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Opening extract from

Constable and Toop

Written by

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Prologue
The Birth of a Ghost

In her last few moments of life, as the blood gushed from the knife wound in her neck, Emily Wilkins found her thoughts drifting to her mother's death. Mrs Wilkins had lain on her deathbed for weeks without uttering a word until finally, one day, she sat up, fixed her eyes upon Emily and spoke.

'You're a good girl, ain't you, Em?'

'I try to be, Mam,' she replied.

'You deserve more than I've ever been able to get for you.'

'I've never wanted for anything,' said Emily.

Her mother shook her head. 'You never had no schooling, but you're a bright girl. I only wish I had done better by you.'

'I just want you to get well,' Emily pleaded.

'There's no chance of that now, my love,' said her mother. 'I can hear them knocking for me.'

'Who?' Emily looked up. 'There's no one knocking.'

Mrs Wilkins smiled weakly. ‘Soon I’ll have no choice but to answer. But promise me this, Em. You need to make the most of this life because who knows what lies on the other side of that door.’

‘What door, Mam?’

Her mother pointed at the blank wall beside her bed. Her smile was so full of sadness and regret that it drew yet more tears from Emily’s eyes. She wiped her face with the cloth she was using to mop her mother’s forehead.

Her mother coughed; a dry, throaty cough that sent a splatter of bloody phlegm into the palm of her hand, before she fell back and died, leaving Emily alone and orphaned.

At the time, Emily had childishly believed this final cough was her mother’s body ejecting all of its blood before dying.

She realised how very wrong she was as the red liquid now gushed from her own throat. The human body contained much more than a handful of dry blood. The murdering hands that were taking Emily’s life were covered in it.

The hands had appeared out of nowhere.

The right had closed around her throat. The left, around her mouth. Emily tasted the salty sweat of the skin as she struggled and kicked, but the hands were strong and this wasn’t the first time they had been put to such use.

The blade slid across her neck so smoothly she barely felt it cut the skin. The blood gushed out like water breaking through a dam until the murderer’s right hand closed around the wound, stopping the flow.

‘Can’t ’ave you dyin’ in the street like a dog, can we, girl?’ snarled a voice. ‘That would never do.’

The hands dragged her up the dark, cobbled alleyway.

She could hear knocking.

‘Don’t you heed that, girl,’ said the gruff voice. ‘We ain’t far now. Hang on yet.’

1
Lapsewood's Paperwork

Lapsewood dipped his pen into the pot of black ink, licked his fingers and pulled a piece of paper from the pile on his desk. In the top right-hand corner he wrote the date: 16th January 1884. His in-tray was stacked higher than ever and today's Dispatch documents had not been delivered yet. It concerned him greatly.

He didn't mind the work. Quite the contrary. In life, Lapsewood had lived to work. In death, he was no different. Work was orderly. It was structured. It was safe. It meant arriving early, sitting down at his desk and working his way through the paperwork to be completed by the end of the day.

Work was satisfying.

Except recently, there had been an unsettling amount of paperwork still left in the in-tray when the final bell tolled.

He tried staying late to get on top of it, but if old Mr Turnbull, the night watchman, found him at his desk he

would take the opportunity to recount the tale of his bloody Crimean death, while idly scratching the gaping bayonet wound through his heart.

Lapsewood tried working on Sundays, but still the paperwork grew and grew. Perhaps he was being too conscientious about his processing, taking too long over each one, but he couldn't bear the thought of speeding up at the expense of doing a good job. The Bureau was all that stood between an orderly afterlife and utter chaos, and Lapsewood's Dispatch documents were a vital cog in that great machine.

The office door opened. 'Morning, Lapsewood,' said Grunt.

'Morning,' Lapsewood responded. He didn't look up.

Grunt was new. He had been hanged at Newgate for the murder of his wife and wore a silk scarf around his neck to hide the red marks from the rope. But the soft skin around his throat had been broken during the hanging, meaning that now, with no blood left in his veins, grey fluid seeped out, collecting at the top of the scarf. Every so often, Grunt would wipe it away with a spotted kerchief from his waistcoat pocket. Lapsewood found this habit utterly unacceptable. In his less charitable moments, he secretly wished that Grunt had been guilty of his crime, thus making him ineligible for Official Ghost Status and unable to work at the Bureau.

