

Time of Grace

Robyn Annear

© Robyn Annear 2008

For David & Rosie

*...it is more in our power (than it is
commonly believ'd) to foften what ever
ills are founded or augmented by Fancy.
Strictly fpeaking, there is but one real
evil: I mean acute pain. All other
Complaints are so confiderably
diminifh'd by Time that it is plain the
Greife is owing to our Paffion, fince the
fenfation of it vanifhes when that is
over.*

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu
to her daughter, 1749

A Note to Pedants

Fiction, fik'shun, *n.* a feigned or false story: a falsehood: romance: the novel, story-telling as a branch of literature: a supposition of law that a thing is true, which is either certainly not true, or at least is as probably false as true.

There was no bridge across the railyards at Exhibition Street in 1893. The author has put one there for her characters' convenience.

Other historical particulars depicted herein may likewise not be accurate – which is to say, true. On the other hand, they may be. If that kind of thing bothers you, the author suggests that you put down this book and walk away.

Oh, and get a life.

Chapter 1

Monday, September 4th

‘Keep up, Moody!’ The springy-haired girl darted from kitchen range to table with a hot pan. Behind her scabbled a young man on hands and knees, not in supplication as your first glance might suggest but mopping at, chasing, the hem of his sister’s skirt. Mashing the contents of the pan, she threw an exasperated look back at him. ‘Oh, not with the dish-rag, Moody!’ She dropped the tin spoon and swished her skirt out of his reach. ‘An *old* rag, I said.’

In contradiction of his name though, Moody Vivo was imperturbable. He just reclaimed a handful of skirt hem and went on dabbing, shuffling after Lil as she swept back to the stove.

‘It’s a good thing Poppa’s given up sleuthing,’ he said, ‘or he’d have you pinned for a murder, for sure. What were you doing down the back of Mehegan’s, anyway?’

‘I wasn’t anywhere near the place,’ Lil protested, clattering pan and spoon. (What *was* she cooking?) ‘The gutter was running blood for a hundred yards downhill of his yard. I draggled in it when I crossed the Lane, didn’t notice till it was too late.’ She half-turned. ‘Is it coming clean?’

‘Mmm. Just keep still a minute.’ He gave a concerted scrub to a smear on the moss-coloured cloth.

‘What do you mean, Poppa’s given up sleuthing?’ said Lil, harking back. ‘He’s a detective still.’

Moody snorted. 'Puzzling over blotted envelopes? I don't call that detective work. He's no better than a glorified postal-clerk.'

'You sound just like Uncle O,' Lil said. Then, over her shoulder, 'Are you nearly done back there? I want to move.'

'Move then. I'll follow.' Lil and the pan went back to the table. 'What's for tea, anyway?'

'Monday night - the usual.'

Moody followed the recipe with his ears: a scrape at the salt cellar, a grating of nutmeg, pepper in a flurry, the sucking sound - twice - of a spoon in the mustard pot. 'A bit brave on the mustard, aren't you?'

'Same as always,' Lil replied, tartly, 'and I never hear you complain.'

Both worked for a minute in kitchenly silence. Then, 'Ever see Frank Leeming?' asked Moody, in a tone falsely light, like a pulled punch.

A hesitation marked Lil's intake of breath before she answered, a curt 'No' - a conversational dead-end if you'd ever heard one.

But Moody, imperturbable Moody, went on. 'He was in the shop the other week. Looked as if he'd come up in the world. Half a dozen self-laundering collars, he bought, and a pair of gloves - second-best kid.'

Lil gave a hard little laugh. 'Second-best.'

Moody had unbloodied her skirt and was sitting back on his haunches, still idly swabbing at the hem with the wrong rag. 'He asked after you, and he said...'

'Don't!' snapped Lil, and she jerked the wet tail of her skirt from her brother's grasp. Shooting him a look and seeing he was about to say more, she said, half-pleading, 'Just don't.'

Moody got to his feet. 'Well, I'm done,' he said in a hearty voice. 'We've saved your mousseline-de-laine, but that petticoat'll need a proper soaking.'

‘Thank you, Mood.’ Lil gave him a weak smile. ‘Now nip down the yard, see if Poppa’s coming, while I set the table. Tea’s ready,’ she said, ‘and the old man’s late.’ That made her brother grin.



The old man wasn’t very late tonight, but the tea was more than ready – congealed in its pan on the hob – by the time they got to eat. Henry too had blundered into the butcher Mehegan’s blood drain and arrived home with his trouser cuffs splashed. His ox-blood brogues, being close in shade to what he’d stepped in, were hardly marked. Moody gave them a polish anyway, along with his own and Lil’s boots, after tea.

The three of them sat out under the kitchen verandah, Moody on the step with the shoes fanned around him. Henry smoked his evening pipe and Lil, closest to the lamp, stoned raisins for the next night’s pudding, then made a cigarette for her and her brother to share.

A chill, clear-skied night, it felt like and was the start of spring. From the bottom of the next-door yard came the sound of pigeons shifting in their cote, and beyond that hotel yammers and dogs, trains, trams, an occasional cab. Not many folk out tonight. Still too much like winter. And it was a Monday.

‘...a 51-inch waist – that’s girdled – and he says, “I’ll try one like this...”’ Moody had none of the discretion you’d expect in a shopman. (Actually, very few shopmen had.) A draper’s assistant was privy to the vain and ridiculous foibles of people who’d pass as sensible in public life or the street, and there was nothing Moody liked better, after hours, than to share his day’s observations. It was that prospect, he said, that sustained him through long days serving those who reckoned themselves his betters. Today he’d finished at tea-time, four o’clock. Otherwise he stayed on until closing-time: seven at the earliest, or whenever the last idling customer left.

Henry Vivo fancied himself the most discreet of men and at Moody's more scandalous disclosures would murmur a mildly reproving, 'Now...' But in truth he admired his son's cleverness and sociability. Nor was he as averse to loose talk as he liked to pretend. If challenged on the point, he'd doubtless have defended the value of gossip as a tool in the detective's kit - provided, of course, it was treated with the right sort (that is, Henry's own sort) of scepticism.

As much from inclination as professional discretion, Henry rarely spoke about his work. In fact, he didn't speak much at all, about anything. Like his son, it was in his nature to be observant - only quietly so. Most of the time Henry kept his observations, and his thoughts, to himself.

But tonight, once Moody had done laying bare his customers' peccadilloes, Henry became, by his standards, something like expansive. He'd been late home, he said, because Pettit had detained him. Mr Edgar Pettit, that was, whose basket works was a short way back along the Lane. Hazed about with wicker motes and smelling like old pastry, the works shared blame with Burston's malthouse for the extreme dustiness of the neighbourhood.

'He had a letter to show me,' said Henry. 'Rather a curiosity: the kind of thing you'd expect to see in a museum.'

'Mr Pettit had found it somewhere?' Lil was doubtless thinking it might have turned up in the pages of an old book or amongst family papers. You heard of such things.

'That's what's strange,' said her father. 'It was delivered to his house today. He found it on the front doorstep after he closed up.' Pettit lived in a cul-de-sac off the Lane, just by his works. 'Still sealed, it was. Is. Pettit didn't like to open it, since it wasn't addressed to him.'

'Dead-letter business then, by the sound of it?' Lil heard the smart-aleckiness in Moody's tone and, passing him the cigarette just then, deliberately tapped ash on his trousers,

which made him jump. But Henry seemed to notice neither the sarcasm nor its rebuke.

‘Well, no, it seems not to be one of ours. There was no stamp, no postmark that I recognised.’

‘Ah then, non-payment of postage! *That’s* a job for the post-office detective.’

Henry didn’t miss the mockery this time. He ground the pipe-end between his teeth and said nothing.

‘Who *was* it addressed to, Poppa?’ Lil knew the signs.

Sure enough, her father’s reply was gruff. ‘No one I’ve heard of.’

‘An old tenant, perhaps?’

‘Pettit says not, and he’s been there since before the cottages went up.’

‘But it was addressed to Carson’s cottages?’

‘No,’ said Henry, then, ‘It’ll be a prank, I daresay,’ and to signal an end to the matter he knocked out his pipe on the verandah post and stretched his legs.

‘But you’ll look into it?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ Henry’s voice was flat as he sealed the tobacco pouch and took up his clean shoes. Then he said what he always said, just as if they were fellow lodgers instead of his family: ‘I’ll say good night.’



The clock on the kitchen mantel made it twenty minutes to nine. Subtract the quarter-hour it gained each day and you’d have close to the right time. Henry retired early, yes; but not to bed. It would be near midnight before he put out his lamp. A thrifty man in most respects, he never grudged the price of oil or a candle to light his solitude.

Henry Vivo’s windowless room held an iron-framed bed, demi-robe and dresser, tin trunk, bookshelf, desk and chair – enough to make it crowded. Behind the door hung an old plaid coat and a woollen cap, matching only in their

shabbiness. Henry put these on now, turning up the coat collar. It was chilly in this room that never saw sun. Seated at his desk, Henry leant in to the lamp's warm glow and, like an epicure squaring up to a meal, contemplated Pettit's letter.

The wrapper – for its covering wasn't properly an envelope – was of coarse-grained, creamy parchment, sealed with wax. It was addressed in the manner of a century past or more, the spiky hand formed (if Henry knew anything) by quill rather than nib. Yet the ink looked fresh, the paper unscuffed, its creased edges springy, the wax glossy and uncracked. It might have been sealed and sent a day ago,

To Rob^t Winterboar

Print-feller & ftationer

Tunney lane

Henry knew the city and was certain – pretty certain – there was no Tunney lane in it. Yet when Pettit, handing him the letter, had said, 'Tunney lane, d'you know it?' the name had rung familiar. Tunney? No one came to mind: no pushing shopkeeper or capitalist who might lately have put his name to a right-of-way. But then swagger of that sort wasn't nearly so much in evidence just now. Lately, uncertainty overshadowed the city. Business was practically at a standstill and the ten-storey temples of commerce were half-empty, their former tenants (building societies and land agents by the dozen) listed as 'in liquidation'.

Henry turned the letter over and angled it nearer the light. As he'd told Lil and Moody, it wasn't 'one of ours': it bore no stamp, nor a postmark that he recognised. But there *were* postmarks, two of them, above the seal on the wrapper's folded flap. One was a poor impression. The words POST PAID formed two sides of a triangle, the third (or, properly, first) side being too faint to distinguish. Within the triangle was a letter T above *something-R* – the preceding letter or digit wasn't clear. The other postmark was perfectly legible.

Circular, it had at its centre a number 9, with O’CLOCK forming a semi-circle above, and the letter G below.

Reaching past the lamp, Henry drew into its beam a rectangular tin: his philately kit. Among its contents was a magnifying glass, which (first brushing an eyelash off the lens) he trained on the difficult postmark. With its aid, he could make out a Y near the apex of the triangle – the final letter of the word that ought to have formed the third side. And preceding that R in the centre, Henry could *just* discern the ghost of two horizontal strokes. Of course. It ought to read FR, postmark-ese for Friday.

With Pettit’s letter propped against his philately tin, Henry sat back and squinted at the whereabouts of that missing word: —Y. Surely it was PENNY. PENNY POST PAID. But did that fit? Nowadays, of course, the penny post was practically universal (*would* be, but for the intransigence of the colonial postmasters-general); but its origin in England, to Henry’s best knowledge, corresponded with the issue of the first postage stamp, in 1840. There was no Penny Black on the letter before him, nor – Henry checked for a cat’s-tongue abrasion at the top right corner – nor had some fellow philatelist got there before him. So then, penny post but no Penny Black. Henry’s copy of Roxon’s *All-in Manual of Philately* was absent from its usual place: he’d lent it to Benforge last week. No matter. Henry replaced the lid of his philately tin. He would ask Carr in the morning. On the subject of the postal service, there was nothing Aloysius Carr didn’t know.



‘Macaroni. Cloves. Oh, and lemons. There’s not one left on the tree. Silly to plant it so close to the back fence,’ Lil grumbled, not for the first time. She and Moody were making a list for Mrs Hustler, their three-and-a-half-day housekeeper. Three days it was, properly, plus she called Monday mornings for their washing, which made another half. ‘Anything else?’

‘A nice lump of hard cheese,’ said Moody with relish. ‘The smelly sort. Then we can have cheese straws to go with Wednesday’s soup.’ He looked across at Lil’s list. ‘You’ve just written “cheese”. Go on, put “smelly”. Otherwise she’ll get that awful waxy stuff. Might as well eat tallow.’

Lil added (*sm.*). ‘That’s no good,’ said Moody. ‘She’ll think it means “small”. Here,’ and he grabbed the pencil, showering the list and his sister with dish-water.

‘Watch out, you galoot!’

Moody managed only to poke a hole through the wet paper with the pencil-lead. ‘Not to worry,’ he said, pegging the list over the range to dry on the line meant for tea towels. ‘That’s the shopping list done.’ He wrung out the dish cloth. ‘What else?’

‘Just the pudding. So leave me the washing water; I’ll be needing it yet.’ Lil’s exasperation with Moody was never more than short-lived and, for his part, he shrugged off her flares of temper.

‘I’ll read while you pudding-ize,’ and he spread the evening’s *Herald* across one end of the kitchen table while his sister worked up a duff at the other. Mrs Hustler was a fair enough savoury cook, but a leaden hand when it came to puddings and cakes and such. She was happy for Lil to take charge of the sweets department, taking it as a proof of Miss Vivo’s feminine inclinations and that, after all, there was no denying the proper order of things.

‘Oho!’ crowed Moody. Then he dropped his voice. ‘Here’s more about the naughty Mrs Wilson. And Poppa never said a word.’

‘As if he would.’ Lil gave the sieve a shake, spicing the air with its contents. ‘Go on. What’s she done now?’

Moody read: ‘*An important decision under the Post Office Statute was given by Mr Justice Hood this morning. A woman named Annie Wilson had been prosecuted for a breach of the statute*

in having put into the Post Office a letter of an extremely objectionable character.'

'Again?'

'Hold on.' Moody was reading ahead. 'No, same old case, apparently. Ah... Remember she appealed the conviction, got it thrown out on the grounds that she didn't actually post the letter herself?'

'Even though Poppa proved she'd written it.'

'That's right. Well, listen – *Mr Justice Hood did not agree with the judge that proof of actual posting was necessary to constitute the offence. He had no doubt that the intention of the Legislation was to prevent the Post Office being used for dissemination of indecent literature. If it were necessary to prove that a person put in a letter with her own hand, a malicious person could post a letter with perfect impunity and writings of the most infamous character might be sent by handing them to a child to post. His Honour was consequently of opinion that the conviction was improperly quashed.'*

'Does it mention Poppa?'

'No, but I expect he's pleased. He was cranky enough after the appeal.'

Were it not for Moody and the newspapers, Lil would never have heard of Annie Wilson's transgression of the Post Office Act or any such thing as an indecent letter. Lil set dozens of letters in type each day, and not one of them approached indecency. Some – letters of complaint or demanding payment – might be deemed objectionable by their recipients. But how could a letter be indecent? Photographs, books, yes; but a letter? It made you wonder about the things Henry saw and handled in the course of his work.

'What about the tunnel, I wonder? Will they shut it off, do you suppose, while she's in gaol?'

'Oh, I doubt it,' replied Moody, in the tone of a man-who-knows.

Annie Wilson, besides being perpetrator of an indecent letter – Henry had proven it by graphology – was proprietress of Boccaccio House, a bordello linked (so common knowledge had it) by subterranean tunnel and telephone wires direct to the houses of parliament. The wonder surely was that the woman had recourse to use the public mails at all. As to what Mrs Wilson had written, and to whom, Moody had asked their father, but to no avail. Privity to such salacious particulars, were his father inclined to divulge them, could, in Moody's view, be the only saving merit of Henry's unglamorous billet at the GPO.

The table jumped as Lil heaved the sticky batter round the basin. Steadying the lamp, Moody read on: about the case of the kissing dentist, the 'Axe Brigade' robbers in court, a child's body found in a backyard grave. Then the pudding was in its cloth, the basin washed, and the shopping list restored to legibility.

It was just after ten by the clock. Lil took care of her petticoat, leaving Moody to fix down the fire for the night and swaddle hot bricks for their beds. He was bent over the paper again when she returned. Lil dropped a good-night kiss on the crown of her brother's dark head and he reached back to ruffle her skirt but kept on reading, so that for a moment she thought he'd forgotten. As she drew the door shut behind her, though, she heard him. Same as always: something between a gentle taunt and a benediction, his tone low and light, only half meant for her hearing.

'I wonder where Mrs Wood's sleeping tonight.'



It was eight years since their mother ran off with the woodman. Henry never spoke of her, but it had suited Lil and Moody's younger selves to make light of Marcella's flit, the incognita 'Mrs Wood' emboldening them to do so even with their father in the room. Marcella was last heard of in a

misspelt letter from Yass – evidently dictated to her lover, a bequipped young wood-carter – three weeks after her leaving. Beyond that, all was conjecture. There had come a time when Lil refused to play along, since when the blithe spirit had gone out of ‘Mrs Wood’. Now she survived in Moody’s nightly evocation, nowhere else.

The spirit of the real Marcella, though, was always with them. ‘Tea’s ready and the old man’s late’ – that was one of hers, as was Moody’s sass and the smoke-rings Lil blew and the name they called their father. After all... ‘Poppa’ – it wasn’t really Henry, was it? But it’s what Marcella had called *her* father; and who was it chirruped to the infant Moody and Lil, ‘Where’s Poppa?’, or told them to ‘scoot along and fetch Poppa’ from the station, or crooned that they were ‘Poppa’s angels’? Henry would’ve preferred ‘Father’ or even ‘Papa’; but he’d indulged Marcella – in this as in all things – and answered to ‘Poppa’. Besides, she took to calling him the same and, though it would have shamed him to admit it, he’d been glad. It was an improvement on ‘Enry’.

Lil was, she knew, the living spit of her mother. Only more... contained. Like Marcella with the lid screwed tight. For in Lil were commingled her mother’s looks and her father’s deep sense of reserve. The curls that Marcella, in defiance of fashion, had always worn unharnessed, on Lil were held fast – or nearly so – by a wrangle of pins and skewers. So like her mother was Lil, in face and in figure, that people who’d known Marcella would catch their breath on seeing the grown girl for the first time. But they’d realise their mistake in an instant, for here was the impossible: Marcella subdued, stiffened, even stern. It must be, it was, the daughter. As for a likeness beneath the skin, no one but Lil could have guessed at that.

She let down her hair in readiness for bed, kneading her scalp where the pins had been biting all day. Then she rubbed

in a little rosemary oil and applied the usual hundred-and-eighty strokes of the brush. (Here again was her mother's influence, Marcella having lacked the patience for the regulation two hundred.) The long mirror that stood between wardrobe and dressing-table showed Lil, as mirrors do, practically nothing of herself: only a girl in a nightshift, with a nimbus of hair the colour of strong tea, and eyebrows you couldn't ignore – one of which lifted involuntarily as Lil met her own eye in the mirror. 'I suppose you think you know me?' Addressing her bedtime self, the Lil that didn't exist outside this room, her lips moved, but the words stayed under her breath.

Actually, Lil was not a *girl* in a nightshift, but a young woman. And not so very young at that: she'd soon be twenty-four. It would be fair to say that Lil's girlhood had ended on the day her mother left. Moody, on the other hand, was still a boy, for all that he was the elder of the two. They were what was called 'Irish twins', born the same year: Moody in January, Lil in December.

Lying in the dark, Lil heard her brother's door close. There wasn't a sound from Henry's room, though he'd still be reading – Scott or Rider Haggard or his precious Meredith.



On this occasion, Henry's late-night reading matter ran to a recent number of *The Graphologist* and Wenn's monograph on writing instruments. With the help of the magnifying glass, he'd identified the dip-marks – the junctures at which the writer of Pettit's letter had broken off to dip his pen – and their intervals favoured Henry's hunch towards quill over steel nib. A grey goose feather fanned the blotter and Henry was dribbling into his inkwell, there being (as any schoolboy knows) nothing like a gob of spit to refresh one's ink and make it glide like satin. Not quite like satin this time though, for the quill Henry had cut was a less than perfect job, with a

result alternately blotched and scratchy. Still, he was a novice and the fat-barrelled goose quill far from ideal.

He capped the ink, cleaned the pen, and tidied his desktop, squaring up the blotter. Then he turned down the lamp and sat for a long time, quite still and thinking.

In their rooms either side of Henry's his children slept: Moody bunched up against the cold; Lil dreaming, her typist fingers twitching on the pillow beside Marcella's perfect nose.

Chapter 2

Tuesday, September 5th

Lil's bedroom window faced east and on a morning like this the sun cresting Captain Carmaghan's paddock lit on her toffee sateen bedspread just as she was set to rise. She lay doggo a while before Henry's rap on her door and his 'Morning, Lil!' – a statement, it was, not a greeting.

'Righto, Poppa,' she croaked.

Moody, since his father insisted on receiving an intelligible reply to his reveille, had devised a roster of nonsensical responses. There was 'Put the cat out' (they had no cat), 'Toast me a spatchcock', and one about lumpy porridge. Moody had given 'Run out the hoses!' an occasional sounding until one morning old Mr Tipper next door took fright. He'd banged on the party wall with his stick – 'Where's the fire?' – and next thing he was out in the street in his nightgown. You forgot how thin the walls were in these old cottage pairs.

After a visit down the yard (oh, it was brisk out – frosty, almost), Lil took less than ten minutes to dress. She wasn't inclined to linger in her icy room, so she finished her hair, with Moody's help, in front of the kitchen range. Henry had fired it up before setting off on his morning constitutional. And here he was back, with a fistful of duck quills and his walking boots soaked with dew.

'Got away, did it?' Moody spoke through a mouthful of hairpins.

‘Eh?’

‘That fowl you were chasing. Pity. I fancy one of Mrs Hustler’s *ragôuts*. With peas.’ Moody smacked his lips and the pins fell out.

‘Wrong season for peas, Mood,’ said Lil.

Henry grunted and left them to it.

‘Right season for duck, though.’ Moody licked his fingertips and smoothed the hair at his sister’s temples. ‘There,’ he said, surveying his work, ‘you’re done.’ He held her stubby chin between his thumb and forefinger a moment longer, frowning. ‘Those eyebrows need attention.’

Lil shook free, gathered up her hair-things. ‘Tonight?’

‘If I’m home in time.’

Henry reappeared with his wet boots and damp socks for drying by the stove, and the three of them settled down to breakfast. Moody ascertained (not that he really cared) that the feathers were for use in a graphological experiment. He’d likely be late home tonight, he announced, as they were expecting a big delivery of fancy stuffs off the *Viscount Scuton*. Any other sister would have jumped at the news: ‘Oh Moody, be sure and keep your eye out for anything I might like.’ But Lil, engrossed in a hardboiled egg, let it pass unremarked. Her brother, in any case, knew her tastes better than she did – at least, where apparel was concerned – and could be relied upon always to spot the very thing that would suit her: a lush green kerry-silk to set off her eyes, or a fine wool crepe that’d flow like warm treacle on a quick, lean figure like Lil’s.

The kitchen clock showed the proper time, Henry having set it right first thing. So closely did he watch the clock, or so far was he attuned to time’s passing, that – today, as every day of the working week – when he blew the crumbs from his moustache and pushed back his chair to rise, the clock’s two hands overlaid one another exactly, at 21½ minutes to eight. He was dressed for the street and out the back gate before the

quarter-hour. Lil did the daughterly thing: followed him to the door, dusting the shoulders of his coat.

‘Bye, Poppa.’

A half turn of the head and a nudge of his hat, that was Henry’s farewell. That, and the look he cast back from the gate, a look that Lil missed, turning indoors, but which didn’t miss her. As he let go the latch, Henry sought a last, sustaining sight of his daughter and allowed himself a smile. At least, the unclasp of his features would have passed for a smile had any one seen it; but nobody did. Circumspect in all things was Henry Vivo.



Stalbridge Chambers was one of those boomtime buildings half-emptied by the bust. In Chancery lane, it stood at almost the highest point in the city. To the north, its windows gave cut-short views of buildings – seven-storeyed, stuccoed – like itself. Westward were the hulking stores of the mercantile district, beyond them the railyards, swamp, ships, smokestacks. That was the direction the city’s weather came from, most of it, and her fifth-floor, west-facing window made Lil an oracle. ‘There’s rain coming,’ she’d tell her clients, or Henry when they met at day’s end. So lowly sited was the General Post Office that *its* occupants’ first intimation of rain might be the transformation of the street outside into a torrent boisterous enough to knock a draught horse off its legs.

Lil raised her window-blind. No rain in sight this morning; just clear, bleached sky. It would’ve been cold at Bendigo: that thought occurred, on a crisp morning, to any Melburnian who’d spent time in the inland city, where dawn temperatures well below zero were common. Never had Lil suffered from chilblains like she had at Bendigo, the one winter she’d passed there. Her finger-joints stung at the memory. She gave them a rub as she eased off her street-gloves, swapping them for an

indoor pair, old ones with the finger-ends nipped off to the knuckle.

Until mid-afternoon, when the sun swung round, Lil would need gaslight to work by. The tall buildings facing made a crevasse of the narrow street, gloomy except late and early, or in summer when the sun rode high. Lil was lucky, she knew, to have an office on this side of the street; those opposite would be in gloom or gaslight the whole day long. She pulled the dust-cloths from the typewriter and duplicating machine, taking hold of a corner and swirling each cloth clear with a bullfighter's flourish, a trick she improved on each day. The cloths were of polished cotton twill, turquoise in colour and chosen by Moody. Lil hung them, folded, over the back of the genteely shabby miner's couch that, with a chest-high cupboard, a desk and two upright chairs, furnished the business premises of 'Miss Liliás Vivo, Type Writer' – as announced by the stencilled legend on the door.

Nothing urgent lay in the wire desk tray, so she began, as she did most days, with Mr Pontefract's novel. Execrable, it was, but Lil treated it as a limbering-up exercise, setting her on her mettle for the working day. *Correct Punctuation and Paragraphing Guaranteed*, said her advertisements, and the incessant gush of Mr Pontefract's 'Weeping Willow' surely put that guarantee to the test. He could spell all right – words like *noctivagous* and *sophrosyne* and *beauté du diable*, the more sublime and overheated the better – but he rarely paused for a comma and was squanderous with exclamation points. Every Friday morning he'd deliver fresh pages of babbling, inky prose for Lil to break to the harness. But even fitted with stoppages, the tale of Willow Westermain, the novel's unplucky heroine, careered from one drab misfortune to the next. Three pages of it a day were as much as Lil could stomach.

That said, it wasn't like Lil to condemn her clients' faulty wordsmithing. Much of the satisfaction to be had in her line of work derived, after all, from the sense of mastery at deciphering the cockroach scrabblings of an untidy hand, and superiority at knowing better than her clients how to present themselves – on paper, at any rate – to the world. The pact was unspoken: Lil knew, and they knew she knew, their deficiencies. Her fee bought the client not just neatness and accuracy, but felicitousness passed off as his own. Lil's business, you could say, was deception.

Winding this morning's third page of 'Weeping Willow' from her machine, Lil feathered the carbon paper free and added the typed page and its carbon copy, face down, to their respective stacks. Then, laying a leaf of pink bank between the two, she placed one stack on the other and the handwritten pages on top, re-wrapped the whole in brown paper and, with an expression of distaste, stuck the parcel away, slamming the desk's bottom drawer with a kick. Lost in a blizzard – whatever next?

Next for Lil was stuff of a more mundane but pleasurable sort. There was a balance sheet for Nance & Crewell and a concert program for Reverend Keighley at St James's. There was a bootmaker's stocklist, an engineer's report on a road-cutting, a sheaf of letters for a solicitor downstairs, and a Sailors' Home circular that would require duplication. At ten-thirty Mr Whelk, the building's caretaker, paid his regular morning call with hot water for tea-making and tattle from the floors below. This being the first week of the month, that amounted to a roll-call of bolters – tenants who'd done a flit when the rent fell due.

'Mr Branch... well, I call that no surprise.' The caretaker, always checking, peered at the gaslight mantle while Lil fetched out her tea things. 'Half a dozen callers a week, at

best. Wouldn't've paid for a tin of corn-plasters, never mind the rent.'

Lil was unsorry to hear of the chiropodist's departure. Mr Branch had been a moist-eyed yearner, a hallway-skulker. She had typed his schedule of fees when he first came to Stalbridge Chambers, and he'd insisted on showing her his plaster models of bad feet: bunions, hammer toes - awful. Once, on the stairs, he'd asked her shoe size.

Also discovered gone was Miss Flanner, a typist from whose second-floor office the clatter of typewriting had rarely been heard. Mr Whelk, giving Lil's door-glass a wipe, reckoned it must've been at least a week since the silent typist left. When he made use of his skeleton key last evening, he'd found a fine film of dust over everything and, in the typewriter, a note: 'Unable to pay.' It wasn't just the rent she'd meant; the machine and furnishings were hired, according to paperwork left behind.

Standing by the open cupboard, drinking her tea, Lil said nothing. She and Miss Flanner had spoken just once, besides exchanging nods in passing. With their occupation in common and Miss Flanner's family away off in Gippsland, they might have - but hadn't - been friends. Lil had seen the other typist on the Yarra Bank one Sunday, rather deshabelle and clinging to the arm of a man with long hair and his hat cocked back. Not long after, Miss Flanner had been downstairs by the letter boxes one morning, red-eyed and teary, waiting to collar Lil. Reluctantly, Lil had gone with her ('Fanny. Call me Fanny,' the poor thing had mewed) to her half-furnished room and heard out her woeful tale - like a back-alley Willow Westerman's.

She was a skinny little thing, dark-haired and still somewhat countrified in her dress and deportment. The lace at her neck showed signs of grime and her handkerchief was a tear-sodden pulp. She was in trouble, she'd sobbed, and knew not a soul

in the city, aside from her fellow, Billy, and her landlady in Carlton. Both she'd confided in and both had threatened her with casting-out unless she 'fixed it'. 'But how?' she'd wailed to Lil. Already, she'd tried two patent remedies 'for Removing Obstructions and Restoring Regularity', to no avail.

Preparations of the sort were daily advertised in the press, all claiming infallibility. Not infrequently, they would share a column with items headed ALLEGED ATTEMPT AT SUICIDE—A WOMAN TAKES LAUDANUM, BODY FOUND IN RIVER, etcetera, besides accounts of fallen women and girls brought before the Police Court.

Only out of desperation could Miss Flanner have thought to unburden herself to – let alone seek a solution from – a young lady of Lil's evident good character and standing. For her part, Lil had borne the outpouring with embarrassed fortitude, murmuring the requisite exclamations – 'Oh!' and 'No, surely' and 'Oh dear' – until Miss Flanner had run out of words and dissolved into sobbing, burying her face in her arms on the near-empty desk. For perhaps a minute, Lil had regarded the quaking form of the other typist. Then, going around to the business side of the desk, she had drawn an octavo sheet from the paper rack. Unable to find a pencil, she'd wound the paper into the machine, typed four staccato lines, and stolen from the room before Miss Flanner had raised her head.

Now, the caretaker nodded at Lil's desk. 'You're busy as ever, I see.' Her reply was a guarded smile. 'I'll take that pot, shall I? Let you get on?'

'Thank you, Mr Whelk.'

When the door had shut and his footsteps receded, Lil steadied herself with one hand on the chair-back and dropped into a fencing lunge. Six on one leg then, turning, six on the other. Then, arms out straight in front, a dozen deep knee bends, followed by swinging of arms and legs in turn. These

were about all the physical jerks her corsets allowed: bending or twisting at the waist was out of the question, as was anything that called for deep draughts of breath. (Goodness knows, the climb to her office – Lil spurned the elevator – left her winded.) And a bustle made floorwork impossible. But the circumscribed gyrations and hot tea oiled her joints nicely for another spell at the machine.



The detective had interrupted his egg-and-macaroni pie, but Aloysius Carr didn't mind. He'd been at work since five-thirty and this, the lull between deliveries, was his dinnertime. Carr had been tackling his pie out in the gritty sunshine by the cabstand (it being forbidden for post-office employees to loiter on the GPO steps) when Henry found him.

'No, sir,' Carr shook his head, 'that's a new one to me.' He didn't need to stop and think; he was sure he'd never heard of a Tunney lane. Aloysius Carr was a boyish thirty-five, with fair hair that fell across his forehead whenever his cap shifted. He'd been with the post office more than twenty years and was a postal enthusiast in his spare time, besides. 'Is this in connection with the palm-reading business?'

A rash of letters had lately been intercepted by Carr, addressed to an Eastern Market palmist. Each contained (so Henry's investigations had revealed) a postal order together with a photograph of the sender's hand, for divination by return post. The Post Office Act forbade such transactions. But, 'No,' replied Henry, and he paused, almost theatrically, before producing Pettit's letter from his pocket. 'I wonder what you make of this?' He stood next to Carr, their backs to the kerb, and held the letter out where the letter carrier could see it, but well clear of his pie-greasy hands.

Carr craned forward. 'May I see the other side?' Henry turned the letter over and the younger man studied the back for a quarter of a minute. 'Well, sir, I should say that it's a leg-

pull, for sure. Can't be authentic; far too well-preserved for that. But, by jingo,' he added, 'it's good.' His eyes shot from the letter to Henry. 'I say, sir, it's not of your making, is it?'

'No, no.' The suggestion surprised Henry.

'I didn't mean...' Carr flustered. 'A kind of experimental detective work, I meant.'

'No,' Henry assured him, 'it was handed to me by a neighbour. A reputable man,' and he went on to explain how the letter had come into Pettit's possession.

'Well,' said Carr, 'left on his doorstep - it's got to be someone playing hocus, hasn't it? Still,' he conceded, 'they've done a fine job of it. May I have a closer look, sir? Inside,' he nodded towards the post-office steps, 'with clean hands?' The rest of Lucina's pie could wait.

Gaslight burned bright in the letter carriers' room. At the ground-floor rear of the GPO, its windows and door faced a brick wall across the four-stride width of Angelo lane. Four or five of Carr's fellow letter carriers sat in one corner, finishing up their dinners; another was mending the strap of his satchel. Aloysius Carr, his hands now clean, laid Pettit's letter on a benchtop and bent close to examine it, first with his bare eyes, then with a glass. It was the back of the letter, the postmarks, that interested him most.

Henry watched him, saying nothing.

When at last Carr spoke, it was with amazement. 'You know, these are real.'

'Ah!' The tension went out of Henry like a bow-string snapping. 'You think so too!' He kept his voice low, but couldn't hide the thrill in it. 'Penny post, I thought, but...'

'*London* penny post,' Carr cut in. So absorbed was he, and so sure of himself, that he'd interrupted his superior without thinking.

Henry didn't mind; didn't notice. '*London* penny post,' he repeated.

‘Yes,’ said Carr. ‘See, there’s no Bishop Mark. That would’ve shown the date. The London penny post, because it took only a day to deliver, didn’t use the Bishop Mark, only these two. This T at the top here,’ he pointed to the triangular postmark, ‘signifies the office where the letter was lodged. T would’ve stood for... let’s see.’ He laid down the letter and crossed the room to a leaning row of books, the Post Office Statute among them. But it was a small, green-covered volume that he returned with, turning pages as he came. ‘Here it is. T – the Temple sorting office, near Lincoln’s Inn. FR – of course, that’s Friday.’

Henry nodded, pinching his top lip deliberately.

Carr showed him a page illustrating a variety of postmarks. ‘And here,’ he pointed, ‘is the other one.’ It was very like the round postmark on Pettit’s letter. ‘This was the stamp of the receiving office,’ Carr explained. ‘In this case, G stood for...’ He ran a finger down the accompanying text. ‘G was the *general* sorting office. It would’ve been either in Threadneedle street or Throgmorton, depending on the date.’

‘What about that?’ asked Henry. ‘The date, I mean.’

Carr was too intent on the book and Henry’s question to flick back the lappet of hair from his brow. ‘Well, not even a Bishop Mark would help us there. It’d give us the month and day, but not the year.’ He spoke with a keen authority that made *sir* redundant. ‘London had the first penny post, of course. Started in 1680, in private hands at first, before the post office took it over. The problem is,’ he said, leafing pages of the book, ‘the postmarks don’t seem to have altered much from the outset until about 1800.’

‘The absence of a Penny Black places our letter before 1840,’ Henry put in.

‘Oh, well before that, I’d say. Just look at it: the paper stock, the wrapper, and the handwriting.’ Carr passed the letter under his nose, shook his head. He turned to Henry,

frowning. 'But how do you account for the condition of it, sir? It even *smells* freshly written.'

In thus deferring to the detective, Carr signalled not just the limit of his expertise in the matter, but a recollection of his rank. For his part, Henry greatly esteemed the letter carrier's sagacity. But for a tendency to let his enthusiasm overtake him, Carr had the makings of a capital detective. The letter carriers in general were a perspicacious lot, sharp and mettlesome when faced - as they were, daily - with postal conundrums. A good-natured competitiveness prevailed in the carriers' room, and Henry would often stop by at sorting times, to watch the sport.

'What do you make of this?' one of them would call out: 'Eglocho.'

'Give us a look.' They'd pass the letter round, all putting their mouths to work on it, trying to render phonetic Italian into someplace familiar - *Egloch-o* - *Egl-och-o* - until someone got it. 'Eaglehawk!' *Becgvot* would be likewise revealed as Beechworth, *Stola* as Stawell, and - Henry's favourite - *Walk in here* as Wahgunyah. Rarely were the letter carriers stumped; sometimes, though, there was nothing for it but to stamp an unfathomable article NOT KNOWN BY LETTER CARRIERS and pass it along to the Dead Letter Office, whence it might end up Henry's business.

Mr Mulligan, officer-in-charge of the letter carriers, kept an album labelled POST OFFICE CURIOSITIES, into which he pasted some of the choicest howlers. Once a destination like *Eglocho* had been deciphered, Mulligan would send the letter on its way with a note to the local postmaster, requesting that he ask the recipient for the envelope as a souvenir. Mulligan's CURIOSITIES album had once been inspected by the worldwide penny-post crusader, Henniker Heaton, who pronounced its contents '*better examples of postal difficulties than any I have yet seen*'.

To Carr's question, Henry had to admit his own bewilderment at the apparently mint condition of the curiosity at hand – the letter meant for Tunney lane. What he didn't admit was that there were more of them.



The precision-timing of Henry's routine that morning had been upset, moments after he left his back gate, by Pettit of the basket works. He must have been keeping a watch, and had hailed Henry as he stepped into the Lane.

'Mr Vivo!' He'd waved and hurried towards the post-office detective. 'Mr Vivo!' Pettit's rumpy jowls had flapped and a cloud of wicker dust had swarmed around him as he ducked between slow-moving drays. 'Mr Vivo,' he'd puffed, 'look what's come,' and out of the pouch of his canvas apron he'd pulled a fat handful of letters. 'It's not just me that's getting 'em. Seems everyone in our row's had something turn up, either yesterday or this morning, or both. I found this 'un at my place when I come out today. This 'un come to Gerritys' – on Sunday, they reckon. Mrs Parrish, she's had *three...*' He'd peeled letters off the pile, thrusting them at Henry. 'Jack Altemayer showed me this 'un just now. An' Hall, the fruit-man, he's got one, but he's keeping ahold of it. This 'un here I seen on Old China's doorstep as I come by. He'll have more of 'em, I wouldn't be surprised.' Pettit had spread his empty hands. 'What d'you make of it?'

Henry had shuffled through the letters. All had the same characteristics of just-hatched antiquity, and all were addressed to Tunney lane. Henry had singled out two more untidily wrapped than the rest, looked from them to Pettit. 'These have been opened.'

He'd addressed Pettit's back, the basket-maker walking ahead on the narrow footpath as they made towards his works. Over his shoulder he'd replied, 'You know folk, Mr Vivo. Curious, they are. Only natural. But they've giv 'em to

me to give to you, for safe-keeping and whatnot. For investigation. That's proper, innit?

'Certainly, Pettit. And I'm obliged for your agency.'

Reaching the entrance of the basket works, Pettit had asked again, 'What d'you make of it?'

Henry had weighed each letter from hand to hand, turning it front to back to front, then he'd fanned the letters out before Pettit. 'Tell me again, which one came to your place this morning?'

The big man with the iron-red whiskers had looked uncomfortable. 'That was it,' he'd said, tapping one that had its seal broken and its wrapper disarrayed.

'I see.' Reaching inside his coat, Henry had drawn out a small notebook. Pettit, alarmed, had taken an involuntary half-step back, but the detective hadn't noticed. From the notebook's spine, he'd produced a tiny pencil. 'This one, you say?' He'd shuffled the letter to the top of the pile and written a faint 'Pettit' in one corner. 'And this one?' The basket-maker had been able to state with confidence the recipient of each letter.

'Commendably observed, Pettit,' Henry had said, replacing his pencil and notebook. Then he'd remembered something. 'You say that Gerritys' letter came on Sunday?'

'So Tom's missus says. It was her what found it. And Mrs Parrish, too - one of hers come Sunday.' Pettit had noticed Henry's puzzled frown. 'I know,' he said, a mite defensive, 'it sounds queer, but that's as they told me.'

'Hm.' Henry had nodded. 'Certainly, that seems to rule out delivery by one of our men. Have you any thoughts as to a perpetrator? Someone whose idea of a lark this might be?'

'We-ell, there's young Gerrity. He's a fair scamp. You know him?' Henry did know young Gerrity and thought that 'scamp' was letting him off lightly. 'But I wouldn't've said this was in his line at all.'

Henry agreed. Baiting dogs and shaking down drunks were more in young Gerrity's line. It was doubtful the larrikin could so much as hold a pen, let alone run to an elaborate stunt like this. 'And your neighbours – none of them has voiced any suspicions?'

Pettit had shaken his head. 'They're as foxed as I am. Hall reckons 'em,' he'd gestured at the letters, 'to be valuable, antiques or something. That's why he won't part with his.'

'In all likelihood, they're about as antique as this morning's *Argus*,' said Henry. 'I shall have a word with our letter carriers, see if they've struck anything of the sort on their rounds. Even supposing it a hoax, though, we must treat this as post office business. That means discretion, Pettit, you understand?' The other man had squirmed. Henry had given the bundle of letters a satisfied shake then – 'Well done, Pettit: a first-rate mystery' – before stowing them in his coat's capacious inner pocket and setting course for the GPO, eight minutes behind time.

His admonition about 'post office business' had, of course, been a feint. Properly speaking, the letters were no business of the post office, nor Henry's either. Pettit and his neighbours were free to break the seals, help themselves to the letters' contents, burn them if they pleased. The Post Office Act had no authority over ghost-delivered missives like those that formed a bulge in Henry's coat. But Edgar Pettit wasn't to know that.



Aloysius Carr knew of no Winterboars. 'Tunney lane, though,' he said, walking with Henry to the stairs – 'the public library would have London maps and directories, guidebooks. You'd find it there, sir, for sure.'

'No doubt,' agreed Henry, 'though that's the lesser part of the mystery. Where did the letter come from, I'd like to know.'

They'd reached the stairs leading to the GPO's upper floors. Carr was due to start his afternoon round; there wouldn't be time to wolf down the rest of his pie. 'You'll open it, will you, sir?' He'd like to be there when the seal was broken.

'Alas,' said Henry, 'it isn't mine to open.' Here he employed the opposite strategem to the one he'd used on Pettit. 'If it had come through the post, *then* we'd have a mystery on our hands. As it is, though, it's not post-office business. I promised my neighbour I'd make inquiries. Now I've done that - thank you, Carr - and so...' Henry gestured rueful resignation. 'I believe that Mr Pettit was hoping it might turn out to be valuable. Depending on the contents, it might do yet, I suppose. But, from a postal point of view, I think we can class it as a curiosity rather than a treasure. Would you agree?'

'Mr Mulligan certainly would. He'd put it in his album, for sure.' Carr hid his disappointment at having the letter jerked from his reach. *He* would call it a treasure.

'Thank you, Carr' Henry said again, 'for your time and expertise in this matter.' He tipped his hat, 'I'll say good day,' and mounted the first stair, leaving the letter carrier, belly growling, to turn back the way he'd come.



Why hadn't Henry mentioned the rest of the letters? They'd been in his possession long enough for him to have gleaned from the six of them - the plundered pair, especially - a good deal more than Carr could've been expected to infer from a solitary, sealed example. But Henry was savouring them. That and dedication to duty had prevented his doing more than twice thumbing through the pile, once upon arriving at work and again before he sought out Carr.

