



## Assassin's Creed: Underworld

*By Oliver Bowden*

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Deep undercover is an Assassin with dark secrets and a mission to defeat the Templar stranglehold on the nation's capital.

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**An Original Novel Based on the Multiplatinum Video Game from Ubisoft**

*From the Paperback edition.*

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## Editorial Review

About the Author

**Oliver Bowden** is a pseudonym for an acclaimed novelist. He is the author of the Assassin's Creed tie-in novels.

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### GHOST TOWN

#### ONE

The Assassin Ethan Frye was leaning on a crate in the shadows of Covent Garden market, almost hidden by the tradesmen's carts. His arms were folded across his chest, chin supported in one hand, the soft, voluminous cowl of his robes covering his head. And as the afternoon dwindled into evening he stood, silent and still. Watching. And waiting.

It was rare for an Assassin to rest his chin on his leading hand like that. Especially if he was wearing his hidden blade, which Ethan was, the point of it less than an inch from the exposed flesh of his throat. Closer to his elbow was a light but very powerful spring mechanism designed to deploy the razor-sharp steel; the correct flick of his wrist and it would activate. In a very real sense, Ethan was holding himself at knifepoint.

And why would he do this? After all, even Assassins were not immune to accidents or equipment failure. For safety's sake the men and women of the Brotherhood tended to keep their blade hands clear of the face. Better that than risk ignominy or worse.

Ethan, however, was different. Not only was he practiced in the art of spying—and resting his chin on his strongest arm was an act of deception designed to fool a potential enemy—but he also took a dark delight in courting danger.

And so he sat, with his chin in his hand, watching and waiting.

Ah, he thought, what was this? He straightened and shook the rest from his muscles as he peered through the crates into the market. Traders were packing up. And something else was happening, too. The game was afoot.

#### TWO

In an alleyway not far from Ethan lurked a fellow by the name of Boot. He wore a tattered shooting jacket and a broken hat, and he was studying a pocket watch lifted from a gentleman not moments ago.

What Boot didn't know about his new acquisition was that its erstwhile owner had intended to take it to the menders that very day, for reasons that were shortly to have a profound effect on the lives of Ethan Frye, Boot, a young man who called himself The Ghost and others involved in the eternal struggle between the Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood. What Boot didn't know was that the pocket watch was almost

exactly an hour slow.

Oblivious of that fact, Boot snapped it shut, thinking himself quite the dandy. Next, he eased himself out of the alleyway, looked left and right, then made his way out into the dying day of the market. As he walked, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, he glanced over his shoulder to check he wasn't being followed and, satisfied, continued forward, leaving Covent Garden behind and entering the St. Giles Rookery—the slum they called Old Nichol. The change in the air was almost immediate. Where before his bootheels had rung on the cobbles, now they sank into the ordure of the street, disturbing a stink of rotting vegetable and human waste. The pavements were thick with it, the air reeking of it. Boot pulled his scarf over his mouth and nose to keep the worst of it out.

A wolfish-looking dog trotted at his heel for a few paces, ribs visible at its shrunken belly. It appealed to him with hungry, red-rimmed eyes but he kicked it away and it skittered then shrank off. Not far away, a woman sat in a doorway wearing the remnants of clothes tied together with string, a baby held to her breast as she watched him with glazed, dead eyes, rookery eyes. She might be the mother of a prostitute, waiting for her daughter to come home with the proceeds and woe betide the girl if she returned empty-handed. Or she might command a team of thieves and cadgers, soon to appear with the day's takings. Or perhaps she ran night lodgings. Here in the rookery the once-grand houses had been converted to flats and tenements, and by night they provided refuge for those in need of shelter: fugitives and families, prostitutes, traders and laborers—anyone who paid their footing in return for space on a floor, who got a bed if they were lucky, and had the money, but most likely had to make do with straw or wood shavings for a mattress. Not that they were likely to sleep very soundly anyway: every inch of floor space was taken, and the cries of babies tore through the night.

While many of these people were unfit or unwilling to work, many more had occupations. They were dog-breakers and bird dealers. They sold watercress, onions, sprat or herring. They were costermongers, street sweepers, coffee dealers, bill stickers and placard carriers. Their wares came into the lodgings with them, adding to the overcrowding, to the stench. At night the houses would be closed, broken windows stuffed with rags or newspaper, sealed against the noxious atmosphere of the night, when the city coughed smoke into the air. The night air had been known to suffocate entire families. Or so was the rumor. And one thing that spread about the slums more quickly than disease was rumor. So as far as the slum dwellers were concerned, Florence Nightingale could preach as much as she liked. They were going to sleep with the windows sealed.

You could hardly blame them, thought Boot. If you lived in the slum, your chances of dying were great. Disease and violence were rife here. Children risked being suffocated when adults rolled over in their sleep. Cause of death: overlaying. It was more common at weekends when the last of the gin had been drunk and the public houses emptied, and mother and father felt their way home in the soupy fog, up the slick stone steps, through the door and into the warm, stinking room where they at last laid down their heads to rest . . .

In the morning, with the sun up but the smog yet to clear, the rookery would ring to the screams of the bereaved.

Deeper into the slum went Boot, where tall buildings crowded out even the meager light of the moon and fogbound lanterns glowed malevolently in the dark. He could hear raucous singing from a public house a few streets along. Every now and then the singing would grow louder as the door was thrown open to eject drunkards onto the street.

There were no pubs on this street, though. Just doors and windows wadded with newspaper, washing hanging from lines overhead, sheets of it like the sails of a ship, and apart from the distant singing just the sound of running water and his own breathing. Just him . . . alone.

