
Opening Extract from...

Winter at Death's Hotel

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WINTER AT DEATH'S HOTEL

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CHAPTER ONE

New York City, January 1896

The New Britannic was one of New York's smaller and finer hotels – the city's finest, in fact, it would have insisted, although people who judged by flash and size would have said otherwise. The very best service and tone, the hotel management asserted – service and tone and taste. *Good* taste, of course, the best taste, matched by hotels like the Criterion in London, as the service and tone were perhaps matched by Brown's.

Most certainly, if you were English and of a certain sort, you stayed at the New Britannic when you were in New York. Of a *certain* sort: not new money, not great peerages, not political power; rather, achievement and reserve and even fame – but of course, no notoriety.

The bronze front doors opened into a paneled space with narrow beams overhead, pillars that rose at intervals of fifteen feet to Egyptian capitals in dark oak. Bronze chandeliers reached down, all electric; real imitation Aubusson stretched away to the mahogany Reception. Around the periphery, straight chairs, heavily carved, not very sittable; towards the centre, leather chairs meant to look and be more comfortable; an occasional dark table, a lamp – again electric, of course. Sitting in a leather chair towards the periphery but facing the doors was a man in a dark suit and dark necktie and a very high collar, his face square, a little heavy, displeased; on his upper lip a moustache and a faint sneer of scepticism.

The group coming through the doors was small, only three people but with a lot of luggage, so that it took two 'boys' to carry it. The man was noticeable, the two women not: he was tall, heavy,

self-confident, dressed in London tailoring and London shoes and a London hat, with a London overcoat, a sprinkle of snow on the shoulders. He strode past the dark man in the leather chair – never noticed him, in fact – and went straight to Reception and said in an oddly high-pitched but loud voice, 'I am Arthur Conan Doyle.'

'Of course, sir!' The eminence at Reception, still young but very grand, sounded both impressed and regal.

'Cook's have reserved a suite of rooms.'

'*Yes*, sir.' Said as if some question had been raised about what Cook's had done. He moved a register a fraction of an inch forward, followed it with an inkwell and a pen. 'If you would just sign, Mr Conan Doyle …'

'*Doyle*. "Conan" is not the patronymic.'

'Ah. Mr *Doyle*.'

Doyle wore pince-nez, which he touched with a finger as he bent over the register as if he feared losing them. Pen in hand, he read up a column of the names of those who had registered before him. His lips moved, slightly shaking the walrus moustache on the upper one. He occasionally made a joke, in fact, about his looking like a walrus because of his girth and that moustache, although inwardly he cringed at the idea that anybody would make the comparison but he.

'Our other guests at the moment,' the young man said, 'include Sir Henry Irving. Sir Henry is doing a season at the Lyceum Theatre. And two of the principals of his company are with us, as well. *And* Mr William Cody!'

Doyle looked up at him. 'I *know* Irving.' Indeed, he had written a play for him before he had become *Sir* Henry. 'I *don't* know a Cody.'

'Of the Wild West. They're completing an engagement at Madison Square Garden.' He waved a hand, pointing vaguely at Madison Square Garden a block away.

Doyle sniffed. 'You seem to have a superabundance of show people.'

'Oh – oh, and we have General Sammartino of Argentina. And Mr Cyrus Bickle of American Steel. And Miss Marie Corelli, the English novelist!'

A somewhat dour stare suggested that Doyle didn't think of Marie Corelli as a novelist. Or perhaps not as English. He said, 'I was assured by Cook's that this would be a quiet, entirely respectable hotel suitable to British sensibilities.'

'We pride ourselves at the New Britannic on our Britishness, Mr Doyle. We go out of our way to come up to British standards. And as for quiet, this is the quietest hotel in New York. It was *built* to be quiet.' He pushed a pamphlet across the desk: *How the City's Quietest Hotel Was Constructed along the Most Modern Lines.*

Doyle sniffed again. 'We shall be here only a few days, anyway. I am embarking on a lecture tour of the United States.' He signed the register – 'Mr and Mrs Arthur Conan Doyle and maid.' He hid pretty well his profound annoyance that he couldn't add 'and valet,' as his man had got sick on the crossing and had been held for quarantine at Immigration. It left Arthur Conan Doyle – *the* Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the stunning novels and short stories about Sherlock Holmes, *the* Sherlock Holmes – about to begin an exhausting tour with no support except a wife and a lady's maid. Not that his wife wasn't a great help, a huge help, of course. Nobody knew his shirts as she did.

