



Who Am I?

I with a vizard-mask am born,
To show my face the world I scorn;
And though the curious searchers strive
Me of my vizard to deprive;
Although they bite their nails and frown,
Long as I can I'll keep unknown,
Nor am I without cause this shy,
For when bold mortals me descry,
I at that very moment die.*

* Solutions to all riddles can be found at page 432.

I

A Riddle

Insensible as clay, deaf, dumb and blind,
I yet possess each passion of the mind,
Rage, tenderness, guilt, joy and fear
Dwell in my breast and in my words appear.
Some at my sight you'll see with horror start –
While others fondly press me to their heart.
But though the object of a strong desire,
Ungrateful folk oft doom me to the fire.

The 30th to 31st day of July 1752

Luminary: Sun sets 35 minutes after 7.

Observation: Venus is in the Ascendant and shows many perturbations.

Prognostication: An unlucky day for travel.

'An unlucky day for travel.' The phrase tolled like a doom bell in Tabitha's skull as she woke. Wincing against the over-bright morning, she groped a hand to the other side of the bed, but found no warm flesh there, only cold rumpled linen. Raising herself stiffly, she pushed skeins of hair from her face. No doubt her gentleman had gone to the privy or, even better, to settle her bill. Busy voices and clatter from the downstairs of the inn told her she'd slept exceedingly late.

Her first stab of misgiving was heralded by the disappearance of the gold sovereign from the table. And where was her box, her trunk, her bag? In a twinkling she was up on bare feet, scrabbling beneath the table, beneath the bed. 'The black-hearted dog!' she cursed, then a tremor shook her voice. 'No, no. My mother's money . . .'

Casting around the room in despair, she found even her flowered silk gown had vanished. After pulling hard on the maid's bell, she laced the few garments the rogue had spared her over the top of her stale shift. Here was her quilted petticoat and

satin stays; but not a thread remained of stockings, cloak or hat. Ill-matched with this scanty apparel, the villain had left her fancy ribboned shoes neatly at the bedside.

A scrawny serving girl appeared.

‘The gentleman in black and green. Where is he?’

‘Why, he got the early morning flyer, madam.’

‘But he said . . .’ Oh, what did it matter what he had said? ‘I have been robbed by the rascal! Fetch the landlord.’

The Malmsey-bloated landlord appeared at the doorway, his face pinched with suspicion.

‘Look, sir! I have been robbed – by one of your patrons, no less. And he’s taken a deal of money I owe my mother.’ Her eyes pricked at its mere mention.

‘Now hold your horses, missy,’ grumbled the landlord. ‘Even if he were a gentleman, I never set eyes on the fellow before you led him to your chamber. I charged his drinks to your bill, just as he asked.’

She wanted to spit in the rogue’s eye. Lifting empty palms, she cried, ‘The villain has taken every farthing I own, and my box and clothes besides. What am I to do, sir?’

Pushing the door closed, the landlord took a few steps towards her. ‘So? Is it the magistrate you be wanting?’ He lifted his bushy brows, knowing the answer well enough.

She shook her head, unable to disguise her wretchedness. ‘But my bill of charges . . .’

‘That scoundrel’s made a proper fool of you, young miss. Mend your ways, is my advice. If you don’t want any trouble, clear off smartish and I’ll wipe the slate.’

Chastened by his kindness, she mumbled, ‘I shall repay you when I can.’

‘Repay me by keeping clear of this inn, you hear?’

The little maid hung back after her master had left, jittering excitedly. ‘Some of these villains carry the timetables to all the rattlers – sneaking from inn to inn, forever acting the stranger. Travelling folk be easy pickings to them.’

Wearily, Tabitha remembered her own sorry plans to strip the fellow of his purse and abandon him at first light. If only she had woken first. What a fool she felt herself – the biter bit, indeed.

