairs seven years ago. Coroner said it was an accident."

"Doesn't sound familiar, but I wouldn't have paid attention; I was just a beat copper at the time." He blew a large cloud of smoke. "Did you have any reason to doubt the coroner?" He looked McFergus in the eye; the two men might have been on different levels once, but things had changed since then.

McFergus nodded. "I got a tip from a snitch, a lad running with pickpockets, that Marley had been murdered."

"You told this to Superintendent Bannim, of course?"

A hesitation. McFergus looked at Amy.

"You let the young man go." Bowe looked serious for a moment, then laughed. "I guess you didn't have any choice there, not once you'd let the kid go." He puffed some more, then lit another cigarette. "You know, if you were to work in Altham Grange…." He hesitated, and McFergus felt he was about to be lectured about proper protocol. Then the constable went on. "If you did, that would be an appropriate action to take in most cases. If you're a hard man, you'll soon have every ploughboy for miles in jail after a night at the public house, and most of the landed gentry after your hide. A lot of diplomacy is needed here."

"McFergus nodded. "I grew up an a small Scottish village, and spend a few years as a gamekeeper."

"Then you know. And what about Miss Boyle?"

"A housekeeper at the time of Marley's death. Did his rooms in the afternoon."

"You suspect her?"

"Not in the slightest," McFergus said, although both men knew that, in a case like this, the list of suspects was never completely closed. "She doesn't seem to have had motive or have acquired any material advantage after his death."

"You've been tactful here. I've heard you were bringing news of her brother."

"I didn't want to get her in trouble."

"Wise," Bowe said. "I'll keep up that story." He looked out the window. "But I do get the feeling that Miss Boyle would be just as happy to go back to London." He looked at Ian and Amy McFergus. "Nothing I've heard; just a sense. It happens sometimes, particularly to servants who've seen the city."

McFergus nodded. He knew the upper classes usually had a city home, and always took some of their servants with them to say for a few weeks every year. "The servants get to like the dirt, the smell, and the poor food?"

"They see it as freedom," Bowe said. "Even in an apartment they have to share with rats, they at least work a few hours less a week, and if they want to talk to a young man, or visit a theatre there's nobody to stop them."

"Sounds better when one is young."

"It does." Both men filled the room with smoke. Both men scratched their moustaches. "But there's freedom and there's duty," the constable said.

"Are people not free to go where they want in this kingdom?"

"If there were no constraints," Bowe said, "there would be no need for the police. Or the churches. We remind people of their duties. To the Queen, to their country, to their church, and to their society."

"Or it's off to America," McFergus suggested.

Bowe shook his head. "America is sorting itself into the same pattern that humanity has always lived in. Sooner or later the rich will own it all. Money buys freedom, and the rich Americans gather money faster than the poor. They call themselves free, but we've banned slavery, and they haven't. I wouldn't go to America. That slavery issue's going to come to a head sooner or later in spite of Mr. Lincoln. Probably sooner."

"And those rich will command the poor? The very churches will be divided by pew there, too?"

"It was always thus, since the beginning. And it's made Britain the most powerful country in the world. It will be that way, I suppose, as long as each Englishman remembers to put duty before a frivolous freedom."

McFergus shrugged, glad that Amy wasn't saying anything. "The French seemed to be doing well for a bit."

"Not for long. They beheaded their king, and now they're poor and run by a bad emperor."

"Nominally a democracy."

Bowe laughed. "The French emperor has far more power than Queen Victoria, and the total opposition in their parliament is five confused men. *Five*." He looked out the door. "After a bit of fun with equality, the old order asserts itself. The nobles are supplemented by capitalist barons and the poor are still poor."

McFergus decided not to mention Karl Marx.

“I can see why people, are running off to America or turning to communism,” the constable added. He waved out the window. “But things are improving for the lower classes. The working hours have lessened and parliament has steadily raised the age at which a child can start working. That may be better for the children, or not, depending on how desperate their parents are for money to feed them.”

“Does the improvement in factory conditions affect the Grange?”

“It does.” The constable watched as a group of farm boys laughed their way past the window. “It makes the old gentry treat their help a bit better. Not much, of course, but a bit.”

“Even here?” Amy asked.

The constable grinned. “It might, but another rumour says the Squire’s youngest son has in interest in your Miss Boyle, and that’s going to stir up trouble at the manse. The other servants don’t take well to that sort of thing, no matter how common it’s been in older times.”

“She didn’t mention that,” Amy fibbed.

“It’s not something one talks about, but I think her situation is about to change. She’s not in an enviable position, except that, with her last parent dead now, she’s freer than most. You might see her in the city, or at a factory eventually.”

“Or?” Amy asked. McFergus thought his wife was becoming braver; she’d have listened without comment in the days when her husband still worked for the force.

Bowe puffed out clouds of smoke. “Or run off to Canada or the United States with the squire’s youngest son. With a small remittance from his parents, they might do well there.” He paused. “It happens.” The constable stood up. “I thank you for telling me about this.” He shook McFergus’s hand, and said, “Did you know Mr, Bill Sikes got off the train that came here after yours?”

“What?”

“He did. He walked around town half an hour, then caught the next train back towards London. Is he of concern?”

McFergus shrugged. “Not that I know of.”

“Well, we both know enough of him to know he needs watching.” Constable Bowe led them to the station-house door, put on his hat, tipped it to Amy, and watched them leave.

“Now what?” Amy asked her husband.

McFergus smiled. “Back to the Big Smoke, I guess.”

On the way back to London, Amy was silent, watching the landscape go by under a cloudy British winter sky. A few guardsmen from a military regiment were singing noisily in the train car. McFergus turned to his wife. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“I’m worried about you. Do you think you’re stirring something up?”

He smiled. “But at least I’ve got something to do.” Then, seeing her look of concern, said, “I’ll be careful; I know my way around the streets.”

“I hope so,” Amy said. “I do hope so.”

It took them an hour to walk back home from the station; Amy insisted on walking, in order to save money, although Ian knew of the extra time she'd have to spend cleaning the clothes. It didn't take him more than a few minutes to realize they were being followed by a couple of boys. He didn't mention it to his wife, since the followers kept their distance.

Bumping people and dodging horses, they stopped only for a few minutes to watch Dwan, the conjurer, confuse two out-of-towners and a sceptical group of locals by making a small bird appear from his sleeve. Then Dwan went into his medicine-man routine, and sold someone a bottle of something guaranteed to make anyone feel ten years younger, and Amy urged her husband on.

Ian pointed out something new to London, a public toilet, but Amy just said, "Tuppence for the toilet and tuppence to wash you hands after. Robbery."

Ian could see that most of the locals felt the same, and there were few customers. I hear they have some of that toilet paper in those toilets."

Amy snorted. "Wiping ones bottom with special paper. What next?"

That night, in bed together, with their feet on bricks that had been warmed by the fire and wrapped in cloths, Amy asked her husband if he'd been satisfied with the day.

He thought about it, then said, "Yes. I think I've eliminated a suspect."

"You don't see her killing Mr. Marley?"

"She gained nothing from it."

"And not enough rancour to do it for vengeance for some action of his?"

"Did you think she was angry at him?" McFergus scratched at a flea.

"No," Amy said, "I do not think she disliked him." A long silence followed. "Did you like the village?"

"I am without illusions about such places."

"The air seemed nicer."

"They are building factories." He paused. "Do you think the people seemed happier?"

"They seemed cleaner and healthier."

"But not happier. In a village, everyone judges you, constantly. It is a jury you cannot escape."

"But they don't hang you for those judgements."

Ian put his arm around his wife. "That's true. Yes, I could live in a village again, as long as it weren't the one I grew up in. And as long as I could get away from time to time."

"They have trains, now. An hour to London.

"Let me think about it," the ex-inspector said. And he did, long after Amy was snoring by his side and the brick had gone cold. His last thought though, was, *Scrooge. Christmas eve. I have three days left.*

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Chapter 4: December 22

McFergus was at the table Monday morning, looking out the window onto the street. Molly had brought him oatmeal and tea from the kitchen in the basement. As with thousands of row houses, the McFergus house in London was narrow, with three floors.

From the street, one took a flight of stairs up to the middle floor. On this floor the owner welcomed guests into the drawing room. Part of the floor was the dining area, with the best table they could afford and a hutch with their best china and dinnerware. Several stuffed chairs would be scattered around, and possibly a musical instrument such as a small piano. All shelves, and the mantle over the fireplace were normally full of collectables, books, and various interesting objects.

The top floor was reserved for bedrooms for the family.

The bottom floor, the kitchen, was as large as the other floors, but partly set into the ground. Normally, it was well-lit by light from two windows, high on the wall facing the street, even if keeping the glass clean was not always easy. The kitchen had a fireplace that was used to cook food. Long after Germans and Americans had switched to iron stoves, most of the English stuck with fireplaces, although some of these had a number of iron attachments to permit the cooking of food and heating of water. Pots and pans were kept on cupboards. Water and/or gas were piped into the kitchen in the first years that these became available.

Outside, a steady rain was just on the verge of sleet and a nasty wind whipped the horses' manes and rattled along the housetops. It was, the inspector noted, a dark and stormy morning. Molly joined him for tea, which warmed his heart. He reached over to put his hand on hers.

Molly smiled. "Staying in, today?"

"When the game is afoot?"

"Pardon?"

"A phrase meaning the animal you're hunting has come out of hiding and you should be able to follow some tracks." McFergus poured another cup of tea, although it was already too strong. But he wasn't about to have Amy offer to go down to the kitchen to heat more water; the arthritis in her back was bad enough as it was. The last time he'd tried to heat more water himself, she'd seemed more than a little insulted.

"You think you've stirred something up?" His wife looked concerned. "There was that note about the threat to Scrooge, but yesterday, at the Grange, I don't think we learned much." She poured herself the last of the tea from the pot. "Do you think you're getting anywhere because Bill Sikes came on the next train to the Grange?"

"Mostly that," he said.

"Mostly?"

He shook his head. "Just a feeling that things downtown are getting to be a bit… different."

"Well, if it's dangerous, you might not want to continue with the Marley thing." She smiled. "I need you, Ian. I don't want a mudlark to find you tangled in chains when the tide goes out."

"Or in the sewers by some sewer hunter," he laughed. "I'll give it one more day; how's that?"

"What are your odds of solving the Marley thing?" Amy asked, instead of answering his question.

He wrinkled his nose. "One in a hundred, maybe. It's been seven years and there aren't going to be a lot of talkative people around."

"You might as well be off, then," Amy said. "Put your greatcoat on and come back before you freeze." She got up to clean away the breakfast dishes.

He sat for a minute after she'd disappeared downstairs, thinking about what else he could or should be doing, and didn't come up with any ideas.

When he stepped out the door, the first thing he noticed was two street kids sitting in a doorway on the other side of the street. It was snowing by this time, and their clothes looked totally inadequate, but they kept their eyes on him. He checked that the front door was locked.

He looked back a half block later, and the kids were shambling along, following his footprints in the new snow. It unsettled him a bit. Someone who was interested in what he did had paid to have him followed. Someone knew where he lived. There was no consideration of running after the urchins with his bad leg. He went around a corner and waited, but they were too smart to be caught by that, walking wide and circling behind a wagon bringing in bales of hay for London's horses.

What, he wondered, *am I doing? No one cares about Jacob Marley and no one on the planet would care if old Ebenezer Scrooge also fell down the same staircase in the next few days. The world went on without Marley; it will go on without Scrooge. God knows, it will go on very nicely without a limping and cold old police inspector named Ian McFergus. The street was slippery with the snow and he almost fell a couple of times. Good planning,* he decided. *I can break my other leg before Bill Sikes or someone else gets to do it.*

He found himself following the Thames, coming eventually to the King James Docks again. It was hard to see across the river with the snow now falling in thick flakes and swirling in the wind. He leaned over a railing, pulling his coat tighter. The tide was almost full, and only a couple of youngsters were feeling with their feet in the thin mud margins of the river by the wall. They looked very, very cold, and the inspector wondered if they'd have warmth and food in a system such as Mr. Marx proposed. He called to the closest child, a girl, and tossed her a coin. She caught it without smiling, and put it into a pocket. Then she shouted, "Betty's gone."

McFergus said, "Gone?"

"Gone," the girl repeated. "Gone. You won't ever find her again. Ever." McFergus hesitated, and the girl said, "Go away. I can't, won't talk to you." She turned her back and went

off to find or steal something to sell. After a few moments, McFergus headed back towards downtown, where the buildings might break the wind a bit.

That's where he met Augustus Oftan, coming down the street and waving to him. The big constable hailed McFergus from the other side of the street. "Ian!" he shouted, crossing the street while dodging a train of ash-hauling wagons, all of whose horses were treading carefully and slowly on the slippery street. "Good to see you again," Oftan said, with a big smile. "Avoiding drunken sailors these days, I hope." He brushed a bit of snow off McFergus's shoulder.

"Indeed, Constable Oftan," McFergus acknowledged.

"How's the missus?"

McFergus focused his gaze down the street a bit. "Fine," he said. There was a bit of a silence.

Oftan stomped his feet on the road, shaking a bit of mud-coloured snow off them, then leaned in a bit. He reached into a pocket, and brought out a small piece of paper from an inside pocket. "This is for you," he said, moving a broad smile to a slight smirk. "The superintendent said to give it to you." He seemed disappointed when McFergus stuffed the note into a pocket. "I think he wants to talk to you."

"Very good, Constable," McFergus said. "I'll read the note a bit later." He changed the subject by pointing to a couple of sewer people searching the sewers at the edge of the road with sticks. "They're out even in the cold."

"Some of them will get to move indoors eventually, I guess," the constable said.

"Indoors?"

Oftan nodded. "They say the sewers they're building under the streets now will be big enough to live in. Warm and cosy for sewer rats on a winter day, they say."

McFergus sighed. Searching sewage for items of value was, with mudlarking in the river, pretty well at the bottom of society's ladders. "At least the streets will smell a bit better." Country people coming to London for the first time were a bit shocked by the quantities of human waste that slid in the gutters at the sides of each street and edged every alley between buildings.

Oftan shook his head. "I hope so, but it's going to take a long time to connect everybody to the sewer, and the way London's growing, well, I hope the engineers planned for that."

"I expect they did," McFergus said. "Thank you for the note. Have a good day."

"As should you." The constable moved off. McFergus watched him for a moment, then continued towards the heart of the city. The snow fell more heavily. It was after eleven, by the inspector's retirement watch, by the time he got to the teahouse.

Eventually, on his third cup of tea and second fried cake, and after the inevitable second trip to the facilities behind the store, Former Police Inspector Ian McFergus took the note from his pocket. Superintendent Stanley Brimagem Bannim had taken over five years ago, coming from the Manchester Police. The man had, McFergus admitted to himself, been a very

effective copper in some ways, particularly in extending an increased police presence in areas of London that had, for a long time been left to themselves.

But Superintendent Bannim and Inspector McFergus had come into conflict over what McFergus considered ignorable crime. McFergus preferred a warning to a costermonger over a food violation or a tap on the head with a police baton for an aggressive drunk to a trial and a few months in prison for those found guilty. Removing a poor man from the street often not only left his family without support, but the prisons too often changed a man for the worse. Many of the prisons on land were brutal workhouses. A prisoner spent his sentence forbidden to talk to any other prisoner, and his days with other men operating a large treadmill on a diet that was somewhat short on the calories necessary to exist.

Even so, the workhouses were still better than the rotting hulks of the old warships, their masts and rigging long gone, that served as anchored penitentiaries in the Thames. Many of the prisoners in the ships spent most of their sentences chained to the walls in rooms too small to stand up in. At intervals they got to see the outside, as men would be put, three at a time, into an iron cage, then hauled to the deck to be washed off by warders using a hose and long-handled brushes.

It was a policeman's call; someone you let off could commit a major crime shortly after; some of those you sent for imprisonment might well die, become bitter to all humanity, or even, occasionally, turn out to be innocent, incarcerated for lack of a good lawyer. Bannim was a tough man, but one, McFergus thought, without much sympathy for the poor. There had been a sense of relief on both sides when McFergus had retired from the force.

McFergus took out the note. On letterhead paper, it said, "Mr. McFergus; could you arrange to see me at your earliest convenience." It was signed, "Superintendent S. B. Bannim." The former inspector was still frowning when he looked up and noticed Sampson Hill beside him. The young man was looking a bit disheveled and was holding a bloodied handkerchief to his head.

McFergus stood up. "Are you all right? What happened?" he asked.

Sampson pulled the handkerchief away. "How does it look, to you? I suspect you've seen more abrasions and contusions than I."

McFergus took the handkerchief, dipped the end in his tea, and wiped a spot on the youth's face. "A surface cut that's almost stopped bleeding. You'll also have a bruise or two for a while."

Sampson sat down, and the inspector waved to a server. Sampson ordered a cake and a cup of tea. "I was assaulted," he said.

"Was it anyone you knew, or did you annoy one of the locals?"

"I was walking along, observing the people, when a young man, about fourteen years old, wearing the garb of a transient, walked up to me and hit me three times in the face, knocking me against a building. I can give a complete description, if it would do any good."

McFergus shrugged. “English law has always tended to ignore physical violence as a crime, unless severe injuries occur. Most of her laws are about property, although I’ve heard that’s changing.” He sipped his tea. “One more step towards civilization, I guess.”

“I rather suspected that. Even the policeman who stepped in to rescue me didn’t seem inclined to apprehend the assailant.”

McFergus sat up. “Can you describe the policeman to me?”

“A large man, with an East Anglian accent. He’s been a constable most of his life, without promotion and is satisfied with that position, presumably because of graft. His father was disappointed in him, but his wife is afraid of him. He has a mole on the back of his neck and his left ear is slightly misshapen, most likely from a fight. He likes to think of himself as intelligent, but is aggressive towards anyone who is actually smarter than he is. He spent at least one year at sea as a youth.” He looked at McFergus.

“Ah,” said McFergus. “You, too, have now met Constable Oftan, Constable Augustus Corbally Oftan. He’s been with the force for about nine years, and we can hope he never rises above his current grade.”

“He rescues people who are in trouble?”

“Constable Oftan,” McFergus said, “has never, so far as I am aware, rescued anybody, with two exceptions.” He paused to take a bite out of a scone which did not taste as good as the scones McFergus knew as a child, perhaps because of the London habit of adulterating the flour with alum or other white fillers. “You are the second. He was the one who rescued me from that drunken sailor last week.”

“I thought as much. More street theatre?” Sampson asked.

McFergus, who was by nature suspicious of most things, merely tilted his head and looked sideways at Sampson. “Constable Oftan is not all that intelligent. If someone had asked him to keep close to us, this is the sort of thing he’d dream up, so we’d think of him as a friend.”

“Perhaps,” Sampson said with a rueful smile, “perhaps we’d better pretend to be the constable’s close friend before he does us both serious injury.”

“That,” said McFergus, “was my plan. I didn’t know he’d try it with you, if that was indeed what he did.”

“That presumes that someone is getting sufficiently interested in our endeavour that he’s putting pressure on us.”

McFergus told him about the two street urchins who followed him from his house, and about what the mudlark had told him. “As you said, the game is afoot.” Then he remembered to Sampson about Altham Grange.

Sampson nodded his head. “But we ourselves might end up as the game that’s afoot.” He sighed. As long as we’re here anyway, we might as well draw up a list of logical possibilities.”

“About?”

“The killing of Marley, of course.” Sampson pulled out a few sheets of paper.

“You think the notes will come in handy?” McFergus didn’t think so, having talked this over with Amy already.

“For you,” Sampson said, handing the paper to McFergus. “I can remember everything but I find other people are less able to remember correctly. It would be logical to start with the assumption that Marley’s death was murder, and see if we can draw some conclusions from that.”

McFergus nodded, arranged for a beer for each of them, and hoped his bladder would hold out a bit longer. He put the papers that Sampson had given him aside, and took out his notepad.

Sampson looked at him. “If someone rolls you on the way home, they might take that notepad as their first item of interest.” McFergus smiled and said nothing, but the idea of beating the crap out of the kid didn’t seem as reprehensible as it had moments before. Sampson sighed, as if people would always be a bit illogical. “The easiest place to start, especially in the case of a rich man, is to ask who gained monetarily with the death of Mr. Marley.”

“Logically, the first person would be Mr. Scrooge.” McFergus just pretended to sip his tea; he’d had enough liquid.

As McFergus set the cup down, Sampson looked at it and raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Scrooge seems to have inherited everything of Mr. Marley’s, including, eventually, a apartment at a good price.”

“Yet Mr. Scrooge does not seem to have enjoyed his newfound gains very much.”

“From what you tell me, Mr. Scrooge likes gaining money, or is habituated to such as his life’s occupation.”

“Still, from what I know, Mr. Scrooge insists on being fair in his transactions, and is not known to practice any evil arts at the exchange.”

Sampson nodded. “As it seems to you. Then, unless Mr. Scrooge was ready to change his ways and kill to get a better apartment, we’ll proceed to others who might have gained. Have you considered Bob Cratchit?” Sampson scowled at his tea. Tea leaves were sufficiently valuable that they were often recycled instead of being thrown out.

