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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Dodger of the Dials**

Written by James Benmore

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# Dodger of the Dials

James Benmore

Based on a character created  
by Charles Dickens



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To my brothers, Michael and Harry

*'Burglary or pocket-picking wanted 'prenticeship. Not so, murder. We are all of us up to that.'*

The Night-Inspector from *Our Mutual Friend*

# Part One

## Chapter 1

# The Lady of Stars

*In which the reader discovers me, just two short years since our last meeting, going about my nightly business*

The whole thing would have gone down very well had it not been for the bad crow. We was four working the crack on that cloudless night and if we had all played our parts as given then a good deal of unpleasantness would have been avoided. But however adept a burglar might be as he busies himself inside a fine home, he cannot afford to rely on accomplices what do not know what they're doing. Now I'm never one for pointing fingers at the less talented, but young Scratcher, it pains me to record, proved himself to be a proper liability before the job had even begun.

The first sign of trouble was when we at last reached the small Kent village, after five hours' travelling, and I heard his quiet snuffle as our cart trundled on in the darkness. He was trying to hide the tears from us but to no avail and Tom Skinner, who was always quick with the *I told you so*, flashed me a hard look.

'This is Whetstone,' I whispered to Georgie Bluchers who was driving the dairy cart into the village and about to pass by a local hostelry. He was dressed in a white milking smock so as not to arouse suspicion but it was gone midnight and there was not a soul about. 'The crib we want is further along. It's best if we three foot it over alone and you just trot off and stay hidden.' Tom and myself had been scouting this location over the past week in a series

of disguises and we knew what was the sharpest cut to approach Whetstone Manor. 'Is your watch wound?' I said to Georgie before we climbed out of the cart. He pulled out his ticker from inside the smock and we compared times. 'Good,' I said when I saw that they was as one. 'Then give us thirty minutes if you don't hear from the crow.' I turned to Tom who was lifting Scratcher down. 'Go over the calls,' I said. 'Once more.'

Tom squawked like a bird twice and I asked Georgie what this meant.

'The policeman is coming,' Georgie replied. 'Time to go.'

'Correct,' I said and then Tom squawked again, only this time it was one long and lazy squawk of a bird cry.

'That means he's gone—'

'Not you,' I interrupted Georgie and turned to little Scratcher. 'You.'

'He's gone to the pub?' Scratcher asked.

'Right!' I nodded in encouragement. 'Which we'll want to know.'

During our secret excursions to this village both Tom and myself had noted that the sole beat constable was inclined to visit the pub after hours for a jar with the landlord. This meant that he would not be coming out again for hours and was unlikely to be patrolling near Whetstone Manor until morning. If this happened tonight then our task would be easier so it was worth the crow informing us. Tom then began squawking in an alarmed manner and there was no doubting what this meant.

'Trouble,' I told them all as I filled up the sack with the necessary tools. In went a knife, a jemmy, two persuaders, a tub of glue, a brush and one loose glove. 'Coming fast. If this happens then Georgie gallops the cart up to the main gate and we'll bundle in and collect Tom on the way back. But if that don't work then it's every man for himself.'



This was the moment when Scratcher could no longer conceal his emotions. Georgie looked most startled to see these open tears as he, like most people familiar with the boy, had always considered him to be a hardened little cove. We had met him two years before when we was trying to escape from some peelers through his house in Bethnal Green rookeries and ever since he had been hanging around our gang trying to ingratiate himself. I had even begun to make an apprentice of him – something many other fledging crims would have considered a great honour. And until this moment he had seemed a worthy student – nimble-fingered and quick with the dash. But now he was acting like we was being most cruel by involving him in our nefarious doing and I sighed at the ingratitude. So this is the thanks I get – I thought as I knelt down to his height – for trying to give an eleven-year-old a decent start in life.

‘Now let’s have none of this, young shaver,’ I whispered with a soft smile. ‘It’s only nerves on account of it being your first crack. But it’s nothing to worry over and we’ll be laughing about it afterwards. Ain’t that right, Georgie?’

