

September 1863

Chapter 1

The raven levels off into a glide, flight feathers fanned. Slick on the rolling level of rising currents and down-draughts, she turns her head, this way and that. To her black eye, as black as pooled tar, London is laid out – there is no veil of fog or mist or smoke-haze her gaze cannot pierce!

Below her, streets and lanes, factories and workhouses, parks and prisons, grand houses and tenements, roofs, chimneys and tree tops. And the winding, sometimes shining, Thames – the sky's own dirty mirror. The raven leaves the river behind and charts a path to a chapel on a hill with a spire and a clock tower. She circles the chapel and lands on the roof with a shuffling of wings. She pecks at brickwork, at lichen, at moth casts, at nothing. She sidles up to a gargoyle and runs her beak affectionately around his eyes, nudging, scooping.

The gargoyle is a creature designed to vomit rainwater from the gape of his mouth onto the porch. The parishioners (when there were parishioners) blamed the blocked gutters, but it was always the gargoyle, holding back only to let go a sudden flood upon the faithful below as they stood at God's threshold, looking up to the heavens, flinching.

The raven hops to the edge of the porch roof and peers down.

A woman is standing below: she looks up, but she doesn't flinch. Bridie Devine is not the flinching kind.

What kind is she then?

A small, round upright woman of around thirty, wearing a shade of deep purple that clashes (wonderfully and dreadfully) with the vivid red hair tucked (for the most part) inside her white widow's cap. She presents in half-mourning dress, well-cut but without flash or fashion. On top of her widow's cap roosts a black, feather-trimmed bonnet of a uniquely ugly design. Her black boots are polished to a shine and of stout make. The crinoline is no friend of hers; her skirts are not full and she's as loosely laced as respectability allows. Her cape, grey with purple trim, is short. This is a practical woman, or at least a woman who finds it practical to be able to fit through doorways, climb stairs and breathe. At her feet, a doctor's case, patched and antiquated, the leather buttery from handling.

She takes from her pocket a pipe. Here's a teaser: a *fast* habit in one so *seemly*? And isn't there is canniness to her smoking in the shelter of a deserted chapel (and not puffing down the Strand with a chinful of whiskers and a basket on her head?).

The raven eyes her with interest.

The woman winks at the bird. There is a world of devilment in her wink. The raven responds with a soft caw.

The bird gauges the gargoyle. No water falls; the gargoyle is dry-mouthed, the lips frame an empty grimace.

Reassured, the raven takes to the air.

Bridie Devine watches the raven fly out of sight. Now all that's moving in this chapel-yard are her thoughts, she thinks. The occasional cart or carriage passes the open gate. Otherwise

there is a wall of a decent height between Bridie and world and that is enough.

Bridie breathes out, turning her face up to the sun: autumn warmth, fuller-bodied and lovelier than summer heat, with the mellow dying of the season in it. Bridie welcomes it on brow and cheek. That the sun has found a clear patch of air to shine through (in these days of smoke-haze and mist and fog) ought to be appreciated.

Bridie is alone with the sun and her thoughts and her pipe.

The pipe is unremarkable: clay-made, shaped to sit snug in the hand or in a tooth gap, of a cheap variety favoured by Irish market harpies. Short of stem and small of bowl so that the nose of a hag may overhang and keep the rain off the tobacco. The pipe may be unremarkable but the contents are anything but. To her usual twist of any mundungus Bridie has lately been adding a nugget of Prudhoe's *Bronchial Balsam Blend*. A crumbly, resinous substance which burns with a pleasant incense scent followed by a lancing chemical stink. This is less unpleasant than it sounds, being simultaneously bracing and dulling. You add lots of Prudhoe's *Blend* for colourful thoughts and triple that amount for no thoughts at all.

Prudhoe's *Bronchial Balsam Blend* is just one of the recreational creations of Rumold Fortitude Prudhoe, experimental chemist, toxicologist and expert in medical jurisprudence. Prudhoe's previous legendary blends, *Mystery Caravan* and *Fairground Riot*, proved either blissful or petrifying. As such, these blends continue to attract loyal followers among his more adventurous friends, Bridie being one of them.

But now Bridie's pipe is empty. She has smoked it all.

Bridie puts the bit of her empty pipe in her mouth, just while she's thinking. A drop more tobacco would be nice. It wouldn't have to obliterate her thoughts, just line her lungs.

She'll smoke anything; earthy and wholesome or treacly and nasty, costermonger's dust or gentleman's savour.

As if in answer, in the far corner of the chapel-yard, a wisp of smoke wends its way up into the air.

Bridie takes this as a sign.

Bridie looks down at the man sprawled by the showy tomb of a successful family butcher. Two things strike her as immediately wrong.

Firstly, the man is deficient of clothing (his wardrobe consisting, in its entirety, of: a top hat, boots and a pair of drawers).

Secondly, she can see *through* the man.

She is able, with perfect ease, to read the inscription on the tomb that should, by rights, be obscured by the body of the man. She can even see the angels on the decorative stone frieze.

This is an ingenious trick – like Pepper's ghost! There will be mirrors, screens certainly, black silk or some such, an illusionist's contraption, a phantasmagorical contrivance. A rudimentary search of nearby graves turns up nothing.

Bridie is baffled. If no *external* explanation for the presence of this transparent, partially clad man is evident, the cause must be *internal*. She cannot recollect transparent partially clad men being a symptom of the consumption of Prudhoe's *Bronchial Balsam Blend*. But the list is long and includes many adverse reactions, from sweating of the eyeballs to sensitivity to accordion music.

She resolves to inspect this apparition, systematically, from crown to toe.

A top hat is tipped down over the eyes of its owner. Like its owner the hat is transparent. Despite this, Bridie can see that the hat has known better days. It is dented of body and misshapen of rim. The transparent man is naked to the waist; below the waist he sports close-fitting white drawers, tight at

the thighs, sagging at the knees. The boots on his feet are unlaced and his fists are sloppily bound with unravelling bandages, none too clean. He is massive of chest and bicep, strong-shouldered and thick-necked. And tattooed: stern to bow.

