

The Bone Mill

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It's a night of sounds and shadows.

Under a sallow moon, a woman sways down the embankment towards the canal basin. She carries something in her arms. It looks like a bundle of rags, but with every jolt of her body the bundle screeches with tiny, forceful lungs.

The clacking of her clogs on the cobbled towpath echoes across the canal basin.

In the distance, a shout. "Mother!"

A lantern wobbles onto the bridge. Another shout. "Mother, where are you?"

The woman ignores the shouting and carries on. She is at the water's edge now. She lays down the screeching ball of rags and unwraps the onion layers of tatty cloths from around the tiny child it contains.

The boy with the lantern is nearer now and hears the child's screams this time. But as they echo across the grimy water, he can't make out the direction they are coming from. He stops still, to listen again, but all he hears is the wind and the low rumble of the Mill.

The woman scoops a fistful of loose stones and begins to wrap the baby back up again, adding more stones and pebbles with each layer of rags. The baby starts to scream again. This time louder, even more insistent.

On the bridge, the boy holds up his lantern. Its wavering light is all but useless. He strains his ears. He feels the thrum of the mill engines under his feet. Yes, the baby's cries are coming from near the factory. His footsteps thunder along the wooden bridge, as he hurls himself down the far side towards the mill.

Her bundle is heavier now. The woman staggers to her feet. For a moment, her face is caught by the light of the half moon as the clouds part briefly in the night sky. It is a face of deep lines and

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hollowed creases. Then with all her remaining strength, she hurls the baby into the darkness.

The boy is close enough now to see the arc of her arms as the bundle leaves them and the woman's blank, moonlit face.

Time is static. The baby, in its casket of rags, unseeable against the sky is held in mid-air by some hidden force.

Then the splash.

"No!" shouts the boy.

He sees the ripples spreading towards the canal bank. He guesses at their centre and kicking off his clogs, dives into the sharp, fetid water.

He is too late.

He is always too late.

Chapter 1

In which we make the acquaintance of Master Ryder and several of his work colleagues at Jessop's Mill.

Joseph cupped his hands and tried to breathe some warmth into them.

He picked up the stub of chalk and the slate tile and began to draw. The picture wouldn't come. He closed his eyes, and tried to conjure up her face, but he couldn't bring it to mind. He made a few short strokes on the slate, but they were wrong. He spat on his drawing, wiped it clean with a corner of his blanket and instead summoned up the church in his mind, drawing it with long, bold strokes - the steeple, the clock face on the tower, the windows shaped like a shield. It looked fine. Why could he draw this so easily and not her face? After all, he dreamt about her every night.

His chalk criss-crossed the walls of the church, drawing in the stones. Yes, it looked good. There wasn't room enough for the churchyard, but maybe he'd go down there on Sunday, copy some of the grave-stones.

'Joseph, what are you doing?' It was Gerda, calling from the passageway. She thumped on his door. 'Are you awake?'

'Yes,' he called back. 'I'm just going.'

'You will be late.'

He propped his slate against the wall, pushed out into the corridor, past Gerda, who held out a couple of still-warm potatoes and a bowl of porridge.

'You cannot lose this work,' said Gerda.

'I know,' said Joseph. He spooned down as much of the porridge as he could in four mouthfuls and shoved the potatoes into his pockets. Within moments, he had dashed out of the main door, slithered down the flight of stone steps and was headed for Jessop's.

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Grey winter had come early and there was no sun in the harsh November sky. He didn't need to see the chimney smoke pushed sidelong in a cloying pall from the pot-banks up the hill to know that the wind was strong. He could feel it as it cut through his thin jacket and shirt. He wondered if it could get much colder. He'd heard it said that a few years ago the frost had been so fierce that the canal iced up. The men had taken crowbars and jemmies and broken the surface to get the boats moving back out of the canal basin.

As soon as he got onto the bridge, he could feel the throb from the Mill. Sewell had told him on his first day that the engine never stopped, except for a couple of weeks a year when they closed down the works. Then they stripped everything apart, smearing every cog, gear and piston with blackjack. You could feel it through the ground even before you could hear it. When it was working at full tilt, you could sometimes see tiny little vibrations across the surface of the canal. But Joseph tried not to look too hard at the canal.