‘Course it is,’ said Georgie who had become the boy’s favourite ever since getting back from the north. He dismounted the cart and came over, took the small black hat from off Scratcher’s head and ruffled his dirty hair. ‘We’ll have a roar later as we split up the money between us. You’ll be the flashest lad in London by then and you’ll wonder what the fuss was.’ But the tears went on spilling.

‘What if there’s a dog, Dodge?’ the boy sobbed a little too loud. ‘There’s always a dog. Morris Bolter said.’

‘Don’t you go listening to Morris Bolter,’ I replied in a lower whisper. ‘That coward ain’t ever cracked a crib in his life. There won’t be no dog in this house, Scratch. I promise you that.’

I had been informed that Whetstone Manor was without dog by a man what had only ever introduced himself to me as Percival

— a name I have no doubt was made up. This Percival was a gentleman, or so his airs and graces would have us believe, but he had ventured into the London slums two weeks prior for reasons unbecoming. He had already spoken to a prostitute of our mutual acquaintance at the Portland Rooms in Haymarket and told her, at some point in the evening, that he was in the market for a burglar. He wanted a cracksman of higher sort, he had explained, for a delicate job, and not just some lowly area sneak what took careless chances. He wanted someone ingenious in his devices, as brave as he was dextrous and who knew the value of discretion. Now did the fair lady lying in bed beside him know any tradesman like that?

‘Percival promised us no dogs and no servants neither,’ I reminded Scratcher as I wiped the tears from his eyes with a silk ladies’ handkerchief what I kept in my inside coat pocket. ‘And it ain’t in his interest for us to get caught, is it?’ But Scratcher seemed unconvinced and continued to whimper.

‘I thought you said this one had steel, Dodge?’ Tom snapped from behind me. ‘Look at him. I’ve seen more steel in a chicken-house.’ Georgie then tried to defend the boy by saying that every young thief gets the flutters sometimes. ‘But do they cry like little girls about it?’ returned Tom uncaring. ‘He should be ashamed of himself.’

Tom’s derision had an effect on Scratcher who then started to look more affronted than afraid which pleased me because anger has always been one of the best ways to motivate a boy. Georgie though, who had not liked the look of Tom Skinner ever since I had introduced them both two months before, put up a protest.

‘Watch that mouth, Tom,’ he growled ‘or whatever you’re calling yourself. Scratcher’s a good boy and I won’t hear otherwise.’ Tom asked Georgie what he was going to do about it and I had to

shut them both up before the quarelling got worse. Then I turned my attention back to Scratcher.

‘When I was your age,’ I said in a far friendlier tone than Tom’s, ‘when I was even younger than you, I used to get pushed into situations far more precarious than this one. Bill Sikes never cared if there was a dog in any of the places he expected me to crawl into, in truth that was one of the reasons he’d shove me through little holes – to find out what was on the other side. I would never treat you in such a disgraceful manner, Scratch, you’re a partner and you’ll get your fair share when this is done.’ Then I dropped my voice into a heavier tone and locked eyes with him. ‘But you need to play your part, understand? You get nothing for nothing.’

There was some silent seconds as we all waited in that dark lane for Scratcher to gain mastery of himself. At last he lifted his chin up. ‘I just need to get in?’ he checked.

‘That’s all,’ I smiled. ‘Just get in that house and slide back the bolts for me. I’ll do the rest.’ Scratcher nodded as I went on. ‘You know I’d do it myself if I was your size, Scratch, but it’s always easier for a kinchin to gain entry. That’s your special talent,’ I winked. ‘You’re so small.’

It appeared that I had won him over and we all began to prepare for the crack. Tom was about to climb the tall tree what provided a clear view of both Whetstone Manor and the village pub where the constable would be and Georgie drove the cart away out of sight. Then Scratcher crumbled again.

‘Tom’s small,’ he said in a cracked voice and I could now see it was never going to happen. ‘Not as small as me but enough. I’ll play crow instead. I know all the calls and I can climb that tree easy. I’ll crack the next place we do, I swear I will, but let me be crow for now.’