“I have,” McFergus said calmly. “The people closest to a victim are, of course, primary suspects.” If Sampson could patronize him, he could patronize Sampson, McFergus thought. “I can’t see what financial good Marley’s death did the clerk, though.”

“Then we’ll put him on hold for now, and contemplate other persons who might have benefited by Mr. Marley’s death.”

“At the present moment,” McFergus said, “there don’t seem to be any. Scrooge and Marley seems to have engulfed the lives of both those men.” He contemplated a trip to the toilets behind the tea shop. “I’ll check in case there are any financial interests that were linked to Marley, but not to Scrooge.” He took out his notebook and pencil, then carefully wrote in it, “Don’t forget to buy a Christmas present for Amy.”

“In the meantime,” Sampson went on, “We should consider non-monetary motives. Perhaps someone hated Mr. Marley for personal reasons.”

McFergus wrote, “Maybe a new hat,” into his notebook. “Again we come to the clerk, Cratchit, and Mr. Scrooge at the only people known to have been close to Mr. Marley.” He looked up. “As I said, my impression of the housekeeper was that she neither disliked Mr. Marley nor gained from his demise.”

“In other words, if we include only Mr. Marley’s murder, we are at a dead end. If Mr. Marley was playing with flash girls or street boys, the trail probably went cold years ago. What odds do you think we have, from that point of view?”

McFergus smiled ruefully. “Last week I’d have said one in a hundred. Just enough to keep a restless old man active for a few months before giving up.” He squeezed his hands together. “After the events of the last few days, I’d say one in ten, given that people are getting riled like an ant’s nest.”

“”Bringing us to the next item; what changes if Mr. Scrooge is truly targeted for death?”

“We have to look at the motives again.”

“Right,” Sampson said.

McFergus then told Sampson about his interview with Bob Cratchit, and handed over the address note Cratchit had given him. “I’ll be right back,” McFergus said. “While I’m gone, you might think of the man Miss Boyle described as dressed like a banker; the one who had an argument with Mr. Marley.”

He returned, a bit snow-covered, a couple of minutes later to an impatient Sampson, who started talking before the inspector sat down. “You understand that a threat to Mr. Scrooge revives the possibility that the clerk, Mr, Cratchit or Mr. Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, may have been involved.”

McFergus nodded, and lit his pipe. “Seven years would be a long time for someone to wait for whatever benefit might accrue from killing Scrooge.”

Sampson nodded. “It would, but some motives and desires stew in a person’s mind, rising and falling with circumstance. If Mr. Marley’s wealth went to Mr. Scrooge, then who would get it when Mr. Scrooge died?”

This time McFergus did actually take a note in his notepad. “I’ll look into that. “We must also consider the long-running grievance as a possibility,” he said.

“Cratchit,” Sampson said. “Underpaid, overworked, and, more importantly, treated poorly by Mr. Scrooge.” He shifted nervously in his chair. “We must ask ourselves why Mr. Cratchit stayed with the Scrooge & Marley firm so long.” Sampson looked serious, as if he’d have preferred a pipe of his own. “Obviously, at first an economic downturn may have made him cautious about leaving, but the economy’s been good for a couple of years, and good financial clerks should have no trouble moving to a place where they are appreciated more.”

“There’s also the possibility,” McFergus said, “that there was financial gain available. If Scrooge died, a sharp clerk might have the opportunity to, shall we say, make a few amendments to the books if he were quick enough. Get a few crumbs in the confusion.”

Sampson nodded. “Especially if under pressure to do so by his family.”

“I’ll check that out. The Cratchit family might have an urgent need for money.”

“Other than that, following the money would probably go to Fred, Scrooge’s nephew.”

“I’ll also check that out.”

“And Fred’s wife, if he has one. For all we know, she may have been eyeing Fred’s uncle’s fortune for years, impatient to move up financially in London society.” Sampson brushed his hand through his hair. “And there’s the ‘banker,’ of course.”

“The man Miss Virginia Boyle saw visiting Mr. Marley at his apartment. Why would a professional man go to Mr. Marley’s apartment instead of to the offices of Scrooge & Marley?” The inspector tapped the ashes from his pipe onto the saucer on the table.

“We have leads, and we need more information.” Sampson looked a bit uncomfortable.

“And you have to return to school now, leaving all the information-gathering to someone else. Someone who might decide not to pursue the case at all.”

“You know we should,” Sampson said, looking a bit desperate. “It would be wrong if we… let a murderer get away with his crime.”

McFergus looked into Sampson’ s eyes and thought he knew what the boy really meant; that it would be wrong to leave a case unsolved; that it was the challenge that excited Sampson, not the morality. “I am old,” he said, “but I’d like to get a bit older before I get tossed into the Thames for the mudlarks to find.”

“You think that’s likely.”

“I care,” McFergus said, “if it’s possible.”

“How many would go to that extreme?” Sampson put his hands together in front of him.

McFergus sighed. “There are four thousand costermongers in London now. They do not like much of the English power structure, they do not like rich people, and they certainly don’t like the police force of the city, whom they see as interfering with their supposed right to make a living. A lot of the force is dedicated to moving the stalls and tents and barrows out of the way of traffic, and out of the way of the stores that face onto the streets. And there is also a less savoury underworld, more dangerous than the costers.”

“Enough to hurt you, an inspector?”

“The costermongers believe the police are just thieves in uniforms, sending little girls selling apples and flowers off to jail, where they’ll die on the treadmill. As far as the costermongers are concerned, most policemen are bullies in the pay of the aristocracy. And I was a beat constable, doing just that for years.”

“Are the police like that?” Sampson asked.

McFergus looked up. “Enough of them. You don’t wander into those crowds on a Saturday night unless you’re tough enough to get back out if the drunks and criminals turn on

you, or unless you're paid off so you do only a token job." He looked Sampson in the eye. "There are many honest people in among those who sell products and services in the streets of London, but there are a lot of truly desperate people, for whom the sale of one more item means they can buy some stock on the morrow and have something to sell. They sleep thirty to a bug-infested room that lets the snow and rain in, and they make children when they're not much older than you. They are desperate, as I said, and there are an increasing number of professional criminals ready to organize them."

"But didn't you have a reputation of being better than the other policemen towards them?"

"I did, when I was a constable. But not everyone believed my motives and many people have come and gone since I became an inspector and more since I retired." He paused. "Many costers have more fear of a man they can't pay off than one they can." He finished his tea. "Many would say even if Marley was actually murdered, it was a crime that hurt no one except an old man with more money than he had a right to." Sampson was about to say something, but McFergus put up a hand first. "Is your morality so strong at your age that you'd risk danger to both of us to get justice?"

Sampson smiled. "I have discovered I have a fairly low sense of morality." He finished his now-cold tea. "I cherish the chase, the chance to solve a puzzle."

"And if I gave up. Or were killed?"

"I'd wonder all my life if this problem could have been solved."

"I want to give up this chase," McFergus said simply. "I have no one on my side right now except a callous young man who would read my obituary without a tear."

"Until the end of the day, perhaps," Samson said. "You'll have the chance to get out the word that you're removing yourself from the case."

"And who would I tell?"

Sampson grinned for the first time. "The prime suspects, of course."

McFergus pondered that. "And perhaps my old Superintendent." He handed the note to Sampson.

The youth read it, then shook his head. "People do like handing you notes, don't they? Are you going to see him?"

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

"Other than the fact that you two can't stand each other? Can he affect your pension?"

"In theory, no," McFergus said.

"In theory. Did the note come to your house?"

"No. The same Constable Oftan who saved both of us. The Jesus of the streets."

"You could do time for blasphemy," Sampson noted.

"Unlikely, in this part of town."

"Any idea what he wants?" Sampson got up.

"No."

"Then it may be connected to our case."

McFergus snorted. "To our former case, which I had two days left to solve."

"Two and a half," Sampson corrected.

McFergus snorted, tapped the ashes from his pipe and put it into his jacket pocket. As Sampson left, McFergus noted that it had stopped snowing. He realized that he had no idea where the Cratchits or Scrooge's nephew lived. It seemed a good time to visit Scrooge and Marley Inc, and see if he could get some information from the clerk.

He had gone barely half a block when he paused to watch a match girl weeping loudly. She was telling a well-dressed man that he had bumped her, causing her to spill her matches into the snow. She would, she claimed, go hungry. A tall woman standing nearby nodded, saying the match girl would also surely be beaten for losing her product. The well-dressed man, and a few more strangers, gave the little girl with the thin, ragged clothes, a few shillings. McFergus, having seen the scam a hundred times before, smiled and went on.

As he was dodging fresh horse manure McFergus was remembering that there were more than twenty thousand horses in London and estimating that the city had to get rid twenty thousand tons of horse manure a year, when a hackney cab stopped in front of him and interrupted his calculations. A constable unknown to McFergus stepped out. "The superintendent sent you a cab."

Interesting, McFergus thought. *This must go into the police budget. And how did they know where to find me?* A shiver that wasn't from the winter went through him.

He looked around. A seller of newspapers was squeezing between the cab and a coster pushing a cartful of vegetables along. McFergus waved at him, then bought a copy of The Scotsman from a couple of weekends past. Superintendent Bannim was well know as a man who liked to make visitors, even ones with appointments, wait a while. As the former inspector stepped into the hansom, a dog left a pile of brown turds on almost under the wheels. Immediately, a very small and quick girl rushed in to scoop the deposit before it was run over. The dog excrement might be unappealing, but, thickened to the consistency of honey, it was essential in the process of turning cowhide into good leather; despite centuries of efforts by chemists, nothing better had been found. The girl who rescued it from the melting snow and the wheels of the traffic was one more step on the way to making enough for another night's food.

With the cobblestone streets, the rough suspension of the hackney cab (commonly known as a "growler" from the noise its wheels made), and the stops and starts as the cab negotiated its way through the streets, it was not possible to read inside. McFergus preferred, anyway, to watch the people of London. What must they think, he wondered, of the policeman in a cab and the man beside him? A felon being taken to court? He smiled; felons traveled by police cab; McFergus had accompanied many of them in his time on the force. He didn't anticipate any pleasantness at the division office, but there wasn't much he could do about it, it seemed.

It was a slow trip, but McFergus was in no hurry. The snow had stopped but the granite streets were slippery in any case and people were taking care with the horses. One street was more or less blocked with the deep hole made as London's first subway line progressed steadily from Paddington to Farringdon. The huge trench was braced with timbers, and the men worked with no mechanical help, hauling buckets of mud and water up to the street level, and lowering bricks downward. The cold, he assumed, made the men's hands numb, but the work went on; London was frantically trying to put underground as much of the utilities and transport as it could before gridlock on the street level had become permanently hopeless.

That was yet another reason the society and police faced the costermongers and other street people; as useful a function as these vendors served, they clogged the streets and harboured a multitude of petty criminals. The police went into some areas only in groups, for safety, but bit by bit the world of the costermongers was shrinking under police pressure. Yet the number of poor in the city was always being augmented by the endless stream of optimistic or desperate people coming into the capital city by train, wagon, and on foot. McFergus thought of the boy he'd seen from the train, sleeping by a hay rick and probably now somewhere in the warren of slum housing south of the town centre. That kid would be lucky not to end up working for Fagin or some other gang of thieves.

Once, McFergus turned his head to watch a Hansom cab go by; it was the second one he'd seen. A nimble two-wheeled vehicle, capable of holding two passengers, it was pulled by a single horse, and the driver stood behind the passengers. The former inspector approved of this import from New York; its smaller shape promised to make it more suitable for the packed streets. He suspected they'd have become more common except for a lingering resentment of America.

Superintendent Stanley Brimagem Bannim was, of course, busy when the unnamed constable followed McFergus up the steps and into the pretentious opening of the police station. McFergus wondered, as he was seated on a hard wooden chair beside a shifty-eyed man of strong body odor, whether police stations should be made less pretentious, so that the common folk would be less likely to associate maintaining the law with maintaining the aristocratic national structure. There was, of course, nothing to be done about it, so he opened the newspaper and began searching for articles worth his time. He ignored the police officers who came and went, although he'd known many of them well enough to call them friends. They ignored him, too, as if he were a common criminal. *Bannim's still setting the tone for this place*, McFergus thought.

There was an interesting discussion near the back of the paper. Thomas Henry Huxley, one of Charles Darwin's proponents, was carrying out a debate, in the newspaper, on whether evolution was real or not. His opponent, one Lord Greystoke, argued that lack of any fossils of creatures intermediate between apes and humans cast a lot of doubt on the theory. "Show me an ape-man," he wrote, "and I'll be more inclined to believe I'm descended from a tree-

climbing, chest-beating, banana eater." It was a good line, but McFergus knew that the study of fossils was only in its beginning.

He opened the week-old Scottish newspaper. There was continuing commentary on golf, two months after the first professional golf tournament had been held at Prestwick. Some thought the next tournament should be open to amateurs, too. And the Royal Hospital for Sick Children had opened in Edinburgh. McFergus wondered if it would have made any difference to his family; only three of his eight brothers and sisters had survived childhood.

By the time a clerk indicated that Superintendent Stanley Brimagem Bannim would see him, former Inspector Ian McFergus had read most of the newspaper, and the opinion pieces twice. Most of the paper was taken up with Scottish politics, and McFergus realized again how far he was from his native land.

Inside the superintendent's office there were three people waiting. Superintendent Bannim, a tall man with a grey mustache, did not get up from his desk. McFergus wasn't totally surprised to see the coroner in another chair, but the presence of Constable Augustus Oftan, seated in another chair did cause him pause. *What?* he thought, *Does Bannim think I'm going to limp over and assault someone*?

The Superintendent waved him to a chair, which McFergus took as a good sign; he'd have refused to remain standing as if he were a truant schoolboy back in Scotland. He looked at the coroner, who didn't smile. He looked at Oftan, who smirked. Then he looked at the Superintendent.

"Thank you for coming here," Bannim said, as if McFergus had had any other choice except to limp away into the crowds and hide in the slums where people slept thirty people and to a room. McFergus just nodded, so the Superintendent continued. "We have word that you're doing some investigating on your own." He looked like he was trying not to glare. He didn't succeed. McFergus didn't move a muscle.

"The case of the death of Mr. Jacob Marley," the coroner said, in a squeaky voice. He had, McFergus realized, a rather rat-like face.

Bannim glared at the coroner.

There was a moment's silence in the room, then Bannim looked back at McFergus. "Mr. McFergus," he said, "We were told you might be investigating the death of Mr. Marley. Is this in fact the case?" Although the other three were staring at him, McFergus said nothing, and sat, expressionless, looking at Superintendent Bannim. After a moment, the Superintendent added, "We've brought the coroner's report for you to look at." He nodded to the coroner, who handed a report book to McFergus.

McFergus took the book and skimmed the writing, which was small but neat and quite legible. Then he read it in more detail. There was nothing he didn't already know. Mr. Marley had been discovered, dead, inside the building he lived in one morning. The building had housed not only Mr. Marley's apartment but the offices of several enterprises, and the first person to enter the building the day after Christmas had discovered Mr. Marley's body at the

bottom of the stairs. That person had returned to the street, and had called the nearest police constable.

That was a surprise; the policeman had been one Constable A. Oftan. Interesting, McFergus thought. I didn't know that. Some time later, the coroner and McFergus had arrived, but by that time Oftan had returned to his beat.

The rest of the report was no different than he remembered. There was no sign of violence, nor of robbery. It appeared that sometime in the night Mr. Marley had opened the door to his apartment, and carrying a candle, had walked out into the hallway, then had tumbled down the stairs, breaking his neck. He'd landed on top of the candle, which probably prevented a fire in the building. McFergus handed the report back to the coroner without comment.

"You see," the coroner squeaked. "You see; there's nothing to indicate foul play." Bannim glared at the coroner again.

"Are you," Bannim asked, "investigating the death of Mr. Marley? And if so, why? Is the report not complete?"

McFergus sighed, and began to talk. He told them of his love of London and how much he enjoyed the noise and the people, and compared it with his youth in the highlands of Scotland. Eventually he got to his living conditions in London and how he and Amy were looking forward to the increasing progress of British society, even anticipating the arrival of indoor flush toilets some day. As he talked, his Scottish brogue grew wider and deeper, like the river Clyde. By this time the other three were straining to make sense of what he was saying.

He worked his way through Amy's suggestion that he deal with his boredom, making up a threat from her to go back to her mother if he didn't get a hobby and adding a few fictitious details about how he'd tried knitting and candle making, but could never compete with the street vendors, for whom a penny profit on a day's work was adequate, and anyway the doctor had told him that walking was essential for the leg he'd got injured heroically in the line of duty, and how he'd decided to revisit some cold cases, and what a joy it had been to be wandering the streets of London just before Christmas. He assured them it was only a pastime for him. It took quite a while to do this, since he seldom finished a sentence without inserting another in parenthesis first, and often another within that, until some how his sentences were long paragraphs, constructed like a set of Russian nesting dolls, with parts within other parts within other parts, and until he finished the exact meaning of the original could not be deduced, assuming the listener could translate it into something resembling English in the first place. *There should*, McFergus thought, *be a piper playing sadly behind me*.

When he stopped, the other three men had rather glazed looks in their eyes. There was a silence, then Bannim asked, as if to stop McFergus from starting again, "What made you think there was foul play in the death of Mr. Marley in the first place?"

“I had no reason to,” McFergus lied to them, and explained how his dear mother had told him that when the wind was right through the heather and the morning mist was lifting off Glen Miller in Scotland, where his people had lived for centuries, well, sometimes a person could sense things that others could not. It was, he said, just a gut feeling, and he had no basis for it.

In fact, there would have been several problems with telling about the warning he’d received from the youth he’d detained. In the first place, he’d let the youth go free, and he knew how Bannim would have felt about that, even if the event did happen before Bannim had arrived as superintendent. Another problem was that it might have seemed that McFergus had dealt with a “confidential informant” among the criminal classes. The use of snitches had been firmly banned in the London police for fear of creating unregulated relationships between police and criminals.

“And the results of your investigation?” the coroner squeaked.

“McFergus spread his arms wide. “Sir,” he said. “It’s been seven years, and there was no cause for me to doubt the report. The results have been as expected, of course. No one remembers and no one will talk to me.” He winked. “In another few days I can tell my wife that I’m done with this case.” He looked around. “I assure you that I’m assuring all I speak to that I’m no longer with the police and have no authority whatsoever.” This, thought McFergus, is going to be the hardest part. He was expecting The Lecture, the part where he’d be told, at length and in detail about his obligations as a former police officer and how fragile the relationship with the public was. And, of course, he’d be told to quit doing any investigation.

Instead, to his surprise, Bannim asked him, “Have you any problem with the coroner’s report or any questions to ask these men?” McFergus just shook his head, wary. Then Bannim got to his feet. “Then get out, all of you. I have work to do.”

McFergus left first, followed by Oftan and the coroner. Neither man spoke to McFergus as he walked through the station, watched by the eyes of all present, and out onto the street. Since no one offered him transport, he began walking homeward. It was still cold, but the snow had stopped, and there were more costermongers on the street, many offering Christmas cards and small toys. Must buy something else for Amy, he thought. A bonnet would be good.

Eventually he realized he was not far from Scrooge & Marley, so he changed direction to pass by the establishment. He was sure, now, that his wisest move would be to abandon the inquiry as quickly as possible. The odds of him getting beaten were high and the odds of him actually solving the case were vanishingly small. And those boys outside his home in the morning had spooked him; he didn’t want anybody targeting his wife.

“Greetings again, former inspector.” The voice came through the street-side window at Scrooge and Marley, Incorporated after that window had been opened slightly.

“I gather that Mr. Scrooge….” McFergus looked around. There was nobody suspicious, as far as he could tell, but he’d gathered in the last couple of days that any number of people might be tracking him.

“Is at the ‘change at the moment. So he is, as far as I know. Have you solved the murder of Mr. Marley, yet?” There was a chuckle from the clerk.

“I have not. Furthermore, I have indications that several… people are following my wanderings as if concerned that I might just turn up something.”

“You might want to quit your endeavour, then,” Cratchit said. “Former policemen may receive unwanted pokes in the ribs when moving about. I had an uncle in the Manchester force,” Cratchit explained. “He eventually moved to another town where he could shop without tripping so much.”

“I am,” said McFergus, “thinking seriously of doing exactly that, although I have some suspicion that the people opposing me are doing so because of my inquiries into the Marley case.”

“You’d quit when you might be getting somewhere?”

“The odds are still small, and the pay is nothing but bruises, at the least. Even the police would like me to take up making ferret cages or hunting sewer rats as a pastime, it seems.”

“Have you come here to redeem your promise to keep me informed, or are you here to arrest me before I’ve also killed Mr. Scrooge?”

“The former,” McFergus said, “but I didn’t know you were planning on interring your current boss.”