He picked up his step as he trotted past the House of Recovery, almost knocking over a scruffy servant-girl, wrapped in a cloak several sizes too big for her, in his haste. He yelped a swift apology, but barely broke stride.

He could just make out the clock tower on the church. The big needle was nearly pointing upright and he didn't want to be late. If he lost this job too, he would be back in the workhouse. His fingers were still criss-crossed with fine scratches where he had spent hours picking apart tarred ropes and, even if he felt hungry from time to time, at least he got to eat something more than watery gruel.

Everyone knew when you'd been in the workhouse. Even if they couldn't guess from the dull greyness of your clothes, then they could always tell by your hair. Joseph's had grown back now from where the superintendent's wife had shaved it off to stop the lice

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from spreading. But he felt that Sewell knew. Sewell probably knew everything.

No gruel today. Today it would be better - a potato in either trouser pocket. He'd eat the little one at the mid-morning breakfast and keep the other for dinnertime. Nibble each of them slowly, till they got smaller and smaller in his hand. That way, you felt fuller and the taste lasted longer.

He scampered down the embankment and trotted along the towpath. There was a rancid, sickly smell in the air today, whipped along in the wind. He sniffed hard. It was like old fat that had been left in the summer sun and grew stronger with every step he took. He had not smelled this before, but he knew what it was.

It came from the two boats moored in the basin. One boat was a grimy, streaky, red the other had probably once been moss green but was now nearly black. They still had their tarpaulins stretched over their cargoes, but Sewell had told him what would be underneath. And if he could smell it from here, what was it going to be like in amongst it?

A short, stocky figure with a wheelbarrow was standing on the quayside. Sewell. Next to him was the figure of a second man, slighter and smaller than Sewell. Joseph guessed it might be Briggs.

As the steam whistle blew the first of its half-dozen blasts, Joseph broke into a sprint, dashing the last hundred yards or so, his clogs clattering, arriving beside the boats before the final note fell away on the wind.

The man with Sewell was Briggs, a little rat-faced man, only an inch or so taller than Joseph himself, with a nose that constantly ran. He was leaning on a shovel by the first crane.

Sewell, the foreman wore mittens and a muffler. Joseph envied him. He would buy some as soon he could. This cold was getting into his bones. He needed something to keep out the winter. What if he caught a chill and couldn't work?

He could never, ever go back to the workhouse.

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‘Cutting it fine, Ryder!’ said Sewell, casting a look over his shoulder towards the church clock.

‘I’m here now, Mr. Sewell,’ said Joseph, giving him his best smile. ‘Mr. Briggs.’ Joseph nodded a hello at the other man. Politeness, obedience. These are the things that would help him keep this job.

‘If this idle hillock can make it,’ Sewell jerked a thumb towards Briggs, ‘then so can you.’

‘Of course, Mr. Sewell,’ said Joseph. He smiled at Briggs, but Briggs stared at him with his little rodent face and hawked up a mighty gob of phlegm, which he spat into the canal.

‘Guess what we’re doing today, youth!’ Sewell always spoke in a mixture of sternness and cheeriness, so in the couple of days Joseph had been working at Jessop’s, he could never quite make out if he was joking or serious.

‘We’re going to unload this?’ Joseph pointed to the two boats. The stench alongside them was already strong. He dreaded the moment when they would pull back the tarpaulins. The porridge he had eaten a few minutes ago stirred in his stomach.

‘Dunna think *we three* are going to unload this,’ Sewell laughed and the laugh became a cough. ‘No, youth. *You two* are going to unload it.’

Briggs made no move, but leant on his shovel, his currant eyes darting to and fro.

‘Right, Briggsy,’ said Sewell. ‘Show him what to do.’

‘It’s always bloody me,’ said Briggs. ‘Always me as gets the cack jobs.’

‘Aye. Well, maybe if you put your back into t’other jobs round the place, instead of fuffling all the time, you’d not get lumbered with this.’

Briggs eyed the foreman for several seconds, before picking up his shovel and throwing it into the wooden wheelbarrow.

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'I dunna wanna come back and find this not done.' Sewell turned on his heels and set off back to the boiler-room of the Mill.