TABITHA HAD INTENDED TO hire a carriage to take her baggage to Netherlea, but now she was forced to walk. Though she was mortified to appear outdoors in such undress, it was at least a fine summer’s day, the sun shining bright upon the hard-baked road. Down Chester’s Bridge Street she strode as fast as she might, past high-gabled brown and white half-timbered mansions, avoiding the eyes of strangers. Passing the bridge tower, she crossed the River Dee in a throng of hawkers and market folk, weaving to avoid horses’ hooves and the pole-ends of sedans. On the far side, she turned aside for the water meadows and near-forgotten path to Netherlea. Passing a familiar sandstone tomb, she idly traced the gritty image of a spear-bearing woman, just as she had on a hundred childhood errands. It had been the local custom to make a wish there, to some pagan witch or other. What was her wish now? Everything she truly wanted was impossible: to have her money back and more besides, to have Robert at her side again, to be a thousand miles away, inhabiting another, carefree life.

The events of the previous night blazed in her mind as she

marched steadily on beside the river. Two days had already passed since the date she had told her mother to expect her. Robert had kept her back in London, promising a fine farewell, so she had bought herself the flowered gown and ribboned shoes. Their encounter had ended with violent words in the street; he complaining that his wife was ill, at which Tabitha replied she hoped the malady would prove fatal. Then the coach had run tiresomely late, trundling along rutted byways and through naked and uncivilized land for mile after mile. Chester's church bells had been ringing eleven chimes, the moon a sickly crescent, when the coach rolled into the walled city.

When she had strode into the smoky fug of the White Lion, all eyes had risen and fixed upon her. She wore her hem raised high to show scarlet heels and pretty ankles. Sending the landlord's boy upstairs with her box and bags, she sauntered to a table by the fire. Taking her seat, she laid her head back against the panelled oak, content to breathe in pipe tobacco and hops, and find herself blessedly motionless.

'The gentleman's compliments,' the tapster had announced, setting a bottle of garnet-red claret and two glasses down before her. From the chimney corner, the said gentleman tipped his hat in her direction – a lean-faced cove, in a coat of black with green frogging. She had not turned a trick since meeting Robert, but now that he had scorned her, what price a loyal heart? Rapidly, she calculated. After she had given her mother five pounds, and paid her fare home again to London, she would have less than twenty pounds to keep herself afloat. Sitting upright, she banished weariness and turned to her admirer, posing a coquetish question with her eyes. Slowly he approached, and though his

deep-pocked visage was not quite as handsome as the shadows had promised, she thought him no less agreeable than many another.

Setting his tricorne on the table, he poured her a glass of claret. 'Have you travelled far?' His voice was hoarse and low, with a faint Irish lilt.

'From the capital. I miss it sorely, already.'

'You are seeking business tonight, lady?'

Well, straight to business he goes, she thought sourly, at the same time affecting laughter. 'I should rather say I am in pursuit of pleasure, sir.' No, that wouldn't do; she was not about to give the goods away for free. 'Most especially, with a kind and generous gentleman,' she added airily.

He leaned towards her and narrowed his grey, gleaming eyes. 'Why, just today my banker gave me a fresh-minted sovereign of the prettiest gold. Is that . . . agreeable?'

After a pause, Tabitha nodded, raising her glass. 'Now business is done – let us raise a toast to pleasure.'

He took a long draught of claret, then delved in his pocket and pulled out a globe-shaped silver article. Turning it upside down, he flipped open the top.

'That's a curious trifle.' She leaned forward to gain a better view. It was formed in the shape of a human skull, but about the size of a bantam egg. He had swung its jaws open on a hinge, revealing a silver watch-dial marked with Roman numbers and circled with gold. The time was accurate: it wanted only thirteen more minutes to midnight.

She reached out to touch it, but he snatched it to his chest.

'Hold. His teeth are sharp. Death has his bite, see?'

With great care he closed the mouth and displayed the miniature skull on his palm. It was gruesomely beautiful, decorated with tiny figures, mottoes, hollow eyes and bared teeth. Across its domed brow was a familiar scene from Robert's collection of curiosities.

'Death bearing his scythe and hourglass,' she murmured. 'Standing between a castle and cottage with equal favour. A *memento mori*; a reminder we all will die.' Then, meeting the Irishman's eye, she uttered a favourite remark of Robert's: 'So passes the glory of the world.'

'Now who would have thought a girl of the night would fancy herself a scholar?' he said coolly. 'It's almost midnight. Time lost cannot be won again; that is my creed.' Pocketing his macabre toy, he extended a hairy hand towards her. With barely an instant's hesitation, she let him lead her up the staircase.