Now he laid them on his blotter, in two rows. He scrutinised the front of each letter, then turned them all over, like cards in a game. The flaps of the two unsealed letters awned enticingly, but Henry made himself ignore them. He

examined all six sets of postmarks in the light of Carr's interpretation, and noted some peculiarities of the wax seals. On the flaps of two letters were written the names of (presumably) their senders. Henry observed every detail, stroking his moustache, scarcely letting himself blink. The performance was for his benefit alone: a show of measured deliberation to defer the moment when he'd reach for a letter with a broken seal. He even pretended indecision over that choice, letting his hand hover above one before settling instead on the other. It was Pettit's letter – the one with that name pencilled in the corner – that Henry picked up at last. Of course it was.

The wrapper was minimally addressed –

To

M^r Winterboure

at y^e Hand & Pen

Tunney-lane

None of the other five letters was directed to Winterboar or Winterboure. Like Pettit's, all three that had come to Mrs Parrish's were intended for the same address (the Brazen Head coffee-house), but the rest named different destinations in Tunney lane. With care, Henry unfolded the wrapper – which wasn't actually a wrapper, but the letter's other side – and held it flat with the sides of his hands while he read.

Naked boy Yard, Southwark.

Friday.

Sir □...



Lil half-sat, half-lay on the miner's couch and watched Mr Finlay get dressed. The shoulders of his shirt, she noticed, were worked into bunches where she'd gripped them. 'Here,' she said and stood, her hands raised towards him.

Mr Finlay smiled, delighted. 'Miss Vivo...'

‘It’s your shirt,’ she said. But while she smoothed his creases, he slid his hands under her camisole and smoothed *her* stay-creased ribs.

‘Miss Vivo,’ he said again, just for the pleasure of it. She was fastening his collar now, and his hands were moving upwards, stroke by gentle stroke. ‘D’ye know Latin at all?’ he asked.

Lil knew what was coming. ‘A little.’

‘Vivo,’ he said. ‘That’s *I live, I am living.*’

‘Hold still now.’ Lil was reaching around to fix his collar at the back.

Mr Finlay bent and nuzzled her hair. ‘I live,’ he murmured close to her ear; ‘I am living.’



Mr Finlay had arrived before his appointed time. He always did, and would sit across the desk from Lil, watching her as she typed. His scrutiny made her self-conscious and error-prone, so she insisted that he occupy himself while he wait for her to finish. He duly brought along a newspaper, but watched her over the top of it, rustling and turning the pages only as a subterfuge.

Lil’s lips moved as she typed: not framing the words – her fingers moved too fast for that – just softly pursing and unpursing, as they might do in sleep. And her emphatic eyebrows knitted in earnest whenever she came to a knot in the copy. Otherwise, and except for her flying fingers, she sat still and erect, her tilted head drawing taut the plane of her throat, from earlobe to neckline. All this Mr Finlay took in, overlooking AN EXTRAORDINARY MARITAL DIFFICULTY – not his own, but a headline in the *Herald*. Beneath Lil’s buttoned bodice, he knew, hung a clenched metal morsel like a baby’s tooth: the head of a typewriter’s letter *m*. It had snapped clean off her first machine (‘Extraordinary,’ said the Remington’s agent) and Lil had worn it ever since, tied to a

loop of waxed cotton. Moody had seen it, and Mr Finlay – not many others.

Except for a pause at midday for another round of callisthenics and a bite of lunch (bread-and-dripping and a Welsh cake), Lil had worked on until two. Then she'd made her deliveries, saving St James's for last so that she might take tea with Mrs Uhr, the rector's housekeeper. Despite her best efforts with soap and pumice, Lil's fingers were stained with ink from the duplicator, its operation being (whatever the claims of its manufacturer) a messily bothersome business. Mrs Uhr had noticed and, in parting, had pressed a lemon into Lil's hand. 'The juice'll fade the staining, you'll find.' Mrs Uhr might know about ordinary ink, but experience had taught Lil the only solvent that worked on Hudson's 'permanent' was time. But she'd been polite and hadn't said so. The lemon would go nicely with tea.

She'd been glad to be out in the sunny streets, part of the business-doing traffic. Chancery lane, as its name suggested, was in the city's legal quarter. Temple Court on one side and Selborne Chambers on the other formed a barristers' arcade, cut through by the lane. At this time of day the wigs were mostly in court, but their factota were out and doing. Hardly a man on the street (women being but few) was without his long legal envelope or tape-tied papers, some of them taken up with no other purpose than escape from chambers. Office-boys, in particular: you could practically smell their elation at being out of doors.

Lil and her lemon had got back to Stalbridge Chambers and up the five flights – the first two at a trot – soon after three-thirty. That left time not just to enter into character but actually to get some work done before Mr Finlay showed up early.



The crumpled shoulders of his shirt, it turned out, would be disguised by his braces. Pulling on his jacket – a Harris tweed with a thistle-head fleck – Mr Finlay gave a start, ‘Ach, I nearly forgot,’ and produced from one pocket a delicate silvery spiral that snagged the lining on its way out. ‘For you.’ He held it out on the flat of his palm and Lil took it gingerly. It was a shaving of galvanised iron, pretty, but sharp as razors.

‘It’s no wonder you cut yourself, carrying a such thing about in your pocket.’ Mr Finlay’s fingers were never free of nicks. ‘But thank you,’ said Lil, ‘it’s lovely,’ and she placed the spiral with the other offcuts arrayed, glinting, on the window rail.

Besides the sliver of roofing iron, Mr Finlay had brought her a slim sheaf of paperwork for typing, that being his ostensible reason for calling on her each week. The galvanised iron manufactory in which he was a partner kept a clerk as well as a boy to run errands; but for a year and a half now Mr Finlay had made Tuesdays his early day and insisted that it was ‘no trouble’ for him to deliver work to Miss Vivo, her office being ‘on my way’. (Though, really, it wasn’t.) He’d have visited her more often had she not insisted on delivering the finished work herself. She always left it with the clerk at Finlay Brothers & Froome, where her aloofness as she passed through the noisy, spark-lit works had earned her the nickname ‘Miss Virgo’. Of course, Mr Finlay, when he heard of it, had pretended to share in the joke. Its subject, had it reached her ears, would have considered it a triumph.

Now, having dressed, she had Mr Finlay check that her appearance was in order – her hair especially, since Moody would be sure to notice if its arrangement had altered since the morning. Knowing Lil to be the daughter of a detective (not that she’d told him so; hadn’t had to, the reputation of the former Detective-Sergeant Vivo having, in years past, been common knowledge), Mr Finlay supposed it to be her father’s scrutiny that she was anxious to appease. But he had his own

suspicious, too. 'Are you meeting somebody?' He was close behind her, loosing tendrils caught in the back of her collar.

'Ah,' said Lil, turning to him as she tucked up the stragglers, '*what a dusty answer gets the soul...*'

The face he pulled gave a comic twist to his spurtle of sandy beard. 'You always say that,' he said, adding ruefully, 'I ought to know better than to ask.' Lil just smiled. She liked this pink and freckled, bony Scotsman, with his prickly suit and his highland burr. 'Who're you quoting there, anyway?' he asked. 'It's not Burns. Would it be Scott?'

'Not a countrymen of yours, no,' at which Mr Finlay gave a mock-dismissive snort. 'It's Meredith. One of my father's sayings.'

'D'ye know the rest of it?'

'Ah, *what a dusty answer gets the soul... when seeking certainty...?*' She'd heard Henry say more of it. 'Something like that. I'll search it out for you, for next time.'

Mr Finlay smiled. It pleased him, you could tell, the idea that she would think of him between now and then. Generally, she gave no sign that he crossed her mind outside of this place and this hour on a Tuesday afternoon. 'Very good,' he said.

'Now,' she said, 'this work of yours,' turning her attention, and his, to the business that - purportedly - had brought him there. 'Just the one carbon copy, as usual? Will Thursday do?'

'So long as it'll catch the post. Otherwise,' he said hopefully, 'I can collect it.'

'No need,' said Lil. 'I'll bring it round by early afternoon.' She gave him a look so level it seemed to rule a line. *So much*, it said, *and no more*.

Mr Finlay read it right. 'Very good,' he said again.



Mrs Hustler had kept the range stoked all afternoon, simmering a mutton stew so slow that the sinew melted into

gravy. The kitchen was warm and the tea nearly ready – vegetables and pudding sharing a second pot – when Lil arrived home. Straightaway, the housekeeper gathered her hat and coat and, while she put them on, gave an account of her day: her success and otherwise at the shops and market, domestic mishaps (one involving the cat from next door) and triumphs (she'd fixed an errant flap of wallpaper in the hallway corner), the state of the laundry (all ironed and put away) and, of course, the tea. Which smelled delicious. Then she took from the oven a small pot that held her own evening meal and, swaddling it twice in a piece of old blanket, nestled it into her basket and left.

Lil and her father ate in near-silence. Moody wouldn't be home till after eight and Henry had a Mechanics' Institute lecture at seven-thirty. He wanted to use the Institute library beforehand, he said, so he'd set off around seven. With Henry, that meant *at* seven. They were alike enough, Lil and Henry, to be quiet together in comfort. Aside from pleasantries, and superlatives over the stew, they didn't speak until Lil stood to clear the table for pudding. She told him then about her visit at the St James's rectory.

'There're fewer every Sunday, Mrs Uhr says.' Most of its congregation had forsaken the dilapidated St James's for the new cathedral. 'Poor Reverend Keighley's at his wit's end. There's damp in the chancel wall and the tower's so shaky they daren't ring the bell. Mrs Uhr says there's talk of pulling it down, even.'

'The tower?'

'No, the church. They say there's not the money and, well...' Lil trailed off, not stating the obvious: the old church, now surrounded by factories and warehouses, was worth infinitely more as land for sale than for saving souls. 'You've not heard anything about it?'

‘No,’ said her father, ‘but I expect Reverend Keighley’ll be at tonight’s lecture. I’ll be sure not to mention it,’ he added, drily. They devoted themselves to their pudding. Henry, chewing a mouthful, bit on something hard. ‘One of Mrs Hustler’s?’ he winced.

‘No, mine,’ said Lil. ‘Sorry. I must’ve missed a seed.’ Her father gave a start as his teeth struck gravel a second time. ‘Or two. Sorry,’ she said again. ‘But I call that unfair,’ she teased, scraping her own bowl clean. ‘Not a single pip in mine, and you get *two*.’ Henry was proceeding with caution now, feeling for more buckshot with his tongue. Lil took pity. ‘You needn’t finish it, Poppa. Here, the kettle’s boiled. Have some tea before you go.’



She’d meant to ask, but then hadn’t, about Mr Pettit’s letter from the night before. The basket-maker had been hanging about the door of his works when she came past this evening. Watching for her father, in all likelihood, with more letters – the same letters that now added to the tidy pile on Henry’s desk, beckoning him home from his lecture.

Lil saw them there when she ducked into his room around nine o’clock. She was careful not to disturb them, or anything except the philately tin, which she took back with her to the kitchen.

Since the front room, Lil’s bedroom, was meant to be the parlour, the kitchen was all the Vivos had for ‘living’ in. Visitors tended to be few and of a kind – which is to say, old friends – to whom eating at the kitchen table presented no affront.

Moody had staggered in close to half-past eight. Really staggered: he’d been on his feet without let-up since breakfast. Lil took his stockinged feet on her lap and kneaded them while he ate his tea. Ravenous, he was, too. There’d been no stop for lunch and, since eating on the premises was strictly

prohibited, he'd been lucky to cadge – or, rather, pay a ransom for – some broken crackers and a couple of figs from a grocer's boy taking a smoke in the back lane.

So that, in Henry's absence, they could take *their* smoke indoors, Lil swung the kitchen window wide. She'd warned her brother to watch out for seeds, but his pudding, like hers, proved to be pip-less. Poor Poppa.

'You should see the stuff that's come!' The new stock, Moody meant. 'The whole shop *stinks* of India rubber. Braces, garters, bath-caps, unmentionables...'

'Made of *rubber*?'

'I kid you not.' Moody's speech had a vaudeville inflection, the result of too many nights at the Gaiety. He passed the cigarette across the table to his sister, squinting through the smoke. 'Let's do something about those eyebrows of yours. The old man'll be a while yet.'

And that's why Lil had borrowed their father's philately tin: for its tweezers. It wasn't an *eyelash* Henry had found on his magnifying glass last night, but one of his daughter's eyebrows. Black and coarse as hog bristles, they formed – if left to nature – a lush swath across her brow. Even when tamed by Moody, Lil's eyebrows gave intensity to her expression, hooding her speckled green eyes in a way that made her seem contemplative, unapproachable even. Of course, her mother, Marcella, had had the same eyebrows, but they'd been different on her, contradicting her nature, rather than, as in Lil's case, confirming it.

'There was some stuff came in today that I think you'd like,' Moody told her as he plucked.

'Not rubber, I hope.'

'Put your chin up,' he said, squinting at his sister. 'No, not rubber. Balzerine, it's called: a wool-cotton mix, lightweight. I reckon it'd wash well. And there's a bolt in just your colour. Come in tomorrow – no, not tomorrow, Thursday – and I'll

show it to you.’ He gave her face a gust and rubbed with his thumb the flushed skin between her brows. ‘There.’ He slumped back in his chair, the suspenders hanging slack on his slim frame. ‘Thank God tomorrow’s my half-day. I’m whacked.’

Lil smoothed his hair. ‘Go to bed, Mood. I’m going to.’

‘No,’ he said, ‘I think I’ll stay up and read a while.’ Henry had brought home the *Herald*. ‘Give my tea a chance to go down.’

‘Well, here, put your feet up.’ Lil gave him her chair for a footstool.

‘Good girl.’



Henry got home soon after she was in bed. She heard the rumble of his and Moody’s voices, the open-and-shut of the hall door and his own, the scrape of a chair, then silence.

Returning the philately tin, Lil had picked up the top letter from the pile on his desk. It looked old – old-fashioned, anyway. *Tunney lane*. The next one had the same address, and the one under that; they all did. *Tunney lane*. She’d never heard of it, nor any of the addressees. Lil had replaced the letters just as she’d found them.

Chapter 3

Wednesday, September 6th

'Might be that's the end of 'em.'

Henry had arranged with Pettit, and had had the big man tell his neighbours, that the detective would come by early and inspect this morning's crop of letters *in situ*.

'They was here before this, yesterday. P'raps he's slept in.' By *he*, Pettit meant, of course, the perpetrator, the hoaxer, the falsifier of the stoagie letters. The two men stood in the grainy pre-dawn dark, scanning the verandahs and doorsteps of Carson's cottages for the luminous white of a letter. Nothing.

'I'll wait for a bit,' said Henry.

'Will you come in? Take a cup of tea?'

'Thank you, no. At least... might I wait in your front room?'

'Ehh, keep a watch unseen. Of course. Well,' said Pettit, leading the way, 'it's none too comfortable. None too warm, neither.' The first door off the narrow hallway opened onto utter blackness. 'Here, let me get a light.' The lamp he fetched from the kitchen revealed a tiny room choked with piled-up furniture. 'Now, a chair,' said Pettit, diving in. 'Would you hold the light?' A chair? There seemed to be dozens of them. Pettit wrestled one from an unruly stack and shouldered others aside to clear a space by the window. 'There you go.' Henry squeezed through the jumble and took the seat offered. 'Best put out the lamp, I s'pose,' said the basket-maker. 'Or should I leave you to it?'

‘Perhaps that would be best,’ said Henry.

‘Ehh, well, I’d better keep meself moving.’ Pettit had pulled trousers on under his nightgown, with an ulster over the top. ‘I’ll have to be opening up soon. Sure you’ll be right if I leave you?’

Henry nodded. ‘I shan’t stay long.’ He was glad when Pettit retreated down the hall with his lamp. No movement outside. Pettit’s cottage was at the end of the row closest the Lane. Anyone entering the right-of-way could easily be seen, and Henry had a partial view in the other direction, along the row of cottages. Fifteen minutes or so he sat there, still as a stick, and saw nothing but a cat until, just before 6.40 a.m. – it was lighter now; Henry could read his watch – one of Pettit’s neighbours went past, swinging keys on a chain. It was Hall, the fruiterer: back from the markets, no doubt.

Henry got to his feet then and haltingly felt his way towards the door; even so, the leg of an upturned chair caught him a knock on the temple. ‘Blast!’ he muttered and, reeling back, toppled an ill-balanced whatnot with his elbow. The noise brought Pettit hurrying with the lamp.

‘Ehh, you’re all right?’

Henry was, more or less. Collecting himself and his hat, he said, ‘I’ll take another look outside, but I should say we’re out of luck this morning.’

In the weak light of dawn, there was still not a letter to be seen. ‘You could always try again this afternoon,’ said Pettit. ‘Though, Lord knows, I tried meself to keep an eye out yesterday. There was nothing, there was nothing – and then, there they was. Just like a snow shower, come out of nowhere.’

Two doors along from Pettit’s, Mrs Parrish emerged with a basin of water. Henry knew her as the genial woman behind the confectionery counter at the Town Hall Café. Here, in nightcap and wrap and with her broad face scrubbed raw –

and faced with a pair of quizzing men practically on her doorstep – she presented a tarter aspect.

‘Plurry dogs.’ With the soapy water, she sluiced the turd-fouled ground in front of her cottage. ‘I saw you there earlier,’ she addressed Henry sharply. ‘Find anything, did you?’

Pettit answered. ‘None this morning.’

‘You must’ve scared them off.’

‘Tell the detective what you seen,’ said Pettit.

‘Well, there was nothing to see, was there? One minute they weren’t there, the next minute they were.’

‘When was this?’ Henry asked.

‘Yesterday. Tuesdays I finish at two. I was out here, beating the rugs. There was no one else around, but yet these letters appeared. Just like that. And not just at my place; right along the row. I could see them,’ she gestured with the hand that wasn’t holding the basin. ‘Down the end, and back your way,’ she nodded at Pettit. ‘And there was no one went past. I’d have seen them if they did.’

‘And the afternoon post had already come?’

‘Oh yes, the postie had been before I got home.’

‘So these other letters came... at what time?’

‘It must’ve been close to three.’

Pettit agreed.

‘You’ve got all the letters that’ve come?’ Mrs Parrish asked Henry.

‘Most of them, yes.’

‘Old China’s got more, I wouldn’t be surprised,’ said Pettit in a low voice, jerking a thumb at the cottage between his and Mrs Parrish’s. ‘And Hall – he won’t part with his.’ He rolled his eyes, as did his lady neighbour.

‘Mr Hall... *well*,’ she said, significantly.

As if at a signal, Hall came striding up the row from his cottage near the end, swinging his keys and whistling. His trousers against the leather apron swooshed with every step.

‘What’s this?’ he said as he approached the little group. ‘Police business, Mr Vivo?’ Then his smile stretched to a smirk. ‘Ah, I was forgetting: it’s post office business now, isn’t it?’

Stiffly, Henry touched his hat to the fruiterer.

‘You’re on the trail of these letters, I expect?’

Mrs Parrish excused herself – ‘I must be getting on’ – and went indoors.

‘Ehh, so must I be,’ said Pettit, recalling the time. ‘Might be I’ll see you this afternoon,’ he said to Henry in parting.

‘Perhaps so,’ replied the detective, touching his hat. ‘Thank you, Pettit.’

‘So, what do you think?’ asked Hall as he and Henry kept stride for the two dozen paces to his shop in the Lane.

‘Forgeries or not?’ He waited barely a beat for Henry’s reply, then answered himself. ‘They look real enough to me. And not from around here. Eighteenth-century, I’d say.’ He looked sideways at Henry. ‘How’m I doing?’

It goes without saying that Henry paused before answering. He was not inclined to tell the cocky fruiterer a thing. It wasn’t just the matter at hand, the letters, that made the air between them crackle. Whether it had been more than a fruit-shop flirtation – ‘*Happy with the size of that one, ma’am? Or d’you fancy something bigger?*’ – Henry would never know for certain. But Hall had the leer of an adulterer and was just the type to have turned Marcella’s head. ‘It’s easy to be taken in, Mr Hall,’ said Henry, ending the pause. ‘The untrained eye sees what it wants to see.’

‘Is that so?’ Hall stood before the door of his shop, still swinging his key chain. The two men’s eyes locked, but just for a moment; Henry looked away. Traffic in the Lane was picking up. Pettit was unlatching the outer door of his works.

‘I’ll leave you to make ready for your customers,’ said Henry, ‘make this place presentable.’ He swept the approach

to Hall's shop (and couldn't it use a sweep?) with a disdainful glance, pursing his lips at the state of it: old fruit trodden to black underfoot, the smell fermenty, over-ripe. For all that Henry's authority was nowadays limited to postal matters, his habitual bearing tended to unnerve men, making them look to their flies and their consciences. Not Teddy Hall, though.

'No word from the missus?' You can imagine the low, sneering way he said it, at the same time driving the key into the lock of his shop door. And he laughed.

Henry was quivering as he turned to go. He heard Hall hawk and spit behind him.



'You're late.' Lil's greeting did nothing to lift his mood. She and Moody cocked each other a look as their father stumped past to his room.

At least he hadn't got wet feet this morning – though it'd been a near thing, the way that Parrish woman had splashed her slops about. Henry changed shoes and combed his hair, awry after the dust-up with a chair leg in Pettit's front room.

There was a cup of tea poured and cooling, ready for him. Lil set down his breakfast plate, resting her free hand on the back of his neck as she did so. Everything about the way Henry held himself – the precise geometry of the man – seemed to say, *DON'T TOUCH*; but, as he told Hall, appearances can lie. Now, whether it was Lil's touch that did the trick, or the not-too-hot tea, or the egg poached to perfection and served on a rusk with a slice of tongue and mustard, Henry soon felt so far consoled as to volunteer an account of last evening's lecture at the Mechanics' Institute.

'Dr Amos was the speaker, on the phenomenon of *déjà vu*.'

'*Déjà vu*? That's...'

"Already seen". Apt enough, I suppose, though I'm not sure it's an improvement on the old term, "false recognition".'

‘I had that experience just the other night,’ said Moody. ‘It was outside the King’s Theatre...’

‘Nothing false about that,’ his sister interrupted. ‘You’re there often enough.’

‘No,’ said Henry, ‘that’s interesting.’ He pointed his egg fork at Moody. ‘You’d do well to take notice when that happens. According to Dr Amos, it’s not uncommon for epileptics to have that sensation immediately before taking a fit.’

‘I’m pretty sure that I’ve never...’ Moody began, and then he stopped. ‘Actually, you know, I reckon it did happen once. It was...’ He stared past Lil’s ear, straining to recall. ‘I was just a kid, at Rosamond street...’ He trailed off, reaching for his teacup.

Lil watched Moody over the rim of her own cup. He must’ve been with their mother, that time he was remembering. That’d be why he cut himself short just now: it wouldn’t do to mention Marcella at the breakfast table.

‘At any rate,’ their father continued, ‘there’s nothing occult about it. Just a slight flicker of the brain, Dr Amos says, caused by insufficient rest, or else too much of it.’

‘So much for romance,’ said Moody, ‘glimpses of past lives and all that.’

‘Quite so.’ Unlike his son, Henry preferred a prosaic explanation to a fantastical one. ‘And it seems we experience it – false recognition, *déjà vu*, whatever it’s called – less often as we grow older.’

‘Same as all good things,’ said Moody.

‘You’d count it as a good thing, would you?’ Lil slid the stove grate shut and kicked the kindling-box a safe distance from the range. ‘I must say I find it rather unsettling. Not,’ she added, ‘that it happens often – you’re right, Poppa – now that I’m getting so old.’ This was a piece of provocation: if *she* was old, what did that make the two of them?

‘Eleven months and two days, that’s all.’ Moody sounded like someone settling an argument, and he wagged his little finger at Lil, so that he nearly spilt his tea. It was no uncommon thing for one of them to invoke the difference in their ages as a retort to the other’s jibe or claim to privilege. When they were younger, it had usually been Lil who’d cited the measly 337 days between them; nowadays, it was more likely to be Moody.

Lil was moving about the kitchen, putting away, tidying, and Henry, having sensed or seen the clock hands’ alignment, was on his feet too. Pretty soon, all three of them were gone – Henry first, then the other two together – leaving the range clicking as it cooled and the clock steadily gaining time.



‘Open them, open them. I’m starving.’ A pair of pigs’ trotters, hot and wrapped in paper, was Henry’s contribution to lunch. Otto Berliner’s was a bagful of the cakes that shared his name, from Zweifel’s Prussian bakery. The two friends met for lunch every Wednesday when Berliner was in town; and that was most weeks now, since age and authority kept him at his desk while his deputies did the footwork. He was roughly ten years Henry’s senior and twice his size. Height, girth and force of personality – Otto Berliner was a big man in all departments. His fat face glowed red above a double swag of chin and a loud bow-tie. The trousers rucked up where his thighs rubbed together and his waistcoat strained at its fastenings. Nor was it corpulence alone that made his clothes such a tight fit: vanity held him to the fashion of his youth. (Fitting his Uncle O for a new suit was, Moody considered, as good as a night at the circus.) Still though, he cut a figure more commanding than ridiculous.

Back in the early ’sixties Berliner had been one of the leading lights of the colony’s detective police force. That’s how he and Henry had met, of course, the young Constable

Vivo having assisted in the capture of the murderer Le Franchi at Daylesford in '61. Just five years later, Berliner had resigned from the police force. For while he'd been lauded by the press and judiciary as 'something more than the ordinary "thief-taker"', he was rather less of a favourite with his superiors on the force. The methods he employed were unconventional to the point of daring, and his lack of advancement through the detective ranks may, it's true, have owed something to his adeptness at *self*-promotion - a talent that had, however, served him well in his subsequent career.

For close on thirty years now, Berliner's Private Inquiry Office had been known throughout the colonies as the first and best resort of anyone wanting a lost relative or absconding debtor tracked down, a writ or summons served, or evidence 'got up' on any matter bound for the courts. Berliner himself, renowned as 'the detective's detective', always got his man, or the dirt, whether by fair means or foul. He had a wiliness you didn't tend to associate with a man of his bulk and demeanour. In fact, nothing about him suggested tact or discretion, qualities (you'd have thought) indispensable to a private detective. But this apparent lack was itself a strength, enabling him to practise a kind of sleight-of-hand. Suspects and would-be informants were liable to be so distracted by the bow-tie and bonhomie or the effort of matching him drink for drink, that they'd fail to notice their (metaphorical) pockets being picked.

All in all, Otto Berliner and Henry Vivo could not have been more different, as detectives or as men. Yet friendship worked the trick of making their best qualities reciprocal: where the other was concerned, Henry could be big-hearted, Otto discreet. *Could* be.

'You're too damned careful, Henry! All this softly, softly, catchee monkey... Confrontation - that works the best

surprise. D'you want me to front him?' Berliner wiped his greasy fingers with a handkerchief unequal to the task.

'Otto...' Henry tapped his own chin, indicating a dribble of fat on his friend's. In the collegial spirit of their weekly lunches – one Detective Office exile to another – he'd been briefing Berliner on the latest postal infractions to come under his notice: the palm-reading by post, an unlicensed lottery, and assorted schemes either fraudulent, obscene, or plain crackpot. Henry had nibbled at his trotter; it wasn't really his sort of meal. He'd fill himself up on jam-filled *berliners*. 'No,' he replied mildly, to his friend's offer. 'My own methods meet with a fair degree of success, you know.'

Berliner did know. Critical though he was of Henry's cautiousness, he couldn't but acknowledge its results. And Henry knew better than to take his friend's bluster to heart. Hadn't Otto offered him a job twice a year or oftener since before Henry left the force?

While they ate their *berliners* – two apiece – the big detective entertained his colleague with an account of evidence-getting for a divorce case that would shortly reach court. Otto still allowed himself the odd spell of suburban muckraking. 'It promises to be a most... spicy proceeding.' He plainly relished the prospect of his court performance. (*I followed the respondent to an address in Leopold street, South Yarra. Number 97. The front door was opened by the co-respondent. She appeared to be attired in a nightgown...*) 'The press, they will love it.' And Otto Berliner would get his name in the papers again.

He licked his fingers, then untucked a shirttail for a table napkin. The trousers sat high over his pudding belly, so no one but the laundry-hand (and Henry) need know about the jam stains down below. Only when Henry was satisfied that his friend's hands were clean did he produce the two unsealed letters for Tunney lane.

Can you believe it? He'd still not opened any more of them. Last night, after the lecture, he'd confined himself to examining the postmarks of all eleven letters, in light of Heaton's *A Short History of the Penny Post*, borrowed from the Institute library – the same book Carr had consulted. And he'd whittled and tried a fresh quill, with no better success than his first attempt. Was this really savouring, or was it wasting, his 'first-rate mystery'? The latter, Otto Berliner would have said, and he'd have shaken his featherweight friend – except that, until this moment, he hadn't known a thing about the Tunney lane letters. Even now, Henry would confide only half as much as he wanted his friend to know about them.

'Tunney,' said Berliner. 'There's a familiar name.'

'Is it?' Henry was surprised to hear it.

'Yes, yes. You know it yourself. Tunny's Toothache Elixir – "The Finest Nervine Tonic". It's painted up big on the side wall of a druggist's in... is it Bourke street?'

Of course. Cater's, near the Cyclorama. That accounted for the name's familiar ring, though it was Tunny without an *e*.

'Seems as if it's a London address, though,' Henry said. 'And the postmarks – they're real enough, apparently – make them a hundred years old, or more. Turned up just this week in a right-of-way off the Lane, not far from my place. Delivered by an invisible hand,' he added.

Berliner had turned the letters over. 'May I?' he asked. Henry nodded, and his friend unfolded and read first one, then the other. 'Hmph,' he said, when he'd finished. 'And the date, you say?'

'Sometime before 1800. The absence of a postage stamp...'

Berliner waved one hand dismissively. 'You think they're genuine?'

‘It seems so. There’s the postmarks, as I say, and the handwriting – almost certainly written with a quill – and the manner of expression. You see, the long s...’

‘Yes, and here: *stopp’d, satisfy’d, deferr’d*. And this: *se’night*. But they’re not in the same hand, are they?’ Berliner looked from one letter to the other. ‘Nor for the same address?’

‘No, they came to different cottages in the same row.’

‘What’s the name of the right-of-way?’

‘It doesn’t have one, though the row itself’s called Carson’s cottages.’

Berliner re-folded the letters and slid them across the desk. ‘So, what makes them your business?’

On that point at least, Henry could be frank with him. ‘Curiosity, that’s all.’ He held the letters, one in each hand, as if weighing them. ‘What’s strangest is their state of preservation. I can’t explain it. If they’re as old as I believe them to be, the paper ought to be yellowed, the ink faded, the wax gone brittle. And they were still sealed when they were delivered.’

‘How did you come by them?’ asked Berliner, through teeth clenched on a post-prandial cigar.

Henry explained about Pettit and his neighbours, and defended their *bona fides*. With good cause, since Berliner was immediately suspicious that one of them was having his friend on.

‘In our line of work,’ he told Henry, ‘there’ll always be someone who’s keen to outfox you – just for the sport of it. I see it all the time. You know what I think? It’s that word, *detective*. To some people, it’s like a red rag to a bull.’ Did Henry think, then, of Teddy Hall? ‘That’s why this is the Private *Inquiry* Office and my men, they’re *officers*. But people, they have long memories. *Detective* Otto Berliner.’ There was pride in his voice. ‘They don’t forget. And it makes them – some of them – want to get the better of you. Now, to me,’ he

motioned with his cigar in the direction of the letters, 'that's what *this* looks like.'

'Of course, that was my first thought, too' said Henry, seemingly not at all offended at Berliner's treating him like a new chum. He'd have known that the older man's manner stemmed as much from protectiveness as condescension. 'But I've done some reading and conferred with our best man in the letter carriers' office...'

'Who do you mean?' Berliner interrupted.

'Carr. You know him?'

'Hmph. Quite right: he is the best of them.' The Private Inquiry Office had had recourse to Carr's expertise on occasion, when investigating cases of extortion and anonymous letters.

'And he agrees... in fact, it was Carr who first suggested that they were genuine.'

'Well, and what if they are?' Now Berliner was just being provocative. The two of them were alike enough for him to understand the impulse, if not this instance of it. Like Henry said, it was curiosity. And once curiosity had made you look, it was hard, Otto knew, to look away. 'Suppose they're as old as you say, just well-preserved; say they're collector's items. So... what? Perhaps somebody's dropped them. Or even if they've been playing the fool, I still call that a pretty half-baked mystery.'

Henry couldn't agree, but he shrugged. 'To each his own,' he said, pocketing the letters. 'I feel the same way about your traffic in adulterers.' Again, there was no ill feeling in his words; he was merely remarking on what both men knew to be true: that their curiosity snagged on different thorns. Henry had stood up, was straightening the hem of his jacket. 'In all likelihood, I know, they're nothing. Or, as you say, nothing but trickery (though I don't believe that). Either way,' he met his friend's eyes and spoke with un-Henrylike candour,

‘they’re a welcome relief from the seedy stuff I’m accustomed to. You’ve read them, Otto. There’s a big-heartedness about them, a kind of... grace.’ It wasn’t a word you often heard outside of a church, and the delicacy of it seemed to embarrass Henry. ‘Makes a change, at any rate,’ he went on, gruffly, ‘from the malice and filth and the rest of it, the scum of the postal system. Sometimes I feel like a mudlark, raking out the public sewers.’

‘Except that your boots stay cleaner.’ His friend’s uncharacteristic show of passion amused Berliner.

‘But these,’ Henry continued, ignoring him, ‘...well, there’s no harm in them that I can see. Even supposing they were full of threats and obscenities, if I’m right about the age of the letters, the people concerned are a long time dead. And the fact that (you’re right) the letters *are* no business of mine only makes them the more innocuous. A harmless puzzle, Otto. Don’t you ever long for a case with no sting in its tail?’

‘Never!’ Berliner laughed but he meant it, you could tell. ‘Besides, Henry – harmless? You and me, we both know there is no such thing.’



Moody had knocked off work at two and headed straight home, stopping only at the butcher’s for a beef shin sawn in four. Shinbone soup was his Wednesday-night specialty. Once the pot was simmering, he’d changed clothes, chopped enough wood to last till the weekend, then sauntered up to Collins street for tobacco and the *Herald*.

Lil got home to find the lid on the soup rattling lazily and the kitchen lamp lit with the wick turned low. Slung over a chair was Moody’s jacket; his boots were splayed on the hearth.

‘I’m in here, Lil!’

Moody's voice came, muffled, from somewhere behind the kitchen range. He was out in the bathroom, an enclosed portion of the back verandah.

Lil heard the splash of water. 'You're not in the bath!' She tore open the back door. 'Moody?'

'It's all right. I'm just getting out.' The sounds of more splashing and the creak of a board.

'Couldn't you have waited?'

'Don't fuss, Lil.' Too late. His sister's lips were a tight line of exasperation. 'I'll be out in two ticks. You go and get your bath-things ready. But check on the soup first, will you?'

Under the lid, the soup's surface was all bobbing carrot and swede. Lil thrust in the tin spoon, scraped it round. Fine. The meat was coming away from the bone nicely, too. She fished out a morsel with the tip of the spoon. The big kettle, she noticed, was puffing slow steam at the back of the stove, put there by her brother so there'd be hot water to replenish the bath.

She fetched her things and when she returned Moody was bent in front of the stove, rubbing his hair dry with what looked like a tea towel.

'That's not a tea towel, I hope?'

'Used to be.' He held up the cloth, worn threadbare and torn in the middle.

'Just as well,' said Lil. Then, 'I wish you'd waited till I got home.'

'What, so's you could nab first bath?' He had his head cowed in the former tea towel once more.

'Be serious, Moody. You *know* why.' Their Uncle Dan, Marcella's brother, had taken a fit in the bath and died. Moody had only a singlet on his top half, and Lil took in the pointy shoulder-blades and stripling arms. Turning, he caught her at it.

'Stop worrying,' he told her, 'and have your bath.'

Which she did, soaking clean her ink-mottled hands, to the aromatic accompaniment of cheese straws baking. Delicious.



‘Talk about muddying the trail: that Mrs Thwaites seems to have lived in a different suburb every week.’ Over tea, Moody was canvassing the baby-farming case, which had filled more than four columns (STILL GREATER SENSATIONS; A REMARKABLY SHIFTY FAMILY) on the *Herald*’s front page. ‘Our old street, Rosamond street, even gets a mention. Seems she farmed out some nippers there.’

‘Oh, whereabouts?’ said Lil.

‘Chapel street end, from the sound of it. A family called Josephs.’

‘I don’t remember them. Do you, Poppa?’ Henry shook his head. (He had a mouthful of cheese straws.) Well, it was six years since they’d moved from Balaclava.

‘What about this Wilcox, the copper who’s been trailing her all over Melbourne?’

Henry’s mouth was empty now, but still he gave only a shake of the head in reply. He seemed distracted.

Pettit had shaken *his* head at Henry’s approach up the Lane this evening. ‘There’s still nothing come. Must be our phantom’s day off,’ he joked. ‘But here, there’s these,’ and he held out two letters. He’d got them from his neighbour, the one he called ‘Old China’. Both had been opened, Henry saw, and on the back of one were columns of pencilled Chinese characters. ‘They come Monday, I think,’ Pettit told him. ‘He’s been using ’em as scrap. Don’t know what that says,’ twisting his head to peer at the foreign script. ‘Laundry list, most probably.’

That made thirteen letters on Henry’s desk, waiting, while he finished his soup.



An hour later they were still waiting. He'd gone to the Public Library to look at old London maps, hoping to clap eyes on Tunney lane.

Wasn't that typical? The perfect apple, in Henry's care, was apt to lose its bite, the love-of-his-life to decamp, and this 'first-class mystery', this 'harmless puzzle' to go cold on his desk, while he approached crab-wise and circuitous, stoking his anticipation.

By night (it closed at ten) the Public Library's reading room glowed a cedar-y rose. The upper reaches of the shelving bays, with the ceiling, were muffled in shadow, past the gaslight's pitch. At the advice of the brass-caged reference clerk and with the aid of a sliding ladder, Henry sought and found Elmes' *Topographical Dictionary of London*, published in 1831 but still the authority on London placenames. Then he made for one of the tables in the centre of the long room, where an attendant had laid out two maps for his perusal. One was an Ordnance Survey map of recent date; the other was Horwood's, close to a hundred years old. Henry scanned the two of them, side by side, drawn into the ant's-nest profusion of streetage and hazed by a sense not unlike *déjà vu*: a reader's familiarity with a place he'd never been. Of course, the chances of his lighting on Tunney lane in that way were remote. But remember, this was Henry. Minutes passed before he sat and opened Elmes. Then it took him just nine seconds to find the spot where Tunney lane ought to have been. (Not bad for a man who was taking his time.) *Tunmarsh alley*. *Tunstall road*. But no *Tunney lane*. Henry exhaled, not even noticing that he'd been holding his breath.

Back he went to the ladder and the gap whence Elmes had come. On the same shelf, half a yard along, he came to a volume titled *New remarks of London*. It was older than Elmes' *Dictionary* - nearly a century older, according to its title page: published in 1732 for the Company of Parish Clerks. A

glance told Henry that the Parish Clerks' survey of London ('within the circumference of the Bills of Mortality') was set out not alphabetically but parish by parish, the only guide to its contents being a summary at the head of each chapter. With a glance at the clock – it was twenty minutes before nine – Henry returned with the book to his table, where the gaslight was brighter and the footing firm, and commenced skimming the tight-packed, arcane text for Tunney lane. Once, for relief, his eyes drifted back to the fretwork intricacy of Horwood's map. He had only the vaguest idea as to what part of the city he ought to be looking in. According to Carr (and Henniker Heaton), the 'G' on the letters' round postmark signified a post office in either Threadneedle or Throgmorton street as the closest to their destination. Henry turned back to the book and, roughly midway through, found what he was looking for.

Tunney or Tunny lane, on the authority of the Parish Clerks, ran south off Cornhill, nearly opposite the Royal Exchange. Its occupants in 1732 were few in number, but included 'the Brazen Head Cophee House' which had been among the first in England to serve the 'China drink called by the Chineans Toha, by other nations Tay alias Tee'. Henry turned again to the maps. First the Ordnance Survey, his index finger navigating half an inch above the paper streets. He easily found the Royal Exchange, set in the V where Threadneedle street (aha!) and Cornhill converged. And to the south... there was Birchin lane and Popes Head alley. But no Tunney lane. And on Horwood's map, the same.

'Earlier than the Horwood? That'd have to be Rocque's.' The clerk in his cage had been half-dozing when Henry sought his advice a second time. He was wide awake now, though. 'The Rocque is a good deal earlier, though. The edition we have is... let me see.' He had turned to the catalogue cabinet, to a drawer labelled MAPS, and his fingers were flicking

through the cards. 'Here - 1746.' He wrote on a slip of paper and rang a bell for the attendant. The Rocque map, he explained, was an exceptionally fine and rare piece, bequeathed to the library by the late Mr _____, an eminent Old Pioneer who'd been born within sound of Bow's bells.

'Ah, yes,' said Henry. The same man's name had been inscribed (*ex libris*) in the books he'd just consulted.

The preciousness of Rocque's map of London was evident in the fact that the attendant, when he brought it to Henry's table, didn't leave. Henry's murmured 'Thank you' was meant as a dismissal, but the attendant only nodded and stayed where he was: at the end of the table, politely watching. Rocque's map comprised twenty-four sheets, all in a stack, with a leaf of tissue between each. Luckily, the sheet Henry wanted was fourth from the top. (The attendant tensed each time a sheet was turned.) *There* was the distinctive six-branched intersection with the Royal Exchange practically at its hub. And there, just across Cornhill... Henry twisted his neck to read the name. *Tunney lane*. 'Ha!' he softly exclaimed. The Horwood map lay beside Rocque's on the table and, shuttling his gaze from one to the other, Henry could see what had happened. On the later map, the site of Tunney lane was built over. Sometime between about 1745, when Rocque compiled his map, and - Henry checked the date of Horwood's - 1794, Tunney lane must've disappeared.

It remained only to ascertain the date and means of the lane's obliteration. To that end, (and first assuring the attendant that, yes, Rocque's map would still be required) Henry returned to the same shelf as before and took down a mint-new volume, Wheatley's *London Past and Present*, which he'd earlier passed over in favour of the Elmes. In the ladder-top gloaming, he could just make out an index entry for Tunney lane, which led him (once he'd climbed down to a better-lit altitude) to page 117 and the particulars of how it

had come to pass that 'Tunney lane is no more.' In the early hours of 26 December 1752, fire had reduced to ash a swathe from Exchange alley to Lombard street in the south, and eastward as far as St Michael's churchyard. Tunney lane, White Lion yard, Castle court - all were burnt. Henry leant once more over Rocque's map. Tunney lane, he could see, had been but a short distance from Wren's monument to the Great Fire of 1666. Even all those years later and with London substantially rebuilt in brick, a fire at night in the city's heart must have been a terrifying thing. Wheatley told of how, it being midwinter, the fire plugs on Cornhill had been frozen, allowing the blaze to take hold and sweep ahead of the wind '*with such velocity that it could not be stoppt*'. Of Tunney lane itself, however, the same report quoted (from *The Gentleman's Magazine* of January 1752) had noted that '*The inhabitants on both sides of this narrow court succeeded in removing the greatest portion of their furniture and stock-in-trade.*' Once the ruins of the Brazen Head and the rest were cleared away, the ancient wriggle that had been Tunney lane soon vanished under the expanded bulk of the new Vintners' Hall.

1752. Could the letters be as old as that, or older? On a fresh page in his notebook, Henry made notes from Wheatley and sketched a map of his own based on Rocque's. Then he gave a nod to the attendant and gathered up his things. Tunney lane. He had it.



Henry's next move, you may suppose, would have been to unseal and examine all the letters. He might thus easily have established their exact age, and from their contents - at least begun to - plumb the mystery of their source and their appearance, now and in this place. But would he do it?

He cleared more space on the desk. Books, papers, pencil box, and philately tin - all were pushed back to the wall; notebook and pencil were all he kept to hand. Then he

performed his same old trick, laying out the letters in rows. This time, though, there was system in the way he did it. He checked each letter's postmark as he went. There were four marked TH (that was Thursday), all but one with morning lodging times. At least two of them had come on Sunday. Then there were those, like Pettit's first, marked FR; three with morning posting times had arrived Monday; three more, lodged at midday or after, had come on Tuesday morning. The last letters to turn up, yesterday afternoon's, were all stamped SA. Henry's grid of three rows – one for each day, arranged first-lodged to latest – ended with a letter that had, according to its postmark, been lodged at eleven on a Saturday morning.

Henry took up his pencil and wrote:

Sunday = Thursday.

Monday = Friday.

Tuesday = Saturday.

You could tell when the realisation hit. He stopped writing and his head shot up, his lips parted in a silent exclamation. Of course. That made today Sunday, by whatever scheme of time these letters followed. No wonder none had come today.