Or so he thought.

And now even the distant singing stopped. The only sound was dripping water.

A scuttling sound made him jump. “Who’s that?” he demanded, but knew immediately it was a rat, and it was a pretty thing when you were so scared you were jumping at the sound of a rat. A pretty thing indeed.

But then it came again. He whirled and thick air danced and eddied around him, and it seemed to part like curtains and for a moment he thought he saw something. A suggestion of something. A figure in the mist.

Next he thought he heard breathing. His own was short and shallow, gasping almost, but this was loud and steady and coming from—where? One second it seemed to be ahead of him, the next from behind. The scuttling came again. A bang startled him, but it came from one of the tenements above. A couple began arguing—he had come home drunk again. No, *she* had come home drunk again. Boot allowed himself a little smile, found himself relaxing a bit. Here he was, jumping at ghosts, scared of a few rats and a pair of old birds quarreling. Whatever next?

He turned to go. In the same moment the mist ahead of him billowed and striding out of it came a figure in robes who, before Boot could react, had grabbed him and pulled his fist back as though to punch him. Only instead of striking out, his assailant flicked his wrist and with a soft snick a blade shot from within his sleeve.

Boot had squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them it was to see the man in robes behind the blade that was held steady a millimeter from his eyeball.

Boot wet himself.

### THREE

Ethan Frye awarded himself a small moment of satisfaction at the accuracy of his blade—then swept Boot’s legs from beneath him and slammed him to the filthy cobbles. The Assassin sank to his haunches, pinning Boot with his knees as he pressed his blade to his throat.

“Now, my friend”—he grinned—“why don’t we start with you telling me your name?”

“It’s Boot, sir,” squirmed Boot, the point of the knife digging painfully into his flesh.

“Good man,” said Ethan. “Good policy, the truth. Now, let’s you and me have a talk, shall we?”

Beneath him the fellow trembled. Ethan took it as a yes. “You’re due to take delivery of a photographic plate, am I right, Mr. Boot?” Boot trembled. Ethan took it as another yes. So far so good. His information was solid; this Boot was a connection in a pipeline that ended with erotic prints being sold in certain pubs in London. “And you are due at the Jack Simmons to collect this photographic plate, am I right?”

Again Boot nodded.

“And what’s the name of the fellow you’re supposed to meet, Mr. Boot?”

“I . . . I don’t know, sir . . .”

Ethan smiled and leaned even closer to Boot. "My dear boy, you're a worse liar than you are a courier." He exerted a little more pressure with the blade. "You feel where that knife is now?" he asked.

Boot blinked his eyes yes.

"That's an artery. Your carotid artery. If I open that, you'll be painting the town red, my friend. Well, the street at least. But neither of us want me to do that. Why ruin such a lovely evening? Instead how about you tell me who it is you planned to meet?"

Boot blinked. "He'll kill me if I do."

"That's as may be, but I'll kill you if you don't, and only one of us is here holding a knife at your throat, and it's not him, is it?" Ethan increased the pressure. "Make your choice, my friend. Die now, or later."

Just then Ethan heard a noise to his left. Half a second later his Colt sidearm was in his hand, the blade still at Boot's throat as he drew aim on a new target.

It was a little girl on her way back from the well. Wide-eyed she stood, a bucket brimming full of dirty water in one hand.

"I'm sorry, miss, I didn't mean to startle you." Ethan smiled. His revolver went back into his robes and his empty hand reappeared to assure the girl he wasn't a threat. "I mean harm only to ruffians and thieves such as this man here. Perhaps you might like to return to your lodgings." He was gesturing to her but she wasn't going anywhere and just stared at them both, eyes white in a grubby face, rooted to the spot with fear.

Inwardly Ethan cursed. The last thing he wanted was an audience. Especially when it was a little girl watching him hold a blade to a man's throat.

"All right, Mr. Boot," he said, more quietly than before, "the situation has changed so I'm going to have to *insist* you tell me exactly who you intended to meet . . ."

Boot opened his mouth. Maybe he was about to give Ethan the information he required, or perhaps he was going to tell Ethan where he could stick his threats, or more likely it was to simply whine that he didn't know.

Ethan never found out because just as Boot went to reply, his face disintegrated.

It happened a twinkling before Ethan heard the shot, and he rolled off the body and drew his revolver just as a second crack rang out. He remembered the girl, his head whipping round just in time to see her spin away, blood blooming at her chest and her bucket dropping at the same time, dead before she hit the cobbles from a bullet meant for him.

Ethan dared not return fire for fear of hitting another unseen innocent in the fog. He pulled himself into a crouch, steeling himself for another shot, a third attack from the dark.

It never came. Instead there was the sound of running feet, so Ethan wiped the shards of bone and bits of brain from his face, holstered the Colt and flicked his hidden blade back into its housing, then leapt for a wall. Boots only just finding purchase on the wet brick, he shinned a drainpipe to the roof of a tenement, finding the light of the night sky and able to follow the running footsteps as the shooter tried to make his escape. This was how Ethan had entered the rookery and it looked like this was how he was going to leave, making short leaps from one roof to the next, traversing the slum as he tracked his quarry silently and remorselessly, the image of the little girl seared onto his mind's eye and the metallic smell of Boot's brain

matter still in his nostrils.

Only one thing mattered now. The killer would feel his blade before the night was out.