Grunt, however, was innocent. He had been hanged for another man's crime.

'Penhaligan wants to see you,' said Grunt.

Lapsewood felt one of his headaches coming. This was not good news. Not good news at all. It had to be the paperwork. He knew what would happen. He would be called into Colonel Penhaligan's office, given a dressing down, then escorted to the Vault where he would reside until he was tried and convicted of professional incompetence.

'Did he say what it was about?' he asked.

'Nah,' said Grunt. 'He just told me to tell you to come up and see him urgently.'

'Urgently? He used the word *urgently*?'

'I think so. Might've been *immediately*. Or just *now*. It was something like that, anyway.'

'Grunt, this is important. Exactly what did he say?'

'He didn't *say* anything,' replied Grunt. 'He more bellowed . . .'

Grunt's smile suggested this was supposed to be funny.

'Bellowed?' exclaimed Lapsewood.

'I'd say it was a bellow, yes. He bellowed, "*DAMN IT. DAMN IT. DAMN IT. GRUNT, GET LAPSEWOOD UP HERE IMMEDIATELY.*"' The ghost looked pleased with himself for remembering this. 'Yes, I think that was it.'

'Did he sound angry?'

'I ain't never heard a bellow that didn't sound angry. It's the nature of a bellow, isn't it? Shouting, now that's different. My wife used to shout at me all the time but that was on account of the deafness I got in one ear. Funny thing – since being dead, I can hear perfectly well in both. It's as though the hangman's rope dislodged the wax when it snapped my neck.' He chuckled.

Lapsewood had no interest in Grunt's post-death hearing improvements. His mind was as busy as a beehive, bustling with questions, concerns, theories and fears.

Colonel Penhaligan was angry with him. It had to be the paperwork, but what did he expect Lapsewood to do? He was working as fast as he could. The Bureau needed to employ more clerks to help to clear the backlog. That's what he would say. He would demand help. He refused to be forced to do a second-rate job for the sake of speed. Hadn't it been Colonel Penhaligan himself who had praised Lapsewood's exemplary work ethic and attention to detail last Christmas? Admittedly, the colonel had consumed a substantial quantity of spirit punch that night, so who knew whether he had really meant what he said.

'Do you think I have time to walk?' asked Lapsewood.

'You'd better not,' said Grunt. 'In my experience, immediately means as soon to now as possible. Best use the Paternoster Pipe if I were you.'

Lapsewood glanced with dread at the small tube in the wall that led to the Paternoster Pipe Network. While all spirits had the ability to turn into the grey smoke-like substance known as Ether Dust, Lapsewood found the whole business thoroughly dehumanising. To quite literally disappear into a puff of smoke was another blatant reminder of his own deadness. He preferred to walk one step at a time like a man rather than whoosh about like burnt tobacco on a breezy day.

However, on this occasion he had no choice. He had

wasted enough time already. If he stood any chance of persuading Colonel Penhaligan not to dispatch him, he needed to move quickly.

Lapsewood shook Grunt's hand solemnly. It was damp.

'Mr Grunt, it's been a pleasure working with you,' he lied.

Grunt laughed. 'You look like I did when I stepped up on to those gallows.'

'That's precisely how I feel.'

More laughter. 'Didn't no one tell you? You can only die once, Lapsewood.'

2
The Body in the Coffin

Sam Toop was awoken by a hammering on the door and a voice crying out, 'Let me in! Charlie, I know you're there. Let me in!'

Charlie? he thought, half asleep. Charles was his father's name, but he had never heard anyone call him Charlie.

Rain pelted against the window. Wind rattled the frame.

'For God's sake, let me in, Charlie . . .'

Sam slipped out of bed and went to the window. Bare feet on the cold floorboards. It was the middle of the night and blowing a terrible storm outside. Who would be out in such weather? Customers never came at night. The business of funerals rarely called for urgency. The funerals of Constable and Toop were arranged as they were conducted: gracefully and calmly.

'Charlie!' yelled the voice.

Definitely not a customer. Customers only ever spoke in hushed, respectful tones. It was as though they feared

waking the corpses that were occasionally kept in the coffins in the back room.