'It's all right for him,' said Briggs. 'He's off to warm his fat arse by the furnace. Listen, there's only one thing we do quick, right?'

'What's that?'

'We pull that tarpaulin off straight away. That way it looks like we've done a load. Then we slow it down. Take our time. Understood?'

'Why?'

'You'll get paid no more for working fast than for working slow.'

'But I need this job.'

'I know what I'm doing,' Briggs sneezed, sending a shower of spit into the cold air, then wiped his face with his sleeve. A string of snot dangled for a moment between Brigg's nose and his jacket. It looked like the start of a spider's web, only stickier.

Briggs pulled his muffler up over his face and stepped from the towpath onto the blunt rear-end of the moss-green boat.

'Let's get it untied,' he said and began tugging at the knots of the ropes that lashed the tarpaulins to the side of the boat.

Joseph clambered onto the boat. The smell was even stronger here. It seeped through the heavy tarpaulin. He took in a deep breath, and then bent to fiddle with the knots, expelling the air slowly as he did. Under his shivering fingers, the rope felt just like the stuff back at the workhouse. He'd sat for hours, unpicking all those tarry lengths, the pile of oakum growing slowly at his feet whilst the Superintendent barked at them. Surely this was better.

He would make money here. Not much, but at least some. And besides, it wouldn't be forever. He'd prove himself a good worker and get a better job elsewhere. Maybe in a pottery. Somebody once said that they had work there for people who could

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draw. What a job that must be. To draw in a pottery. Maybe it was the best job in the world.

Later, when Sewell wasn't looking, he could sneak a few minutes inside and get warm beside the furnace. Joseph's fingers were so cold, he could hardly grip the knot. If anything, it seemed to tighten on itself, rather than come loose. He cupped his hands again and blew slowly into them. Already Briggs had uncoiled several feet of rope. He sidled along the narrow sill of the boat towards Joseph.

'Not like that. You're tangling it up and making it harder to undo. Just slip it like this.' Briggs tugged on the loose ends of the rope and it came away easily.

A corner of the tarpaulin flapped free, wafting up a noxious stench. Joseph's stomach turned a somersault. He mustn't be sick.

They worked their way round the boat, pulling away the loose ends of the ropes. With each tug, foul gas escaped from under the cover. Joseph's stomach was churning now. He felt a rush of water in his mouth and spat over the side of the boat into the canal to stop himself from gagging. The wind caught the spittle and it dribbled across his chin, chilling immediately in the sharp wind.

'You won't be the first to cough his guts into the canal.' Briggs stood up, putting his hand into the small of his back and stretching himself as he did. 'In fact, I don't think there's a single man been through this place not puked the first time he did this. If you're going to puke, do it downwind.'

Briggs bent to his task and Joseph copied his motions. Soon they had slipped all the knots.

'Get over there,' said Briggs indicating the far side of the boat.

The sill was slippery and Joseph edged along it carefully.

'Right, now grab hold of the edge of that tarpaulin and start rolling,' shouted Briggs.

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Briggs had already grabbed one corner of the vast cover and Joseph copied him again, taking the opposite corner on his side of the barge. They hauled off the loose tarpaulin.

As it lifted, the stench rose to hit Joseph's nostrils. He gagged, turned his face into the wind to try to breathe something fresher, but his mouth and nose and lungs were filled with vile decay. His stomach lurched and he leant over the side of the barge and heaved. Once, twice, then a third time, spattering the still water of the canal with sticky oatmeal.

'Told you,' shouted Briggs across the boat. 'I said you'd spew your load!' He sounded proud of his prediction.

Joseph felt the muscles of his stomach spasm yet again and vomited a fourth time. But nothing came out. He faced upwind, away from the rancid, putrefying smell of the boat and sucked air deep into his lungs. This time, the air felt slightly sweeter. But he gulped so quickly, his head span, so he sat in the tiny prow as the world swung around him, before finally settling again.

'Come along. We canna hang around all day.'

Joseph straightened up and grabbed the tarpaulin again.

"Now!" yelled Briggs. The man and the boy peeled back the tarpaulin, rolling it over as they worked their way from prow to stern. Joseph could now see the cargo in the boat's hold.