From below he heard the boots of the shooter clopping and splashing on the cobbles and Ethan shadowed quietly, unable to see the man but knowing he'd overtaken him. Coming to the edge of a building and feeling he had a sufficient lead, he let himself over the side, using the sills to descend quickly until he reached the street, where he hugged the wall, waiting.

Seconds later came the sound of running boots. A moment after that the mist seemed to shift and bloom as though to announce this new presence, and a second after that the curtains parted and a man in a suit, with a bushy moustache and thick side-whiskers, came pelting into view.

He held a pistol. It wasn't smoking. But it might as well have been.

Though Ethan would later tell George Westhouse that he struck in self-defense, it wasn't strictly true. Ethan had the element of surprise; he could—and should—have disarmed the man and questioned him before killing him. Instead he engaged his blade and slammed it into the killer's heart with a vengeful grunt and watched with no lack of satisfaction as the light died in the man's eyes.

And by doing that the Assassin Ethan Frye was making a mistake. He was being careless.

\* \* \*

"My intention had been to press Boot for the information I needed before taking his place," Ethan told the Assassin George Westhouse the following day, having finished his tale, "but what I didn't realize was that Boot was late for his appointment. His stolen pocket watch was slow."

They sat in the drawing room of George's Croydon home. "I see," said George. "At what point did you realize?"

"Um, let me see. That would be the point at which it was too late."

George nodded. "What was the firearm?"

"A Pall Mall Colt, similar to my own."

"And you killed him?"

The fire crackled and spat into the pause that followed. Since reconciling with his children, Jacob and Evie, Ethan was pensive. "I did, George, and it was nothing less than he deserved."

George pulled a face. "Deserve has nothing to do with it. You know that."

"Oh, but the little girl, George. You should have seen her. She was just a tiny wee thing. Half Evie's age."

"Even so . . ."

"I had no choice. His pistol was drawn."

George looked at his old friend with concern and affection. "Which is it, Ethan? Did you kill him because he deserved it or because you had no choice?"

A dozen times or more Ethan had washed his face and blown his nose, but he still felt as though he could smell Boot's brains on himself. "Must the two be mutually exclusive? I'm thirty-seven years of age, and I've seen more than my fair share of kills, and I know that notions of justice, equity and retribution play a distant second to skill, and skill is subordinate to luck. When fortune turns her face to you. When the killer's bullet goes elsewhere, when he drops his guard, you take your chance, before she turns away again."

Westhouse wondered who his friend was trying to fool, but decided to move on. "A shame, then, that you had to spill his blood. Presumably you needed to know more about him?"

Ethan smiled and mock-wiped his brow. "I was rewarded with a little luck. The photographic plate he carried bore an inscription identifying the photographer, so I was able to ascertain that the dead man and the photographer were one and the same, a fellow by the name of Robert Waugh. He has Templar associations. His erotic prints were going one way, to them, but also another way, to the rookeries and alehouses, via Boot."

George whistled softly. "What a dangerous game Mr. Waugh was playing . . ."

"Yes and no . . ."

"Well, he was bound to meet a sticky end sooner or later."

"Quite."

"And you were able to divulge all of this postmortem?"

"Don't look at me like that, George. I'm fully aware I was lucky, and that on any other day my impetuous killing of Waugh might have had unfortunate consequences. On this day it did not."

George leaned to poke the fire. "Before, when you said 'yes and no' that Waugh was playing a dangerous game, what did you mean?"

"I meant that in many ways his gamble of the two worlds staying separate paid off. I saw the slums afresh today, George. I was reminded of how the poor are living. This is a world so completely separate from that of the Templars that it's scarcely believable the two share the same country, let alone the same city. If you ask me, our friend Mr. Waugh was perfectly justified in believing the paths of his disparate business enterprises might never cross. The two worlds in which he operated were such poles apart. The Templars know nothing of the rookeries. They live upriver of the factory filth that pollutes the water of the poor and upwind of the smog and smoke that pollutes their air."

"As do we, Ethan," said George sadly. "Whether we like it or not, ours is a world of gentlemen's clubs and drawing rooms, of temples and council chambers."

Ethan stared into the fire. "Not all of us."

Westhouse smiled and nodded. "You're thinking of your man, The Ghost? Don't suppose you have any thoughts about telling me who The Ghost is or what he is doing?"

"That must remain my secret."

"Then what of him?"

"Aha, well, I have formulated a plan, involving the recently deceased Mr. Waugh and The Ghost. If all goes



well, and The Ghost can do his job, then we may even be able to lay our hands on the very artifact the Templars seek.”

## FOUR

John Fowler was tired. And cold. And by the look of the gathering clouds he was soon to be wet.

Sure enough, he felt the first drops of rain tap-tapping on his hat, and the engineer clutched his leather-bound tube of drawings more tightly to his chest, cursing the weather, the noise, everything. Beside him stood the Solicitor of London, Charles Pearson, as well as Charles’s wife, Mary, both flinching as the rain began to fall, and all three stood marooned by mud, gazing with a mixture of forlornness and awe at the great scar in the earth that was the new Metropolitan Line.

Some fifty yards in front of the trio the ground gave way to a sunken shaft that opened into a vast cutting—“the trench”—twenty-eight feet in width and some two hundred yards long, at which point it stopped being a cutting or trench and became a tunnel, its brickwork arch providing a gateway to what was the world’s very first stretch of underground-railway line.

What’s more, the world’s first *operational* stretch of underground-railway line: trains ran on the newly laid rails night and day, pushing wagons heaped with gravel, clay and sand from unfinished sections farther up the line. They chugged back and forth, smoke and steam nearly suffocating the gangs of unskilled laborers working at the mouth of the tunnel, who shoveled earth into the leather buckets of a conveyor that in turn brought the spoil to ground level.