The personage behind the desk nodded to a uniformed inferior, handed over a key, and murmured something about a hydraulic elevator, then smiled and said, 'Lift.'

Doyle looked at the woman, looked at the lift, sighed and said, 'Come along, Louisa.'

If asked, she'd have said she adored her husband, and she'd have added 'of course.' That expression often invites an implied 'but,' but she'd never have intended such a thing. She *did* adore him. She was aware of what she called his whims and his eccentricities, but he was a man and so entitled to them; besides, he was a suddenly and phenomenally successful author, also her first and only lover and the father of her two children. When he said, 'Come along, Louisa,' she came along. Her eyes, however, did not stop flicking about the hotel lobby as if she were memorizing it. Those eyes were small, blue, shielded by spectacles; the rest of her was slightly plump, a bit settled about the hips and bosom – no doubt about her having

had children. Her clothes were expensive and correct and no more than two or three years behind the fashion, as they needed to be to be thought really *proper*. And Arthur didn't like what he called 'faddish' clothing, by which he meant noticeable, and which she called 'cheap.'

Still, those blue eyes searched the big space as avidly as the eyes of a woman studying a roomful of other women's clothes. She had taken in the man in the dark suit at once, decided he was a hotel detective (she knew that Americans had such things), decided that that was slightly thrilling, filed it away. Now, as she turned to follow her husband, her eyes went to the bronze doors, through which were coming a pretty young woman with wonderful copper-coloured hair and a good-looking young man. The woman looked nervous, the man pleased and as sleek as a wet seal. Louisa Doyle saw him trade a look with the hotel detective; something passed between them; the couple came on. (*How interesting*, she thought, *he's fixed it with the detective and they're having an illicit liaison!*) The woman was chattering – nerves, Mrs Doyle thought; she's never done this before – her voice gratingly American, quite astonishing, really. How they got those nasal sounds, she couldn't imagine. She must try it when she was alone. And what had happened to the letter G in their participles and gerunds? Thrown overboard to lighten ship so that they could talk as fast as they did?

The copper-haired woman's eyes touched Louisa's, started away but came back, and the two women looked at each other, and suddenly the young woman smiled as if she and Louisa were sharing a wonderful secret. As if they were sisters. The woman looked momentarily radiant, happy (*in love*, Louisa thought, *oh, my dear*), and then she swept past, still chattering in a whisper to the handsome man.

Louisa Doyle smiled her small, tentative smile. It all pleased her very much. New York had already rewarded her with a small thrill and something to write home about. How nice.

'Come along, Ethel,' she said to her maid.

The rooms were precisely what she'd hoped for, more for Arthur's sake than her own; he was particular to a fault ('too fussy to live,'

her mother had said). Both rooms had windows looking down on Twenty-third Street; the sitting room had a small fireplace, the bedroom a bed large enough for anything they might get up to. Arthur could be surprisingly athletic for so large a man; of course, he still played football occasionally. And cricket. Cook's had suggested that the new American fashion was two matching beds, but she had refused, blushing, using the Italian term *lette matrimoniale* to buffer her embarrassment as she insisted on one bed for the two of them.

A woman friend in their young married days had told her quite a daring joke about marriage and what Arthur called S-E-X: If a newly married couple for their first year put a bean into a jar for every time they made love, and if at the beginning of the second year they took a bean *out* of the jar each time they made love for all the rest of their married life, they'd never empty the jar. That had sounded cynical and depressing to Louisa and still did: she believed that she and Arthur were still, after years, putting beans *into* the jar.

Perfect the rooms were, then, with a perfect bed, and she wished they might stay there longer than a few days before the railways would whisk them off to exciting places named Erie and Buffalo and Milwaukee. But Arthur's career came first.