Tom, who had a superb crow voice what could carry further than anybody’s, just shrugged back at us.

‘I ain’t fussed either way. Let him be crow if he wants. It’s all one.’

So it was agreed that Tom Skinner would enter the house with me instead which, in all truth, was acceptable as I had only wanted Scratcher to come with me for his own education. But Tom was one of the best criminals I had ever worked with and had been my main accomplice for over a year. Getting into this old place would pose no real obstacles for the two of us, so we just watched Scratcher climb the tree to make his nest and, once we was sure he would not fall out, we set off for Whetstone Manor without further delay. Inside that grand Georgian building was a bedroom and inside that bedroom we would find the Lady of Stars. Percival had drawn me a picture and she was so beautiful that I might have even stolen her back for nothing.

Not only had Percival promised us that there would be no servants or dog to worry over we had also been assured that the master of the house was away on parliamentary business for the week. Our careful surveillance over the previous nights had shown this to be true but that did not mean that the place was empty. There would be two people what we knew of in residence, the mistress of the house and one other, and our first job was to ascertain what part of Whetstone Manor they was now occupying. Most of the many windows we saw as we peered through the iron bars of the front gate had their curtains drawn, including the high one on the top floor what belonged to the master bedroom. A long bridle-path circled around to the back of the property and we crept along it, with me carrying the sack, sticking to the shadows all the way.

‘Have you seen her, Jack?’ Tom whispered as we came to the ivy-covered brick wall what separated the path from the enormous back garden. ‘This woman? You must have on one of your lurks?’

‘I seen her,’ I whispered back as I uncovered the small footholds

what I had carved out with a chisel on the night before and hidden over with the ivy. ‘She’s a heartbreaker.’

I hoisted Tom, who was not much heavier than Scratcher would have been, over the wall first, threw the sack over and then followed using the footholds. I then dropped myself down into a small bush on the other side with a small thump but the walled garden was so deep that we would never have been heard from up at the manor. We crouched down and surveyed what lay between us and the house. I had, in my short career as a burglar, been privileged enough to trespass through a number of impressive gardens but never before had I feasted my eyes on botanical beauty like this. The light of the moon shone down upon an Italian fountain what was surrounded by a vast collection of flower beds the like of which I had never before seen in a private property. Such sights was one of the many pleasures of the profession. We then started to cross the edge of the lawn where it was darkest, passing a pond, the fountain, the small glass fernery and a birdbath until we reached a low hedgerow nearer the back of the house behind which we could spy all the better. Now, a short distance from some stone steps leading up to the patio terrace, I noticed that a white cloth was still covering a wooden table where someone had been picnicking earlier. There was only two chairs and teacups and plates of half-eaten cream cake still left upon the table. This confirmed Percival’s prediction that the mistress of the house would have sent any servants away for the week. We looked up to the window on the far left of the upper floor – which we knew was the lady’s boudoir – and saw that there was light behind the curtain. Nothing of the sort was detectable from any of the other rooms. I pointed over towards the opposite side of the building where the servants’ entrance was.

We darted across the terrace and Tom grabbed a slice of cake as we passed by the table. By the time we had made it down a small

staircase what led towards the cellar Tom had taken a big bite and, with a full mouth, offered me the rest. I took the cake, licked away the rest of the cream and tossed the remains aside. Then I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out my trusty lock-picker. This small implement had never let me down before and it did not fail me now. The small lock submitted to its turn but, as predicted, the nuisance door was bolted on the inside.

‘It’s never easy, is it?’ I sighed to Tom who had been untying the sack. We then took out the persuaders – small lead clubs what we hoped not to use but would never leave behind – and the glazer’s knife.

‘I could climb the guttering,’ Tom offered and pointed up to a high window what the waterpipe ran up to. ‘Jemmy that open, no problem. I’ll find the Lady while you stay here.’

‘What you are,’ I said as I cleared away the cobwebs covering the large window to the lower scullery and peered inside, ‘is a show-off. We’ll stick to my plan, thank you very much.’