The bones lay criss-crossed in a huge heap, as though they were firewood stacked up ready for the grate. They weren't the deep brown of firewood, but a dull yellowy-white, dotted with rusty flecks of caked blood and furry blotches of black and white, where the cowhide still clung.

For a moment he thought that the bones were alive, stirring, moving in tiny little shivers, but then realised that they were crawling with maggots. More maggots than you could ever count, like little quivering sacs of pus.

At the top of the pile, a huge cow's skull lay on its side, its jaw gaping open, one hollow eye staring straight at him. As he

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stared back, the skull juddered and skittered halfway down the pile and a huge black rat scuttled out from the eye-socket.

Joseph shuddered and at that moment, he felt a huge shove in the small of his back. He teetered, trying to maintain his balance, but he felt a second, bigger push and this time a clogged foot whipped round his ankles.

‘Go on, lad!’

The evil cargo rose up to meet him. He felt the bones shift and splinter under him. His face was squished up against the cow’s skull. He heard the rat squeal and as it ran across the top of his head, scratching through his stubbly hair, he screamed.

He scrambled to his knees, not knowing where to put his hands. Not wanting to touch anything, but knowing that he had to get free. Each time he put a foot down, the bones snapped under his weight and his foot sunk deeper. Like trying to wade through a mud field. The bones seemed to suck at his feet. He grabbed the side of the boat and pulled himself upright. Then, just as he thought he’d got a foothold, the bones cracked and slid beneath his weight.

He fell on one knee again, then managed to stand upright and, putting both hands on the sill of the boat, pulled himself out of the cargo hold and lay panting on the little fore-deck.

There was a vile, acidic taste in his mouth. The taste of death and decay. He spat, then spat again. His clothes were spotted with patches of slime. Somehow one of his clogs had come unlaced and was somewhere back in the monstrous cargo. He stood up, the wood of the deck icy beneath his naked foot.

‘What d’you do that for?’ he yelled at Briggs.

He could hear laughter. Huge guffaws. And handclapping.

Briggs pointed at the quayside. Sewell and the other men were lined up along the water’s edge. There was that servant-girl in her cloak standing next to Sewell too - the same girl he’d nearly knocked over this morning as he passed the House of Recovery.

‘We do it to all the new lads,’ said Briggs, his eyes glinting.

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Joseph felt the colour rise to his cheeks. His ears were burning despite the cold. He wanted to hit Briggs, but knew he was supposed to see this as a joke. Some joke. He forced a rictus smile, as though he'd actually enjoyed it, then began brushing himself down.

'Well done youth. You've taken it in good spirit.' Sewell sounded almost jovial.

Briggs held out a greasy hand towards him. 'No hard feelings, eh, young 'un? As I say, we do it to all the new lads.'

Joseph took the proffered hand. As Briggs's calloused fingers closed on his, the older man jerked his arm so hard it felt like his shoulder was popping from its socket. Briggs spun him round and with another shove sent him sprawling backwards onto the pile of bones for a second time.

The wind burst from Joseph's lungs. He lay there gasping for breath, like a carp that had just been landed.

'You allus have to take it a step too far, Briggs.' Sewell pushed past Briggs and held a hand out to Joseph.

Joseph, still gasping, reached out, and the foreman tugged him out onto the foredeck of the barge.

'You all right, youth?'

Joseph was still sucking great gulps of air, and his back ached from where he'd hit the bones, but he knew he mustn't look like a weakling. Above all, he mustn't cry.

'I'm gradely, Mr. Sewell,' he gasped. 'I just wanna get on with work.'

'Good lad,' said Sewell. He glowered at Briggs, then shouted to the men on the quayside. 'Right, we've all had our little fun. Let's get back to work.'

Sewell and the men left the quayside and headed back into the Mill. The girl went off into the roadway.

Joseph took a few moments to catch his breath. 'That's not fair,' he said.

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‘Not fair!’ snorted Briggs. ‘It’s the real world here. Nowt’s fair.’

Joseph brushed himself down. ‘What about my clog?’

‘Tie them tighter next time. We’ll find it soon enough.’ Briggs spread a net over the prow and clambered back off the boat onto the wharf. ‘Now listen,’ Briggs instructed. ‘We take it slow and easy. We’ve all day to do this. You’ll shovel it in there. No more than half-full, mind, or you’ll bust the net and I’ll not sweat more than a man has to.’