Wednesday = Sunday.

He stared at what he'd written for a drawn-out minute before adding: *Thursday = Monday?* Then he closed his notebook, gathered up the letters (keeping them in sequence), and took a moment to restore order to his desk.

And then Henry did what he always did, last thing before bed. He sat for a while, thinking.

Chapter 4

Thursday, September 7th

“The current is too strong!” Dread seized Roland’s ursine baritone. Clio, her pleading gaze locked on her rescuer, fought the roiling river’s brutal surge with every fibre of her wraithlike frame.

“Roland!” Willow’s unmaimed arm thrust through the lashing tempest to indicate the limb of a noble eucalypt overhanging the desperate and affecting tableau. If only... Too late! The torrent gave a dreadful heave and Roland’s manly grasp was void! “Clio!” A mighty sob tore from Willow’s storm-swelled breast as the pumice-hued whippet – her truest friend! – was borne headlong into the Murrumbidgee’s fathomless embrace.

This morning’s instalment of Mr Pontefract’s novel surely rivalled, for awfulness, the death-by-poisoning episode in his first chapter. (The paroxysms inflicted on Willow’s guardian by a tainted Cornish pasty had quite unfitted Lil for her morning tea that day.) Not that Lil was sorry to see the dog drowned, since its mute and cloysome presence had supplied the justification for no end of vapid soliloquizing on its mistress’s part. To satisfy herself that Clio had not, by some miracle of the picaresque, survived, Lil flicked through the handwritten pages to come. But no: once the storm abated, the whippet’s body would be found snagged downstream, thence laid to rest in a thicket of purple pathos. ‘Good job.’

Lil let herself smile. It was the closest she'd come to praise for Mr Pontefract's opus.

The day after washing it, Lil's hair was always a fright. No quantity of pins could contain it; even Moody's sternest efforts were in vain. Lil was reminded of her unruly coiffure when she consulted the mirror behind the door to examine a sty blooming on her left eye's upper lid. She'd woken with it this morning and, before leaving home, had bathed it with salt water, as hot as she could bear. But it was still coming on, throbbing and fiery red. 'Drawing out, that's what you need,' Lil told her reflection - addressing the sty, though it was a sound piece of advice for the rest of her, too.

There was a crust-end of bread in her dilly bag, the cloth drawstring bag she brought lunch in. Lil pinched out a morsel of the soft bread and popped it in her mouth. She chewed it and worked it with her tongue, binding the crumbs with saliva. Then she took the warm mush - a poultice, now - between two fingers and applied it to the burning eyelid, holding it there with a folded handkerchief while she used her free hand and good eye to leaf through the papers Mr Finlay had left on Tuesday. All were done - typed up - but a tender to the Railways Department, itemising roofing iron, gutters and spouting for stations and goods sheds on the new northern line. There were four pages, nearly all figurework in tabulated columns. That's why Lil had saved it - the best - till last. Still working one-handed, she made adjustments to the machine in preparation. And now the poultice was stone-cold, so Lil ditched it, blinking, then squared up to the machine and to work.

Once the parameters of a task have been set, a good typist performs it almost automatically. With work from a reliable hand (unlike, say, Mr Pontefract's) she acts the plain part of a conduit, requiring the devotion of little more conscious thought than one of Mr Finlay's downpipes would give to the

stuff that gushed through it. All the words and numbers coursing out her finger-ends still leave a good typist with room in her head for reverie. And Lil Vivo was a very good typist.

For all we know, her thoughts, as she set his firm's tender in type, may have strayed to Mr Finlay himself. As always when she plied her machine, her lips moved involuntarily. From time to time, they formed a wistful half-smile, hinting that her thoughts were not on roofing iron. Not, at any rate, on the particulars of linear yardage that her fingers were pecking out; but perhaps on the filigree scraps Mr F. brought in his pocket. Or maybe she thought of his tin-snicked hands, pale and freckled, with their slender, tapering fingers: the delicate way they held the newspaper he pretended to read; the way they stroked the inside of her wrist. There was that half-smile again, and Lil drew a long breath that pressed her ribcage against her stays. Then, '*Drat!*' She lost the dreamy look and reached for an eraser.



It was windy for September, and Lil was met by a dusty gust when she stepped from Stalbridge Chambers in the early afternoon. The telegraph wires hummed and rattled on their nit-comb poles. Lil threaded through to Bourke street, to the clanging of cable trams and the dinnertime hubbub of the cab-rank by Menzies' Hotel. Crossing at the broad intersection, she bunched her skirt's fullness in her free hand, fighting the whipping wind. Ahead of her, a flock of barristers coming from court hadn't a hope: while they held tight to wigs and papers, their robes swirled and flapped like washing on a widow's line.

At the pillar box by Goldsbrough Mort's grain store, Lil reached inside her satchel and drew out a letter for posting. It was addressed to Clara Meisner, a friend from her schooldays. A letter in this morning's post had proposed a visit from Clara a few days hence. Lil's reply assured her best - and only

- friend that of course she'd be welcome at the Vivos' for Sunday dinner and to spend the afternoon. Clara lived not far from town, but she and Lil saw each another once a month at best. Schoolteaching and her mother took up most of Clara's time.

Lil turned north down a lane that would bring her out nearly opposite the works of Finlay Brothers & Froome. The dress she'd worn today was a deliberate choice, severely cut in steely blue-grey gabardine. It was hardly her favourite; the colour, for a start, was one she'd never have chosen for herself. Moody, though, had insisted. It was perfect for her, he'd said: she'd look like Catherine the Great striding through a snowstorm. And Lil, of course, had given in, though she'd drawn the line at a fur trim. Between the two of them, it was known as her grave-robber dress, since the cut and colour 'brings out your bones' - so Moody said. At any rate, it did the trick, underscoring her icy reputation at Finlay Brothers & Froome when she made her delivery there. From the outer office, she caught a glimpse of Mr Finlay at his desk. He was a little pink, but he didn't look up.

Moody had practically nodded off over breakfast this morning, and he still looked dozy six hours later when Lil called at his place of employment to see the dress-stuff he'd told her about.

Osborne & Wright's was on a busy corner and Lil had come at a busy hour. Not the busiest, mind you: that would come late in the afternoon, when all but those who worked in shops could rummage and browse at their leisure. Moody was engaged with a customer, but he tipped Lil a nod that meant *I won't be long*. She stood well back from the counter so as not to be mistaken for a customer - even though, really, she was one. The other shop assistants knew her, as did Mr Osborne, the surviving partner in the business, who was just now

helping a shaky old gentleman into his overcoat. Mr Tredrea, Moody's particular friend at the shop, was free and approached Lil in the trademark pose of the shopman: hands clasped, head slightly bowed, anxious to please. Was there anything he could help Miss Vivo with, or...? Lil bobbed and, thanking him, replied that, if he didn't mind, she'd wait until Moody was free, at which Mr Tredrea redoubled his bowing and clasping and backed away. Turning to examine a bolt of figured damask, Lil smiled. He was an odd match for her brassy brother. With his stumpy legs and big blushing head, fair hair thinning on top, Lewis Tredrea seemed ready-made for a scraping posture. When Moody put on that act with a customer... now *that* was something to see.

Her brother, just then, was closing a transaction over a pair of ladies gloves, wrapping them and writing out the bill while a junior, the boggle-eyed Willie Moyes, returned the unwanted pairs to stock. When, a few minutes later, Willie escorted the customer to the door, Moody turned to his sister with the familial version of a shopman's courtesy - which is to say, he let his tiredness show.

'Ah,' he said, and it came out like a sigh, 'the balzerine.' He wrestled a heavy bolt of fabric from the wall rack, then another, and lugged both to the counter. 'This one, I thought.' He unfurled a couple of yards from the first bolt, a pale, minty green.

'Oh no, I don't think so.' Lil wrinkled her nose.

'Ha. Thought you might say that.' Moody reeled in the fabric, fixing the end with a pin. 'That eye looks bad. Sore, is it?'

Lil touched her swollen eyelid. 'It is, rather. And that mucky wind hasn't helped.'

'How about this one, then?' Moody was back on the balzerine.

'Oh, mauve...'

‘I know – oh, mauve. But look, with your hair...’ Moody loosed a length off the bolt – *thump thump* – and draped it over Lil’s shoulder. Then he stepped aside, so that she could see past him to her reflection behind the counter. ‘See? And to set off your eyes, I thought...’

Fifteen minutes later he had closed a sale on six yards of the oh-mauve balzerine, besides a yard of emerald green Canton crape for covered buttons and piping on the yoke, collar, and cuffs. He kept to his sales patter as long as Mr Osborne was in the shop; but when his employer retreated to the back room, Moody said to Lil in an undertone, ‘Take your time.’ So she pretended indecision for his sake, and he leant one hip against the counter, easing his weight from foot to foot. It was the nearest he’d come all day to sitting down.

‘Early to bed for you tonight,’ said Lil, seeing him stifle a yawn as he secured her parcel with string. He took longer about it than he need have done; in fact, she needn’t have waited at all, could’ve left the dress-makings for Moody to bring home. But the dinner-time rush was easing, and while he was executing a sale he was spared the rote busyness of tidying displays and wiping counter-tops. So he fussed over Lil’s parcel and made out her bill in his carefulest copperplate. As he returned from the cashier with her change, they exchanged a look over a customer of Mr Tredrea’s, a stout-bosomed lady who wanted a length of muslin for a fichu and was taking exception to the suggestion that as much as a yard and a quarter would be required.

Moody leant close to his sister as he saw her to the door. ‘A yard and a half, more like.’

Back out in Bourke street, Lil adjusted her load so as to keep an empty hand for parrying sudden gusts. And she paused a moment to admire Osborne & Wright’s window display, Moody’s special department. His current effort featured handkerchiefs of all different colours and patterns,

strung along wires like fairground flags and seeming almost to catch the wind.



Henry found Edgar Pettit 'stalking' Carson's cottages for the afternoon letters when he happened past the right-of-way shortly before three. He was on his way – or rather, out of his way – from the Detective Police Office, where he'd been conferring with Planck of the plain-clothes force in connection with a case of extortion. The alleged victim was a city councillor, upright and abstemious by repute; three letters in three days, however, had averred otherwise and threatened him with exposure. Henry had been able to identify for Planck the writing paper's watermark (that of an Elizabeth street stationer), the letters' distinctive scent (not aniseed, but mace), and the sex (male) and probable nationality (northern Italian) of the extortionist. Moreover, the postmark common to all three letters gave Richmond as their place of lodgment, shoring up Henry's theory that their sender would be found employed in the pickling shed of Councillor _____'s eponymous sauce and preserves manufactory, situate in that near-city suburb.

Clearly, the severance between Henry and his former employer was not absolute. His investigations under the Post Office Act frequently relied on enforcement by the police, while their own investigations hinged, from time to time, on Henry's expertise. Relations between Otto Berliner and the Detective Police Office tended to be rancorous. For Henry, though, there was only a faint crackle of embarrassment in dealing with his old colleagues. Mostly they *weren't* his old colleagues, in any case, as there'd been a changing of the guard since his time; and though the new plain-clothes men doubtless knew Henry's story, they hadn't actually witnessed his humiliation. That made it easier for him not only to command their respect, but to step inside the Detective Office

in the first place. God knows, for close to two years after his departure from the force, Henry couldn't bring himself to set foot in the place. He'd even charted a detour to avoid passing its door – no small inconvenience, since, after he moved from Balaclava, the Detective Police Office stood just a couple of hundred yards from his new home, on the town-ward side.

Now, having concluded his business with Planck, that same proximity placed him in the neighbourhood of Carson's cottages. He could see Pettit from the Lane, pacing the length of the right-of-way, scanning the cottage-fronts, tensed as if tracking a flighty animal. Turning when he reached the far end, the basket-maker spotted Henry and waved, then hurried back along the row, eyes flicking left.

‘Anything yet?’

‘Nothing yet.’ Both men had spoken at the same time. ‘No, nothing yet,’ Pettit repeated.

There'd been a windswept scatter of letters on the doorsteps at dawn this morning, all postmarked Saturday. Henry, working on his late-night hunch, had been there to harvest them before any of the cottagers emerged. He'd even snatched one from the front of Hall's place. Later, passing on his way to work, he'd told Pettit of the letters' return, and the two had agreed to meet this afternoon and scout for more.

How do you suppose Henry justified what he was doing: trespassing on other people's property and lifting their post? To Pettit, he'd called it post office business; to Otto, he'd confessed it was curiosity. But to himself? Strictly speaking, the letters weren't the property of Pettit and Hall and the rest of them, any more than they were Henry's own. Who was to say they hadn't lit on the verandahs of Carson's cottages by pure chance, no different from the old newspapers that wrapped themselves around railings, or any other wind-borne refuse? And surely his position at the post office granted him some entitlement to the letters, for... well, for diagnostic

purposes. Thus might Henry's thoughts have run – or not, as the case may be.

But now he paced with Pettit, past Pettit's own cottage, past the Chinaman's, past Mrs Parrish's and Altemayer's and Hall's, to Gerritys' at the end, then back again. The town hall clock had yet to strike three. Henry took out his watch: four minutes to the hour. Pettit was talking about varnish and keeping half an eye out for the agent who was calling at three to show him something new in that line. Henry, as he tucked his watch away, heard a sound like a startled pigeon. There was a single letter skating on Pettit's doorstep that hadn't been there before.

'Ehh, I'll be blowed!' Pettit had spotted it, too, and was pointing. 'See that? Just like I said: out of nowhere!'

He made to dive on the skittering letter, but Henry stopped him – 'No, wait' – and darted back along the row of cottages. There was mail on several doorsteps. Henry stopped at the end and half turned. His hand went to his brow. 'How...?' he said aloud, and shook his head, a study in bewilderment. How long had he and Pettit stood at the other end? Less than a minute? Had someone followed them, dropping the letters as he came? Henry had looked away for – what? – a matter of seconds as he returned his watch to its pocket. How could he have failed to see the perpetrator? But there was no time for reflection, let alone investigation.

'Mr Vivo – the wind!' A squawly gust from the south swept every letter from its resting place and sent them eddying, cartwheeling, in Henry's direction. 'I've got 'em!' shouted Pettit, though he hadn't, quite; the wind snatched them from his reach. His hat went too, as did Henry's, tumbling along the dusty cartway as he lunged after the letters. And then came the rain, a proverbial cloudburst, hard and sudden, driven on by the wind.

‘You’re sure that’s the lot of ’em?’ They were standing by the boiler that fed the steam-room of Pettit’s basket works. He’d let himself and Henry in by the rear door, each of them clutching a couple of rain- and mud-smirched letters besides their hats, likewise. ‘That’s four.’ They’d laid out the letters (never mind their hats) on a work bench, straightening them as best they could without further smearing. ‘How many did you count before the wind got ’em?’

‘I didn’t, didn’t have time. But that looks about right. Let me see: there was one at your place, one at the Chinaman’s...’ Henry tapped the corner of a letter for each one he counted off, though, of course, he couldn’t say which had come from where. ‘...one at Mrs Parrish’s, none at Hall’s or Altemayer’s...’ He was frowning at the effort to recollect. ‘... and one, I think, at Gerrity’s,’ he finished. ‘So, four. Yes, that looks right,’ and he nodded, fairly well satisfied that none had got away.

‘Lucky they’re this stiff parchment.’ Pettit had practically to shout to make himself heard over the din on the iron roof. ‘Otherwise they’d’ve turned to mush in that downpour.’

He was right. The letters, though damp, still held their shape and, folded in on themselves though they were, none showed any sign of ink bleeding through from inside. But their outsides were in a sorry state, the handwriting bleared and (Henry lifted two letters by the corner) the postmarks swimmy. In fact – look – here was one wiped to a blur by someone’s (Pettit’s?) grabbing fingers. Henry tut-tutted.

‘Still, at least you seen it for yourself. The way they just *appear*.’ Pettit made a magician’s gesture with his hands.

He was right: the letters *had* just appeared. Now, how did a man like Henry go about explaining such a thing, even – especially – to himself? The difficulty of it showed as a frown drawing tight the lines of his thin face. *The letters had just appeared*. Henry didn’t like it, you could tell. And yet... there was a tightening at his jawline too and, detectable by a sharp

eye, a quickening of the pulse in his neck. And his colour was up. *They'd just appeared.* If it were possible to be at once perplexed and elated, then Henry Vivo surely was. The 'first-class mystery' had him fast in its grip.



Among Lil's regular clients was the firm of Xebec, Mistico & Felucca, fancy goods importers of Lonsdale street East. Soon after she began typewriting for him - two years ago, or more - Mr Bacash, the firm's principal, had confessed that actually there were no Messrs Xebec, Mistico and Felucca; there was only himself.

'They are kinds of sail-boat,' he'd explained to Lil. 'The xebec, you see, it has three masts, the felucca has two, and the mistico is between in size.' Long experience in trade, on both sides of the world, meant that Mr Bacash knew a good deal about boats and the sea. Much of his nautical lore, it was true, had been imbibed through intercourse with sailors for, in the absence of Messrs Xebec, Mistico and Felucca, or of anything in the shape of a clerk or import agent, his shipments were met at the docks by Mr Bacash himself.

The kitbag he always carried was made of Canary Island banana palm - so he'd been told by the sailor from whom he'd got it. Bound at the edges with leather and brass, the fibrous wood (or was it bark?) made a receptacle that was lightweight and surprisingly sturdy. Indeed, there was much to be surprised at in both Mr Bacash and his Canary Island banana palm kitbag. Besides a rolled-up bundle of letters and orders that wanted replies, Mr Bacash could produce from his kitbag any number of unexpected things - queer things, some of them, that Lil couldn't put names to. No doubt they formed a portion of his stock-in-trade; 'fancy goods', after all, encompassed a near-infinite catalogue, from the trifling to the essential. But some items that emerged from the kitbag on

Thursday afternoons were put to uses for which, almost certainly, they had never been intended.

Lil had long ago made a search of her own stock-in-trade for the means to reciprocate. Only two small brushes had recommended themselves. They had come with her Remington: a hard one for cleaning the type-heads, a soft one for dusting the more delicate parts of the machine. Both had proved admirably adaptable to other uses.

One thing Mr Bacash invariably produced from his kitbag that did not rank as fancy goods (though perhaps it ought to have done) was Turkish delight. It came in a pretty hexagonal box about the size of a hymnal, olive-green, with roses traced in gold. Lil had learnt only recently that a quantity of the very same stuff had been the currency that procured Mr Bacash his banana palm kitbag.

‘Like you, Miss Vivo,’ he’d told her, ‘that seaman had a softness for Turkish delight.’ Mr Bacash’s choice of words was not inapt (a *weakness* was what he’d meant), but the sailor’s softness was not quite like Lil’s, surely. Her partiality for the sweet was such that the fancy goods man would dab himself with rosewater, sometimes, as a bait to her ardour.

He sat across the desk from Lil now, sorting through his papers. Because his command of written English was not as sure as his speech, Mr Bacash dictated aloud his outgoing correspondence. Taking it down in shorthand, Lil corrected some of his ‘Persian-isms’ as she went; the rest she would sort out as she put them in type. Thanks to Lil, whether he was addressing a supplier of Egyptian knick-knacks or a country vicar wanting prizes for a Sunday school pic-nic, Mr K.M. Bacash (Principal) expressed himself in faultless commercial English.

Not until the paperwork was dealt with did he delve into his kitbag for the box of Turkish delight, marking the commencement of a separate transaction.

‘Mr Bacash.’ Lil’s slight smile showed her pleasure. She removed the lid of the box and, folding back the crackly paper, chose one white-dusted pink square and raised it to her mouth. There was that smile again, her eyes briefly closing.

‘Your eye. What is wrong?’ Normally, Mr Bacash would observe her pleasure with pleasure of his own, anticipating the moment when she would reach across the desk and place the unbitten half of the sweet in *his* mouth. But he had noticed the red swelling of her eyelid.

‘Oh,’ she touched it, ‘a sty. It’s nothing.’

Mr Bacash’s concern was not to be deflected, though. He came round to her side of the desk. ‘Let me see.’ Taking her face between his hands, he tilted it towards the window. He peered hard and gave a grunt of concern. ‘I know a thing for this. Have you a spoon, Miss Vivo?’

‘A spoon, Mr Bacash?’ she said, saucily for Lil. ‘There must be one in your kitbag, surely?’

‘Indeed no, not a spoon, but...’ He rummaged in the kitbag and produced a folded, jap-yellow neckerchief. ‘A spoon?’ he repeated.

There was a spoon in the tea canister. But wait, better still, she’d brought a billy-can of Moody’s left-over shinbone soup for dinner today, and a spoon to eat it with. Mr Whelk had heated the soup on the stove in his room. Now, at Mr Bacash’s insistence, Lil paid a call on the caretaker, one floor up, for a teapotful of hot water.

‘Very good,’ Mr Bacash greeted her when she returned. ‘Bring it here.’ In a cleared space on the desk he’d arranged the teapot stand, the neckerchief, and the soup spoon. ‘Come, sit,’ he said, indicating his chair, which he’d turned away from the desk to face the centre of the room. With a gesture of resignation, Lil did as she was bid. Mr Bacash stood behind her and she heard the soft *clank* of the spoon in the pot. Then, ‘Close your eyes.’ He wrapped the yellow cloth around

the bowl of the hot spoon. Placing one hand flat on her upper chest, he pressed Lil's shoulder-blades against him; his other hand applied the warm, cloth-wrapped convex of the spoon to her eyelid. Four times he repeated the process, each time letting the spoon grow cool, then unwrapping, reheating, re-wrapping, and resting it again on the crest of the sty.

'There,' said Mr Bacash after the fifth application, 'you will see, that will make it...' He hesitated, seeking the right word.

'Better?'

'Break... no, burst. Better also, I think.'

Hearing him lay the spoon on the desk, Lil opened her eyes and made to turn and face him.

'No,' he said, 'stay.' He drew a hand across her brow, just the finger-tips, and brushed each eyelid shut. 'Let it rest. Dark will do good, I think.' He re-folded the neckerchief lengthways and gently covered her eyes with it, tying the ends behind her head. 'See what the dark brings.' He cradled her face in his hands, thumbs stroking her cheekbones, then tracing down the line of her jaw. Obliging, Lil tilted her chin to let him unbutton the throat of her grave-robber dress.



'Lil!'

She started at hearing her name hallooed. Waiting at Champion's corner to cross busy Swanston street, she turned to see Otto Berliner puffing towards her with his habitual red face and a furled umbrella. 'Uncle O!'

'Lil, my dear!' He seized her hand in both of his, and his face registered surprise. 'What's this? No gloves?'

Embarrassed, Lil pulled her hand away. 'Mislaid, I'm afraid. I could've used your powers of detection half an hour ago, Uncle O, when I was searching my office top to bottom for them.' They must have found their way into the Canary Island banana palm kitbag while her eyes were covered - there could be no other explanation.

‘You have not been working until this late hour?’ Otto’s tone was one of mock admonishment, and he furrowed his brow theatrically.

Lil smiled. ‘Late hour?’ She nodded towards the town hall clock. ‘It hasn’t gone six yet.’

‘But who is preparing dinner?’ demanded Otto. ‘Who,’ he shook a fat finger at her, ‘is looking after your papa?’

‘Poppa can look after himself,’ said Lil, giving him a stern look of her own, ‘as you well know.’ There wasn’t an ounce of animosity in the exchange. It was merely an affectionate ritual that the two of them enacted each time they met: Otto sounding avuncular concern, Lil rebuffing it.

Otto blew a disparaging sound with his lips. ‘And supposing he can? What about you, my girl? Who will look after *you*? You cannot be a type writer all your life. Show me your hands.’ He took hold of both her hands, swivelling them palm-up before Lil snatched them away. ‘Aha! You’re ashamed of your working hands! Calloused, are they?’

‘Not so much as they would be if I stayed at home, keeping house for Poppa, as you think I ought to,’ Lil replied with spirit. Typewriting had, it was true, somewhat hardened the skin of her fingertips; but the closest thing to a callus was on the side of her right thumb, where it repeatedly struck the space-bar. If Lil was avoiding Uncle O’s scrutiny, though, calluses weren’t the reason. The far-famed Otto Berliner could discern clues that eluded other eyes, and Lil’s hands... well, her ungloved hands had lately been complicit in acts more shameful than typewriting. Who was to say that a man like Otto – exposé of dalliances, prover of paternity suits – couldn’t detect traces of such acts? Blushing, Lil stole another glance at the town hall clock, its face illuminated in the deepening dusk.

Otto noticed (of course he did). ‘Here, I will walk with you,’ he offered, crooking his elbow to receive her hand.

Her Uncle O knew, and Lil knew he knew, all about her year in Bendigo. Uncle O, more than anyone, had seen her undone. They'd never spoken of it, the two of them, but a residual ballast of shame on the one's part and protectiveness on the other's meant that their banter often listed into darker shoals. Now, as they proceeded uphill on the Lane, Lil held her uncle's arm and yet kept her distance.

Frank Leeming had been an apprentice with Moody at Buckley & Nunn's, and the pair had stuck together outside of working hours as well. Shopmen kept such unsociable hours that the standard youthful hijinks – the races, Bourke street on a Saturday night – were closed to them. So it had happened that Frank and Moody fell in with a crowd of mid-week, back-street gamblers and bad hats. Young Frank Leeming had been halfway there to start with. He was made of harder stuff than Moody and always seemed to have something to hide. For all that, Frank was a born shopman, with ostentatious good manners and charm laid on; so that, if you didn't entirely trust him, still you couldn't deny his prowess as a salesman. His looks were arresting, too: hair so blond that pomade scarcely darkened it, with indigo eyes, a fine-shaped head, and a lithe, lean frame in a natty suit. And there was a teasing languidness about him – the lowered eyelids, the slow smile – that beguiled, hinting at a secret worth knowing.

Lil was beguiled, that's for certain. From the first time he came out to Balaclava – she must have been fourteen – she'd mooned after Frank Leeming. Of course, Marcella had still been at home then and... well, Frank and Marcella – it was a case of like meeting like. Not that Marcella could ever have been called *languid*; she was too spirited for that. But she and Frank were charmers both. Irresistible, and they knew it.

Like her friend Clara, the schoolgirl Lil had been destined for training as a teacher. Her eyebrows were yet unplucked, her aspect maiden, bookish and shy. Even her playfulness with Moody was tempered when Frank was around, and was outshone anyway by their mother's all-round luminance. Until Marcella left, Lil was as good as invisible. But then Frank noticed her, and Lil was gone. Not *gone* in the sense of *gone away* – that was later – but *gone* as in *lost, beyond help*. And before she'd turned seventeen, Lil Vivo was a *goner*: ruined beyond recovery.

Henry had apprised his old friend – and *only* his old friend – of the particulars attending his daughter's fall from grace. 'It's in the blood, I suppose,' he'd said. 'Like her mother.' The same thought must already have occurred to Otto, just as surely as Marcella's disgrace had stirred Frank Leeming's notice of the girl in the first place. And Lil herself, it was clear, had embraced her mother's fate as her own. Hers, though, had been a solemn kind of waywardness that she'd seemed not so much to revel in, as submit to – something like the difference between beach-bathing and wading out deep with weighted pockets. *Like her mother*. Only Moody would have scorned the idea, knowing Lil and their mother, and Frank, as he did. 'But she's still young,' Otto had said, in her defence.

Otto it was who'd set off in pursuit of the fugitive pair, tracking them down at Kilmore. (Just like Marcella and her woodman, they'd taken the Sydney road, but hadn't got so far.) He'd sent Frank packing from the Pretty Sally Inn with fifty quid to set himself up in Sydney and a warning-off that had rattled the younger man's teeth. As for Lil, she'd been *gone* now in another sense – several months gone, in fact. Otto had taken her by train to Bendigo, ostensibly to stay with Henry's family (of whom none remained living there) while she trained – this much was true – in shorthand and typewriting at Cash's Commercial College.

Had Lil protested? Had she wailed after Frank, or railed at her confinement for nearly five months in Reverend Angove's Society-in-Aid home? Had she resented her father's interference, or the fact that he'd had Uncle O find and rescue *her* but not Marcella? There'd been just the one outburst: the day Otto found her and chased Frank away. Otherwise, she'd shown no sign of any such feelings, nor of repentance either, only stoic resignation.

It was ten days after her eighteenth birthday when she came home, and by then home was no longer Rosamond street, Balaclava, but the cottage in the city.

*'Here we are! *Hoc loco.*'

Otto Berliner announced the name on the Vivos' back gate, carved out of sassafras by Henry when he and Marcella were newly wed. Moody had jemmied the nameplate off their old front door when they moved house, and fixed it here. *Hoc loco.* In this place.

While Lil completed Mrs Hustler's dinner preparations, her Uncle O nipped out for a bottle of beer to share with Henry, who was already home.

'You'll stay for tea?' Lil and her Poppa had conferred in Otto's absence and, yes, if she added more rice and made up a batch of drop scones, the meal ought to stretch to meet the big man's appetite. But no, he couldn't stop. Mrs Berliner was expecting him.

Henry had two small glasses of beer to Otto's twice that, and they talked over the day's news, primarily the baby-farming case. Needless to say, Otto was acquainted with the indefatigable plain-clothes Constable Wilcox ('Energetic, but a muddler') and both men were up on details that hadn't yet appeared in the papers. Henry's account of his visit to the Detective Police Office elicited scornful asides from Otto, whose face the beer had made redder than ever. He loosened

two buttons of his waistcoat and – ‘May I?’ – put up his feet on Moody’s chair, looking as if he might settle in, for all that Mrs Berliner was keeping dinner for him. Ten minutes later though, he was out the front door and headed for the tram.

Henry stood by the kitchen stove, kneading his knuckles where rheumatism had started to make itself felt. His eyes were fixed on something not there, giving him a slightly fuddled look. It could’ve been the two glasses of beer. But it wasn’t.



Tonight he would open the letters, all of them. He’d been at home a good while before Lil and Otto arrived, and had shooed Mrs Hustler off early so that he might finish drying out the storm-stained letters on a tray in the range’s warming-box. Now they were put away with the rest – making eighteen in all – and Henry was about to give in to temptation at last.

He retreated early to his room, leaving the young folk to linger over their drop scones (even without Uncle O’s appetite to consider, Lil had decided they’d make a treat for her dead-on-his-feet brother). Now that he’d decided, Henry tackled the task without ceremony, almost in haste. Of course, he had a system. He’d cut sheets of foolscap in quarters, making neat slips that measured six-and-a-half inches by four, one slip for each letter, numbered 1 to 18.

Letter by letter and slip by slip, he transcribed the details from front and back of each wrapper. The last four, rain-soiled, yielded practically nothing. Four others had been opened before they reached Henry; one of them was covered with the Chinaman’s scribble, but its address and postmark were still legible. Where a letter’s seal was other than a flattened blob, Henry made a sketch of the design pressed into the wax. He took considerable care in slitting the seals, but found it hard, even so, to keep the wax from cracking. Each letter he flattened out, outer side up, then turned his

attention to the next. And so on, eighteen times, until there was no next letter.

The letters' stiff creases and lumpy wax seals made for in an unruly pile when the first part of Henry's job was done. The room was cold as ever, but he had a fair steam up and had cast off his woollen cap. Now he turned the pile of letters over and took off the topmost sheet. Letter No. 1. With the corresponding slip at his right hand, Henry read:

3rd Sept^r, Thursday

My D^r. Husband,

*Theſe 4 Years, I have play'd the Seekforrow, ſo
Deſpond^{ing} as ſcarce to ſhow a gry for you. Nor
for my Selſe, nor not for aught foever but the ake.
Yet ſome Thing, of a fudden, has commov'd me
to chuſe it otherways. What ſay you Husband,
but we fadge to Live gladly to gether at laſt?*

*Please to forgive for ſo long lett^{ing} forrow ſcrape
our Homes old chear to bitter Dern,
Y^r ftill true wife,
Jennet*

The husband whom she addressed was Richard Maydwell, pewterer, 'at the Acorn' – the sign of the acorn, that would be.

Her letter had come to Gerrity's, as had another addressed to Maydwell, plucked from the doorstep just this morning by Henry himself. That one, though, had been addressed to M^{rs} Maydwell, in a very inferior, blotty hand. Henry reached into the pile, making for letter No. 15. But he stopped – actually drew his fingers into fists and bunched them tight on the desk's edge, visibly willing himself to firmness. He exhaled, a slow breath that snaked the length of his backbone, then he straightened his head with a click like the hands of a watch resetting. His hands, when he freed them, reached for the pencil and the slip of paper for letter No. 1.

A dithering draught at that instant fluttered the paper from his grasp and skewed Jennet Maydwell's letter sideways. Henry clapped a hand on each and turned his head sharply in the direction of the fireplace. A Jubilee pennant hung unstirring from the mantel. He twisted the other way then, leaning back in his chair to see the foot of the door past his bed. The draught-excluder was in place. Frowning, he straightened his papers and, with another glance over his shoulder, commenced to write. *Jennet Maydwell to her husband*, he noted on the slip. *Thursday, 3rd September - Seeking reconciliation after 4 years' estrangement*, he wrote, *Seeksorrow - gry - fadge - dern.*



From the back of the house came the rattling squeal of a window opening. When Henry passed through the kitchen a minute later, on his way to the privy, a ragged smoke-ring was issuing from his daughter's lips. A stern, 'Outside,' was all he had to say.

'Oh, Poppa, it's cold!' But Lil pinched out the cigarette and shoved down the sash. Noticing how he tugged the collar of his plaid coat tight before stepping outside, she called after him, 'I'll do you a brick, shall I, for your feet?' There came no reply, but she stuck a brick in the oven anyway, and two in the warming box for hers and Moody's beds.

Moody went outside with the snuffed cigarette and brought it back to life. 'Pop.' He acknowledged his father on the exhale. Henry took a seat under the verandah and fixed himself a pipe. 'I hear I missed Uncle O.'

Henry may have grunted, or else puffed a rejoinder.

'Any scandal?'

A contemplative puff. 'Much as usual.'

Seeing how it was, Moody settled for smoking until Lil joined them, shivering, to claim the fag-end. The rain was gone and the wind with it, leaving a clear sky over their yard and the promise of frost. None of the Vivos spoke, only

sought out their separate stars and thought their separate thoughts.

Lil tapped on Henry's door not long after. 'Your brick, Poppa.' He had his cap back on, his collar up. 'Brr,' she said, 'it's cold in here. You ought to set yourself a fire these nights. There's plenty of wood cut.'

Henry let her fuss while he set the wrapped brick on the rug under his feet. Its heat quickly penetrated the thin soles of his slippers. He gave a grunt, a satisfied one.

'What's this, work?' Standing behind him, Lil surveyed the desk with interest.

'Not work, no. At least,' Henry looked abashed, 'not exactly.' A pause. 'You remember that letter Pettit showed me?' And Lil propped on the edge of her father's bed while he told her the rest. From a halting start, Henry gathered steam, exhilarated to be telling someone at last. 'And I've just begun reading them all through,' he finished, indicating the Maydwell letter.

Lil was incredulous. 'Do you mean to say they've been arriving since Monday and you haven't looked at them till now?'

'Not in a systematic fashion, no.' A *systematic fashion*. Even to his own ears, it must have sounded feeble. 'Some were already opened when they came to me; of course, I've examined *them*,' he said, defensively. 'And I've been doing a good deal of background investigation. I *am* a detective, remember.' That last hovered between haughtiness and hurt pride.

'Have you shown them to Uncle O?' It was the kind of question you'd expect Moody to have asked, implying as it did *Have you shown them to a real detective?*

Henry looked at his hands. 'One or two of them.'

'What did he say?'

‘He thinks somebody’s “having me on”.’

‘And what do *you* think, Poppa?’

‘Oh, they’re genuine. I’m sure of it.’ And he sounded sure.

‘But how can they be? You say they must have been written some time before... when?’

‘1753.’

‘...some time before 1753. Yet, just look at them: they can’t possibly be that old. And how could they just *appear* like that, out of thin air?’ Her father’s apparent credulity had set Lil agitated. She must have clocked her own rising shrillness, though, because she gave an apologetic smile and altered her tone to a coaxing, daughterly one. ‘Where do you think they’re coming from, Poppa, really?’

‘That’s just what I intend to find out. The thing is...’ Seeing Lil about to interrupt, Henry held up a hand. ‘No, I can see what you’re thinking: that I’ve gone soft-witted; that next I’ll be turning to spirit-photography or table-rapping. Just what Otto said, more-or-less. But, as I told him, where’s the harm? This isn’t work, after all. No one’s breaking the law – at least, not so far as I can tell. I can take my time, unravel this just as I please. *I* don’t know why letters addressed to a London street in... in Dr Johnson’s time should suddenly turn up here, or how they materialised like they did today. But there they are.’ The way Lil was smiling made Henry half-shy to admit it, but he did: ‘I’m enjoying myself.’

He was practically sprawled back in his chair, self-satisfied – a most un-Henrylike attitude and the reason for Lil’s indulgent smile.

‘Can I see them?’ she asked, and her father lost his equanimity in an instant. The hot brick made him stagger as he found his feet.

Lil was already reaching for the crackling heap of letters. ‘Just a look,’ she wheedled. ‘I’ll leave the detective work to you, Poppa, I promise.’

Henry huffed and pushed back his chair, kicking the damned brick out of the way. 'All right,' he frowned, 'just a look. But be careful how you handle them.' And he stood sentinel while Lil bent to read the letter on top.

Actually, she didn't read it but, as she'd promised, just looked. 'No date,' she mused. 'No year, I mean.' She turned to Henry. 'You haven't looked at them all yet, have you?'

'No. I mean to examine each one thoroughly, in their proper sequence.' He emphasized the word *examine*, as much as to say: a detective doesn't *look at* evidence.

'May I look - just at the dates?'

Henry hesitated; fumed, really. It was plain that he wanted - part of him - to say, 'Be off!' But this was Lil, after all. The twist of his mouth betraying his reluctance, he gave a curt nod.

'Good.' Lil gingerly took hold of the letters, and a fragment or two of sealing-wax skittered on the floorboards. 'Bring the lamp. I'll spread them out on the bed.'

So Henry stood on one side of the bed holding the lamp aloft while Lil, opposite, lay out the letters all over his bedspread. It was a cramped fit, but by removing the pillow she made two rows of nine. The lamplight, close-to, accentuated the bulge of her inflamed eyelid. Her father must have noticed, but said nothing.

'Now...' and Lil bent to survey the arrayed letters, noting aloud the date at the head of each. 'Third of September, Thursday...' (that was Jennet Maydwell's) '...September the third, Thursday. Thursday... Ah! September the third, 1752.' She looked up, but couldn't make out Henry's expression past the lamp's glare. 'There's your year, Poppa.' Then she went on. There were letters dated Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and - this afternoon's delivery, pitted and stippled from the rain - Monday. And several of them gave the year: the same year, 1752, that Tunney lane burnt down.

‘Seventh of September?’ said Lil when she finished, echoing the date of the last letters. ‘That’s today.’ She was right. Trust a typist to be sure of the date.

Chapter 5

Friday, September 8th

‘Still bung-eyed, I see.’ Lil had woken with her eye glued shut, the sty having burst in the night. She’d bathed it clean; even so, it looked, Moody observed, like she’d been in a prize fight.

‘Will you be wanting tea tonight, or not?’ She was leaving a note for Mrs Hustler.

‘Let’s say, not. Lewis and I’ll find for ourselves after work.’ He meant Mr Tredrea from the shop.

Moody helped Lil plot a list for Mrs H’s bi-weekly shop, and she reminded him about Sunday – that Clara would be coming for dinner. ‘And in the afternoon, there’s a Liedertafel concert at the town hall.’

‘Liedertafel? No, thanks.’ He pigeoned his chest and let out a warbly tenor. ‘*Give me no part-songs! Give me no glees!*’ The Liedertafel’s starchy, front-parlour repertoire wasn’t at all to his taste. Music, for Moody’s liking, had to be comical, parodical, and served from the stage at the King’s or the Gaiety, not the teetotal town hall.

He sat to breakfast in his workaday suit – all but the coat – of deepest navy blue. That and his hair, near-black and brilliantined, his quick, inky eyes and sharpish nose gave him the air of a cheeky jackdaw. As striking to look at as Lil, he was, only with more of their mother’s animation and less of her eyebrow. Young ladies liked Moody and he liked them back. Barmaids, shopgirls, Mr Tredrea’s sister. Still, at age

twenty-four, he showed no inclination to settle on one. It wasn't – by any means – that he was shy, nor a cad. He hadn't eschewed manly feelings, just hadn't grown into them.

'The old man's running late,' he observed, sipping his tea. 'Where is he, d'you know?'

'Oh, he's gone.' Lil looked up from her note. 'Left early. Postal business.'

Moody had asked, when she returned to the kitchen the night before, what had kept her so long with Henry. 'I thought you must've gone to bed till I heard you in there, talking. Hasn't gone and converted you to stamp-collecting, has he?'

'He needed help sorting some paperwork, that's all.'

'Paperwork?' Moody had made it sound as if the word smelt bad. 'You'd reckon he'd get enough of that in his day-shift. Still,' stretching in his chair, 'at least it means he leaves us – well, me – in peace.'

'Hmm,' was all Lil had replied.

Despite what she'd promised her father, she hadn't looked *just* at the dates as she'd scanned the letters laid out on his bed. True, she hadn't examined any one minutely, but she'd seen enough to glean strong hints of similitude between them. There was the archaic script, of course, and the quaint style of expression; but those weren't the only points of likeness. No ordinarily observant eye could have failed to notice that, though originating from many hands, every one of the letters was a transaction in forgiveness.

Lil's eye, more than ordinarily observant, had chanced on *the undertakings of pride... in hopes our differences will foon be compof'd... take these as figns of mending... I will confefs... it remains but to palliate what we cannot cure*, among other overtures at reconciliation and remorse. Some – like Jennet Maydwell's – were tender, some businesslike. Altogether, the letters had

given Lil more than usual cause for contemplation as she'd gathered herself for sleep. She had been awake to hear the yielding squeak of Henry's bedsprings some time past midnight and, later still, the sudden cry of Moody's old incubus. After that – after a while – she'd slept.



Lil's insufficiency of sleep showed in her typewriting next morning. Her fingers were sluggish and her thumb dragged on the space bar, making words run together. Unmistakeable was her repeated slurring of *allthe, willthe, untilthe*. There was something in those *-l the* combinations that, when she was tired, caused Lil's thumb to miss its beat. She pecked haltingly through Mr Pontefract's last few pages, so as to have the week's copy of 'Weeping Willow' wrapped in readiness – not perfect, but better than presentable – when the author called at eleven with his next instalment.

Self-importance like Mr Pontefract's was a thing to behold. Indeed, the man was the living spit of his writing style: pompous, flamboyant, overreaching. Sartorially, he was of the type Moody called a *noncer*: possessed of a certainty in his own good taste that was as misplaced as it was unshakeable. A spotted neckerchief, white-on-red, was his signature-piece. He favoured dark-coloured shirts and suits of a baggy fit, over which, in these colder months, went a greasy black opera coat, worn cape-style and trimmed with astrakhan. In all the time she'd worked for him, Lil had never known him to settle on one particular hat. They were a mixed lot, Mr Pontefract's hats, but all attested to the man's self-delusion, to his *noncerness*. Today's was something like a matador's headgear: a kind of beret, stiffened to a peak at either end. If Lil suspected he was wearing it sideways, she wouldn't have been the only one. But she kept her gaze averted and her face straight.

‘Splendid, Miss Vivo! Splendid.’ Mr Pontefract fanned the typewritten pages. ‘Now, tell me truly: did you shed tears at poor Clio’s demise?’ He wanted indulging, but Lil wasn’t about to oblige. All she gave him was a wan smile together with her account for fifteen shillings. ‘Ah, but of course,’ he drawled as he counted out the coins, ‘you are a typiste, not a *littérateur*.’ He said practically the same thing every week, and every week Lil paid strict attention to the forming of her letters on the handwritten receipt. ‘However,’ he went on portentously, ‘I predict that even you, Miss Vivo, will be moved by what awaits our heroine herein.’ And he patted the parcel of fresh pages with one ring-studded hand.

There came a sharp sound of tearing. ‘Your receipt.’ Lil handed the slip of paper to her vexatious client. ‘Next Friday, then.’ Saying which she crossed to the door, and held it open, meaningly. Lil had taken care, since Mr Pontefract’s third or fourth visit, never to offer him a chair. He took up a good twenty unpaid minutes of her time as it was; once seated, he’d stay for an hour.



‘I wondered, sir, about that letter – the London penny post...?’

‘Yes?’

‘...whether you’d been able to learn any more of it?’