“Oh, it’s a diabolical plan,” Cratchit said, laughing. “As soon as Mr. Scrooge is gone, I’m going to steal the candle and pen from his desk and make a run for it. I’ve been planning it for seven years because I’m a very patient thief. Have you any other suspects than myself?”

“I have not.” There was a silence. “Well, then –” McFergus began.

A gloved hand reached through the window with a slip of paper. “They day’s not over. Check these out or you’ll be dissatisfied the rest of your life.”

McFergus looked at the notes. “These are?”

“The addresses of my wife and Mr. Scrooge’s nephew and a note of introduction. Perhaps they’re also involved in planning Mr. Scrooge’s murder. Maybe we’re a murderous bunch, astounded by our success with Mr. Marley.”

“You seem sure Mr. Scrooge will be murdered.”

“It’s only logical,” Cratchit said. “No one seems to have gained at all from the death of Mr. Marley, except Mr. Scrooge, and he had no known motive. But the death of Mr. Scrooge would result in the liquidation of the firm, and a fair amount of money would have to be moved. Not,” he added, “that I would know where it would be moved to, only that I’d be out of a job.”

McFergus sighed a world-weary sigh. “Why not?” he asked no one in particular.

“Why not?” Cratchit agreed, and shut the window.

McFergus took a bus to the suburb where Scrooge's clerk lived. It was in an area perhaps a little poorer than that where the McFergus residence was situated, but Bob Cratchit's house was one room larger. McFergus tapped on the door.

A woman who must have been Mrs. Cratchit opened the door. She was dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, and attended by two youngsters, a boy and a girl, and a somewhat older boy with a crutch. "Please, what may I do to help you," the woman said.

"I have here a note from your husband," McFergus said, producing from his pocket the neatly folded piece of paper. He knew it read, "Emily. This man is a former policeman who would like to ask you some questions." It was signed, "Bob."

Mrs. Cratchit looked at the note briefly, then said, "Come in; I'll put on some tea." She did, in fact assign that task to a daughter, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, whom she addressed as "Belinda."

When the tea was poured, some slices of bread were laid onto a small, cracked plate. Mrs. Cratchit told Belinda to get the good plate for the bread, which was done without any sign of resentment on the daughter's part.

After comments on the weather and some thanks for the tea and hospitality, McFergus said, "I fear I am troubling you for nothing. I am merely looking into the case of Mr. Marley, who died seven years ago."

"Seven years ago, on Christmas Eve," Mrs. Cratchit said. "I do remember it."

"Did you think it was an accident?" McFergus decided to get right to the point.

"It seemed strange," Mrs. Cratchit acknowledged, "but it was to nobody's convenience or gain, and the coroner at the time declared it accidental." She looked strangely at McFergus. "Do you not think it was an accident?" she asked.

McFergus smiled and once again told the story of being sent to the streets by his wife to keep him busy. "But," he added," It did seem a bit strange at the time. It was an unlikely thing to do, to leave his apartment in the night with a candle." He sipped the last of the weak tea.

"People do strange things," Mrs. Cratchit said, nodding her head wisely. "People live lives of quiet desperation in their normal lives, and keep their desires within their secret lives, if only in their imaginations. It is their way of being free. Mr. Marley may have had a secret life. Possibly Mr. Scrooge has one, too.

McFergus thought it unlikely that Mr. Scrooge had a secret life. "Then, with nothing to trace, the truth may never been known." He shook his head, then asked, "Did your husband like Mr. Marley?"

"Mr. Marley," she said, "could be nice to Bob at times, but then, for no reason would criticize him loudly." She was lost in thought for a moment. "In many ways Bob preferred Mr. Scrooge, because he's always a odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man, but very much the same, every day."

"I'm wondering why your husband doesn't change positions. There must a demand for good clerks in the city."

“Mr. McFergus,” Mrs. Cratchit said, “do you remember the financial downturn a few years back? Many clerks were on the streets after that. Bob is underpaid, but his job is likely secure if only because Mr. Scrooge cannot find another clerk who knows Mr. Scrooge’s business and would work for that salary.” She smiled a wan smile. “We are not free, Mr. McFergus, none of us. Even Mr. Scrooge is bound by his money devils. We make our choices if we can, but we are not free to do what we want.” She began to clear the table. “You are perhaps freer than most people I have met.”

McFergus stood up. “Then nothing is likely to change unless Mr. Scrooge happens to die?”

“It might be good if Mr. Scrooge were to die,” she said, “but it might not. Bob could find a better-paying position, but in the next financial downturn – do you not remember the ‘hungry forties?’ – he could be on the street selling apples, could he not?” She walked the ex-policeman to the door, children following. “I wish you the best in your quest. Try Mr. Scrooge’s nephew; maybe he’s as greedy as his uncle, and needs money. Good day, Mr. McFergus. And merry Christmas.”

McFergus, who didn’t remind her it was not yet Christmas, walked into the street under a cold pearl-and-grey sky and a nasty wind. Now what, he wondered. He looked around and for a moment caught the eye of a young woman passing by. She looked away and hurried off, but he remembered her as Molly Lambert, whom he’d seen last at the Communist meeting. *Hmm*, he thought. Then he looked at the paper that Mr. Cratchit had given him, and began walking north. After a mile, his leg began aching, and he took a bus. It didn’t take long before the bus had travelled uphill and upscale away from the crowded central London buildings and into quieter and tidier streets. Not, McFergus decided, upper class, but a safe distance from downtown.

When he arrived at the home of Fred, Scrooge’s nephew, it was getting late and dark; he wondered if Fred might be in. He tapped the door knocker, and the door was opened in a few seconds by a young woman in servant’s dress. “Could I speak to Mr. Holywell,” he asked.

“Mr. Holywell is expected momentarily, the young woman answered in a lowlands accent that made the inspector smile. “Shall I inform Mrs. Holywell that you are here?”.

“I would appreciate that,” McFergus said, handing her a business card that identified him as a former police inspector.

She had barely gone in before a coach stopped and a handsome man in his mid-thirties stepped off. The man, his face ruddy from the cold, inspected the inspector, smiled broadly, and asked if he could help. “Fred Holywell, at your service,” the man said, handing McFergus a card that identified him as a solicitor for a large and well-known legal firm.

Before McFergus could reply, an exceedingly pretty woman came to the door. “Fred,” she said with a smile that brightened the dark street outside, “Inspector McFergus has just arrived.” She turned her face to McFergus. “Welcome to our home, Inspector McFergus. Come in out of the cold!” She led the two men into a well-lit interior. McFergus noted that the

residence was about three times that which he and Amy lived in, and better furnished. The servant took McFergus's hat.

"Former," he said. "Former inspector. I'm retired now."

It took a good ten minutes for the servant girl to start the tea heating, put more wood onto the fire, and get out some fine china with sweets to go with the tea. While they were waiting, they talked about the London weather, which both Holywells seemed to find very funny, especially when it involved some snowball fights that had occurred among children with the morning's snow. A description of hats being knocked off brought more laughter, and the prospect of London being blanketed under a few inches of the white stuff brought a comment from Clara Holywell on how beautiful the city could be on a winter's day. *It was not*, McFergus decided, *that there wasn't misery around, but that these two had chosen to look at life the way they wanted it*.

During the small talk, which went well into the drinking of the tea and eating of the afternoon sweets, McFergus could smell supper cooking somewhere in the house, and decided that he'd try to keep this interview to a reasonable length. He looked around, and could see the house was being prepared for Christmas, presumably for a gathering of friends and relatives in three days. There were several wrapped gifts on a shelf. Beside them was a small pile of embroidered goods, pen wipers, bookmarks, and handkerchiefs awaiting some final hand assembly or colouring to be ready for wrapping, as well as a few books by Tennyson and Dickens. Scissors, string and hand-painted wrapping paper sat on another chair. There were rolls of ribbon awaiting and space enough for a small Christmas tree, a fashion that was spreading steadily throughout England. *Perhaps*, he thought, *this pair share the superstition that a Christmas tree brought bad luck if a tree or wreath were set up before Christmas eve*.

Finally, there was a moment's silence, and McFergus said, "I have to be getting home soon." He smiled, and went into his usual explanation of how his wife had told him to get out of the house and find something to do. Fred and Clara paid such rapt attention that McFergus reached into his Scottish roots to find the humour in the situation, exaggerating as much as he could, and adding details that hadn't actually happened. The couple across the table laughed at everything, and McFergus even saw the servant girl keeping close enough to listen. For a moment, he even saw the servant girl smile at a joke, an act normally prohibited among servants.

"You think Mr. Marley was murdered?" Clara was aghast. Her perpetually surprised expression outdid itself and her very bright eyes grew wide. "Who would murder Mr. Marley?" Then she paused, and added, "Of course, I never met Mr. Marley. He died several years before I met Fred."

"Three years before we met," Fred said happily, looking at his wife with a large smile. "And four years before we were married." He turned to McFergus. "I didn't know the man well. We talked socially whenever I went to Scrooge and Marley Incorporated, but that's all."

He frowned. “A person never could tell what mood he’d be in. Sometimes he was warm and friendly and other times he just growled like my uncle Scrooge.”

“Now there’s a man I would expect to be murdered,” said Clara, indignantly, looking hard at McFergus. I have no patience with that man. He’s odious, he is.”

He is what he is,” Fred said. “He’s a strange duck, but not a happy man. He makes his own misery to live in, although he could be happy. I understand he has bins of money.”

“And shame on him for that. You tell me he has all that money, and yet he spends nothing on himself and nothing on anyone else.”

“He doesn’t provide for you?” McFergus asked, casually.

“Oh no!” Fred was adamant. “He paid my way though school, and if it weren’t for him, I’d never have become a solicitor, but when I met Clara….” Fred gave his wife a loving look. “When I fell in love with Clara, and then married her, my uncle cut me off entirely. I am sure he was looking to get a free lawyer from my education, and a connection to some other financial interest with my marrying a rich woman. But I married for love, and have never regretted it.” Fred hugged Clara, who blushed and smiled even more; her smile gave her dimples a depth McFergus had seldom seen.

“You don’t think he’s likely to change his mind.”

“I don’t’ think so,” Fred acknowledged, “but he gave his word that I’d never see a penny of his money, and my uncle’s word is final.”

“So, if he were to die….” McFergus shook his head.

Scrooge’s nephew shook his head. “I’ve not seen the will, but I have connections with other solicitors, and have been assured that my name is not in it.”

“He’s a bitter man.”

“I didn’t meet his expectations, and I killed his sister.”

“Pardon?”

“I am sorry for him,” Fred said, “and for his expectations. And for my mother’s death. She died giving birth to me, of childbirth fever.” For just a moment, Fred looked sad. “But I never knew my mother, and that’s the way it is, so now I have a happy life, with enough money if we don’t spend too foolishly, and uncle Scrooge is stuck in his dusty chambers in that old office. It’s comical, it is, the way he hunches over his desk like a toad. He makes his own misery and doles out his own punishment to himself.”

“And yet you see him every year,” Clara said.

“At least once a year, at Christmas time, to invite him over here for a Christmas dinner. He never accepts, but I think he should see a merry face every now and again, if only to remember what one looks like.”

“I haven’t the patience with him that you have,” Clara said, pursing her small red lips.

“Maybe someday I’ll wear him down. Or maybe he’ll get so angry that he’ll write a will leaving all his wealth to his poor clerk, just to spite me. That would be fine. Just fine,” he said, decidedly.

"Well," said McFergus, "if you get it into your head to sing a Christmas carol outside his lodgings, I don't think I would want to be part of that."

"Now would I," said Fred. "I imagine he'd fling his chamber pot at me from his window if I did." Suddenly Fred seemed to smell the supper that the servant was cooking. "You are more than welcome to stay here," he started, but the inspector rose to his feet.

"I must be going home," McFergus said. "My poor Amy will be wondering where I am."

"Merry Christmas," Fred said.

McFergus just sighed. "Yes," he said.

It was dark by the time McFergus had walked halfway home, saving money rather than find a coach. There was no wind, but a few snowflakes drifted down. As he crossed a major street, two policemen joined him, greeted him, then walked away at the next corner. McFergus sighed, and kept on, wrapping his muffler closer around his face, and pulling his hat a bit further down. The cold weather made his leg hurt more every year.

Amy greeted him from the kitchen when he opened the door and climbed the steps to the dining level. "I'll be right back," he assured her, taking a candle to go to the privies out behind the row of houses in which he and Amy lived.

After returning he washed his hands and face in the cold-water sink. Amy would have heated and brought him warm water from the kitchen basement, but Ian didn't want her to go up and down the stairs more than she really had to. Besides, between his Scots upbringing and the police force, he'd washed in cold water most of his life.

He told her about his day over a stew of carrots and potatoes, flavoured with some small pieces of salt pork.

"Gone?" she exclaimed when Ian told her about the mudlark who had spoken to him in the morning. "The mudlark you gave the what-is-it to? That young girl said you'd never find that woman, that 'Betty,' again?"

"The scraping tool," he reminded her. "Just the sort of thing a mudlark might find."

"Or steal," Amy reminded him. Mudlarks were notorious for "finding" things that "must have fallen off the back of a ship."

"True. But I guess that line of inquiry's closed."

"Do you think it might have been because she asked about Marley?"

McFergus scratched his chin. "Just talking to a policeman might be enough to get a person warned off the area. I wouldn't think it would be enough to get someone killed." He had more tea. "I'll see if I can find out if her body turns up downriver, but I doubt that anyone will tell me that, either." He sighed. "Nobody's eager to tell me anything."

"But if it were because of the Marley investigation, might it mean some criminal elements are concerned?"

"Not much of an investigation." McFergus smiled ruefully. "Nobody wants to talk about it, and all I'm likely to get out of it is another bad leg." He told her about Samson's assault and

how Constable Oftan had “rescued” the boy. Then he told her about his interview with the Superintendent.

“So,” his wife said, “Let’s get this clear. The criminal underground doesn’t want you investigating this and the police don’t want you investigating anything and Constable Oftan, who might be part of both of these, might be arranging for you to think twice about it?”

“By Jove,” McFergus said, “I think you’ve got it!”

“And so?”

“I’ve spent the afternoon assuring everybody that I’m off the case,” he said, although he suddenly remembered that he hadn’t told Fred and Clara any such thing.

“Can you do that?” Amy asked. “Would you be happy if you did?”

“I think I can live with it,” her husband assured her, looking away. Then he added, “I’m worried that if I go any further you yourself might not be safe.”

“The problem is Scrooge, isn’t it?” Amy got to the heart of it. “If Scrooge is killed, like that note suggests, you’ll feel very bad.”

Ian sighed again. “There is that, isn’t there?”

“Can you let that go?”

“I could pass the note to the police,” Ian said quietly.

“Amy shook her head. It wouldn’t affect the outcome, whether the note’s a fake or real, and you’d end up in deep trouble.”

McFergus nodded. He’d figured that out himself. “There are people following me sometimes. Maybe some of the police, too. I can’t be sure, but it feels that way.” He inspected the empty teacup. “It could get dangerous.”

“Maybe they’ll get word that you’re off the case. Even if you just stay to protect Mr. Scrooge.”

“Stay? Where would I go?”

In answer, Amy went to a cupboard and brought back a piece of paper. She put it into the light of the tallow candle in front of her husband. He read it twice. It was a telegram from her cousin Harland, from St. Austell, in Cornwall. Older by ten years than Amy, he’d been with the military, but had been retired for a few years. The telegram was an invitation to spend a few weeks around Christmas with him. Ian had met him only a few times; he seemed a nice man, if a bit quiet. “You should go see him,” McFergus told his wife. “Take the train tomorrow, and you can be there in a day.”

“And you’ll stay here?” Amy tilted her head.

He sighed, then nodded. “Till the day after Christmas. Then I’ll take the next train to join you.”

“That seems reasonable.” There was a silence. “You’ll take care?” Amy asked.

“I will. I will do that.”

“Then tell me about what you did this afternoon.” Amy folded the telegram.

McFergus described his visits with the Cratchits and the Holywells.

“Suspects?” Amy asked, smiling.

“Unless they’re very good actors, probably not. I won’t eliminate them, but they’re not at the top of my list any more.”

“A killer who would wait seven years might have to be a good actor.”

McFergus winked. “They’re still on the list, just not at the top.”

“And who’s at the top, then?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know yet. But someone’s concerned about my investigation, and I’d like to figure out who that might be.” He got another candle. “I’ll help you pack.”

“That would be fine,” Amy said. She knew that really, she’d be packing up bags for both of them. Ian had spent so many years as a policeman he had little idea how to dress for civilian life.

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Chapter 5: December 23

It wasn’t yet light when Ian and Amy arrived by bus at the train station, the horses snorting clouds of steam into air. Looking a bit sad, and feeling lonely already, the inspector bought his wife tickets to take her to Cornwall. The ticket seller assured them that, while they didn’t have special carriage for women at the time, there was the front of one second-class carriage reserved for women. Ian and Amy had a warm hug, a chaste kiss, and he watched as she waved from the coach window. The air in the station was still, so the smoke took a while to leave after the train was gone. McFergus walked to the telegraph office, and sent a message to Amy’s cousin, telling when to expect her.

He walked out of the station, into the street and stood there for a moment, feeling a bit lost. A cold December wind came with the first light of dawn, shaking a few drops of water from overhanging awnings. A solitary tree reached for the sky like a black vein. A dozen cold men with brooms pushed the remnants of the previous day’s grunge into piles, then shovelled it into carts. The sun broke out suddenly, through the slate-grey clouds, poking odd streaks of light into the mist in the street. One shaft of light touched some grain that had fallen onto the granite pavement, and a flock of sparrows descended onto their breakfast, dodging the carts of costermongers setting up.

Uncertain what to do, and not yet willing to return to an empty home, he bought a bread that a vendor picked out of hot oil then dipped into powdered sugar. Then, thirsty, he bought a cup of warm milk from a man with a cow. The cup could have been cleaner, but he was at least assured that nothing had been added to the milk. Earlier in the year the British parliament had passed a law against adulterating some foods, but it would be a while before even the products mentioned started to improve.

He spent an hour walking the streets by the train station. The Christmas displays in the store windows fascinated and annoyed him; Christmas in his childhood had been strictly non-commercial, and even when he'd arrived in London a dozen years ago all that the stores had done for the season was to increase their supply of ribbons and items that a customer might ask for as a treat for a family member. In the week before Christmas, families made up presents themselves, and went to Church. That, and a large meal, generally with a goose, made up the celebration.

All of Christmas, when he'd been a boy, had been a one-day event; two if you went to the church sermon the night before. People hand-made a few things and many songs were sung in the parson's house. But now it seemed that the stores had discovered there was money to be made in selling presents, and materials from which to make presents, days in advance. McFergus had seen the first store window pushing Christmas this year almost two weeks in advance, and had been dismayed. *Where will this end?* he asked himself.

McFergus scowled a bit; there would be no goose for him this year it seemed. After Christmas, come what may with the Scrooge thing, he'd be on a train to join his wife in Cornwall. That reminded him again that he should look for a present for Amy and a few gifts for her cousin's family.

Among the vendors in the street were a couple of street musicians, singing traditional songs and trying to get people to buy a sheet or two of music. He listened for a moment, and decided that when he bought his gifts, in the next day or two, he'd get them from one of the many street vendors. One window even had a Christmas tree, decorated with toys and ribbons. He'd heard that this German tradition had spread to Britain, but this was the first one he'd actually seen. It looked pretty, but it seemed to him that it was just one more thing to separate the rich people, who could afford such a luxury, and the poor, who could not.

Then he sighed. Might as well get it over with. He turned and walked towards the poorer sections of London; the rookeries, toward a man who might know more about this "underworld." Deep in the warren of narrow streets and unnamed alleys he would find Fagin.

There were a numbers of areas left from medieval times, areas that had escaped infernos such as the Great Fire of London. Called "rookeries" from their resemblance to homes the black crows nested in, they were essentially areas abandoned to their own devices.

McFergus was a bit worried that he might be injured in the rookery – physical violence was common in London – but not fearful for his life. There were no more than twenty homicides a year in the whole city; as many people died in crinoline fires as died by violence (the very wide dresses that were in fashion went poorly with a society where candles provided most of the light and fireplaces provided most of the heat).

As McFergus went away from the downtown the quality of the streetscape deteriorated rapidly. The street itself hadn't been paved in many years and he wondered if people were stealing the cobblestones for some purpose he couldn't fathom. Nor had the street been cleaned since the last good storm; it was slippery with waste and mud, and the tire tracks were

often filled with puddles of water. There were no shops; most of the buildings were brick and several storeys high, but they were now rooming houses. For a few pence a night, a person might get a decent room, but those people who couldn't afford even that shared rooms with a dozen or two other people and more bugs than anyone could imagine, curled up in rags on the floor, sometimes thirty to a room, sometimes a thousand around a dark and tiny civic square. The people slept on mats, because mats kept things from falling through the holes in the floor. There was often nothing to keep the rain from coming through holes in the roof.