Briggs passed Joseph a spade and Joseph jabbed with it at the mound in the boat. The blade of the shovel skittered across the top, scattering small bones.

‘Not like that, you wuss. You’re just making more work for yourself.’

Briggs clambered back onto the boat. He spat on his hands, rubbed them together and grabbed the shovel from Joseph’s hands. He speared the blade deep into the mound, worked it upwards, loosening the pile. The blade chinked against the bones and the sound carried across the canal basin, rippling off the sides of the Mill and the House of Recovery. He scooped a couple of shovelfuls onto the net, then pushed the spade back into Joseph’s hands and watched as Joseph copied him.

Joseph lifted a shovelful onto the net spread on the quayside. He did this several more times until Briggs called out that it was full. Joseph looped the ends up onto the hook on the little crane. Briggs cranked the winding handle and the jib groaned as it took the weight of the bulging net.

Once the net was a few feet above the ground, Briggs swung it over the cart, lowered the jib and the bones settled. He pushed the cart off to one side and then laid out a second net.

‘I’ll take this inside, you start on the next load.’

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‘Can’t we take it in turns? You shovel this time and I’ll do the cart?’ Joseph suspected he knew what the answer was before he even asked.

‘No, we bloody well canna,’ said Briggs, sweeping the back of his hand across his dribbling nose.

‘I’ll have this full for when you get back, then.’ said Joseph.

‘Take your time,’ said Briggs, sniffing mightily. ‘This lot’s not going to get any deader just cause you’ve offloaded it quicker.’

Joseph watched as Briggs slowly pushed the lopsided cart, which rattled across the cobbles of the canal basin, towards the crusher room. The vats of water in the room over on the far side of the Mill would already be at a roiling boil, waiting for these bones.

He spat on his hands again, rubbed them together and stabbed the shovel into the mound of bones. He could already feel a small blister rising on the heel of his right hand. How many shovelfuls would it take to empty the boat?

A couple of hours later, by the hands on the clock on the tower of the House of Recovery, and Joseph had already lost count of the loads he’d shifted. He knew to count to fifty and he knew he’d counted fifty several times, but he wasn’t quite sure how many that made altogether. His hands were chafed raw and pulpy, and his back was creaking almost as badly as the jib on the crane. At least he’d found his clog, so his foot was no longer freezing.

He straightened up, feeling the strain of the work in his back. As he did so, he saw Sewell emerge from the boiler-house. He quickly rammed his shovel into the bones and heaved a small pile onto the awaiting net.

The foreman swayed across to the boat and peered into its hold. There was still a huge mound.

‘I canna see the bottom,’ said Sewell. ‘You should be half done by now.’

‘Sorry, Mr. Sewell,’ said Joseph.

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Briggs looked at Sewell, his lip curling. 'I'm doing my best.'

'My arse,' said Sewell. 'You've had your fun, now put your back into it.' He turned to Joseph. 'Do you see him working hard?'

Joseph said nothing. If he agreed, Briggs would make life hard from him. And you couldn't disagree with the foreman.

'I don't know, Mr. Sewell,' stammered Joseph.

'You're an idle hillock, Briggs, always lossocking about,' said Sewell.

'Aye. Course I am. Nobody works as hard as you. Warming that fat washerwoman's arse of yours must take it out of you.'

'Remember who's in charge.' Sewell stared into Briggs' dark little eyes. 'Remember what happened to Harry Cattermole.' With that, the foreman turned again and stomped back into the Mill.

'Who's Harry Cattermole?' asked Joseph, pushing his shovel into the mound of bones.

'Used to work here. He's in the House of Recovery now.'

'Did Mr. Sewell hit him or what?'

'Of course he didn't. Harry Cattermole's twice his size. He'd have kicked Sewell's fat backside from here into next Sunday.' Briggs snorted back a load of catarrh and chewed it in his mouth. 'It's Potters' Rot as put Harry in the House of Recovery, not some narky little runt like Sewell.' He coughed a huge yellow gob of heavy spit onto the quayside.

Joseph bent to his work, this time picking up the pace.

'Slow down,' said Briggs. 'We keep to the same speed.'