The scullery was dark but I could make out a clay sink below the inside of the window what would be easy to step down onto. I took the knife to the thin glass and began tracing out a circle wide enough for Tom to squeeze through. As I began circling the glass with a strong cut, over and over, Tom put on the glove from the sack and brushed it with glue. When I was almost done with the cutting Tom’s hand was placed against the centre of the glass and soon after it was pulled out and laid down most gentle. The hole was big enough for Tom to then step through with ease, the inside bolts of the servants’ door was slid open from inside and I too entered the house.

It was a summer night so we had not brought any dark lanterns with us – they could be cumbersome and might betray our movements – but we needed light now. The air in this kitchen

was thick and musty from domestic neglect and we had to stand still while our eyes made sense of the blackness. I could just about see where the large kitchen range was and I tried not to knock over any crockery as I passed the dresser. But as I trod across the sticky floor I felt that there was something peculiar about, black shapes moving on all the furniture and around the walls. Just then – and to my shock – something hit me in the face. I heard a snigger from the other side of the table and realised that Tom had flicked one of the room's many large black beetles at me. 'Behave yourself,' I said as I brushed it away. I was itching from fleas by the time I made it to the far door and was most eager to escape this horrid room. 'This kitchen is a disgrace,' I remarked as my pick worked its magic upon the second lock.

Once out of the kitchen we came to a simple servants' staircase and we crept up it to the main house. In the long hallway of the ground floor we listened out for any noises what would tell us where the occupants was but heard nothing. The mahogany walls was hung with medieval armour and paintings of long-dead aristocratic men and we waited a beat to see if anyone would emerge to challenge us. Then we heard a distant male groan coming from somewhere above and this meant that Tom – who was now holding the sack – could begin filling it with swag downstairs without interruption. Tom opened one door what led to a room full of exciting ornaments and vanished straight into it. Meanwhile it was my part to venture upstairs and snatch back the Lady.

The Lady of Stars was our client's special request and it was all he was really interested in. Anything else what Tom and I might collect from this crack was ours to keep but we was being paid a very generous fee to steal this particular item so I made it my main priority as we would not leave without it. I did not want this Percival person thinking he had hired an amateur.

The broad wooden staircase looked like it was going to be a creaker but it had a thick centre carpet running all the way up and so I ascended as soft as a dormouse. The manor house was large enough for raised voices to carry but I could not be sure behind which door the two occupants could be found. This was the sort of property what would never be unoccupied but tonight at least we was not the only ones who was not supposed to be here.

I knew from Percival where the lady's bedroom was and so I now headed in that direction. I had my persuader gripped tight and was ready for any trouble and I crouched down behind the top banister and listened hard. I then heard some light shuffling coming from down the far end of the landing. It seemed that perhaps the couple was just where I did not want them to be – inside the boudoir – and this could prove a problem. I moved with stealth down towards the noise which, as I grew closer, became the unmistakable sound of love-making. Perfect, I thought, as I tried to hear behind which of the four doors they was engaged. Even if they was in the wrong room there was a chance they would be too distracted by each other to detect my movements.

As I crawled further down the passage I saw that the closest door on the left was ajar and that bright candlelight could be seen flickering through the crack. I inched up to it to see what was happening within and saw a small library room which had a long fainting settee with its back to me. I could see no one at first but I could hear the woman. Somewhere in that room the mistress of Whetstone was having herself a wonderful time and I envied whoever was in there treating her to it. I had to shift my view before I could tell where the noise was coming from but soon spied a silken nightdress lying beside the settee and one bare female foot dangling over the end and twitching in excitement. I then saw her hand lying over the top of the settee and wondered where, given



the small size of the furniture, the man was. I could not proceed on my way until his whereabouts was accounted for so I had to risk peeking my head even further inside until I spotted him, still fully dressed and on his knees applying himself for her pleasure alone. I withdrew my head from inside that room and left them both to it.