Irish citizens, fleeing the potato famine, people who'd been displaced by the building of the railways, and people drifting in from the villages and towns, people either fleeing something or hoping for something; they usually ended up in these dark streets and cul de sacs, poverty their only crime. With them lived the unsupported people, those who were too old to work, or too sick, or had been injured on the job. The insane and the desperate. People who gibbered or simply sat in silence, looking out any window that wasn't covered with paper.

Some of the people were out-of-work mothers with children. They could also survive by showing up at the workhouses, but then the children would be taken away to orphanages.

The streets were narrow, with overhanging upper floors that let in little sunlight on the mud streets. The centre of the street was the common sewer, and the hand pumps brought water directly from the Thames. People of all ages, with ragged hair and ragged clothes, usually without shoes in any season, argued with each other and begged with any strangers that came in. McFergus knew that development in London was pushing these people into smaller and smaller areas, but when the last rookery was gone, he had no idea what would become of them. These are the people, he thought, that Karl Marx should be speak to.

There was an underworld to London, and some criminals lived in the rookeries, where they felt safe. More prosperous criminals, of course, could avoid police just by taking trains to other cities, and some even had houses in better sections of town.

Fagin's place was in a narrow building with wood covering the windows on the first floor. He was well known to the police, but too smart to be caught. Officially a boarding house, the place housed Fagin and some young men who stole for a living. Since most of the slum areas were full of people who stole just to stay alive, the police were in no hurry to make a foray into an area of desperate people. If they were waiting for a fire to do slum clearing for them, the police had a long wait; small fires were extinguished as soon as they started by people for whom sleep was difficult and housing was critical.

As he passed one of the side streets, a young man made eye contact with McFergus. Moments later, the youth was following him, matching the inspector's pacing. The two slowed as they skirted a large hole, filled with sewage, in the middle of the street. A couple of old prostitutes, more rags than glamour, called to him, but McFergus ignored them. The sound of bellowing from behind a wall indicated a backyard slaughterhouse. Then the streetscape improved just a bit, with enough cobblestones left to assure footing. There was, McFergus felt, enough difference between the London of the Holywells and the London of these people to call

the two groups a different people. The poor had a world that the rich knew almost nothing about. The lifespan in the slums was dramatically shorter than that in the middle-class and upper-class sections; reason enough to take a mate at age twelve. Even the language of these people could well need a translator just to be understood. He paused beside a beer shop, took a step in, then back out, and grabbed his follower. “And who are you?” he asked.

The boy he grabbed was as dirty a youngster as one would want to see, short, snub-nosed and bow-legged, with sharp, little, ugly eyes. His hat, which barely fit hit his head, would have fallen off, had he not twitched his head to restore it. His man’s coat reached to his heels, the cuffs and sleeves turned back. Yet, McFergus noted, he had the presence of a grown man and the attitude of one afraid of very little. “I call myself ‘Artful Dodger,” the youth said, and might have twisted himself away had McFergus not tripped him. The name, McFergus knew, meant nothing; it was Cockney rhyming slang for a lodger, and which of the people in this part of London wasn’t a lodger?

“A shilling if you’ll take me to Fagin,” McFergus said, taking his watch back.

“Fine. But I don’t know if he wants to see you.” The young man brushed some mud off his fancy coat.

“We’ll see about that when we get there.”

Ignoring the beggars and prostitutes, watching for pickpockets and stepping over people sitting or lying in the street, McFergus followed Artful Dodger into an area near Field Lane where police generally went in pairs, at a minimum. They stopped in front of a narrow building, maybe four storeys high, and somewhat cleaner than most. There was no sign on the door.

Artful Dodger collected his shilling. “I’ll see if he’ll talk to you.” The young man glanced behind McFergus, then turned and entered the house.

McFergus turned to see a small group of boys behind him. “An appointment with Mr. Fagin,” he lied.

“Copper, are you?” one said. McFergus said nothing. There was a silence for a minute, then Artful Dodger opened the front door and held it open. McFergus climbed the steps and went into the building. As he entered the house, the Artful Dodger whistled.

A voice called down dark stairs, “Ain’t he a copper?” A candle appeared beside the voice on the stairs. A good idea, thought McFergus, considering how dark the stairway seemed, even in daylight.

Artful Dodger called back, “Fagin says to let him in anyway.”

“Righto.” The candle was drawn back, and the face disappeared.

Artful Dodger indicated that McFergus would go ahead of him. McFergus hesitated, trying to see the condition of the stairs. There was no handrail, so he stepped forward keeping one hand on each wall and favouring his good leg. He made his way slowly up the stairs, as much by feel as by vision. Several of the steps rocked a bit, but none actually gave way,

although at one point the voice behind him advised him to skip over the next step. This accomplished, the last few steps were easier, McFergus's eyes having adjusted to the gloom.

He came into a room lit by light from one dirty window, the fire in a small fireplace and a candle stuck in a ginger-beer bottle. The walls of the room itself were black with dirt, smoke, and age. What smelled like a vegetable stew bubbled in a copper pot over the small fire. An old man with matted red hair stood by the table, eyes fixed on McFergus. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure," the old man said. He had, to McFergus's eyes, a face villainous enough to justify his reputation as a prominent receiver of stolen goods. He was dressed in rough clothes with a fine jacket over them.

McFergus kept his eyes on Fagin, pretending not to see the beds of rough sacks in the corners of the room, and studiously ignored the three boys at the table; they were all about the same age as the Artful Dodger, and sat quietly at the table, smoking long clay pipes and drinking beer. The Artful Dodger himself came in and sat beside, them lighting his own pipe.

"Former police inspector McFergus, now retired, at your service."

"Former, now. *Former*, it is, is it?" Fagin pushed his hair from his eyes. "Not a police inspector pretending to be a former police inspector? They'll do that, they will. I've been told they will. I have been told." He tilted his head and put his hands behind his back."

"I am the genuine thing, I assure you." McFergus did not smile.

"I am an innocent man," Fagin said. "I buy and I sell and I make a living for myself and for my scouts" – he indicated the boys – and we survive in this, not the best end of town, we do." He shook his head. "Do you know anything about the secondhand trade, inspector. Former inspector?"

"Almost nothing."

"Then why are you here? Here where a retired person is so common?" Fagin waved an arm around, before wiping his nose with it. "Retired from life, retired from hope of ever getting a job again, retired from comfort and decency?" It was Fagin who almost smiled.

McFergus sighed. "I am here to pretend to certain people, including my wife, that I can make myself useful by pretending to investigate crimes long forgotten and of interest to few."

"Crimes of property?"

"Other detectives involve themselves in matters like that. I'm chasing a death that might or might not be a murder."

"And why me? Why here?" Fagin edged over and sat in a chair by the table.

"Might I sit down?" McFergus asked. "I have an injured leg that does not like standing." He did not move towards the table.

Fagin pushed out a chair. "Of course. Pardon my lack of civility."

McFergus sat down with a sigh. "I have been told that you are an unusually intelligent man."

"Cunning, do you mean?"

"No. 'Intelligent,' is what I was told."

“And if so, what of it?” Fagin didn’t move more than an eyebrow.

“You live in the toughest part of town. You know your way around it. You may know someone in what the newspapers call “the criminal underworld.”

“I may?” Fagin said, looking at the boys at the table. Fagin shook his head and this was followed by the boys shaking their heads. McFergus had a hard time keeping from smiling; it looked like a scene in a penny gaff theatre. He wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d broken out in song. “I am,” Fagin said, “just a dealer in used items. A buyer and seller. I buy from people who need the money and I sell to those that need the item. I help both people that way.” He paused. “I am not a thief, Mr. McFergus; I am an honest man in a bad part of town.” He paused again, for effect, and waved his arms around. “Does this look like the abode of a man who is a kingpin of crime?”

It was as good a hiding place as any, McFergus thought, if you could stand the smell. “I’m investigating the death of Mr. Jacob Marley of Scrooge and Marley. Seven years ago.”

The boys looked puzzled. McFergus wasn’t surprised; most of them weren’t much older than that. Fagin merely squinted, and waved his hand at the boys. “Which of these do you suspect, my dear ex-inspector?”

“Neither any of them nor you, I can assure you.”

“But I’m supposed to be acquainted with the underworld, am I? An honest buyer and seller!”

“You are a smart and observant man,” McFergus said, “and you live in an area where some of the London underworld also live.” He straightened out his bad leg.

There was a very long silence. Fagin stirred the stew and threw another coal on the fire. “I heard of the death of Mr. Marley,” he said. “I know nothing, but I heard rumours, I did” He looked at McFergus. “There are many *many* rumours in this wonderful area. They are as common as the flies.”

McFergus watched the boys. They were interested. “Any rumours that might help me would be appreciated.”

“There were approaches made to some in the Rookery,” Fagin said, “but they came to nothing. Nothing! You might want to search the underworld, but not the one here. Go look where people wear new silk hats and run their own underworld.” He started to shake the stirring spoon at McFergus. “Be gone; that’s as much as you’ll get from me. And for what? What will I get from you?”

“I thank you for your help,” McFergus said, getting up. “And I offer you a bit of observation. When those boys learned I was once a policeman they looked towards the bricks in the lower left corner of your fireplace for some reason.” The boys looked away and tried to look confused.

Fagin merely opened his eyes wide. “Ah,” he said. “Ah!”

McFergus turned to the Artful Dodger. “Another shilling if you’ll lead me out of this area.”

A sly smile. “Two, to get out. Safely.”

They settled on one shilling sixpence. The Artful Dodger was polite enough to show him the steps that wobbled, for which McFergus was grateful. The outside was a bit brighter, although the atmosphere of gloom and the smell hadn’t changed. McFergus learned it was better not to look into any windows.

London, McFergus knew, was approaching three million in population, counting a lot of small towns that had been included into the metro area, and the Rookery, the bottom of the bottom, held only about six percent of those people. True, there were many poor people elsewhere, but nothing like the Rookery. It took only a glance around to make him decide that maybe he’d read that Communist pamphlet again.

For a moment, he considered finding the place where he’d lived when he first got to London. He’d been younger then, and optimistic, hoping for a life better than he was living in Scotland. Instead, he’d found himself in the Rookery, getting up from the floor of a dark room wall to wall with men and women and walking downtown in hopes of finding work. He’d arrived in London during a major economic downturn. Fifteen percent of the city went onto relief assistance, and many more were kept alive by the churches or relatives.

His mother had given him the name of an uncle living in London, but young Ian McFergus had been angrier and more independent. That attitude had lasted a week in the Rookery, before he had been tapping on his uncle’s door. Unexpectedly, a sudden increase in crime in the city had worked in McFergus’s favour; the first city police force formed its first detective division, moving many constables there. McFergus’s work catching poachers in Scotland was enough to get him a job as a replacement for one of those promoted to the detective division.

Britain had become the world’s leader in industrial output, and the owners of those industries were, McFergus knew, pushing against the established aristocracy for influence. Lost at the bottom were those in the streets and behind the walls of the buildings that lined the narrow streets. *We could use a bit more sharing of the wealth*, he thought, as he dodged the pickpockets and beggars, the old and the handicapped, the wounded soldiers and the consumptives ones coughing out their last. There were even some foreigners around, which brought the police into the area more often than the criminals. The world had gone through a number of revolutions since the Americans had exited the empire, and that usually meant the upper classes ended up being slaughtered by the lower classes. So the British aristocracy – and the newly rich industrialists as well – nervously watched for foreign provocateurs.

He’d passed the worst of the streetscape, where the locals used ridges of fireplace ash to avoid losing their boots in the fermenting human waste, when the Artful Dodger stopped abruptly. McFergus stopped watching where his feet were stepping and looked past his guide. Standing where solid ground started again was Bill Sikes. He was, McFergus could tell, drunk, as usual, and in no better mood than usual. Even his dog, Bulls Eye, was keeping a respectful distance from his master’s boots.

Artful Dodger had probably been looking back to make sure McFergus wasn't getting lost or bogged down when Sikes had come around the corner; the young man was too smart to get near Sikes otherwise. Sikes's fist took Artful Dodger into the middle of the street, but the youth quickly got up and retrieved his hat. He was bleeding from one ear, McFergus noted. "Good day, Mr. Sikes," the inspector said, trying to figure a way out. Reasoning with Sikes was, he knew, was silly. Nor was anybody likely to help get McFergus out of this one; Sikes was noted for a long memory and a constant desire for revenge, even if the revenge was real only in his own mind.

"Well, what in the blazes do I see here? Good day, Mr. McFergus," he said, his eyes narrowing.

McFergus looked around. "Good day, Mr. Sikes."

Sikes was getting redder. "Why you sneakin' in here, hoping I wouldn't find you? Who took you in here?" he asked. "That little thief?" He pointed to Artful Dodger, just brushing some filth off his red velvet coat. A thought struck him. "You been talking to Fagin? He peached? He sayin' things about me? That damned old man been blabbing lies about me? Should a done something about him long time ago?" Sikes looked to be sobering up rapidly.

It was at that point that a group of about ten sailors came around the corner, singing, off-key, a sea chanty and more or less dragging one of their members along. "Sailors! My friends!" McFergus shouted. "Sailors saved England at Trafalgar. I'll buy free ale for all of you!" The singing stopped and McFergus repeated his offer. He pointed up the street, past Sikes, and sidled among them. "There's a beer house next block."

There were, indeed beer houses a block closer to downtown. There were beer houses practically everywhere. The government, in an effort to cut down on the consumption of gin among the working classes, had allowed anybody with a dwelling, for a nominal fee, to convert part of their house into a beer parlour. The sheer quantity of these places along London's streets kept both price and quality low. McFergus led the sailors into the first one that looked like it would hold the group, and ordered a round of beer for everyone. Midway through his own mug of beer, he looked into the street. It was busy, but there was no sign of Sikes, and the tolling of a church bell told him where downtown was. Standing, he thanked the sailors for their heroic efforts on Britain's behalf, and stepped out into the street where he saw the Artful Dodger waiting for the rest of his payment. Behind him, some quick sailor had already downed the last of McFergus's beer. Keeping among the largest groups, he found himself out of the Rookery in a few minutes.

It took him another hour to get home, walking slowly and watching for people who might be watching him. As he moved away from the centre of town the number of people around him dropped off rapidly, until he had only a few donkey carts around him. Most were sellers of vegetables but he passed a couple selling items suitable for Christmas items. He paused beside one, and selected a carved wooden miniature of the parliament buildings.

Then he was home. He looked around. A couple of children were pretending to sweep the street ahead of someone who didn't want that, and further along the street Desmond, the bookmonger, was going door to door trying, probably, to sell Christmas cards or printed Christmas stories.

McFergus was tired. He had to admit that. He ached all over, but his bad leg ached most of all. He was cold; there was a stiff wind flowing down the street like some arctic current, and snowflakes fell from a leaden sky. He climbed the seven steps to the landing, unlocked his front door, then carefully closed the door behind him. He set two packages on the table. One was a set of three silk ribbons to give Amy for Christmas, whenever they met again. The other was a bottle of single-malt Glen Miller scotch whisky.

It was dark inside the house, and cold; there had been no fire in the fireplace since the night before. He raked off the remains of the last fire, picking out the larger cinders for re-use, and cleaned the fire bars of small cinders. Then he put a few pieces of paper, scrunched up into a ball, with some small pieces of scrap wood. He started the fire with a match. When the wood was hot, he put a some pieces of coal onto it.

When he was assured that the fire would keep going well, he put some potatoes and parsnips on to cook, together with a few chunks of salt pork. He went upstairs again, poured himself an ounce of the whisky into a chipped cup, thought about it, tripled the amount, drank a bit from the bottle, and carried the cup back downstairs.

There was only a small window in the lower level, so he lit a couple of candles, poured some water from the water bucket into the washing tub. Then he took off his shoes and trousers, and with strong soap and straw he began the process of cleaning the stuff that had attached itself to them, sipping from the cup every now and again.

By the time he was even half satisfied with the results the room was warmer, the food was more or less cooked, and he was feeling a little better, though infinitely alone. He ate the stew (the potatoes were a bit solid in their middles) with bread, finished the whisky in his cup, and closed his eyes. *What an idiot I am,* he thought.

Tally. Things accomplished. Someone claims, without proof, that Marley was murdered. Someone claims, without proof, that Scrooge is going to be killed on or about Christmas eve. Motive for either act; none known. If this was a game, then it's like one of Dwan's street games. Get the audience worked up, make them see what they want to see, and keep moving the shells around.

Support. None, if you look honestly. Your wife's left town. Some dangerous people are now annoyed with you. The police force was more annoyed with you. Sampson? Who cared what he thought? And Betty, the mudlark? Probably under the mud further down the Thames, about to be found by some other mudlark and turned in for the corpse-finder's fee.

With McFergus's mood falling, it was beginning to look darker, grimier, and colder inside his soul than on the streets outside. He examined the label on the bottle. There was a picture of a fieldstone cottage and the words, "A Very Scottish Scot's Scotch" underneath. He had

some more and felt a little less bad. Then he opened the bottle, poured himself some more, and tried to decide if he should join one of the crews looking for the lost Franklin expedition in the Canadian arctic when spring came. Or maybe join the latest expedition looking for the source of the Nile. He put some more coal on the fire, then sat on the chair. *Us Scots*, he reflected, *can get very gloomy, but only when we're thinking*. For a moment, he thought about opening the copy of Marx's Capital that he'd bought for Amy, but decided his ability to focus was not what it could be.

He went upstairs for another wee bit of whisky. From outside the window came the sound of someone singing a Christmas carol in the street. *Humbug*, he thought, trying to ignore them. He'd just started down the stairs when someone knocked on the door. He tried to ignore it, then stepped over and peered through the tiny glass pane set into the door. For a moment, he assumed the young woman he was looking at was one of the singers, but then he recognized her. His brain circled itself a couple of times before coming up with the name. Virginia Boyle, the former Marley cleaning woman and current resident of Millbridge Abbey. He fumbled with the lock and opened the door.

"Hello, Mr. McFergus," she said. "Remember me?" Behind her, the street had settled into darkness with a single gas lamp lighting one building and making a few snowflakes sparkle as they passed. In the summer there would be a woman and her two daughters, using the street light to make clothes, but now there was only the cobbled lane, lightly covered with snow, and a few footprints. One set led to his door.

He blinked his eyes a couple of times and tried to figure out what to say. "Ah, yes," he came up with, then, "Miss Boyle, of the Abbey." Then, "Altham Grange."

"May I come in?" she asked, pulling a shawl more tightly about her. McFergus could see she had a plain but warm coat and good shoes.

"Yes. Yes. Of course. Pardon me." In confusion, he stepped back, holding the door wide. "Come in."

Virginia Boyle stepped into the house of Ian McFergus. He set his cup on a step, to help her put her coat and shawl on a peg. He watched as she put her shoes onto the shoe bench. He reached down and gave her a pair of Amy's knitted wool slippers. She looked at the slippers, then looked at McFergus, and said, "Is your wife at home?"

"My wife? No, she's in Cornwall visiting her cousin for Christmas?"

"Ah." There was a pause, as both seemed to contemplate the total Victorian impropriety of the situation. "I'm cold," she said.

"Yes, of course, Miss Boyle. Come into the kitchen; there's a fire." The two of them made their way to the kitchen. McFergus offered her a chair by the fire, then went back to get his mug.

"I wouldn't mind what you Scots call a 'wee dram' of that, if you don't mind," Miss Boyle said.

“Of course. Of course.” He lit a candle and started upstairs. On the way, he tripped on his cup in the darkness, spilling the whisky but not breaking the cup. He got a new cup for himself, and one of the better ones for Miss Boyle, and poured whisky into both, although somewhat more in his own. He put out the candle and stuffed it in a pocket, since he didn’t have three hands, and headed downstairs, cup in each hand.

There were two chairs and a small table in the kitchen, since McFergus and his wife often had tea there, rather than upstairs in the drawing room with the stuffed chairs and big table. That was, of course, the inevitable result of not having a servant. McFergus himself never felt the need of a servant, but he’d often told Amy they could afford one. Amy, however, had always declined, for reasons her husband had never figured out. That, and increasing age and bodily aches, had meant that the couple more and more often had tea there, beside the cooking fireplace.

Now McFergus was in Amy’s chair and Virginia Boyle, looking younger than she had any right to be, was sitting in McFergus’s identical chair. “Can I put on some tea?” the former inspector asked, before a casual inspection of the fireplace showed him that Virginia was already heating some water in the kettle there.

Miss Boyle waved a hand at the fireplace. “I hope you don’t mind. I thought we might both enjoy a cuppa. And,” she smiled sweetly, shaking brown hair, “I’ve been a servant for a very long time.”

“Thank you,” McFergus said. “That’s a good idea. The tea, I mean.”

“Thank you,” she said, “for the drink.” She sniffed, then took a sip from the cup. “Good Scotch whisky, I presume?”

“It seems fine. At least it tastes like the real thing, although if it is, it’s one of the few unadulterated items, other than milk fresh from the cow, you can get in London.” For a moment he wondered about his choice of words. “I don’t suppose you got much at the Grange, although of finer quality.”