Below the tipped-down hat-rim: a nose that hasn't gone unbroken, a clean-shaven jaw and a shining black moustache (generous in proportions, expertly waxed, certainly rococo). In the mouth, a pipe lolls. A draw is taken from it, intermittently. The smoke has dwindled to a wisp now and has no discernible scent. On inhalation the tobacco in the pipe bowl glows blue.

Bridie wonders if the man has a pinch of tobacco to spare and, if so, whether that's likely to be transparent too.

The man, perhaps sensing her presence, pushes up his hat idly. His eyes open and meet hers. He springs to his feet in alarm, holding his fists up before him.

He is nothing short of miraculous.

The tattoos that adorn his body – how clearly Bridie sees them now – are, in fact, moving. She is put in mind of Monsieur Desvignes's Mimoscope. A device of cunning construction (a wonder amongst wonders at the Great Exhibition), pictures looped between spools, illuminated by a spark. Bridie, transfixed, saw animals, insects and machinery – static images – flickering to life, to bounce and flutter, slither and winch. Bridie watches this man with the same fascination as, in one continuous motion, an inked anchor drops the length of his bicep. High on his abdomen an empty-eyed skull, a grinning memento mori, chatters its jaw. A mermaid sits on his shoulder holding a looking-glass, combing her blue-black hair. On finding herself observed the mermaid takes fright and swims off under the man's armpit with a deft beat of her tail. On his left pectoral an ornate heart breaks and reforms over and over again.

He is a circus to the eye.

‘Had a good look?’ he asks.

Bridie reddens. ‘Forgive me, sir, if I startled you. I was after borrowing a smoke.’ She gestures to her empty pipe.

The man lowers his fists. ‘Merciful Jesus, *it is you*. Is it not?’ His expression turns to one of delight. He sweeps off his hat. ‘Oh, darling, do you know me?’

Bridie stares at him. ‘I do not.’

‘Ah now . . .’ He runs a hand over shorn hair, black velvet, dense as a mole’s pelt, and wrinkles his strong square forehead. ‘Your name is Bridget.’

‘My name is Bridie.’

‘It is.’ The man nods. ‘Your full appellation, if you would be so kind?’

Bridie hesitates. ‘Mrs Bridie Devine.’

The man grins. ‘What else would it be, with those eyes divine?’ He pauses. ‘And Devine would be your husband’s name, madam?’

‘*Late* husband, sir,’ corrects Bridie.

The man bows. ‘My sincere condolences, Mrs Devine.’

Bridie turns to go. ‘If you’ll excuse me, sir.’

‘Won’t you stay, Bridget? We could talk about the old times.’

Bridie stops. ‘Sir, you are quite mistaken in your belief that you know me—’

‘But I do know you: you are Gan Murphy’s girl.’

Bridie’s eyes widen. ‘He was my gaffer.’

‘I know that!’ The man pauses, his expression amused. ‘You don’t remember me at all, do you?’

Bridie looks at him in desperation, sensing a game that could go on for all eternity. ‘That is not the point, Mr—’

‘Doyle.’ He wanders to a grave across the way and gestures down at it. ‘Not a bad spot, is it?’

Bridie follows him. She reads the headstone:

“THE DECORATED DOYLE”

Here lies RUBY DOYLE,
Tattooed SEAFARER and CHAMPION BOXER
Untimely taken, 21 March 1863
“He felled them with a bow”

‘Do you know me now?’ asks the dead man.

‘Well, sir, you are a boxer by the name of Ruby Doyle. You have been deceased half a year, and still I do not know you.’

Ruby Doyle puts his hat back on. ‘Throw your mind back, Bridget.’ He taps his topper down at the crown. ‘Think awhile. I’m in no hurry.’

‘If this is some kind of trick, Mr Doyle—’

‘Ruby, if you please,’ he says, with a rakish tip of his hat rim. ‘What trick?’

‘You being dead.’

‘Trick’s on me.’

‘I do not believe in ghosts, sir.’

‘Neither do I – why do you not?’

‘I have a scientific mind. Ghosts are a nonsense.’

‘I agree.’

‘A parlour trick.’ Bridie looks at him hard. ‘Smoke and mirrors.’

Ruby smiles disarmingly. ‘A chance to pull one over?’

‘A fashionable flimflam.’

‘And what of table-tipping?’ Ruby, who seems to be enjoying this, scans the heavens: ‘*Send me a sign, Winifred!*’

‘Dark, overheated rooms and suggestible types.’

‘Half of London is at it!’

‘Half of London is duped. To believe in the existence of ghosts, spirits, phantoms – that one can see and converse with them – is deluded.’

‘Are you deluded, Bridget?’

'I see you, sir, but I do not believe you exist.'

Ruby Doyle is crest-fallen.

Bridie frowns. 'If you will excuse me, I have work to do.'

'Church-yard work, is it?' He glances slyly at the bag in her hand. 'Is there a shovel in there? Let me guess: you're a resurrectioner, like your old gaffer, Gan?'

She rounds on him. 'And I look like a resurrectioner? I help the police.'

'Do you, now. In what way?'

'Working out how people died.'

'How did I die?'

'A heavy blow to the back of the neck.'

'Now that's clever. But you read about it in the *Hue and Cry*?'

'I did not.'

'*Boxer bested in tavern brawl*. I'd survived this fella trying to knock me to pieces, stepped in for a quick celebratory one and then—'

'Ruby, I'm wanted in the crypt. They have found a body there.'

'That'll be the place for it. Off you go, so. And my compliments to your gaffer – how is Gan?'

'Dead. In jail.'

Ruby stops smiling. 'Then I am sorry. Gan was one of those fellas that go on: a long, thin strip of gristle, everlasting. Do you not see him too?'

Bridie regards the man with desperation. 'Gan is dead.'

'Then am I the only dead fella you see?'

'Appears like it.'

'What about Mr Devine?'

Bridie looks puzzled.