'I hope *you* have a nice room, Ethel?'

'Oh, very nice, ma'am.' Ethel was unfastening the hooks and eyes at the back of Louisa's bodice. 'In the back and upstairs, but quite nice.' The boned bodice was grey velvet with a high collar and grey piping, dull silver beads next to the piping – all quite tasteful, and in fact one of her favourites.

'You must be tired, Ethel. Heaven knows I am. All that hurly-burly of the dock! And no man to help you oversee the luggage.'

'Mr Doyle helped, ma'am.'

'Well, of course, but …' She meant no manservant to help; Arthur was, after all, the man in charge, the *general*, as it were, of the campaign that had had to fight its way from the dock to this very pleasant hotel. 'I do hope that Masters will be released from quarantine quite soon.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'The bustle, please, Ethel.'

The dress had a separate bustle, very dark red wool, almost a brown, the actual bustle *quite* small but with folds of the wool falling to the floor. When it was off, Louisa reached into the opening in the skirt, just where her right buttock began, and undid the ties there, first reaching into the pocket that hung below the opening and taking out her notebook, her pencil, and her beaded change purse. 'I'm always forgetting these things.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Ethel gathered up the skirt as Louisa stepped out of it, leaving her in her grey silk petticoat and corset, also silk, boned, decorated around the top and over the breasts with ecru lace. 'Undo me, please, Ethel.' Ethel was folding the skirt; she laid it on the bed, then undid the corset.

Louisa sighed with pleasure as it came off. 'Don't you *despise* corsets, Ethel? I simply loathe them. It must be lovely to live in the South Seas where they wear practically nothing at all.'

'Oh, madame.' Said rather perfunctorily.

'Oh!' Louisa stretched. She untied the side fastening of the petticoat and let it fall, leaving her, rather daringly, in form-fitting combinations. She wanted to say, *It's a good thing Arthur can't see me now*, by which she meant it was a too-bad thing, as Arthur would have been excited and they'd have made love. Arthur, however, was out walking, 'getting the lay of the land,' as he put it. At any rate, she couldn't say such a thing to her maid, so she said, 'Who helps you with your fastenings and corset and all, Ethel?' She meant, corsets were the devil to get in and out of, so did the maids help each other?

'I do myself, ma'am.'

Louisa saw her in a mirror. Ethel was blushing. She supposed it was the idea of having help in undressing, perhaps the idea of a man's helping. Ethel was plain, in fact quite homely – 'homely as a mud fence,' Louisa had heard a man say of a woman once, though she'd never seen a fence made of mud. And at forty, surely Ethel was far past any dreams of men. Surely. Not that Louisa was any raving beauty herself – not enough chin, rather too little nose, too – but she had never thought of herself as *plain.*

'I can fend for myself now, Ethel. You go and have a nap.'

'You should have a nap, ma'am; remember you've been ill.'

Louisa was supposed to have had tuberculosis, but she didn't acknowledge it and didn't accept the diagnosis and hated the idea. She'd had a stay in Switzerland because Arthur had insisted. She thought it was all nonsense. 'I'm quite fit now, Ethel.'

'I'll just hang these things up, then, ma'am.' One of the steamer trunks was open and sitting on its end; a cave full of clothes was visible. As Ethel hung her dress in it, Louisa moved about the handsome room in her combinations. She tried the bed, found it gratifyingly firm but bouncy; she stood by a window and looked down on the tops of carriages and people's hats. New York City! She had been told that New York was terrifically energetic and quick, full of people perpetually on the run. London seemed to her about as much city as the world could want or need. Could New York be bigger? Quicker, noisier, grittier? London had had its underground for decades; what did New York have? Something called 'the El,' trains that ran along next to people's windows, which she would hate, she knew. The idea of people looking in her windows, looking into her *life,* appalled her.

'I'm going then, madame.'

'Thank you, Ethel.'