Aloysius Carr had been so bold as to seek out the post-office detective in his office. The ostensible superiority of Henry’s billet – the window facing Bourke Street, the hand-lettered injunction to KNOCK AND ENTER – was marred by a sporadic din from the floor above. The newly added third storey of the Melbourne GPO housed the printing works wherein the colony’s postage stamps were produced. Through the ceiling of Henry’s office would come the pneumatic hiss and punch of the machinery that drove the perforating rollers. Better that than the situation of poor Morris, whose office was near the stairwell. He had to keep his window wide open, regardless of

the weather, or risk smotheration by fumes from the gum that made the stamps stick.

The presses upstairs were silent just now, so Henry couldn't use their racket to deflect Carr's question. Quick as a shiver, his expression resolved from hesitation to decision. 'Come in,' he said, 'sit down.' Carr did so, uneasy at the invitation but eager as to what he might learn. Henry looked at his hands and at the blotter, marked with faint reversals of his handwriting. 'There are more of them,' he said, 'more letters. Nearly two dozen now.' There'd been another five this morning.

'Your neighbour's found them? Mr... Pettit?'

'Yes, and *his* neighbours.' Shifting in his seat, Henry met Carr's eyes. 'The letters arrive on their doorsteps, morning and afternoon.'

'By post, you mean?' Carr was leaning forward, keen to grasp the details.

Henry dropped his eyes again. 'Not by post, no.' Then, 'Look what came this morning. It will interest you, I think.' It was a letter - of course - only more elaborately directed than the rest,

To Edw^d Cates Esq.
at t^{he} Brazen Head
Tunney-lane, by Corn hill
London

and with the added instruction *Hold till call'd for* across the top corner. But it was to the back flap that Henry drew Carr's attention.

'Ah now, *there's* a Bishop Mark.' The large circle enclosed the date: 7 SE. 'Seventh of September,' said Carr. 'That's yesterday?' He looked from the letter to Henry, his expression matching the tentativeness in his voice.

'Not yesterday, no.' The detective paused, and Carr waited. Henry's hands were splayed lightly on the desktop, and he

studied them – one, then the other – like a man uncertain how many fingers he possessed. ‘1752,’ he said.

‘1752? That’s the year? How can you be sure?’ Carr’s quizzing of his superior didn’t register as impertinence with either man.

‘The other letters,’ Henry waved one hand, ‘I... with Pettit’s permission, I opened them. Some bear the date in full. 1752,’ he said again.

Carr turned the letter over in his hands, examining every pristine part of it. He rubbed the wax seal with his thumb and marvelled at the freshness of the impression. ‘Hard to believe it’s as old as that. A hundred and ... forty-one years.’ He looked at Henry straight. ‘Do you believe it, sir?’

His gaze was met with one that invited complicity. ‘Yes,’ Henry said, ‘I do.’

He told Carr of his successful hunt for Tunney lane (‘as you suggested’) at the Public Library. ‘It was off Cornhill – just as it says there.’ Henry indicated the letter in the other man’s hand. ‘Do you know London at all?’ Carr shook his head and his forelock covered one eye. ‘It was close by the Royal Exchange, in the commercial part of the City.’

‘You say “it was”?’

‘That’s right. Tunney lane is no more,’ said Henry, unconsciously quoting Wheatley’s *London Past and Present*. ‘Destroyed by fire at the end of 1752...’

‘Ah!’

‘...and then built over.’

‘So...’ Carr flicked his hair back. Holding the letter by one corner, he frowned at it, hard. Words, questions seemed to fail him.

‘Here.’ Henry offered his flummoxed visitor a letter knife, blunt end first.

‘Open it?’ The letter carrier’s eyes went wide.

Henry nodded. ‘Pettit and the others have charged me with Solving The Mystery,’ he said, capitalising those last three words for the drama of it. ‘Let’s take a look, shall we?’

It was unlike him, this breezy candour. Carr was unnerved by it, you could tell. ‘You’re sure, sir?’ he said, like a schoolboy to a tipsy master.

Henry gestured with an open palm: *go ahead*.

Letter in one hand, knife in the other, Aloysius Carr hesitated a moment longer, as if asking absolution of the postal gods. Then, ‘Righto,’ he said and sliced the seal. With a careful crackle, he opened the folds and quickly skimmed the contents. ‘It seems to be a legal document,’ he said, the trepidation in his voice replaced by rising excitement. ‘And the date... yes, here: September the 3rd, 1752. You’re right,’ he said, his bright eyes meeting Henry’s. Then, realising how that sounded, as if he’d doubted the detective, he fumbled, ‘I mean, sir...’

But Henry waved away the addendum. ‘Let me see.’ Carr handed him the document, and he read –

Know all men by theſe prefents. That I Roger Bramble of Anfelhome, Lincs, have remifed, releafed, and quit claimed unto Edward Cates all manner of actions, Suits, Cauſes, and accounts, Debts, Duties, Reckonings, Sums of Money, Controverſies, Judgments, Executions, and demands whatſoever, from the beginning of the World, to this day, being September the 3^d 1752. In witnefs whereof I have unto put my hand and feal, the day and Year above written.

Signed and Delivered

Roger Bramble

in the Prefence of

Ja^s Windus Deveney

Those long *fs* and the writer's scrappy hand impeded a smooth reading. Henry began aloud but finished in silence. 'So,' he said when he reached the end, 'a letter of release.' He spoke with satisfaction, as if the letter in his hand proved something. 'September the 3rd,' he mused. 'That would've been...'

'Sunday,' said Carr, smartly.

'Ah, but in 1752,' Henry consulted his notebook, 'it was a Thursday.' He turned the letter over. 'This postmark...'

'The Bishop mark.'

'You say it signifies that the letter was posted outside of London?'

'That's right,' said Carr. 'I'd have to check one of my books downstairs to be sure, but at a guess I'd say it was stamped when it arrived in London. So that, supposing it was lodged in Lincolnshire on the 3rd or 4th, it would have been postmarked by the receiving office in London on the 7th.'

'And delivered on the 8th,' Henry completed the sequence.

'Except,' said Carr, 'that it was *not* delivered. Obviously,' he added, indicating the just-opened letter.

'Not in 1752.' Henry's habitual mien, nailed-down and guarded, was transformed: his cheeks were flushed, his features oiled and mobile. A certain archness pricked at the corners of his mouth.

Carr's face, on the other hand, was pinched with the effort of making sense of things. 'I don't see...' he began, then leapt to his feet. 'The time! Oh gawd,' he said, forgetting himself entirely, 'I'm late!'

'Wait,' said Henry, rising too. 'Let me make your excuses to Mr Mulligan. I'll tell him you were lending me assistance with a case of Some Importance.' He took his jacket from its hook and held the door for the letter carrier. Even in his agitation at returning late from lunch, Carr cast back a reluctant look at the parchment on Henry's desk. 'Sir, I...'

Henry appeared to make a lightning calculation: it was only one letter, one of twenty-three. 'Here,' he said, 'take it,' and refolding the stiff paper, he thrust it at the other man. 'Study it some more. We'll talk again soon.' He buttoned his jacket and followed Carr into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind them. Suddenly empty, the office seemed to hum, like a bass string left to play itself out.



In Edgar Pettit's basket works every horizontal surface was furred thick with wicker dust. Henry, to keep the sleeves and hem of his coat clean, had made sure he stood well in the clear when he paid Pettit a call that morning.

The detective had been out before dawn – out, gloveless, in the severest frost of the year – to pick up that morning's post for Tunney lane. He hadn't been in time to see the letters alight, but must have got there just after. Five, there were, including one at Hall's place; Henry had beaten the fruiterer to it again. Pettit had opened his door to the cold just a crack and hailed him in a hoarse whisper. 'Mr Vivo! Can we have a word? At the works later, if you're passing?'

Henry's nod hadn't carried in the dark, so he'd added, in a low voice, 'About seven?' The door had closed with a click, Pettit having failed, evidently, to discern the question-mark.

Henry had intended to set off early for work anyway, his office affording better light than his windowless bedroom for examining the morning's catch. At just gone seven, he found the street door of the basket works latched back and dust swarming into the shock of morning sunlight in the Lane. He knocked and stepped inside. There was no sign nor sound of Pettit.

'Hallo! Mr Pettit?' No answer. Henry waited half a minute, then gave a dry, self-conscious cough. Again he waited. 'Anybody about?' He craned his neck and peered into the gloom.

Heavy, scuffing footsteps approached in the street and there stood Pettit, dark in the doorway, squinting in. 'That you, Mr Vivo?' He was out of breath. 'Kept you waiting, did I? Ehh, it's them damn carriers, Wigan's lot...' and, puffing, he grumbled over a botched delivery of three-gauge basket straw. 'A nag went down lame, he says. And what's all them in your stables, I says, bandicoots? That's what I says to him. Like he's got no other beast to pull the bloody cart.'

Henry frowned and nodded, making sympathetic noises in his throat, while the basket-maker lumbered in and planted his weight on an unsteady swivel-top stool.

Pettit was still puffing. 'Have a seat?' He indicated a modified saw-horse.

'Thank you, no. I'll keep my feet,' the detective replied.

'Good luck to you,' said Pettit. 'Now, if you had my bunions...' and he glared at his lumpy feet like they were traitors.

'You wanted to see me?' Henry brought him to the point.

'True enough, I did.' Pettit tapped the side of his knee with a short switch of split bamboo. He seemed to have lost the bluster he'd come in with. 'I just wondered... How're you getting on with them letters? I seen you got more this morning,' he added.

Henry nodded. 'Another five.'

'So that'd be... how many now, altogether?'

Henry pinched his top lip deliberately (though he'd have known the number, for sure). Then, 'Twenty-three,' he said, 'plus Hall's. And there may be others besides that have eluded us.'

'Might be so, I s'pose,' Pettit agreed, frowning. 'In any case, it's been a few days now. I just wondered,' he said again, 'if you've found out anything about 'em yet. Like, for instance, how old they are. Or maybe,' still tapping his knee with the

switch, 'if they'd be worth something. Money, like. I just wondered,' he trailed off.

'We-ell...' Henry drew out the word and gazed in a considering way past Pettit's right ear.

The detective's circumspection seemed to nudge Pettit to boldness. At any rate, he splundered on. 'Reason being, I been talking with... a pal of mine, told him what you says about them letters being "Post Office business" and *he* says that's not so. What with 'em being so old and whatnot, he reckons they're more prob'ly antiquities than any affair of the Post Office. He says,' and here Pettit's boldness began to flag, 'he says we ought to get 'em back of you. The museum might be int'rested, he says, or else Tewkes, what deals in old books and such.' He looked up at Henry, more sheepish than defiant.

'Pettit, I'll be square with you.' Henry's voice was pitched low, confidential. 'What your friend says is correct: this is *not* Post Office business.' He paused, seeming to weigh his words. The basket-maker leant forward, hands pressed on knees. 'I was at the Detective Police Office yesterday, however' - that was no lie - 'and have also consulted my colleague Mr Berliner of the Private Inquiry Office.'

Pettit's eyes widened.

'And... well, it looks very much as if a deception is being practised here.' Nor was that a lie, except that Henry was the deceiver.

'Deception?'

'A *criminal* deception, yes, for the purpose of monetary gain. So, I should warn you that any talk of profiting from the letters, at this juncture, may incur considerable suspicion. Your name - I tell you this in confidence, Pettit - has been mentioned in connection with the matter. Of course, I had no hesitation in vouching for your honesty and co-operation.'

Henry looked very grave. 'I trust that my good opinion has not been misplaced?'

'But it's me that guv you them letters in the first place!' Pettit was wounded by the slur, but not as cowed as Henry might have hoped.

'Exactly.' Henry spread his hands ruefully. 'You can see how that might look.'

'But Mr Vivo,' the big man protested, 'you seen how they just turn up from nowhere! How could I be doing that? I'm no conjurer. Baskets is all I know.' He sat very straight on his wobbly perch, hands outstretched in appeal.

'You asked what I'd found out about the letters; I've told you,' Henry said in a conciliatory but no-nonsense tone. 'At least, I've told you why I can't tell you more - and why I can't return them to you at this time. And,' he added, more sternly, 'why it would be unwise to withhold any letters, or information concerning same.' A thought seemed to occur to Henry. 'It's not Hall you've been talking with?'

'Him?' Pettit pulled a face. 'As if I'd hark at anything that blackguard had to say.'

'Quite right,' said Henry. He made a show of consulting his watch and then, noting the basket-maker's slumped attitude, delivered himself of a short speech in parting. 'Be assured, Pettit, that I count you as an invaluable ally in this business and that, depending on the outcome of my investigations, I shall be only too glad - eventually - to share their fruits with you.' At the open door, he turned. 'We'll meet again this afternoon, I dare say?'

'Dare say, Mr Vivo.' Pettit half-raised one heavy hand, a wry salute to the victor.



From Stephen street, stout drapes doused the gaslit glim of Duvalli's dancing academy. The window glass between the

scrim-backed velvet and the gathering nighttime chill was foggy with condensation

Lil glanced up from the footpath and cocked her head. It sounded as if Madame Marguerite was back. Wife, accompanist and muse to Monsieur Duvalli (properly Charles Coutts), the academy's *maître de la danse*, Madame had been absent these past three weeks, visiting a sister in Tasmania. In her stead they'd had the sparky Miss Quartermaine ('*Call me Gertie!*'), moonlighting from the teachers' training school and not near so lead-footed as Madame on the *sostenuto*.

The Vivos, father and daughter, attended Duvalli's each Friday evening at eight. An hour's instruction was followed, after a short recess, by a further hour of 'social dancing' under the surveillance of M. Duvalli. 'Erect, sir! Keep the thorax erect!' he might bark from the rim of the Promenade Room. Or, 'Only one step on that turn, Miss Vivo, *s'il vous plait*,' all the while beating time with a short baton. Really though, they'd been coming here so long that there was little left for Duvalli to teach them, save, from time to time, a fashionable new variation. (On each such occasion, Henry's initial disgruntlement would quickly turn to smugness at his – and his daughter's – easy mastery of the step.)

You might think that dancing, much less 'social' dancing, would have been far from Henry Vivo's cup of tea. True enough, he had no love of music or society, and God forbid that he'd ever attend a public dance or ball. But he was light and quick on his feet – had been a fair athlete in his youth – and took pleasure in precision. Only under the guise of instruction, though, of self-improvement or else duty, could he permit himself to indulge that pleasure. The Friday night engagement was a *lesson*, conducted by a *qualified* instructor (a fact testified to by a framed diploma in the vestibule).

'Miss Vivo. Mr Vivo.' M. Duvalli greeted them at the door of the Promenade Room, bowing over Lil's hand. 'Our

presiding spirit has returned!’ His wide-swept arm indicated Madame at the instrument, mid-fugue and imperious. The plangency of her playing matched her *toilette*: the peripatetic beauty spot half as big as a threepence, the mantilla dripping with jet beads, and lace gauntlets that reached past the elbow – and black, always black. Lil had seen her at the markets one Saturday, dressed plain as plain and buying onions, yet her bearing still unmistakably Madame Marguerite’s.

‘So I see.’ Henry’s nod in her direction went ignored.

‘Another surprise,’ Duvalli went on (though Madame’s return did not strictly count as one): ‘For tonight’s social dancing we are to be favoured by a violinist, Mr Maurice Lade, formerly of the Pittsburgh Conservatorium.’

‘An American?’

‘Indeed, and a gentleman. Madame made his acquaintance on the crossing from Launceston.’

Now, like most Victorian natives of gold-rush vintage and older, Henry would have been mistrustful – *constitutionally* mistrustful – of any person arriving in the colony from across Bass Strait. It wasn’t just the old taint of convictism, but that the island, being situate at the bottom of the globe, seemed naturally to draw down more than its share of the world’s filth. Few civilised places on earth (any Victorian police officer would tell you) lent themselves better to the criminal arts of concealment and deception. Thus it was that, when a man with a violin-case edged round the door near the end of the lesson-hour, Henry’s eye made straight for him.

Tall for a violinist, he was, and not how you’d picture a conservatorium man. Maurice Lade’s auburn curls were flattened to his scalp from the cap he now held in one hand, and the tan of his complexion hinted at outdoor work or a long sea voyage. His eyes were a pale brown, almost amber, with long, straight lashes, dusty-looking. Below his dimpled chin nestled a baby-bird bowtie striped pale blue and red,

offsetting a suit of sandy-coloured tweed that was pouched and softened through constant wear. His hands were big, his feet as well, and there was a looseness about him, nothing like that darting tension you tended to expect in a violinist.

M. Duvalli had called Lade a gentleman, and it was possible: of the down-at-heel sort, of course, and... well, he was an American. Aside from the question of headgear – a *cap*, after all – his appearance bore none of the hallmarks of the scoundrel. There was neither shiftiness nor excessive swagger, no prison pallor, and he didn't look like the sort who'd spit in public. No, his countenance – at least the way it was arranged as he leant in the doorway, smoking and watching the dancers – betrayed nothing but a man on fair terms with the world.

That much Henry would have been able to discern from glances in the course of his revolutions. As for Lade, what might he have observed, looking on? The Promenade Room was modest of its kind: just a pair of professional chambers knocked through with a broad archway. It was gaslit, with the main source of illumination two glittery confections hung from the ceiling, one either side of the arch. Otherwise, the room was done out plain, the walls white with fluted columns wallpapered on at intervals. Bare, polished floorboards ran lengthways, Madame and her piano being raised on a low platform at the far end. The acoustics were less than perfect but better than bad; if the air seemed to shudder at the top- and low-notes, the blame lay with Madame, not the room's dimensions. Along both side walls were arranged cane-bottomed chairs, enough for all the dancers.

Of the dozen couples engaged in the reel, the Vivos were undoubtedly the most proficient. There was a good deal of stumbling and misstepping among the rest, the men – most of them – watching their own feet or others' and several of the women biting their lips in concentration or to stifle yelps of pain. Of course, keeping an erect thorax was nothing to a man

in whom stiffness was elemental. The high-raised knees and elbows, though, and the jigging and wheeling and gliding were far from being native to one of Henry's make. It could never be said that he surrendered himself to the music, but he did lose some of his sharp edges, became gravely nimble, when stepping out a reel or a polka or gavotte. His colour rose and the fall of his hair, the set of his mouth relaxed a few degrees from their accustomed lines.

Now, if, as one of the poets has said, to dance is 'to pray with the feet', what was it that Henry prayed for every Friday night? He and Marcella used to go dancing. It had been for her pleasure - sensing her restlessness - that he'd agreed to take lessons in the first place. That was at Pluckridge's, above the piano showroom. It had seemed to make her happy for a while, dancing coming as naturally to Marcella as stillness did to her husband. They'd attended lessons twice a week right up until she left: on the Wednesday night they went dancing, on the Friday she was gone. Now he and Lil had been coming to Duvalli's for upward of four years. Neither, if asked, could have said which had been the instigator. A handbill announcing the Gala Opening had come through the letter-slot at *Hoc loco*; one of them had thought it a kindness to suggest that they go, the other had thought it a kindness to consent. At any rate, they were M. Duvalli's prize pupils now, a living advertisement for the success of his methods.

Lil had on a gown of dusky chartreuse, the one she always wore for dancing. Though hardly décolleté, it showed her throat to advantage and the swooping hollows that announced her collarbones. It was cunningly constructed, this ballgown of Lil's. The bodice fitted firmly, or appeared to, yet left her torso pliant so that she could raise her arms and *breathe* without pinching or straining. Best of all, it was made of stuff shapely but soft, so that it moved with her rather than creaking and rustling like armature.

She wasn't a natural dancer, Lil; not like her mother. But, if you could never imagine her abandoning herself to the dance – not with those eyebrows, always set (so they seemed) in earnest concentration – she did appear warmed by the motion and the music, as lamp oil loses viscosity as it gains heat. In a boisterous dance and afterwards, with her skin flushed, her breath coming in heaves, and her spirit quickening, one caught a glimpse of Lil as her gentleman callers must have seen her.

Tonight, though synchronised as ever, Lil and her father's execution seemed cooler than usual, as if they were Siamese twins trying to avoid each other's company. Lil had inquired at teatime about that day's flotsam from Carson's cottages. Twelve letters had come, three of them with Bishop marks, and all but the one he'd given to Carr were in Henry's room, not hidden exactly but not in plain view – rather like his reply to Lil's question. 'Nothing,' he'd said. 'There was nothing new today.'

Lil, making tea, had set the kettle firmly back on the hob. 'Have you noticed,' she'd persisted, 'they're all concerned with forgiveness?'

Henry had seemed to reflect for a moment, then, 'No,' he'd replied, 'no, I don't think so.' And something in the manner of the rebuff had conveyed, as clear as words – clearer – *There's nothing to forgive.* 'Hadn't you better be getting dressed? We'll be late.'

With the end of the reel, the lesson was over and Maurice Lade came on into the room. He had good manners, you could tell – yankified good manners – and charm besides. M. Duvalli led him to Madame at the piano and the three of them discussed the rest of the evening's program before Lade uncased his instrument and commenced tuning up. In his hands, the violin was more a fiddle than a yearning-machine,

his playing more jaunty than sublime. Of course, that made him and Madame Marguerite an odd-matched pair. When the dancing resumed, he fitted himself to her style as best he could, then turned his attention to the dancers, seeming to take his lead as much from them as from his *maestra*. That and his relaxed stance – flexed knees, tapping foot – and approximate musicality rather belied M. Duvalli’s account of him. In fact, Lade confessed to Henry afterwards, so far as he knew there was no such place as the Pittsburgh Conservatorium.



‘Steel, sir. That and coal. Nothing much to speak of in the musical line, though. Industrial and proud of it, Pittsburgh.’

The two men had struck up a conversation in Duvalli’s vestibule while the footman retrieved their top-coats. Like the Vivos, Lade had left smartly once the dancing finished. Madame had made no effort to hide her displeasure, their musical incompatibility having cancelled all fellow-feeling from the Bass Strait crossing. As for Lil and Henry, they never lingered.

It was wet outside: a deceptive drizzle that – ask any Melburnian – could keep up for hours and ruin a good hat with almost the efficiency of an honest Sydney downpour. Since Lade had a ten-minute walk to his lodgings, and no umbrella, Henry offered him shelter at *Hoc loco*. His sizing-up of the American evidently had dispelled Henry’s suspicions, even pricked his curiosity.

Over an uncorked imperial pint of whisky, Lade gave an account of his chequered progress from signwriter’s apprentice to cornettist with a circus band (the violin being, as he said, his second string). He and Turlington’s Tip-top Circus had parted ways, he explained, on the last leg of their Tasmanian tour. ‘Nothing but a bunch of crooks.’ Lade blew a derisive spurt of smoke. (Visitors were exempt from Henry’s

rule on smoking indoors.) ‘Always it was *in the next town* that we’d be paid. Same thing, town after town after town. Never did get paid, did we?’

‘What will you do now?’ Henry asked.

‘Work, you mean?’ The American’s mouth gave a wry twist. ‘It’s a bad time for it, I know. Plenty more than just me looking. I’d hoped I might find something at Fillis’s Circus,’ jerking his head in the direction of St Kilda Road, ‘something in my old line. Not just the band, I don’t mean: I’m used to tent-wrangling and messing out the animals – all that. But no, nothing doing.’ He leant back in his chair, sighed. ‘That’s how I came to renew my acquaintance with *Madame Duvalli*. Offered me a guinea to play tonight.’ A thought occurred to him. ‘Reckon I’ll pawn my fiddle. Save myself from a repeat performance.’ He chuckled.

‘You’re set on staying in Melbourne, are you?’

‘If I can find work I’ll stay, sure. My lodging’s paid to the end of next week. I’ll give it till then.’ Lade sat up a little straighter and turned to face Henry. ‘Anything you can do for me, sir... well, I’d be obliged to you.’

Henry was biting his top lip, his eyes narrowed with hard thinking. He seemed to be re-measuring the man in the sandy suit. ‘Hard to say,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll give it some thought, ask around. Your signwriting experience...’

‘I’m pretty well up on your colonial spellings,’ Lade assured him. ‘Can’t help noticing the differences – trained to, I guess.’

Henry nodded.

The detective, still in his dancing pumps, and the American had their chairs drawn up close to the kitchen range. Lil had excused herself, so as not to crush her best gown with prolonged sitting, and unable to return in nightdress and wrap as she’d have done in the absence of company.

Lade caught sight of the mantel clock, just gone eleven (but running its customary quarter-hour fast). 'Day's just begun in Pittsburgh,' he said, his voice hearty-wistful.

'What's that?' Henry hadn't followed the other man's glance.

'It'd be eight in the morning back home.'

'*Tis always morning somewhere in the world.*' Henry seemed pleased with himself for having summoned Horne's best-known line.

Clearly Lade had never heard it before. He smiled politely. 'That's right,' he said. 'I try to keep track, wherever I am, of the time-difference. Down here, you're a whole day ahead of Pittsburgh. Ahead of most of the world, in fact.'

'Ahead of the world, eh?' The idea of his native colony leading the world didn't seem to surprise Henry. But, 'Strange to think,' he said, 'of time spreading itself like that. Morning there, late night here; same moment but a different time.' He took a swallow of Glenisla.

'S'pose I'm used to it,' said Lade. 'I've been gone a good while now.' He paused. 'I wonder whether, in aggregate, over all my travels, I've gained time or lost it?'

Henry made a throaty rumble.

'And if I *have* lost time,' Lade went on, talking mostly to himself, 'I wonder where it's gone?'

Outside the resolute drizzle kept up. The verandah downpipe sputtered a tattoo and the two men sat silent, attending the toothy glow of the firebox grate.

Chapter 6

Saturday, September 9th

The drizzle of last night had given way to a beaming day. A fine one for the races, Moody pronounced it. 'A dead track, I'd've said last night. But a few hours of this and she'll be a purler.' On the strength of which, he made a close study of the racing pages over breakfast, revising his bets. 'Rueful Lass in the fifth,' he muttered, scribbling; 'she ought to go like a cracker.'

It was work for him today - his longest day at the shop, in fact, though he wouldn't start till ten. With luck, he'd get his bets on before that, or else he'd send young Moyes out (on some pretext or other) to place them up at Wenwright's.

He'd come in last night, bedraggled, just in time to shake Maurice Lade's hand as his father's new acquaintance was leaving. Moody had made straight for the stove and, excusing himself, had begun stripping off his outer clothes while Lade donned an old rain-cape of Henry's for the walk to his East Melbourne lodgings.

'Moody!' Henry had rebuked, but his son had continued to unbutton.

'Got to get out of these wet things, Pop. With my bad chest...' Moody had, in his capacity as shop assistant, seen so many men in (and out of) their undergarments that he was immune to modesty, and Maurice Lade, for his part, had seemed untroubled by the sight of the younger man's bare legs

and shirt-tails. In any case, he'd had to attend to Henry's instructions regarding the correct alignment of cape and hood. Moody had rolled his eyes, causing Lade to stifle a smile.

'Actually, sir,' the American had admitted to Henry, once his wet-weather outfitting was complete, 'I'm pretty well accustomed to rain. Where I come from, it never stops.'

Moody's wet things had been left slung over chairs near the stove. Morning found them still damp and in need of a good laundering. Surely Moody hadn't got *that* wet and mucky walking just two blocks from the theatre. No, the young Messrs Vivo and Treadrea had played up last night. The presence of Lade at Moody's homecoming had been opportune, since it distracted Henry from his son's unsteady footing and the disordered and mud-stained state of his trousers. The beery bouquet of *eau de Foster's*, however, had been – still was – impossible to miss.

Surprisingly, Lil did not chide her brother. 'How'd you sleep?' Her wary tone gave her away: it was no idle pleasantry.

'Why?' Moody was straightaway defensive.

'I heard you yell out in your sleep.'

'Huh. That's what I get for eating so late.'

'It's been two nights in a row,' Lil said, gingerly. 'Same old thing, is it?'

'You tell me. Did it sound like the same old thing?'

Lil nodded. 'You don't remember?'

Moody gave a shrug, sipped his tea. It wasn't like him to be secretive – the only one in the household of whom that could be said – but for this one thing. Just once, early on, had he confided in Lil the nature of his night-terror: Marcella was dead. He didn't *see* her dead, in his dream. She was smiling and said something he couldn't catch, 'But it's like she wanted to comfort me.' And somehow, in the dream, he just knew she was dead: almost as if that's what she'd been telling

him. What woke his sister and father (but never Moody himself) was his shriek of 'Mama!' in a voice so unlike his own that, the first time Henry heard it, he'd seized a waddy and burst into his son's room to confront the intruder. The ruckus had woken Moody himself, adding to his fright, so that Lil had had to stay and sit awhile with him. The next time, though, she'd tiptoed in to find him sleeping, apparently untroubled, and so now she left him be.

On no other occasion than Moody's nightmares was their mother's name heard at *Hoc loco* - the name they called her before they called her Mrs Wood.



The Bourke street crowds thickened after midday, when the tradesmen got paid. From Henry's office window, the carnival atmosphere of the city on a Saturday afternoon seemed undimmed from what it had been in the spendthrift 'eighties. The shopkeepers, however, could tell you better. And at street level you saw the beggars, careful though they were (most of them) to avoid notice by the police. There were more families window-shopping than spending, their clothes marginally more threadbare and unfashionable than those they'd have worn for best just a year or two before. The trams that disgorged in Bourke Street were as jam-packed as ever; but, same as ever, at least half the passengers rode for free. Once the main body of a tram was full, no conductor stood much chance of collecting fares from the outriggers.

The post office detective had his back to the scene. Close to completing his half-day's work, he was occupied with the serious matter of counterfeit postal orders. Three of them he had in hand, evidently the latest in a cleverly forged batch that had begun trickling into post offices a month ago. Before these three, there'd been none show up for more than a week and it had looked as if the nine already passed might be all there were. Postal orders (or P.O.O.s) - real ones - came in threes and these fakes had likewise been printed three to a

foolscap page. The printing itself looked genuine enough, and the paper stock was a fair match. The identifying numbers, though, had been applied with a rubber stamp and the perforations looked as if they'd been done – very neatly – with a pin. The numbers all began 00978, as they ought, with the final five digits strung on at random. Had the numbers run sequentially, the fakes would have been easier to spot. Likewise, the stamp of the supposed place-of-issue differed in every case; always, though, it named a place sufficiently distant that the postal clerk paying out was unlikely to recognise (or rather, *fail* to recognise) the signature of the issuing officer.

All but one of the twelve counterfeits had been passed and redeemed at small post-office agencies on the city's eastern fringes. Henry's Saturday half-day had largely been spent in making arrangements to revisit that part of the world next week. With the first nine forgeries, he'd called on and questioned the postal agents who'd fallen for them. This time, though, he had a 'live' lead. Mrs Sophia Leary, storekeeper-postmistress at Doncaster, out beyond the train line, had had the perspicacity or dumb intuition to question the bona fides of P.O.O. no. 0097855802, causing its bearer to bolt. In a telegram just sent, Mrs Leary was advised to expect Detective Vivo at eleven on Wednesday.

But now it was approaching two and Henry's office, aft of the clocktower, felt the deep, anticipatory shudder of the mechanism gathering gear to chime the meagre hour. '*He was a stranger to me...*' Henry chewed the fringe of his moustache as he re-read Mrs Leary's account. Five minutes later, he was out the door and about to launch himself into the Bourke street swim when he heard his name above the hubbub.

It was Aloysius Carr, in his street clothes. 'Mr Vivo!' Henry had looked for the letter carrier between rounds, but had missed him. Now Carr skirted the flower stall at Angelo lane

and battled the crowd's current to gain the post office steps. 'Mr Vivo,' he said again, with relief, 'I have your letter.'

'Ha.' Henry glanced about uneasily. It wasn't exactly a private place; in fact, the steps of the GPO formed the city's chief Saturday-afternoon rendezvous. Within easy hearing were a gazy girl of the housemaid sort, a pair of crop-jacketed larrikins, and someone's anxious sweetheart, craning his gobbler neck. Carr was holding out the letter and in broad daylight it looked rarer and more curious than ever. Henry took hold of the younger man's elbow and steered him up the steps to the colonnade that ran the length of the building. It was shadowy there and less populous. 'So,' said Henry, taking the letter. 'Anything?' He looked it over, front and back, as if inspecting for damage. Fortunately, Carr was too excited to take offence.

'From the letter itself, sir, no. Nothing more than what you'd gleaned already. But the date...' Something in his voice made Henry look up. 'I remembered what you said: that Wednesday, the - what was it? - the 6th, seemed to equate with Sunday in the letters' time, in 1752. So I consulted the perpetual calendar in *Whitaker's Almanack*.' Carr was burrowing in his satchel, wedged between one knee and a stuccoed column, and from it produced a green-bound book. 'Here.' A torn strip of paper marked the page he wanted. Carr flipped the book open and handed it to Henry. The perpetual calendar (doubtless Henry was familiar with it; in fact, why hadn't he thought of it?) was a dense grid of years and months and days of the week. Carr drew his attention to the legend at the head of the page:

A Calendar

For ascertaining Any Day of the Week for any given time within Two Hundred

Years from the introduction of the New Style, 1752.†

‘Now, see...’ Carr ran his finger to a footnote that corresponded with the dagger: †1752 same as 1772 from Jan. 1 to Sept. 2. From Sept. 14 to Dec. 31 same as 1780. (Sept. 3 to 13 were omitted.)

September 3 to 13 were omitted!

‘Of course!’ Henry’s eyes were as big as a cat’s. ‘Give us back our eleven days!’

‘Exactly,’ said Carr, ‘the eleven days that were “lost” when we changed to the Gregorian calendar (what they call here the New Style). That was in 1752. September. Same as your letters. And look – may I?’ He took back the letter from Henry and unfolded it with care, then traced with his finger to find the date. ‘There – third of September! And here,’ turning the paper over, he pointed to the Bishop mark, ‘September the seventh. Dates that never existed!’

‘So,’ Henry swallowed, struggling to digest what Carr was telling him, ‘so, that means they’re fakes after all.’ It was a statement, not a question, and it came out flat as a Johnny cake.

‘Looks that way, doesn’t it?’ Far from seeming let down by his discovery, Carr was cock-a-hoop. But, noticing that the detective was taking it otherwise, he made himself frown at the letter in his hand. ‘Damned clever, though. Had me fooled. I still can’t make out the fakery in it – besides the dates, of course.’ Carr cast a glance at Henry then, to see if he looked mollified. He didn’t.



A TYPEWRITER DIES. Geelong, Monday. An inquest was today held concerning the death of Kate Hood, a single woman, aged twenty. She died last week after cutting her throat, left wrist, and left arm with a razor.

The deceased was a shorthand and type writer and had for some time shown signs of

melancholia. Amongst other things she said that she had made a lot of mistakes in her work.

The jury found that death was due to wounds self inflicted whilst deceased was of unsound mind.

Lil had the *Weekly Times* spread open across the hump of her typewriter. The death of the Geelong typist lay in a crack between HINTS TO APIARISTS and the new Spring modes. *She had made a lot of mistakes.* Poor Kate Hood. Lil wet a finger and turned the page.

She was in no hurry to leave her office. Not that she was expecting anyone. That was exactly the point: she wasn't. Her west-facing window was raised halfway, a sniff of a breeze dabbled the blind cord, and the off-duty typist was relishing her Saturday cigarette. It was the only one she had to herself all week. Moody had rolled it for her after breakfast and she'd placed it with a single lucky match in an old Piccadilly pastilles tin to await this lull.

Ten minutes past two on a Saturday marked the still point of Lil's week - stiller even, better even than night-time. *Then* the demands of sleep, besides all those after-dark female impossibilities, imposed the kind of stillness that could be stifling. This was different. The streets round about Stalbridge Chambers were emptying eastward, the windows of the building opposite (most of them) revealed no sign of life. But the stillness didn't depend on an absence of movement in Chancery lane; it was implicit in the hour and the cigarette. And in Lil, too - at least, that's how it looked. Elbows on the desk, cigarette poised in scissored fingers alongside one ear, bunched chin on a bunched fist, lips slightly pursed, that frowning brow. Still Lil, with - for this moment - no one and nothing to answer to but herself.

Fixing her hat in place a while later, 'I suppose this is life,' she murmured to the mirror, looking past her own reflection

to the room behind her: the typewriter under its dust-cloth, and the miner's couch.



After parting from Carr, Henry sidestepped the Bourke street circus, going instead by Elizabeth street and grazing the foot of the Block. He had to veer into the roadway there to avoid the congestion of promenaders and would-be-seens. On the other corner the building works – the only building works in town, practically, since the slump – had gone quiet for the day. With its gaping window holes and upper edges all jagged, the soaring masonry shell of the Equitable building had the appearance of a mint-new ruin. The newspapers and its backers touted it as a portent of renewed prosperity and a monument, for all time, to Victorian craftsmanship and solidity. Around town, though, they called it The Slaughterhouse for the – what was it, twelve? – lives it had claimed so far. And the walls weren't even finished. A most ill-starred piece of work, it was generally agreed. Why, when a donkey-engine exploded there a few months back, a piece of flying debris had killed a bystander 200 yards away, down by the Flinders lane corner. (In the other direction, fragments of the engine, and the engine-driver, had sprayed as far as the GPO steps.) It had happened at dinnertime on a Saturday. The poor fellow had just collected his week's wages and was walking with his little daughter by the hand when he was flattened by a two-pound lump of metal.

Chances are that, as he approached that blighted spot on *this* Saturday, Henry Vivo's thoughts were elsewhere. At any rate, he failed to notice his own daughter standing there until she spoke his name. Crossing Elizabeth street, she'd seen him deep in thought and had waited at the corner.

'Poppa.'

Henry reared back in surprise. He *had* been deep in thought.

‘Sorry,’ said Lil, ‘I didn’t mean to startle you.’ As a little girl, she used to steal her hand into her father’s when she met him off the train of an evening, squeezing his bony knuckles as she chattered about the day. Now she took his arm and they turned up the Lane together, giving wide berth to a snarl of mongrels tussling in the gutter. ‘How was your morning?’

Henry’s agitated disappointment spilled out. It transpired, he said, that the Tunney lane letters were a prank after all. And he told her of Carr’s discovery: the missing eleven days making it impossible that the letters were authentic.

Lil, as they walked and she listened, leant in closer to her father. When he finished (‘How *could* they be real, when there never were any such dates?’) she said, ‘But it’s still possible, isn’t it, that they’re as old as they profess to be, that the prank’s as old as that? I’ll bet that people in those days were even more given to superstition than they are now.’ Henry may well have doubted that, given the things he saw in his line of work. ‘Think of it,’ said Lil, ‘eleven days, gone – like *that*.’ She clapped her free hand on the one tucked in Henry’s elbow. ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if there’d been a ready market for “evidence” that eleven days couldn’t just disappear.’

‘No, no.’ Henry was shaking his head in irritation. ‘You’ve seen them: they never did look their age. Well,’ he said bitterly, ‘now we know why.’

They’d reached Swanston Street and neither spoke while they negotiated the rumbustious tide of northbound traffic. Safely across, ‘All right,’ said Lil, ‘just suppose you’re right. Someone’s done a grand job of them. But why? Not just for a lark, surely.’

Henry said nothing, his lips pressed tight as a crown seal. What was it Otto had said? *In our line of work, there’ll always be someone who’s keen to outfox you – just for the sport of it.*

Lil took in her father’s grim profile and gave his arm a squeeze. ‘It’s still a mystery, isn’t it? More so, even, than

before.’ Henry’s expression hardened, if anything. ‘I know,’ Lil cajoled, ‘it was nice to think they might be real.’ A snort from Henry. ‘But this – this is right up your street, Poppa. Before, it was just a case of curiosity; now it’s a real job for a detective.’

Exactly. Same old string of who-what-why with a blackguard on the end. Or not *quite* the same, perhaps. After all, who would take such trouble to forge letters that asked for and offered nothing but forgiveness? And – had Henry forgotten? – they appeared out of nowhere.

If he *had* forgotten that particular, he was reminded of it a few minutes later. It happened to be just before three when he and Lil drew athwart of the Carson’s cottages cul-de-sac. And there was Pettit, leant against the side wall of his basket-works. He straightened up, raising his hat to Lil (‘Miss Vivo’), and greeting Henry not with the conspiratorial spirit of old, but coolly. ‘There’s none come yet,’ he told the detective, off-hand, and half-turned towards the cottages. ‘I’ve been... *hup*.’ Pettit interrupted himself and pointed. ‘There you go.’ With no breath of wind discernible, a letter was *fluttering* to rest at the Chinaman’s doorstep. Henry saw it and so did Lil, whose hand went to her mouth too late to smother a gasping laugh.

She looked from her father to Pettit. ‘Is that one of them? Where ...?’

Henry cut her off. ‘You go on home,’ he said. ‘I have business with Mr Pettit. Go home,’ he touched her elbow, ‘I’ll be along shortly.’ His look and his tone brooked no objection, and so Lil bobbed adieu to Pettit and was gone.

‘Ehh, sorry, Mr Vivo,’ said the basketmaker. ‘I s’pose I oughtn’t to have said nothing in front of the lass.’ But Henry already was gathering up the letters: the one at the Chinaman’s and the rest. Pettit trailed behind. ‘Six, is it?’ he said.

Henry had reached the end cottage and turned back, examining the letters as he walked. 'So,' he said, 'the truth now, Pettit.' He drilled the big man with a look. 'What do you know about them?'

Pettit's eyes flew wide. 'Nothing – just what I told you already.' Henry's iron-tipped glare made Pettit quail. 'Mr Vivo, I swear it!'

'Yesterday you mentioned a friend.'

The other man looked flummoxed.

'A friend who thought they might be worth money,' Henry prompted.

'Ohh' – it was like a sigh of relief – 'that was only Tommy Mackie. You know him. At the Long Leaf.' The Longleith Arms in Russell street, he meant. 'He didn't mean nothing. Tommy's a betting man, that's all. Reckoned it was worth a shot.'

Tommy Mackie. Pettit was right: there was no harm in him, only that he'd bet on two ants crossing a bar-room floor. A scheme like this – these letters, all subtly fettled up – would be none of Tommy's doing.

There came just then a clattering crash from the Lane and a torrent of apples, yellow and red, skeltered past the mouth of the right-of-way.

'Fucking hell!'

It was Teddy Hall. The overloaded barrow outside his shop had collapsed, sending crates of eating apples keeling onto the footpath.

'Ehh, easy on,' admonished Pettit.

'Well, don't just stand there bloody gawking! Give us a hand. Jesus!' The fruiterer turned his ankle on a Golden Delicious and almost fell to his knees – would have done if Henry hadn't grabbed his arm. All three men scrambled after the runaway apples. Pettit retrieved a few armsful, then made to pursue more of the fugitives further along the Lane. 'Nah,'

called Hall, 'leave them. Let the nags polish them off. Jesus,' he said again, surveying the damage, 'two quids' worth, that was.'

Pettit made sympathetic noises. After all, you didn't have to like a man to suffer a twinge of fellow feeling. The barrow lay on its side, one of its struts snapped like barley sugar. 'Won't take much to fix,' was the basketmaker's verdict. 'Just give us a minute,' and he clumped back to his works for the tools.

The apples that remained were pretty sorry-looking, all bruised and split; knowing Hall, they'd probably been second-grades to begin with. Henry had salvaged his fair share and now wiped his hands with a handkerchief while Hall swore and swung kicks at the windfalls.

'Fair go,' Henry said at last. 'This is a public street, remember.'

'Public street, be buggered,' came Hall's belligerent reply. 'What, Inspector of Nuisances now, are you?'

A good thing for him Henry wasn't: like as not, that barrow shouldn't have been there in the first place. But the detective didn't deign to reply. He finished wiping his hands, re-folded the handkerchief, and was about to go when Hall spoke again.

'Cracked that case yet, have you?' He'd spied the bunch of letters sticking out of Henry's coat pocket.

'Forgeries,' said Henry flatly, 'as I'm sure you know.'

'Yeah?' Hall's surprise seemed genuine. 'Looked real enough to me.' But he grinned to see Henry downcast. 'So, what was the give-away? Not enough spit on the stamps?'

'Never mind.' Henry turned to go.

'Anyway,' Hall's rising voice caught the detective like a hook on the sleeve, 'what d'you mean "as you're sure I'd know"? You reckon I've got something to do with it?' Henry threw him a dismissive look. Then - 'Right, you bastard!' - Hall launched at him with a flying tackle. Henry came down

heavily on the bluestone kerbing, the thirteen-stone fruiterer on top of him, plunging in with knees and fists.

'Here! Ease up!' Pettit hurried up on his bunioned feet, dropped the toolbox and weighed in. Grabbing a fistful of Hall's waistcoat and his leather apron strap, he heaved Henry's attacker off balance.