'I don't want to lose this job, Mr. Briggs.' Joseph continued heaping bones into the net.

Briggs leant against the crane, and took out the stubby clay pipe with a chewed stem that he never seemed to light. 'Keep it easy and we'll both be fine.'

Behind Briggs, up in the first floor window of the mill, Joseph saw movement. 'I think he's watching us.'

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‘Let him do what he wants,’ said Briggs. He clamped the pipe between his teeth and sucked noisily at it.

Joseph heaved the last shovelful onto the net, and Briggs, moving at the speed of a man on a mudflat, began tying it onto the crane jib. Even before Briggs had finished, Sewell was back across the narrow quayside, bellowing.

‘What did I just tell you not two minutes ago?’ Sewell’s face was puce.

‘We’re working.’

‘*He’s* working,’ said Sewell pointing at Joseph. ‘And I’ve been watching. You’ve done nothing. You’re an idle son of a whore, Briggs.’

Sewell’s fists were balled. ‘I warned you.’

Briggs stuffed his pipe back in his pocket. ‘Come on then. Let’s see what you’re made of.’

Briggs was toe-to-toe with Sewell now. He stared up at the foreman’s face, a good six inches above his own.

Sewell took a few steps away and ripped the shovel out of Joseph’s hands. He swung it at Briggs’s head. For a moment, Joseph thought that Sewell was going to take the smaller man’s head clean off, but he pulled away at the last moment and the blade of the shovel sliced through thin air.

Briggs stood his ground. Sewell was trembling from head to foot as though a rage was bubbling through his whole body.

‘Take that as a warning. If this job’s not done, I’ll jowl you so bloody hard, you’ll not have a tooth in your head. You’ll wake up in a bed next to Harry Cattermole.’ Sewell flung the shovel down on the quayside, where it clanked on the cobbles, and stormed off.

Briggs turned and spat towards Joseph. ‘See? See what you’ve done? If you didn’t push on and work so fast, this wouldn’t have happened.’

‘Why’s this my fault?’ Joseph only just stopped himself from spitting back.

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‘You’ve got to learn. You won’t get anywhere kissing his arse.’ The ratty little man stuck a finger under Joseph’s nose. ‘Don’t cross me again, or I’ll sodding well do for you.’

Chapter 2

In which Gerda foretells certain matters and Joseph spends the last of his money

The light had gone by the time Joseph got home.

Every part of his body ached, especially his back and shoulders from where Briggs had pushed him into the pile of bones. His hands were raw and blisters had already appeared and burst, leaving blotches on his hands. His feet were sore from the shovel, although at least he'd got his clog back now. He still smelled, even though he'd washed his clog in the canal just before dinnertime and got it half-dry against the boiler at the Mill. The stench of the bones had seeped into his clothes and hair.

He'd lost one of the potatoes Gerda had given him in amongst the cargo when he fell, so he was starving hungry. He hoped there'd be something more to eat tonight. Anyway, at least he'd been able to snaffle a piece of chalk from beside the tally-board at work, and he'd found another slate on the way home.

There was a gaggle of small children clustered at the entrance to the alleyway, poking sticks into a puddle. He pushed through them and climbed the flight of uneven stone steps that led to the doorway of his lodgings, avoiding leaning on the rotten rails of the banister to his left. He opened the tattered front door and went into the short passageway.

There was a faint light oozing from Gerda's room where the door never quite closed properly. He was just about to knock, when he heard voices. He stayed his hand, pressed his ear to the gap between the door and the jamb and listened.

To begin with, he couldn't tell what they were saying. There were two voices. He recognised Gerda's, low for a woman, with its strange accent straight away. The other was also a woman's. It

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seemed to come from an older person. A voice that broke slightly as it rose and fell. After a moment or two, his ears had tuned in.

‘That was a marvel. A very marvel.’ The unknown voice. ‘I never thought I’d speak to him again.’

‘You have to have the faith. And you had the faith.’ Gerda’s voice.

‘So did you see what he looked like?’

‘Not really. You can’t always see as closely as you would be liking. It was as if he was in a haze.’ Gerda’s tone changed and she called out. ‘If that’s you, Joseph, you can come in.’

He pushed open the door sheepishly and went into Gerda’s room.