She moved about the room again. She touched things, smiled at nothing, realized that she was excited – *New York! A hotel detective! An illicit liaison!* She came to the full-length mirror and studied herself. Without her glasses, she looked, she thought, rather pretty – but then without her glasses, she couldn't see very well, so perhaps it was only her poor vision. Her figure had come back after the babies, although she'd been secretly pleased (and scolded herself for vanity) that her breasts had kept their size. So had Arthur been, she thought. Of course, there was the problem of her hips …

She began to unbutton the front of the combinations. She slipped a lacy strap from her left shoulder; her breast appeared, happily plump, rose-brown at the nipple. She exposed the other breast. Yes. She undid more buttons, pulled the garment over her hips. There. There was the soft hair, paler brown, she thought, than her head, so intricately coiled. Her own smell rose to her, clear through the

scent of patchouli. She slid the combinations down, pulled one side over her left heel, then the other over the right.

And, naked except for her stockings, wondered if anyone could see her.

She threw her left arm across her breasts and cupped her right hand over her pubis. Crouched, she turned, as if she would surprise an intruder. (*And say what?* she asked herself.) There was nobody, of course. She looked at the windows, over which Ethel had pulled lace curtains. Could somebody see in? Some horrible creature several streets away with a telescope?

You fool. She had had these fantasies when she was thirteen. They hardly suited her at twenty-eight. Aloud, she said, 'Remember – you're a representative of Britain!' That was what Arthur had said to her as they had come down the gangway from the ship. Arthur could be rather stuffy sometimes, was the truth of it, although she'd never say so to anyone else. She said, 'Remember you're British!' and laughed and took her hands away and walked with deliberate slowness to the steamer trunk and selected a flannel Jaeger dressing gown and put it on with the same slow grace. Then she looked around the room and even waved (at nothing), as if to show that she had risen above the moment.

When Arthur came in, she was lying in bed, the robe exchanged for a sensible nightgown because of course she couldn't go to bed naked. ('What would people say?' her mother would have shrieked.) Arthur's cheeks were red, his pince-nez fogged, but he was grinning. 'New York is a hurly-burly!' he shouted. 'Are you asleep?'

She was laughing. 'How could I be?'

'I walked to Broadway. I walked *up* Broadway. I walked over to Fifth Avenue and I walked *down* to Washington Square! It is all quite magnificent in a somewhat *active* way. I've never thought of this before. London is magnificent for its static things – buildings and statues and places where great things happened: the Monument! Westminster! New York is magnificent for what *is* happening – the people, the traffic, an electrical feeling. Perhaps it's money being made. Are you tired?'

'Why would I be tired?'

'Remember that you've been unwell, Touie. You mustn't

overexciteyourself. And it's been an exhausting day. Getting us and our goods and chattels off the ship and into a hackney carriage; getting here – all that. You must be tired.'

'You're having an idea, Arthur.'

'Oh, well – I only thought – it's an hour until we have to dress for dinner – perhaps a bit of a lie-down …'

'Well – lie down.'

That went well, and they both dozed a bit, and then she lay on his chest and told him how silly she'd been in fearing she'd been watched.

'Nonsense, little one.' He stroked her hair. 'Do you know that the walls of this hotel are two feet thick? And do you know why? It's what makes the hotel so quiet: They put up two brick walls separated by twenty inches of air and then filled that space with volcanic stone! Yes, hundreds of tons of porous, and therefore quite light, stone between the rooms! I read the pamphlet the little man at Reception gave me – wretchedly written thing – and it's quite remarkable, quite remarkable. Nothing like it in London. It's very … mmm … *New York*.'

'It is quiet, isn't it?'

'So nobody could possibly have seen you. What you were feeling were my spirit emanations.'

'You mean *you* were watching me.'

'From a distance, and only in spirit, my dear.'

'And then you came in, in the flesh.' She snuggled against him. 'How nice.'

At seven, they dressed for a very early dinner (really more a workingman's tea, she thought) with Henry Irving, who'd left a card and an invitation to join him, but who had to be at the theatre at what she thought of as the dinner hour. Louisa and Arthur managed, in a practiced but never-mentioned ballet, to avoid dressing in front of each other. Louisa needed the help of Ethel, anyway, and it would hardly have been proper for Arthur to be there when Ethel was and Louisa was less than fully dressed. Arthur, therefore, dressed first while she stayed in the bed. He smoked a cigarette, put on trousers

and shirt and announced that he was now decent by walking around to her side of the bed as he talked.