Hall had been swinging for a punch and when he fell back his elbow bit the kerb with a crack. 'Owww! Get off, you bastard!' He curled up, rocking himself back and forth. Blood seeped through the fingers claspings his elbow. 'Jesus Christ!' he wailed. 'It's busted, for sure!' and he gave a tearing sort of moan. It looked as if he was right about the arm. Even cradled as it was, his forearm lay at a mighty queer angle.

'Hell's bells,' muttered Pettit, seeing the stain spread up Hall's shirt sleeve. Then, recollecting the other shifting heap by the gutter's edge, he said anxiously, 'You all right, Mr Vivo?'



'Poppa! Let me see!'

It took an effort, but Henry resisted his daughter's attempt to unpeel his suspenders. For once his thorax was far from erect, and he held his elbows braced tight by his sides. He looked cowed, awful: his hair all larched, his clothes scuffed and soiled, even his moustache disarrayed.

'Poppa,' Lil tried again, 'you must let me...' There was a knock at the back door. Father and daughter exchanged a look of faint alarm. 'Just a moment!' called Lil, and Henry reached, grimacing, for the jacket that hung on the back of his chair. 'Here...' Lil put it loose around his shoulders and went to answer the door.

It was Maurice Lade, the fiddle-player, his shoulders dusted with blossom from the weeping cherry by the gate. He was returning Henry's rain-cape, but had hardly begun his greeting before he cut himself short. 'What's happened?'

And Henry let Lade take charge, to Lil's evident chagrin. She was required only to fetch a basin of hot water and a flannel and towel and to point Mr Lade in the direction of the medicine chest. And then she was banished, leaving the American to attend to whatever injuries lay beneath Henry's shirt and vest.

'There's his leg, too,' Lil told Lade as she prepared to take her reluctant leave. 'The left one, I think. Make sure he lets you look at that.' When she frowned that way, her eyebrows knit into one and, what with her swarm of hair... well, she looked fearsome.

Not to her father, though. 'I can tell him myself,' he grumbled. 'I haven't lost my voice, you know. Or my senses.'

'Oh, that's right,' said Lil, addressing Lade. 'There may be a concussion. Will you...?'

'Will you just go?' interrupted her father, his voice clenched. 'I'm sure Mr Lade knows what he's doing. Now go on,' and he gestured the door.

'Give us an hour,' said Lade, with a two-eyed wink that meant 'Trust me'.

And Lil must have done, because she secured her hat with a pin and left.

She was right to trust him. Lade was perfectly at home around knocks and bruises, having physicked, in his time with the circus, to the workaday ailments of his fellow troupers. Henry's injuries, it turned out, were not dissimilar to those sustained in a fall, without nets, from a practice-trapeze, viz., one or two cracked ribs and others contused, with the leg Lil had adverted to being one big bruise from hip to knee, and the knee itself rattled and swollen - nothing broken, though, Lade decided. Henry let him apply tincture of arnica and good, firm bandaging to his ribs and damaged knee. As for Lil's concern about concussion, having satisfied himself that the patient's vision wasn't blurred and that he could recall his

own name and the date, Lade made up a mustard poultice and urged bed-rest.

Henry was hardly less testy with the American than he had been with Lil. But while he continued to object to the 'fuss', at least he acquiesced to being undressed – a proceeding to which he would never have submitted in his daughter's presence. He dismissed the suggestion that he ought to see a doctor, though with nothing like the same vigour as when Lade ventured to ask if the police had been called. 'No need for that!' barked Henry and he raised a hand as if to restrain the other man from dashing off in search of a constable. 'His type...' He snarled at the thought of Hall. 'Never mind. Not worth the trouble. Besides,' he added, with an uncharacteristic flash of malice, 'he got his dues.' That shattered elbow would take longer to mend than anything Henry had brought away from their encounter.



Give us an hour, Maurice Lade had said.

At the scene of the scuffle, there was nothing for Lil to see but two spots of blood and a few pulverised apples. Hall's shop had been hastily locked up, though the barrow was still out front, propped up with a fruit crate. Dealt a discreet kick by Lil, it shuddered but held.

She scanned the Lane, left and right, uncertain where to go. Then she settled on leftwards, making for Collins place and thence across the railyards to the muddy parkland by the river. The late sunlight gave the river a golden crust and made the canopies of the remnant gums seem lit from within. There were seats, spaced at intervals and some of them empty, but Lil didn't sit. She took the gravelled path in the direction of Jolimont, stepping on her own shadow, her face dark with thought. She kept a spirited pace, though, and tossed her head from time to time, salvos in some muscular reverie: a skirmish with that brute Hall, you wouldn't be surprised.

When a pair of boys clattered past on a bicycle, Lil seemed to come to. Not four yards ahead, walking towards her, was Mr Finlay and a woman, his wife. Her laughing lilt carried ahead of them – ‘...never said *that*, I’m quite certain. But she insisted...’ – and her heart-shaped, smiling countenance presented an almost comic contrast to her husband’s, as tight and red as pull-taffy. Of course, they were past Lil in a moment, acknowledging her as they would any stranger, with nods and, from Mr Finlay, a self-conscious tip of the hat. Lil’s pace slowed to a glide then and she smiled to herself, seeming, at least for the moment, to have forgotten the fight.



In the end she rather dawdled and by the time she came in, close to six, her father was showing signs of impatience. Lade had left him propped up in bed, but Henry had disinterred himself as soon as he’d heard the front door shut.

Lil found him hobbling round the kitchen, making a start on tea, and she bullied him back to bed. She fetched extra pillows from hers and Moody’s rooms and spread thin-sliced bread with fish paste, to tide Henry over till tea. She fussed just enough to make him snap (*‘For goodness’ sake!*), then withdrew to the kitchen and her own unbruised company.

Along with her father’s tea-tray, she brought tidings of Hall’s elbow. It was broken all right – clean through in two places. ‘That’s a week in the hospital, at least,’ Pettit had said when he called, just now, at the Vivos’ back door. He’d inquired after Henry. Oh, and Hall had charged him with disposing of his most perishable stock, beginning with the apples from the barrow. Would Mr Vivo like a bag of the better ones, did she think, before the rest went for pig-feed?

Henry scoffed. ‘They’ll be fit for nothing.’

‘Well,’ said Lil, ‘even so, I accepted them on your behalf. If he brings them round early, I’ll make us an apple tart for dinner.’

‘That reminds me: I invited Mr Lade to eat with us tomorrow. Seemed like the least I could do to thank him.’

Lil looked stern. ‘I don’t know that you’ll be up to company, Poppa. You’ll be mighty stiff and sore in the morning, I expect.’

‘We’ll see. Anyway, I’m sure you and Moody could entertain him.’

‘And there’ll be Clara, too,’ Lil reminded him.

‘Ah, Clara. Good.’ Henry’s countenance seemed to uncrease a little at the mention of Lil’s old friend, and he sipped his lamb and barley soup.

Lil kept him company with a tray of her own. ‘You’ve not had much of a day, have you? The letters,’ she said, ‘then this.’ Hall’s fisticuffs, she meant. Henry gave a shrug and his face skewed with pain as he shifted just a little in bed. Lil took away his tray and untucked the bedclothes to ease his movements, then perched on the bed’s edge and stroked the bony bump that was her father’s feet. ‘Tell me about those letters,’ she said mildly, not looking at Henry, ‘the ones that came today.’ It was like a sidelong approach to a twitchy colt.

‘What about them?’

‘Do they always come like that?’ Henry didn’t reply, just heaved himself up straighter in bed. Lil adjusted his pillows, then, ‘You know,’ she said, ‘that Hall performs magic tricks? I’ve seen him make an orange disappear, turn grapes into cherries, that sort of thing.’

Henry’s grunt signified interest.

‘You haven’t seen him do it? No,’ Lil answered herself, sardonic, ‘I expect he keeps it mainly for his lady customers. But he’s good,’ she conceded. ‘Good enough to conjure letters out of thin air, maybe.’

Her father seemed to ignore the suggestion and the lift of the eyebrow that went with it. ‘It’ll be a while before he’s up

to much in the prestidigitation line,' he said drily. 'He'll have to find some other way of charming the ladies.'

But Lil persisted. 'But it *could* be him behind these letters, couldn't it? You ought to ask Moody if he's heard anything around the traps' – which was to say, around the pubs and theatre bars, Hall's idea of recreation pretty well matching Moody's: horse races, vaudeville acts, barmaids.

'I'm tired,' Henry said, and he looked it. 'You're right: it hasn't been much of a day. Best pull the blind on it,' an odd choice of words in a room without windows. The voice that was missing in the next instant's silence – both father and daughter seemed to pause for it – was Marcella's. 'There's got to be *something* good happened,' she would often say, being of the firm belief – superstition, really – that no day could be wholly bad.

Lil gave her father's toes a squeeze. 'Sleep then, that's best,' she agreed. And after a deal more fussing she turned the lamp low and left him be.

In the kitchen she stoked up the stove for warmth. She stood there a while, skirt and petticoat hoicked up at the back, till her legs grew hot and mottled. Her work basket beckoned. There were socks for darning, like always, besides an undershirt of Moody's. And there was Henry's outdoor coat, not just scabbed with roily grime but torn: a jagged rip at the hip from the kerbstone's edge. Lil examined the damage and shook her head. It wouldn't be an easy job. An invisible mend was beyond her and a patch would ruin the coat. But Clara was coming tomorrow. Her needlework had won prizes at the Centenary Exhibition. She'd know how to tackle the tear.

Her father's coat crackled as Lil returned it to its hook by the door. It was the letters Henry had harvested that afternoon. They'd spilled out during the fracas and Pettit had shoved them back roughly into the detective's pocket when he helped him up. Now Lil found them scuffed and crumpled,

the wax seals cracked on all but one. She smoothed them at the kitchen table, using her workbasket to hold them flat. Then she tiptoed to the hallway and Henry's bedroom door. She peeped in; he was sleeping. Good.



For seventy minutes Lil dwelt in deep and crafty contemplation of those five letters whose seals were broken. Of course, she lacked her father's experience, but nothing about them, besides their apparent newness, fitted an amateur sleuth's notion of fakery. Idiosyncratic folding meant they'd arrived in a variety of shapes, from almost-square to clumsy trapezoid. Of the six of them, no two letters bore the same handwriting or exact shade of ink. And their mode of expression – each of the five unsealed – was distinctly its own: pompous, familiar, inarticulate, craving, clipped. They seemed in no way mass-produced; there was no scent of contrivance in their intent or execution, nor anything sinister, nothing that smelt of a *scheme*. What they did share was that same thread of clemency that Lil had detected when she ran her eye over the epistolic multitude on Thursday night. *I could nott blame you*, she read, and *nivr wod i ev ert yor felins* and *We greatly regret that our ill-judgement fh'd have tarnish'd your good fstanding* and *Of course I forgive you, Dear Girl*.

This time Lil didn't have to steal words and phrases under her father's possessive eye. She read all five letters right through, unfolding one at a time, then refolding and replacing it under the workbasket before taking the next. She examined the wrapper of the sixth and scraped with a fingernail at its wax seal, checking for brittleness. But no, it was sound and so were Lil's scruples, evidently. She might, after all, have broken the sixth letter's seal, pretended it another casualty of Hall's pummelling. As it was, she left it be, left it for Henry.

The weight of the workbasket hadn't flattened the letters – not really. But no matter, for in returning them to her father's coat Lil scrunched them up the way she'd found them, justifying the sediment of sealing wax in the pocket's bottom.



'You're home early.' It was unusual to see Moody before midnight on a Saturday.

'Huh,' he said, 'there's the same old stragglers, but they're just not spending. We hardly took a spondulick after nine. In the end, Mr Os. just kept a couple of the young fellers behind to watch out for drunks and put up the shutters.' He yawned. 'Long day, all the same.'

'So, you don't count as a "young feller" any more?' Lil teased. With a small mound of balled socks – two hours' darning – by her side, she had the look of a costerwoman down to her last few artichokes.

Ignoring the jibe, Moody flicked his head in the direction of Henry's room. 'Is he still up?'

'No,' said Lil, 'asleep hours ago.' She'd looked in on Henry not long ago and put out his lamp. Shifting, he'd moaned but hadn't woken. Now Lil cut the worsted short and lay down her mending. 'Just wait,' she said, 'till you hear what happened,' and she filled Moody in on their father's dust-up.

Moody was first incredulous, then amused. 'I can't believe Poppa would take on Teddy Hall.' He sounded almost admiring.

'He didn't *take him on*,' Lil objected. 'Poppa was *helping* him pick up his fruit.'

'Oh no,' Moody agreed, 'that Hall's a hothead, true enough. Flies off the handle – doesn't need an excuse. I've seen it myself.' Even so, the idea of Henry shaping up to the neighbourhood pugilist made him smile. 'He'll be all right, won't he, the old man? Nothing's broken?'

Lil explained about Maurice Lade's timely advent.

‘That’s two of us Vivos he’s seen in our smalls,’ said Moody with a wink. ‘It’ll be your turn next.’ He was elbow-deep in the biscuit tin, his vest-front swarfed with crumbs. It had been hours since he’d eaten and Moody had a stripling’s appetite.

‘You’ll be around in the morning?’ asked Lil. ‘I expect Poppa could use a hand. He’ll be pretty tender.’

‘Very well,’ replied Moody, mock-solemn, ‘I s’pose I can give church a miss, this once.’ In truth, he hadn’t been inside a church since Marcella left. He dusted crumbs off his lap and, on his sister’s signal, deftly caught the three bundled pairs of fresh-darned socks that were his.

‘Those toenails of yours, Mood,’ Lil tutted. ‘They make no end of work for me. Keep them short, won’t you?’

‘Marzipan,’ was his enigmatic reply. ‘Have we got any marzipan?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Lil, packing away her workbasket. ‘Look for yourself.’

Moody found some marzipan left over from last Christmas. ‘Will there be room in the oven for darkies?’

Lil cocked her head in calculation. ‘I was thinking of an apple tart, but... It’ll have to be early, before the roast goes in.’ Moody was still at the store-cupboard, digging a thumbnail into the marzipan through its waxed-paper coating. It was a bit stiff, but usable. ‘Fetch us out the dates then,’ said Lil, ‘and we can stone them now, before bed. Save time in the morning.’ She sounded all good sense and business-like, but there was a speck of mischief in her manner. ‘Darkies,’ she mused, ‘just the thing to cheer up the old man. Well thought of, brother.’ Moody lobbed the bag of dates and she caught it two-handed and laughed. ‘Now,’ as they set to work with paring-knife and fingers, shucking the dates from their pits, ‘what do you know about Mr Hall and his magic tricks?’

Chapter 7

Sunday, September 10th

‘Good trick, eh?’ called Moody from the verandah.

‘What’s that?’ Lil had missed it.

‘Watch.’ But her brother’s reprise of his new party turn – smoking and whistling at the same time – was cut short by a coughing fit. He hadn’t had anything useful to tell, last night, about Hall and his sleight-of-hand, nor mentioned the fruiterer’s trick cigarette-tin, with its can-can girl who lost her clothes when you opened the lid.

Lil was in the kitchen, at the narrow bench by the window. In a bowl clapped to one hip, she stirred the short biscuit mixture that was the key to a good darky. Moody had already stuffed the dates, each with a plug of marzipan, and pinched them shut. They were lined up now on the pastry board like a regiment of slugs.

Darkies were a family favourite. They’d started off as a prank of Marcella’s, the idea being that, when the eater sank his teeth into the date, the crisp biscuit coating would crumble in his lap. The first couple of times Henry had let Marcella have her fun, had let himself be fooled. After that, though, he’d eaten each darky at a bite – no crumbs and only the momentary indignity of a mouth over-full.

He was as sore this morning as Lil had predicted. Of course, he ought to have stayed in bed; but there wasn’t much comfort to be had there, with all his bruising. No, Henry

insisted, he'd feel better on his feet. Moody's offer to help him dress had been rebuffed. So he was in there now, struggling pridefully with his suspenders. He hadn't a hope of raising his arms to comb and dress his hair. Either he'd have to let Moody help, or face their guests looking like a tramp. Exhausted, Henry sank onto the bed, flinching at the pain his hip gave him. Then resolve steeled his features again.

'Lil!' He opened his bedroom door a crack and called down the hall. Lil must have been listening for him, for she was there in an instant, wiping her hands on a rag pinned to her apron front. 'My socks. Can you...?' With difficulty, he'd managed to put on his sock-suspenders, but he couldn't reach his feet.

'Consider this practice, Pop, for when you're old.' Lil would never have been so insensitive, but Moody, leaning on the door-jamb, seemed to be enjoying his father's incapacity.

Lil murmured sympathy as she eased a just-darned grey sock up her father's bruised and wiry calf. She tied his shoes and straightened his trouser cuffs. 'There.' She touched his unbruised knee and, knowing what she risked, asked him, 'Are you sure you should be up?'

Henry shook himself irritably. 'Don't fuss...'

'*Don't fuss,*' mimicked Moody from the doorway and drew a murderous glare from Lil..

Ignoring his son, Henry drew himself up as straight as he could. 'A walk,' he said, 'will do me good. Before the guests arrive.'



Sunday mornings Henry always walked, for miles sometimes. He too had forsaken churchgoing ever since Marcella left. Of the Vivos, only Lil still went to church - or said she did.

Now, church attendance wasn't an easy thing to falsify, even in a city the size of this one. It helped that there were two Anglican parish churches, besides the cathedral, within easy

walking distance of *Hoc loco*. If ever she was missed in her supposed place of worship, she could claim to have been at one of the others. Every Sunday before rising, she'd read at random from Kennett's *Standard Sermons*, of which she kept an old copy under her bed. Not only did it amount to Sabbath-observation of a sort, but it meant she was prepared in the event of Moody's quizzing her about that morning's sermon - which, from time to time, he did. Perhaps he suspected something; more likely, he was just mocking her duteousness.

Duteous daughter that she was, she walked with Henry as far as the Lane, where he insisted on going his own way. Even over that short a distance, his progress had been iffish; but he promised, testily, in order to shake Lil off, that he would not go far and that he'd stop along the way to rest. She squeezed his arm in parting, meaning to convey concern but causing him to wince. 'Sorry, Poppa. I forgot.'

Their guests were due at noon. The darkies were done already and the roast was on, with Moody staying behind, as he said, 'on basting detail' - meaning leisure to sit and smoke in the yard, counting the neighbours' pigeons as they circled overhead. Any leisure was agreeable to one who had so little of it.

Dressed in Sunday best and clasping a prayer book of blue morocco, Lil strode west on Flinders lane, nodding, as she passed, to acquaintances making for the ten o'clock service at the cathedral. Her striding gave the impression that she was running late for a ten o'clock service elsewhere in the town. It must've been St James's she was bound for. But no. She threaded her way 'inland': along Collins street for a distance, then nipping up an alley that delivered her straight to Stalbridge Chambers. At the door, she fished in her dilly-bag, swapped the prayer book for a ring of keys, and let herself in.

Mr Whelk was waiting.

Their arrangement hadn't been forced on Lil; but nor was it exactly of her choosing. It had become necessary, that was all. The caretaker, loud in his speech, was in other ways stealthy and had noticed - had made it his business to notice - Lil's gentlemen callers and deduced the nature of their visits. He might have caused her no end of trouble; as it was, she'd acquiesced without demur to his proposition that he 'deserved a share' in return for his silence. If it gave her distress, she never showed it. Except that she flinched whenever he touched her with the finger that was missing its tip.

A compositor before he was a caretaker, Mr Whelk had lost the top joint of his type-picking finger with a whitlow turned bad. 'Only an inch it was they took' - telling Lil, he'd wagged the stump - 'and my living's gone, like that.' She had made sympathetic noises, but the blind-eyed missing inch repulsed her, you could tell.

For six days a week their arrangement entitled her to such caretakerly largesse as hot water for tea-making. Only on the seventh did it keep her from church and sink her deeper into ruin.

Nothing so very bad.



From where Lil left him, an eastward course on the Lane presented her battle-sore father with the least obstacle in the shape of a hill. It was slow going, nonetheless; there was nothing of his daughter's stride in Henry's shaky gait. Ten minutes' walk that would normally have taken two brought him to the gardens alongside the Treasury, where he lowered himself unsteadily onto a bench.

At one time, he had come to these gardens almost daily; which was probably why he rarely came there now. This place had been his refuge from the Detective Office in the awful months after Marcella left. Among his colleagues there'd been

no friends, only rivals, none of whom – for all their professional arts of subtlety and concealment – had made an effort to hide their pleasure at Henry’s being cuckolded. When he lost his grip on detective work as well, his humiliation had been complete.

The Sydney swindler, Baron von Ebst (*alias* Wilhelm Paul Richter, *alias* Ehrling, *alias* Bill the Jockey), at large in Melbourne for Cup Week 1885, had made a public spectacle of taking Henry down. Detective Vivo had long been the Baron’s self-declared nemesis in the southern colony, having once apprehended the bogus nobleman, only to lose him. (He’d escaped Henry’s custody at Geelong by feigning food poisoning, greasing his shackles, and prising off weatherboards with a butter knife.) Learning from a mutual ‘friend’ of Henry’s recent marital misfortune, the Baron – a master of disguise – had posed as a Sydney solicitor hired by Marcella to broach a reconciliation. It hadn’t been the money, he’d explained afterwards in a gleeful letter to the Superintendent of Police: the £200 Henry had coughed up for Marcella’s debts and journey home had barely covered a ‘flutter’ at Flemington. No, said the Baron, he’d have *paid* that amount for the satisfaction of seeing the sagacious Detective Vivo brought so low.

The worst of it was that he’d repeated his boasts in a tip-off to *Table Talk*, a so-called ‘society’ journal retailing in gossip that ought never to have seen ink. The ignominy that followed had made life at the Detective Office insupportable for Henry. He’d resigned, but had kept the fact from his children. Every morning, dressed as if for work, he’d taken the train to town, walking all day through the near-city suburbs or sitting for hours at a stretch in the gardens. In lieu of a salary, he had drawn a mortgage on the house at Balaclava and wore the money away, over months, as surely as he did his shoe-leather. (These were the same months during which Lil had

turned down the road to ruin – unnoticed by her father, ‘working late’.)

Not even word of the Baron’s arrest had seemed to penetrate Henry’s despondency. The conman had himself been conned at last, inveigled over the border by a ‘sure thing’, a sham gold-mining venture at Beechworth. The whole set-up had worn the mark of Otto Berliner and, sure enough, it was a couple of his men who’d seen the Baron into the hands of the police and made certain that, this time, he’d stayed there. Otto himself it was who’d brought Henry the news, though never letting on as to his part in it. If he’d hoped to see his friend’s spirits lift, he must have been disappointed. Poor Henry, walked and starved past lean to cadaverous, had merely nodded, his expression set as stone.

The way he looked now wasn’t so very different. Though he ate well enough these days and no longer walked himself to exhaustion, advancing age had stripped whatever plumpness there’d been from his face, scoring a deep vertical line under each cheekbone and another between his brows. His eyes, dark as boot-buttons, offered no window onto Henry’s thoughts; their steady, unblinking gaze was, paradoxically, the key to his habitual ‘closed’ expression. In its present state of repose, the only flicker of life in Henry’s face was a rabbitish whiffling of the moustache as, thinking but unthinking, he gnawed his top lip.

Eleven faint chimes carried on the wind, seeming to stir him from his trance. He drew from his coat pocket the crumpled letters, tutting at the state of them. Even so, he didn’t accord them the same care as he had their predecessors. One by one, he smoothed them – none too gently – on his good knee. His mouth was tight, disdainful. Coming to the letter whose seal was yet intact, Henry broke it open with a vengeful flick of a thumbnail. *So there.* But his mouth lost the shape of scepticism as he unfolded the paper.

No forger – not even, as Lil had posited, one contemporary with the missing eleven days – would have wasted his wiles on the likes of the letter just opened. At the foot of the sheet were written the words ‘I ATONE’, in about as unskilled a hand as could be imagined. An illiterate, surely, had copied those six letters, stroke for painstaking stroke. They served as title to a sketch, naive in style but so vividly wrought that Henry’s mouth went slack in admiration.

In the foreground, on a notional headland overhung by palm fronds, there stood a man, whiskered but youthful and dressed in a sailor’s garb of some hundred years past. He gazed from the picture with imploring eyes, twice the size of life. At his side stood a pelican, noble in three-quarter profile. The sailor’s left hand rested on the bird’s tufted head, in his other he held a paper: a woman’s portrait, done in just a few strokes, but lovingly. Behind him stretched the sea, with a sailing ship at anchor, flanked by flying fish and dolphins. And beyond was a sunset, the variations of colour intricately rendered in the sepia ink by shades of wash and hatching all the way to the paper’s edge. Without words, the composition plainly conveyed: *Though far away, you are not forgotten.* And besides that, there were the words: *I atone.*

The letter showed signs of having been roughly handled long before it reached Henry’s pocket. It had been folded in half – a dirty crease ran down the middle – and kept that way, pressed in the curve of a pocket or a bedroll, for a goodly time. The address on the front was in a hand scarcely more proficient than the artist’s, and on the back, above the scab-like seal, was written *At Sea*. And you could well believe it: the pen strokes seemed to lean into and draw back from the paper with the motion of the swell. Done at sea then, and brought to port – to London itself, by the postmark – for sending to

Sally Vinns

at Mr Ogg

Sine of Teezel
Tunny l^{ane}
London

Ogg. That made it the letter snatched yesterday afternoon from the step of Pettit's neighbour, the Chinaman.

Reluctantly, Henry re-folded it and glanced through the other five – the letters Lil had read last night. Then he opened it again, the one meant for Sally Vinns (or Vines, or Vince – who could say?), and he smiled to himself. Henry Vivo, bruised and bitter, sat on his old rack of pain in the Treasury Gardens and smiled. A sailor and a pelican. The thing was so guileless, it had to be real.



If Henry picked at his dinner, the darkies were to blame. He'd taken several of them with him on his walk, wrapped in a handkerchief, and had brought none home. In front of Lil's friend Clara, he played down his injuries, hinting that they'd happened in the line of duty. No one contradicted him – not even Moody.

'My word,' was all Clara said about it. She could ask Lil later.

Maurice Lade, when Henry came in from his walk, had appraised the older man with frank admiration. Lade had not long since arrived, with a half-pound tin of jersey toffees.

'Why, the pleasure is mine,' he'd replied to Lil's thanks. 'This'll be my first homecooked meal (not counting boarding-house fare) since...' – he considered a moment – 'since Washington State, last Thanksgiving. But, I swear, no turkey could smell as fine as what you've got cooking there.'

'Lamb,' said Lil. 'But, as you can see, it's Moody who's the cook.'

Her brother, in shirtsleeves, was stirring gravy at the stove. 'Quite right,' he said. 'Up before dawn, I was. Shore the beast, cut its throat, spun the wool for a guernsey, plucked out the

chitterlings and boiled the head for soup, besides roasting this splendid haunch,' indicating, with a flourish, the warming-box where the roast was 'resting'.

'As usual, my brother claims too much credit,' Lil told the grinning Lade. 'Twenty minutes ago, I found him sound asleep in the yard.'

'Not *sound* asleep,' corrected Moody; 'I was dozing. Well, what would you expect, after all that hard graft?'

Lil herself was not long risen from repose of sorts, in Mr Whelk's cupboard-like quarters. She was wearing her grave-robber dress, and if the back of it was rather creased... well, an hour's sitting on a hard pew could do that.

After the roast was partaken of and the plates cleared away amid compliments, Moody brought the darkies to the table in Marcella's best Spode bowl. He offered them first to Clara, who took one, placing it on her tea plate with the merest of smiles. She was no stranger to a darky. Maurice Lade likewise helped himself to one. 'Take two,' urged Moody. 'They're really something special.'

Henry frowned at his son, who, smiling encouragement at the American, ignored him. 'Mr Lade...' Henry began. But it was too late. Lade's tentative bite sent biscuit crumbs cascading down his shirtfront and a splutter of laughter around the table. 'Oh, really,' scolded Henry. 'I must apologise...'

But Maurice Lade signalled unconcern with a wave of his hand, only trying to swallow the mouthful so that he could laugh properly.

It might seem strange that such a dry stick as Henry should make friendly overtures to a hearty, unserious man like Lade. But look at Otto, look at Marcella: it took generosity and good humour to cushion Henry's spikiness, and something in him must have known it. A chill old world it would have been for Henry, with only his own exactitude for company. He was

drawn to the warmth given off by larger, looser spirits than his own. And in return, he made a loyal friend, one who gave those large, loose spirits the ambit they required. He listened well and kept his counsel; Henry's share of any conversation tended to be instructive, but sparing.

Lade sat on the detective's right at dinner, showing him a manly deference when he wasn't entertaining the company with yarns of circus life. A quick study, he dispatched his second darky at a bite.

'You're from Pittsburgh originally?' Lil must have recalled M. Duvalli's fawning preamble.

'That's correct. Born and raised at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers.'

'My word,' Clara Meisner clapped her hands, 'I thought *our* rivers had queer names. Say them again.' He did, whereupon Clara and the younger Vivos racked their brains for rivers with names to rival them. Murrumbidgee. Onkaparinga. Gellibrand. The Yarra, of course. 'But my favourite,' Clara said with finality, 'must be the Esk.'

She jutted her chin as she pronounced the monosyllabic waterway. It was her schoolmarm look - one of them. She could reel off the names of rivers and creeks, mountains, inlets, all manner of landform by the score, since she regularly led her class in recitations of same, pointing at the wall-chart of the colonies with a cane. Apart from which, there was her young man, Mr Ditchley, a draughtsman in the Department of Crown Lands. His idea of an amusing pastime was a stump-challenge (so called because the contestants took turns until one of them was stumped) to name as many towns as one could think of beginning with, for instance, the letter B. Stump-challenges notwithstanding, Mr Ditchley made a more-than-acceptable beau, being rather handsome, dependable, and kindly to a fault. Why, Clara had confided to Lil, even her mother could find no cause for objection.

‘This afternoon,’ she said now, turning to Lil, ‘before the concert, could we walk down Bourke street, do you think, as far as the Book Arcade? There’s something in the window I’d like you to see.’ Blushing, she gave her friend a meaning look.

‘My word,’ teased Lil (like her brother, she did a nice line in mimicry), ‘how intriguing.’



Of course, it had to do with Mr Ditchley.

Moody kept them company as far as Queen’s Walk, where they left him comparing Henry Buck’s window-dressing with his own. Of the two young women, Clara was the taller by a good two inches, and she took Lil’s arm in a bosomy, confiding way as they walked. Things were close to being settled between herself and Mr Ditchley, she said. ‘If all goes well’ – meaning, if her mother agreed to the marriage – ‘I shall finish up teaching at the end of the year. Just think: no more chalkdust in everything, no more Mr Wattie’ (the head-teacher whose unwelcome attentions had made Clara consider a transfer to the backblocks), ‘no more smelly children.’

‘Excepting your own.’

‘Lil!’

What Clara didn’t say – didn’t need to tell Lil – was that marriage to Mr Ditchley and an end to school-teaching would put her squarely at the mercy of her mother’s ‘nerves’. There was no question of Clara’s being mistress of her own home; once married, the Ditchleys would live with Mrs Meisner for as many years as it took her to die. No beaming prospect, it was nonetheless one to which Clara had long since accustomed herself. In fact, before meeting Mr Ditchley, she’d been resigned to spinsterhood, having passed the age by which she might reasonably have expected to marry.

‘Have you signed the petition yet,’ she asked, changing the subject, ‘for woman suffrage?’ Lil shook her head, no. ‘I can’t

imagine how you've avoided it,' Clara went on. 'At church today, we were practically barricaded inside until we'd signed. And not just the ladies; they're asking men to sign as well this time. I suppose *they*'ve more chance of being listened to.'

Lil was attending a gutterside beggar with a fiddle and a singing dog. The boot on the fellow's tapping foot was so far gone in decrepitude that his bare toes were visible intermittent with the beat. Turning back to her companion, 'I don't need a vote, do I,' said Lil, 'with two men voting for my interests? Not,' she conceded, 'that Moody has stirred his stumps at election-time yet. I suppose, if I ever cared to, I could make use of his vote. Jot the name of my preferred man on a scrap of paper and send Moody with it to the polling booth. Rather like placing a bet with the bookie - he'd like that. You and your mother, though: that's different. All being well,' she added, 'you'll soon have a man looking out for you.'

'He already looks out for me,' replied Clara, squeezing her friend's arm.

They were in Bourke street now, nearing Cole's Book Arcade. It being a Sunday, the city's most eccentric emporium was closed, but still, there was plenty to see. Caught by the afternoon sun and framed by the tremendous painted arch of a rainbow, Cole's great windows were crammed, like the arcade itself, with things contrived to draw a crowd. The perpetual-motion machine was like fly-paper to the eyes of small children, who seemed never to tire of watching the two little tin men cranking their windlass. Pass the Book Arcade anytime, day or night, and there'd be a child howling as their parent led them away - perpetual motion on the one side of the glass resulting in perpetual emotion on the other. Adjacent was a painted backdrop of a monstrous, grinning clown's face, with Coles' own popular books for children - *The Funny Picture Book*, *The Family Amuser* and *Intellect Sharpener* and the rest - propped open to display their

grotesque illustrations. And right there in the window was one of them, brought to life: a half-scale model of the Whipping Machine for Naughty Boys. In the original illustration, a roller spiked with hundreds of canes raked the rear ends of four bawling boys secured in a rack. The model was less impressive, the canes being rather sparse, the naughty boys represented by an assortment of blank-faced dolls, and there being no motion, perpetual or otherwise.

‘Dreadful thing,’ said Clara. That certainly wasn’t what she’d brought Lil to see. No, she drew her friend to a side-bay of Cole’s window, where an easel set close to the glass held a map pinned to stiff board. If it seemed insignificant in such clamorous company, it was made the more so by a banner strung overhead. LOOK! LOOK! LOOK! LOOK! LOOK! it importuned, SEE MELBOURNE ANEW WITH COLE’S NUMBER MAP. As if that weren’t exhortation enough, ‘Look,’ said Clara, adding, ‘Mr Ditchley did it.’

Lil looked. It was an ordinary-seeming map, measuring about 24 inches by 18. Along its top edge ran the legend: *THE NUMBER MAP for the City of Melbourne. Shewing all the streets & lanes; also STREET NUMBERS at corners of blocks, &c.*

‘Months it took, in his spare time: checking all the numbers, taking measurements. I helped him,’ said Clara with pride.

‘What a splendid thing,’ Lil exclaimed, and she pored over the map, her nose almost touching the window glass. ‘There’s our neighbours’, number 11,’ she pointed, then traced with a finger the route to her office. ‘Ah,’ she said, surprised, ‘he’s marked on Stalbridge Chambers, I see. And spelt it correctly. Well done. What a splendid thing,’ she repeated, not taking her eyes off the map. ‘You never realise, do you, how crowded with lanes the city is, until you see them all laid out like this? I see he’s even put in the rights-of-way that don’t have names.’

They were marked with dotted lines, and what a lot of them there were. Then, 'Oh,' said Lil, 'how strange.'

Clara looked at where her friend's finger had stopped. 'What's that?'

'Tunney lane. You see, off Flinders lane there?' A stubby dead-end corresponded with the Carson's cottages cul de sac. 'I never knew it had a name.' Lil stared hard at it, then blinked. 'My word,' she said, not in the least facetious this time, 'I must tell Poppa.'



She wouldn't get the chance until after tea. Being a Sunday, it was sardines on toast. To go with his, Moody cut a wedge of the smelly cheese. Ordinarily, Henry would have objected to its being brought to the table; but tonight he made no complaint. Perhaps that knock to the head had affected his olfactories.

Lil had got home to find him actually dozing in an armchair while Lade occupied himself with a newspaper. After a game of draughts, their visitor had spent the afternoon reading the *Weekly Times* and yesterday's *Herald* from front to back, besides the best part of Moody's *Sportsman*. 'No better way to get to know a town,' he'd told Lil, 'than by its newspaper.' He had demurred when she thanked him for keeping her father company. 'If anyone's to feel obliged, it's me,' he assured her. 'I've spent a most pleasant afternoon. Most pleasant indeed.'

Henry, just woken, had uncreased himself with embarrassed care. 'Must've nodded off.' In fact, he had slept for nearly two hours, snoring intermittently and once muttering, 'Mussels. No. Mussels.' At least, that's what it had sounded like. Lade, having never heard of Marcella, doubtless supposed the detective to have been dreaming of shellfish.

He left soon after Lil got in, having to see a fellow who was interested in buying his instrument. 'An acquaintance of my

landlord's. Wrong of me, I know, to be doing business on a Sunday.'

Henry dismissed Lade's qualm with a half-gesture. He wore a distracted look, was cranky, in fact, at having squandered his Sunday and said as much, once their guest was gone.

'But Poppa, you...' Lil began.

'Don't *tell* me I need rest,' he cut her off. 'I am aware of that. Obviously.' His mouth made a bitter *moue* and he gave a snort of exasperation. 'Rest!' He seemed to be talking to himself. 'There were things I wanted to do today.'

'*Things* can wait.' Seeing him struggle to rise, Lil rushed forward, taking hold of one hand and forearm. 'You're cold,' she said. 'Let me help you to bed. I can bring you tea there again.'

Henry shook off her grip and straightened up with difficulty. 'Don't nursemaid me. I will eat at the dinner table,' he said, mustering his dignity - not that much dignity was in order, really, to preside over sardines on toast.

It was Lil's turn to show exasperation. 'If I nursemaid you...' But she stopped there. 'At least come and sit nearer the stove, Poppa. And let me fetch you a rug and your cap. The last thing you want is to be catching a chill as well.' She stooped to stoke the firebox, grasping the latch-handle with a canvas mitt and letting the glow toast her face a moment before she thrust in a stub of split gum. 'As it is,' she went on, her back to her father, 'I'll be surprised if you're fit for work tomorrow.'

That was too much for Henry, who had never lost a day's work to illness. 'Of course I'll be fit for work. Why wouldn't I? Don't be ridiculous.' This was about as cross as Henry ever got, yet he never raised his voice; if anything, it got quieter and more chill in anger. As well as his voice he lowered his eyes, drawing himself in, dismissing the object of his scorn.

No wonder Marcella had left him.

Lil, being a Vivo born, was well used to her father's frostiness. She settled him in a chair near the stove – rug, slippers (he refused the cap) – with a briskness that amounted to keeping a safe distance. And neither spoke a word until Moody came in.

'You'll be sorry to have missed it,' replied Lil to her brother's arch inquiry about the Liedertafel concert. 'Mr Grills was conductor.'

'Oho, Twitchy Grills! What a treat! Was he very bad?'

'Moody! He wasn't *bad!* Although,' she had to admit, 'he was rather distracting.' She and Clara had been put in 'old maid' seats, sidelong to the apron of the stage, whence Mr Grill and his twitch had been impossible to ignore.

'You can't blame those Lieder boys for hitting so many dud notes.'

'Oh, they do not,' Lil admonished.

'It must be hard to tell if he's signalling a key-change or just having one of his spasms.' Coming from an epileptic, it was a pretty shaky line of humour; but then, Moody had never seen himself in the grip of a fit.

'Well, we enjoyed it,' said Lil, fishing at the back of the cupboard for sardines. She added, 'Miss Boxer was there with her mother.'

Moody, his head in the *Sportsman*, showed not the slightest interest. Scratch Miss Boxer, then.

During tea, Lil shuttled between range and table with hot toast. 'More?' But they were done and, with the room smelling unmistakably of Sunday night, the three Vivos drifted into reverie or, in Moody's case, close contemplation of Saturday's racing results.



Henry was first to stir, but Lil was first to her feet, scuttling ahead of her father to make ready his bed. That meant keeping him at bay – 'Sorry, Poppa' – while she stripped the

sheets and pillow-case, replacing them with fresh ones ahead of washing day tomorrow. When he was rugged up and settled, with a brick at his feet and extra pillows and a lamp on the stool at his bedside, Lil said, 'Now, what can I bring you?' Only when he asked for his notebook and pencil did she remember about Mr Ditchley's map.

'Tunney lane? Are you sure?' Henry was interested, all right. 'But our letter carriers have never heard of the name; nor has Pettit or any of the others who live there. And the directory gives it only as "Carson's cottages".'

'Well,' said Lil, 'it makes some kind of sense of things, doesn't it?'

'Hmm.' Henry stared at his tented knees and plucked his top lip. (Sunday night, and he hadn't trimmed his moustache.) 'Who did you say he works for, this fellow of Clara's?'

'The Department of Crown Lands. But this map - the one in the window of the Book Arcade - is an enterprise of his own. Cole's printed it, but Clara says it was all Mr Ditchley's own idea and doing.'

'Ditchley, is it?' Henry wrote in his notebook: *Ditchley, Dept. Crown Lands*. 'And he's a draughtsman?'

'I'm sure that's right,' said Lil. But she sounded uneasy. 'It won't bring any trouble for him, will it? I mean, he made the map on his own time. Clara helped him.'

'Did *she* know anything about Tunney lane?' Henry asked. 'About where her fellow got the name?'

'No,' said Lil, 'she'd never heard of it. But that's not surprising. She says Mr Ditchley counted hundreds of lanes and rights-of-way - something like eighty off Little Bourke street alone.'

For once, though, Henry wasn't interested in the numbers. 'So it's brand-new, is it, this map of his?' he wanted to know.

‘Came from the printers just last week, Clara says, and went straightaway on sale at Cole’s.’

‘Only at Cole’s, did she say?’

‘For now, yes. Mr Ditchley was to do the rounds of the booksellers and stationers yesterday, to see if others of them would carry it – but with what success, Clara couldn’t say.’

‘And was it in the window all last week?’

‘Only since Friday, she says.’

Evidently Henry was seeking a connection between the advent of Mr Ditchley’s map and that of the Tunney lane letters. ‘Printed at Cole’s own works, you said? Interesting.’ He jotted, then dotted another note in his book. He looked better than he’d done all day. His colour was back and his eyes were undimmed for the first time since Carr had handed him *Whitaker’s Almanack*, open at the perpetual calendar.

‘Very good.’ He closed the notebook and had Lil swap it for Kipling’s *Barrack-Room Ballads*. ‘I’ll say goodnight, then,’ he said. ‘You needn’t look in again.’

Detective Vivo’s record of vanquishing the sick-bed would remain unbroken. Nothing would keep him at home tomorrow. He had things to do.

Chapter 8

Monday, September 11th

Before eight o'clock, Henry was nine letters better off. Five he'd found first thing, wrapped in brown paper on his own kitchen table. They were yesterday's Tunney lane post, handed by Pettit to Moody the night before.

('What'll this be?' Moody had asked, turning the parcel over when he brought it in.

'A postal conundrum,' Lil had replied, at which he'd dropped it like a dirty rag.)

Four more had materialised this morning, Henry gathering them soon after dawn. If the stooping to pick them up had given him pain, he must have felt recompensed - indeed, he'd almost smiled - at finding two by Hall's front door. Infirmary had limited his morning walk to Carson's cottages and back. That had been quite hard enough. He'd managed to get his elastic-sided boots on all right, but needed Lil's help to remove them on his return. Breakfast he ate standing at the bench, shifting his weight from foot to foot so as to keep from seizing up.

You could read the seasons from the Vivos' kitchen window. Their backyard sloped away, leaving an elevated outlook over rooftops and yards. The red-brick bulk of Burston's malthouse blocked the sightline to the river, a loss redeemed in some measure by the orchardy expanse next door. Until a fortnight or three weeks ago every deciduous

tree in Smiths' backyard had been skeletal, a wintry purple; now they were a mass of blossom, pink and white. A huge old leaning gum played seasonal staging-post to flocks of cockatoos, currawongs, and rosellas, besides hosting a brood of magpies all year round. Their springtime squabbling may well have caught the attention of Henry, who gazed out while he spooned boiled egg from a cup held close to his chin. Behind him, Lil and Moody exchanged a look. Their dutiful concern at his refusal to rest having met - predictably - with disdain, they left him to his egg and his stoical pride.

With his stride reduced to a hobble, he'd have left early for work anyway. But, having something to do on the way, he set out earlier still. Between *Hoc loco* and the Book Arcade, the stiffness of his gait eased a little. Moreover, the linament that he'd rubbed all down his left side had the unintended effect of keeping dogs at a distance, so that he was spared the usual sniffings and jumpings-up.

Henry had to squint at first to make out the detail of Mr Ditchley's map in Cole's window, gloomed over by the shop verandah. Like Lil the day before, he traced a finger near the glass to get his bearings. Unlike Lil's, his hovering finger made straight for the Carson's cottages right-of-way, labelled *Tunney lane* in minute but legible print.