The operation was Charles Pearson’s baby. For almost two decades the Solicitor of London had campaigned for a new line to help ease the growing congestion in London and its suburbs. Its construction, meanwhile, was John Fowler’s brainchild. He was, quite apart from being the owner of remarkably luxuriant whiskers, the most experienced railway engineer in the world, and thus had been the obvious candidate for chief engineer of the Metropolitan Railway. However, as he’d told Charles Pearson on the occasion of his employment, his experience might count for naught. This was, after all, something that had never been done before: a railway line beneath the ground. A huge—no, a *gargantuan*—undertaking. Indeed, there were those who said that it was the most ambitious building project since the construction of the pyramids. A grand claim, for sure, but there were days that Fowler agreed with them.

Fowler had decided that the majority of the line, being of shallow depth, could be dug using a method known as “cut and cover.” It involved sinking a trench into the earth, twenty-eight feet in width, fifteen feet deep. Brick retaining walls were built into it, three bricks thick. In some sections iron girders were laid across the top of the side walls. Others were made using brickwork arches. Then the cutting was covered and the surface reinstated, a new tunnel created.

It meant destroying roads and houses, and in some cases building temporary roadways, only to have to rebuild them. It meant moving thousands of tons of spoil and negotiating gas and water mains and sewers. It meant forging a never-ending nightmare of noise and destruction, as though a bomb had detonated in London’s Fleet Valley. No. As though a bomb was detonating in the Fleet Valley every day and had for two years.

Work continued overnight, when flares and braziers would be lit. The workers labored in two major

shifts—the change signaled by three tolls of a bell at midday and midnight—and smaller duty shifts when men would move between tasks, swapping one backbreaking and monotonous job for another but working, always working.

Much of the noise came from the seven conveyors used on the project, one of which was erected here: a tall wooden scaffold built into the shaft, towering twenty-five feet above them, an agent of dirt and ringing noise, like hammerblows on an anvil. It brought spoil from farther along the excavation, and men worked it now, gangs of them. Some were in the shaft, some on the ground, some dangling like lemurs off the frame, their job to ensure the passage of the conveyor as giant buckets full of clay were hoisted swinging from the trench.

On the ground, men with spades toiled at a mountain of excavated earth, shoveling it onto horse-drawn wagons, four of which waited, each with a cloud of gulls hanging over it, the birds swirling and dipping to pick food from the earth, unconcerned by the rain that had begun to fall.

Fowler turned to look at Charles, who appeared ill—he held a handkerchief to his lips—but otherwise in good humor. There was something indomitable about Charles Pearson, reflected Fowler. He wasn't sure if it was resolve or lunacy. This was a man who had been laughed at for the best part of two decades, indeed, from when he'd first suggested an underground line. "Trains in drains," so the scoffing went at the time. They'd laughed when he unveiled his plans for an atmospheric railway, carriages pushed through a tube by compressed air. *Through a tube*. Little wonder that for over a decade Pearson was a fixture of *Punch* magazine. What fun was had at his expense.

Then, with everybody still chortling at that, there came a scheme, Pearson's brainchild—a plan to build an underground railway between Paddington and Farringdon. The slums of the Fleet Valley would be cleared, their inhabitants moved to homes outside the city—to the suburbs—and people would use this new railway to "commute."

A sudden injection of money from the Great Western Railway, the Great Northern Railway and the City of London Corporation, and the scheme became a reality. He, the noted John Fowler, was employed as chief engineer for the Metropolitan Railway Company and work began on the first shaft at Euston—almost two years ago to the day.

And were people still laughing?

Yes, they were. Only now it was a jagged, mirthless laugh, because to say that Pearson's vision of the slum clearance had gone badly was to put it mildly. There were no homes in the suburbs and as it turned out, nobody especially willing to build any. And there's no such thing as an undercrowded slum. All of those people had to go somewhere, so they went to other slums.

Then of course there was the disruption caused by the work itself: streets made impassable, roads dug up, businesses closing and traders demanding compensation. Those who lived along the route existed in an eternal chaos of mud, of engines, of the conveyor's iron chime, of hacking picks and shovels and workers bellowing at one another, and in perpetual fear of their foundations collapsing.

There was no respite; at night fires were lit and the night shift took over, leaving the day shift to do what men on day shifts do: drink and brawl their way through to morning. London had been invaded by unskilled laborers, it seemed; everywhere they went they made their own; only the prostitutes and publicans were glad of them.

Then there were the accidents. First a drunken train driver had left the rails at King's Cross and plummeted into the works below. Nobody hurt. *Punch* had a field day. Then almost a year later the earthworks at Euston

Road had collapsed, taking with them gardens, pavements and telegraph wires, destroying gas and water mains, punching a hole in the city. Incredibly, nobody was hurt. Mr. Punch enjoyed that episode, too.

“I’d hoped to hear good news today, John,” shouted Pearson, raising his handkerchief—a finicky thing, like a doily—to his mouth. He was sixty-eight to Fowler’s forty-four but he looked twice that; his efforts over the last two decades had aged him. Despite his ready smile there was permanent tiredness around the eyes, and the flesh at his jowls was like melted wax on a candle.

“What can I tell you, Mr. Pearson?” shouted Fowler. “What would you like to hear other than . . . ?” He gestured over the site.

Pearson laughed. “The roar of the engines is encouraging, that’s true enough, but perhaps also that we’re back on schedule, or that every compensation lawyer in London has been struck dead by lightning. That Her Majesty the Queen herself has declared her confidence in the underground and plans to use it at the first opportunity.”