“A gentleman’s house is a land of a million thefts.” The kettle was boiling, and Virginia got up to make a pot of tea. “The noble steals labour from the poor, and the poor steal as much time and labour as they can get away with from the noble.”

“And game,” McFergus said, his head still foggy. “I spent much of my youth as a gamekeeper on a Scottish estate.”

“Working for the rich, were you? A servant, like me?”

“Aye,” McFergus said, going back in time. “Although near the end, the Laird suspected that my mastiff and I were particularly inept at catching the truly hungry in those woods and hills.” He lapsed into silence as a cup of weak tea was placed in front of him. He sighed, pushed the cup of whisky away, and sipped the hot tea. “The rich,” he said, “think the poor are going to rise from the dregs of London and overthrow them. They’re forever checking out foreigners in case such ideas are coming into the country with the pineapples and sugar.”

“It might not be a bad idea,” Virginia said, “but I’m not sure the English are up to that. Much as there is resentment, there seems to be little of the organization needed. And little talk of it among the servants and factory workers, at least the ones I’ve known.” She smiled. “ No rebellions in the works among the servants, I guess.”

McFergus took another sip of the tea, being careful not to burn his lip this time. “London looks pretty safe from rebellion, too. The police push the costermongers around, and they push back, but they’re capitalists when you get right down to it, so there’s no danger of them joining the communists.”

“Communists?” Virginia looked perplexed.

“The latest movement, I’m told. Let the workers own the factories and share the profits. Everybody shares; nobody owns anything. Something like that.”

“I can see why the costers wouldn’t like that. Or the upper classes. Or especially the factory owners.”

“Even the Scots,” McFergus said. “The clearances have driven poor Scots out of the country or into even more poverty. All so the lairds can raise more sheep.” He sighed. “All a poor Scot wants is some land. No wonder they’re off to Canada.” He looked up at Virginia. “And you, Miss Boyle? You leave your position at the Abbey and come back to London, which some have called the ruin of all their dreams.”

“I was happier in London.” Virginia looked into space and smiled. “The hours were shorter than at the Abbey. I started factory work at seven in the morning; half the time Abbey work starts at four in the morning and ends at midnight.” She looked at McFergus. “I was sending money to my dad, and I knew being a servant would be steadier work.”

“Steadier than anything you can get in the city, I imagine.”

Miss Boyle laughed. “Steady it is. I get up well before dawn, open the shutters and make a fire in the kitchen. I empty the ashes from the fireplaces, then sweep the halls and the rooms. when that’s done, I get a fire going in the dining room for breakfast, and carry the breakfasts to the family. While they’re eating I get to clean the boots, make the beds, and empty the chamber pots outside. By that time the family is finished with breakfast, so I take the dishes to the kitchen wash them, and help the cook start preparation for the other meals of the day. And take breakfast of bread and drippings when I can, but am allowed to pause only briefly, for there are steps to clean on my knees and, of course, I put new blacklead onto the foot scraper. It’s very important to them to have a foot scraper that’s black and clean. Most days except laundry days, I then flood the kitchen and pantry floors with boiling water, then – again on my knees – I scrub those floors and, if I’m lucky, I can hurry into town for something from one of the grocers or a letter to mail before cleaning the privy, washing the dog, and helping with supper.”

“And you left all that?”

“Most days I get to bed well after dark, very tired. Most weeks I lose some pay as fines for infractions such as being late with a chore.”

"Yet you left. I find that hard to believe!" McFergus laughed.

"As I told you, my dad died last week."

"Yes," McFergus bent his head. "I was sorry to hear that."

"Thanks." Virginia poured more hot water onto her tea. "Mrs. Green, she took a dislike to me. Do you know what that means?" McFergus shrugged, and Virginia went on. "I had no hope of advancement. I'd be forever sleeping in a corner of the kitchen."

"What had you done?" McFergus shook his head and held up a palm. "Sorry, Miss Boyle. Too many years as a detective and a bit too much whisky. It's not my business."

"I caught the eye of a young man."

"That's not allowed?"

"Not if he's the squire's son." Virginia smiled. "Even if he's a contrary younger son without much hope of inheriting anything."

"Ah, yes. I remember you mentioned that. Is that why you came to London?"

Virginia nodded. "He's to meet me tomorrow, and we're off to Canada in a week or so." There was a pause while she watched his reaction. "Yes, he may have mislead me; young men do that. But I think he'll be here tomorrow. I grew up as the only child on a farm in the Cotswolds, and, as you can see, I'm sturdier than most servants." A sip of tea. "My sturdiness appealed to him."

"He'll get money from his father?"

"Yes," she laughed. "Another remittance man wandering among the savages. It won't be much, but it's a chance I'm going to take. Can I spend the night here?"

"Ah…. yes."

She saw McFergus's confusion, and took a sip of whisky from her own cup. "And your wife's left you?"

McFergus sighed. "Let me start from the beginning." He cut several pieces of bread from the quartern of bread and put them onto a plate on the table, together with a butter box and a jar of jam. Then he found a bread knife, and gave it to Virginia. When she was eating, he buttered himself a piece. That done, he told the entire tale (or most of it), from Amy's suggestion that he look up the Marley case right up till Virginia herself knocked on her door. Being Scottish, and having had wee dram of whisky, he made the whole story so darkly amusing that Virginia laughed through most of it, several times almost to the point of choking on the bread. When he was done, he waited for her to catch her breath.

"That," she said, "was the funniest thing I've heard since the squire's son fell into the pig slop." A pause. "Anyway, I'm glad to hear your wife hasn't left you for good. Can I sleep here, by the fire?" She saw his look. "You have no idea how many times I've slept on the kitchen floor in the last few years. With a blanket I can be perfectly comfortable. And it's only for one night. I'm meeting the squire's son tomorrow." She laughed. "Or at least I surely hope to."

McFergus thought she was beautiful when she laughed, but that might just have been the Scot in him. "You can sleep in the bed…" he began, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"I do hope you catch the person who killed Mr. Marley. He wasn't that bad a person, sometimes, for all his money."

"Did he pay you well?" McFergus rose, not totally steadily, onto his feet, his leg still hurting.

"Not enough to live on in London, but sometimes I got extra money for cleaning the other building."

"You mean the Scrooge and Marley office?"

Virginia shook her head. "No. A place called the Teacher Building. A dozen blocks over."

McFergus sat down again. "Will you show me that place tomorrow morning?"

Virginia squinted her eyes. "You didn't know about that one, did you?"

"I did not."

"Tomorrow morning, then."

McFergus said, "I'll put the chamber pot on the middle floor. We can both use it in the night, if we need to."

In the bedroom on the top floor, he fell asleep at once, but woke a couple of hours later, as usually happened when he'd had too much whisky. *I wonder*, he thought, *if that building had anything to do with the man who Virginia had, back in Altham Grange, described as "dressed like a banker*. Then the thought, *one day left*, kept him awake for another hour.

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Chapter 6: December 24

He got up in the morning a bit later than usual. He was cold – the bedroom fire had long since gone out - and stiff, but trying to decide which hurt more, his head, his leg, or his pride. That a young woman should assume that it would be safe to spend the night with him, especially after whisky. It was true; there were few safer places in London, but he was a Scot, after all. A Scot's a Scot, for a' that. He sighed.

"Good morning, Mr. McFergus," Virginia said, cheerily. He discovered she'd made coffee, put on some salt cod to cook in pork fat in a frying pan, and emptied the chamber pot.

Dear Lord, he thought. *And Amy's always refused to get a servant.* "Good morning, Miss Boyle," he said, pouring himself a cup of coffee from the black coffee pot, "this is wonderful."

"The coffee should help your head," Virginia said, putting a plate of bread and the butter dish in front of him. "Can I serve you some fish?"

"Thank you," he said, although he suspected the salt in the cod would do unpleasant things to his headache.

They ate together in silence, until Virginia said, "Let me know when you want to go see the Teacher Building."

"Is it far?"

"Eleven and one-half blocks," she said.

"Whenever you're ready."

"How about right now?" she asked, with an enthusiasm and cheer that was hard for McFergus to take. Personally, he suspected that if someone looked up the phrase "dour Scot" in the latest edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, they'd see a face much like his was at the moment.

"I'll get my coat," he said.

"It snowed in the night," she added.

Twenty minutes later, after he'd made a stop at the toilets behind the house, they were on the street. "Doesn't it look lovely, all covered in white?" she asked.

He nodded. "Good to look at, anyway," by which he meant it was slippery. The few horses pulling wagons down his side street were walking a bit more slowly than usual, and two laughing children were throwing snowballs at each other, while their governesses watched in unsmiling amusement. McFergus doubted that children in the villages would have had governesses. There was little chance that a child would be kidnapped in London, but he might come back home cold and naked; clothes were valuable enough to be worth stealing.

Virginia turned out to be quite right; it was exactly eleven and one-half blocks between McFergus's front doorway and a four-storey building with the words, "Teacher Building" on it. McFergus had found walking in four inches of snow tiring, but his guide had walked patiently beside him, and he suspected that, had he started to slip, she'd have reached over to save him. *Just how old do I seem to her?* he wondered.

The building was, itself, unremarkable and indistinguishable from many others in the area, except, perhaps, a bit older and a bit more sturdily built. There was no indication that it had ever been more than a residence for a dozen or so business. From the lack of traffic at the door, McFergus decided that the companies renting it were using it as a warehouse. *Old*, thought McFergus, and a bit weak in the knees, like me. There were a few cracks in the foundations. He suspected that someone named "Teacher" had financed it originally, and had given it his name.

"This is it?" he asked, redundantly.

"This is it," Virginia replied. "Mr. Marley would have me clean it occasionally, when one of his usual cleaners was unavailable or when a storage had to be done because someone moved out." She looked it over. "It hasn't changed at all. Mr. Marley would pay my bus fare but I usually just walked here as fast as I could, and saved the fare money."

"And there's just living apartments here?"

"Storage rooms, that's all. Nobody wanted to live here or have offices here." The sun came out but didn't do much for a building dark with decades of London soot. "People complained of the stink," she noted. "They were right."

McFergus sniffed. “Seems pretty normal to me.” There were still sewage gutters along the sides of the street, but the clean snow showed that not much was flowing along them. “Probably better now,” he said, “with the underground sewer line in.”

She shook her head. “They had sewer lines then, too. I heard some of the residents talking about it. Apparently they were getting backups a lot of the time. People kept moving out and other people just moved in until word got around and the rooms were just used for storage.”

McFergus scratched his head. The steady influx of people into London meant that accommodation was always a tricky thing, so it was odd to find an empty building. “I thank you very much for this,” he said, his feet cold in the snow already turning grey with fallen soot and droppings from the horses pulling wagons. “Can I buy you a hot drink somewhere?”

Virginia shook her head. “I’m meeting my friend in a couple of hours at the train station.” She smiled, turned, and joined the trudging lines of people moving along the sidewalks towards their jobs. After a moment, she turned waved at him.

Good luck in America, McFergus thought.

When he got home, Sampson was waiting on his step, leaning against the railing. McFergus didn’t try to figure out how the youth had found his address. “Come in,” he said, unlocking the door. “I’ll put some coal onto the fire.” Sampson said nothing but “thank you” until the tea and bread was served. Neither of them mentioned that McFergus seemed to be working on the Marley case again, the case he’d told Sampson he was done with.

It took McFergus about half an hour to get comfortable talking to Sampson about the case. Somehow it seemed different telling it all to him in McFergus’s own house, but eventually he got into it. He’d covered his interview with Superintendent Bannim, his talks with the Cratchits and the Holywells, , Amy’s departure for Cornwall, and then the visit with Fagin without comment from Sampson. When the inspector paused at that point, his listener looked puzzled.

“What about the young woman who slept here in the kitchen last night?” Sampson asked.

McFergus didn’t bother asking how the youth had deduced that, but continued with Virginia’s visit and their trip to the Teacher Building. There was a long pause, then Sampson said, “It makes a lot more sense, now.”

“It does?”

“Didn’t Mr. Fagin tell you to look where people wear new silk hats and run their own underworld?”

“He did,” McFergus acknowledged.

“Didn’t Miss. Boyle describe a man dressed like a banker, who argued with Mr. Marley?”

“True.”

“And didn’t you learn that the Teacher Building had odour problems of the sort caused by sewage difficulties?”

McFergus was beginning to see where he was going. “You think the ‘underworld’ Fagin mentioned might have been a pun. That bankers, money, and the sewer system were somehow involved with Mr. Marley and his Teacher Building?”

Sampson looked up as if his host had finally got to the obvious. “A fairly elementary linkage, it seems to me. Possibly a linkage in error, but one that deserves further investigation.”

McFergus lit a pipe and thought about it. “It is a lead, I’d say.”

“And,” Sampson continued, “it’s almost certain that Mr. Scrooge inherited that building from Mr. Marley. Maybe there’s a connection to his ownership and the threat on his life. Which,” he added “gives us, ah, the whole rest of the day, or maybe less, if that original threat is to be believed.”

“Us?”

Sampson shrugged. “School’s out till the new year.” He looked around. “I can sleep here, if you don’t mind. But unlike Miss Boyle, I’m not much for cooking and cleaning,” he added.

“Of course you can stay here, if sleeping on the floor doesn’t bother you.” McFergus wondered why Sampson didn’t go home. He wondered if Sampson would spend the first few days figuring out what the rest of his family (assuming there was more to the family) had been doing, secrets and all, while he was at school. His personal popularity must have been very low both at school and at home.

“You think we’ll get struck down by some sort of ‘man’ disease if we don’t clean properly?”

“Other than the cleaning a man does just before his wife comes home? A good-but-not-great job of it to show that he’s had no other women in the house. Unlike you,” he added.

McFergus wondered if Samson would be allowed to live to maturity. “Anyway, we can sleep with the windows closed; that should keep some of the many diseases in London out of the place.”

“Ah,” Sampson said. “You’re a follower of the theory that bad air is the source of most disease.”

“As are most physicians and scientists,” McFergus said. “Although the germ theory has made some advances, the weight of professional opinion is that disease is a product of bad air.”

“The weight of scientific evidence counts more than the beliefs of a million people,” Sampson said. “Have you read the treatise about Dr. John Snow, *On the Mode of Communication of Cholera*?”

“I have heard about it.” McFergus lapsed into silence.

“Then you know about the Broad Street pump incident, or at least you might have, five years later, after publication of the book. Five hundred and seventy-eight people died in one outbreak of cholera. Dr. Snow drew a map of the places where people had died,” Sampson said, leaning back in his chair. “Every one of those five hundred and seventy-eight people got

their water from that well, or had passed that way and may have taken a drink." He was almost glaring, then took a deep breath and relaxed. "No one who did not drink from that well died. When he had the pump handle removed, the outbreak faded away."

"I've heard that, but you do know that most authorities still believe cholera is from bad air. In fact," McFergus noted, very quietly, "the government replaced the handle." McFergus looked around the room. When he looked at Sampson again, Sampson was looking at him.

"I'm sorry," the youth said quietly. "I didn't know. Your son, I think."

McFergus nodded. "He often took that street, and probably drank from the pump."

"Have you noticed," Sampson said, "that all people who work in the kitchen scald milk containers and table tops with boiling water?" When McFergus nodded, Sampson went on. "What can that be, other than killing germs before they multiply?

"Possibly. But I have a cousin in Glasgow…."

Sampson shook his head. "Everybody knows someone with anecdotal evidence that proves something. You must have run into that many times as a copper. But scientific evidence is real evidence. There was one woman who died in that cholera epidemic who was nowhere near that well; did you hear of that?"

McFergus shook his head. It seemed to him that if Sampson had been a man, or had worked for Fagin, he'd have had a pipe and would have been huffing out great clouds of smoke.

"She'd moved away from the neighbourhood some time before." Sampson's eyes flashed and he tapped a finger on the table. "She liked the taste of water from the Broad Street well, and regularly had a friend bring some. She died."

"Okay…."

"And," Sampson went on, "Snow looked at the water and saw some sort of bacteria in it; a type that no one had identified. Do you know what this means?"

"That the water from the well…." McFergus nodded.

"More than that!" It means that the germ theory may be right, regardless of what other people say. And do you know what that means?"

"Continue."

"If there are living things, germs, that can float through the water, drift through the air, and stick to the clothes and hands of people, then it is people who help spread sickness. And it is people who can help stop it!"

"More tea and bread?" McFergus asked. He didn't wait for an answer.

"It would explain things like childbed fever."

McFergus stopped what he was doing.

"Women," Sampson said, "are vulnerable at childbirth, if there are invisible creatures that want to get into a person's body and multiply. And yet women go to hospitals to give birth. To whole buildings full of sick people. Can you imagine? We flush off the tables of our

houses and the wooden milk buckets with boiling water, yet what doctor even washes his hands with CLEAN water, coming from the man dying of typhus to the woman giving birth?"

McFergus laid out more bread and jam, and poured tea for both of them. Amy's mother had died of childbed fever in a hospital. She'd grown up the only child of a widower who'd raised her as much like a man as like a woman. McFergus had been attracted to her toughness and independence the day he'd met her. "And yet," he said, "some people don't get sick. Not everyone who drank at the Broad Street well got sick."

Sampson waved his hand. "Some people survive things. Perhaps they're tougher or there's something in them that fights off bacteria." He thought a bit. "If their children have that toughness, then they're lucky and it will be their families that increase, as time goes by."

"You're talking like Darwin."

"Who?" Sampson looked puzzled.

"Charles Darwin? Survival of the fittest? You don't know him? Mr. Darwin believes that natural population growth always exceeds the food available to sustain it. Most individuals die, and those that survive are more fit, and somehow pass this on to their progeny. The fittest survive."

Sampson thought some more. "Given enough time, groups with different survival needs could form into new species. Interesting." A shrug. "But it doesn't seem like knowledge that would be of use to me, so I can't see why I would bother learning it."

"Were we going anywhere with this discussion, interesting as it is?" McFergus tasted his tea; it was weaker than Amy liked it. "Or have we been trying to avoid the main issue?"

"We have been trying to avoid the main issue. Sewage. Sewers. The Teacher Building was known, you say, for its bad smells. And it belonged to Marley, and now belongs to Scrooge. These are facts; there may be a connection."

"Someone who has a lifetime lease in the building wants out because of the smells, but neither of Mr. Marley nor Mr. Scrooge will permit it?"

"Unlikely. There's always a way of getting out of a lease." Sampson put a good layer of jam on his bread. "We must look for a connection between the sewers and the building."

"I've got an idea," McFergus said. "I'll just find a tosher to lead me through the sewers of London to see what's under the Teacher Building."

Sampson pondered that. "It might be the best thing to do."

"I was joking."

Sampson looked up through the window. "A high-ranking policeman, one who's never been here before and is wearing street clothing, is looking at your house. I think you can expect a visit. It might be best that I hide myself in the bedroom." He took his bread and vanished upstairs just as someone knocked on the door. McFergus put Sampson's teacup into the sink, then went upstairs to the door.

"Hello, Inspector McFergus," Superintendent Bannim said.

"Yes," said McFergus

"May I come in?"

McFergus stood back. "Yes, of course. May I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Thank you. That would be good."

McFergus led his former boss to the dining table on the main floor, took his cloak, then went downstairs to the fireplace. There was enough hot water in the kettle, so he added more bread, a small pot of butter, and a jar of jam to the tray and brought them upstairs where Bannim had remained standing by the table. On McFergus's invitation, the superintendent sat and was served tea in a good cup. "Thank you," Bannim said when McFergus poured the tea. He subsequently refused an offer of bread and jam.

"You must be wondering why I'm here," Superintendent Stanley Brimagem Bannim said.

"I am." McFergus cut a piece of bread, then put some butter onto it.

"You know that the Marley case was closed as an accident."

"As was mentioned in your office the day before yesterday."

"The Marley incident was before my time." Bannim seemed a bit ill at ease. He looked up at McFergus. "Word of your current investigation went around the department very quickly."

"As I would expect." McFergus, who wasn't hungry, had more bread, this time with jam. "But I wouldn't expect the police administration to care as much as they seem to."

"Nor would I," Bannim said. "It was my expectation that you'd continue with your investigation just to reinforce your current independence, but let it wind down slowly as no new evidence came in."

"You expected no new evidence?" McFergus said calmly.

"It seemed reasonable. The other policemen won't talk to you because of your difficulties with myself, the criminals won't talk to you because you were a policeman, and you can't force any information by threats or promises because you're not a policeman now."

"That," said McFergus, "sums up the situation fairly well." He had no intention of letting Bannim in on anything he'd learned.

"Nonetheless, you were one of our finest inspectors, and might learn something." He held up a palm to McFergus. "That was irrelevant to me until I received this anonymous note." Bannim reached into a vest pocket and withdrew a small sheet of paper. He handed it to McFergus, then took a piece of bread and added butter to it.

McFergus poured more tea for the superintendent, then unfolded the paper. There was the word, "Marley" on it, and a date.

"It is dated," Bannim pointed out, "almost two months before Mr. Marley died."

McFergus looked the paper over. "Who sent you this?"