So my path towards her bedroom was now clear and I grew confident that, if I continued in perfect silence, their night of stolen passion would be undisturbed by my own thieving antics. I crossed over to the golden door handle of her private chamber and it opened onto the fitted carpet with no more noise than a hush. I stepped inside and was gratified to see some already lit candles about so I could begin my search without having to draw the curtains first. The perfumed room was as impressive as all the others I had passed but it was the only one in the manor what felt feminine, with its soft colours and vases full of those garden flowers. I breathed in the room's fragrance and then tiptoed past the four-poster bed and headed towards the curved dressing table what Percival had described to me. It was, as he had said, fully-covered in a muslin cloth and had on top of it an ornate vanity mirror. It was a messy room with discarded clothes tossed all about but everything in it felt refined. The only rough thing I could see was the grubby interloper staring back at me from the mirror.

I picked up one of the candlesticks what was stood beside some sewing materials to help me in my search. I lifted up the sheet what was as fussy as a petticoat and revealed the chest of drawers beneath. I knelt down once the sheet was pulled up and found the little drawer with the miniature golden lock. I then took one of her needles from the sewing kit and in less than five seconds the drawer was open. There I found a blue felt jewellery case with the insignia of Blaze and Sparkle inscribed upon the front and I unclasped it. Inside, and in all her naked splendour, was the Lady of Stars.

Percival had described this glittering necklace as a constellation of jewellery and I could now see why he had become so obsessed with having it. I pulled it out and held it up to the candlelight in admiration. I was tempted now to forget my obligations to him and just keep it myself as it was so rare a find. Either way, I could not dither here for much longer so I placed the necklace into my coat pocket, taking care not to be too rough on the diamonds. Then I closed the case, put it back in the drawer and rearranged the petticoat so I would leave this room as I had found it.

And then, just as I was congratulating myself on another successful grab, the quiet night was interrupted by the sound of the bad crow. It was a high-pitched whine coming from the woods out front, a weak mimic of the sound what Tom had demonstrated to signify that the constable had gone into the pub, and it seemed to last forever. I cringed and knew that it could not help but disturb the amorous activities in the library as it was too peculiar a noise to pass without investigation. I moved fast over to the door and looked out into the hallway to see if I could make it to the staircase before our young lovers had time to react. But before I had even left the room I could hear that the man had already been put off his stroke.

‘What in hot hell was that?’ he cried in alarm and there was a huff of frustration from the woman.

‘You’ve stopped!’ she snapped back at him. ‘I said not to!’

The footsteps of the man could be heard stomping over to the far window and, as I approached their half-open door, there was the sound of curtains being drawn.

‘There’s somebody outside,’ the man announced in fright. ‘In the trees! Your bloody husband probably.’ I was preparing to make a run for it past the door and down the stairs before either of them had time to see me but I stopped when I heard the woman jump to her feet.

‘My husband doesn’t hide in trees,’ she shot back at him. ‘He’s a knight of the realm.’ I could hear her gather her nightdress and make for the door. I darted backwards and back into the boudoir knowing that I had missed my last chance to leave unobserved.

‘Well I can see a head moving about outside!’ he countered. ‘Must be one of his spies!’

I now needed to hide myself before she followed me into her own room as she was bound to do on leaving the library. I made it over to the curtains what was made of three layers of drapes and found that they offered the perfect place to secrete myself behind. Before she had a chance to enter the room after me I was behind them and crouched on the deep sill trying to work out how the noisy the window would be to open.

‘Spies!’ the woman jeered as I heard her sweep into the room. She was still speaking loud enough for him to hear from the room opposite and I could hear the rustle of the nightdress as she put it on. ‘As if he would need spies, you idiot man. He couldn’t care two tits for what I get up to!’

I heard her moving over to the little table where I had snatched the necklace from and I readied myself for an outcry once she saw that the necklace was gone. A drawer was pulled, a case was heard opening but no shriek followed.

‘You wanted to stop, Humphrey, that’s what this is about,’ she said instead as if something was in her mouth. ‘And I hadn’t given you permission yet.’ Then I saw the faint light of the candle move through the drapes and realised that she was lighting a cigar for herself. ‘You’re a waste of blood and organs.’