The figure banged on the door. It occurred to Sam that maybe he was one of *Them*. But no, they didn't bang on doors. Why would they, when they could easily pass through them? Sam placed his hand over his right eye to be sure. Yes, he could still see him.

Lightning snaked across the black sky, illuminating the man's face. His eyes looked wild and desperate. Rain dripped off his crooked, broken nose. The realisation that this man was alive was of little comfort. Sam feared the living far more than the dead. Ghosts were powerless to hurt him. Their threats were empty. It was the living who could inflict pain.

A floorboard creaked and a light appeared at the base of his door. His father was up and crossing the landing, heading down the stairs and through the shop front. Sam watched the light of his lamp through the slit in the floorboards.

He could not hear what was said but he heard the door open and the man step inside, accompanied by a gust of wind that rushed through the building. A feeling in the pit of Sam's stomach kept him rooted to the spot. From the back room he heard the sound of banging. Hammer on nail. A familiar enough sound, except never before in the middle of the night. He waited until his father's footsteps came back up the stairs and had passed his room before he went back to his bed, curling up and gripping his toes to warm them.

He must have eventually fallen asleep because when he opened his eyes, the sky was light blue and there were voices downstairs. He could hear his father saying, 'I'm afraid I haven't seen a thing. It's just me and my boy here.'

'Then I'd like to speak to the boy too,' said a man's voice.

'Sam,' shouted Mr Toop. 'Please come down.'

Sam climbed out of bed, dressed quickly and went downstairs. A man dressed in black with grey pockmarked skin stood in the doorway. His suit had the look of clothing that had been smart when first put on, but was now bedraggled and damp.

'Sam, this gentleman is the law,' said Mr Toop.

'Savage,' said the man. 'Detective Inspector Savage. Some of your neighbours said they heard a hollering last night. Did you hear anything, young man?'

'I fell asleep last night and woke up just now,' said Sam. 'I don't know of anything in between.'

Sam neither knew where the lie came from nor how it was that it sprang so readily to his lips, but he sensed his father's relief upon hearing it.

'May I ask who it is you're looking for?' asked Sam's father.

'A villain by the name of Jack Toop. I noticed the name on the shop sign. There's a coincidence, I thought. You wouldn't have a relation by the name of Jack, would you, Mr Toop?'

'None that I know of,' he replied. 'But Toop is not such an uncommon surname.'

‘Nor such a common one neither. You have no brother nor uncle by that name?’

‘I was born an only child and orphaned as an infant, sir,’ said Sam’s father.

‘Then you’ve done well for yourself, Mr Toop. A shop with your name on it.’

‘I have been fortunate.’

‘Tell me about this fortune,’ said Inspector Savage.

‘As a lad, a carpenter took me under his wing and taught me the ways of his noble trade, then, as a man, I had the great honour of making the acquaintance of the man who would become my business partner: Mr Constable. A finer and more upstanding gentleman you will never meet. He made me a partner, and gave me and my boy a roof above our heads. He has been as good as a second father to Sam.’

Inspector Savage glanced around the shop at the solemn paintings that hung on the wall, the items of funeral paraphernalia on display in the glass cabinet and the statues of angels carefully arranged on the shelves. These were decorations placed to set the right tone in the shop, while subtly suggesting items that could be purchased and incorporated into each funeral. To an outsider they were, no doubt, gloomy and morbid. To Sam they had the familiarity of any ordinary domestic ornaments.

‘This Mr Constable lives here too?’ asked Inspector Savage.

‘He has his own house not far from here,’ replied Mr Toop.

‘You won’t mind if I take a look around,’ said the inspector. It was more statement than question.

‘I won’t stand in the way of the law,’ said Mr Toop.

‘You’re a wise man. Your living quarters are up there?’ Inspector Savage pointed to the staircase to one side of the shop. Mr Toop nodded and the inspector climbed the stairs up to the landing. Sam and his father listened to his heavy footsteps on the floorboards above.

‘Father . . .’ Sam began.

Mr Toop raised a finger to his lips, silencing Sam.

When Inspector Savage came back downstairs he pointed at the door that led to the back room. ‘What’s through there?’

‘That’s my workshop,’ said Mr Toop. ‘We keep the bodies there sometimes.’

‘And have you a stiff in there now?’

‘One. He’s to be buried this afternoon.’