Fowler regarded his friend, again marveling at his spirit. “Then I’m afraid, Mr. Pearson, I can give you nothing but bad news. We are still behind schedule and weather like this simply delays work further. The rain will likely douse the engine and the men on the conveyor will enjoy an unscheduled break.”

“Then there is some good news,” chortled Charles.

“And what’s that?” shouted Fowler.

“We will have . . .”

The engine spluttered and died . . .

“. . . silence.”

. . . and for a moment there was indeed a shocked still as the world adjusted to the absence of the noise. Just the sound of rain slapping on the mud.

Then came a cry from the shaft: “*Slippage!*” and they looked up to see the crane scaffold lurch a little, one of the men suddenly dangling even more precariously than before.

“It’ll hold,” said Fowler, seeing Mr. Pearson’s alarm. “It looks worse than it is.”

A superstitious man would have crossed his fingers. The workers were taking no chances either, and the gangs on the crane scrambled to ground level, swarming the wooden struts like pirates on rigging, hundreds of them it seemed, so that Fowler was holding his breath and willing the structure to hold the sudden extra weight. It should, it must. It did. The men emerged shouting and coughing, carrying shovels and pickaxes, which were as precious to them as their limbs.

Fowler and Charles watched them congregate in the expected groups—London, Irish, Scottish, rural, other—hands shoved into their pockets or wrapped around them for warmth, shoulders hunched and caps pulled tight against the rain, every single one of them caked in mud.

Just then there came a shout and Fowler turned to see a commotion by the trench. As one the laborers had moved over to look and now surrounded the lip of the shaft, staring at something inside the cutting.

“*Sir!*” The site manager Marchant was waving at him, beckoning him over. He cupped his hands to shout.

“Sir. You should come and see this.”

Moments later, Fowler and Charles had made their way across the mud, the men parting to let them through, and they stood at the top of the trench looking down—past the struts and buckets of the silent conveyor to the lake of muddy water that had formed at the bottom and was already rising.

Bobbing in it was a body.

## FIVE

The rain had eased off, thank God, and the water level in the trench had fallen, but the machines remained silent. With a hand on his hat, Marchant had rushed away to inform his immediate boss, Cavanagh, a director of the Metropolitan Railway, while another man had been sent to find a bobby. It was the peeler who arrived first, a young constable with bushy side-whiskers who introduced himself as Police Constable Abberline then cleared his throat and removed his custodian helmet in order to get down to the business of seeing the body.

“Has anybody been down to it, sir?” he asked Pearson, indicating the trench.

“The area was cleared as soon as it was discovered, Constable. You can imagine, it caused quite a stir.”

“Nobody likes to see a dead body before their elevenses, sir.”

Those assembled watched as the peeler leaned tentatively to stare into the trench and signaled to a man nearby. “Do you mind, mate?” he said, and handed the worker his helmet, then unbuckled and removed his belt, truncheon and handcuffs before descending the ladder to inspect the corpse at close quarters.

They crowded to stare down into the cutting and watch as he stepped around the body, lifting one arm and then the other. Presently, the peeler crouched and the watchers held their breath in expectation as he turned over the body.

In the trench, Abberline swallowed, unaccustomed to being on show and wishing he’d left instructions that the men be asked to move back. They lined both sides of the trench and even the figures of Fowler and Mr. and Mrs. Pearson were there, all of them gazing down at him, fifteen feet below.

Right. He turned his attention back to the corpse, putting aside all self-conscious thoughts to concentrate on the job at hand.

The body, which wore a tweed suit, was facedown in the mud, with one arm raised as though trying to hail a carriage. His brown boots were well shod, and though covered in mud were otherwise in good condition. Not the attire of a derelict, thought Abberline. Crouching, heedless of the mud that soaked his clothes, he took a deep breath and reached to the man’s shoulders, grunting with the effort as he rolled him over.

From above came a ripple of reaction but Abberline had his eyes closed, wanting to delay the moment he saw the man’s face. With trepidation he opened them and stared into the dead gaze of the corpse. He was in his late thirties and had a bushy white-flecked Prince Albert moustache that looked cared for, as well as thick side-whiskers. By the looks of him he wasn’t a rich man but neither was he a worker like Abberline, one of the new middle classes.

Either way, this was a man with a life whose next of kin, when they were informed, would want an explanation as to how he ended his life in a trench at New Road.

This was, without doubt—and Abberline couldn't help but feel a small, slightly shameful thrill at the thought of it—an investigation.

He tore his gaze away from the man's sightless open eyes and looked downward at his jacket and shirt. Visible despite the mud was a bloodstain with a neat hole at the center. If Abberline wasn't very much mistaken, a puncture wound.

Abberline had seen victims of stab wounds before, of course, and he knew that people armed with knives stabbed and slashed the same way they punched: in quick, haphazard multiples, *bomf, bomf, bomf*.

But this was a single wound, direct into the heart. What you might call a clean kill.

By now, Abberline was vibrating with excitement. He'd feel guilty about that later, remembering that there was, after all, a dead man involved, and you shouldn't really feel anything but sorrow for him and his family in that situation, and certainly not excitement. But even so . . .

He began a quick search of the body and found it immediately: a revolver. Christ, he thought, this was a geezer armed with a gun who'd lost a fight with a knifeman. He pushed the gun back into a jacket pocket.

"We'll need to lift this body out of here," he called up in the general direction of the boss men. "Sir, could you ask men to help me cover him and put him in a cart for taking to the police morgue?"