His landlady sat on one side of the little pitted table. Opposite her was a solid matronly figure with a flat brow and hair scraped back. A candle sputtered between them, pooling light onto a small pile of dull coins.

‘Have you met Joseph, my new lodger?’ said Gerda.

‘He’s the one as took over Harry Cattermole’s job at Jessop’s.’ The solid woman nodded.

‘This is Mrs. Butler.’

Joseph and Mrs. Butler exchanged greetings.

‘Poor Harry,’ said Mrs. Butler. ‘Has anyone been to see him? Maybe I should try to take him some soup.’

‘They say it’s a matter only of some days,’ said Gerda. ‘Then he too ...’ She let the thought drift.

‘Poor, poor Harry. Still, maybe he’ll meet up with my Ezekiel. Thick as what’sits they were in this world. Liked a pint or two, they doth did.’ Mrs. Butler turned her flat forehead towards Joseph. ‘She’s a wonder, your landlady. She spoke to my Ezekiel.’

Joseph wasn’t entirely sure what the two women meant. His bewilderment must have shown on his face, for Mrs. Butler continued. ‘He passed you know. My Ezekiel. He’s on the other side. In a better place.’

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'He's dead?' Joseph blurted with sudden realisation.

'We don't like the using of this word,' said Gerda.

'Sorry. I didn't mean ...'

'You're all right, Joseph.' Mrs. Butler grabbed hold of his jacket and leaned in conspiratorially. 'She spoke to him. In the next world. She spoke to him and he's ...'

Joseph groped for the words. 'Not alive any more?'

'Exactly. She spoke to my Ezekiel, and him gone some twelve month now.'

'You can really do that?' Joseph asked Gerda.

'She's a wonder. A modern marvel,' said Mrs. Butler, shifting her bulky frame in the chair.

'Joseph makes the drawings. Don't you?' said Gerda.

Joseph nodded.

'He is very good in drawing,' Gerda sounded almost as proud as a mother.

'Drawings is all fine and dandy if you've got the time for it. Anyway I canna stop here chopping the whole night away.' Mrs. Butler levered herself out of the chair and stomped towards the door. 'I'll be back when I've got more, Gerda. Nice to meet you, young man.'

'She's a good soul, but a lonely one,' said Gerda once Mrs. Butler had closed the door behind her.

Joseph dropped into the chair Mrs. Butler had just vacated. Blood soared in his ears. 'You can really speak to those in the other world?'

'Mostly. There are some who are hard to reach, but most who have passed across I can find.'

Joseph forgot his hunger now. He could think only of one thing.

'D'you think you could do it for me?'

'You want to speak to her? After all she did?' Gerda fixed him with her green eyes.

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‘Especially after all she did.’

‘It costs money, Joseph. I cannot be doing these things for free.’

Joseph felt in the lining of his shirt to make sure that the big round coins were still there. ‘I have threepence.’

Gerda interlaced her fingers, knobbly knuckles butting up against one another, then stretched out her arms, pushing the flats of her hands towards him. Her joints cracked and she let out a sigh.

‘Threepence isn’t going to buy you much, now.’

‘I get my arns come Saturday after work,’ said Joseph. ‘I can get you more then.’

‘And my rent?’ Gerda’s green eyes seemed to come into focus more now.

‘Dunna worry.’ If he went without his bait and just ate what Gerda gave him at morning and night, he’d have the little bit extra. Besides, he could always find someone who needed an errand running. There’d be a way.

‘Will I get to speak to her?’

‘We will try, but this is not a lot of money. The cards take strength and I have done this already this evening for Mary Butler. It is not easy. If it is easy, everyone will be doing this. You have to have *Gottesgab*. You have to have the gift, and not so many have the gift.’

‘It’s all I’ve got,’ said Joseph. He slipped the three coins from the lining and held them out to her. ‘Please. You’ve got to try.’

‘You know that it cannot work every time, don’t you?’

‘I have no more than this,’ said Joseph, the coins laid flat on his outstretched hand.

‘That’ll have to do.’ Gerda picked the coins off his palm, her fingers dry as kindling against his skin, and stuffed them into a pocket hidden deep inside her skirts.