Without invitation, Inspector Savage opened the door and entered. Sam and his father followed. Sam glanced at his father and saw the slight discolouration of fear in his eyes. There had been no body in the back room yesterday and there was no burial planned this afternoon – and yet, as they entered the room, there was indeed a coffin resting on the table, its lid nailed down.

‘Nice carpentry,’ said Inspector Savage. ‘You make this yourself, then?’

‘Yes. My partner deals with most other aspects of the business.’

‘Other aspects?’

‘The money and what have you. We always say Mr Constable is better with the living, whereas my strength is the dead.’ Mr Toop smiled at his usual joke.

Inspector Savage made no effort to return the smile. He turned to Sam. ‘Pretty gloomy place for a lad to grow up,’ he said.

‘I’ve never known any different,’ said Sam.

Inspector Savage shrugged then gestured to the coffin. ‘Who’s in there, then?’

‘Mr Grant,’ said Sam’s father.

Sam lowered his gaze. Mr Grant had been buried two days ago.

‘What kind of man was he?’ asked Inspector Savage.

‘He was the butcher.’

That, at least, was true. Sam felt Savage’s eyes upon him.

‘Open it up,’ ordered the inspector.

Sam looked at his father.

‘Now really,’ argued Mr Toop. ‘I know you have a job to do, but so do we. When someone places their dearly departed in our care they do so knowing that they are in good, capable hands.’

‘I just want to look at him.’

‘This man you’re looking for,’ said Mr Toop. ‘Tell me, what does he looks like?’

‘Like a rogue,’ said Inspector Savage sharply.

‘Have you no more detailed a description?’

‘I’ve never seen him up close,’ he admitted. ‘All I have is the name.’

‘And what crime is he charged with, this other Toop?’

'The worst there is. He murdered a copper, a good man by the name of Heale. Now, bid your son get a hammer and open it up.'

Mr Toop nodded his consent. Sam took a hammer from the shelf and began pulling out the nails one by one.

'Be careful now, son,' said Mr Toop. 'Try not to damage the wood.'

When the last nail was out Sam stood back and his father took the hammer from his hand.

Inspector Savage lifted the lid off and leaned it against the table. Lying in the coffin was the man Sam had seen from the window last night. He recognised his broken nose, his weather-worn skin, his lank hair, thinning in places and revealing an uneven skull. He was dressed in one of the cheap suits they kept for the deceased with nothing smart enough to be buried in. The man, whoever he was, lay as still as a corpse, his eyes shut. Unmoving.

'Ugly-looking fella,' said the inspector, eyeing him carefully.

'Now, please,' said Mr Toop. 'I will not stand and have you insult the dead.'

Inspector Savage picked up one of the man's hands. 'He feels cold enough to be dead. Mind you, this criminal we're looking for is also a cold man.' He turned to Sam. 'Boy, fetch me some pepper. Let us see how dead this man is.'

Sam looked at his father uncertainly.

‘Do as you’re told now,’ said Mr Toop calmly.

Sam went upstairs to the pantry and picked up a small tin of ground peppercorns. He returned with the pepper and handed the tin to Inspector Savage, who took a handful and sprinkled it liberally over the man’s face.

‘Please, Detective Inspector,’ said Mr Toop. ‘Not satisfied with insulting this poor dead man you are now seasoning him.’

Sam noticed how tightly his father was clutching the hammer. Was he contemplating attacking this man Savage? Or perhaps it was the man in the coffin who would receive the blow.

Inspector Savage stared at the body.

There was no movement.

Nothing.

He grunted and said, ‘My condolences to this butcher’s family.’

He turned around and marched out of the room and back through the shop to the door.

‘At Constable and Toop we believe in the dignity of death,’ said Mr Toop, returning the hammer to its place on the shelf and following the inspector out.

‘And I believe in the sanctity of life, Mr Toop,’ replied Inspector Savage, without turning. ‘A good day to you.’

The shop bell rang as he left.

Sam looked back at the man in the coffin.

The man opened his eyes, making Sam jump.

‘He gone?’ he said in a low, gruff voice.

Silenced by fear, Sam nodded.

'Thank God for that,' said the man. 'I . . . ah . . . ah . . . ah . . .'

The sneeze that rang out was loud enough to wake the dead themselves, and Sam only hoped that Inspector Savage was far enough away not to hear it.