'Perhaps I should take up smoking,' she said.

'Ladies don't smoke.'

'You make it look so nice.'

'Only fast women smoke.' He was trying to tie a white butterfly in his cravat. 'Drat! Why did Masters have to make himself sick!'

'I don't think he made himself. I think he caught something.'

'Because he's undersized and pale as a ghost and unhealthy – typical London lower class. I should never have taken him on.'

She smiled. 'What you need, Arthur, is some sinister Indian. A dacoit or a dervish – something from one of your stories.'

'Damn my stories. Drat! I can't get this tie right!'

She got into her robe in the shelter of the bedcovers and went to him. He had lit a new cigarette, had it jutting from his mouth as he raised his chin for her to tie the bow. She took the cigarette from his mouth, puffed, and put it back. He cried, 'Louisa!'

'Hush or I can't tie your tie.'

'You must never do that again. Promise me.'

He was using his serious voice, when he sounded like her father. She finished the tie and said, 'I promise,' but ended the promise with a silent *never to take a cigarette from your mouth again.*

'I shall be in the sitting room. Shall I ring for Ethel?'

She began going through her dresses. She had put only three evening dresses in this trunk. All were conservative, matronly, 'nice,' the sort of thing that the retiring wife of an eminent man should wear. She had picked out the bronze with the gunmetal stripes and the *pavé* over the breasts when Ethel came in. She had been out for a walk. It had been quite exciting! Louisa was left unsure why it was that Ethel could go for a walk alone but she couldn't. The difference was some nuance of propriety, she knew that, but she supposed the real difference was Arthur.

A little after eleven that night, Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt was walking – it might more accurately have been said *marching* – up Sixth Avenue. He had been a commissioner for more than a year, the entire time devoted to what in military

terms was called a 'forward strategy.' In police terms, this meant reorganization, the ripping out of dead wood, and the tearing up by the roots of corruption and graft from what had been (and, he feared, still was, thanks to his three fellow commissioners and a wickedly immoral Democratic Party) the most corrupt police force in the country. Soon, he promised himself, he would go on to better things, leaving, he hoped a legacy – or at least the reputation of a legacy.

Part of his project of reform was this nightly walk, every night a different part of the city, to check on the beat policemen: Were they on their beats? Were they on time? Were they sober? Terrible Teddy might appear anywhere, any time from nine to midnight, and now and then at three in the morning. He had found sleeping cops, drunken cops, cops sitting over fires in trash cans getting warm, cops getting their ashes hauled by prostitutes, cops doing everything that cops shouldn't. The broken careers of cops littered the paths of Teddy's walks; the ghosts of fired cops haunted them as the fallen haunt a battlefield.

Roosevelt in fact thought in military terms – thought, too, that he'd make a damned good general, if only he could find a war. And of course he'd *be* a general, not a private or a sergeant or even a captain: his career, having started at least halfway up the ladder because he was a child of privilege, was of course headed for the top. And he *had* to reach the summit of whatever mountain he chose to climb; it was no good enjoying the view from even a few feet down. He had to *achieve* – but he also had to be seen to achieve. At that moment, he was thinking that his next step should be to run for governor of New York State. And to be elected, of course. He'd already run for mayor of New York City but lost – finished a humiliating third, in fact – and he'd been appointed to the Civil Service Commission and to this job as a commissioner of police, but what could a man do as one of several members of a commission? Where was the glory in it? Where was the fame?

He swung his arms, as if to a military band, marched towards Twenty-second Street as if on parade. If eleven o'clock at night was at least theoretically a dangerous time to be out, let the crooks and bad men beware: Terrible Teddy was armed with both a police

whistle and a revolver. He secretly hoped some fool of a criminal (criminals were stupid, he insisted) would try something. Action – he was a man of action!