'Your late husband,' Ruby prompts. 'You must see him?'

'Never.'

'Then I'm *peculiar* to you. Are you surprised, Bridget? Are you rattled?'

‘Nothing surprises or rattles me.’

‘Is that so?’ He reflects on this a moment, then: ‘Can I come with you, watch whatever it is that you’re doing in the crypt?’

‘You may not.’

Bridie walks through the gravestones. Ruby ambles alongside her. The boots, unlaced, lend a loose parry to his boxer’s strut.

At the edge of the path she stops and turns to him. ‘I am hallucinating. You are a waking dream.’ She bites her lip. ‘You see I smoked something a little stimulating earlier . . .’

Ruby nods sagely. ‘The empty pipe – is it Kubla Khan you’re visiting?’

Bridie is dumb-founded.

Ruby gestures at his bandages. ‘Ringside doctor, recited while he patched.’

When they reach the chapel, Bridie holds out her hand. ‘This is where we part company.’

Ruby smiles; it’s a charming kind of a smile that gaily remakes the contours of his fabulous moustache. His eyes, in life, would have been a handsome dark-molasses brown. In death, they are still alive with mischievous intent.

‘I would shake your hand, Bridget, but—’

Bridie withdraws her hand. ‘Of course. Good day, Ruby Doyle.’

She heads into the chapel.

‘I’ll wait for you, Bridget,’ calls the dead man. ‘I’ll just be having a smoke for meself.’

Ruby Doyle watches her walk away. God love her, she hasn’t changed. She’s still captain of herself, you can see that; chin up, shoulders back, a level green-eyed gaze. You’ll look away before she does. She has done well for herself, with the voice and the clothes and the *bearing* of her.

If it were not for that irresistible scowl and that unmistakable

hair, would he have recognised her? But then, the heart always knows those long ago loved, even when new liveries confuse the eye and new songs confound the ear. Does Ruby know the stories that surround her? That she was an Irish street-rat rescued from the rookery by a gentleman surgeon who held her to be (ah now, this is a stretcher!) as the orphaned daughter of a great Dublin doctor. That despite her respectable appearance (it is rumoured among *low* company) she wears a dagger strapped to her thigh and keeps poisonous darts in her boot heels. That she speaks as she finds, judges no woman or man better or worse than her, feels deeply the blows dealt to others and can hold both her drink and a tune. Ruby Doyle meanders back to his favourite spot, to muse on all he knows and all he doesn't know about Bridie Devine, lighting his pipe with the fierce blue flame of the afterlife.

The curate of Highgate Chapel is battling the locked door to the crypt with his collar pulled up and his hat pulled down. On seeing Bridie his face betrays surprise, which turns to displeasure when she reminds him of her business. The vicar is expecting her in relation to the delicate matter of the walled-up corpse. The curate fixes Bridie with a look of profound begrudgement and, managing to unlock the door, leads her into the crypt.

The corpse is propped in an alcove behind loose boards. Discovered by workmen clearing up after a flood, now abated. More than a few Highgate residents blame both the flood and the resurrected corpse on Bazalgette's subterranean rummaging. All well and good creating a sewerage system that will be the envy of the civilised world, but should one really delve into London's rancid belly? London is like a difficult surgical patient; however cautious the incision anything and everything is liable to burst out. Dig too deep and you're bound to raise floods and bodies, to say nothing of deadly miasmas and eyeless

rats with foot-long teeth. The rational residents of Highgate defend Mr Bazalgette as a first-rate engineer and deny the existence of eyeless rats.

The corpse had been immured in an alcove; its shackles and wide-socketed expression of terror suggest foul play. This poor soul met their fate an age ago, lessening police interest in the case. This is a bygone crime in a city flooded with new crimes.

The coppers are up to the hub in it: London is awash with the freshly murdered. Bodies appear hourly, blooming in doorways with their throats cut, prone in alleyways with their heads knocked in. Half-burnt in hearths and garrotted in garrets. Folded into trunks or bobbing about in the Thames, great bloated shoals of them.

Bridie has a talent for the reading of corpses: the tale of life and death written on every body. Because of this talent Bridie's old friend, Inspector Valentine Rose of Scotland Yard, passes her the odd case – with the understanding that she stops short of a post-mortem, her unqualified status being a bar to this procedure. The cases usually have two things in common, other than having piqued Rose's interest: bizarre and inexplicable deaths, and victims drawn from society's flotsam (pimps, whores, vagrants, petty criminals and the insane). For her considered opinion Bridie receives a stipend (paid, unbeknownst to Bridie, from the pocket of Rose himself) and signs her report with an illegible signature. If anyone asks, her name is Montague Devine. In the event that she is called to give evidence, she'll give it in a frock coat and collar.

With the curate's help Bridie clears the remaining stones from the alcove. The crypt is a grim space, with a vaulted ceiling and flagstone floor. As with many subterranean, lightless places it has the climate of a year-round winter. The recent flood has left a rich, peaty smell not unlike a dug bog.

The corpse, a woman, Bridie judges, by size and apparel, is well preserved, allowing for her lengthy entombment. A macabre spectacle decked in finery. There is a cruel theatricality to her, costumed as if for a tableau vivant. A tragic heroine, a goddess – an unknown figure from history! Her gown, rotten now, could be Grecian, Roman. Her pale hair, shedding in clumps, falls onto withered shoulders. Bridie divines last moments spent shackled by the neck in the suffocating dark. It is there in the open mouth, stiffened around a howl.

The curate fusses with the lamp, swearing under his breath. He is a young man with an unfavourable look about him. Slight of stature and large of head, with light-brown hair that cleaves thinly to an ample cranium with bumps and contours enough to astound even a practised phrenologist. His complexion is as wan and floury as an overcooked potato and his mouth was made for sneering. Otherwise, Bridie notes, he is shabbily dressed for a curate and vaguely familiar.

‘Sir, have we met?’ she asks.

The curate regards her blankly. ‘I think not, Miss—’

‘Mrs Devine – I didn’t catch your name, sir.’