"It had been slipped under the door of my office before I arrived for work this morning."

"Ah." McFergus took a moment to collect his thoughts. "And the date?"

"I looked at the log book myself. It seems that on that date Mr. Marley received a threat of physical violence."

"Under what circumstances?" This was getting more interesting.

"It was all very…roundabout and vague. But according to the records Mr. Marley believed it might be connected to a piece of property he owned."

"The Teacher Building."

One of Superintendent Bannim's eyebrows went very high. "You know of it?"

McFergus nodded. "I learned that Mr. Marley had acquired the property, but that's all."

Bannim looked at the teapot, but refused more tea. "Mr. Scrooge informed me – I talked to him this morning – that it was not the habit of Scrooge and Marley Inc. to acquire real estate, but that Mr. Marley himself, through the bankruptcy of a creditor, had done so, and that, against the advice of Mr. Scrooge, Mr. Marley had retained ownership. Against the *vehement* advice or Mr. Scrooge, I gathered."

"And Mr. Scrooge has it now, probably."

"Indeed he does." He hesitated. "The company that was building the sewers seven years ago went bankrupt. It is believed by some that the Teacher Building was somehow in the way and contributed to the company's demise."

"And he, too, hasn't sold it in the seven years since Mr. Marley died."

"So it seems. The registry office lists no other owners."

"What," McFergus asked, "was the result of the physical threat?"

Bannim shrugged. "I don't know, but Mr. Marley seems to have convinced the thug to leave without anything accomplished, at least by the thug himself."

"And this was in the log book?"

"Signed," Bannim said, "by Constable Oftan himself."

"Ah. I wonder how long it will be before Constable Oftan gets a promotion. He's been a constable a long time."

"He'll be a constable the rest of his life, I imagine." Bannim looked out the window at the falling snow. "But he won't care. I imagine he gets enough payoffs from the costers and the criminals to keep him happy."

"But his name shows up again at the death of Mr. Marley," McFergus said.

"Indeed." The superintendent looked a bit uncomfortable. "I shouldn't even ask this, but you were sure, at the time, that Mr. Marley died accidentally."

"I always felt uncomfortable with that conclusion."

"And yet you said nothing till a few days ago." Bannim reached for more bread.

"There was no other logical deduction. The door to the building in which he lived was locked, and bolted twice from the inside. The other units in the building were offices, empty during the night. If someone, for example, hid in one until after closing, there would be no way to get out."

"And no one else had a key?"

"The cleaning staff came in during the day when the building was open and after it had been unbolted each morning by Mr. Marley. The people who rented the offices in the building seemed to be genuinely sorry at his death, and none, so far as we could tell, had a quarrel with

him." McFergus shook his head. "Barring any other physical evidence, it looked as if Mr. Marley opened the door to his room in the middle of the night, took a candle, and walked into the central hall, and tumbled down the stairs, breaking his neck."

"Perhaps he heard a noise."

"No sane man in his circumstance, hearing a noise, would do other than add another brace to the inside of his doors." McFergus had no intention of telling Bannim about the youth whom he'd released; the one who'd warned; he could see no good that could come from an admission like that. He was still debating about telling about Virginia Boyle's tale of the argument between Marley and the "man dressed like a banker," when the conversation went past that.

Bannim nodded. "True."

"I had no idea that anyone had visited Mr. Marley and threatened him," McFergus said. "Unless that were moved to the attention of an inspector, I'd never have found out about it."

Bannim nodded. "True. You seem to have done some research in the last day or two." McFergus let it sit until the superintendent went on. "I wanted to tell you that I have no objection to your continuing this line of investigation, if you want, as long as…." He paused.

"As long as I don't embarrass the police department," McFergus said.

Bannim tapped his forefinger on the table. "As far as I'm concerned, if you don't embarrass the police you can investigate Queen Vicky herself, for all I care." When McFergus said nothing more, the inspector stood up. "I thought of deputizing you."

"But not a deputy superintendent, just a deputy like in Kansas with a star on my chest and a couple of six shooters?"

Bannim laughed. "You've got the idea. But I decided against it."

"Just as well, I think. Aside from looking stupid, I wouldn't be able to tell people I wasn't with the police any more. Assuming anybody believes me, anyway."

"Keep up the good work, Inspector McFergus." Bannim put on his coat and stepped out into the lightly falling snow. A costermonger pushing a wagon full of roasted chestnuts looked at them and went on into the stream of people moving by the house.

McFergus was still contemplating the events when Sampson came down the stairs from the bedroom. "He got the best of that one, didn't he?" Sampson asked.

"In that sense that I'm doing work for the police department on what maybe a criminal case, and he doesn't have to pay me?" McFergus smiled.

"And, with no written record, he can deny anything. And, not being on the force means you can legally consort with informants and other criminals, which a policeman cannot."

"Well, then, I guess my investigation is his Christmas present."

"A Christmas present from Christmas past," said Sampson. "Mr. Marley died on Christmas day."

"As might Mr. Scrooge," McFergus noted.

"Which would be no Christmas present for you, or for Superintendent Bannim."

“Or for you.”

Sampson nodded. “It would annoy me to leave a question unresolved.”

“There isn’t much of a answer in formation.”

Sampson scratched his head. “We have what may be our only set of tracks. Should we not follow it?”

“Those tracks being…?”

“As I said; sewage. Sewers. The Teacher Building was known, you say, for its bad smells. And it belonged to Marley, and now belongs to Scrooge. These are facts; there may be a connection.” He looked at the former inspector. “Do you not agree?”

McFergus got out his pipe and some tobacco. When he had lit the pipe, he went to a drawer, searched around a bit, and found another pipe, a “bent” one, which he handed to Sampson. “A Christmas gift from several years ago. I never liked it.” Sampson filled the pipe and lit it. For a few minutes there was silence and smoke.

“All we can do is gather information,” Sampson said. “Get some more details. Is this not the way it’s done? Where would we get them?”

“We can ask around, but that will take time. We can search the registry downtown but that will take time, since neither of us has any influence.” McFergus paused a long time.

“We have several hours,” Sampson laughed.

“We could check the sewers under the Teacher Building.”

“That’s possible?” Sampson asked. “Do you know how?”

“Courtesy of Superintendent Bannim, I’ve been down in the sewers four times. People were always drowning themselves there. Or a sailor would be robbed and his body thrown into the Fleet River. That's the source of one of the main sewer lines, and the body'd be found downstream by some tosher. There was a small reward for finding bodies, so the tosher would call the police, and if Superintendent Bannim and I weren't speaking, I'd find myself underground."

"Sailors." Sampson seemed to be contemplating a sailor spending his last moments drowning in waters far, far from the seas.

"Oh, and the costermongers. As I told you, there are maybe four thousand in London. You've seen the barrows and wagons they have. Their whole stock in this world is tied up in that inventory on wheels. And where do you think they put all those wagons at night?"

"You know," Sampson said, "I'd never thought of that. There's not many places to secure a wagon full of goods."

McFergus puffed a cloud of smoke. "They leave the barrows and wagons in courtyards and side streets, covered by a tarp against the rain."

"Given the proclivity for theft in this city, there would have to be a good guard posted or a very serious set of consequences for infractions."

"As far as the police can tell, there is no guard posted."

"Yet when a person is desperate enough…."

"There is a belief that, with an absolute certainty, someone stealing from a costermonger's cart at night will be found in the mud of the Thames when the tide goes out. Or…."

Sampson grimaced. "Or floating face down in the London sewage system."

"When the body is 'found,' an apple core stuffed in its mouth, someone in the metropolitan police force is led, by a tosher, to the location. The closest street grate is opened, and the body is lifted out."

"And nobody knows who did the murder?"

"Even you would have a problem with that. The costermongers are a very tight group, and they regard a crime that can be accomplished successfully as a positive thing. Besides, they hate the police, who are always moving them on or taking bribes to let them alone."

Sampson waved his hand around. "You couldn't have taken many bribes. You don't even have one servant."

"I was happy to be promoted to inspector, even if the people of London regard police in civilian clothes as nothing short of short of a secret police for the rich and powerful." He puffed. "Being a policeman was not my heart's ambition."

"You always wanted to be an engineer."

"Yes. I always wanted to be an engineer. This Victorian England will always be known as the great age of engineering. We've done more than the Romans, by far." McFergus stood and stretched and got the subject back on track. "One of my forays was in the area of the Teacher Building, if I remember correctly."

Sampson looked at McFergus. "Are you thinking….?"

"I've still got the clothes I wore when I last went into the sewers." McFergus went upstairs, and came down shortly with a canvas bag. From it he took a pair of worn boots, a tattered shirt, a patched pair of trousers, and a waterproof cloak and fisherman's hat. He pointed at the cloak and hat. "Water comes in from the street drains and various other slop comes in from the private toilets."

"The clothes are too big for me," Sampson said.

"The sewers are quite slippery, and I don't walk well," McFergus noted.

"If someone went into the sewers, he'd need a guide."

"That wasn't a big problem for the police," McFergus said. "We'd hire a tosher."

"There are still toshers? I thought that the practice was illegal. Didn't they put grates over all the openings a few years ago."

McFergus snorted. "This is London. Poor people are desperate and cunning. Toshing is better than mudlarking - it's warmer down there in winter."

"Is there anything to be found down there?" Sampson looked skeptical.

"Among those that sort through other people's waste, toshers are among the richest people." McFergus shrugged. "You wouldn't think it, but they live better than most of London's poor, and work hard to make sure more people don't try to get in on the loot."

Sampson looked at McFergus to make sure he wasn't joking. "Don't they die of disease? Whether bad air or bacteria causes disease, they should suffer ills just being down there."

"Maybe both theories are wrong." McFergus loaded his pipe again. "Toshers have the reputation for being healthier than most. Which isn't saying a lot, of course, given the short lifespan of the gentry of the rookeries. But, as I say, they seem to live longer and make more money than you'd imagine." He took a long puff on the pipe, and watched as Sampson relit his own pipe. "The sewers are quite slippery, and I don't walk well," he repeated.

"What's it like down there?"

"Dark, smelly, and dangerous," McFergus said. "And slippery."

There was a pause as both men puffed smoke. "How dangerous?" Sampson asked.

"Dangerous enough that they made it illegal to go into the sewers without permission. Dangerous enough to install those the grates to keep people out. There's a good reward just for informing on someone who goes into the sewers without permission."

"So do people still do it?"

"Of course. Money overrules law for both the rich and the poor and hunger trumps safety at all times. There are at least ten thousand miles of sewers down there – they've never been mapped – and maybe a thousand miles of those that a person can walk, crouch, or crawl into."

Sampson shook his head. "But what's to be found in human waste?"

McFergus spread his arms. "This is a city in which many people can't afford to have their garbage hauled away and in which many people just don't want to pay."

"So garbage goes into the sewers." Sampson nodded in understanding.

"Anything small enough to throw into a sewer opening. Household stuff goes down there, as well as dead animals; anything from pet cats to offal from the slaughter houses and washings from the pig sties. Ashes, and teaspoons, dirt from the streets and coins from people's pockets." He tapped his finger onto the table. "There are chemical factories dumping material right into the sewers. A man can wander into a pocket of sewer full of gas, foul and ready to explode."

"A danger I hadn't considered"

"There are far more dangerous things down there," McFergus assured him.

"Continue," Sampson said.

"Well, getting lost could be a problem, since there are no maps and not many reference points."

"Don't you go with a guide?"

"Always have, and it would be mad to do otherwise."

"So that shouldn't be a problem."

"Of course not," McFergus said, though something rang a distant bell in the furthest corner of his mind. "The police pay a tosher who can at least lead them to whatever body is down there, and show them the way to the nearest exit." He puffed a bit, thinking. "When I was down there, I was warned that there are holes you can step into that are over your head.

Since you're wading in opaque water with only a candle light, you have to know where these are."

"Sampson shook his head. "Don't the toshers fall into these, maybe if one is newly formed or they're exploring an area new to them?"

"So they claim. But they normally travel in groups of three or four, led by an older man. And they always carry a long-handled hoe. The hoe lets them check out places, but – so they tell me – if a person falls into a deep spot, he can reach out with his hoe, hook it onto something, and pull himself out. Another danger, as you can imagine, is having rotten walls fall onto you. On my first excursion I was shown a wall where the bricks were so soft I could pull them out with my fingers, and they crumbled as I did it."

Sampson sighed a long sigh. "I'm not sure it would suit many as a profession."

"You haven't been in the rookeries. The toshers can be rough on anyone trying to get into their profession, and many do, for the money." He tapped his pipe into an ash tray. "But the most dangerous thing for a tosher is drowning. Not even the rats are more dangerous. though I've heard that they'll take down a lone tosher, which is another of the reasons they stay in group."

"How does the drowning happen?" Sampson clenched his hands together, which amused McFergus, so he carried on.

"You have to realize…" and here McFergus drew a diagram onto his notepad, "that when the tide's up, water flows back into the sewers. Given a spring tide and a strong east wind, that can push water well back into the sewers. That's especially true since they removed the old London bridge, and the tides run faster back up the Thames and further into the sewers now."

"Tides," the youth said, "are predictable."

"Yes they are. Yes they are. And since most of the major sewage lines follow old creeks, toshers stay out when there's a heavy rain around the headwaters of the lost creeks." McFergus contemplated his empty pipe. "But there's one thing they can't predict." He drew a sketch of a creek. "The sewage authority sometimes places a dam over the water going into a sewer, and lets a little lake build up behind it."

"Sensible," Sampson said. "Then they remove the dam and let the water rush down, to flush out the tunnels. The force of the water would do a bit of cleaning."

"A group of toshers could get flooded to the roof of the tunnel before they could get out."

"And the authorities don't warn anybody?"

"Well," said the former inspector, "nobody is supposed to be in there. But if a flushing of the system were about to start, the sewer men raise, then drop, some of the nearest sewer grates in the street to sound a warning. Any toshers in the street do the same to their nearby grates, in to alert their compatriots below. It wasn't as serious in older days," McFergus said, "but there are 300,000 cesspits in London being converted to flush systems, and that's adding a lot of water to the sewers. More than they can handle, so the sewers often fill up and now

sewage comes boiling out into the street. The city is rebuilding the whole system, but that takes time."

"So," said Sampson, "I think we can rule out that method of looking for data."

McFergus said nothing, then went on. "Shall I tell you about the black swine that are said to roam the upper sewer system?" He tilted his head at Sampson and asked, "Or about Queen Rat, who sometimes fancies a tosher and turns for an hour or so into a beautiful woman?"

"No," said Sampson. "If you can't deliver them on a plank to me to, they don't exist. Truth cannot be misled. If the belief in these beings influenced a man's actions, that might be important, but fantasies are for clergymen who see fairies in their garden and rabbits with stopwatches and a vest. Life is an endless maze without useful facts." He lit a third pipeful of tobacco. "I am younger and more nimble than you."

"I have sewer clothes and I've been down there four times. If some sewer-hunter can show me an entrance close to the building, I might not have to walk very far."

"The game is worth the candle," Sampson said.

In the end, they flipped a coin, although Sampson voiced opposition to the unscientific and illogical method.

An hour later, McFergus was in the basement of a house less than two city blocks from the Teacher Building. He checked his watch; another hour until he would meet Sampson again.

The air was dank, and smelled of human waste and the vegetables stored in cubbyholes in the crumbling cellar walls. The smell had stopped bothering McFergus. He'd stopped at a Presbyterian church for a quick prayer, but the smell of decomposing bodies put him off a bit. Thirty years before such administration as the city possessed had decided to change the rule requiring that the dead be buried only on church property, and seven large private cemeteries had been established in the surrounding country. But there were still a few people interred in the land surrounding each church, people too religious or too poor to get buried in anything but a churchyard. Sometimes previous tenants of the soil were removed, but often the new body was simply piled on top of the soil and a thin layer of dirt was added to cover it. That slim covering and London rains, along with grave robbers, left a scattering of bones among the markers and a bad smell in the church.. So his prayers hadn't eased his mind any and now he stood in the dark basement with two hired toshers feeling the need of more spiritual help than was likely ahead.

An old fellow named Skinny Bob and a young man called himself One-Eye Peter carefully moved aside a shelf unit containing preserves. There was a door behind it, which they opened. There was only darkness beyond the door. With a single match, Skinny Bob lit candle lanterns and attached the lanterns to the greasy surface of the coats he and his tosher companion wore. He handed a third lantern to McFergus.

Both men were dressed more or less the same. The coats, although dirty, were velveteen, with huge pockets attached. They wore old trousers, a heavy canvas apron, and shoes that

were barely holding together. This outfit marked them as toshers, or sewer-hunters; the police knew that, and the police knew that such men were still finding their way into the system, despite the danger, the fines and the rewards for turning a tosher in. There were at least a couple of hundred toshers sill working the sewers; the money to be made and the reputation that toshing had as a healthy lifestyle was too much temptation to forego. Care, and bribery, got the men past the police. Care, and luck, kept them alive.

A tosher used his lantern to find his way through the darkness and to find saleable items. When the tosher walked forward, the lantern on the right side of his chest shone ahead of him; when he bent down, it shone where he was looking. At McFergus's insistence, he was provided with both a lantern, which he carried in one hand, and a hoe, to use as a cane.

Not for a moment did the former inspector believe that these two were using their own names. He'd identified himself as a former policeman, and was paying them well enough, but they knew they were safer making up names (although in the same style as other toshers) and they blindfolded McFergus for the last half-block of his travel before the door to the sewer.

For a moment, all three stood in the slowly moving water, waiting till their eyes adjusted and their noses got used to the stench. Slowly, the walls of the sewer came into view, old brick, dripping with fingers of gray-green material. McFergus learned to look down, tilting his hat to cut the bright daylight glare that came through the grates above every hundred feet or so. He now understood one of the advantages of working at night, as most toshers did. A few snowflakes also came through the grates, looking as out of place as McFergus felt.

Shining his light around, he moved his legs slightly. The bottom was slippery, but not as bad as he had feared. Away in a corner, bright eyes reflected the lantern beam; a dozen rats, feeding on the entrails of some large animal, probably offal from a slaughter house. This impressed the inspector; he didn't think that anything from the slaughterhouses was ever thrown away, rather than being spiced and stuffed into a meat pie and sold, regardless of its condition. A dead cat bumped against his leg, shaking some flies loose, and moved on. The waste from horses seemed to improve the smell of human waste, if not the texture.

"Ready?" Skinny Bob asked.

"I am ready." They moved slowly upstream. McFergus almost slipped a few times in the first few minutes, but got his sewer legs after that. He was immensely grateful that the rounded brick roof of the sewer was higher than his head. That, unfortunately, changed when Skinny Bob led them into a side sewer that was three feet, nine inches high, the normal height for sewers that didn't follow old streams. In such a smaller space McFergus was unable to use the hoe as a walking-stick, and had to drag it behind him while using his other hand to hang onto the clothes of the man ahead of him.

They came again to a larger sewer, followed it for a few minutes, then went into to a smaller one again. By the time he got to the next high one, McFergus was thoroughly lost. For all he knew they could be back at the original sewer that they'd entered from the basement. As

he contemplated that fact, he remembered what Sampson had asked him before they separated.

"These toshers, they help the police?"

"Yes," McFergus had said. "A bit for goodwill and a bit for the reward money."

"What will they do when they find out you're not a cop?"

"Actually, I don't know," McFergus had told him.

"They won't feel the same responsibility for your safety, will they?" Sampson had raised his eyebrows.

And now McFergus was somewhere under the streets of London, dependant on two toshers whose only real reason for getting him safely back was the fact that he'd paid them only half the agreed fee at the beginning. There wasn't much to keep them from robbing him of the money in his pocket as well as the watch he had tied to his arm, taking back their hoe and lantern and leaving him to find his own way out in the dark. He looked up at the heavy iron grates set into the street above. There were people moving by, and dirty snow being kicked down, but there was a lot of street noise, and he wondered if anyone would hear him if he shouted. He checked his watch; it was ten minutes before he had planned to be in near the Teacher Building, and Sampson was supposed to be there at the same time, and every half hour after.

Skinny Bob and One-Eye Peter came to a stop in front of McFergus, giving him time to catch up. The sewer was wide here, but the bricks were old, with many fallen out. McFergus shone his lantern around him. "Are we there?"

"We're here," Skinny Bob corrected him. He pointed ahead of him at a wall.

McFergus moved forward, and felt the wall; it was concrete and stone block, unusual in Victorian foundations. One block of stone had what looked like a figure in relief on it. Perhaps it had been an angel once, but it was old enough to have been so worn down that it was hard to be certain. "This is the Teacher Building ?"

"It is."

McFergus turned his lantern in a circle, then moved over to the other side of the sewer. That part was built of bricks, but looked like it had been patched many times. And it was slumping; dangerously so, to the ex-inspector's eyes. As he moved forward, he saw the problem as an engineer would. The flow of sewage made a sharp turn at this point, around the foundations of the Teacher Building, then straightened out afterwards. "This is an engineering nightmare," he said, tapping his hoe against the solid foundation of the Teacher Building. "I can see that when the building was erected the soil here was sandy and unstable, so someone put in solid foundations to hold the building firmly. But," McFergus pointed with the hoe, "the result is that eddies are forced against the far wall, and the pressure of that liquid will always undercut the bricks there."