He was aware of a horse-drawn wagon heading downtown. Somebody sat on the box. The rig-out didn't look criminal and so didn't interest him, and he barely looked at it before returning to thoughts of himself as governor; what he saw from the corner of an eye registered only as *Sheeny with a wagon.* Of no interest to a commissioner of police.

He walked on, glanced at his watch, thought that the beat policeman was thirty seconds late. Another deadhead! Another time-server, another—

A large bulk in heavy blue wool rounded the next corner, his truncheon spinning on its strap as if he were giving a display of fancy stick-work. He would be Irish. They were all Irish; that was part of the trouble: they stuck together; they owed more to their common Irishness than they did to law and order; they were the creatures of Irish politicians, who got them their jobs and paid for their funerals, and they were the pawns of the Sons of Erin and the Hibernian League and Tammany Hall. The only thing that could have been worse, to Roosevelt, was if they had been Italian. A few Italians had been let into the force, doubtless bringing the Black Hand and other criminal societies with them, because it was well known that all Italians were criminals. Trying to turn them into policemen was like making a bed for the fox in the henhouse and expecting it to lay eggs.

'Sure, and it's Mr Roosevelt hisself!' The Irish accent was probably laid on thick for his benefit; the beat cops knew it annoyed him. The man seemed so jovial that Roosevelt wondered if he had been warned. Or was drunk.

'You're a minute late, officer.'

'Aw, I was having a bit of a waterworks in an alley, your Eminence. Hard to concentrate on the police work if your bladder's screaming for a drizzle.'

'Report.' Roosevelt moved himself close enough to sniff the man's breath.

'Ah, very much a great deal of the usual tonight, Commissioner.

Staying alert, being vigilant, preventing crime.' The man seemed to blow his breath out with greater force to make sure Roosevelt got its pungent cabbage-with-onions scent.

'That's what the handbook says you *ought* to be doing. When I say "Report," I don't want my own words recited back to me, man. I mean, tell me what's happening!'

'Oh, sure it's very quiet. Cold, not many of the bad boys and girls on the streets. And this is a decent neighbourhood, gentlefolk all, most of them tucked up in their beds by now. I been checking the locks on the businesses with rigour; all well and good there. Cautioned one young swell was three sheets to the wind and headed for a rap on the head by some lushworker and his pockets emptied if he didn't go home, so I put him in a hack and sent him on his way.'

'You'd better have found him a night in jail.'

'Indeed, indeed, but that'd of meant me walking him to the station and leaving the streets without police protection, so I used me better judgment and let him go. And isn't it that we're supposed to be preventing crime more than punishing it? Oh, and I met you, Mr Roosevelt, which is a high point of the evening and will go in my report for sure.'

Roosevelt grunted in disgust. 'Well, you'll simply waste more time, standing here jawing at me. Good night to you.'

'Indeed, indeed, and to yous, your Honour.'

The fat cop went off whistling and spinning his stick. Roosevelt, deflated by the triviality of the encounter – not quite what Prince Hal found when he made the round of the campfires before Agincourt – turned right and walked back to Fifth Avenue and right again and so headed home.

The wagon that the Commissioner had hardly noticed made its plodding way down Sixth Avenue, its driver seeming to nod over the reins. At Fourteenth Street, it picked an erratic route by side streets down to that over-romanticized area called Greenwich Village, now a louche resort of the down-and-out, the Bohemian, and a good many of the Italians who were part of the latest tidal wave to break over New York. Respectable brownstone houses clustered near the

bottom of Fifth Avenue and Washington Square (although the original families had already moved farther north), but south and east there was squalor. It was a village in name only, bleeding into the Bowery to the south and the new tenement area that bulged into the East River in that direction. It had been a village when Washington was president; now, the city had engulfed it, eaten it, digested it, excreted it as a slum.

The wagon made its slow way down Bleecker Street, then east until it was in the Bowery itself – the Bouwerie, as it had once been when the Dutch were there, now a bower no longer. Paved, built on, decayed, fallen from whatever grace neighbourhoods achieve, it was at night the home of the preyed-on and the predator – rats and feral cats; men who staggered when they tried to walk and slept where they lay when they fell, and men who turned out the pockets of the fallen and would steal even their shoes while they slept. By day, it had its pool halls and its dime museums, its Yiddish theatres and its saloons and its scams and its whores, as well as its businesses and its churches, its almost new buildings with their cast-iron fronts and their hydraulic elevators, its mission for the destitute and its police stations, whose gas lamps burned in the dark like the last hope of any honest citizen mad enough to wander there.

