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opening extract from

Coram Boy

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Prologue

‘A fine lady went to Stowe Fair. She was pregnant for the first time and, keen to know what the future held for her, she consulted an old gypsy woman.

‘ “Why, my dear, I do believe you will have seven babies,” said the gypsy woman studying her hand. The fine lady went away and thought no more about it.

‘When the time came for her child to be born, a midwife was summoned to attend the labour. “What have we here?” she exclaimed as she delivered first one baby, then another and another.

‘ “Oh no!” cried the young wife, remembering the gypsy’s prophecy. “That can’t be so!” She wept. But sure enough, one by one, seven little baby girls were born and laid into a basket.

‘The fine lady was upset fit to die. “I don’t care what the gypsy prophesied; I will only keep one baby. Take the other six away,” she begged the midwife. “Drown them in the river, but whatever you do, don’t tell my husband,” and she pressed a purse of silver into her hand.

'So the midwife took the basket of six babies down to the river. But on the way she met the husband, a fine gentleman. He heard little squealings and noises. "Pray, what have you in that basket?" he asked.

' "Oh it's nothing but six little kittens I am going to drown in the river," quoth she.

' "I'm going that way myself," said he. "Give them to me. I shall deal with them." Whereupon, he took the basket and rode down to the river.

'When the husband got to the riverbank and opened the basket, what did he see, but six little newborn girls. He frowned a dark, dreadful frown, then closing the basket took it away to a secret place.

'Seven years passed. The gentleman and his fine lady prepared to celebrate their daughter's birthday and to give thanks to God for preserving her through infancy. First they would go to church for a special service, then afterwards throw a party to which the whole village was invited.

' "And what shall our daughter wear for this special day?" the husband asked his wife.

' "Because she was born in October, I shall stitch her a dress of autumn colours," the fine lady told him.

'The little girl's birthday dawned and she was all decked out in nut-brown velvet trimmed in red. The gentleman and his fine

lady set off for the church with their pretty little daughter between them.

'They sat in the front pew and said their prayers. The organ played, the choir sang. The minister raised his hand to give the blessing and make the sign of the cross, but he was interrupted. The east door of the church swung open. Everyone turned to see who had arrived so late. There standing in the threshold were six little girls, all dressed in nut-brown velvet trimmed in red. All were identical to the fine lady's daughter.

'At the sight of them, the fine lady gave one dreadful scream and fell down dead.'

The children clustered round the nursemaid were silent as she ended.

'That's a sad story,' one whispered at last.

'It's a sad world out there,' agreed the nursemaid. 'Now come on, Nanny says it's time for bed.'

There came six maids on their knee.
When do they come?
They come by night as well as by day,
To take your little child away.

My little child is yet too young,
To stay away from his mam.
Whether he's old or whether he's young
We'll take him as he am.

Part One – 1741

Chapter One

☆

The Coram man

'Oi! Meshak! Wake up, you lazy dolt!' The sound of the rough voice set the dogs barking. 'Can't you see one of the panniers is slipping on that mule there! Not that one, you nincompoop,' as the boy leapt guiltily from the wagon and darted in an agitated way among the overloaded animals, 'that one – there – fifth one back! Yes. Fool of a boy. Why was I so cursed with a son like you? I don't have to have eyes in the back of my head to know that one of the mules had his load slipping. What goes on inside that addled brain of yours?'

A man and his boy were coming out of the forest with a wagon and a train of six mules. They were heading for the ferry at Framilodes Passage, which would take them across the River Severn and on to the city of Gloucester.

'Why I don't ditch you is more than I can say. Thank your lucky stars that blood is thicker than water. Tighten him up properly. Don't want no hold ups now. We can just catch the ferry before nightfall if we hurry!'

Otis Gardiner, pots man, Jack-of-all-trades and smooth-tongued entrepreneur, ranted non-stop. It was a side of Otis that not everyone saw; he could be so attractive, so charming, so sweetly spoken. A young man still, he had wide, appealing, brown eyes and shoulder-length red-brown hair drawn back to show off his broad, handsome brow. He could barter the hind leg off a donkey – especially if the donkey was a lady. By flirting with the wives, bantering with the gentlemen, demonstrating magic tricks to little children, he could persuade a customer to part with twice as much money as they should, all the while making them think they had themselves a bargain.

Meshak tightened the straps round the mule's belly. He ignored the faint kitten-like wails which came from the sacks and tried not to look at the sneering face of the man he called his father. From his driving seat Otis peered round the covered wagon and flicked his whip at him. Jester, the brown scraggy lurcher, shadowed Meshak among the mules as the boy tried to compensate for his negligence by meticulously checking all the panniers. The other dogs, tied to the wagon by bits of string, barked their heads off and leapt and twisted in a frenzied bid to pull free. They didn't calm down till Meshak and Jester were back on the wagon.