3
The Beauty of Alice Biggins

First thing in the morning was the worst time to be using the Paternoster Pipe Network. The pipes were clogged up with the Ether Dust of clerks, scribes, dogsbodies, secretaries and all the other working spirits running late for work or heading off to their morning appointments.

Approaching the twenty-fifth floor where Colonel Penhaligan's office was situated, Lapsewood experienced a similar dread to that which he used to feel when his old school master, Mr Thornton, summoned him to his office. Mr Thornton had been a cruel and strict disciplinarian, who deployed a heavy wooden ruler on the backsides of his pupils, hitting them in time with each remonstrating syllable he uttered.

'You . . .' *Thwack*. 'Shall . . .' *Thwack*. 'Learn . . .' *Thwack*. 'Your Latin verbs.' *Thwack thwack-thwack thwack*. Having spent his formative years in abject fear of this ogre of a man, Lapsewood was pleased when Mr Thornton's Dispatch documents had arrived on his desk. Lapsewood

had taken his time over that document, savouring the pleasure and smiling to learn Mr Thornton's Christian name. If only he had known at the time that the man he feared above any other was called Hilary.

Lapsewood's eyes rematerialised first so he could maximise the time he spent gazing at the only good thing about being summoned to his superior's office: Colonel Penhaligan's secretary and the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Alice Biggins.

'Hello there,' she said, smiling.

Short, plump, with perfect porcelain skin and auburn hair that fell down in ringlets, Alice was everything Lapsewood looked for in a girl and everything he had failed to find in life. He had never had the courage to ask what she had died of, but whatever it was didn't show from the outside. Quite the opposite. Whenever he was in the same room, Lapsewood found himself unable to tear his eyes away from her. As a consequence, he could barely utter a word in her presence.

'You'll have to wait,' she said. 'There's one already in with him.'

Lapsewood tried to think of something to say, something clever, something witty, something wry. Anything. Nothing came to mind.

'He's in a terrible mood,' continued Alice, oblivious as usual to the inner turmoil endured by Lapsewood as a consequence of being in her company. 'He's already had two clerks and the office boy carted off to the Vault, and

it's not even nine o'clock. They all come out with faces like thunder but I tell them it's not so bad. At least they won't have to hang around this miserable place any more. Honestly, if I'd known I was going to end up working for that old sinner I'd have thought twice about accepting a job here at all.'

'You don't mean that,' said Lapsewood, with more desperation in his voice than he had intended.

Alice pushed her hair away from her face and looked at him. For a moment he panicked that he had given himself away. If there was anything more unbearable than the agony of Alice not knowing how he felt, it was the dread of her finding out. Lapsewood had never been able to cope with rejection. Better, he thought, to grasp moments like this, when he could gaze upon Alice's perfect face, than attempt to reveal his true feelings and risk humiliation.

Besides, what could he possibly hope for, anyway? The dead didn't fall in love. The dead didn't marry. The dead simply trudged on, endlessly, hopelessly, inevitably, until the day they heard the Knocking and stepped through the Unseen Door.

It was so unfair. Alice deserved more. She should have had a real life in a real house with a garden and flowers. The best Lapsewood could offer her was a squalid, windowless room down the Endless Corridor where all employees of the Bureau spent their sleepless nights, no doubt identical to her own.

'There's a Prowler in there right now,' she said, a twinge

of excitement in her voice. 'A new one . . . French fella. I heard he worked as a detective before he came here.'

'A detective?'

The door to Penhaligan's office opened and a tall, slim man stepped out, carrying himself with easy elegance. He was immaculately dressed, with a thin moustache adorning his upper lip, piercing blue eyes and angular cheekbones.

'*A* is the incorrect article,' he said in a smooth French accent. 'You should use the definite article, *the* as in Monsieur Eugène François Vidocq, *the* great detective.'

'So you worked for the police?' said Lapsewood.

'The police are mindless brutes,' replied the Frenchman. 'A detective is a gentleman of superior intellect who can detect that which goes unnoticed by the common man.'

Lapsewood didn't like the way he looked at him when he said *common*. He was even less keen on the way Alice gazed at Monsieur Vidocq, as though she were a knob of butter and he a piece of hot toast.