With that the heavy footsteps of this Humphrey was heard thundering down the corridor and towards this boudoir. ‘You insolent bitch,’ he declared on entrance. ‘You poisonous jade!’

Bentley is my oldest friend, God rot you, and he doesn't know *I'm* here.' The woman just laughed back at him.

'He knows about all of you,' she breathed out after what must have been her first drag. The man's voice lowered when he spoke next.

'If that is another of your famous jokes, madam,' he said with a hateful seethe, 'then know that I do not take it in good humour.'

While all this was under discussion I had been busy working out the details of my escape. The sash of the window could be opened with ease and I could see that it would be possible for me to scale down the building to the back garden using the water pipe. All that mattered was that I could get outside before drawing attention to myself. Once I had got hold of the pipe I was confident that I could move faster than they could and be down and off with the necklace before they had even left the room.

'Oh, you think that I've been living as a nun until now, do you?' the woman went on taunting, while I tried to lift the sash. The night was warm and windless so I was not concerned about letting in air and this fiery spat was covering whatever creaks I made. 'While my brute husband sleeps with every whore in Christendom?' There was now almost enough space for me to slip underneath the window and get onto the ledge outside. A couple more inches and I would have my liberty.

'Why your husband should feel the need to sleep with a *single* whore, madam,' boomed Humphrey loud enough for me to risk a greater shove of the window, 'is a great mystery! For he has in his marital bed the biggest harlot of them all!'

Just then the sound of a struggle broke out and the woman began to scream. It seems he had got hold of her now and was manhandling her towards the bed. I could hear her hit him with something and she told him to leave as the light of the cigar was

snuffed out. He laughed as something fell over and said that he was done taking orders from her and that it was his turn to receive satisfaction. The sound of this violent outburst was such that I could lift the window to as far as it would go and there was now nothing to obstruct my departure. But something powerful held me there.

It was the thought of Nancy. Many a night, since I had returned from my incarceration in Australia and learnt of her terrible murder, I had suffered dark dreams thinking about what that bastard Sikes had done to her. I had often thought that – had I been there to prevent it – I would have saved her from his butchery in a most dashing fashion. But it's easy to flatter yourself with thoughts like that if history never repeats itself.

'You're hurting me!' the woman cried again in serious distress. The spite in her voice was gone now and I just heard the fear. There was a loud smack and she groaned as her attacker told her he would ruin her looks if she made one more noise. She carried on pleading for help, though, and I wondered who she thought might hear her. She herself had sent the servants away and the only person in this village what might have a chance of coming to her aid was the constable what Scratcher had just announced through his terrible crow was busy getting drunk in a pub. If this Humphrey wanted to overpower her, bash her face in and even kill her, he could do it and leave the house without anybody even knowing he had been there.

With one stroke I pulled back the drapes of the curtains so I could see what was occurring. I stepped back into the room and there was this Humphrey, lying on top of her on the bed and trying to keep one hand over her still screaming mouth while his other hand was unbuttoning his fly. The woman turned her tearful and bashed face to see me and screamed all the louder but he had not noticed

my entrance yet and thought her wailing was still on account of his own unwelcome advances. So he carried on removing his trousers while I pulled my persuader out of coat pocket and cleared my throat.

‘Put your drawers back on, Humphrey,’ I said and brandished the club at him. ‘And step away from the lady. She ain’t interested.’

Humphrey flicked his head toward me and cried out in shock. Then he jumped up from the bed and staggered back against the wall which was not a graceful move considering that his trousers was down by his ankles. His mouth was open but he was struggling to speak.

‘You just thank your lady friend there for her pleasant company,’ I continued staring him down, ‘and tell her it’s time you was getting off.’ I must have struck quite an aspect, I considered, as I stood by the open window with a full moon shining in from behind me. For the sake of the lady I tried to assume as heroic a stance as possible. I did not move from my position by the window though, as I was still planning on making my exit through it.