Tudehope was out, of course, when Henry called at the letter carriers' room on his way upstairs. If such a name as Tunney lane did exist, Tudehope, better than anyone, would know of it, since Carson's cottages - and the Vivos' own, for that matter - were on his postal round. On Mr Mulligan's instruction, the letter carrier, as soon as he returned, came knocking at the detective's door. But he had no joy for Henry. Like his colleague Carr, Tudehope had never heard of Tunney lane (his evident puzzlement at the name being proof, moreover, against loose talk in the carriers' room). Post for Carson's cottages, Tudehope confirmed, was generally

addressed 'Off 104 Flinders lane' or just 'Off Flinders lane east'. There had been no change in that, he assured Henry.



Thus assured, come midday, the post office detective took a tram as far as Parliament, whence he limped downhill to the public offices in hopes of finding Clara's Mr Ditchley. Henry's every step, not to mention the business of swinging on and off the tram, was by strict negotiation with his narky limbs and cracked ribs. His left side, under his clothes, was all one bruise and, in motion, he appeared to have aged twenty years since Friday.

The stuccoed three-storey H of the public offices - housing Crown Lands, Agriculture, Public Works, Mines, and the rest - stretched along a ledge overlooking the Treasury Gardens. 'I'm looking for Mr Ditchley, of the Survey Branch,' Henry told a doorman of the old-soldier variety.

'Dinner-hour, sir,' the flap-jowled fellow replied. 'You've just missed him.' It was in connection, Henry explained, with a private matter that he hoped to speak with the draughtsman, at which the doorman assumed a graver bearing. He sized Henry up - debt-collector or arm of the law? - and, evidently settling on the latter, suggested he might seek his man in the gardens adjacent. And he described Mr Ditchley, down to the style of his hat, the cut of his coat, and the manner of kitbag he carried.

As luck would have it, a fellow answering the description was lunching, a serviette spread across his knees, on the very seat Henry himself had occupied the day before. 'Mr Ditchley?'

He looked up, startled, and swallowed his mouthful. 'Yes?' He flapped a protective corner of the table napkin over the rest of his meal.

Henry introduced himself. 'I've seen your map, your Number Map of Melbourne.'

The draughtsman stood up, unsure, from his expression, whether to be pleased or alarmed. ‘How did you know I...?’

‘Miss Meisner is a friend of my daughter’s.’

‘Ah yes, of course. Miss Vivo.’

‘Please,’ Henry looked pained, ‘may we sit? My leg...’

‘Of course,’ flustered Mr Ditchley. He was a good-looking fellow, with a rosebud mouth, a fussy collar, and mutton-chops tending to ginger.

Henry came straight to the point. ‘Tunney lane. What can you tell me about it?’

‘Tunney lane?’ Mr Ditchley started like a guilty man. ‘Well,’ he gave a nervous chuckle, ‘it’s a fabrication – the name, I mean. But *you* know that, I suppose.’ He lowered his eyes a moment and wet his lips with a quick tongue before going on. ‘It’s... in commercial mapping, it’s called a “trap feature”: a false feature that brands the map as yours. For reasons of copyright, you see. So you can tell if someone’s copied your work.’ The draughtsman, warming to his subject, was encouraged by Henry’s nod and squirreled brow to continue. ‘Ordinarily, on a map like mine, it’d be a wholly bogus street – one that doesn’t exist at all. But I didn’t like to mislead people,’ he smiled at his own scruples. ‘I wanted them to trust my map. So I simply gave a name to a lane that didn’t already have one. There were plenty of unnamed rights-of-way to choose from.’

‘I see.’ It was hard to tell whether Mr Ditchley’s explanation came as a disappointment to Henry, or a relief. ‘And the name,’ he asked, ‘Tunney lane?’

‘My mother’s maiden name.’ The younger man sounded apologetic for its prosaicness. Then his expression sharpened. ‘I say, I haven’t broken any laws, have I? I didn’t think to consult the Postal Act.’

‘No, no,’ Henry assured him. ‘This is not strictly a post office matter; it’s...’ He paused. ‘There’ve been letters

appearing – not by the post; hand-delivered, it would seem – addressed to Tunney lane.’

‘Ah!’ Mr Ditchley’s eyes went wide.

‘I live in the neighbourhood,’ Henry explained, ‘and it’s been rather a mystery. So, of course, when I saw your map...’ His brow furrowed. ‘It was printed just last week, is that correct?’

‘That’s right. Came off the press Tuesday.’

‘Tuesday? Ah.’ Then the map hadn’t been available when the first letters appeared, on the Sunday previous. ‘And you’d delivered it to the printers, when?’

Mr Ditchley touched the tip of one finger to his chin. ‘The Wednesday before?’ he interrogated himself. ‘Yes, it was the Wednesday. I took it in to them before work. It made me late.’ He pulled a rueful face. ‘Got me in a bit of strife.’

Henry gave a grunt that might have been disapproving. ‘Aside from the printers, would anyone else have seen the map beforehand?’

‘Well, of course, I showed it to my family – my parents and sisters. And,’ his cheeks coloured, ‘Miss Meisner saw it at every stage. She even helped me, first with the survey and later checking the details – a considerable task, as you can imagine, and a vital one.’ Suddenly, he scrabbled at his watch pocket. ‘Do excuse me.’ He glanced at the watch and, alarmed at what it told him, hastily gathered his dinner things and got to his feet. ‘I’m sorry, sir, but I must be going. If I’m not back by 12.50, there’ll be trouble.’

‘Of course,’ said Henry, himself a stickler for punctuality. ‘I won’t walk with you – would slow you down, I’m afraid. Thank you, Mr Ditchley. I’m obliged for your time.’

The draughtsman returned the handshake. ‘And I’m obliged to you, sir, for whetting my curiosity. Fancy my Tunney lane taking on a life of its own like that. Someone from the printers playing a prank – that’s all I can think of.’

Lives in the lane himself perhaps, or knows someone who does. Spotted the name on my map and thought to have a lark. That's all I can think of,' he said again, and drew back a reluctant step or two in the direction of his office. He really was going to be late. 'I shall look forward to hearing - from Miss Meisner, perhaps - how the mystery turns out. Good day, sir.' Mr Ditchley tipped his hat and was gone, at a trot.

Of course, Henry also would be late back to work. But there'd be no trouble at the GPO; no one watched the clock where Detective Vivo was concerned. It was common knowledge that he started early and finished late most days and that his legitimate duties - chiefly 'making inquiries' - necessitated his frequent absence from the office. His present inquiries made, Henry pushed off the cold iron seat and heaved himself, disappointed, to the nearest west-bound tram.



Lil never strayed from her office on a Monday. There was always an inrush of work as her clients' pent-up dealings spilled onto paper at the start of a new week. She welcomed the busyness, the routine of making a living. Not just the typewriting itself, but the small rituals - folding the dust-cloth, cleaning the machine, crossing dates off the calendar, tea-time, calisthenics - all fed her sense of who she was and what her life was for. That much was suggested, at least, by the calm, sure purpose with which Lil conducted herself during the long hours unobserved.

How then to account for her fatalistic lunges at ruination - for what else were the drawn-blind interludes on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and her arrangement with Mr Whelk? She was doomed to follow her mother, was that it? Her fate had been sealed at sixteen by Frank Leeming, with no prospect of recovery or restitution, no undoing but her own? Now, on the face of it, Lil had far too much sense to believe such a thing. Where Marcella had been shameless, she was

discreet; and where Lil's indelicacies were an aberration in a well-ordered life, her mother's had *been* her life – more so, evidently, than the family she had left cold.

But if Lil's lunges at ruination had begun as a submission to fate, they were no longer that. There was very little of submission and a good deal of frank pleasure in Lil's conduct of her mid-week assignments. And far from being agents of Gehenna, her gentleman callers (not including Mr Whelk) were good, considerate men – if adulterers. (Mr Finlay, indeed, would invariably ask, 'May I?' before laying a freckled hand on her.) Whatever Lil may have told herself, she was neither dwelling in purgatory, nor meant to.

Whatever Lil may have told herself. From whom, after all, might she learn how other women conducted themselves in this department of life? What, really, did she know even of Marcella, except that she had gone off with the woodman? Newspaper reports of vague indecencies committed by bad women – hard cases like Annie Wilson and Madame Brussels – and neophyte fallen women can have left Lil little the wiser. Moody might have enlightened her a little (*just* a little), were she to ask him; she never would, though.

All she had were clues. Clara, for instance, just yesterday, had blushed to relate how Mr Ditchley had kissed her (*'and, Lil, I kissed him back!'*), but they, after all, were as good as engaged. No, it was Miss Flanner who had supplied the most illumination. The morning she'd dragged Lil into her office downstairs, the tearful typist had unburdened herself of a tale such as would have made most young ladies blush and protest. Lil, though she'd averted her eyes, had remained alert to all the tawdry particulars. Her occasional exclamations, muted as they were, had done nothing to break the flow of Miss Flanner's narrative.

'He didn't make me. I wanted him to!' '...in the gardens there, by the bandstand. And I even brought him here. He

put his coat down there...' She indicated the floor near the window. 'He said that, so long as I liked it - if I wasn't frigid, and he said I wasn't - it'd be safe. And I didn't *know!* I mean, it was wrong; I knew that well enough. But I didn't know he was lying.' Her listener's lips had formed a tight line: of disapproval, Miss Flanner might well have supposed, had she been in any state to notice.

'So, you're not the only one.' Just that once, there had been no *supposing* in Lil's confidences to the mirror behind her office door. (It was as if, with her own thoughts, there was always guesswork involved.) But *here* was something she'd observed in - had been told by - someone else, that touched on her own self also. She wasn't the only one. At Bendigo, at the Reverend Angove's home, she and the other inmates had been kept under strict supervision, for the express purpose of preventing such accounts as Miss Flanner's from being aired and exchanged. That had suited Lil. It had been plain enough, in any case, to see that the other girls and women were 'in trouble' the same way she was. But she *hadn't* known what Miss Flanner - and now Clara - had told her. 'I wanted him to!' 'I kissed him back!' It wasn't just Lil, then.

Right now, an inventory for a paint merchant was giving her trouble. The list required, first, alphabetising, then setting in type alongside columns showing stock levels, in-hand and minimum. The handwritten original ran to thirteen pages and wasn't at all easy to follow. Lil made two false starts and, by dinner-time, had given herself a headache over it. There'd be a full day's work in the wretched thing and it was wanted by Wednesday. So much for the fresh, new week.

Lil stood and stretched, unpinned her hair and shook it forward. Pressing the heel of one hand between her brows, she gently rocked her head on its pivot - back to front, side to side - then tossed back the obstinate curls. That was better. She pegged her hair up loosely and set again to work.



There turned out to be less than a day's work in the paint inventory. Once she'd got a proper start at it and her eyes grew accustomed to the tar-licked scrawl, Lil made good progress and by soon after six the thing was done. That would make her late home; but, for a penny, she'd got a message to Henry with Jerram & Lacey's post-boy. Moody, once he knew she was held up, could make a start on tea.

It didn't often happen that Lil was at her office after dark. With the blinds drawn and the street gone quiet, the circle of lamplight around her desk seemed charmed. And surely darkness amplified the clatter of the machine, barricading her solitude even as it betrayed it.

She must have been hungry, having had nothing to eat since half-past twelve, only a slice of Nice Useful Cake with her tea. But getting the inventory done meant she could make headway tomorrow with other things. Lil leafed, before she left, through the contents of her desk tray, reminding herself what the next day held. She'd already arranged the papers in order of urgency. Those not needed till later in the week would lay at the bottom of the pile a day or two more, making way for white rabbits – the ones that couldn't wait.

Speaking of white rabbits, she found Moody waiting in the street, peering at his watch and shivering.

'Any longer and you'd have had a yonnie through your window.' (An improbable feat, the window in question being five floors up.) Henry had sent him to escort his sister home. 'Don't worry. The tea's on,' Moody told her.

'You worked out the recipe all right?'

'Oh yes – or else made it up.' He wasn't lying. 'How much mustard was it?'

'A teaspoon and a half,' said Lil. 'How much did you put in?' Her voice was sharp with suspicion.

Moody had used a soup spoon for a measure, but he deflected. 'I left the old man tending the pot.' It worked.

'How is he?'

'I'll tell you what: he's tough. He must've taken a hell of a hiding, but it hasn't kept him down. Not like Hall.' Passing under a street lamp just then, Moody interrupted himself. 'What have you done to your hair?'

Lil's loosened hair was cascading from under her hat. She put up one hand. 'Oh, I forgot. I must look like a madwoman. Here, hold this.' Stopping in the dark between street lamps, she poked the straggling locks under her hat and tugged it down hard while Moody held her dilly bag. 'That all right?'

'Wait till we get to the light, I'll tell you. It looked quite nice as it was, though. Pity you don't wear it loose more often.'

'You were saying,' said Lil, 'about Mr Hall?'

'Nasty break, apparently. Looks as if he'll be in hospital a while yet. So a crony of his told me.'

'You don't think Poppa'll get in trouble over it?'

Edgar Pettit had not taken credit (or blame) for disarming their father's assailant; indeed, Henry had been unaware of the basketmaker's intervention. 'Self-defence, wasn't it?' said Moody. 'I mean, everyone knows Teddy Hall's a bruiser. Only this time it was him got the bruising.' He grinned to himself. 'Good old Pop.'

Lil cast Moody a look. It wasn't like him to concede even a speck of admiration where their father was concerned.

Moody caught his sister's look. 'What?'

'Nothing.' They were approaching the Vienna Café, hansom cabs jostling at the kerb, and a thick lock of hair unfurled behind Lil's left ear. 'Let's cross over.' So they did, and were home almost in time to save the tea from 'catching' in the pot that Henry was meant to be tending.



Henry revived his own burnt helping with a slurp of Goodall's Yorkshire Relish.

'Did you see Mr Ditchley's map today?' Lil asked him.

Henry nodded, but took a sip of water before he replied. 'I saw the man himself.'

'Mr Ditchley? Did you?'

'Caught him in his dinner-break.'

'And what did he have to say about Tunney lane?'

Henry carefully finished chewing. 'Said he'd made it up.'

'No!'

'As a copyright marker.'

'Can he do that?'

'It's standard practice, apparently.'

Moody was wrestling with the Goodall's bottle, trying to scrape out the last of its contents with a knife. 'What's all this?' he said, looking up.

'Clara's beau,' said Lil. 'He's made a new map,' she said, 'of the city.'

'And he's made up a street?'

'No, just the name of one.'

'Huh,' said Moody. 'Fellers do that all the time. Change street signs, anyway. All it takes is a bit of axle grease.' He and Frank Leeming, one night on a spree, had made Cocks and Bosom out of Corrs and Blossom and had rendered Tuckett Chambers unspeakable.

To end an unsatisfactory meal, the Vivos finished off the week-old cake in the tin, before appeasing their innards with a smoke on the back verandah. Lil made a start on the shopping list (first thing: a bottle of relish), Moody splice-mended one of his bootlaces in preparation for going out, while Henry cut short his blow to return to the task that had kept him from tending the tea.

It was the letters, of course. With the handful Pettit had passed on this evening, there were more than fifty now. Henry had continued to open them as they arrived, but his inventory, begun last Thursday, hadn't progressed beyond letter No. 18. As for his systematic summarising of their contents, that had stalled with Jennet Maydwell's letter No. 1. Well, things had got in the way: the beating he'd taken, for one thing, and the advent of the companionable Maurice Lade; the implausibility of the letters' dates – missing from any calendar – and now the bogus name on Mr Ditchley's map. Otto had been right: the affair bore all the marks of a hoax at Henry's expense. And what were his numbered slips of paper but proof that he'd fallen for it?

There was another kind of proof, though: the proof of his own eyes. The letters didn't look or feel or *appear* like a hoax. Twice now, remember, he'd seen them materialise out of thin air. Even allowing that Hall was an amateur magician – well, Hall was in hospital and still the letters came.

That was why, when his own sore limbs would have thanked him for an easy chair by the kitchen stove, Henry was sat upright at his desk, numbering more slips of paper: 36, 37... All the letters lay open, crackle-creased, in a pile. Jennet Maydwell's, Roger Bramble's letter of release, the sailor and his pelican. So far, all Henry had to go by were impressions; once he had them all reduced to notes on numbered slips, he could shuffle them, compare them, *parse* them to get the measure of the whole.

...51, 52, 53. Done. He squared the slips into a neat stack, No. 2 topmost. Then he turned the pile of letters face-up, laid Jennet Maydwell's aside, and dropped his eyes to the next. No salutation, just *I have often mark'd, my Dear Brother* (the recipient – already noted from the wrapper – was a Mr William Greene at the Brazen Head), *how my raillery goes ever unanswer'd by you. It has pleas'd me, I own, to take & treasure your*

Meeknefs as proof of my own fuperiority. Now in this Time of Grace...

Time of Grace? wrote Henry.

...it behoves me to abafe my Self. How unbrotherly has been my conduct & how error'd my meafure of your forbearance...

Henry noted it all down: the quaint forms, the humility, and *Henry Huffey Greene*, the name at the foot of the page. And he didn't pause, but turned over Henry Greene's letter and the slip that went with it, and drew the next letter from the pile. It was one of those whose outer side the Chinaman had scribbled on. The inside, though, appeared just as sent: from Josiah Love of Furnival street to Ogg of Tunney lane, pledging payment of a long-disputed debt for a suit of tailored clothes. Henry made some notes and turned aside letter No. 3. Fifty more to go.

Right about then – twenty-past eight – Lil tapped on her father's door. No reply, so she left him, as she thought, to doze. Henry would not let himself be side-tracked tonight.



That said, he did lift his head involuntarily at the scent of hot gingerbread. Contrary to its name, the Nice Useful Cake was *not* very nice – not, at any rate, in Mrs Hustler's rendering of it. Every bit as leaden as one of her puddings, it was: over-floured and under-egged, with no sweetness you could put your tongue on. It would be just like their housekeeper to have halved the quantity of sugar called for in what was an economy loaf to begin with. She prided herself on her thriftiness, did Mrs H. Just as well, with her husband past working and her consideration from the Vivos, besides the trifle from the washing she took in, all they had to live on.

The warm, ticklish smell of the gingerbread penetrated not only Henry's concentration but the party-wall, causing Mr Tipper's cat to sneeze. *Treacle*, Lil added to the shopping list, then commenced on a letter to Annie Yeoman (as was), a

schoolfriend lately married. She had the form by rote, having committed the same sentiments to paper a good few times now: *I trust that you may be spared many years to be a blessing and comfort to each other, &c.* That done, she gave herself over to mending the tear in her father's coat. On Clara's advice, she'd had Moody bring home a scrap of stout-weave linen for the backing. She turned the lamp turned up bright; even so, the light was unequal to near-black needlework. But it was no weather for going coatless, as Henry had done today. Lil could be seen to sigh.

A pity Moody wasn't there to read aloud from the *Herald* or entertain her with skits from the shop. But he'd gone out to the King's Theatre to see Bébélons, the illusionist, and his three pretty daughters. It was close to eleven when her stop-out brother came in, frisky with drink and with Maurice Lade, laughing, in tow. 'Look who I found at the King's: a fellow devotee of the thaumaturgic art.'

'Miss Vivo.' The American, though flushed, was sober enough in his greeting to Lil.

'Thank goodness,' she said, addressing Moody. 'I could use some company.' She'd been frowning over her mending, cursing the fiddliness of it and her own inadequacy to the task. 'I've been at this for hours and it's still not nearly done.'

'The old man's battle dress, is it?' Moody helped himself and their guest to slices of gingerbread.

Lil nodded. 'Now amuse me,' she said, 'I command you. And throw a log in the stove while you're about it.'

'D'you see this?' Moody implored their guest, who only smiled. 'See how I'm used up round here?'

'Do you have sisters, Mr Lade?' asked Lil.

'Just the one, a deal older than me. And with not much fun about her,' he added. 'I'd say your brother's lucky to have you.'

‘Oh, don’t,’ said Moody, dusting sparks from his hair where the fire-box had spat at him. ‘Don’t give her ideas.’ But he did as Lil bade him, giving her the highlights of Signor Bébélons’ performance, punctuated by bites of gingerbread. ‘All in all,’ he finished up, ‘a pretty good turn, wouldn’t you say?’

Lade tilted his head critically. ‘A bit short on showmanship, that’s all.’

‘Well, of *course* you’d say that, being American.’

‘Moody!’

But Lade smiled reassurance at Lil. ‘Nothing to do with it,’ he said equably. ‘In the illusion business, showmanship is everything.’

‘You sound as if you know something about it.’ Lil was pinning the rent in the coat’s lining.

‘Well...’ Lade paused. ‘I travelled for a time – this was before the circus – with a medical show.’

‘Oho!’ whooped Moody. ‘Like our “Professor” Weston with his Wizard Oil.’ And he thundered like a fog-horn Yankee: ‘*Ah tell yuh, ladies an’ gennulmen, jest one bottle o’ mah mir-aculous elixir an’ the halt shall walk, the blind shall see, an’ the most hide-oosly poxed visage shall be re-stored to the unblemished purr-fection of a maiden’s thigh!*’

The American laughed. ‘Nine parts show to one part medicine, that’s about the usual formula.’

‘Plus,’ Moody added, ‘the tin to plant a fake cripple or two in the audience.’

‘That makes eleven parts,’ Lil protested.

‘And *that*,’ crowed Moody, ‘is why the stuff’s *mir-aculous*.’ He was in first-rate form tonight. It was whisky he’d been drinking, which always – up to a point – had the effect of sharpening his wit. Rum and brandy fuddled him, beer made him sick, gin... he never drank gin, though it’s unlikely to have made him maudlin. Nothing made Moody maudlin. (But then, he never drank gin.)

‘With any illusion,’ Lade was saying, ‘the real trick is to create a distraction: to make your audience pay attention to the wrong thing.’

‘Signor Bébélons’ daughters, for instance,’ said Moody.

‘Just so,’ Lade agreed, with a grin. ‘Supposing they *are* his daughters.’



Henry, had he heard it, would have frowned on such folderol, especially Lil’s part in it. But two thicknesses of brick wall intervened, besides the trance the post-office detective had put himself into. He must have been all but chilled to the spot. Outside, the night was sharpening itself for a frost. It was a hard season indeed for Spartans who refused to answer their daughters’ knocks.

Henry, on the home straight, turned over letter No. 47. *Dear Husband*, he read,

*Will I ever be allow’d Home? If, as I fear, I muft
Die in this place, let it not be without Your
knowing once & for all Time how bitterly I regret
our efrangement. I tried but could not be the
Wife you wifh’d for & deferv’d. Yet I can not
think that I did our Dear Ones any hurt except
by leaving them. You per haps confider that no
hurt, indeed a Blesing. But Children need a
Mother. Even such a one as Me.*

*I am forry, dear Husband, so forry. Forgive me,
I beg you, & fay that I May come Home at laft.*

He didn’t hear Lil at the door till she put her head around. ‘Poppa?’ He cleared his throat with a wrenching sound before twisting in his chair to face her. ‘Sorry,’ said Lil, ‘I thought you’d left your light on.’ She noticed – must have done – the expression he wore in that instant: flinching, like he’d been expecting a blow. ‘Are you feeling all right?’

‘Quite well.’ His back was to her now, but that didn’t account for the constricted quality of his voice. ‘Occupied, as you can see.’

‘If you’re sure.’ Lil waited a moment. ‘Good night, then, Poppa,’ and she closed the door.

That wrenching sound from Henry had been a sob and it – more than Lil – had startled him. Now he sought to master himself. With eyes shut, he blew out a long skein of breath, then drew a deep draught in. He did the same thrice more, the in-breath less ragged at each repetition. He’d clasped his hands over the letter face-up on his desk. Now, opening his eyes, he drew his hands apart and re-read letter No. 47.

The writer had signed herself ‘*your loving Wife, Sufannah Tweddle Sandoe*’ and her letter was postmarked Southampton. It was one of the two that had come this morning to Hall’s place. Decidedly, though, Henry had taken more pleasure in the finding than the reading of it. Did he yearn for a letter of the sort from Marcella? Susannah’s was done in a tidy hand. A female hand, almost certainly; but was it her own or had she, like Marcella, to prevail on an amanuensis even to entreat her own husband?

With something like reluctance, Henry added Susannah Sandoe’s to the heap of letters read and turned over the next. Letter No. 48 was the other one from Hall’s front step. But while Susannah had directed hers to *Rich^d Sandoe at The Dove & Branch*, this one sought *Dick Sandoe at y^e Dove & Duck*. *Cluck-cluck*, it greeted him and went on, matey-wise, to square the ledger over a pair of fowls which the writer – one Archimedes Buck – had purchased of Sandoe a year earlier. Buck owned that, while paying for fowls of the common strain, he had recognised the chicks as roseates, which indeed, once fledged, they had turned out to be. As proof of his deception and amends for it, he’d enclosed a glossy, reddish feather together with a note for ten shillings. Henry had set

both aside (tagged '48') when he opened the letter. Now he took up the feather and held it to the light, and did the same with the banknote, examining its watermark. And then he moved on, to the next letter. Nothing – not feathers, not banknotes, not pleas from exiled wives – would keep him from getting through the whole lot tonight. Midnight must be close now, and there were five letters to go.

Midnight *was* close, but at barely twenty-past he was done. Very good. Henry straightened the pile of letters and flicked through the corresponding slips with his thumb. Some he'd marked in one corner with an X. Number 2, for instance: William Greene from his brother. Henry's note, *Time of Grace?*, was a question to himself. Or, more precisely, to Dr Brewer, the self-styled 'babbler' whose *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* stood out as the best- (or worst-) thumbed volume on the detective's shelf. ***Time of Grace***. Henry found it. *The lawful season for venery, which began at Midsummer and lasted until Holy Cross Day (14 September), used to be called the Time of Grace.*

Strange that Henry Hussey Greene should have mentioned it. True, his letter was dated 3 September, near the close of the hunting season. But what bearing had that on Greene's fraternal shortcomings? There was, perhaps, an ecclesiastical complexion to this Time of Grace. A time of repentance, for the seeking of God's grace? Dr Brewer shed no light on such a construction. Henry would have to pursue it elsewhere, as he would his other Xs. A quick inventory showed that an atlas would be required, besides other maps, a mercantile and shipping directory, and an almanac of suitable date – a visit to the Public Library, in other words.

Henry leant back in his chair at last, distancing himself from the letters and his notes, trying perhaps to gain the long view that had been the point, surely, of his binding himself to a desk for the past four hours and a half.

If Henry didn't feel the cold in his room, Lil did in hers. Shivering, she undressed. Hooks and eyes, sleeves and skirt. Hung up the dress and patted it smooth. Stepped out of her underskirt and with icy, expert fingers whipped her stays undone. As her breasts were released from their caging, Lil's expression changed. But it wasn't relief. The flicker of something troubling furrowed into a frown as she pressed the flat of her right hand's fingers first against one breast, then the other. And then she sighed and her mouth gave a twist of... what? Resignation? Bitterness? She finished undressing, pulled on a flannel nightdress and bedsocks, then bent her head to the censorious strokes of the brush. Her hair, when she was done, was splendid, electric, and her face aglow. But Lil never looked at the mirror - spared herself that interrogation tonight. Nor did she bother with the rosemary oil; just slid into bed, blew out the candle, heaved twice or thrice, then slept. Or, at any rate, was still.



What ought Henry to have made of his dubious windfall? Fifty-three letters of false date and address, and whose antiquity their condition belied. To Otto they were decidedly a hoax, a detective-trap. To Aloysius Carr they posed a curiosity. To Tommy Mackie of the Longleith Arms they offered the chance of an easy quid. But to Henry? Now that he'd read the lot, what did he make of them? He had looked for cracks and hadn't found them. The letters were as idiosyncratic as they ought to be, coming from so many different hands; yet there was an underlying logic, a consistency of sorts. Taken as a whole they did not jar, for all their oddness.

Out of the fifty-three, needless to say it was Susannah Sandoe's letter that drew Henry back. He read it through again, examined it front and back, and, strange to say, he sniffed it. Nothing - at least, he seemed disappointed. He

returned letter No. 47 to its place in the pile, and did a thing with his hands: fingers poised lightly along the front edge of the desk, as if it were a keyboard and he a composer, waiting on the muse. It was a posture of readiness.

Chapter 9

Tuesday, September 12th

He was out early, in the frost. Through the gardens, he stuck mainly to the paths, diverging only when their geometry disagreed with his own. Ornamental curves and angles thwarted the course he set for himself, Henry Vivo being a straight-line man.

Early sunlight had already unfrozen the open expanses of lawn. Where there were trees, though, their long shadows held the frost. More than once, Henry was showered with a flurry of rain out of a clear sky as the sun, stealing over a gum tree's canopy, thawed the icy leaves in an instant.

He had gone by Carson's cottages first, picking up six letters. Hardly cold they were, and not at all damp from the frost, meaning they hadn't lain there long. And there'd been a light in the cottage next-to-last in the row: Hall's place. Seeing it, Henry had trod as stealthily as his tin-tapped boots and limp would let him. So much for Moody's information.



'You wait, Mr Os'll have me write a notice for the window: LIQUIDATED STOCK FROM McCREDY, DREW & CO.,' Moody was telling his sister. 'That ought to be good for shifting a few collars.'

According to Monday's *Herald*, one of the absconding partners in the defunct drapery firm Moody had named was under arrest in London on a charge of fraud. Moody's

employers, Osborne & Wright, had acquired a job-lot of small wares – collars, cuffs, handkerchief, gloves and the like – for next to nothing at the McCredy, Drew creditors' auction. Now, Moody reckoned, was their chance to unload the slow-shifting stock. 'Better than embezzlement,' he said, 'or common bankruptcy. Fraud's much more glamorous.'

Henry came in just too late to hear that pronouncement. And it was just as well. He could have pointed out half a dozen of their acquaintance who'd found themselves, this past year, victims of business dealings that had amounted to fraud. From all accounts, none had found the experience glamorous in the slightest degree.

Moody was coddling an 'invalid egg' for Lil. She'd foregone her usual breakfast; would have done without any at all had her brother not been so clucky. 'No matter that you're feeling seedy; you've still got to eat,' he'd admonished her. 'You're the one who taught me that.'

Lil looked grey-skinned and sickish. Already she'd made two trips down the yard and, from the tentative way she was holding herself, another was on the cards. Moody's coddled egg was looking like a bad bet. While he hovered over the saucepan, Lil – listlessly, for her – plucked filaments of ostrich feather from his coat, hung on the chair-back. At the King's the night before he'd volunteered himself as subject for an illusion, in the course of which he'd had a canary, a lit cigar, and several yards of bunting produced from his collar and pockets, besides being brushed against – fondled, practically – by a pair of the Mademoiselles Bébélons. Hence the ostrich feathers.

He had agreed to say nothing in front of Henry about Lil's feeling off-colour. Not that it would have mattered. Henry was unlikely to urge her, as Moody had done, to stay at home in bed. And Lil was right, anyway, when she'd rejoined that there'd be little rest for her with Mrs H on the warpath; it

would be quieter at her office. ‘Besides,’ she said, ‘I’ll come good. You know yourself how you can wake up feeling poorly and be hungry as a horse by dinnertime.’

‘That’s true,’ said Moody, ‘but with me that’s usually a case of the-morning-after-the-night-before. You didn’t take a hipflask to bed last night, did you?’

Lil ignored him.

She didn’t walk with Henry, but let him set off first, alone, so that he could make his own faltering pace. Instead she left with Moody. Parting at Little Collins street he said, ‘You can always have a lie-down if you feel like it, on that couch of yours. You’re lucky,’ he added in a pity-me tone. ‘I’ll be home late, I dare say. Keep tea warm for me, won’t you?’ And saluting his sister, Moody headed north. A slim, nippy fellow with a touch of the popinjay about him, he was recognisably a draper’s shopman, even out on the street.

Perhaps it was Moody’s mentioning the miner’s couch, or else some coinciding reverie of her own, that reminded Lil of her promise to Mr Finlay. *Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul...* She had meant to look it up. She hesitated right there, in the nearing-nine-o’clock throng, evidently in two minds: should she go home and find the book? Poppa was gone, but there’d be Mrs Hustler to contend with.

Lil really didn’t look well. In fact, she seemed to sway for a step or two as she started uphill in the direction of Stalbridge Chambers and, specifically, the closet by the ground-floor lift. Afterwards, though, she by-passed the lift and, stubborn as her father, took the stairs as usual. In Room 504, even before she raised the blind, Lil pencilled a note to herself: *Ah, what a dusty answer...* It could wait until the sickness passed. And that wouldn’t be long – as Lil, being no stranger to her present condition, must have known. By half-past ten, she’d be famishing for a cup of tea and one of Mr Whelk’s hardtack biscuits.

And so it proved. She was sufficiently recovered even for the usual bout of callisthenics, after which she pushed on with her morning's work. At dinnertime she didn't stop, but spread a napkin beside the machine and alternated bites, between paragraphs, of buttered bread and gnarly figs, washed down with cold tea. One hand swiped the carriage-return lever while she fed herself with the other. Even as the keys of her left hand became a trifle sticky – it was the figs – Lil never missed a stroke. Piston-fingered and engulfed in a racket of her own making, she was suzeraine of the machine.

She took leave of her dominion around one o'clock, to do the banking and run a few deliveries. A parcel for Grist & Son, the manufacturing chemists, included, as well as the usual letters and consignment notes, a couple of poems on a nautical theme from the hand of young Mr Grist. They'd seemed thundery and portentous until Lil set them in type. Divested of their author's belligerent penmanship, however, 'Midnight Watch' and 'The Wreck of the *Tarbar Rune*' had come anodyne off the machine. But young Mr Grist had insisted that the papers were needed for that day's post and their delivery, besides paying her extra, would take Lil to the east end of town, past *Hoc loco* – so there would be her chance to root out the *dusty answer* for Mr Finlay.



Otto Berliner almost toppled the table with his belly as he plumped himself down. The chair under him quivered on its shanks. Henry had called at Otto's office on his way home last evening, to propose that they dine today at the Spanish Restaurant. Maurice Lade was to join them. Henry had chosen a table deep in the back parlour. Had Otto got there first, he'd have planted himself square in view of the front door and the street, so that he could see all who came and went and passed; never mind that they could see him too.

He called for a bottle of *Vino Tinto*. 'Now,' he said, all businesslike, 'I went to the printers on my way.' Henry, the evening before, had asked if Otto knew anyone at Cole's printing works. Needless to say, he had. There was scarcely an establishment in the city where Otto didn't, as he would say, 'have' a man. Any acquaintance, however slight, was to Otto an informant *in posse*. 'I talked with the fellow, Sparks, who handled your map,' he told Henry. 'Tried "Tunney lane" on him - nothing. He's not your culprit.' Otto poured himself a glass of wine and offered the same to Henry, who shook his head. 'Then there were the lads who did the folding and packing. A couple of them.' He read their names from his notebook. 'No?'

Henry was shaking his head. 'Certainly, they don't live on the lane.'

'No, I asked them that,' said Otto. 'Carson's cottages, Tunney lane: both drew a blank. And they seemed like straight lads. No pointy heels there' - the sure sign of a larrikin.

Lade came in, steaming and apologetic, tugging off his new hat - a decent, if not first-rate, squirrel-coloured felt - as he threaded his way to the table. His tram had been delayed when it sliced a dog in half in front of the Treasury. 'Or not in half, exactly,' he qualified. 'Just took off the tail-end' - that being, coincidentally, the same point at which he had come in on Otto's account of his visit to the printers. Having made the introductions, Henry, for the sake of politeness, explained to Lade about the map and its falsely labelled Tunney lane.

The American, while - 'Thank you, I will' - Otto filled his glass, commenced to relate how, years before, a fellow apprentice at the signwriting shop had misspelt a street sign. 'He painted it C-O-B-E-T-T when it ought to have been Cobbett (with a double-b) or Cubitt, or something of the sort. It stayed up for a week or two, this sign,' he said, 'and the folks who

lived in this street... well, they weren't bothered about the name being wrong. Plenty of them couldn't spell themselves, or even read, I'll bet. No, what caused the bother were these oddball letters that showed up, all addressed to Cobett street - spelled the way Bob had done it. *That's* what got him in real trouble, more than spelling it wrong in the first place. They figured it must've been him who sent them.'

'They?' It was the kind of question a detective would ask, and Lade was dining with two of them.

'Well, our master for one, and... I don't think it was the police; someone from city hall, I dare say. It's the kind of thing a kid would do, I guess: spinning out a joke like that. At least that's how they figured it. But it was none of Bob's doing. He'd just misspelled a street-sign: just the one, mind you, out of hundreds of them. I can tell you, he was a hell of a lot more careful after that. Me, too.'

'Crank letters, were they?'

'No, not exactly. But they were addressed to this wrong-spelled street *and* to folk nobody'd ever heard of. And they were hokey - the letters, I mean. (They brought a couple of them to the shop, to show us, thinking we might know the handwriting or something.) It was like the Founding Fathers had written them: all ye this and ye that. Well, they woke up pretty quick that it couldn't have been Bob that wrote them, seeing as he lacked the nous even to spell a street-sign right.' Lade took a long swallow of his wine.

'What time of year was it?'

'Time of year?' Lade looked at Henry screw-faced. The detective must've been pulling his leg. But no: Henry's own face was straight - so stiff, in fact, with expectancy that the American was unnerved. 'We-ell,' he began, 'that's hard to say, exactly. It *was* close on twenty years ago.' But he made an effort. 'Let's see... Bob must've come a year or two after me. A new feller'd usually start when school closed for the summer -

so, say June. And he'd have still been pretty new to the job when he slipped up. Just a few months in, I guess.' Lade looked perplexed. 'Why?'

Henry held up an index finger, as if to intercept the question: *First, answer me this.* 'You don't recall a date on the letters you saw?'

Lade shrugged. 'Only that they made out to be old-fashioned. Why?' he asked again, looking from detective to detective. Otto's eyes, above his wine glass, directed Lade back to Henry. Just then a harried waiter burst on them. The restaurant was at full roar now, every table occupied, diners squeezed together. The three men gave their orders, Lade in an approximation of the waiter's native tongue. To the return volley of Spanish, he agreed, 'Si, si,' nodding energetically.

'You didn't understand a word he said!' Otto accused him when the waiter left.

'You're wrong,' Lade grinned, not in the least shamed at being caught out. 'It was something about a cigar, I think.'

"Have a cigar on me", perhaps,' hazarded Otto through the haze from his own cheroot. 'How is it you know Spanish?'

'Well, I don't - obviously,' laughed Lade. 'Just picked up a few words here and there. California, mainly. A lot of Mexicans out there.'

Henry, meanwhile, had burrowed in a pocket of his coat and brought out a letter: one of that morning's for Tunney lane. He'd intended to call at the Carriers' Office and show it to Carr if he got the chance; but now he handed it across the table to Maurice Lade. 'Is that what your letters looked like?', meaning the ones that had found their way to 'Cobett' street in Pittsburgh.

'Ha.' Lade handled the letter gingerly. 'May I?' Henry had broken the seal already, and gestured that the American might open the letter for himself. Lade took a moment to look it over. 'It looks like the same sort of thing, all right. As for the

particulars, though – I mean, even if I could recollect... well, I never rightly took them in back then.’

‘But the look of them...’ Henry prompted.

‘Same sort of thing, for sure,’ agreed Lade. ‘See,’ he pointed, ‘there’s a *ye* and the old-time writing – these long *fs*. And the way it’s folded. That’s as I remember it.’ He passed the letter back to Henry, casting an eye at the address. ‘So this is the Tunney lane from the map?’ Henry nodded. ‘The street-name that feller made up?’ Another nod. ‘Same thing then, isn’t it: my Cobett street, your Tunney lane? And these letters. There’ll be more than just the one,’ he added, and it wasn’t a question.

‘They’ve been coming every day,’ confirmed Henry, ‘morning and afternoon.’ And he told Lade, in brief, about the past week’s post for Tunney lane, now running to fifty-nine letters. ‘Did they ever find the culprit in the case of your letters, the ones addressed to...’ Henry groped for the name.

‘Cobett street. No, not so’s I ever heard. But,’ added Lade, ‘whenever a young feller’d start at our shop, he’d get the cautionary tale of the “ghost letters” – suitably embellished, of course.’

Chuckling, Otto refilled his own glass and the American’s. He was less boisterous than his usual self. True, he had a cigar to meditate on, besides his wine and a bowl of hot nuts sent over by the waiter for his Spanish-speaking friend. Besides, he’d been watching Henry with wry interest. How much would he reveal to this near-stranger?

Just yesterday Henry had apprised Otto of that coincidence between the letters’ dates and eleven days excised from the calendar in 1752. ‘Well, there,’ the corpulent detective had gloated, ‘what did I tell you? Q.E.D.’

But although less ardent than he had been the last time they’d spoken about the letters, Henry still had seemed reluctant to concede the blatancy of the sham, didn’t want to

be talked out of believing in it. In fact, he'd cut short Otto's gloating to tell him about the itinerant, fiddle-playing American. 'Come to dinner tomorrow and meet him. He's looking for work.' Otto gave a snort. 'I thought you might know of something.

'Jew, is he?'

'No. Why?'

'Moritz... a Jew name.'

'No, it's Maurice. M-a-u-r-i-c-e. And Lade - doesn't sound Israelite-ish, does it?'

Still, Otto had looked sceptical as he wrote the name down. It was no more like Henry to be seduced by a blow-in like Lade than it was for him to fall for so transparent a deception as the Tunney lane letters. Not since the aftermath of Marcella's desertion - no, since Lil's misstep - had Otto seen his friend so susceptible. That impression, it was true, may have owed something to Henry's present state of infirmity. His visit to Otto's office coming at the end of a long day and three flights of stairs, he'd arrived looking as hunched-up and woebegone as Tenniel's rendering of the Mock Turtle. He'd refused to take a seat or a nobbler, but had accepted a humbug and sucked it uneasily, like an obligation. He'd felt Otto's concern, you could tell, and it did not suit Henry - not at all - to be judged gullible, and be pitied.

'So you're a sign-writer, Mr Lade?' What did Otto make of him, now that they'd met?

'By trade, yes, though it's been more than ten years since I practised it steadily. I was a journeyman, all set to become a partner in the shop I was at. But then...' Maurice Lade was chasing scraps of pastry around his plate with a fork. He had capable-looking hands: calloused but well-scrubbed, fingernails squared off neat. His countenance was open - not skittish in the least - with eyes that met you straight, a broad, amused mouth, and one ear that stuck out. Deferential

without being obsequious, he had a ready, manly laugh. He was good company, that was all; an easy man to like.

‘But then... what?’ prompted Otto. ‘You ran away with the circus?’

Lade laughed. ‘No. That was later. I got to nineteen and the wanderlust came over me. That’s about the size of it, sir.’ He leant back in his chair, to all appearances an open book.

‘There was no broken heart impelled me, nothing like that. Pittsburgh’s a port – that’s what got me, I reckon: what made me restless.’

‘Ah, the lure of the sea.’

‘No, sir, not exactly. An inland port, it is: biggest in the country. So there was none of your briny tang. And not many mermaids strayed so far upriver. But ships, wherever they’re from and whatever’s in their hold, can’t help but carry an *idea* of the wide world. Make a young man wonder what else there is. The possibilities. Even here, I’ll bet, even this far from the rest of the world.’

‘*Especially* this far from the rest of the world,’ agreed Otto, mopping up gravy with a bread-end.

‘You’re not from here.’

‘I was young and there was gold.’ It was explanation enough.

‘There you are: the possibilities,’ Lade said again.

‘Ah, Mr Lade, you sound nostalgic. They grow less, do they not, these possibilities? It is a common condition, I believe, whereupon they appear so numerous, and so very near to one’s grasp. That condition is called *youth*.’ Otto pushed away his plate and, flicking two waistcoat buttons undone, pummelled his belly with both hands.

‘You act the cynic,’ Lade said amiably, ‘but – forgive me if I’m presumptuous – you strike me, sir, as man who seized the possibilities and found satisfaction.’

Otto seemed to reflect for a moment or two. 'Perhaps so,' he mused. 'But then, I am a detective. Finding and seizing are my trade, are they not?' He re-lit his cigar and returning to his theme of youth and its passing, 'So here you find yourself,' he said, between puffs, 'far from the rest of the world, as you say, and the wanderlust waning. What will you do, Mr Lade?'

'I know what I *won't* do,' the American replied. 'Anything remotely connected with a circus. And I'm not inclined to take to sea again. Not just yet. Maybe never.'

'Henry says you'd stay put here a while if you had work to keep you?'

'That's what I'm thinking,' Lade agreed. 'I like it here.' He sounded surprised to hear himself say so.