‘Cridge.’

Bridie resumes the examination. Trying to ignore Mr Cridge straining to see past her.

The corpse’s injuries (bone-deep lacerations to her right arm, three broken fingers, shattered mandible, fractured orbital) tell a dark story. A shawl hides her left arm. Bridie carefully unwraps it.

‘She has a child,’ she says.

A baby, swaddled, no bigger than a turnip, lies in a sling beneath the folds of its mother’s shawl. Bridie feels a flood of pity. There hadn’t even been space to sit, pressed as they were into a shallow recess, so this woman had died standing and her baby had perished alongside her.

Mr Cridge leans in nearer and bites his lip, wearing an

expression of ghoulish excitement. Bridie is offended on the victims' behalf.

'If this is at all disturbing for you, Mr Cridge, I suggest you leave me to it.'

'I'm not in the least disturbed. How old is the infant?'

'At death: a few months old. It suckles still on its mother's finger.' Bridie peers closer. 'The baby isn't suckling the mother's finger, it's *gnawing* it.'

'Well, I'll be damned!' The curate raises his eyes to the ceiling. 'Apologies.'

Bridie frowns. 'The lantern, Mr Cridge, as near as you can, please.'

Bridie sees the baby's face, wizened now, its features vague and leathery. Bridie puts the tip of her finger into the infant's tiny mouth cavity, gently pushing past the mother's shrivelled digit.

'They are like pike's teeth,' she says, astonished. 'Irregular needles in the upper and lower jaw, sharp yet.'

'How about that . . .' murmurs Mr Cridge.

'I will need to remove the corpses for a thorough examination in decent light.'

'That will be impossible,' says Mr Cridge sourly. 'At least, not possible today.'

'It must be today; the police will expect my report.'

'The vicar is out.'

'Then I shall wait for him.'

'I will raise this matter with him directly he returns, Mrs Devine.'

'Please make sure that you do, Mr Cridge.'

The curate turns from the corpse to Bridie with a look of such concentrated enmity she is in no doubt: if he could, he'd shove her into the alcove and wall it up again.

Mr Cridge closes and locks the gate behind them and pockets the key.

‘I would strongly advise you to keep the nature of this discovery to yourselves, Mr Cridge,’ says Bridie. ‘London has a taste for aberrations.’

‘I can assure you that this matter will attract the utmost discretion on our part. Good day to you, Mrs Devine.’ The curate puts his hat on, bows resentfully and heads off towards the vicarage.

Bridie surveys the chapel-yard: it is empty of partially clad, imaginary dead pugilists. Then she catches sight of it, bobbing into view above the top of the wall: a top hat. A hat that has known better days, dented of body, misshapen of rim and transparent. With a firm hold of her case Bridie takes flight, around the side of the chapel and out through the back gate. She continues along the street alone – once or twice glancing back over her shoulder, with a mixture of relief and something approaching disappointment.

Bridie, crypt-cold to the bone, is glad to be above ground. As she descends Highgate Hill, below her, in the acidulated smoke atmosphere, London glimmers. She follows the hidden Fleet townward, as the sky darkens and street-lamps are lit and the gas-lights are turned up in shops and public houses. Past St Giles, Little Ireland, where the tenements totter and the courts run vile with vice. New Oxford Street marches down the middle. The Irish hop over it and spread out to the north, forming new footholds. They have flooded this town, wave after wave of them, spilling out from their rookeries to perch in all places. On the south side the buildings turn their backs on the main road, leaning inwards, like gaunt conspirators. Change is always drawing near. Innovation waits like an offstage actor, primed and ready in the wings, biting its lip and grinning. Rag-plugged windows and crumbling bricks will give way to open landscapes of stone and sky.

The rats and the immigrants will be sent running.

But for now, the slums are as they have always been: as warm and lively as a blanket full of lice.

Bridie could find her way with her eyes shut and her nostrils open.

Try it now. Close your eyes (eyes that would be confused anyway by the labyrinthine alleys, twisting passages, knocked-up and tumbling-down houses).

Breathe in – but not too deeply.

Follow the fulsome fumes from the tanners and the reek from the brewery, butterscotch rotten, drifting across Seven Dials. Keep on past the mothballs at the cheap tailor's and turn left at the singed silk of the maddened hatter. Just beyond you'll detect the unwashed crotch of the overworked prostitute and the Christian sweat of the charwoman. On every inhale a shifting scale of onions and scalded milk, chrysanthemums and spiced apple, broiled meat and wet straw, and the sudden stench of the Thames as the wind changes direction and blows up the knotted backstreets. Above all, you may notice the rich and sickening chorus of shit.

The smell of shit is the primary olfactory emission from the multifarious inhabitants in Bridie Devine's part of town. Everyone contributes, the Russians, Polish, Germans, Scots and the especially the Irish. Everyone is at it. From Mrs Neary's newborn crapping in rags to Father Doucan squatting genteelly over his chamber pot. Their output is flung into cesspits, cellars and yards, where it contributes to London's *perilous* reek.

Bad air (as any man of science worth his monocle will tell you) sets up stall for the latest bands of travelling diseases. Cholera is the headlining act. When cholera comes to visit you'll find the lanes empty. Cholera keeps the women and the children from pump and square and the men inside scratching their arses. When cholera comes to visit, the streets are quiet. There is no bustling to and fro, no gossip and ribald

laughter, only fervent prayer and the dread of an unholy bowel movement.

Mercifully there is no cholera today and so the streets are full.

Full as only London is full – and the din of it! Chanters, costers and traders, omnibuses thundering along thoroughfares, horse hooves at a clip and carriage wheels at a growl, carts and barrows at a rumble and all of London jostling in all directions at once.

Bridie heads home.