'Ah, Mademoiselle Biggins, is it possible you have grown even more beautiful since I last saw you?'

'Don't be daft. That was only five minutes ago.'

'And yet, I think your beauty has increased even more in that small amount of time.'

Alice giggled.

'But beautiful doesn't quite say it . . .' continued the Frenchman. 'Radiant, perhaps. Exquisite . . . desirable. How *très difficile* it is to find the word for such beauty in this barbaric language of yours.'

'Oh, Mr Vidocq, really.'

‘You may call me Eugène.’

With no blood in her body, blushing was a physical impossibility, but Alice came as close to it as any ghost could. Lapsewood felt miserable.

‘LAPSEWOOD,’ bellowed Penhaligan. ‘Are you out there?’

He would have done anything to avoid leaving Alice alone with the charming Frenchman, but he could no more avoid going through that door than any man can prevent the wheels of fate from turning.

‘Good luck, *mon ami*,’ said Monsieur Vidocq, grabbing Lapsewood’s hand and firmly shaking it. ‘I very much hope you are not . . . *pour la Vault*.’

Lapsewood didn’t like Prowlers. They thought they were so superior because they got to go on missions to the physical world, walking amongst the living, haunting and scaring in the name of the Bureau. Of course, he understood that they were necessary, just as Enforcers were needed to bring Rogue ghosts into line. But where would any of them be without the paperwork, supplied, completed and diligently duplicated by the clerks?

‘LAPSEWOOD, GET IN HERE NOW OR I’LL HAVE YOU WHISKED TO THE VAULT SO FAST YOUR FEET WON’T TOUCH THE GROUND,’ bellowed Penhaligan.

A last glance at Alice’s pretty face and Lapsewood stepped inside the office.

4
Uncle Jack

Sam had hated his time at school, where the other boys relished taunting him every day. They would push him into walls to see whether he would pass through, failing to understand that being able to see ghosts was not the same as being one.

'You must learn to ignore them,' his father had said.

'How can I ignore them when they push me into walls?' Sam had responded.

'I mean the spirits, son. You must learn to look through them; try not to let others know you can see them.'

Easy for him to say. He wasn't plagued by this disease. Once, Sam even tried wearing a patch over his right eye to hide the visions, but that drew yet more ridicule from the other children. It was a relief when, aged thirteen, he could stop going altogether. It was easier to avoid the existence of the living than ignore the presence of the dead.

Sam sprinkled a pinch more pepper into the soup and

gave it another stir. He lifted the ladle and tasted it. It definitely still needed something.

'Your son cooks like a woman, Charlie,' said Jack. 'All tastin' and no dishin'. Come on now, enough of your delayin', boy. This ain't no royal banquet. Give your uncle Jack some of that.'

'It's not ready yet,' said Sam.

'It's ready enough for me. I don't like my cooking too fussy and I don't trust all them little pots you keep going to. I like to know what's in my food. It's too easy to drop in something that wouldn't agree with me, something along the arsenic line.'

'Strangely, we don't keep arsenic in the kitchen,' replied Sam. He slammed a bowl in front of his uncle and dished a spoonful into it, carelessly splashing it on the table.

'Mind what you're doing now, lad,' said Jack. 'There's no point wastin' it, is there?'

Sam grabbed a cloth and sullenly wiped up the spilt liquid.

Uncle Jack tasted a spoonful. 'Tastes like warm pond water,' he said, gulping it down. 'Ain't you got no meat?'

'The butchers has been shut since Mr Grant died,' said Sam.

Uncle Jack shrugged. 'He looks like his mother, Charlie,' he said. 'Where is she? Not upped and left you, I hope.'

Mr Toop turned to Sam. 'Sam, you can go. Your uncle Jack will be leaving after his soup.'

'Stay where you are,' ordered Jack, a little fire burning in his eyes. 'I only asked after Liza.'

‘My mother’s dead,’ said Sam.

‘That’s a pity. She was a sweet girl,’ said Jack. ‘What took her?’

‘Liza died of a fever,’ said Mr Toop. ‘Sam was still an infant.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Jack.

‘I think you should leave.’

‘Charlie,’ moaned Jack. ‘We’re still blood, ain’t we? You’re all I’ve got.’

‘Blood is one thing you never seem short of,’ snapped Mr Toop.