‘Another lover?’ Humphrey asked the woman at last as he pulled up his britches. ‘Do you have one hidden in every room?’ But despite this, he must have seen that she was just as shocked by my sudden appearance as he was. Humphrey then turned back to me and began his pleading. ‘You’re from Bentley,’ he said to me as he edged his way around the bed towards the foot of it. ‘One of his spies. I knew it, I saw you hiding in the trees. Listen,’ he held his hands out and came forward, ‘it was all her. Tell him that. *She* seduced *me*. I was helpless against her.’ Then he gave me a wink. ‘And there’s a pound note in it if you play the game and forget the whole thing.’

Just then the woman on the bed sprung up, jumped through the foot posts between us and made for the chest of drawers where I

had stolen the necklace from. This was unexpected and I worried that she had landed upon my business and was checking to see on her priceless treasure. In my moment of confusion, Humphrey gathered his courage. He charged at me and grabbed me by the chest, sending us both crashing backwards and into the curtains. ‘Got you now, spy,’ he cried as he tried to grapple me into submission. ‘You won’t be telling any tales on old Humphrey, on no, sir!’

However, I still had the use of my left arm what held the persuader and so gave him a good cosh around the head. That did the job and he released me, fell to his knees and got tangled up in the drapery. I tried to move from him then but he still grabbed my leg and I turned to see what the woman was doing. She had pulled something out of a different drawer to the one I had been at and was turning back towards us with it. It was a small silver pistol and her hands shook as she pointed the thing.

‘You’ve got one shot, my darling,’ Humphrey told her from his position on the floor with his hands still on me. ‘Aim steady.’ She fired the pistol and I flinched to the side. The shot missed me, flew over Humphrey’s head and went straight out of the window. ‘Christ Almighty, woman,’ he shouted enraged. ‘That almost hit me!’

‘I was *aiming* for you!’ she shrieked and then chucked the empty gun straight at his head. He cursed as it struck him causing him to release me and I made straight for the open door. But Humphrey, to give him due credit, was not letting me escape that easy.

‘Get back here, you little bastard!’ he roared as I ran out into the corridor. I could hear him forcing himself to his feet and wondered at his resilience. To have taken two strikes to the crown like that and still be prepared to chase me was without question the act of a true sportsman. ‘I’ll tear your bloody arms off!’ he swore as he pursued me across the landing and to the top of the staircase.

I moved fast down the stairs but the place was dark and my footing was not as familiar as his. Just as I reached the bottom steps he made a last ditch tackle and we both crashed down into the hallway together. As this happened there was more crowing sounds from outside. Trouble was coming, no doubt on account of the gunshot, and it looked like I was done for.

Then a sweet female voice called out from another room in the house. It was not the haughty tones of the lady we had left upstairs but that of a low-born angel whispering in agitation.

‘Please, sir, the mister is coming!’ said the voice from somewhere in the darkness. ‘The mister of the house is back early from London, Lord help us. I sees him coming up the lane now, you better scarper for all our sakes!’ Humphrey looked up and asked who was there. ‘Mary, sir,’ the voice replied. ‘Mary the maidservant begging your pardon, sir. You better not be found here, sir, you better go!’ The sound of Scratcher’s crowing was getting louder and more urgent from outside and I could see that this was unsettling Humphrey. ‘Let the burglar take the blame,’ Mary advised him in a lower voice. ‘You should look after yourself, sir, you just go!’ Humphrey, who still had me helpless with one knee pressed into my back, twitched his head towards the front windows, then turned back to the nearest open door where this Mary sounded to be.

‘Come out here,’ he commanded her. ‘Show yourself.’ But as he stared in that direction he did not hear the quiet footsteps coming from another room to the left of us and nor did he see who approached. It was Tom Skinner, holding a great silver plate above her head, and it came crashing down onto Humphrey’s already wounded head. This third strike was too much for him and he doubled over releasing me and I was back on my feet.

I was surprised to see the person behind that girlish voice



suddenly brandishing the crockery in this violent manner. I was so accustomed to seeing her stomping around in trousers and pretending to be one of the boys that even I forgot what she really was.

‘Out the front!’ I told Tom, once I’d recovered. I could see Georgie through the window, he had driven the cart to the front gate and was working upon the chain with his iron file.