Chapter 2

Bridie Devine has, for some years, resided on Denmark Street in the rooms above the shop premises belonging to Mr Frederick Wilks, bell hanger. Mr Wilks is a very old man with the look of something that has been carefully varnished and then put away for a long time. His face is as benign as his clothes are severe. Above a stiff jet-buttoned frock coat, with the rigidity of something ossified, moons a round face with large bleary eyes and a larger man's pair of ears framing a white-haired head. Bridie suspects that the old man lives in the shop, tidying himself away into the tool cupboard at night. By day, he sits by the window fiddling with his tollers or polishing his clappers. Held upright by his coat, Mr Wilks rarely moves, but when he does it's with a sudden flapping flit, from stool to workbench and back again.

Bridie rents from Mr Wilks the two upper floors (comprising: parlour, kitchen and scullery, bedchamber and maid's attic room) and the use of a yard if she wants it. It is not the most salubrious of addresses, granted; the more genteel or less robust visitor may recoil at its proximity to slums notorious and their noxious emissions (criminal, moral and pestilential). But it's a convenient spot in a friendly street

nestled between Herr Weiss, baker, and Mr Dryden, gunlock manufacturer. Bridie Devine is unquestionably the best tenant Mr Wilks has ever had. Deaf from decades of bell testing and milky-eyed with cataracts he is nevertheless able to both *hear* Mrs Devine (oh, a melodious brogue that carries!) and *see* her (oh, glorious fiery locks!).

Mrs Devine arrived at Mr Wilks's widowed. Details of the late Mr Devine's demise, previous standing in the world and other particulars of interest remain unforthcoming. Mrs Devine is held to live either *above* or *below* her station (depending on who you talk to) on account of being in possession of a 'mahogany' sideboard, a library of books and a giantess of a maid she has taught to *read* these books. This is untrue; Bridie's maid *only* reads penny-bloods (stories old and new, chiefly those featuring romances of exciting interest, highwaymen and hangings).

Then there is the fact of Mrs Devine's *occupation* further to that of a widow with a modest annuity. A plaque hangs next to Bridie's front door, which is beside Mr Wilks's front door (all cosy-like). This plaque might offer a clue as to the trade conducted upstairs:

Mrs Devine
Domestic Investigations
Minor Surgery (Esp. Boils, Warts, Extractions)
Discretion Assured

Look up. There is a locked-down, tight-lipped feel to Bridie's residence. Her front door is always closed and the windows are rarely open, the curtains are sometimes drawn and the shutters occasionally fastened. Neighbours are not encouraged to stop by for the cupeen of tea. Cora Butter, Bridie's housemaid, is impervious to the joys of gossip and will not be baited into conversation, even when she's out sweeping the front step.

Cora Butter is the only, and most terrifying, seven-foot-tall housemaid in London. The local children never tire of spying on Cora. On fair weather days she can be seen hanging out washing in the yard, singing hymns in her glorious baritone. Or else shaving in the kitchen, stropping her razor, taking time to work the soap into the bristles on her chin. And if she catches the children watching there's the joy of hearing her bass bellow lift the rooftops and scatter rats and pigeons.

If you are calling on business, then Cora will fix you with an unnerving glare and lead you into the parlour.

Cora greets her mistress at the top of the stairs. Bridie hands Cora her cape. Cora shakes it violently, wrings its neck and hangs it up.

'There's a man in your parlour,' Cora says, a testy look in her eyes.

'On business?'

Cora nods. 'He has the manner of a weasel about him. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him.'

Bridie smiles up at her housemaid. Cora has never trusted a client. Cora doesn't trust anyone. And, depending on his size, she can throw a man surprisingly far.

'Does he have a name?'

'Didn't ask.'

Cora opens the door to the parlour a fraction and they look inside. The caller paces from the fireplace to the window and back again, suggestive of a state of nervous agitation.

To be fair, the room itself would do nothing to contribute to his ease. It is low-ceilinged and dreary. The lights burn dim and there is no welcoming fire in the grate, for Cora is frugal with both coal and gas. The furniture is ill-matched and includes a gentleman's writing bureau of an unfashionable design, cabinets crammed with glass bottles and bookcases stuffed with difficult reads. The sideboard is pretty and makes

a stab at mahogany (but even in this light it's clearly counterfeit). The caller squints at the spines of a few books, raises his eyebrows at several and takes one from its shelf and opens it under the gas-light, only to hurriedly put it back again. He turns and notices, gathering dust on the mantelpiece, an object of mystery and interest. A large unfathomable mechanism wrought in dull metal with a rubber attachment ending in a sinister kind of nipple. A gauge of some kind, an instrument of some sort, but who can tell what?

The visitor draws nearer to this device. He puts out his finger and tentatively touches the rubber nipple, stepping back quickly as if expecting repercussions. When nothing happens he touches it again, stroking it lightly.

'See what I mean?' Cora whispers.

'He has an unpromising aspect to him.'

'It's his head,' observes Cora, 'as bald as a peeled bollock.' Bridie frowns. 'What's his business?'

'He wouldn't say, but it'll be sneaky business.' Cora glances at her. 'Will I give him a clatter and hold him upside down until he admits to something?'

'We will try to find out what he wants without the clattering. By using our intelligence.'

Cora snorts and sails off to the kitchen. Bridie enters the room.

The caller turns and offers Bridie a rigid bow.

A man of middle age with luxuriant side-whiskers, the twin carpets of which cover his cheeks, as if to compensate for the smoothness of his pate. His chin is clean-shaven and the wire-framed spectacles he wears hooked high on the bridge of his nose are thick-lensed. This inauspicious head is set on a hotchpotch body composed of a long back, thin arms, downward-sloping shoulders and large womanly hips.

He has a pettish face, with a tense, red-lipped mouth and

tiny eyes that flicker restlessly under glass, like tadpoles. They travel over Bridie in a series of inky darts.

He expected rather more.

But then people are always disappointing in the flesh if you've heard brave things about them. And, of course, Bridie Devine would be diminished, what with the debacle of her last disastrous case.

The caller looks closely to see how diminished Bridie Devine might be.

She is small and sturdy and stalwart in appearance; she'd stand in a storm. Divested of her bonnet her hair, a riotous shade of auburn, escapes in wisps from her white widow's cap. Her eyes are prominent, muddy green and roguish, changeable in expression. The caller is instantly put in mind of harems and savages, high seas and vagabonds.