With that he started to ascend the ladder, just as orders were called out and a team of men began to descend the other ladders with varying degrees of eagerness and trepidation. At the top, Abberline stood wiping his mucky hands on the seat of his trousers. At the same time he scanned the lines of assembled men, wondering if the killer was in there somewhere, admiring his handiwork. All he saw was row upon row of dirty faces, all watching him intently. Others still crowded around the mouth of the cutting, watching as the body was brought up then laid on the flat bed of a cart. The tarpaulin flapped as it was shaken out then draped over him, a shroud, the face of the dead man hidden again.

By now it had started to rain in earnest, but Abberline's attention had been arrested by the sight of a smartly dressed man making his way over the boards that crossed the expanse of mud, toward them. Not far behind lolloped a lackey carrying a large, leather-bound journal, its laces dancing and jerking as the lackey tried unsuccessfully to keep up with his master.

"Mr. Fowler! Mr. Pearson!" called the man, gesturing with his cane and instantly commanding their attention. The entire site quietened but in a new way. There was much shuffling of feet. Men were suddenly studying their boots intently.

*Oh yes?* thought Abberline. *What have we here?*

Like Fowler and Pearson the new arrival wore a smart suit though he wore it with more style—in a way that suggested he was used to catching the eye of a passing lady. He had no paunch and his shoulders were squared, not stooped with stress and worry like his two colleagues. Abberline could see that when he doffed his hat it would be to reveal a full head of almost shoulder-length hair. But though his greeting was warm, his smile, which was a mechanical thing that was as quickly off as it was on, never reached his eyes. Those ladies impressed by his mode of dress and general demeanor might well have thought twice upon seeing the look in those cold and piercing eyes.

As the man and his lackey drew close to them Abberline looked first at Pearson and Fowler, noting the discomfort in their eyes, the hesitation in Charles Pearson as he introduced the man. “This is our associate, Mr. Cavanagh, a director of the Metropolitan company. He oversees the day-to-day running of the dig.”

Abberline touched his brow, thinking to himself, *What’s your story, then?*

“I hear a body has been discovered,” said Cavanagh. He had a large scar on the right side of his face, as though somebody had once used a knife to underline his eye.

“Indeed, sir, it has.” Pearson sighed.

“Let’s see it, then,” demanded Cavanagh, and in the next moment, Abberline drew back the tarpaulin only for Cavanagh to shake his head in nonrecognition. “Nobody I know, thank God, and not one of ours by the looks of him. A soak. A drunk like the poor soul serenading us over there, no doubt.” He turned his back on the cart. “Marchant! Get these men back to work. We’ve lost enough time as it is.”

“No,” came a lone voice, and it was the voice of Mrs. Pearson. She took a step in front of her husband. “A man has died here, and as a mark of respect we should suspend the dig for the morning.”

Cavanagh’s automatic smile was switched on. Instantly oleaginous he swiped his tall hat from his head and bowed low. “Mrs. Pearson, please forgive me, how remiss it is of me to forget that there are more delicate sensibilities present. However, as your husband will attest, we are often the site of misadventures and I’m afraid that the mere presence of a dead body is not enough to prevent the tunnel work’s continuing.”

Mrs. Pearson turned. “Charles.” In return, her husband lowered his eyes. His gloved hands fretted at the handle of his stick.

“Mr. Cavanagh is correct, my dear. The poor soul has been removed, work must continue.”

She looked searchingly at her husband, who avoided her eyes, then Mrs. Pearson picked up her skirts and left.

Abberline watched her go, noting the look of sly triumph in the eyes of Cavanagh as he went about the business of mustering Marchant and the men, and the sadness in the face of Charles Pearson, a man torn, as he too turned to leave in the wake of his wife.

Meanwhile, Abberline had to get this corpse to Belle Isle. His heart sank to think of it. There was scarcely a worse place on the whole of God’s green earth than the Belle Isle slum.

\* \* \*

Among the men who were at that very moment being urged, cajoled, bullied and threatened back to work by the site manager, Marchant, was a young Indian worker who, though he appeared on the worksheet as Bharat, and if any of the men working beside were curious enough to ask, that was the name he would give them, thought of himself by another name.

He thought of himself as The Ghost.

To all outward appearances The Ghost was unremarkable. He wore similar clothes to the other workers: shirt, neck scarf, railwayman’s cap, waistcoat and work coat—though no boots, he went barefoot—and he was a competent, conscientious worker, no better or worse than the next man, and he was perfectly personable should you engage him in conversation, not especially loquacious and certainly not the sort to

initiate a conversation, but then again not particularly retiring either.

But The Ghost was always watching. Always watching. He'd caught sight of the body and by good fortune had been close enough to look before the order was given to evacuate the trench. He'd also seen the drunkard by the trench and in the ensuing commotion had been able to catch his eye, then, as if responding to an itch, he had rubbed his own chest, a tiny insignificant gesture practically invisible to anybody else.

Then he'd watched as Abberline arrived. He watched Cavanagh come bustling onto the site, and he watched very carefully indeed as the tarpaulin was drawn back and Cavanagh gazed down upon the face of the dead man and hid his look of recognition.

Oh, he was good. The Ghost had to give him that. Cavanagh's powers of concealment were almost on a par with his own, but his eyes had flickered briefly as he looked down upon the face. He knew the man.

Now The Ghost watched as Abberline left on the cart, taking the body to Belle Isle, no doubt.

He watched as, shortly after Abberline had left, the drunk departed also.