The toshers said nothing. One-Eye Peter casually scooped his hoe in the liquid that flowed, ankle deep around him, as if he were there to look for valuables, not to discuss engineering.

"They can't keep patching that wall so the only reasonable thing to do is remove the Teacher Building and its foundations, to let the sewers flow properly. I imagine things get hung up on this corner all the time."

Skinny Bob nodded. "There are often jams here, so we check after a clearing. But that wall is getting ready to fall again, so I wouldn't stand too close to it."

With his hoe, McFergus tapped on the patched brick wall across from the Teacher Building foundation. Two bricks fell out, then another dozen. All three men stepped well back. "Sorry," McFergus whispered. Skinny Bob started to say something more, but the collapse of the wall accelerated, until much of the brick was lying on the floor of the sewer, forcing the effluent into small rapids.

McFergus shone his lantern into the opening that was left, then stepped onto the pile of bricks to see better. There was a large room. His light made out arches and pillars. It was, he thought, the remains of a chapel from a long-earlier part of London's history. No doubt some of the stones, with their carvings, had been conscripted for use in the Teacher Building foundation. Another brick fell nearby, but he couldn't help looking in. He was just assuring himself that there would be nothing of value left in there when he saw that a stone plinth had been struck by a falling brick, and had split open. He reached in towards the gleam of metal, and came up with a handful of coins, gold by weight.

"Look at this!" he whispered, turning around. There was no sign of either of the toshers. Confused, Ex-Inspector Ian McFergus stood on the pile of bricks from the fallen wall, and called. There was no answer but echoes.

Dropping the coins into a pocket, he ran back downstream a bit, but there was not a sign of the other men. He couldn't figure why they would leave, since he'd paid only half the agreed-upon sum, the rest to be handed over when he got out of the sewer system. *Were they superstitious about the old chapel? Had they planned all along to leave him there?*

He shouted again. There was a faint noise to the water, and a steady rumble of carts and horse hooves from the street above, but no return call. Rats ran by his feet. he considered following them, but realized they could get out smaller holes than he could.

Then he heard it, faintly. A triple boom, boom, boom from somewhere far away. A half minute later, the sound was repeated, a bit louder. It was, McFergus knew suddenly, the sound of men raising heavy steel sewer grates in the street, then letting them fall back into place, to sound a warning that the sewer lines were being flushed.

Once again he ran downstream, but stopped where the first two small side drains entered. He knew he'd come from one of them, hunched over and following the toshers, but he was unable to remember which one. He shouted down both of them, and got no answer.

For a moment, he thought of crawling into one of them. The flushing water would be coming down the main sewer line, and if he got back far enough, maybe it would get past before some of it ran up the side drain far enough to drown him. But he knew in his heart that that was a faint hope. And there probably were rats up there, also running to get away from the coming flood. The rats would infest, and probably defend, any spot that stayed above the coming waters. Turning, he ran upstream, towards the Teacher Building. Halfway there his weak knee gave out when he stepped onto the corpse of a small, rotting animal. The lamp went underwater and the candle went out. He wished he'd brought matches.

The banging of sewer grates got closer until the one upstream of him, just past the Teacher Building rang. A minute later the one a block downstream was raised and lowered. He yelled as loud as he could, but he knew how the volume of traffic, the steel rims of wagon and carriage tires, and the clopping of horses' hooves would drown the sound of his voice coming from the sewer grates. He realized that he should have positioned himself beneath a grate before it was raised and lowered, but that, he knew, was hindsight and useless to him.

His knee was throbbing badly and wanted to give out, but he stumbled forward. The grate nearest to the Teacher Building was where the newer brickwork met the older sewer frame. He was trying to remember whether someone had installed steel bars into the walls of the newer part of the sewer. Standing just below the grate, he felt the wall. *Yes!* The rungs of a steel ladder, installed to let men up and down from the grate in the street above.

The first rung was the hardest, as it was furthest from the floor of the sewer. Hearing a distant roar, in a note so low it was barely audible, spurred him on. Going three steps up the ladder put his face close to the grate. McFergus pushed on the grate; nothing moved. He reached down, grabbed the hoe, and shoved the handle through one of the square openings in the grate and into the street above. As he looked up, his fisherman's hat slipped off and disappeared into the darkness.

Almost immediately the handle was knocked aside; then it was grabbed and pulled up. The iron end of the hoe cut a line through McFergus's cheek before jamming against the iron grate. "Help me!" McFergus called.

There was some scuffling and shouting above him, and some dirty snow fell onto him. Then a high-pitched voice; "This is Samson." A couple of pairs of fingers reached through the grating and tried to lift it. McFergus tried to help by pushing with one hand. The grate barely moved. McFergus wasn't surprised: if grates weren't heavy and solidly anchored to the street, they'd certainly disappear in the night, even if the costers would turn in anybody trying to sell one.

"I'm going to get an iron bar," Samson called down, above the street noise.

"Hurry," McFergus said. "They've opened the gates to flush the system." He had no illusions about the consequences of waiting; it was not uncommon for flushing waters to reach up to street level and fountain out of the grates. And heaven knew where Samson would get an iron bar.

But he didn't have to wait; as the rumble grew loud, another set of fingers reached through the grate, and it hinged up and away onto the street. Even then, it was close; the rising waters were tugging at McFergus's legs and a large but soft object hit them as he was hauled up and onto the street. He looked down into the darkness past his feet; it was filling with muddy water. Then he looked up. Several people were standing there, including Sampson. But the one who had dragged him up, the one who evidently had the strength to open the grate without needing an iron bar, was standing there, breathing heavily. It was Bill Sikes.

McFergus sat there, in the dirty snow, soaking wet and covered with waste. Blood from the cut in his cheek was running down his face and snowflakes fell steadily upon him. Horses and wagons, cabs and carriages detoured around him, kicking up grey slush that spattered him. He saw someone grab a live but very wet cat from the same sewer hole, and a couple of rats swam to the edge and crawled out.

McFergus looked up. Sikes looked at him, then turned to Sampson and said, "Tell him what I said." Then he and his dog walked away, vanishing almost at once behind the traffic. The former inspector was cold and getting colder. He watched Sampson reach into his pocket and pull out a bottle of scotch.

"I estimated that there was a reasonable chance that you might need this, now or later." But as McFergus reached for the bottle, Sampson removed the stopper, pushed McFergus's head aside and poured the alcohol into the cut in his face. He wiped the cut with a handkerchief, then poured more onto it.

"Mother of God," McFergus said, "are you going to waste all of it?" Sampson just smiled and handed McFergus the bottle. There was some left in it; enough to give McFergus hope, though he coughed a bit up through his nose.

"I suggest," Sampson said," that we get you home before you freeze to death. I doubt that any public house wants you in your current smelly condition." They retrieved the hoe, watched to make sure the grate was closed by passers-by, and hobbled down the street, snow still falling on them.

A half hour later, Sampson had a warm coal fire going in the kitchen of McFergus's house. McFergus, naked under several layers of blankets with his feet towards the fire, had been washed off and was drinking tea.

"Feeling any better, now that your teeth have stopped chattering?" Sampson asked. Sampson himself was drinking tea and smoking the pipe McFergus had loaned him.

McFergus looked at the young man; the bent pipe rather suited his features. All Sampson needs is a deerstalker hat, McFergus thought, to be the image of a highlands hunter. That, and twenty more years. But he didn't say so to Sampson. "I feel much better. Would you be so kind as to fetch me the bottle of whisky hidden behind the butter keg?"

Sampson came up with the bottle of Glen Miller scotch, about half full. "Aha!" he said. "Just what we need."

“I would,” the ex-policeman said, a bit gruffly, “prefer to drink it, rather than have it poured down my face this time.”

“Some of it, anyway.” Sampson found the rag bin, found a small piece of white cloth, and poured some whisky onto the cloth. He handed McFergus the rest of the bottle, then wiped the cut along McFergus’s cheek with the whisky-soaked cloth.

McFergus said something in Gaelic, then, “What, in the name of Baby Jesus, is that for?”

“If,” Sampson said, “the germ theory of disease is valid, then it would be logical to sterilize a cut made from a tosher’s hoe before the germs can settle down in your face, would it not?”

“You think whisky will do that?”

“I’ve been told that it will,” Sampson said, “and if any alcohol will kill things, the cheap scotch you buy should be ideal, considering the number of people in the British Isles it’s already removed from the planet.” He inspected his work; the cut had stopped bleeding. “Did you know that Nelson’s body was brought back to England preserved in a cask of brandy?”

“I did,” McFergus said. “I never approved of the act; us Scots have love of neither British officers nor using good liquor for anything but getting drunk enough to forget the servitude of Scotland to England.” He tried reaching for his cheek, but Sampson pushed his hand away. A sudden thought struck McFergus. “Did you set the clothes outside the front door?”

“I did.”

“Can you check to see if they’re still there? I have some souvenirs of my expedition in one of the pockets.”

Sampson was back in a few minutes with the clothes. “I had to argue with a rag-and-bone man,” he said. “He was just about to take them away.” The clothes didn’t smell much better for having been outside. McFergus pointed at them. “Since your hands are now dirty, you might as well look through the pockets for some coins I found under there.” He gave Sampson an abbreviated version of the subsurface expedition and of the room that looked like a temple.

Gingerly, Sampson began looking through the soaking clothes. “Maybe a Roman temple? I know London goes back that far.”

“Doubt it. Gothic arches; probably medieval.” McFergus watched as Sampson eventually came out with thirteen small metal disks. When he was sure there was no more, Sampson carried the clothes back outside. When he returned, the youth washed the coins, washed his arms up to the elbows, then took the water bucket outside to get rid of the contents in the street. When he got back, McFergus was holding a coin up to a candle light. “It’s not like anything else I’ve seen,” he said, handing the coin to Sampson.

Sampson weighed it in his hand. “It’s gold.” Taking a small magnifying glass from one of his pockets, he examined it under the same candle light. “It looks like a picture of two knights riding the same horse,” he said

“You carry a magnifying glass around?” McFergus said, amazement in his voice.

“As every detective should,” Sampson said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “There’s a Latin inscription around the picture; SIGILLUM MILITUM XPISTI.” He turned to McFergus. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Not to me.” McFergus got up and limped up the stairs, where he exchanged the blankets for a union suit of ankle-to-wrist underwear and some better clothes. He went down to the warm kitchen, where Sampson was waiting for him. “Find out anything more?” he asked the youth.

“There’s a picture of a church on the other side, but that’s about all I can tell.” He shrugged.” Interesting, but for now we’ll assume it’s not relevant to our investigation.”

“How does one divide thirteen coins fairly?” McFergus sat down and poured himself some tea, which, he discovered, was too strong and too cool. He added a bit of whisky.

Sampson put his hands out. “These are in no way mine, but…. A souvenir would be nice. This is one of my first big cases.”

“Take one.” McFergus wondered just how many big cases Sampson had worked on at his age, but refrained from smiling.

Sampson smiled and took a coin. “Now you can tell me what you did down there, in detail.” The kettle was boiling, so he made another pot of tea. “If you don’t mind.”

“After I told you to meet me in front of the Teacher Building in two hours, I found a couple of toshers and paid them to take me there, along the sewers.” He shook his head. “At least they never got the last half of the payment, which would barely cover the lantern and hoe they lost.” Then he told Sampson the rest of the story.

“I couldn’t hear the sound of grates slamming, not with the street noise,” Sampson said. “The first thing I knew of your arrival was the handle of the hoe sticking up from a grate down the street.” He grimaced. “I had to fight off a couple of young girls just to get it loose. Then I tried to lift the grate myself, but there wasn’t much hope of that.”

“And Bill Sikes just appeared?”

“Oh, no.” Sampson shook his head and lit his pipe again. McFergus was glad he had enough tobacco. Sampson went on after getting the smoke going. “We’d been having a little conversation before you came by under our feet.” To McFergus’s puzzled look, he added, “It seems that your investigation into the death of Mr. Marley is the talk of the local underworld, and Mr. Sikes wanted to clarify a point.”

“Which was?”

“That he had nothing to do with Mr. Marley’s death. He’d been paid to threaten Mr. Marley a couple of months before, but that was all.”

“Ah. The thug that the police records mentioned,” McFergus said.

Sampson nodded. “Almost certainly. But he told me that that was as far as it went. According to him, Mr. Marley said if Sikes killed him, the property in question would go to Mr. Scrooge, and Mr. Sikes’s bosses would be very disappointed. And if Mr. Sikes injured him,

Mr. Marley would most assuredly arrange for a series of unfortunate events to occur in Mr. Sikes's life. Mr. Marley assured him that he had very much influence in the parish."

"Mr. Marley was a tough customer."

"Indeed." Sampson looked like he was trying to decide whether to have more tea or continue smoking at a frenetic pace. He opted for the tea. "Mr. Sikes said that the very next day a courier boy delivered one of Mr. Marley's business cards to his front door." Sampson looked at the old policeman. "Do you believe him?"

"He saved my life," McFergus said, shivering a bit. "I'd believe him if he said he was Mary, mother of God, in disguise. Besides, he's a thug, and Mr. Marley's body had no unusual marks on it, other than what falling downstairs would have provided. Mr. Sikes is not subtle, I understand."

"So the foundation of the Teacher Building is the key to the puzzle?"

McFergus raised his eyebrows. "I hadn't mentioned the foundations."

Sampson shrugged. "The building has no importance above ground. You were under the building. One can assume that the foundation was the important part of the puzzle. How was it?"

"Solid. Some engineer found that the soil under the building was soft and unstable; it needed an unusual foundation just to keep the building up. But no engineer in his right mind should have left that foundation blocking the path of the sewer. The diversion was blocking the natural path of the water and shoving the flow against the far wall. That street is going to fall into the sewer, soon." He lit his own pipe. "Probably one of the reasons the last sewer corporation went out of business. I can't imagine either Mr. Marley or Mr. Scrooge would refute the law of supply and demand and sell the Teacher Building for less than a very goodly sum."

"You're right on that supposition,: Sampson said. "I had a word with Mr. Scrooge."

Again, McFergus was surprised. "You did?"

"It would have been foolish to waste the two hours you gave me." Sampson smiled broadly. "I rented a courier's cap from a boy and marched right in past the clerk." He scratched his head. "Now I've probably got head lice again."

"Do you think he'd recognize you again?"

Sampson shook his head. "I doubt it. He didn't look beyond the hat. I don't think he's a people person. Money and station are all he knows."

McFergus leaned forward. "But what did you tell him?"

"I wished him a merry Christmas. He snorted at me. Then I told him I'd been sent to ask if he, in the spirit of the season, and in the interest of the common good, would consider relenting on the – and here I looked at the back of my hand, as if there were a note on it – sale of the Teacher Building."

"He did not do so, I presume." McFergus tapped the ash from his pipe.

"He allowed – as your former superintendent noted – as he'd advised Mr. Marley against the loan that got him the building. Then he gave me a lecture about supply and demand and said he might just *increase* his asking price. Finally, he sneered and said that if there were so much as a hairline crack in the building from my bosses working under it, he'd see them in court. He also mentioned that he had good friends on the parish council. I don't know what he meant by that."

"London," McFergus said, "is divided into church parishes. That's changing – the police force was the first institution that was city-wide, and no doubt the sewer and other underground lines will be next – but for now, if you control a parish council, you have control of a small section of the city. For now the Teacher Building is likely free from fear of expropriation." He reached out to shake Sampson's hand. "Very well done."

"Thank you."

"But we haven't solved the case." McFergus scratched his head. "We know why a defunct company wanted the Teacher Building. And we know Mr. Scrooge won't sell for a reasonable price. But why kill Mr. Marley when he owned the place?"

Sampson thought about it. "He fell down the stairs."

"Behind a locked door."

"Nobody in London would open their front door at night. Not in their night clothes. A Scot might; a Canadian certainly would, but an Englishman wouldn't."

"You're right. The normal response is to look out the window, down at the door, and tell whoever it is to go away." McFergus looked at the ceiling.

"What if he knew the caller?"

"If it was business, the call would be to go away and make an appointment. If it was a personal call, he'd have dressed for the visit."

"No matter how personal the visit was?"

"Even so. We have our standards." McFergus raised his eyebrows. "So he'd have had to be crazy."

"You're thinking he was poisoned in some way? It's possible."

"But that leads nowhere," McFergus said. "An old crime, with an unknown assailant. Seven years ago. Long ago."

"Would be different if it were today. Would be different if someone were about to kill Mr. Scrooge."

"The note."

"Yes." Sampson nodded sharply. The one with 'Scrooge is next: Christmas eve' printed on it."

"The one Desmond handed to me."

"Tomorrow is Christmas. It's Christmas eve tonight," Sampson pointed out.

"The game may be afoot." McFergus got up. He ached in places he hadn't remembered he had.

"What do you suggest?"

McFergus thought. "I suggest we start with Mr. Scrooge's residence. If he isn't there, then we work back towards his office. Find him and follow him."

It was getting dark, and the fog was getting thicker. It wasn't a pea-souper, but it was thick enough to muffle sounds. Sampson kept close to the policeman. Snowflakes appeared through from the dark sky, appeared briefly around the gas streetlights then disappeared into the fog. McFergus seemed to be going by memory.

The residence of Ebenezer Scrooge was dark. There was no indication of even so much as a candle light in the upstairs windows, but even if the man had been home, McFergus suspected he'd be using a very small candle. McFergus pounded on the door. "Police! Open up!" None of the upstairs windows opened. McFergus turned to Sampson. "Mr. Scrooge hasn't got home yet."

"He's still at work?"

"Or having dinner at someplace between."

Just less than halfway to the business location for Scrooge and Marley, they passed a barrow parked under a lamp, the glow of a bad-smelling cigar coming out of the fog. "Mr. Dwan," said McFergus, identifying the man.

"Sir," said Dwan, as if he didn't know the policeman. He walked to the front and began pulling his barrow away into the street.

"You know that man? He looks like a street conjurer." Sampson said quietly. He shuffled his feet and pulled his cloak tighter."

"You were asking about driving a man crazy," McFergus said. "That man, if I can believe him, could mix up a potion to do exactly that." He watched the fog and darkness close around the barrow.

"A bit much of a coincidence," Sampson noted. "You didn't mention him before."

McFergus walked on less than half a block. He stopped in front of The Lion and Crown, a public house. There was music coming through the door.

Sampson almost bumped into McFergus. "I'll take a look inside," he offered, opening the door and going in. McFergus had watched the street no more than a minute when the youth came back out. "Scrooge is in there," having a meal. He doesn't look happy that someone's singing while he's reading the financial papers."

McFergus went inside, followed by Sampson. The pub was mostly full. In the corner Mollie was singing Christmas carols, with a three-piece drum, tuba, and flute band beside her. McFergus noticed that the lyrics included some new lines about overthrowing the fat capitalists.

He recognized a frowning Ebenezer Scrooge finishing up a small meal, probably a suet pudding. Scrooge was simultaneously folding up a newspaper and beginning to stand up. Probably, McFergus thought, he wanted to escape the music, but was too tight to leave the

pub without finishing the meal he'd paid for. In a few seconds he left the building, squeezing past McFergus and Sampson.

In the far corner Devon was trying to sell papers and chapter books to the people in the pub. He looked up, turning pale when he saw McFergus. He dropped a few papers, picked most of them up, gave a panicked look at Molly, then moved towards the door. As he passed McFergus, he whispered, angrily, "Too late! You're too damned late."

McFergus followed him outside. Scrooge was moving away towards his home; Devon was walking quickly, almost running, in the other direction. "What do we do now?" Sampson whispered.

"Follow Mr. Scrooge;" McFergus said. "I'll find you at his house," and took after Desmond as fast as his leg would let him, which was, admittedly, not very fast. Given the slippery streets, the dense fog, and a little bit of snow, McFergus got no more than a couple of blocks before admitting to himself that if Devon had kept running, he'd never catch up. And if Devon had hidden himself in any dark corner, he, McFergus, would never see him. But the slight snow had accumulated, and for the first time in decades, the former Scottish gamekeeper was able to follow a set of clear footprints on the ground. He hoped they belonged to Devon.

His luck held. The footprints turned a corner and stopped at a beer house. McFergus stepped in and stood by the door, his cap in his hand. At a table, Devon stood up in panic. Perhaps he didn't know if there was another way out, or perhaps he figured the ex-inspector had tracked him first to the pub Scrooge frequented, then unfailingly to this place like some sort of hell hound. He sighed and sat down. It had been a house much like McFergus's own, but the main floor now contained a half-dozen tables and a counter with a casks of beer and ale on it.

"Sir," McFergus said, realizing that he had no idea what Devon's surname was, "might I have a word with you?" Not waiting for an answer, he sat down at the little table, opposite the bookmonger. An old man missing a few fingers on both hands brought Devon a foamy dark ale, then looked at McFergus. McFergus ordered a duplicate. Then he put his most official look on his face. "Sir," he started again, "we have reason to believe you are an accomplice in the death of Mr. Jacob Marley."