'You are here on business, sir?' asks Bridie.

'On a matter of great urgency and even greater delicacy, madam.'

'You represent yourself in this matter?'

He shakes his head. 'No, I represent a man of great social standing.'

'Good for him, and who are you that he's sent to me then? His valet?'

The smile becomes rigid. 'His friend and personal physician, William Harbin.'

'Are you now? Well, isn't that grand.'

Bridie motions him to sit and takes the seat opposite. Dr Harbin perches his backside on the edge. He's a man with business so pressing he hasn't time to sit down properly.

'And he's entrusted this matter, this delicate, urgent matter, to you?'

The smile stays fixed. Dr Harbin puts a hand up to stroke his whiskers, one side and then the next, gently, reassuringly, as if they are fretful pets about to jump off his face.

'I must say,' says Dr Harbin. 'I thought my employer was misguided in seeking out your services. I was certain that you had ceased to trade. Shut up shop, so to speak.'

'As you can see I am still here, Dr Harbin,' replies Bridie, grimly.

He throws her a sly glance. 'It shows an admirable fortitude, carrying on, all things considered. Your last case: a young boy, was it not, Mrs Devine?'

A young boy she could not find in time.

She had read the story of her failure on his body: curly-haired, web-toed, dead. Perfect but for three inconspicuous bruises, one each side of his nostrils and one under his chin. Burked. A pattern a one-time resurrection girl would recognise, even if the buyer of the corpse didn't.

'Dreadful business.' The doctor adopts a sympathetic expression. 'We heard all about it, even where we are. Miles from London.'

Yes, you peeled bollock, thinks Bridie. It was in all the bloody newspapers.

'The trouble is,' continues Dr Harbin, 'any amateur can call themselves an investigator. But is it not best to leave that sort of thing to the police?'

'The police were involved in the case you referred to, Dr Harbin. I was not the only person searching for the stolen child.'

The doctor makes a gesture with his hand, a wave of sorts, at once dismissive and conciliatory.

Bridie looks him square in his sliddery eyes. 'If you are of a mind that a police investigation is preferable, sir, then why are you here?'

Dr Harbin reddens, a deep flush inclusive of ears and nose-tip.

Bridie stands and walks to the door. She picks up the bell. 'Would you care to join me in a drop of Madeira, Dr Harbin? It could only help matters.'

Cora comes instantly into the room. She throws Bridie an impatient look. This is taking far longer than a good clatter would.

‘Cora, would you bring the Madeira? The special vintage.’

Cora winks at Bridie, glowers at the guest and goes to fetch the decanter. Bridie has a plan. She’ll get this arse-sponge drunk on whatever coaxing mix that is in that Madeira bottle and then he’ll be rattling with news.

‘To recapitulate once more, Dr Harbin: you are here on behalf of Sir Edmund Athelstan Berwick – a baronet, no less. His six-year-old daughter, Christabel, is missing and, by your reckoning, almost certainly kidnapped.’

‘That is correct.’

‘Sir Edmund is widely held to have no heir, that his marriage to the late Lady Berwick was without issue.’

Dr Harbin’s eyes scurry behind glass; he nods.

‘But now it transpires Sir Edmund had kept a small and secret daughter at his home, Maris House.’

‘Yes.’

‘Sir Edmund is adamant that only four people know about her existence.’

‘That is correct.’

‘And those people are yourself, the butler, the housekeeper and the child’s nurse.’

‘Yes.’

‘That is, the nurse who is currently missing alongside the child?’

Dr Harbin is hesitant. ‘Yes.’

‘And Sir Edmund has never mentioned his daughter to anyone else: friends, relations, interested parties?’

Dr Harbin is beginning to sound weary. ‘That is correct.’

‘And Lady Berwick is deceased.’

‘Yes.’

‘When and how?’

‘Is that relevant, Mrs Devine?’

‘I haven’t decided yet.’

Dr Harbin looks resentful. ‘Lady Berwick had a tragic accident. A few days after Christabel’s birth.’

‘What sort of accident?’

‘Drowned, unfortunately.’

‘Where?’

‘In the ornamental pond in the grounds of Sir Edmund’s estate.’

‘Lady Berwick drowned in a pond?’

Even Dr Harbin doesn’t seem convinced. ‘Yes.’

‘So Sir Edmund’s heir has passed all six years of her life motherless, hidden away?’

Dr Harbin nods.

Bridie palms her pipe. ‘Do you object, sir?’

She reads the lift in his eyebrows as assent.

Bridie finds her tobacco, fills the bowl, tamps it down, lights it and raises a cloud. Then she remembers her resolve not to smoke, and instantly disremembers it.

Dr Harbin’s shuffles; his long legs twitch, wanting to be gone.

‘Have you a problem sitting, Dr Harbin?’

‘I am anxious to return to Sir Edmund in his hour of need, madam.’

‘Naturally.’ Bridie smokes her pipe serenely.

Dr Harbin makes an effort to stay still.

‘I am a little confused, Dr Harbin. Why would anyone hide a child away from sunlight and playmates, parties and Christmas? I’m assuming that, deprived of her liberty, the child has experienced none of these things.’

Dr Harbin looks to be studying his glass of Madeira, but it is hard to tell where his eyes are moving in the far-off depth behind his spectacles.

‘The child wants for nothing,’ he says. ‘She has everything she needs. As for playmates, she has my own daughter, Myrtle.’

‘Then there are *five* people who know about her existence?’

Dr Harbin’s fingers tighten on the stem of his glass. ‘Yes.’

‘Is there anyone else you’ve neglected to tell me about, sir?’

‘No, madam.’

‘The chimney-sweep, or the cats’ meat man? Perhaps they have met Christabel too?’

He is riled. Bridie detects a tightening of the mouth and an increase of leg-twitching.

She smiles. ‘You still haven’t answered my question, Dr Harbin. Why was the child hidden away?’