Meshak was an awkward lad. At fourteen he was taller than his father and growing. But he looked as if he had been put

together all wrong; his body was all over the place, his head too large, his ears too sticking out, his lips never quite closing. There seemed always to be a sleeve at his runny nose. His arms and legs dangled from his body, uncoordinated and clumsy; he dropped things, tripped over things, fumbled and stumbled. All this meant that people – especially his father – shouted at him, cuffed him, jeered and sneered at him, so his whole look was that of a cowering dog. If he had had a tail, it would have always been between his legs, as he slunk by waiting for the next kick. He had a vulnerable, infantile look, with his pale-freckled face beneath a stack of wild red hair, and his large, watery, blue eyes, which often stared round at the world with incomprehension. But no one ever saw him cry or laugh. People called him a simpleton – a loon – and wondered why his father hadn't abandoned him years ago. People assumed that he was nothing but an empty vessel, lacking in all substance, feeling or emotion; neither able to love nor in need of being loved.

How could Meshak speak of his terrors? There was no one to tell except Jester. He saw trolls and witches; evil creatures crouching in shadows, lingering round trees, hanging in the sky; demons with hairless heads and glinting teeth. He never knew when they would come to poke and prod him, to torment his sleep and rampage through his head. Even now, the darkness of the forest they had just left behind seemed to be creeping down

the road after them, gobbling up their tracks, soon to consume them too.

His father was mean with the lamps and only kept one up in front for the road ahead, so Meshak hated being out on the highway at night. He was afraid of the dark. It was not just the spirit world which frightened him, but the real world of robbers and highwaymen, especially near the forest. And then there were the wild animals. He hated the green eyes which glimmered in the dense undergrowth, and the scufflings and gruntings of unseen creatures stalking among the trees.

Most of all he hated the pathetic squeals which came from the sacks bumping against the scraggy flanks of the mules, and the task Otis and he often performed at night in some bleak lonely place. He never told anyone of the frightful nightmares he had, and how he had learnt to smother his gasping whimpers lest he woke his father. He never told anyone of the faces and voices and clutching fingers of all those children, who drifted like lost spirits through his dreams.

He glimpsed the tall towers of Gloucester Cathedral in a distant smoky haze, and his heart leapt. He loved churches because there were angels there, sometimes within gleaming stained-glass windows or out in the graveyards; stone angels with gentle hands and loving faces. He would go to the cathedral as soon as he could and find his favourite angel. His father would

usually abandon him in the city and go off for days on end, making his deals, meeting his contacts, disappearing into the pubs and taverns to indulge in gambling, dog-baiting, womanising and furthering his career. Meshak knew his ambition was boundless. He would not stay a pots man. Meshak, meanwhile, would live and sleep in the wagon. With the few pence he was given, he could fend for himself, especially as he always had Jester.

'Get on up front, boy!' A yell from his father indicated that he had spotted someone on the roadside. Otis liked to have his 'idiot' son up next to him during certain transactions. It gave him the air of being a devoted and caring father; a man you could trust and entrust with secrets. Meshak dutifully climbed up next to him.

With a shock of pleasure he saw the vast shining back of the river, so close now. The first tremulous lights of the fires and torches were being lit along the riverbank as dusk deepened into evening. Great hulks of ships brooded at anchor, and small craft scuttered like insects to and fro across the surface. Silhouetted tall and stiff as a scarecrow was the ferryman standing on his punt with pole in hand, about to embark with a full load of passengers, sheep and mules and baskets of goods. Corgis barked and scuttled in and out of the other animals' legs to keep them from bunching together.

Otis and Meshak were in a queue of at least three drovers' trains ahead of them, each with their thirty or so head of cattle, so they would be lucky to get across before nightfall.

'Pots, pots, pans and pots, griddles and ladles, kettles and skillets, mugs and jugs, knives, forks and spoons, farming tools, all Cornish tin and Newcastle iron,' Otis sang out in his trader's patter.

'The charity man's here!' A murmur went round. Word had gone on ahead that he was coming and some had waited for him.