The old man on the wagon seemed not of the place, neither predator nor prey. The horse clopped on; the old man's head stayed down. When, however, he reached a short alley that offered its dark opening like a narrow mouth to Elizabeth Street, he glanced aside down the alley but did not stop. At the next corner, however, he turned right again, then left to go south on Mott Street until he passed a beat policeman going slowly north. The old man glanced aside with only his eyes. The policeman opened his dark lantern and shone it on the wagon.

'*Shalom*, Mr Policeman.'

'And the same to you. You're in a rum neighbourhood, Ikey; they'll kill you for the rags in the wagon, much less the horse.'

'I am careful. Thank you.'

They turned away from each other. The policeman dropped the flap of his lantern. The wagon went on but turned left at the corner, then moved faster as the old man flicked the reins on the

horse's back. The horse did nothing so noticeable as trot, but the wagon was moving now a good deal faster than the policeman on his parallel track. It went back up Elizabeth Street, slowed opposite the mouth of the same alley, and made a half-circle in the street so as to stop with the wagon blocking the alley.

The old man got down. He almost ran into the alley; muffled sounds came out – nothing more, perhaps, than a rat, the scrape of a trash can. Then the old man hurried back, and, with surprising agility, lifted a bundle of rags from the wagon bed and half-staggered with it back into the alley.

Now the sounds were furtive, unclear – the trash can again, the old man's wheeze, a grunt as if at some effort. Then a silence. Something soft falling. A couple of thuds.

The old man came out, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. He carried some of the rags, threw them into the wagon, and lifted out a burlap bag that looked wet in the dim light of a distant lamp. A strong stench of manure was carried on the breeze that blew dirt and a days-old newspaper along the pavement. The sack went with him into the alley; no sound, then a soft fall of something, a rustle, silence, then footsteps as the old man came out, threw the now empty sack into the wagon and climbed up behind the horse and touched it into motion. Forty-five seconds later, the street was empty.

Not, however, for long. Four minutes later, the beat policeman rounded the corner a street north of the alley and began his slow progress south. The dark lantern threw its soft beam into doorways; the policeman's hand tried every door. On he came, not pausing at the crossing of Grand Street because there was no traffic now, and then hardly pausing for two bodies crowded into the angle of an ancient brick house, now empty, and its broken front steps. The policeman flashed his light on them, assured himself that they were alive, moved on and crossed Hester Street.

Three buildings lay between him and the alley. He tried each door – one, long ago a merchant's home, now a warehouse; one new, with a neoclassical front, a jobber's in hardware goods; the third a near-ruin with a closed saloon on the first floor.

He came to the alley. He opened his dark lantern and held it up

to throw the light down its length. He was already poised to move on, ready to see nothing but a rat or two and perhaps a cat. But he paused.

He took a step back up the street to get a better angle. He moved closer to the building, almost leaning on it. He held the light out ahead of himself to try to get the beam closer to what he thought he had seen.

It hadn't changed: it still looked like a bare leg, not down on the pavement but up in the air.

Fear of the new commissioner drove him into the alley. In the old days, he'd have left it for the next man and for the light of morning, but now it would be hell to pay and no pension if he passed up something like a man naked and dying of cold. He had a pal who'd passed up a drunk who'd fallen off Gansevoort pier and drowned; that had been the end of his pal's police career.

Gripping his truncheon and the lantern – he carried a pistol, thanks to Know-It-All Roosevelt, but the nightstick was the weapon he trusted – he moved into the alley, the dark lantern thrust out ahead like a talisman that would protect him from evil. As he got closer, he saw that he had been right about the human leg. There it was, sticking out.

He went closer. Not a man's leg, but a woman's. Sitting on a trash can as naked as—

'Oh, Mother of God!' He bent to vomit.