‘She is somewhat *unique*,’ says Dr Harbin, his voice stilted with anger.

‘What variety of unique?’

‘Sir Edmund has not given me permission to disclose that.’

‘Come, come, as the family physician you must have examined the child?’ Bridie studies the doctor closely.

And there it is: the doctor winces.

‘What can you disclose, Dr Harbin?’ asks Bridie evenly.

Dr Harbin’s hand goes up to his whiskers, for a soothing pat. ‘I can disclose that the child has singular traits – I *will not* disclose what these are – which have prevented her from entering society.’

‘So many mysteries! A missing girl hitherto kept a perfect secret from the world . . . that must have been difficult to contrive. But then again, six-year-old girls are usually small and quiet.’

Dr Harbin winces again. Again, Bridie notices.

‘And the missing nurse, how long had she been with the child?’

‘Nearly a month. Mrs Bibby came highly recommended.’

‘Not very long, then – and before Mrs Bibby?’

‘Sir Edmund’s own childhood nurse.’

‘Please elaborate.’

Dr Harbin pauses. ‘She drowned, unluckily.’

‘In the ornamental pond?’

‘No, in a wash-tub,’ says Harbin stiffly. ‘She slipped and fell.’

‘Dangerous place to live, Maris House.’ Bridie takes a puff on her pipe. ‘And you are telling me that the rest of the servants know nothing of Sir Edmund’s secret child.’

‘They know nothing of the child, madam.’

‘Dr Harbin, you know as well as I do – having kept them and doubtlessly having read the advice pertaining to them – that servants never know nothing. They have eyes, ears, brains and an addiction to gossip. This equips them to flush out secrets like trail dogs.’

‘Sir Edmund’s servants are loyal and discreet.’

‘You passed the child’s nurse, Mrs Bibby, off as—’

‘A seamstress, restoring the hangings in the west wing.’

‘The west wing being where the child was kept hidden?’

‘Yes.’

Bridie relights her pipe, thinking, smoking with relish. A movement in the corner of the room catches her eye. Behind the potted palm, next to the window, the dead man from the chapel-yard stands. He is rummaging down the front of his drawers. He glances up and, catching her eye, looks momentarily confused, then melts into the wall. Bridie waits, marking his point of departure, but there are no further emanations of a phantasmal nature.

‘Mrs Devine, are you quite well?’

‘I am, of course.’ She waves her empty glass in the direction of the decanter Cora has left on the sideboard. ‘Would you be so kind, Dr Harbin?’

Bridie is on her fifth glass and Dr Harbin has hardly tasted his first. He drinks Madeira like a maiden aunt, but it’s of no matter; the investigation is loosening up nicely now.

‘Have the police been informed, Dr Harbin?’

Dr Harbin looks cagey. ‘They were called by a servant who thought that a robbery had occurred.’

‘And it had, of course. But the police weren’t told of the theft of the small and secret daughter?’

‘No.’

Bridie nods; it’s as she expected. ‘The perpetrators have yet to make any demands?’

‘As I left there had been no word. Sir Edmund is willing to pay any ransom.’

‘Ransoming the child may not be the intention of her abductors.’

‘Whatever their intention, my employer wants his daughter found as a matter of urgency,’ Dr Harbin counters coldly. ‘Sir Edmund will recompense you for your trouble and your utmost discretion. And hopes that you will accept a generous bonus on the safe return of the child.’

Bridie frowns. She has the bones of the case – a stolen secret heir, missing nurse – but not the meat of it.

‘There’s a great deal you’re not telling me, Dr Harbin.’

‘I’ve told you everything Sir Edmund entrusted me to tell you.’

‘Even so, you’re a bit light on the old observations, the facts as they stand, for a man of science. The doctors I know love to put their guinea’s worth in.’ On Bridie’s face a notion of a smile. ‘Are you sure you’re not the valet, sir?’

Dr Harbin puts down his glass and stands abruptly. He steps forward, threat flickering darkly behind his spectacles. He reaches his hand into the pocket of his frock coat . . .

With a rush and a blur Ruby Doyle strides out from the wall and stands in front of Bridie, in a fighting stance. One hand is raised in a formidable fist, the other hitches up his spectral drawers.

Bridie stifles a laugh.

Dr Harbin, undeterred (seeing nothing but thin air between himself and Bridie Devine), pulls his hand out of his pocket.

In it sits nothing more dangerous than an envelope.



Bridie contemplates the envelope on the mantelpiece as she smokes her pipe distractedly, not altogether alone in her parlour.

Ruby has taken the chair opposite, having made a great act of kicking the departing doctor up his arse. He sits with his top hat between his knees, pulling on the side of his magnificent moustache; his gaze roams the room but mostly it falls on Bridie.

Cora comes in without knocking. 'What did the bollock want?'

'You heard, you were outside the door with your ears flapping.'

Ruby straightens up. 'Does this one see me? Ask her.'

'Cora,' says Bridie, pointing at Ruby in the chair, 'what's that?'

Cora glances over. 'A chair.'

'And on the chair?'

Cora steps forward and runs a large hand over the arm of the chair and the back of it. Ruby crouches in the seat.

'Lint, dust, fluff,' says Cora. 'Is this about my housekeeping?'

Bridie looks at Ruby. 'Not at all.'

Cora turns down the gas-lights. 'You took the case, then?'

'They want the child found.'

Cora studies her. 'And are you ready for that, after last time?'

'Am I to decline?' Bridie asks. 'Even mutton is no longer on the menu. I've no idea what meat you're serving but it's hard to get down.'

‘It’s even bloody harder to run down,’ mutters Cora, mutinously. ‘Well, it’s up to you. If I can help, I will.’

Cora the loyal, since the day Bridie brought her home. A decade has passed since Bridie first set eyes on Cora, huddled in a bear cage.