‘You don’t want to go believin’ everything they say. These official types, ’alf of them are more corrupt than the criminals they’re after.’ Uncle Jack shovelled another spoonful of soup into his mouth.

‘Murdering a policeman is what he said,’ said Sam’s father. ‘I’d be relieved to hear you saying you’ve played no part in that, Jack.’

Jack smiled. ‘Oh, it’s so black and white for you, ain’t it. Livin’ up here in the hills, away from the smoke. With your clerks and your gentry takin’ the train up to London by day then back here before the city comes to life. The true London is lit by gas, not by sunlight. Down there, nothing’s black nor white. It’s all just grey.’

‘Murder’s murder,’ said Mr Toop.

‘Some people don’t deserve life,’ said Jack, spitting soup across the table.

‘I don’t want my son subjected to any more of this. You’ll leave now if you know what’s good for you.’

Sam had never heard his father speak so sternly.

'Please, Charlie,' whined Jack. 'They'll string me up if they catch me. You know they will. So I've done wrong. I admit it. But I had my reasons. And someone's done me over. I know they have.'

'I'm glad to hear you had a good reason to take another man's life,' said Mr Toop angrily.

'Things 'ave changed since we were lads,' said Jack.

'You'll speak no more of that,' interrupted Mr Toop.

'No, I suppose you've forgotten, ain't you?' replied his brother.

'You listening to this?' said Jack, addressing Sam. 'Your father would throw his own flesh and blood to the wolves. His own flesh and blood.'

Sam said nothing.

'If they found you here we'd all hang for harbouring a criminal,' said Mr Toop.

'As it is, you'd rather it was just me that felt the squeeze of the 'angman's rope, wouldn't you?' replied his brother.

'Two nights, Jack,' conceded Mr Toop.

'A week. It'll give time for the heat to die down,' said Jack. 'After all, as I see it, you still owe me.'

Mr Toop glowered at his brother. 'I'll have to ask Mr Constable, and you won't take one step outside. You don't even come downstairs. You're as silent as a mouse then you leave and you never come back. After that, we're no longer brothers. And you'll leave the boy alone as well.'

The shop bell rang and Jack shot up from his seat like a startled rabbit.

‘That will be Mr Constable now,’ said Mr Toop. ‘Stay here.’

‘You were working for him when I last saw you,’ said Jack. ‘How did you wheedle your way into his business then?’

‘He made me partner.’

‘He’ll turn me in if he knows about me.’

‘No, he won’t.’

‘It’ll be in his interests not to.’ Jack spoke in a threatening whisper.

Sam’s father left the room, leaving Sam alone with his uncle.

‘Any more of that soup, boy?’ Jack held the bowl up for him to take.

‘I thought you didn’t like it.’

‘Sensitive soul, ain’t you? Funny you should act so much like a woman when you’ve been brought up entirely by men.’

As Sam took the bowl he saw the ghost of a young woman in a nightgown step through the wall and fall to her knees, sobbing loudly. ‘Oh, I’ve found you. Please, you must help me. How could he do it? How could he? With my own sister too? He said he’d be mine forever and now he’s with her,’ she wailed.

Sam glanced at his uncle. He had no desire to reveal his gift to him. He tried to ignore the ghost but she continued to go on. ‘They say you’re a Talker. You can hear and see us. They say you’ll help us. Please help me. I must tell my Tom not to marry her.’

Sam disliked the maudlers and the mopers most of all, always coming to him, begging for help. At least this one was pretty. A few years older than Sam, twenty perhaps, but even in death he could see she had been a beauty.

He shifted his eyes to indicate that he would speak with her outside, then poured a ladleful of soup into the bowl and placed it back in front of his uncle.

'You shouldn't listen to your old man,' said Uncle Jack. 'We used to be as thick as thieves, me and him. I don't know what he's said about me before, but every story has two sides. Most have more.'

'He's never mentioned you,' replied Sam honestly.

Jack swallowed a mouthful of soup. 'This tastes better now, lad. You'll make someone a good wife some day.' He laughed. 'Oh, there you go again with your sulky looks. It was a joke.'

The lady in the nightdress sniffed.

'And pay no attention to her, neither,' added Jack in a hushed voice. 'I'll bet her chap's better off with the sister than with that moaning old trout.'