From the back of her chair, she pulled up a shawl that shimmered gold and red in the fluting candlelight. She wrapped it

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like a hood around her head and tied it loosely with a single knot. Then she produced a folded silk scarf, put it on the table and peeled it back to reveal a set of playing cards. She shuffled them briefly.

‘Sit. Here, take the cards.’

Joseph took the proffered pack.

‘Shuffle them.’

Joseph shuffled the cards as he had seen her do, only more slowly and deliberately. Even with her knotted fingers, she was far quicker than he was. They felt awkward these cards - narrower and longer than the cards that he’d used when he and his mother had played. How many years ago was that?

‘Give them back to me.’ Gerda took them off him and placed the pack gently back on the table.

She closed her eyes and held her hands out over the cards, moving them in circles, almost as though she was swimming. Then she picked the pack back up and laid three cards face down on the table with a snap.

‘Three pennies, three cards. Penny a card, past, present and future.’

Joseph wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, but nodded all the same. ‘Can you really tell, just from that?’

‘There are secrets that I bring with me from the old country,’ said Gerda. ‘This will tell us your past.’

Gerda flipped over the mottled red card and took a sharp intake of breath. ‘The Moon,’ she said.

Joseph looked at the upturned card.

The picture faced away from him, but even upside down, he could see that there was some kind of a hill, with a couple of animals either side of it. And what would have been the sky had a picture like the moon, but the moon had a face. It was the kind of moon that a child might draw.

‘Is that good?’

‘You have had bad dreams, no? Nightmares?’

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Joseph whistled. 'You can tell that just from that card?'

'The cards never lie.'

Gerda turned the next card over. 'The Nine of Swords! This too speaks to us of nightmares. Nights when you wake from your dreams, anxious, sweating. You have been troubled and something troubles you still. You see her face,' said Gerda, her green eyes staring straight into his. 'I know you see her face. I know you see her eyes.'

'They're always black as coal.'

'I know. And so she stalks you whilst you sleep. Isn't it?'

'But she says nowt.'

'This I can tell. You want her to speak, but she will say nothing. This is hard, very hard.'

'Why won't she speak?' Joseph edged forward on his chair, scraping it along the bare floor.

'Let's try to find out. Perhaps the last card will show us. The one that is your future.' Gerda turned over the third card.

Again, Joseph looked at it upside down. A young man, dressed in some old-fashioned tunic was holding up a ball. Inside the ball was a star.

'This is the Page of Pentacles.'

'What's a penta ...?'

'A kind of star. It has five points. Someone is trying to get a message to you. It is a message over money.' Gerda closed her eyes, as if to summon up the message. 'Yes. Money. I see money. More than you think.'

'When am I going to get money? At the Bone Mill!'

'I see a girl. A young girl. A girl about your own age. And then there is a man. This man is important. When you see him, he will bring you to the money. You must follow him if you want money.'

'And my mother, will this bring me to her?'

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It was as though a cloud passed in front of Gerda's face. She let out an enormous sigh and held her fingers to her temples. 'This is all I can tell you at the moment.'

'That's it? That's all I get?'

Gerda passed her hand across the table and place it on top of Joseph's. 'It is difficult. With only threepence, we can only get so far. But he will have hands.'

'But we've all got hands.'

'These are different. They are hands that bring healing. And a girl.'

'Does this man have a name?' Joseph edged forward in his seat.

'The cards cannot tell me this.' Gerda picked up the cards from the table and returned them to the pack, then wrapped them back up in the damask silk again.

'So how will I know it's him?'

'You will know him when you meet him.'

'I canna just go up to strangers in the street,' Joseph pleaded 'What does he look like? Tell me that much.'

Gerda took his hands in hers again. 'It's not always that easy, Joseph. You're young, you must have patience. I see only his shadow. But he is not far away.'

'And through him, I'll get to speak to her?'

'It's not always that simple.' Gerda let go of his hands and undid her shimmering shawl. 'You will know him when you see him. The healing hands will bring you to the money.'

'And then can we speak to her.'

'You can't speak to her through the cards, Joseph. We are getting closer. Next time bring silver, not copper.'

'And will I speak to her then?'

'You must have patience, Joseph. Some people are harder to contact than others. But I am sure that one day you will see her. Now, take my scarf and hang it up on the back of the door.'