Otto shared the last of the wine between Lade's glass and his own, the conviviality of the gesture belying the appraising look that went with it. 'Hiding from anything, are you?' Berliner's long experience enabled him to gauge Lade's reaction - more hurt than defensive - in an instant and disarm it in the next. 'Forgive me, Mr Lade,' he smiled, reverting from inquisitor to *bon vivant*. 'Suspicion, you will understand, is foremost in my nature.' He let forth a rumbling belch. 'As is gluttony. Forgive me,' he said again. 'I might, if you like, put in a word for you with Brettschneider,' the proprietor of a sizeable painting and decorating concern in Flinders street. 'I can't say that he'll have anything to offer you, but...' Lade expressed himself greatly obliged.

Henry meantime had been paying only polite attention to his companions' exchange, preoccupied as he was with a chop bone and thoughts of his own. Outside in Bourke street after Otto had gone his way, Maurice Lade thanked Henry for effecting the introduction, and the pair walked together to the Book Arcade. Lade wanted to see the map. 'Do you think (like they thought of Bob, back home) that the feller who drew the map has something to do with the letters?'

‘Certainly, I considered that possibility,’ Henry admitted. ‘But I questioned him yesterday and am satisfied that he knows nothing about them. There it is,’ he pointed at the map in Cole’s window, then more particularly, ‘See? Tunney lane.’

Lade, pointing in turn, said, ‘And your place is... there?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Then how do the letters come to *you*?’

The two men turned back towards the GPO, Henry explaining how Pettit had brought the letters to his attention and how, between them, they harvested each day’s deliveries.

‘But I don’t understand,’ said Lade. ‘Your mailmen, do they follow this new map? Else how do they know where to deliver mail addressed to Tunney lane?’

‘The letters don’t come by post.’

‘No? Then who delivers them?’

They had reached the post office steps. ‘If I could answer that,’ said Henry, turning to Lade, ‘there’d be no mystery. I’ve kept watch, Pettit has kept watch, we’ve kept a watch together; but we’re yet to catch sight of who it is that brings them.’

‘And they come twice a day?’ Lade was puzzled.

‘That’s correct. The next delivery,’ Henry tilted his head to read the post office clock, ‘ought to be there in about an hour.’

‘Let me get this straight: you know when they’ll arrive, but you haven’t been able to catch whoever it is that brings them?’

Far from taking offence at having doubt cast on his powers of detection, Henry seemed gratified by the other man’s perplexedness. ‘Why not see for yourself?’ he asked. ‘Have you an hour to spare?’

‘Sure.’

Henry gave Lade directions to Pettit’s basket-works, at the same time fetching out a card from the pocket of his notebook. Printed on one side was MR HENRY VIVO, POST

OFFICE DETECTIVE. In pencil on the reverse, Henry wrote *Introducing Mr Maurice Lade* above his signature and handed the card to the American. 'Tell him you're a colleague of mine and that you wish to observe the letters' arrival. If he's not there,' he added, 'wait in the laneway alongside his works, just before two, and keep a look-out.' He met Lade's eyes. 'You'll see,' he said, and in the lay of his moustache there showed the faintest twitch of a smile suppressed.



Young Mr Grist himself took delivery of the papers from Lil, heading off the counter-clerk to spirit away his blunted couplets.

At *Hoc loco* Lil could hear Mrs Hustler's voice even before she had the back door open. She followed the sound right through the house to the front verandah, which the housekeeper was giving a sweep. There being no division between theirs and the next-door verandah, she was doing Mr Tipper's as well. The old man was stood in his doorway watching, a grimy woollen undershirt over his nightclothes, while Mrs Hustler shouted a monologue at him. '...dragged muck *all* up the passage. And I said to him, I said...' She seemed to suppose Mr Tipper deaf; in fact, his hearing was his one sound faculty. He'd have told her so, if she'd have listened.

'Hello,' said Lil and, 'Hello, Mr Tipper.' It took an effort not to join in fortissimo. The old man returned her greeting then excused himself, shuffling indoors with a look of relief.

'You're home early, Miss,' said the housekeeper.

'I shan't be staying,' Lil replied. 'Just called in to get something.'

'That's a fairish walk,' said Mrs Hustler, following her into the hallway. 'You want to mind your boot leather.' Lil didn't reply, but let herself into Henry's room, pulling the door to behind her and groping for a candle. Mrs Hustler stood

outside. 'Oh, running an errand for your father! Good girl,' she cooed, making it plain, as always, that she considered Lil's proper place to be at her menfolk's beck and call. Mrs Hustler went on, through the crack in the door, to regurgitate that morning's shopping list, elaborating prices and every retail happenstance in a tone as triumphant as if she'd slain the Jabberwock.

Lil, at her father's bookcase, found the volume she wanted. *Modern Love and other poems* stood with a brace of Meredith's works on the shelf within easiest reach of Henry's desk. Lil cradled the book in one hand, spine-down, and let it fall open. Lacking her father's familiarity with the 800 lines of 'Modern Love', she had to rely, in the first instance, on luck to guide her to the fragment she sought. And as luck would have it, luck was in her favour.

The book had fallen open to the poem's closing verse and, her quick typist's eyes scanning the page, Lil found her *dusty answer* at a glance. In a cramped hand on one of Henry's 6 x 4-inch slips, she copied out the fiftieth stanza in its entirety, marking for emphasis the lines she'd come seeking.

*Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
The union of this ever-diverse pair!
These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
They wandered once: clear as the dew on flowers:
But they fed not on the advancing hours:
Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
|| Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
|| When hot for certainties in this our life!—
In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,*

*Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!*

She folded the paper three times when she'd finished, and tucked it, between buttons, inside the bodice of her dress. Only then did Lil seem to consider what it was she'd transcribed, to read the page for meaning instead of exactitude. And there was more to consider than the verse itself; there was the fact of the book's having sprung open to it. Here, surely, lay her father's bitter solace, a cold-eyed summation of his marriage: he and Marcella were ill-matched; their love neither sustained itself, nor withstood examination; but (and here was the mocking jolt) if love was dead and all seemed dust, well, what mattered that to the remorseless engine of Eternity? As much as a tide-mark on sand, no more. How like Henry!

A flush crept up Lil's face as she read. She shut the book in embarrassment, but then opened it again on registering what she'd overlooked in her haste to find her lines: that what made the book hinge open at that point was a folded envelope placed between the pages. Lil had actually laid it aside while she copied the poem, replacing it when she was done, and yet hadn't given it a thought, apparently. Now she did. And more than a thought: she unfolded the envelope and opened it.

It was addressed to her father at their old address in Balaclava. The envelope had been slit open with a knife, but the letter inside was so firm-creased it might never have been unfolded. Gently, Lil did so. The letterhead read SUNBURY LUNATIC ASYLUM. Female SECTION was completed in a large, upright hand, in which the letter continued. It was dated July 28th, 1887.

*Dear Mr Vivo,
As per your letter of the 15th inst., the
possessions of your late wife have been distributed
to needy inmates of the Female Asylum. Among*

her belongings was found the photograph enclosed herewith.

The hand writing on the reverse is, I understand, Mrs Vivo's own. Although her record of admission, signed by you, states that she could neither read nor write, she evinced a determination to acquire the latter skill. Writing materials are purposely kept out of the hands of inmates, & Asylum staff did all in their power to deter Mrs Vivo's attempts at literacy. She found opportunities, nevertheless, to develop & practise a rudimentary hand, determined to record, as she would often say, "the story of my starved & stony life". However, her daubings (for such they generally were, on walls, floors, paving, using any material to hand) never ran beyond the same few words inscribed on the photograph enclosed. Indeed, I believe that to have been the extent of her ability.

I may say, in closing, that Mrs Vivo was ever a lively & sweet-tempered inmate of the Asylum & a great favourite of all. Trusting that you will not think this letter an imposition,

I remain, Sir,

Yours truly,

Umina Cuddy (Mrs)

Lady Superintendent

The *carte de visite* was a family group, the four of them, taken at a studio in Chapel street when Lil was ten. She'd have recognised it; Moody had one the same, found in a kitchen drawer when they were moving house and kept hidden from his father. Marcella, in the portrait, was seated like a queen, with the children at her left and right and Henry stood behind, his face scratched off by a pin. The children

wore expressions glazed by the effort of holding a pose, but Marcella seemed caught in the act of living. Her smile was a thing of the instant. A fugitive lock of hair trickled over the shoulder nearest the camera and one of her hands made a blur on the chair-arm.

I am living. That is what was written in an unformed hand on the reverse of the photograph. And again. *I am living.* And again. *I am living.* Seven times, like lines written as punishment or affirmation. *I am living. I am living. I am living. I am living. I am living. I am living. I am living.* Only she wasn't. Marcella was dead.

Lil read the letter through again, her face creased with disconcertion. Her hand shook; the other covered her mouth. But she didn't cry out, nor cry. Perhaps the letter concerned some other Mrs Vivo. Her grandmother, Henry's mother? But the old woman had died just eighteen months ago, at Creswick. And she'd been a widow. *Your late wife*, the letter said. Lil was like Henry with his Tunney lane post: turning paper and envelope and photograph front to back, looking for clues. On the other side of the door, Mrs Hustler's chatter had wound down and she'd drifted back along the hallway with her broom.

July, 1887. Lil was at Bendigo, in Coventry. Henry and Moody were about to move house. And there was Marcella, at Sunbury Asylum, dead. *Her record of admission, signed by you.* That meant Henry had put her there.

And he had. He'd found her and put her there, not six months after she left and bare weeks after his humiliation by Baron von Ebst. *Hysteria*, the admitting medical officer had noted, *manifesting as nymphomania.*

Lil couldn't have known that. But she did know now that her mother was dead. You could see the realisation dawn. Her face fell, really fell, the musculature going slack, like wax

melting. She slumped, as far as her stays would allow, and her legs seemed to give way. She reached for the edge of the bed.

Against her general collapse, though, Lil's grip on the letter had tightened. *Trusting you will not think this letter an imposition.* Your wife is dead, Mr Vivo, whom *you* had locked away; but let me not impose on that reserve of yours. That infamous reserve.

Marcella had left them, yes, but she might even now have grown tired of Sydney and the woodman and come home. She might have done.

It's hard to think someone – a mother – suddenly dead. Not to see her dying, or hear of it. Just out of the blue: she's dead. No matter that it's eight years since you saw her. If you think of her as living, she *is* living. *I am living.* For Lil, Marcella had died two minutes ago, in this room.

Still, she didn't cry. She smoothed the letter where she'd crumpled it and took a long look at the *carte de visite* before returning both to envelope, book and shelf, whence they'd come. Her hands were unsteady, the smallest movement seemed an effort. Eyes closed, she used the back of Henry's chair to brace herself, and drew a deep, deep breath.

'Miss Vivo, you still there?' Mrs Hustler was back, outside the door.

'Yes.' Lil's voice was flat. 'What is it?'

'Are you all right, dear?'

Lil opened the door. 'Yes,' she said, her eyes lowered.

'Found what your father wanted, did you?'

She had, in a way, yes. But she didn't answer, just pulled Henry's door shut behind her.

'You sure you're not unwell?' the housekeeper persisted.

Lil shook her head, not looking up. 'I must get back,' and the front door being closest and open, she went out that way to the street.

Mrs Hustler called after her, 'There's corned beef for tea. I'll leave you to do the sauce, shall I?' But Lil was gone.

Her empty hand, as she walked, hung like wet clay at her side; the other let the satchel bump against her knee. Mr Pettit called out, 'Good day, Miss Vivo,' and she cranked her head to look at him as if she hadn't understood the words. Her discovery had estranged her.

It was two-fifteen.

At his place of work, her brother excused himself and shot out into the back lane to be sick. It had come over him in a rush. Doubtless he supposed himself struck by the same thing that ailed Lil.



Mr Finlay was right on time – which is to say, he was early. He knocked discreetly at Lil's door and tried the handle. It was locked. He tapped again, and waited. Then he put his face close to the door jamb. 'Miss Vivo!' Though he pitched his voice low, he couldn't keep the urgency out of it. And again, 'Miss Vivo!'

Lil didn't answer, didn't move. The blinds were drawn. (Mr Finlay, noticing from the street, had smiled to himself and taken the first two flights of stairs at a run.) No lamp was lit. She was sitting upright, hands loosely clasped on the desk edge, unmoved by Mr Finlay's growing agitation. *Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul...* The verse was still tucked in Lil's bosom, but forgotten. Her gaze, in the gloom, seemed fixed on the raked keys of the machine in front of her.

Mr Finlay went away, but five minutes later he was back, tapping and murmuring. Eventually, he slid his papers under the door, followed by a scrap of tin. Triangular, it was about an inch long, with one point resolving in a trilling silver thread. It came to rest not far from the rug's edge and lay there, like a spy. Mr Finlay waited a moment longer –

listening? – before his footsteps clicked away down the corridor.

For a long time, all was quiet.

Then, unclasping her hands, Lil touched the tip of one finger to her tongue and took up a sheet of quarto from the paper rack. She wound it into the machine, flicked down the paper-bail, and commenced to type. In the briefest flurry of keystrokes, it was done. She turned up the roller a few cogs to check her work, then, careful as ever, wound the paper from the machine. (Some typists liked to tear their work off the roller with a satisfying, toothy whir; but that was something Lil never did. It was bad for the machine, on which £7 9s was still owing to Stott & Hoare.) With scissors from the top drawer, she cut a quarter-inch margin around the type, leaving a jot of paper no bigger than a cigar band, which she slipped into a needle case.

She stayed a good while longer, just sitting there, till the dinge began to thicken into dark and one could be pretty certain that Mrs Hustler had left her post. Only then did Lil set off for home, by an altered route, one that would take her out of her father's way. It was true that she always – nearly always – kept her spirit reined in; but not like this. Making her way through the brassy haze of late sun and early smoke, Lil seemed oblivious to the jostling tide of homebound city workers. It didn't take a mind-reader, or a mother, to see that she was smote by grief.



Only Henry could have missed it. His reputed powers of observation, that tea-time, seemed to have deserted him. Depositing the latest Tunney lane letters on his desk, for example, he failed to notice the rumpled bedspread where Lil had sat. And when, at the table, his daughter asked, 'Where would you like your sauce?' he didn't glance up at the lifeless tone of her voice, only answered – same as ever – 'Anywhere

but the beans.’ Nor, when her shaking hand dribbled parsley sauce on that demarcated vegetable, did Henry see any reason not to tut.

‘Sorry,’ murmured Lil, and swapped his plate with her own.

Henry had been lateish home, waylaid by Maurice Lade, who’d been waiting outside the GPO. ‘I saw them,’ said the American, by way of greeting, ‘I saw them come!’

‘Ah,’ Henry said, coming down the steps to meet him, ‘good.’ And he got Lade to describe exactly what he’d seen. Well, he’d called on Pettit and shown him Henry’s card. At the accustomed time, the two had set up vigil at Carson’s cottages and the letters had appeared in the usual fashion: not there, not there, not there... *there*.

No surprises for Henry, at any rate. ‘How many?’

‘Four. Not so many as usual, I gather?’

That would seem about right. By Henry’s reckoning, last week’s Tuesday afternoon delivery had equated with a Saturday morning lodgement, according to the time-scheme of the Tunney lane letters.

Lade had been standing close to Gerrity’s step when a letter had come to rest not a foot away. ‘Incredible.’ Recollecting it, he shook his head in wonder. ‘You don’t have any idea where they come from?’

By unspoken agreement, the two men set off together on Henry’s homeward course. The detective skirted Lade’s question with one of his own. ‘What did you think of Pettit?’

‘I’d say he was as bamboozled as I was,’ Lade replied, looking sidelong at Henry. ‘You don’t think he’s involved?’

Henry screwed his mouth into the equivalent of a shrug. ‘Probably not.’ A pause. ‘Almost certainly not.’

‘I sure hope I didn’t do the wrong thing.’ Lade looked worried. ‘He insisted on keeping the letters, to give them to you himself. Said that’s what he usually does?’

‘Quite right,’ Henry reassured him, and doubtless was himself reassured to know that Pettit had been so circumspect as not to entrust the letters to a virtual stranger.

Lade had also, it turned out, met Teddy Hall, who’d been smoking left-handed on his verandah and had watched the letter-hunt with undisguised amusement. Lade had realised at once that the fellow with the bandaged arm must have been the detective’s assailant, and he’d been wary. But once the letters had been borne away for safe-keeping, the two had fallen to talking.

‘Oh, yes?’ Now, that *did* surprise Henry.

‘Well, about the letters to begin with. And then, more generally, the art of illusion.’

‘You think it possible that it’s some kind of... legerdemain – the way the letters appear?’

Lade shrugged. ‘I’ve seen a fair bit of it. Up close, too.’ He seemed to ponder, frowning. ‘I can’t see how it could be done.’

‘But you talked with Hall about it?’

‘I told him I’d seen Bébélons last night. Seems he’s something of a conjurer himself.’

‘So I believe.’ Henry’s lip curled. ‘Did you mention that you’re acquainted with me?’

‘I did, sir, yes,’ Lade admitted. (‘Friend of yours, is he?’ Hall had asked. ‘Heard about the wife, have you?’ And he’d given a lascivious precis of Marcella’s flit – only seventeen words, but his looks spoke a good many more. ‘Wasted on *him*, she was, that’s for bloody sure.’)

‘And what are his thoughts on the letters, did he say?’

‘You don’t want to take him too seriously, sir,’ was the American’s advice. ‘He’s a wily one, but that type gets a kick out of stringing you along. “If it was *me*...” he kept saying.’

‘If it were him... what?’

‘Oh, it was mainly sleight-of-hand stuff he was talking. Nothing that could explain what I saw – or didn’t see, rather. No, sir,’ and Lade sounded sure of himself, ‘Hall may want you to think he’s behind it, but he’s not. And certainly,’ he added, ‘not with one arm in a sling.’

They were approaching Russell street, the American clipping his stride to suit that of Henry, who was struggling with the hill. ‘Aren’t you just torn up with curiosity about them?’ Lade found his companion’s impassivity as mystifying as the letters themselves.

Henry gave him a levelling look. ‘In my own fashion, I am, yes.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean...’ Had Lade offended him? ‘Sir, I beg your pardon. Of course, I’m forgetting you’re a detective.’ He smiled. ‘Curiosity is for amateurs, I guess.’

‘No, no.’ Henry looked away. ‘I suffer from it, too.’ Then, ‘Do you know the Public Library?’ he asked, as if he were letting Lade in on a secret. ‘I plan to go there later. Meet me and I’ll show you something – something touching on this.’ Though the invitation was coolly dealt, the other man could not have missed the quickening behind it.



With Henry gone, Lil stirred herself to do what needed doing: dishes washed, stove tamped down to keep the chill – just – off the room and her brother’s tea, tomorrow’s clothes made ready, a pudding begun using some of Hall’s apples, a note left for Moody. Before turning down the lamp and striking light to a candle, she fetched from its peg her dilly-bag, taking out the needle case, and out of that the slip she’d typed.

Lit at a tangent by the candle, her face was all torpor and shadow, her eyes dull as stones. She moved with weighted deliberation. Henry’s room, after the kitchen, was like ice. Closing the door, Lil retraced that afternoon’s movements, but without the distraction of Mrs Hustler’s commentary and

with the heavy certainty of what she would find. This time the fiftieth (or any) verse of Meredith's poem went unread. His book was just a vessel now.

She took out the envelope and thence the letter. Slipping the *carte de visite* from between the folds, she put in its place her typewritten scrap. Insubstantial as a leper's touch, momentous as murder:

I know.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, September 13th

‘Seen this, have you?’ Moody had last evening’s *Herald* folded by his breakfast plate. He didn’t wait for an answer, but commenced to read aloud. ‘*WHO WAS MRS THWAITES’S CONSTABLE? HE DANGLED HANDCUFFS.*—Some little excitement has existed amongst the police force with reference to statements that a constable was in the habit of visiting Mrs Thwaites’s home and on one occasion put his handcuffs on her in a playful manner.’ Moody paused to smirk. ‘It has been rumoured that it was one of the Coburg force who was rather smitten with the baby farmer’s charms. The amorous constable has been described as “a nice young man with a black moustache”. This, however, does not correspond with any of the local force, all of whom are married men. Married men!’ hooted Moody. ‘And all of them clean-shaven, I suppose.’

His sister had her back to him. Seen through the kitchen window though, her face was glazed with fatigue. For Lil hadn’t slept at all; keeping her stays on had seen to that. All night they’d pinched and dug in, cutting short the deep breaths that reach down to sleep. Sometime in those shipwrecked hours there’d been a thunderstorm, not near enough to wake a sleeper but not far off. Pale flickers had lit the room and the legs of Lil’s iron bed had trembled. And she’d lain curled and still as an ammonite, eyes open, face to the wall.

...that fatal knife,/Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole./Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul... In her bed, when she made it upon rising, close to dawn, she'd found the slip of paper with the verse copied out for Mr Finlay. It must have fallen from her bodice when she'd undressed for bed, or else been caught in her stays. Lil had considered the folded paper a moment, creased and bowed as it was, then placed it under her pillow. With it went the photograph – Marcella's keepsake – which Lil had propped by her bedside last night and stared at in the dark.

Henry had been startled to find Lil on the verandah when he went out, soon after sun-up. 'There you are. I wondered why you didn't answer when I called you just now.' Lil shrugged in reply. She looked wan and puffy, her hair just however. And cold, she must have been, wearing only her wrap. 'Are you unwell?' There was concern in her father's voice, but also (and did he even know it?) a challenge: willing her to brace up and act like a Vivo.

Lil had her face to him but held her eyes averted, as if to look at him would cause her pain. 'No,' her voice was flat, 'Woke up early, that's all.' Henry left it at that. How little he knew his daughter.

Whatever storms there'd been in the night had blown away, leaving the morning sky clear but for a few grey threads and the sweet, sappy smoke of new-made fires. There were magpies out, warbling and grubbing for their hatchlings. Shadows retreated down the wall of Burston's malthouse, in counterweight to the rising sun. And Lil shivered. How was she to face the day?



Henry walked, this morning, along the Yarra Bank as far as the cricket ground at Jolimont. There'd been no post for Tunney lane, which tended to confirm his theory that Wednesday chimed with Sunday in the letters' disembodied

dates of origin. That he hadn't expected to find any was apparent from the brisk, almost nonchalant, manner in which he'd surveyed the cottage fronts and the smug little nods he'd given himself.

At the Public Library last evening, in company with Maurice Lade, he had returned to the same trio of maps he'd pored over a week ago in his search for Tunney lane.

Henry had allotted himself the task of reaching down Wheatley's *London Past and Present*, while to Lade he'd granted the pleasure of scanning Rocque's 1746 map, beginning with the same sheet as had yielded Tunney lane. And the younger man, with sharp eyes and a measure of luck, had found their quarry while Henry was still up the ladder.

'There! Cobett street.' His excitement had caused the attendant practically to interpose himself between Rocque's map and the American's stabbing finger. Henry having taken charge, they'd been permitted to examine Lade's discovery from a respectful distance. Less substantial even than Tunney lane, Cobett street was a street in name only. It looked to be a remnant, the stub of a one-time or would-be thoroughway. Rocque had it zigzagging north from Lombard street, stopping dead before it reached Cornhill. Close by was St Michael's churchyard, which marked the farthest extent of the fire that had burnt out Tunney lane. Henry's own sketch-map of the locale, taken last time from the Rocque, ended at Birchin lane, to which – ah! – Cobett street lay eastward.

Henry had riffled Wheatley's index (he'd almost dropped the book in his scramble down the ladder), found an entry for Cobett street, located the page, and read.

Parish of St Michael. Husting Roll for 1563 shows property the possession of Elias Cobett (or Cobbett), merchant. Route of St Barnabas's Day procession until 1666. After Great Fire, northern

*portion absorbed into Cornhill frontages;
remainder effaced (by fire?) 1752. Cobett street
resurrected by Goldsmith as fictional domicile of
Wat Cloxafor in The Rake Broussard (1768).
Cobb yard, off George alley, Lombard street,
survives as a fragment.*

Lade had been reading over the detective's shoulder. 'The same fire as took your Tunney lane, d'you suppose?'

'1752 - it's possible. Odd that Wheatley doesn't say as much, though,' Henry had mused. 'Curious choice of word: *effaced*.'

The two maps of later date bore out Wheatley's narrative. Both Horwood's and the Ordnance Survey showed Cobett street gone, its Lombard street opening built over and the old northward course splintered by dogleg alleys and the derivative Cobb yard.

'Now then,' Maurice Lade had said, 'explain to me how this works.' The two men had repaired to the Traveller's Home, opposite the library, and were nursing brandies - the American's shout - under the herring-eyed gaze of Her Most Excellent Majesty, framed in profile over the bar. 'There's *your* Tunney lane and Bob's Cobett street; both in London, both dropped off the map in 1752. Then there's these letters...' Lade had shaken his head, perplexed. 'Explain to me,' he'd said again, 'how they're connected.'

'I can't,' Henry had admitted. 'A hundred and forty years and thousands - tens of thousands - of miles... Logic says there's no connection.'

'But leaving logic aside for a moment...'

Leaving logic aside! Far from being affronted by the suggestion, however, Henry had seemed glad of the invitation to dispense - temporarily - with ironclad reason. 'Ah well, in that case,' he'd all but rubbed his hands together, 'I'd hazard

that the letters were “residue” of the eleven days passed over when the calendar changed.’ Seeing the American’s blank look, he’d added, ‘September 1752. England changed its calendar, brought it in line with the Continent. Had to cut out eleven days.’

‘Huh.’ This had all been news to Lade. ‘But still, where’s the connection?’

‘September 1752,’ Henry had repeated.

‘Ah, so *that’s* why you asked about the time of year. The letters in Pittsburgh – for Cobett street.’

‘Exactly. The dates correspond: September third to thirteenth. If I’m not mistaken, we’ll see the last of the letters tomorrow.’

Lade had been shaking his head again. ‘Forgive me, sir, for saying so, but it makes no sense.’

‘Of course it doesn’t,’ Henry had agreed. ‘But we’re leaving logic aside, remember?’

‘Oh.’ Lade had forgotten. ‘Where are you saying they come from, these letters?’

“‘Out of the great vault of Time”,’ Henry had replied, mocking the very idea. Then, ‘No,’ he’d added, with a shrug, ‘days and years, clocks and calendars – they’re no more than a man-made conceit, are they?’ He’d signalled for a last pair of brandies, the clock at the bar putting the hour at close to ten. ‘An indispensable one, admittedly.’

Coming from Henry, this amounted to heresy. A man-made conceit? Anyone knowing him better would have dropped into a dead faint. Maurice Lade had just looked wary. Was the detective having him on? Nodding his thanks for the drink, he’d asked, ‘But why Tunney lane? Why Cobett street?’

‘Well,’ Henry had spread his hands, ‘both disappeared shortly after the calendar changed – soon after the date of our letters. As to what that signifies...’

‘What *can* it signify,’ the American had interrupted, ‘if those dates were struck off the calendar, if they never existed? Even supposing... no, *especially* supposing you’re right: that calendars, dates, all that, are just a thing we make up to suit ourselves? They’ve got to be a hoax, haven’t they, these letters? I mean, “residue”... you were joking, right?’

Henry would hardly admit to joking. ‘Ah, so we’re back to logic, are we? In that case, yes,’ he’d said. ‘Of course they’re a hoax.’

Lade had smirked at the caginess. ‘But you don’t believe that.’

Henry had seemed to reflect a moment before replying, ‘I don’t know. I don’t know what I believe.’

Never before – never! – had he admitted as much. *Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul...*



Now he was on his way to Doncaster. A train took him as far as Box Hill, through clusters of new suburbs, brash and ruddy-roofed, thinning out between stations. Until lately an agricultural village, Box Hill now had its own hatching of suburban streets that ended in paddocks, with detached brick houses (a good many vacant), school, gasworks, churches, stores, hotels and temperance hall, the inevitable estate agents, and a farm dray in front of the bank.

Northwards from the station ran the Box Hill–Doncaster tramway. Somebody’s bright idea in the ’eighties, here it was, a galvanic marvel running straight to nowhere – one more monument to a profligate decade. In truth, of course, its destination wasn’t ‘nowhere’ but the lookout tower on Doncaster Hill, built by the local publican on the surmise that, having been awed by the view from the platform – westwards over the city, east to the blue Dandenongs – and twice negotiated the tower’s four hundred steps, visitors would be eager for refreshment and a sit-down. He was right.

But if the Doncaster publican had done well out of the tramway, its investors had not. On top of the cost of constructing the line, there'd been the further expense of cutting down the steep gradients and smoothing the jagged bends that, at first, had over-strained the tramcar. Then came a dispute with a property owner over the line's right-of-way through his land. And no sooner had that been resolved than the colony's economic fortunes had fizzled. Since last Easter, when the Land Mortgage Bank suspended trading, the tram company had been starved of cash and credit. Moreover, the slump had put paid to the hopes of investors – land speculators, most of them – that visitors carried up Doncaster Hill by the tram would be charmed by the district and stay.

The tram originally had run ten round trips each weekday; now it was down to five, the first of which met passengers off the ten-seventeen train. Henry Vivo was one of just four (besides the driver) aboard the jaunty green tramcar as it slowed on its approach to the Koonung Creek. A farm worker with a duffle bag sat at the front end, talking with the driver. The other two were a woman and her son, a lad of about seven, used to getting his own way. He shifted from seat to seat, swinging his legs and scuffing the upholstery with his boots. At one point, he plumped into the seat opposite Henry and glared at him. The detective countered, staring the youngster down then catching the mother's eye with such a look that she called the boy sharply to her side and kept him there for the rest of the journey.

From the creek, it was a hard pull to the Doncaster terminus. This being Henry's first time on an electric tram, he was fully attentive to the novelty of it. Aside from the hum of the overhead wires, however, there was little to distinguish the experience from that of riding in the enclosed car of a cable tram. What novelty there was was supplied by the hilly terrain and creek crossings and the fact that, once clear of Box Hill,

the line was closely flanked by apple orchards in blossom. Henry noted the wire strung alongside the tramroad: the telegraph line connecting Mrs Leary, postmistress, to Box Hill and the world.

Learys' general store stood fifty yards from the lookout tower, facing the rutted main road and a horse paddock, opposite. Henry was early, of course. A cold wind buffeted him as he walked down from the tram. Ramming his hat on tight, he peered under its brim at the view, wide open to the south and west. Away past the paddocks and the tidy suburbs could be seen the gasometer and smokestacks of Richmond, then the huddle of the city, twelve miles distant, and beyond that the hazy bay.

Mr Leary, bow-legged and wiry as a cricket, was securing the tailgate of a cart as Henry approached.

'Hold on!' came a woman's voice. 'One more. For Milfords.' And a squat, stout woman, his wife, bustled out with a sack of flour or grain, gripping it by the top corners and hoicking it forward with one leg. She may have been short, but she was strong. And just as well: her husband made no effort to help, just stood by the cart, waiting.

'Off on his rounds. Deliveries,' Mrs Leary said, when Henry had introduced himself. Inside the store was dim, and a brawl of aromas forced themselves on the nose: musty, grainy, papery, spicy, mousy, soapy, cheesy, toasty, ammonia-y, smoky, chalky, overlaid with the clean tang of lamp oil and kerosene and a whiff of rankness from the rafters where bacon hung. Behind the counter a lad, a shop-boy, was picking at his nails. 'Look sharp, Jim,' ordered Mrs Leary. 'Get them sacks tidied away, then go through them apples,' indicating a tubful, 'and put the duds aside for seconds. I'll be out the back,' she told him. 'Any post office business, give me a shout. And lay off

them aniseed balls,' she added, holding open a door for Henry.

A passage led to a kitchen of the farmhouse sort, with a fireplace big enough to agist a pony in. The back door stood open, letting in a thick wedge of sunlight. Mrs Leary had the post office ledgers laid out ready for Henry on the table. On top was the Register of Post Office Orders (Redeemed). Refusing Mrs Leary's offer of a chair, Henry opened the register and bent over to inspect it. The postmistress, standing close beside him, examined the cowlick that curled above his collar and launched into a commentary unrelated to the matter at hand. 'We were at Sunbury before we come out here - that's three years ago now. Mr Leary, he suffered bad from hay-fever when we were there, poor pet. Reckoned it was all them thistles.' She laughed. 'Aye, well, since we been here he's sneezed more but it's bothered him less. He's been cheerier in himself, like. I put it down to the change in his situation.'

'Oh?' Henry's tone couldn't have been less interested.

Even as she spoke about her husband, Mrs Leary's gaze had travelled down the detective's sleeves to his slight, bony hands, splayed either side of the open register. The middle finger of each flexed and unflexed in a curious stroking motion, of which Henry seemed unaware.

'He was at the asylum there,' the postmistress continued. 'We both was. Live-in ward attendants. Not actually living in the wards, of course. In the grounds. We had a cottage; nice enough, it was. He worked in the main asylum, the men's, and me in the female part.'

Henry made an *a-her* sound in his throat.

'What's that?' Mrs Leary's aproned front pressed closer still and Henry bent his hips away from her, so that, from behind, he described a letter C.

'Bookkeeping,' he said in a pinched voice, indicating the dog-eared and blotted page. 'Rather untidy.'

‘Well,’ Mrs Leary turned aggrieved, ‘no one’s ever said so before. I’ve had inspectors come out and whatnot. None of them’s ever said anything amiss. In fact, “Very nicely kept,” the last one said. Aye, and I’ve got reports saying so.’ In her indignation, Mrs Leary retreated a step. ‘Remember,’ she continued in her defence, ‘we’ve got farmers come in here, brickmakers, all sorts. Dirty hands, not used to handling books. But if they want their money, they’ve got to sign, don’t they? Aye. Well...’ and she indicated the tatty page as proof of a job well done.

‘Was *he* a farmer?’ Henry pointed to the careful scrawl of a signature, third from last in the register. ‘This “Ogilvie”? Our counterfeiter?’

‘No, not a farmer. Nothing like.’ The postmistress, confidential, pressed forward again, her plump bosom against Henry’s elbow, and poked her pouchy, middle-aged face between him and the register. ‘He come up on the tram, like you did. Climbed the tower – so he said, though I didn’t see him. Didn’t seem puffed.’

‘Did he call at the hotel?’

‘He never said. But Ryland – that’s the publican – says not. I went and asked him later.’

‘I see.’ Henry had drawn away from her, in order to write in his notebook. With little prompting, Mrs Leary supplied a detailed description of the supposed Mr Ogilvie – a *too* detailed description, Henry very likely thought. She had noticed and was able to recall everything from the distinctive fleck in his waistcoat to the character of his cologne and felt certain that his accent was either Cumberland or Westmorland. ‘Penrith, I’d say, me being from Durham myself. And Mr Leary agrees,’ she added.

Henry looked up from his writing. ‘Your husband saw him, too?’

‘Oh, aye. And heard. He was in the shop.’

‘When will he back?’

‘Not till three, at soonest. Today’s his long run.’

Henry gave an impatient sigh.

‘Well, you should have *said*,’ the postmistress reprimanded him.

‘Never mind,’ Henry muttered. He wouldn’t be waiting for the husband’s return. He meant to be back in the city before three. ‘Now then,’ he said brusquely, ‘tell me why you refused to pay out on the postal order. Something alerted you to its being a forgery?’

‘Oh, no,’ Mrs Leary laughed, ‘I was going to pay him his ten quid all right. You can see, he’d signed the book already. I even had the money drawer open. But he just took off!’ She laughed again. ‘It was Alf, Alf Aker, the tram driver. He stamped his boots on the mat and sung out, like he always does, “Orright, come on, open up!” That’s Alf; he always does that. Anyhow, this fellow just takes off. Out the door, nearly skittled Alf...’

‘But you said he came on the tram?’

‘Aye,’ she said, ‘but he didn’t go back on it. Bolted across the road and off away into the orchard, down there. He must’ve crossed the creek by the tramway bridge, on foot. We heard later that he’d got a lift on a cart from near there to Box Hill, to the station.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘One of the farm lads round about heard it from the fellow who was driving the cart, a chum of his.’

‘I see.’ Henry chewed his moustache and held his pencil poised. But he seemed to have run out of questions. One occurred to him: ‘So there was nothing about him that caused you suspicion?’

‘Only that he’d come all this way to cash a postal order. But then, people do queer things. I thought maybe he was

celebrating, his birthday or something. Give himself a lazy day, cash his ten quid – a treat, you know?’

‘Mm.’ Henry didn’t know. He tapped his teeth with the pencil-end. Mrs Leary had added little to his stock of evidence. Shorn of its fancies, her description of ‘Ogilvie’ made him plainly the same fellow who’d uttered forgeries at Balwyn, East Kew, and elsewhere.

The postmistress walked with him a way towards the tram shelter. If not for the wind, it’d have been a splendid day. ‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ said Mrs Leary, meaning the apple blossom. ‘Better than thistles, that’s for sure,’ and she took up her earlier monologue. ‘Nine years, we were at Sunbury. Hard work, my word it was. A strain. Mr Leary felt it more than I did. Well, the women... a lot of them, you know, there was nothing wrong with them, really. Just their husbands wanted rid of them. Got a doctor to sign the paper – done. Aye, it was sad. Oh, there *was* some bad ’uns, though. They do say – and it’s true – that a bad woman is badder than a bad man. Same goes for mad. But no, mostly they were gentle souls. Pined themselves to death, a lot of them.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Leary.’ Henry stopped her there. ‘I’ll trouble you no further.’ He tipped his hat.

‘Oh. Aye, then.’ The postmistress seemed to appraise the slim, stiff-necked figure as he made uphill to the shelter. Then she turned back to the store, humming a tune and jiggling the keys in her apron pocket

He had the best part of an hour to wait before Alf Aker and his tram returned. But where another man might have climbed the tower or taken his ease at the hotel, Henry planted himself under the whistling wire, pacing and checking his watch and squinting to the south.



The pie could’ve been hotter. A good thing it wasn’t, though, since Moody had to wolf it down quick. He’d missed the start

of the auction, as it was. But if the auctioneer at Wise's – a showman if ever there was one – ran to form, he'd probably still be oiling up the punters. Chances were, in fact, that he'd play the ham even more than usual, given the character of the stuff he was knocking down. For under his hammer this afternoon was the old Theatre Royal wardrobe. The new management having brought in its own, costumes from more than twenty years of productions were advertised for auction, in 214 lots.

Osborne & Wright had done something like a full day's business, for all that they'd closed at two. The Mayoral Ball was just a few days off and all of a sudden folks who'd known about it for months were finding their wardrobes wanting. In gloves alone, the shop had done a week's trade in the past two days. Moody's fingertips were tender from pulling the pins out of ready-made shirts. And as for the window display, he'd surpassed himself. With the help of Tredrea's superior penmanship he'd mocked up a placard-sized invitation – THE RIGHT WORSHIPFUL THE MAYOR OF MELBOURNE REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY – in front of which a hock bottle was poised above a goblet towards which outstretched two dozen hands – or rather, gloves – in sunburst formation. Without a doubt, Moody deserved credit for the surge in glove sales since the window (he'd privately titled it 'Mayoral Melée') was unveiled late on Monday.

The weather being fair, the auction room had its doors thrown open to the street. Sure enough, the theatric tones of Wise's best barker were hauling in passers-by and, besides his urging patter, sounds of mirth filtered out onto Elizabeth street. The auctioneer, as Moody stepped inside, looked like something out of one of the scandalous pictures in which (young Mr Vivo had good cause to know) he dealt as a sideline. Decked out in the diaphanous headgear and skirts of an Afghan slavegirl, he brandished a tin-plate scimitar, items

forming part of Lot 4, the wardrobe formerly employed in 'The Cave of Ali Baba' and other capers of an oriental complexion. Moody grinned. It was as good as a circus.



Lil had waited until Mr Whelk had been and gone at tea-time, then hung the sign out, pulled the blinds, loosened her stays, and slept. The miner's couch was hardly long enough or broad enough for comfort, but that didn't matter. It was nearly three before she stirred. Slowly at first, she uncreased herself. Sleeping - or, at least, waking - in the daytime is always strange; it takes an effort to readjust, to find one's place in the day. While she fixed her hair, she stood back from the window where she could look out unseen. The street below had a distinctly mid-afternoon aspect. It wasn't just the light but the character of the activity and its actors. People dragged their steps and turned dreamy at this time of day. Time seemed to grind its gears before running down to day's end. And here was Lil, just waking.

She didn't look much refreshed. Having no water to hand, she dipped her fingertips in the teapot and rubbed the corners of her eyes and mouth with cold pekoe. The side of her face she'd lain on was red and scored with wriggly lines from the cushion tassles, and her movements and expression all were sandbagged. She sat down at the desk and turned over papers with one hand, pinching her brow with the other. What with yesterday afternoon and today, she'd be hard-pressed to catch up. Like an invalid testing her strength, Lil wound a sheet into the machine and, straightening herself in the chair, commenced to type. The noise hurt her ears - at least, she winced as though it did - but she carried on, tentative at first, then picking up speed. Just like that typist she'd read about in the paper, she made more mistakes than usual. Pretty soon, the desktop was scurfed with the rinds of rubbing-out. But there were just these few things needed doing today: letters

and straightforward stuff promised in time for the post to a firm of solicitors in Bourke street. Lil had them done, quite presentable, by a quarter-to-four, then she skewered her hat to her head, ready to take them round.

The wind had shifted northerly and was kicking up grit. But it was milder. Lil stood a moment outside Stalbridge Chambers, eyes shut, and tilted her face to receive the sun. The typed pages delivered, she continued north to Flagstaff Hill and the gardens and there she sat, back to the view, until night had half fallen.

‘You a’right, miss?’ It was a policeman, giving the gardens a once-over before dark.

Lil’s gloved hands were clasped in her lap. She may have been dozing, but she didn’t seem startled. There was something languid in the way she raised her face: much the same way she’d done, earlier, to the sun. ‘Yes,’ she said, after a moment’s pause, ‘I’m waiting.’

‘Do you expect you’ll be waiting long, miss? Only, it’s getting dark.’ Lil didn’t answer, but regarded her surroundings with heavy-lidded eyes. The policeman might fairly have supposed her drunk. ‘What say I walk with you as far as the street?’ he said. ‘Better you wait there. If you must.’ Wordlessly, obediently, Lil got to her feet and, in step with the constable, took a diagonal path to the park’s edge. A possum froze on a tree trunk as they passed. ‘How will you be,’ asked Lil’s protector at William street, ‘if I leave you here to wait?’ From the thinness of the traffic, it must’ve been well past six.

‘That’s all right, constable’ she replied. ‘I’ve waited long enough, I think.’ She was still like a sleeper waking, by no means her brisk and certain self. But, ‘Thank you,’ she added and turned towards home. The evening was close to balmy, for September.



‘As good as a circus, it was!’ Moody was regaling his sister with an account of that afternoon’s auction. ‘Harry Keck – Councillor Keck, I mean – got himself a sort of rajah’s get-up. Yards of good satin, from the look of it, and all the trimmings: little bells round the sleeves and a great long sceptre thing with an elephant’s head at the top. Made of papier mâche, I dare say, but, crikey, it looked impressive. What Harry Keck’ll do with it...’ Moody shook his head, laughing. ‘Wear it to the ball, perhaps.’

Lil, monopolising the cigarette, squinted through the wreathing smoke into darkness. Her brother had on his own purchase. Actually, it had been one half of Lot 203, which he’d split with a friend. Walt had kept the cape, while Moody had got the matching fez: black, with a red silk tassel. And very pleased with it, he was. When he stood at the stove to fix the tea, he’d kept twitching his head to make the tassel swing, which had raised a faint smile from Lil – her first for the day. Mr Bacash had produced something like Moody’s fez from his kitbag once, only he’d called it a *tarboosh*. It had lent Mr B. a most exotic air when he’d put it on for Lil’s amusement. And she *had* been amused: had laughed out loud, in fact, when the swaying black tassel tickled her perfect nose.

It had been omelette for tea, since Moody had got home later than was usual on his half-day. He’d had a bath, leaving the water for Lil; but it had gone cold waiting for her. ‘Where’ve you been?’ Moody had flung the door open as she came up the back steps. ‘Poppa’s gone looking for you. You had us worried.’ Then, seeing her face, he’d softened his tone. ‘You look awful. Here, give me that.’ He’d helped her off with coat and hat and had drawn a chair close to the stove. ‘Come on,’ he’d coaxed, and sat her down. ‘Do you feel well enough to eat?’ She hadn’t looked it. ‘Just an omelette, and a bit of bread. It’ll do you good.’ And Lil had nodded, meeting her

brother's eye with a look of bleak gratitude but saying nothing. Did he know?

Whatever else he might've known, Moody knew his sister well enough not to question her. Instead he'd put on the pan to heat and introduced her to his fez. Henry had come in to find Lil mopping her plate with a scrap of bread. 'I cooked hers first,' Moody had said. 'She was hungry.' And it was true: she hadn't eaten all day, having felt too nauseous in the morning, then sleeping through dinnertime.