‘Hang about,’ Tom said in her truer, harder voice. ‘I put a big sack of silver down a second ago and now I can’t find it.’ She laughed at her own stupidity and went off to look.

‘There ain’t time,’ I shouted after her. ‘I got what we came for!’ Then at the top of the staircase I saw the lady of the house in her torn nightdress and with her tousled hair hanging down over that fresh bruise.

‘There’s a constable on his way,’ she announced in triumph. ‘I’ve just seen him from the library window. He has someone from the pub with him too. You’re for it now!’

I opened the door and saw that Georgie had managed to smash open the chain of the gate but had driven the dairy cart away, as two others was indeed running down the lane from the village. The one up front was rattling one of those stupid wooden clackers that London peelers like so much.

‘There’s three of them,’ Humphrey cried up to his mistress while I shouted for Tom to hurry. I was waiting to see if she needed any help before making a dash while Humphrey was getting to his feet again. ‘Two men,’ he growled, ‘and a girl hiding somewhere.’ He was clutching his bleeding head and trying to stand and it was clear that he could not tell that Tom was the girl, a butch girl in boys’ clothing who could throw her voice better than any. ‘It’ll be the noose for the lot of them,’ he sneered.

Just then Tom reappeared with a sackful of jostling plate and

other silverware. 'Thanks for your hospitality,' she said as she passed by and kicked him in the face. He fell backwards and groaned.

We dashed out of the front door then and headed across the lawn towards the gate but was dismayed to see that two villagers was already there.

'Halt!' said the constable in a weak, shaky voice. 'I'm putting you boys under arrest.' It was clear that he did not have it in him to take on two desperate villains and I did not think the publican would be much trouble either. 'Put down the sack, fellas,' he ordered without much conviction. 'You're coming with me to the station.'

'Let's charge them,' I said to Tom as we stopped and eyed them hard. 'And you unload the sack.'

'I just spent fifteen minutes collecting this lot,' she complained.

'The necklace in my pocket is worth five times all that,' I returned. 'Just throw it in the air and let them have it. They won't fight if they can boast that they got the swag back.' Before Tom could argue there was another roar from behind and we turned to see Humphrey stagger out of the front door, his face a red mess. He let out a war cry and ran towards us. We then began running towards the villagers and they in turn charged us. We all collided into each other in the centre of the lawn and Tom's sack of booty went flying into the air.

As expected, the publican was no hero and was more interested in collecting the raining silverware than with taking a chance on fisticuffs. I managed to dodge them all and kept on running but the constable was a tougher cove than I had reckoned on and he pounced on Tom. Once I made it to the gate I turned to see what was happening and saw that she was locked in battle with both Humphrey and the policeman and I was considering going back to help her. Then, from Whetstone Manor, the window of the library opened and the lady of the house called out.

‘The one with the bloody head!’ she yelled. ‘He’s the leader! The fiend attacked me in my boudoir and was ordering the others about. He’s the one to grab!’

‘Right you are, milady!’ the constable said and let go of Tom Skinner to wrestle with the stunned Humphrey.

‘Not me, fool,’ he protested, ‘she’s lying, can’t you tell?’ But the constable had pulled out his truncheon and gave Humphrey his final whack to the head of the night. He collapsed to the ground again and both the constable and the publican bundled on top of him to the cheering approval of the woman of the house.

Tom made it to the gates with one tureen dish still in her hands and we both looked about for the dairy cart. We turned to see Georgie racing it towards us down the lane with great urgency and he drew the horse up beside us and hollered out for Scratcher. We climbed into the back and I landed on something what crumpled beneath. It was my stovepipe hat what I had left in the cart and I had near ruined the shape of it. We saw Scratcher then, scrambling towards us from the trees, and Tom called for him to hurry up. As she helped him into the back of the cart I padded out the dent on the hat and then took one last look at Whetstone Manor before the horse pulled away. I’ll never know if Humphrey saw me in the dark waving my hat back at him as he was being beaten up and arrested. But I like to imagine that he did.