## SIX

Prince Albert had been dead a year, and though his taste in facial hair lived on, his adherence to decency and good manners had evidently failed to percolate through to the general public. Quite the reverse it seemed; there was a pall that hung over London, dark and malignant. Some blamed it on the Queen's absence; she mourned Albert still and had taken to the Highlands to do so. Others said the overcrowding was to blame; the terrible stink, the poverty and crime; among them those madmen who thought the best way to solve that problem was by building an underground railway. Still others said that actually it was not the overcrowding that was to blame; rather it was the construction of the underground railway that had thrown the city into disarray. This last group was apt to point out that the underground railway had thus far exacerbated overcrowding by evicting thousands of tenants from their homes on the Fleet Valley, the city's biggest slum. Which was true, it had.

Ah, but at least we've got rid of the city's biggest slum, said the first group.

Not really, scoffed the second group. You've just moved another slum into first place.

Have patience, pleaded the first group.

No, said the second, we won't.

Sitting on the board of his cart, reins held loosely in hand, Abberline thought over how the higher-ups made decisions in the clubs and boardrooms that affected them all. And to what end? For the greater good? Or their own personal benefit? A line from Lord Tennyson's poem about the Charge of the Light Brigade sprang to mind: "*Theirs is not to reason why, theirs is but to do or die.*"

His cart clattered over the rails toward where the tall, spired buildings of Belle Isle appeared like a smudge of dirt on the horizon. Already he could smell the foul stench of the horse slaughterers, the bone boilers, fat-melters, chemical works, firework makers, lucifer-match factories.

To his left some poor deluded idiot had made a valiant attempt to grow a kitchen garden but it was overrun with sickly weeds that climbed the iron fences sprouting on either side of him. Dirty, barely clothed children were running in the wasteland on either side, lobbing old tin cans at one another, scurrying in the street outside the cottages. Inside each home were rooms and washhouses, and at night the householders and their tenants would cram inside, just as they would at the Old Nichol.

His cart came past the horse slaughterers. Under the arch went living horses, whose sense of smell and instinct must surely have warned them what lay ahead, and in the factory they would be put to death, then the flesh boiled in copper vats for cat food.

Outside in the yards men stripped to the waist used sledgehammers to break up bones, watched by ever-present groups of children clad in filthy rags tinged yellow from the sulfur in the air.

Abberline saw a group of children who had obviously tired of watching men break bones with sledgehammers—after all, it wasn't an activity with an awful lot of variety—and set up a game of cricket instead. Without the usual equipment they improvised with part of an old bedstead for a bat, while the ball was . . . Abberline winced. Oh God. The ball they were using was the decapitated head of a kitten.

He was about to shout across to them, to urge them to for pity's sake use something else for a ball, when he became aware of a child who had wandered in front of the cart, forcing him to pull up.

"Oi," he called, waving an irate hand at the young ruffian, "police business. Get out of the bleedin' way."

But the scruffy urchin didn't move. "Where are you off to, sir?" he asked, taking the head of the horse in both hands, stroking it. The sight softened Abberline's heart a little, and he forgot his irritation as the boy rubbed his fingertips over the animal's ears, enjoying the rare intimacy of the moment, boy and horse.

"Where are you off to, sir?" the boy repeated, tearing his eyes off the horse and turning his urchin gaze on Abberline. "Not to the knackers yard with this one, I hope, say it ain't so."

In his peripheral vision, Abberline sensed a movement and turned to see three other young scallywags climb beneath the fence and come onto the road behind him. Let them, he thought. Nothing of value back there. Not unless you counted a soggy corpse and the tarpaulin.

"No, don't worry yourself, son, I'm off to the mortuary with a body on the back."

"A body, is it?" This came from the rear, one of the new arrivals.

A couple more children had arrived by now, a little crowd of them milling around.

"Oi you, get out of it," warned Abberline. "Nothing back there to interest you."

"Can we have a look, sir?"

"No, you bloody well can't," he called over his shoulder. "Now get out of it before you feel the business end of my truncheon."

The first boy stood petting the horse still, raising his face to speak to Abberline again. "Why is the police involved, sir? Did this one meet a sticky end?"

"You might say that," replied Abberline, impatient now. "Now stand aside, son, and let me past."



The cart bounced and jerked and he was about to turn to admonish the kids who were obviously trying to peek beneath the tarpaulin, ghoulish little sods. Then it bounced again and this time Abberline, irritated and wanting to get the hell out of Belle Isle, shook the reins decisively.

“Walk on,” he commanded, and if the kid stood in the way, well, that was his lookout.

He drew forward and the child was forced to step aside. As he passed, Abberline looked down to see the young urchin smiling inscrutably up at him. “Good luck with your body, sir,” he said, touching his knuckle to his forelock in a derisive way that Abberline didn’t care for. In return he merely grunted and shook the reins again, setting his face forward. He went past the rest of the houses to the mortuary gate, where he coughed loudly to rouse a worker who’d been dozing on a wooden chair, who tipped his hat and let him through into the yard.

“What have we got here?” asked a mortuary worker as he emerged from a side door.

Abberline had clambered down from the cart. At the entrance, the sleepyhead closed the gates again, behind him the Belle Isle slum like a sooty thumbprint on a window. “Body I need keeping cold for the coroner,” replied Abberline, securing the reins as the attendant went to the rear of the wagon, lifted the tarp, peered beneath then dropped it again.

“You want the knacker’s yard,” he said simply.

“Come again?” said Abberline.

The attendant sighed and wiped his hands on his apron. “Unless this is your idea of a joke, you want the bleedin’ knackers yard is what I said.”