It had been a rapid descent for Cora, from circus noblesse to livestock. She had long changed hands, from her unwed mother to the orphanage, the orphanage to a travelling circus. Cora had toured the country as headlining act *Gertrude ‘Tree-Topping’ Gigantes* and long-term mistress of Benny Whitlow, a well-respected showman from the north of England. When Benny died unexpectedly his nephew inherited the show and Cora along with it. Benny’s nephew devised new and sordid variations of her act, to satisfy select audiences with infernal tastes. The beatings started when Cora refused him. They worsened when she tried to run away.

Bridie, visiting the circus to investigate the alleged theft of an audience member’s emerald-set brooch, heard tales of a giantess held captive in a bear cage. She explored the camp and found Cora.

Bridie threatened Benny’s nephew with the law. When that didn’t work she threatened him with a pistol. In an act of glorious defiance Bridie picked the lock of the bear cage, liberated Cora, and the pair of them walked out of the circus in broad daylight. Benny’s nephew had no doubt, from the look on Bridie’s face, that she would shoot anyone who tried to stop them. Thereafter, Cora appointed herself Bridie’s housemaid. Bridie hasn’t had a decent meal since.

Cora lays a frugal fire. ‘You leave tomorrow for the scene of the crime?’

‘Maris House, Polegate.’

‘A proper nob?’

‘Sir Edmund Athelstan Berwick, no less.’

Cora grunts. Nobs are one and the same to her. She gets

up, wiping her hands on her apron. At the door she turns back, nursing a question.

‘I’ll find her, Cora,’ says Bridie.

‘Else you know where she’ll end up?’

Bridie nods grimly.

Cora gives her a stern, sad, splay-toothed smile and is gone, whistling down the corridor with the coal-scuttle clanking against her muscled calves.

Bridie settles back in her chair to smoke her pipe and watch the mean little fire in the grate.

‘Where will the child end up? If you don’t find her?’ Ruby’s voice is soft.

‘You, sir, followed me home from Highgate Chapel, entered my home without invitation and eavesdropped on my confidential business.’

‘I did, madam,’ admits Ruby, his expression unrepentant.

Bridie studies him carefully. He is no less wondrous now than he was in the chapel-yard. She sees him in perfect detail, from the mud on his boots to the loose button on his drawers and unravelling bandages on his fists. Yet through his bare chest she can see a tapestried cushion and the antimacassar on the chair behind him.

‘Why are you here, Ruby Doyle?’

‘There’s no life at all in that chapel-yard.’

Bridie ponders this. ‘Why would you not be in a Catholic church-yard?’

‘I am where my friends saw fit to put me.’ His face falls. ‘They drank the money.’

‘Ah no, they put up that nice headstone for you,’ says Bridie, kindly.

‘So they did.’

Bridie rekindles her pipe, giving it a few rapid shochs. She squints at the dead man through the smoke. ‘I’m not in the market for a haunting.’

Ruby opens his bandage-bound hands. 'I'm not haunting you. I just thought seeing as we're old friends—'

'You would follow me home and haunt me. As I told you before, I don't know you.'

Ruby leans forwards and lowers his voice. 'Now, what did the big fella in the dress mean about the stolen child? Where will she end up?'

'Don't digress. Cora is not a fella, she's a lady.'

The ghost looks incredulous.

'I'm not joking.'

The ghost looks sceptical.

'You heard what Dr Harbin had to say, you were there hiding in the wall.'

'Rum bloody cove.'

Bridie smiles wryly. 'Thank you for saving me from him.'

'In my experience, if a fella hops up and reaches into his pocket he's likely to produce something that will sting a bit.'

'I appreciate your solicitude, Ruby.'

A polite nod. 'You were saying, about the child.'

'The stolen child, as you yourself heard from Dr Harbin's testimony, was born different. What Cora was alluding to are the three reasons why a child who has been born different—'

'Like little Christabel Berwick.'

'Like Christabel Berwick, should have been taken. For the obtaining of a ransom, for the collection of a private anatomist, or for a life as a circus curiosity.'

'A private anatomist?'

'A loose term, Ruby, I use it to denote individuals of considerable means with an unhealthy interest in the darker aspects of nature's diverse bounties.'

'How is the child different?'

'Your guess is as good as mine, Ruby.'

Ruby sits quietly, lost in his ruminations, absently stroking the battered silk of his spectral hat. Then: 'I'm at liberty, if you'd like a bit of assistance with the finding of the child.'

'I work alone.'

'Would you not make an exception, for an old friend with time on their hands?'

'I wouldn't.'

Ruby points to the picture over the fireplace. 'That's Ireland there.'

'Wicklow.'

'It's a likeness: the mud and the hills and the rain.'

'I hardly remember it.'

'I knew it was you,' he says, 'as soon as I saw you standing in the chapel-yard with your red hair spilling out from under your wee cap. I said to myself, "Holy Mother of God, there goes Bridget. Green eyes and a biblical temper."' "

'What do you know about my temper, or my eyes?' Bridie puts the bit of her pipe between her lips.

'I'm tormented watching you.' There's a gleaming smile on him now.

Bridie narrows her eyes. 'Meaning?'

'What I'd do for a smoke.'

'Then don't watch me.'

They sit before the fire.

When Bridie glances up she finds Ruby studying her. Feeling a sudden heat in her cheeks, Bridie moves her chair further from the hearth.

Ruby casts her an arch look. 'It was you that conjured me up out of the ground, Bridie. I heard your little feet trotting above me and up I came, running after you.'

The tenderness in his saying of her name is not lost on her. She runs a stern eye over him. 'You were already conjured up, Ruby, slumped against a tomb. Besides, how could I conjure someone I don't know?'

Ruby stands. He arranges himself in front of the fire, as if warming his backside. 'And you really don't know me?'

'Jesus, just tell me,' says Bridie, and immediately regrets the saying of it.

There in Bridie's words is her trust in the truth of it: that they have known each other. And there in her words is her wanting of an answer.

On Ruby's face: triumph. The anchor tattooed on his arm lowers itself gracefully. The mermaid smiles into her looking-glass.

'You're the investigator, you fathom it.'

And with that, he drifts through the wall with a wink.