In recent times, Meshak had got used to his father being called a 'charity man', though it had puzzled him. A wayfaring minister to whom they had once given a lift told him that in the Bible the word 'charity' meant 'love'. It was true that a lucrative part of his father's business as a travelling man was to collect abandoned, orphaned and unwanted children – many from local churches and poorhouses – and take them to the ever increasing number of mills that were springing up throughout the country. Otis always called the children 'brats' – as if, like rats, they were really vermin – but he made money out of them. Older boys, he handed over to regiments and naval ships, which were always on the lookout for soldiers and sailors to fight whatever wars were going on with the Prussians or the French abroad or the Jacobites up in the north. Down at the docks of London, Liverpool, Bristol and Gloucester, he made deals with ships who took both girls and boys to North Africa, the Indies or the Americas, along

with their cargoes of slaves, cloth, timber and metal.

That may have been considered by some to be an act of charity, but Meshak wasn't at all sure that it was love. He only had a vague idea about what love was. He thought he had been loved by his mother, though he could hardly remember her. She used to hug him and kiss him; she had played with him and told him stories. Then one day she had died and was gone for ever, and no one ever hugged or kissed him again, except for Jester – if you count face-licking, tail-wagging and jumping up a dog's way of hugging and kissing. Meshak knew he loved his dog and that Jester loved him, but he would never have called that charity.

The children whom his father picked up on the open road or in small villages, towns and cities, and took into his wagon as an act of charity, never looked happy or grateful. They were usually handed over roughly, received roughly, fed little, beaten often. All in all, Meshak couldn't say that either they, or indeed himself, were loved. If this was love, it was also business. Money changed hands, sometimes a lot of it.

But Meshak accepted that his father was a good and Christian man because everyone said he was. He was admired for this most Christian virtue, charity.

The sky was darkening not just with evening, but with a cloud bank of dark, purple rain expanding across the sky. A spiral of gulls circle-danced across the surface of the river; the evening

light turned their white underbellies to silver. A few foresters and farming people converged eagerly on their wagon, bearing tools which needed sharpening, mending or exchanging.

Meshak knew what to do. He pulled back the flaps of the wagon and lifted out the pots and pans, knife-sharpeners, meat hooks, scissors, graters, mincers, goblets, griddles, knives and axes, as well as knick-knacks like combs and beads, bobbins and cottons, balls of string, trinkets and baubles. He spread out a large piece of sail cloth in a clearing by the side of the road and laid everything out so they could finger and question and calculate their terms for bargaining.

Meshak was up to dealing with simple transactions so, while he bartered, his father moved away in deep conversation with a well-dressed man, who led him into the cottage. He was not a wigged gentleman but a parish man with his hair drawn back under a broad-brimmed hat and wearing brown wool breeches and leather boots.

The skies darkened further and the first plops of rain thudded to earth. The queue for the ferry had shortened to just one wagon in front now, and Meshak had already repacked the wagon by the time Otis reappeared.

'Get these brats in,' he muttered. He referred to five solemn, poorly clad children in tow: a girl and a boy as young as three and five, who clutched each other's hand tightly, and the rest – all

boys – aged eight and nine years old. The children were silent, as though they had been born learning to stifle their fears. They allowed Meshak to herd them into the back of the wagon.

When the children were in place, tucked round the sides, still mute, still staring, Meshak and Otis began to separate the train of mules from the wagon. The ferryman was impatient now, looking anxiously at the stormy sky and the low sun, and urged them to hurry.

Otis tugged the reins down over the wagon mule's ears and roughly cajoled it on to the ferry. The nervous animal resisted, unwilling to step on to the rocking craft, until a sharp stroke of the whip made it leap aboard with a clatter of hooves. Otis pulled a sack over the animal's head to blinker it from the heaving water. He had just about cajoled a fourth mule on to the ferry when a woman's voice called out softly, 'Are you the Coram man?'

Meshak turned to see. He was surprised that his father reacted instinctively, as if that had always been his name. Meshak had never heard it before. Otis tossed Meshak the reins. 'The boy will see them on,' he yelled to the ferryman, and as Meshak took the reins and soothed the frightened mule, his father had already leapt ashore.

It was no housemaid or potato picker, like so many others who had hailed him, but a gentlewoman who, though trying to look modest and inconspicuous, was unmistakably a lady. Even

had her refined voice not given her away, the cut and cloth of her cloak betrayed her. Her head was lowered into a basket, which she hugged tightly to herself, and she hung back in the shadows of the trees on the riverbank, trying not to be seen or identified.

The transaction was rapid. A heavy purse of money went into Otis's pouch and he took the basket with a great show of reverence and concern, as if he would protect it with his life. Meshak heard the lady give one short, pitiful shriek of grief, quickly stifled. Otis leapt back on to the wagon and thrust the bundle into Meshak's arms. 'Look caring,' he muttered, 'till we're on the other side.'

The ferry pulled away, but the woman continued to stand stiffly at the water's edge, watching them. Meshak felt her eyes fixed on them all the way across. She was still standing there when they disembarked.