Abberline paled, already thinking of his encounter with the slum children, the way his cart had shaken; remembering how his attention had been arrested, cleverly perhaps, by the kid nuzzling the neck of his horse.

And sure enough, when he skidded to the back of the cart and swept back the tarpaulin, it was to see that the body from the trench had gone, in its place a dead pony.

## SEVEN

Every night The Ghost made the same journey home, one that took him along the New Road and past Marylebone Church. In the churchyard, among the ramshackle and raggle-taggle groupings of headstones was one in particular that he would look at as he went by.

If the stone was upright, as it was most evenings, that meant no message. If the stone leaned to the right, it meant danger. Just that: “danger.” It was up to The Ghost to work out what manner of danger.

However, if it leaned to the left, then it meant his handler wanted to see him, usual time, usual place.

Then, having performed that check, The Ghost began his five-mile walk home to Wapping and his living quarters at the Thames Tunnel.

It had once been called one of the great wonders of the world, and even at ground level it cut an imposing

figure among the surrounding buildings: a spired, octagonal marble building acting as an entrance hall. Entering through doors that were never shut, he crossed the mosaic flooring to reach a side building, the watch house. During the daytime, pedestrians had to pay a penny to pass through to reach the steps down into the tunnel but not at night. A brass turnstile was closed but The Ghost climbed over, just as everybody did. All of the other ghosts, who haunted the tunnel by night.

Ice had formed on the marble steps that spiraled around the inside of the shaft so he trod more than usually carefully as he descended to the first platform, then to the next, and finally to the bottom of the shaft, the vast grand rotunda, eighty meters underground. Once it had been vast and opulent, now it was merely vast. The walls were dirty, the statues scruffy. The years had had their say.

Even so, it was still a sight to see: alcoves set into grubby stucco walls. Inside the nooks, curled beneath sacks, slept the people of the rotunda: the necromancers, fortune-tellers and jugglers who in the daytime plied their trade to those visiting the tunnel, the famous Thames Tunnel. Eighth wonder of the world.

The first of its kind anywhere ever, the Thames Tunnel stretched from here, Wapping, below the river to Rotherhithe and had taken fifteen years to build, almost defeating Mr. Marc Brunel and almost claiming the life of his son Isambard, who had nearly drowned in one of the floods that had plagued its construction. Both had hoped to see their tunnel used by horse-drawn carriages, but had been undone by the cost, and instead it became a tourist attraction, visitors paying a penny to walk its four-hundred-meter length, an entire subterranean industry springing forth to serve them. One that needed policing.

The Ghost moved from the entrance hall to the black mouth of the tunnel itself, its two arches pointing at him like the barrels of pistols. It was wide and its ceiling high, but the brickwork pressed in and each footfall became an echo, while the sudden change in atmosphere made him more aware of the gloom. In daytime, hundreds of gas lamps banished the darkness but at night the only illumination belonged to the flickering candles of those who made the tunnel their home: traders, mystics, dancers and animal handlers, singers, clowns and street dealers. It was said that two million people a year take a walk down the tunnel, and had since it opened some seventeen years ago. Once you had a place at the tunnel opening you didn't leave it, for fear that some other hawker might steal it with you absent.

The Ghost looked over the slumbering bodies of the tradesmen and entertainers as he passed by, his footsteps ringing on the stone floor. He peered into alcoves and passed his lantern over those sleeping under the arches of the partition that ran the length of the tunnel.

A strict hierarchy operated inside the tunnel. The tradesmen took their places at the mouth. Farther along, the derelicts, the homeless, the vagrants, the wretched, then even farther along the thieves, criminals and fugitives.

Come morning time, the traders, who had a vested interest in making sure the tunnel was free of vagrants and as sanitary as possible, were enthusiastic in helping the peelers clear out the tunnel. The blaggers and fugitives would have departed under cover of darkness. The rest of them, the vagabonds, beggars, prostitutes would come grumbling and blinking into the light, clutching their belongings, ready for another day of surviving on nothing.

The Ghost's lantern played over a sleeping figure in the gloom of an alcove. The next alcove was empty. He swung the torch to illuminate the arches of the tunnel partition and they too were vacant. He sensed the miserly light receding behind him, the glow given off by his lantern so very meager all of a sudden, dancing eerily on the brick.

From within the darkness had come a scuttling sound and he raised his light to see a figure crouched in a

nook ahead of him.

“Hello, Mr. Bharat,” said the boy in a whisper.

The Ghost went to him, reaching into his coats for a thick crust of bread he’d put there earlier. “Hello, Charlie,” he said, handing it over. The boy flinched a little, far too accustomed to the slaps and punches of grown-ups, then took the bread, staring at The Ghost with grateful eyes as he bit into it, cautiously at first.

They did it every night. The same flinch. The same caution. And every night The Ghost, who knew nothing of his background, just that it involved violence and abuse, smiled at him, said, “See you tomorrow night, Charlie, take care of yourself,” and left the boy in his alcove, his heart breaking as he made his way farther into the tunnel.

Again, he stopped. Here in another alcove lay a man with a leg broken from a fall on the icy steps of the rotunda. The Ghost had set the leg and he held his breath against the stench of piss and shit to check that his splint was still in place and that the leg was on the mend.

“You’re a fine lad, Bharat,” said his patient, in a growl.

“Have you eaten?” asked The Ghost, attending to the leg. He was not a man of delicate sensibilities but even so—Jake was ripe.

“Maggie brought me some bread and fruit,” said Jake.

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