'We must have missed one another.' Henry's tone had been light, but he'd scanned his daughter's face for clues.

Lil had avoided his eyes, still. 'There were deliveries took me out of my way. It must've been later than I thought. Sorry.' There'd been a hint of accusation in the way she said the word.

Impervious, Henry had said, 'Another time, let us know. It's not right that you should be out alone after dark. You know that.' He'd sought her eye but Lil had refused to meet it, only giving a tight little nod, such as might be mistaken for meekness.

'I got something for you, too. Hold on.' Moody ducked inside and returned with a flat paper parcel, about the size of a man's handkerchief folded in two. Lil had stubbed out the cigarette and looked as if it had done her some good. 'Open it,' urged Moody.

It was a kind of mantle – a slippery, insubstantial thing of emerald green silk, shot through with silver threads. Lil shook out the folds and held it up. Despite its size, it seemed to weigh nothing. You could see the moon through it.

'There's a cigarette burn in it somewhere – there,' Moody pointed out the spot, 'but not that you'd notice. Do you like it?'

She lowered the mantle and looked at him. 'Moody, it's lovely. A lovely thing.' And she touched his forearm, really meaning it. Even though, God knows, her kind brother's gift was the last thing that Lil would ever wear. Gaudy and foreign-looking, it was – of course it was – *just* the kind of thing that their mother would have loved. She'd have worn it at any opportunity: even to the grocer's, even hanging out washing. Marcella loved – *had* loved – showy things like this.

'Here, let me.' And Lil did: she let Moody take the mantle and furl it round her head and shoulders, draping and tucking it just so. He stood back. 'There.' It was a charged and complicated moment. 'Shall I fetch a mirror?' Moody's voice had a crack in it.

'No,' said Lil. 'No don't. It is lovely, Mood. Thank you.'

'I ought to go,' he said, suddenly thinking of the time. He was meeting Lewis Tredrea at half-past eight; the pair of them were off to the Unemployed Stagehands' Benefit at the Boxarium. 'Will you be all right here on your own?' Henry had gone out after tea.

'I'll not be long out of bed. Don't worry,' Lil coaxed, seeing him unconvinced, 'go on.' So he did, only turning at the gate to salute his mother's apparition, and muttering under his breath – something about Mrs Wood.



It had been nearer three than two by the time Henry made it back to the GPO that afternoon. Near Canterbury, there'd been livestock on the line and his train had been delayed while guard and driver climbed down to shoo them off. Had they been a station or two closer to town, Henry might have got out and walked; as it was, he'd sat tight and fumed.

Under his office door, he'd found a note from Aloysius Carr, proposing they meet that evening at the Mechanics' Institute library. (Carr had been unable to wait and see Henry in person, having to fetch Lucina from the dentist where

she'd been having her top teeth out.) *There is something I wish to show you, touching on the matter of the Tunney lane correspondence.* That word, *correspondence*, had been a neat touch, serving to distance the subject of their mutual interest from *letters*, which might be deemed post-office business. Henry had written up his fruitless morning's inquiries (Aker, the tram driver, having had nothing fresh to add, except that the forger had run 'like a girl') and fixed the report to the fattening file. Other small mysteries had been waiting in his pigeon-hole: a couple of letters that had confounded the carriers, as well as several believed to contain tickets for an unlicensed lottery. There'd also been a page from this morning's *Argus*, the close-printed advertisements including one (circled) for phrenology by post. Henry had snorted at that. Some people really did need their heads read.

Aloysius Carr's cranial bumps were well hidden when he burst through the swing doors of the reading room, thirteen minutes past the appointed time. Under the hat, his fair hair was a fright, there having been no time to comb it between nursing poor Lucina and feeding and settling the bubs. He would never have undertaken to come out tonight had he not been bursting to show Detective Vivo his happenstantial discovery.

'I hadn't gone looking for any such thing. Wholly by accident, it was, that I found it.' It being Carr's idea of a night out to sit for a couple of hours bent over Cunningham's nine-volume *The Collected Letters of Horace Walpole*, last evening he had happened across this, dated 15 September, 1753:

Imagine [wrote Walpole, in the throes of decorating his 'castle' at Strawberry Hill] the walls covered with paper printed in perspective to represent Gothic fretwork: the lightest Gothic balustrade to the staircase, adorned with

antelopes (our supporters) bearing shields: lean windows fattened with rich faints in painted glass, and a vestibule open with three arches on the landing-place, and niches full of trophies supposed to be taken by Sir Terry Robfart in the holy wars.

The neighbourhood has been subject to a curious blizzard of post this week past, coincident in character to the letters reported by you and others in Town of late. I have myself received a brace of the spurious correspondence, all of mythic date and blabbing mercy. Time of Grace, to be sure. One of the letters claims you as its author; and very like to one of yours – only that it names that of which we agreed never to speak. I shall bring it when next I come to Town. Sanders says here then are the eleven days lamented by the agitators. I confess to being displeas'd at their resurrection.

‘It’s the same thing, isn’t it?’ said Carr, when Henry sat back from reading. ‘The eleven days, the letters, and “blabbing mercy”. That’s them, for sure. The same. Only just a year after.’

‘There’s no more about it?’ Henry turned the page to Walpole’s next letter.

‘No, sir, not that I could make out.’

‘The difference,’ said Henry, ‘is that this “spurious correspondence” was meant for him – was addressed to him – and purportedly from people he knew.’

‘That’s true. But then (I know, it doesn’t make any sense) the letters were able to “find” him at the same place he’d been the year before, when the calendar changed – when the eleven days were lost.’ Carr spoke with the careful decidedness of a man who’d had twenty-four hours to think the thing through.

‘Tunney lane, though – it was gone by then. Where could its letters go?’

‘More to the point, where did they come from?’

There was a pause while they both considered the detective’s question. Or rather, while Henry did; Carr, evidently, had considered it already. ‘It depends,’ he said, eyeing the other man cautiously, ‘whether you are inclined toward a supernatural explanation.’

Carr was right to be cautious, though it would not have been so very surprising for Henry, as a man of his century, one wedded to common sense and with more cause than most to feel haunted, to have taken a scientific interest in the supernatural. In fact, he had more than once attended lectures on the subject – lectures, it had to be said, that had served only to solidify his scepticism. Carr, likewise, took a sometime interest in spiritualism, but, unlike Henry, did not disdain to notice the rare manifestations which psychical researchers – men of science – confessed themselves at a loss to explain.

The detective, just last night, had made a game of setting rationalism aside. Now, though, his eyebrows expressed a decided disinclination to entertain any such fancy.

Carr read the look correctly. ‘Sir, I agree,’ he assured Henry. ‘But just suppose that the eleven days...’ He seemed reluctant to voice his speculation. ‘What if they still existed on some other... level? In some other place?’

Out there in the ether, it sounded like, and Henry, his eyes narrowing, was having none of it. ‘What do you mean: some other level?’ Carr looked abashed. ‘You make it sound as if there were a supernatural *post restante*, where letters are held until called for’ – an image analagous with ‘the great vault of Time’ mooted (mockingly, it’s true) by Henry himself. ‘Or are you suggesting,’ he went on, ‘that Time is like a two-storey house, with the eleven days shut in upstairs,’ Henry pointed

to the reading room's ornate ceiling, 'dropping letters through cracks in the floorboards? Why not say that there's a stork with a postbag marked "Tunney lane" in its beak, doomed to circle the globe until a street of that name should appear? A stork that can read maps, what's more.' Henry leant back from the table, as if to distance himself from such absurd analogies. But they hadn't *just* occurred to him, you could tell. No, he'd tried them out before: had taunted himself with them, in all likelihood.

Carr had his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "No, sir," he said. 'Only... well, *you* explain it. Properly, I mean - none of that tomfool stuff.' Here was boldness indeed from the letter carrier.

Henry sat up straight and frowned, mustering authority. 'Who's to say,' he said, 'that the agitators Walpole writes of, the "Give us back our eleven days" crowd, didn't send all these letters - a concerted campaign of humbug, playing on people's superstitions?' It was an elaboration of the hypothesis Lil had put to him six days ago, and he seemed as little convinced by it now as he had done then.

The whole of their exchange had been conducted in undertones. Even so, the librarian, catching Henry's eye just then, raised a finger to pursed lips. Unaccustomed to rebuke, he dropped his eyes to the volume of Walpole's letters.

Carr had to get home to Lucina and her teeth. But Henry would stay a while longer, if only to restore his reputation as a seemly scholar. He walked with Carr to the head of the stairs. 'You're right,' he conceded, although the other man hadn't said as much: 'I can't explain it.'

He sounded weary. He hadn't told Carr about the further complication - corroboration? - of Cobett street, and he didn't tell him now. Under the librarian's approving gaze, he reread Walpole's letter. '*Time of Grace, to be fure.... I confefs to being displeafed at their refurrection.*'



By the age of fifty-three, Henry ought to have been accustomed to that flickering at the periphery of any illumination which relied on an inconstant flame. But when he entered his bedroom late that evening – one hand on the doorknob, the other holding a lamp – he started back in fright. As the door swung open, a shadow had seemed to dance back from the light. Henry squinted into the corner where his desk stood, and thrust the lamp forward. Nothing. Then he wheeled to face the doorway, making the lamp swing so that its flame snarled at the dark. He'd heard something. 'Lil?' He put his head into the hallway. But Lil was fast asleep.



'Do you think it's true?'

Moody's shriek had wrenched her from a deep sleep. This time, instead of lying there, Lil had gone to her brother and found him awake, big-eyed and shuddering. She'd perched on the edge of his bed, crooning reassurance, and he'd curled round to face her. He had the bedcovers pulled up tight, and Lil had tucked them down behind his shoulder, to keep the chill from stealing in. 'Same as usual?' He'd nodded.

Now she stroked his temple while he stared at the candle-flame. 'Mood?' Gentle but insistent, Lil repeated the question. 'Do you think it's true?'

Moody frowned, but didn't shift his gaze from the candle. 'What?' He knew.

'That she really is dead.' She watched his face, her thumb still stroking his temple.

'Do you?' Sullenly, he turned the question back to her. It was Lil's turn not to answer, and Moody's to insist. 'You do, don't you?'

Lil's thumb ceased its half-moon motion as her whole hand leapt to stroke her brother's hair, a frantic reflex of reassurance.

But Moody squirmed his head away. 'Well, she's not.' He spoke with quiet triumph. 'If she was, I'd know. It's just a bad dream.'

His eyes never left the candle, so he didn't see his sister's expression shutter itself, or her chin pucker with the effort of biting back a sob. She couldn't tell him; he wouldn't be told. Lil gave his shoulder a stiff pat. 'You sleep, then,' she said, and stood up to go.

Moody seemed, at last, to shake himself from the candle-struck trance and swung his stare onto his sister. She had on the emerald green mantle, it having been the nearest thing to hand when she left her bed. Moody gave a dry laugh. 'You're nothing like her, you know.'

Chapter 11

Thursday, September 14th

Henry Vivo didn't look like a murderer. Methodically, he ate his soft-boiled egg and sipped his tea, half-attending Moody's commentary on last evening's gala at the Boxarium while browsing the front page of the *Herald*. He didn't look like a murderer as he dabbed at his moustache. But Marcella was dead, and he had seen to it. Hadn't he? All this time – these eight years – he'd played the part of the husband wronged. Not ostentatiously, it's true, but in that tight and pious way of his. Look at him now: spruced, fastidious, picking up every crumb from his plate.

His face registered surprise when he looked up to find Lil watching him critically. 'More tea?' She gave a cool chuck of the head in assent, and brought over the teapot. 'That'll do,' Henry said when his cup was full enough; Lil, though, kept the pot tilted a moment or two longer, filling the cup to the brim. 'Oh dear,' said Henry; then, seeing Lil's face, 'No matter.' He bent and slurped off the excess. Undignified, but a pretty poor penance for killing his wife.

He eyed his daughter with concern. 'You still don't look well.' *He* could talk: one side of his face wore the greenish-yellow tint of old bruise and he was no less creaky in his movements. And, like Lil, he hadn't been sleeping well. His sore ribs woke him whenever he turned over in bed, so that he'd already been awake when Moody sung out 'Mama!' in the

night. But he was right about Lil: she looked grey-faced and spent. Even her hair, on its eighth day unwashed, seemed to have lost its colour. And the slate slab of her graver-robber dress didn't help. When her colour was up, the dress set it off a treat; today it made her look as if it were her own grave she'd robbed. 'Could you not ask Mrs Crowder to step in for the day?' her father suggested.

Here was a concession from Henry. He had, in the past, been less than approving when Lil had, through ill-health, been forced to call on the assistance of another typist. As Kitty Bird, Mrs Crowder had had her own typewriting agency in Temple Court, next door to Stalbridge Chambers, and Mr Crowder (a practising Free Thinker) did not object to his wife's occasional relapse to her former occupation, their union being as yet unblest with children. But, 'No,' said Lil, setting the teapot back on the hob, 'there's no need.'

She had, in fact, gone quickly back to sleep after her visit with Moody in the night. However much she may have wished to think over what he'd said, without her prodding stays to keep her awake, dead tiredness had claimed Lil within minutes.

You're nothing like her, you know. What had her brother meant by it? That she didn't *look* like Marcella? Well, she did. Everyone said so, besides which Lil had the sure evidence of her own eyes. And there'd been that moment last evening, when Moody had wrapped her in the green mantle and it had been plain from his look that it was their mother he was seeing. *You're nothing like her, you know.* But she was, and in more than just looks. What else were her gentlemen callers but the dirty stain of Marcella showing through? And if her mother had died in a lunatic asylum – well, there, just as likely, lay Lil's own fate. *You're nothing like her, you know.* It made you wonder how much Moody knew about Marcella, and about her.

He was his old self this morning, rattling on about last night's show: the bawdy midget-wedding and the mathematical goat. 'Counted by kicking a big tin drum. And to count by tens, she'd butt it. Of course, it all had to do with whether the fellow, the trainer, offered her carrot-tops or barley. But still, pretty clever for a goat. A bit whiffy, though, for an indoor act.' There was no sign of the glassy-eyed Moody of two a.m., nor did he seem any the worse for his broken night's sleep, which went unmentioned by anyone.

Henry left at his accustomed time, then Moody, leaving Lil behind, ostensibly to talk domestic business with Mrs Hustler. While it was true that she wanted Mrs H. to fill the boiler so there'd be hot water for a bath tonight, she could – and did – convey that request via a note appended to the shopping list. No, Lil had business in Flinders lane, or *off* Flinders lane, more properly, at the same address she'd typed on the machine belonging to Miss Flanner, the typist in trouble, downstairs at Stalbridge Chambers, viz. –

Mr Mow Lee,
No. 2, Carson's cottages,
Off Flinders lane (nr Collins place).

To which directions she had added:

- Slippery Elm Bark.



She already had a small supply of slippery elm bark quills in a drawer at her office. But, having been there nearly a year, they had a dusty look about them and their medicinal potency was likely diminished. That would not do.

Lil followed the waddling figure of Mr Mow Lee along his stuffy, dark passageway to the stuffy, dark room at the end. Aside from the stove, it looked nothing like a kitchen; more like – well, it was – an apothecary's shop. Floor to ceiling were shelves filled with brass and bamboo and rosewood canisters, big, small, and middling. And there were tea-chests and sacks printed with Chinese characters, and wicker baskets, some

with lids. In one corner were crowded glazed clay pots of the oriental sort, all shapes and sizes, from ginger-pot to kettle-drum. And the entire ceiling was smothered with bunches of dried and drying leaves and stalks and roots and withered things you couldn't - at least, would rather not - put a name to. Of course, the smell... well, it defied description. Suffice it to say that the mathematical nanny-goat could have performed there without offending the nose.

The Chinaman knew what it was Lil wanted. Neither speaking the other's language, the first time had been difficult. But now Mr Mow Lee went straight for a bamboo canister on a middle shelf close to the door. Lil nodded, unnecessarily, since he wasn't looking at her. Probably though, she was recalling the first time, and one occasion since, when he'd offered her the choice of the ready-cut quills or bark in a sheet which she could cut to suit herself. Mr Mow Lee had seemed to say that the bark was cheaper by the sheet, but Lil preferred the quills, cut to size and shaved to pencil points. Now he shook out several onto the dish of his brass scales, enough to balance the one-ounce slug, then transferred them to a paper twist which he held out to Lil. She had the coins ready, same as last time, but offered them uncertainly. Perhaps the price had changed? But Mr Mow Lee nodded and took the money, dropping it in the pocket of his slit-sided smock. Their business was done. He gestured for Lil for wait, though.

She might have been a girl banished to the forest in a fairy tale, so apprehensive did she look, left momentarily alone in that place. The apothecary was gone for less than a minute, returning from the next room with a letter, which he handed her. It was one of those antiquities her father had been collecting, but looked as if it had washed up somewhere: mottled and warped, the address and postmark reduced to a blur. Dry enough now, the letter had been one of those caught in last Thursday's downpour, the Chinaman having

found it where Henry and Pettit had missed it. Perhaps that's what he was telling Lil now, pointing at the letter, to his front door, waving his arms in a pantomime of the wind. He pointed again at the letter before drawing himself rigid in a fleeting but unmistakeable semblance of the post-office detective. He shook his head: no. Then he gestured at Lil herself, a repeated up-and-down sweep of the hand, before making a flourish in the direction of *Hoc loco* and a last splay-handed thrust at the letter Lil held. He was looking her in the eye, talking all the while in his quick, choppy tongue and nodding insistently, willing her to understand him. What was clear was that he was speaking not just about the letter, but about Lil herself.

Nodding, she kept her face polite. Only when the Chinaman gestured so emphatically at *her* did her eyebrows meet in a frown. 'I suppose,' she said when he'd finished, addressing him as she would her mirror, 'I suppose you think *this*' – she shook the paper twist – 'makes me unreliable, do you?' It was Mr Mow Lee's turn to frown. Lil's tone – mild, almost amused – half-belied what she was saying. 'Give it to my father? Why? He'd only waste it, the way he does everything. No,' she said, placing the letter with the bark quills in her dilly bag, 'I might burn it.' She nodded again at the herbalist, 'Thank you, Mr Mow Lee,' and edged in the direction of the door. Of course, his proper name was no more Mow Lee than it was Old China, but that's how he was listed in the Melbourne directory and how all but his countrymen knew him. He told Lil one more thing about herself, gesturing with an open hand, then saw her out.



Four more letters, postmarked Saturday and doubtless 'blabbing mercy', had awaited Henry at sun-up. Edgar Pettit had been standing in his cottage doorway with them. 'Still they come,' he'd said, sagely.

‘Not for much longer,’ Henry had replied, giving away the ending.

‘Eh, why’s that?’

‘I have a feeling they’ve about run their course.’ A feeling.

‘Have you figured out where they’ve been coming from, then?’

‘No,’ Henry had admitted. ‘But I am inclined,’ he’d continued, for all the world like a guest lecturer at the Mechanics’ Institute, fielding questions from the floor, ‘I am inclined to class them as a phenomenon, something like a meteor shower or an eclipse.’

‘I saw one o’ them once,’ Pettit had said, ‘back home. But this,’ giving the letters a flap, ‘this is different, innit? I mean, this is paper and bits of old wax, not the celestial firmament.’

If Henry had looked surprised at the expression, he must’ve been forgetting that Pettit was a Baptist. Henry’s own talk of the letters being a ‘phenomenon’ had itself been somewhat surprising. Had the notion occurred to him during a sleepless interval in the night? The implication seemed to be that this would make the letters, if not *supernatural*, then at least a natural occurrence. Which, as Pettit had said, was nonsense: letters did not count as heavenly bodies, not even as precipitation. Yet, between his spluttering at Carr last evening and his mellow speculation of a moment before, Henry had seemed more nearly to have reached an accommodation with the letters’ apparent unearthliness. Either that, or this had merely been an act for Pettit’s benefit: the detective as natural philosopher.

In any case, he hadn’t been able to sustain the mellowness for long. ‘Is that all of them?’ he’d asked, indicating the letters in the other man’s hand. ‘I’ll just...’ and he’d nipped along the row of cottages, to check that Pettit hadn’t missed any.

A telegram from Sub-Inspector Devine informed Henry that the P.O.O. forger had been arrested at Mont Albert, and summoned Detective Vivo to the Russell street police office at nine. There he learnt that the accused had been in the act of passing another of his oeuvre when the Mont Albert postmistress had broken into a coughing fit, whereupon her husband, the local constable, had appeared from the kitchen where he'd been eating dinner. The forger, thinking the jig was up, had made for the door, just as he'd done at Doncaster; only the constable had been too quick for him. The accused, said Sub-Inspector Devine, was well-known to police in Adelaide.

Mont Albert, yesterday dinnertime? Why, Henry could practically have watched the arrest from the train. It was possible, even, that he and the forger had shared a carriage on the outward journey. Leaving the police office, Henry looked as if he could kick himself. The case was no longer his, and all credit for the arrest and prosecution would go to the police. Curse that woman's cough, and curse the district's roaming livestock for not having halted Henry's train three stations sooner.

Between Russell street and the GPO, however, he walked off any criminations. Or so it appeared from the genial way he greeted Carr who, having finished his first round early, was just then blowing a cloud in Angelo lane. The letter carrier, for his part, wore an apprehensive look as Henry approached.

'Hello, Carr.'

'Sir.'

'You're done early.'

'Thursday, sir.'

'Ah.' There was a pause while Henry sucked his pipe alight. 'Forgive me,' he said, 'I was wrong to ridicule you like that last night.' Carr began to say something ameliorating, but Henry held up a hand. 'No, you were right. It is beyond explaining,

this business. But it occurs to me,' he said, 'that we ought to be treating this not as a crime – and certainly not as a supernatural occurrence – but as a phenomenon: a thing beyond our ken.' (He *had* rehearsed it in the night.) 'Like raining fishes – you've heard of such things?'

'Yes, for sure. Frogs, too, I've heard of. But (you'll pardon my saying so, sir) science explains that. I believe it's to do with frozen particles...'

'But not everything, Carr,' Henry interrupted firmly. 'Science cannot explain everything.' The letter carrier had never said that it could; Henry was determined, as ever, to have the final word. Now that *he* had decided that the mystery of the Tunney lane letters was beyond rational explanation, he seemed to insist that the world agree with him. 'Can't explain, for instance,' he continued, 'that eleven days cut out of the calendar might remain "in some other place", like unspent money in the bank.' Henry was talking to thin air, he and Carr both having their backs to the GPO and facing the brick wall opposite. 'Or that hundred-and-fifty-year-old letters should be delivered by a map-reading stork...'

'To be fair, sir,' put in Carr, 'the stork was your idea.'

'The point is,' Henry said with finality, 'that the origin of the letters must remain unknowable.'

Now Carr, besides taking an arm's-length interest in spiritualism, had been steeped from birth in the Catholic faith, so can have been no stranger to the notion of the unknowable – nor indeed the miraculous. Moreover, hadn't Henry merely echoed the point made by the letter carrier and spurned by himself last evening, viz: that anything was plausible, until proven otherwise? But Carr said nothing, only put his briar back in its pouch and nodded thoughtfully, as if, by explaining nothing, the detective had explained everything.

'Right then,' said Henry. 'I'll say good day.'

Rather than exacerbate her biliousness, Lil had left the manuscript of 'Weeping Willow' untouched, for the second day running. Mr Pontefract would just have to understand if she came up short this week. It had hardly ever happened. And if he didn't understand - well, then she'd be shut of the job, and good riddance.

No, Lil had given her attention this morning to the papers slipped under the door by Mr Finlay on Tuesday. They were needed for this afternoon's mail. There were other pressing jobs besides, but some of her regulars, finding her closed yesterday or Tuesday, had evidently taken their custom to Stott & Hoare or elsewhere. She'd found her pace by teatime, by which hour too the nausea had passed so that she'd been grateful for Mr Whelk's offer of a buttered teacake.

She had on the right outfit for a delivery to Finlay Brothers & Froome. Moreover, being leached of colour and with her spirits so low, Lil looked more grave and old-maidish than ever. Mr Finlay himself came into the outer office when she was there.

'Miss Vivo,' he greeted her, so concerned by her appearance that he forgot to be embarrassed. 'Are ye well?'

'Quite well, thank you,' she replied, betraying not a hint of familiarity.

'Very good,' he said. 'And ye got the papers I left all right?' Lil indicated the package she'd handed to the clerk. 'This is them?' She nodded. 'Very good,' said Mr Finlay. 'I'll look them over, Peach. Save ye time.' And returning to his desk, he leafed through the papers, stealing glances at Lil while the clerk counted out her fee.

Her only other delivery was for St James's, and Mrs Uhr, busy cleaning brass, had no time for talking, except to remark on Lil's looking peakish. That left Lil an hour and a half before she could expect Mr Bacash. She was walking east on Collins street, deep in thought, when she was hailed - 'Miss

Vivo!' – in a voice bearing the unmistakable accent of Maurice Lade. Lil spun around so suddenly she almost lost her balance. Lade swept off his hat in an arc that, were he a colonial, could only have been ironic. He was grinning like Punch. 'I've just pawned my violin,' he announced. 'Let me take you to tea. Please,' he added, seeing Lil hesitate, 'I hardly know a soul here. Won't you help me celebrate?'

'I... I thought you had a buyer?'

'Ah,' he said, theatrically crestfallen, hat pressed to his heart, 'poor old Nellie. Nobody wanted her. '

'Nellie?'

'That's right,' he said. 'Your instrument's got to have a name.' That got a smile from Lil. 'So, will you join me? You're not working, are you?'

'I am, but...'

'But you can please yourself, can't you? You're your own boss.'

Lil smiled at the expression. 'I suppose I am.'

'How about this place?' He meant Scott's Hotel. 'They'd serve a fair tea, wouldn't they?'

'Certainly,' said Lil. Scott's served one of the fairest teas in Melbourne. 'But...'

'Pricey, huh? Never mind. Nellie's paying.' He offered Lil his elbow, but she didn't take it.

Instead, 'Mr Lade,' she said, in a tone of which her father would have approved, 'think for a moment: you've just pawned your violin because...' It was a delicate matter to speak of with a near-stranger.

Lade came to her rescue. 'No,' he assured her, 'it's not like that. In fact, I have the promise of a job, starting next week.' He sounded surprised, as if he'd just recalled it. 'Now, there's another reason to celebrate,' he said. 'I'll tell you about it over tea. Shall we?' He held out his elbow again, and Lil placed one gloved hand in the crook.

Having eaten only a teacake all day, Lil was ravenous. She polished off her plate of sandwiches with such gusto that Lade insisted she have some of his. Then came a tray of fancy biscuits and petticoat shortbread. Lil even agreed to try some of Lade's coffee and professed to like it. As promised, he told her about his job. 'I have your father to thank for it,' he said, 'and Detective Berliner.'

'Uncle O?'

'Is that what you call him? Well, he put in a good word for me with an associate of his, Mr Brettschneider.'

'Ah, the painting firm.'

'And signwriting. That's in my line, see.' So, why hock his violin? 'Appurtenance of the gypsy life,' he said with half-serious resolve. 'Perhaps,' he added, 'I'll take up the euphonium. Or the steam-piano. Something that'll anchor me.'

That made Lil smile. 'So you'll be staying a while,' she said. 'Poppa will be pleased.'

'He's a fine gentleman, your Poppa.'

Lil took a bite of shortbread.

'A sharp mind,' Lade went on, 'I like that. And a... an instinct for what's right - and wrong, I guess. Well, that's his job, isn't it?' He picked crumbs off his plate. 'Couldn't be more different from my pop, I know that.' He said it like he was letting his companion in on a secret, his voice burred with feeling.

He noticed just then that Lil was struggling with her coffee. 'Here,' he said, solicitous, 'try some sugar - and cream. I was forgetting what it's like, that first cup. I must've been five or six when I had mine. Thought I'd been poisoned.'

Lil thanked him and took a sip of the amended beverage. 'Mm, better,' she said, but through pinched lips. Perhaps it

was discomfort that made her resort to a personal question. 'Are your parents still living, Mr Lade?'

'I believe so,' he replied. 'Leastways, I haven't heard otherwise.' He told her then about how he'd parted company with Pittsburgh at nineteen. 'Didn't stow away exactly, but wasn't crew either. They kicked me ashore at Cincinnati, but it was a start. And I pretty soon found a boat that'd take me further, down the Mississippi and to sea. Didn't look back.' He was looking back now, though.

'No, he said, seeming to change tack, 'about the only mistake Mother ever made, I reckon, was to marry my pop. He was... let's just say he wasn't a man you could look up to.' He poured himself another cup of coffee, and made as if to refill Lil's. At her look of alarm, he laughed. 'No more, I promise. You'll have some tea, though?' But Lil had had plenty.

There was scarcely a hotel in Melbourne to rival Scott's, the dining room, where they were taking tea, being the next-to-last word in grandeur. If it was more thinly patronised nowadays than at the height of the land boom and before the advent of the coffee palaces, the establishment had nonetheless taken care not to let its standards drop. The carpets were as springy, the decor as tastefully got-up, the napery as heavy, and the staff as attentive as when Lil had last been inside - the only time - when she was twelve. It had been her mother's treat ('just the Vivo girls') until a pair of gentleman squatters had joined them, monopolising the unprotesting Marcella and insisting on its being *their* treat.

'Your mother, Mrs Vivo,' said the American, emboldened perhaps by Lil's asking about his own parents, 'has passed on, I believe?'

Lil's head snapped to. 'Who told you that?'

'Forgive me...' Lade began.

'Is that what my father told you?' demanded Lil.

‘Nothing,’ Lade assured her, ‘nothing. I just assumed...’ he floundered, ‘I should never have...’

‘*Did* he tell you that?’ Lil’s eyes drilled him.

‘No!’ He looked pained. ‘Forgive me,’ he said again. ‘It was wrong of me to ask.’

Lil was gathered into a posture of compression, shoulders bowed, hands gripping her elbows. ‘No,’ she said finally, studying her half-empty cup, ‘it’s me. I’m not... it’s only been two days...’

‘Two days!’

‘...since I learnt of it.’

Lade made a soft *Ohhh*.

Lil seemed to gauge her companion before again dropping her gaze. ‘My father, Mr Lade, is not what he seems to be.’

Lade gave her a measuring look of his own. ‘Nobody is,’ he said. Was he humouring her? No, the readiness of his reply and the frank manner of his imparting it suggested a personal truth, hard-come-by.

‘Aren’t they?’ Well, Lil wasn’t, was she? But the idea of its being a widespread condition was new to her, evidently. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I don’t believe that.’

Lade shrugged. ‘I think you’ll find it’s true,’ he said.

‘But my father...’ Lil was determined to tell him. And she did, in a few bald sentences and a voice reduced to a scrape of itself. ‘He as good as killed her,’ she finished huskily, her eyes still downcast.

‘No!’ Lade seemed to defend Henry. Or was it repugnance?

‘Yes!’ Lil hissed. ‘He did.’

Such was the vehemence of the exchange that a passing waiter half-turned his head in their direction before checking himself. This wasn’t the way mere acquaintances talked, in public or at all. But it was exciting. The premature sharing of secrets is a short-cut to intimacy: the prematurity counting for as much as the secret, the hearing for as much as the telling.

The pair of them, Lil and the American, seemed electrified by their transgression. They eyed each other like animals standing off from the first flurry of a fight, at once exhilarated and wary.

Lade broke the moment by signalling for the bill. You had to wonder what Nellie's pledge-price had bought him, besides a toothsome tea.



'Have you ever considered, Mr Bacash, the maxim that none of us is what we seem?'

An anxious Mr Bacash had been waiting outside her locked office door when Lil had burst, out of breath, from the fifth-floor stairwell at six minutes past four. Her colour had been high and so had her spirits, a circumstance of which Mr Bacash had been the delighted beneficiary.

'No,' he said, in reply her question, 'I have never thought such a thing.' But he seemed to consider it now. 'You believe this?' he said, frowning slightly. 'We are not how we seem?'

'Not *us*,' she said, 'anyone. Everyone.' She had one of Mr Bacash's slim hands held up and was tracing its outline with her index finger. Tumbled together on the miner's couch, they wore just six pieces of clothing between them, one being an embroidered satin stomacher of quaint design – something between a girdle and a Cossack sash.

'It is true,' conceded Mr Bacash, 'not *all* is seen.' He turned his head to look at Lil. 'This is what you mean? Secrets?'

'No,' she said. 'I don't know.' Frowning, she continued to stroke the fingers of his captive hand.

They had proceeded, this afternoon, in reverse to the usual order of things. Mr Bacash's Canary Island banana palm kitbag went unopened until the fancy-goods man, at a suitable juncture (as he judged it), undid the clasp and brought out the stomacher. Lil having let him tie it around her, he set about

discovering the contrasts and concurrences between the cool black satin and Miss Vivo's skin. And even after their exchange regarding Maurice Lade's maxim, a longish interval passed before they addressed themselves to Mr Bacash's business correspondence.



Not for much longer, Henry had said. And he had been right.

'You must've known something,' Pettit called out. 'None come this afternoon.'

'Ah,' said Henry, drawing level with the basket-works. Pettit was just locking up.

'So that's the end of 'em, d'you reckon?'

'I expect so, yes.'

Something made Pettit narrow his eyes and size Henry up, conspiratorially. 'It weren't *your* doing, were it, Mr Vivo - this whole show?' Then, 'No, no,' he said, seeing Henry's face, 'of course it weren't. Just a thought,' he muttered, struggling with the padlock, which was in need of oil. He thought of something else. 'Hall's got two of 'em,' he said. '*Just* the two, that I could see. I had a fish around,' he explained, 'when he was in hospital. Remember he guv me his keys, to lock up and what-not? He'd opened 'em, this coupla letters he had. I thought of taking 'em, only I didn't fancy dicing with that temper of his. Not even with one of his arms busted.'

Henry touched his face where it was bruised. 'Quite right,' he agreed. Then, taking up his satchel, 'Well,' he said, 'I expect we'll see one another out and about in the mornings still, Pettit. But I shall be surprised if we see any more post for Tunney lane.'

'Time'll tell, Mr Vivo.'

'I'll say good evening, then.' Looking to his left and skirting a clot of horse dung, Henry crossed the Lane in the direction of home.

He found *Hoc loco* deserted, but with dinner ready, from the smell of it, and a lamp just alight. Henry lifted the lid of a spluttering pot. Potatoes. In the other pot, the big one, were a meat pudding in a cloth along with cabbage, their combined aroma unmistakeable – as was the sound just then of a sigh. Henry turned and peered into the porous gloom. ‘Is that you, Lil?’

‘Yes.’ But her voice came from the other direction. She was taking a bath.

Consternation could be made out on her father’s shadowed face. ‘Have you a light in there?’ Not a bright one, evidently, or he’d have noticed it as he came up the yard.

‘A candle, yes.’

‘Take care, then.’ Lil made no reply, but the floor creaked as she shifted weight from foot to foot in the cupboard-sized bathroom. Henry turned up the lamp.

He had a box: a deep cardboard box with a lid, more square than rectangular. He’d called at Watt’s on his way home and the boot-importer had let him take his pick. People were forever wearing their new boots out of the shop, leaving box and old boots behind. The latter, unless utterly ruined, Watt sent to the Benevolent Asylum; the boxes he found a use for, or else burnt. Henry had a use for his.

He put all the opened-flat Tunney lane letters inside, together with his 6 x 4-inch slips anatomising them. And on top of the lot he placed this morning’s four letters, unopened. He’d hardly glanced at them, and he didn’t do so now; just put them in, face down, and replaced the lid of the box. Let them stay a mystery. Altogether (though he didn’t count them) there were sixty-eight letters; seventy, with Hall’s two.

The letter in Lil’s dilly-bag would’ve made it seventy-one. When, after her bath, she went looking for Mr Mow Lee’s

paper parcel, she found the blank-faced letter, too. Not only hadn't she burnt it, she'd forgotten all about it. For the briefest of moments, she looked nonplussed; then recognition dawned. She left the letter on the bed while she applied one of the slippery elm bark quills. It amounted to a poultice, of a kind: a foreign body that acted to draw out other foreign bodies, effectively 'Removing Obstructions'. And very effective had the quills proven, hitherto, to Lil. A pamphlet of Mrs Smyth's - as matter-of-fact and unjudging as the manual that had come with the Remington - had been Lil's instructor in the matter. It was a method well suited to her self-reliance and discretion, and the result was no worse than her monthlies. Certainly, there was no shame in it, and very little risk.

For an evening at home that began with a bath, Lil had laid out her homeliest things to wear. The skirt she'd unearthed by chance in the trunk where she kept her monthly towels. The only garment she'd saved of Marcella's, it was as uncharacteristic of Lil as it had been of her mother: a rustic brown sack-weave, with a front panel of huckaback. It may well have belonged to Marcella's own mother - come with her from County Antrim, even - so ancient did it seem and of so queer a design. As a little girl, Lil had loved to run her fingers over the honeycomb ridges of the huckaback. Marcella had worn it for housekeeping, the front panel like an apron, built-in. It needed a good thick petticoat underneath, though, or the skirt prickled - 'like the devil', Marcella used to say. Lil had just the thing: an old flannel underskirt, soft and warm as down. And she put on a pale blue blouse - of flannelette, worn thin at the cuffs - under a bolero capelet of cream-coloured angora lined with satin. It had been her thirteenth birthday present, the cape, and there was a brown stain now where the original hook-and-eye fastener had gone rusty. Lil looked, in the mirror, like a Mother Goose milkmaid, wanting only the bonnet and the alderney. Smoothing the skirt over

her stomach, she met her own eye. 'Not long,' she murmured, and offered herself a weak smile as a down-payment on relief.

Away from the mirror, she looked like somebody else's dream of Lil: colour up, hair damp but lifting like a fog; her eyebrows the only prosaic thing about her. Henry stared when she came in, and followed her with worshipping eyes all the while she fixed the tea. Worshipping eyes. Whatever else he had done, he'd saved her, hadn't he? He hadn't sent *her* away. Even as they ate, he couldn't keep from looking at his lustrous daughter whenever she addressed her plate. They hardly spoke, though. Lil said nothing, for instance, of Maurice Lade's job, or even that she'd met him today. Moody, coming in after seven, grinned when he saw her. 'Look at you,' was all he said. Lil gave a twist of the mouth and flushed, like she'd been caught out.

They were quiet tonight, the three of them, even Moody. Likely he was steeling himself for Friday at the shop. The rush ahead of the Mayoral Ball was gathering pace, with gloves still in hot demand. Oh, for a panic on handkerchiefs instead, or cardboard collars – or *anything*, rather than gloves. Moody surely was regretting his choice of window display. The fiddly business of jemmying hands in and out of too-tight gloves (and they *had* to be too tight, to allow for stretching) had the whole of the staff out of humour. Moreover, young Moyes, through rough handling, had rendered inoperative not one but two of the shop's three glove-stretchers. Browsing the *Herald* after tea, Moody failed for once to remark on its contents, being more than usually jaded, perhaps, as to the novelty of human nature.



Tell me I have found you Mother.

In her room after tea and the dishes, Lil broke the seal of the letter Mr Mow Lee had given her. From the way she did it – with a rough flick of a hairpin – it may be that she took

some satisfaction in violating her father's secret business. Red wax crumbled in her huckaback lap. Her hair, in the kitchen warmth, had dried to a perfect pre-Raphaelite swarm, which Lil shook back impatiently. Rainwater had penetrated the letter's wrapper, rendering unfathomable all but one line of script. *Tell me I have found you Mother.* At the head of the paper, farthest from the flap, a thin strip had been twice folded, treble-enclosing the words therein.

But that had not been the sender's purpose. As Lil unfolded the slim pocket made by the double crease, out popped a metal slug, sliding down the paper to land in her lap. She picked it up and tilted it to the light. It was of brass, a tiny forearm and hand, about three-quarters of an inch in length. The elbow end was flattened and pierced by a hole; the hand formed a lumpy fist. Was it pugilist's charm? A strange thing, at any rate, to send to one's mother. Lil held it nearer the lamp. On the underside, the first finger was half uncurled, beckoning. Not so strange, then. *Tell me I have found you Mother.*

Lil had found *her* mother. Found her, and lost her for good.

Compared with Marcella's damnation, the correctives attending Lil's own retrieval from up the Sydney road – a year's exile to Bendigo – seemed nothing. Laundered and pressed, that was all, and sent home lighter. Gently, Lil pressed one hand against her belly.

Tell me I have found you Mother.



Tell me...

Having a velvet collar to clean and a hem to mend, Lil kept Moody quiet company for the hour before bed. 'I thought I'd seen the last of you,' he said, and seemed pleased to have been mistaken. The pocket-lining of his overcoat needed a stitch, so she saw to that, too.

Under her cape, under her blouse, on the same loop of waxed cotton as the typewriter's broken-off *m*, she'd threaded the beckoning brass hand. And, so that she might see what she was about, she'd tied her hair back loosely. They sat near the stove, she sewing, he reading and dozing, with the lamp on a third chair between them. Their father was in his room.

When the fibbing kitchen clock showed just past eleven, Lil put her work-basket away, hung up the mended coat, and paid a visit down the yard. Then she warmed her hands and the backs of her legs at the stove for a minute and, 'Oh well,' she said, 'good night.'

Moody gave her a sleepy smile. 'Good night, sis.' She bent and kissed his head, above one ear. His hair smelt of bergamot. And at the hall door, she turned the handle, then waited.

There it was, the murmured 'I wonder where Mrs Wood's sleeping tonight.'

'Moody?' He turned in his chair. 'Do you say it every night, or just in my hearing?'

'Oh, every night,' he said, sounding hurt that she should ask. 'It's myself I'm talking to, you know.' Perhaps. But something imploring in his expression said that he *wanted* her to hear, to share in the communion that kept their mother alive.

Lil looked as if she might say something; but she didn't.



It was telling that Henry's favourite writer should be the sensuous-but-stern George Meredith. *His* wife, as it happened, had also run off with another man and afterwards died; not before Meredith had killed her, though – made her swallow poison – to neatly end his lyric account of their marriage. *Thus piteously Love closed what he begat...*

The Tunney lane letters had stopped, it was true. Perhaps the eleven days had run their course, or else Henry had willed

an end to them. If truth be known, it hadn't just been his sore ribs that kept him awake these nights. ...*that our breach should be mended is my dearest wish... Your debt, fir, you may consider fettled... let it be as if naught had pass'd to merit regret... w^d but that I c^d undoe what I done... & say that I May come Home at last.* The fugue of repentance and reproachless answering grace in those letters never sent - nor written even, in this life - had scraped at a scab on Henry's soul. At least, they must have done: for here he was in his lamplit corner, seeking his own time of grace with a letter whose delivery, were he to post it, even the combined ingenuity of the letter carriers would be powerless to effect. *Marcella, my dear...*



She had the *carte de visite*, Marcella's keepsake, propped close to her pillow. Not the portrait of the family, but with the other side facing. Her mother's incantation.

Lil's lips moved. *I am living.* And she blew the candle out.

Epilogue

Nothing passes away. (Chekhov)

On the Tuesday following, **Lil** was gone. The Vivo women, it seemed, were drawn as irresistibly northwards as a compass needle.

Maurice Lade worked just one day at Brettschneider's. Lil got his violin out of hock and together they took the Sydney train as far as Violet Town. They would still be there at the turn of the new century, with three little Lades – Jennie, Raymond and Len – and a hardware and stock-feed store just off the main street. Lil did the books and would be the first female in Violet Town to go hatless and ride a bicycle. Maurice played cornet in the town band and violin at dances. On Sundays, the family went to church.

Henry Vivo's dancing days were over. This time, he didn't go after Lil and forbade Otto to make inquiries. To make things final, he broke up Lil's bed with an axe. (Moody came home one night to find the iron frame snarled like a fright in a corner of the yard.) Sometimes Henry would open the box with the Tunney lane letters, and always it seemed to be the last four, the four unopened, that held his interest most. A fifth unopened – his letter to Marcella, folded in the old way and sealed with wax – he kept buried at the bottom of the box.

Otto Berliner, having ignored Henry's injunction, apprised Lil's brother of her whereabouts. **Moody** took to visiting the

Lades at Violet Town each New Year and Empire Day holiday, a bachelor-uncle with thinning hair and a thickening girth from drink. Always, he and Lil would fall easily into their old ways. They spoke of Henry in code, of Marcella not at all.

Nor was Lil's name spoken at *Hoc loco*. The note she'd left said not much else but that she wouldn't be back. Knowing the verse by heart, Henry never opened 'Modern Love', so never found his daughter's other note, the one that would've explained things: I know.

Even with Lil's bed gone, Moody waited fifteen months before taking possession of the front bedroom. The luxury of a dressing-mirror and a window to the street would bring him no end of pleasure.