Devon reddened. "I was not part of that event," he said. "I was not. If I had been, why would I have given you the warning about Mr. Scrooge?" He shuffled his feet, turning the toes to face the door, and pushed his hair back. He leaned back and rubbed his nose. "I ask you that, sir, I do." He lowered his voice a bit when the beer came.

McFergus looked around. There was only one other person in the room, and neither he nor the server seemed interested in the conversation. "Then why did you warn me? Why warn me if you were going to administer the drug to Mr. Scrooge?"

"To have you stop that, of course! Why else?" Devon trembled a bit and gave a pleading look to the man facing him. "I wanted it stopped before I did it!" He looked around and

lowered his voice, as the other men in the room had turned to look at him. “And what good did it do?” he said, working up a bit of anger. “You were late. Too late.” He finished off most of the small glass of beer, and McFergus raised a hand to signal the server.

McFergus took a long slow drink of ale. “Did you really have to do it? Administer the drug to Mr. Scrooge’s food or ale? Could you not have refused?

Devon closed his eyes and scrunched his face mightily. “Twenty years ago I was young, Mr. McFergus; I was young, and as foolish a young man as you’d be likely to find in Liverpool.” His eyes opened wide. “I did something foolish, Mr. McFergus. As foolish a thing as a young man could do. Should it be… found out….” He stopped. “It was a hanging crime, then. Not now, maybe, but I’d still spend the best part of my life in one of those rotting ship hulks that they anchor in the river, chained to a wall.”

“And Mr. Dwan has this over you.” McFergus guessed, as he ordered another ale for Devon.

“Yes.” Devon acknowledged, while McFergus thanked the stars for another lucky guess. “Dwan. I should have figured you’d know that.”

“The drug. Was it a poison? That we don’t know.”

Devon took another big draw on his ale glass. “The… person…. The person who put the drug into Mr. Marley’s meal was told it was harmless. A few hallucinations. A calling up of long-forgotten memories. A change of personality, nothing more was supposed to happen. They said Mr. Marley would not be harmed.”

“Unless his personality was changed for the worse.”

Devon shook his head. “Some people, it would *have* to be for the better. They told me Mr. Scrooge would do the same thing. That the formula had been improved.” He finished his ale and McFergus signalled for a round for both of them. Devon leaned over the table and whispered. “In the jungles of Brazil the natives use it to purge their criminals. It’s a ritual there.” He shook his head. “That’s what I was told. I would not have killed anyone!” He hit the table with a fist. “There was nothing taken. Marley had an accident. There was no crime! No one can prove otherwise.”

After the ales had arrived, McFergus said, “Yes, Mr. Marley fell down the stairs. That could happen to Mr. Scrooge, too. Perhaps the construction company is resorting to poison this time, knowing that whoever gets that building would be a better person to negotiate with.”

The blank look on Devon’s face told McFergus that the bookmonger knew nothing beyond the orders from Dwan. “I know nothing of that,” Devon said, “but I thought money must be involved somewhere.” He sighed and wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead. “Perhaps, then, what they told me is true.”

“We shall hope that it is, sir.” McFergus stood up. “And you can hope so as well. Good night.”

“And a merry Christmas to you,” Devon choked out.

McFergus paid for all the ale and started towards the door. Then he turned. “It’s not Christmas until tomorrow. And what was Constable Oftan’s role in this?”

“He was to patrol all night, in case the old man ran into the street.”

McFergus walked into the foggy night, his leg aching again and the scar on his cheek stinging again for some reason. That Devon was guilty of a crime in the death of Mr. Marley he had no doubt. That it would never be proven was also of no doubt. It took him almost half an hour to get to Scrooge’s house.

There was no visible light in Scrooge’s window, but with his curtains drawn and the certainty of only a small candle, that was expected. The steps were covered with dirty snow – snow in London was always dirty unless it came in quantities and speed enough to overwhelm the soot from chimneys – and there was only one set of snow-filled footprints there. McFergus estimated that Scrooge had entered his house going directly from the pub. There were no other footprints on the steps. He looked around. The fog and falling snow isolated the area, but he could smell cigar smoke and in a moment, thanks to a gas lamp, he spotted the figure on a step across the street. The figure got up, shook snow off his cloak, and walked over, dodging a donkey wagon rumbling down the street.

Sampson shook snow off his hat. He didn’t say anything.

“Cold?” McFergus leaned on his cane. He could see a man coming down the street; it might have been Constable Oftan.

“You must be sore,” Sampson said, “having chased Mr. Devon all the way to Birmingham.” He stomped his feet on the pavement.

“There’s a public house right around the corner. It’s warm.”

“I might just make it back to your house,” Sampson offered. “Then I wouldn’t have to go out again. Especially if you spotted some suspect and were forced to follow him to Paris or Vienna while I waited in the snow.” His teeth chattered a bit.

“I think we can make it. Where did you get that cigar?”

“The conjurer came by. Mr. Dwan, you called him.” Sampson inspected the cigar. “It’s warm, but there may not be much real tobacco in it.”

“I suspect Mr. Dwan of being the person who supplied the drug that Mr. Scrooge took tonight.”

“You did say that.” Sampson pulled the cigar from his mouth, and looked around for a sewer grate.

“Best put it out first,” McFergus advised him. “There may be explosive gas in the sewer.”

On the way back they passed a family, a mother and two children, sitting on a step making hats. A street lamp gave them enough light to continue working after dark, something they obviously couldn’t do where they lived. McFergus stopped and bought two hats, adding a souvenir coin to the money he gave them. He thought the purchased resembled the hats Amy wore, but wasn’t sure.

By the time they got a fire going in the kitchen, McFergus noted that Sampson was shaking quite as badly as McFergus had earlier in the day, but at least he smelled better. McFergus served a small portion of scotch to both of them, then hot tea to the youth as soon as it was available. Then he gave Sampson as detailed a rendition of Desmond's testimony as he could.

There was a long silence afterwards. Both men lit pipes. "You hadn't told me about Mr. Dwan before," Sampson said.

"I saw no connection between Mr. Marley's death and Mr. Dwan."

Sampson sighed a long, long sigh, and said, "I determined several days ago that Mr. Marley was acting in a manner unusual to him when he died. The ingestion of some mind-altering drug for financial gain was the reasonable conclusion." He looked up at McFergus. "That was elementary logic, but I had no suspects." He sighed. "Perhaps I could have saved you an enlightening walk under London."

McFergus wasn't sure Sampson was correct, and said nothing for a moment. "And if the drug is harmless, other than altering a personality, then we have no need to spend the night watching Mr. Scrooge's door."

"I think we should stay warm until morning. The tribes of the middle Amazon have several drugs used to cure psychosis, but the patient is always watched closely for a day or two, lest he wander into the river looking for lost relatives." He had another cup of tea. "Mr. Scrooge could fall down his stairs, attempt to fly out his window, or go running naked down the street. Or he could sleep it off."

"You seem to know much about these things."

"Chances are," Sampson continued, "Mr. Dwan had his original substances in small quantities, and has probably added local toadstool ingredients. The outcome is not predictable in that case."

"Is it not odd," McFergus asked, "that the miscreants should try the same thing twice?"

"Not at all," Sampson said. "It's been seven years, and a different company is involved. It's not likely any of the people from the original company would admit what they had tried on Mr. Marley. I imagine Mr. Dwan and associates decided to convince the current company, as they did the last one, that they might change the mind of the owner of the building that's impeding their sewer and threatening them, too, into bankruptcy. It just took seven years before a new company ran into an old problem and were offered the same solution by Mr. Dwan, whom they'd never met."

There was a long pause. "By rights we should take turns outside his door all night. Just in case he goes outside," McFergus said. There was a pause while he served both of them a wee dram of Glen Miller.

"It is cold out there, the odds of that happening are small, and I'm a deductioneer, not a rescuer. And there are evil men wandering the streets at this time."

"You rescued me," McFergus pointed out.

“I and Mr. Sikes, whom I should not like to meet on a dark street in a fog. And you? Are you ready to spend a long December night on a doorstep?”

“I was lucky not to die in the sewers this morning. I think Mr. Scrooge is going to have to take his chances.” The ex-inspector wished the youth a good night and hobbled upstairs to his cold, lonely bed.

“Sleep well,” came the voice from the kitchen.

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Chapter 7: December 25

It was still dark, eleven hours later, when McFergus woke up. The house was cold and the fire in the kitchen was out. A note on the small kitchen table told him that Sampson had gone out an hour before. Sighing, McFergus first used the common toilets out back, then clothed himself a bit more formally and went out the front and onto the street at the first light of the day. On the way to Scrooge’s house, he bought a hot eel pie from a street vendor. The man wished him a merry Christmas. McFergus remembered that it was, in fact Christmas day. “And a merry Christmas to you,” he said.

The was a slight breeze blowing and the worst of the fog was gone. Magically, the quantity of falling snow had, at some time in the night, overwhelmed the soot, and London was white rather than grey for a short time. The street in front of Scrooge’s house was quiet, with only a few wheel and horse tracks in the snow. How pretty, McFergus thought. Ahead, he could see Sampson, walking back and forth, trying to keep warm. He waved, and Sampson waved back.

At that moment the upstairs window to Scrooge’s residence came open, and the man himself stuck his head out. McFergus stepped back into a doorway, not wanting Scrooge to see him. He watched as Scrooge and Sampson carried out some sort of conversation, but he was too far away to hear. The noise of a herd of cattle being driven into the city behind him didn’t help. He watched, but Scrooge didn’t throw anything at the youth.

In a moment, Sampson came running. He paused for breath as he got to McFergus. “He wants me to come back with the poulterer and his biggest turkey,” he said, panting a bit. “Should I do that?”

“Probably best not to upset him,” McFergus suggested. “I can watch from here.” He did, while Scrooge appeared in his own doorway and seemed to have an affectionate conversation with his door knocker.

Sampson passed McFergus again within ten minutes, followed by the poulterer pushing a barrow with an extremely large turkey in it. McFergus thought that that turkey must have been a big investment for the merchant, and yet, now on Christmas morning, it was yet unsold. No wonder he was moving as fast as his legs and the size of the bird would let him.

Sampson returned, then sat down by McFergus. He opened his fist. “He paid me half a crown.”

“Definite personality change,” McFergus said. “And in a positive direction. Let’s hope he doesn’t try to walk across the Thames now.” But Scrooge’s door closed and the poulterer came wheezing by.

“Changed his mind, did he?” Sampson asked the merchant.

“No, no. Paid me for it, he did. Paid in full, and paid for me to take a cab to the home of a Mr. Cratchit. A cab! For me and the turkey, too.” And he hurried off with the barrow and the bird.

The two watched the house for another few minutes. “Now what?” Sampson asked.

“Don’t know,” McFergus said.

“Theoretically, we’re done,” Sampson noted. “We solved the mystery of Mr. Marley’s death.”

“We seem to have done so.”

“We prevented Mr. Scrooge from dying.”

McFergus raised his eyebrows. “Well, he’s alive, but I don’t think we had much to do with that.”

“He’s alive, in any case,” Sampson said. “I think we should get some breakfast and something hot to drink.” He showed McFergus the half crown in his glove. “I’ll buy this time, if there’s a good public house around.” He pulled the pipe from his pocket. “I still have your pipe.”

“Keep it. It’s a Christmas present from me. The pub is just around the next street,” McFergus said. The streets were, in fact, getting busy; not everyone could afford to take Christmas day off. The costers were selling last-minute Christmas gifts and the street-sweepers and step dusters were hoping for money from well-off people in a good mood. Merchant’s boys were delivering edibles for feasts. McFergus saw a cab go by carrying the poulterer and his bird.

As they crossed the street, two ragged children swept it ahead of them. McFergus tossed them a coin. A family was sieving the streetside sewers; McFergus gave them two coins.

“Are they all deserving?” Sampson asked. “I can’t see how you tell.”

“Experience,” said McFergus, “ Some are running a con game. Some are desperate. Many are both.” He continued along the street, handing out coins. Just before they got to the Green Oak, they looked behind them, and saw a smiling Scrooge come into the street, happily greeting people. McFergus shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, “whether Dwan should be hanged or knighted.”

Sampson laughed. “A merry Christmas to you,” he said.

“Actually,” McFergus acknowledged, “it is.”

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Chapter 8: Epilogue

A week later McFergus sat at a table in a house near the edge of a town in Cornwall, sipping tea and listening to the rain on the windows. He looked outside; the land was painted in sepia and grey. His eyes followed an old fence to a distant grove of trees.

"Remind you of Scotland?" Amy asked him. It was a joke; she'd hired a bagpiper to meet him at the station, and found a cook who made a decent haggis.

"It does, it does," he acknowledged. "Scotland in winter. A good day for poachers." He looked around. "It's warm in here."

"You're glad of that." She sat down carefully, careful for her back.

"My old bones are. Does Mr. Lewis mind the quantities of coal we burn in his house?"

"You're starting to sound like your Mr. Scrooge in his bad days. My cousin makes quite enough money that he can afford to keep us warm while we're here." She paused in her knitting. "This is a far cry from London, isn't it? Do you like the cleaner air? Did you notice the blue skies yesterday?"

"I do. I did. I had almost forgotten what clear skies looked like." He closed his eyes and remembered his trip through the sewer lines. "It's not as interesting as London."

"The food here usually has nothing but food in it."

"There's not much privacy. Everyone knows what you're up to."

"That gives one something to talk about with one's neighbours, doesn't it. You've had some long conversations at the Black Horse with your old Scottish friend, had you not?"

McFergus grunted. He had indeed been glad to find an old friend, Kyle, living in town. They'd spent much of one day walking the muddy lanes and hills comparing the countryside – always unfavourably – to the Scotland of their youth. "He's dour, even for a Scot, but he's got a Scottish sense of humour."

"A Scottish sense of humour is often wickedly funny, and sometimes just wicked. More tea?"

"No thank you, my dear." He turned to look at her. "I missed you at Christmas."

"You brought me some wonderful presents. And the best present, yourself." She poured herself another tea and served him some sweets. "Could you…?"

"Live here?" he stretched his bad leg towards the fire. "I could, perhaps. But you? We'd have to haul water from the well, you know. And there's no gas line coming to the house for light."

"We could get a servant, you know. Things are cheaper here, and some of the youngest local girls will work at a good rate knowing they can stay near their folks."

Amy must be getting old, he thought; she had turned down the idea of a servant in London. On the other hand, not having a servant was the mark of a very low status in England, and here people would comment more. "Good point," he said. "There's not much entertainment in a town this size. And you did have some income from your filing job."

“Mr. Green, at the telegraph office, says I might get a position part time with the telegraph. He was quite surprised to learn that I could do it almost as well as he could.”

“I imagine he was.” Amy had been raised by her father, who’d had an interest in odd things, and had given his only child an unusual education. He sighed, wishing to change the subject for a while.

“Are they really going to tear that building down?” Amy asked him.

“The Teacher Building? I think so, unless Mr. Scrooge changes his mind. Last rumour I heard was that the land at street level would be a small green space called ‘Scrooge and Marley Park.’”

“An eternal monument. That would be good.”

“That would last until Scrooge died and the city decided it needed the land for something else.”

“You are a sceptic, as always.”

“What was it you called that thing you knitted me for Christmas?”

“A tuque,” she said. “It’ll keep your head warm in winter. The bonnet you brought me from London will shade me in summer.” She looked up. “Will you always wonder – if we should leave London – what happened to the people you knew there? Sampson, Mr. Sikes, and Mr. Devon? Or whatever happened to Betty, the mudlark?”

“I can always telegraph some people in the police department, if you get that job. And I meant to tell you; it was strange, but I did see Betty again.”

“You did?” Amy looked up abruptly.

McFergus brought back the memory. He’d fallen asleep at some point on his journey to Amy, and had a dream.

In his dream, he’d been chasing someone – the person seemed to change as the dream progressed – along a street on Saturday evening towards one of the bigger London Saturday night markets. Workmen were paid on Saturdays, so the markets existed to exchange some of that money for goods before it was spent on alcohol. He could tell the market was ahead because the sky above it shone with the lights of hundred of coster carts as if part of the town were on fire. Some costers used candles, balanced on a table or shining from inside carved turnips. Some had new self-generating gas lamps, and others still used grease lamps. The person he was chasing disappeared into the crowded streets of the market, its thousands of people buying, selling, begging, or entertaining. There were people handing out ads for theatres, boys trying to sell the three or four onions they had in their hands, and small girls selling matches.

It was, in his dream, almost Christmas, with luxury goods in the departmental store windows and the booksellers on the streets selling Christmas cards and annual books of poems, stories, and illustrations. Geese and turkeys hung outside butcher stores in the chilly air. The shelves were full of nuts, fruits, and sweets, but in his dream, McFergus discovered he had not a farthing in his pockets.

The noise, from marching bands to vendors yelling their wares, “Bonnets for fourpence,” “chestnuts all ‘ot, a penny a score;” from people shooting at targets to street singers, made conversation impossible. Nonetheless, in the noise, he tried to ask people if they’d seen the person he was looking for, but no one could hear him, and he stood there, almost in tears, feeling abjectly lost.

Then someone touched him on the shoulder and said, “Merry Christmas.” He’d woken to discover the conductor tapping him to tell him the train was pulling into Exeter Station. He took his suitcase from the overhead rack and got off, knowing he had enough time to find a toilet, purchase a meal from a vendor, and catch a different train into Cornwall.

“I was in Exeter Station,” he told Amy, “and while I was changing trains I saw Betty, among the beggars and vendors, sitting at the edge of the walkway, selling apples and oranges.” He shook his head slightly at the way things in life work. “I was almost past her before I recognized her. I has assumed she was dead in London.”

“What did you do?” Amy resumed her knitting.

“I bought an orange, of course.”

“Did she recognize you?”

“I’m sure she did. She seemed a bit taken aback.”

“Did you wish her a merry Christmas?”

McFergus nodded. “I did, and gave her a coin for the orange.”

“Good for you,” his wife said. “I hope it was more than a shilling.”

“It was a good coin,” McFergus said, remembering that he’d planned to bring that last odd coin from the sewer to Amy. “It was a good Christmas coin.”

*** END ***

Notes

Eighty percent of the inhabitants of London, at the time of these events, were born outside the city. The variety of accents would have been great, and not always comprehensible to the wonderful people who read this novel. I have, therefore, carefully (but not necessarily accurately) translated the conversations of the characters in this book from the original Anglo-Cornish, Angus and the Mearns, Ayrshire, Belfast, Berwickshire, Black Country, Blackburn, Bolton, Bristolian dialect, Brummie (Birmingham), Buchan and Aberdeenshire, Burnley, Caithness, Cardiff, Cardiff dialect, Cheshire, Cockney, Cork, Cornish, County Durham, Coventry, Cumbrian, Derry, Donegal, Dublin, Dumfriesshire and theScottish Borders, Dunbartonshire, Dundonian, East Anglia, East Midlands (Derby, East Riding of Yorkshire, Easter Ross and the Black Isle, Esk, Essaxon (Essex), Estuary (Thames Estuary), Fylde, Geordie, Gower, Guernsey English, Highland English, Home Counties,Cockney, Inner city, Inverclyde, Irish Travellers , Isle of Bute., Jersey English, Kentish (Kent), Kerry,

Kirkcudbrightshire and Wigtownshire., Lanarkshire, Lancashire, Leicester and Rutland, Leinster, Liddel Water, Limerick city, Lincoln,Northampton, Liverpool and Wigan, London, Lothians,, Mackem, Manchester, Mancunian, Manx English, Mid Northern, Mid Ulster English , Midlands, Moray, Multicultural London (Inner London), Munster, Newcastle upon Tyne, Norfolk, North East, North East Central, North London, North Northern, North Riding of Yorkshire, North Wales, Northumberland, Northumbrian, Nottingham), Orkney and Shetland, Peeblesshire, Pitmatic, Potteries (north Staffordshire), Preston, primarily, Renfrewshire, Scouse, Sligo town, Smoggie , South London., South Ulster, South Wales, South West Central – west Dumfriesshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Suffolk, Sunderland, Sussex, Teesside, Telford (east Shropshire), Teviot and the Yarrow Water, The Black Country, Ulster Scots Connacht, Waterford city, East Perthshire, West, West Country, West Midlands, West Riding of Yorkshire, Wexford town, Wiltshire, and Wolverhampton accents, as well as from cockney rhyming slang, into contemporary North American English for this novel's intended readership.

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Lenny Everson is the author of more than 40 works published on obooko and other sites. As of November, 2014, over forty-six thousand copies of his writings have been downloaded, including over 20,000 copies of his seven novels and twelve thousand copies of his poems (and song lyrics). Almost all are available for free download.

Please email any questions to lennypoet@hotmail.ca. He is happy to answer questions and hopes you enjoy reading his books as much as he enjoyed writing them.