Her chamber had not been the cheapest the inn could offer, but she was glad of the wide, damask-draped bed and feather-plump mattress. He pulled her towards him the moment the door was closed, and she put up a lively performance, running her fingers up and down his body and coaxing him ever closer to the softness of her flesh. Aha, there was the pretty *vanitas*, a solid lump inside the silk of his coat. Distracting him with burrowing kisses, she helped him from his coat, and at the same time slipped the silver skull into the secret pouch inside her petticoat. After that, the gentleman had applied himself manfully, but she had been glad he made no great effort to prolong their congress. Before she fell asleep, she had mused that the gruesome watch alone would turn the night's venture to profit.

The silver skull. Pausing on the grassy path, she rooted

inside her petticoat and pulled out the watch, swinging it like a pendulum on its silver chain, gratified to feel it hang as heavy as a bag of silver. She placed it to her ear: it had stopped ticking. Then her predicament struck her. Skin the dog alive, she couldn't even pawn it. If the thief was riding the coaches, the watch must have been stolen from some traveller, and might be searched for in Chester. She needed to keep it secret until she could find a trusty fence, down in the capital. Until then, not a soul must see the grinning skull.

Moving on, she made an inventory of all her other losses: her favourite gown and ruffles; a coral bracelet given to her long ago by Robert; laced linen that conjured happier days abed; a shell mirror; a token in the shape of Venus allowing admittance to Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. It was mortifying to turn up at Netherlea as ill-dressed as she had left it. The shame of it burned like a branding iron.

Again she heard an echo of the past. All the previous day, a farmer's wife on the Chester coach had prated from her almanack. 'Today is a day of misfortune on the roads – an unlucky day for travel.' Beneath the shade of her saucily tipped bonnet, Tabitha had rolled her eyes, wondering at what a credulous age she lived in. But was not her own mother a devotee of the same *Vox Stellarum* almanack, making a ritual of marking the days, and reading the prognostications without fail?

A little whimper escaped her lips – she had lost her mother's letter with her stolen box. Yet there was no need to reread the tremulous lines, she had them by heart . . .

It would be best, Tabitha dear, if instead of posting the money for the infant you delivered it here by your own hand, for I must have

THE ALMANACK

words with you, of a grave and private sort. There is something afoot that may only be an old woman's foolishness, yet I can confide it to no one else in the world. Come quickly, dear, before July is ended, as I fear time may be short. I should dearly love to see your bonny face once more, and pray your sharp wits prove a fretful old matron wrong.

Your affectionate and ever-loving,

Mother

How her heart had sunk when she first opened the letter, recalling her shameful departure from Netherlea more than a year past. It was a reminder, too, of a blood oath, unthinkingly sworn one desperate winter's night. Her fingers felt sticky; she fancied, too, that they smelled faintly of iron and salt. Devil take it, why must she venture back? Netherlea was a village of countrified clods, gossips and whisperers. Yet it also held her mother's home, where Tabitha had been born and reared, and whence she had, with much relief, escaped. In London she had kept her past tucked away like dirty clouts, hidden behind the baubles and glitter of her new life. Now, with a sense of dread, she took the soiled memories out once more. She must keep her visit short, and her secret secure.

THE RIVERSIDE PATH WAS deserted that morning; from the golden motes in the air, she guessed most folk must be hay-making. Crossing a well-remembered meadow, she drank at an icy brook and breakfasted on bilberries fresh from the earth; the taste of them, tartly sweet, was fresher than any food she had eaten in years. Thereafter her way grew easy and she passed the succeeding miles serenely. She had forgotten the

lushness of the Cheshire sward in midsummer; the murmur of insects on the wing, the wildflowers that bedizened her path. Idly she picked meadowsweet, wild rose and ragged robin, twining them into a chain and then winding it in a circlet through her hair. Why, in London she often paid twopence for half-dead twists of heather. And truth be told, her diminished costume was suited to the glorious heat, leaving her arms bare of all but her thin shift.

Ahead of her loomed the high peak of Beeston Castle, casting a fairy-book silhouette against the blue sky. Pulling off her pinching shoes, she walked barefoot on the silky grass, enjoying the coolness between her toes, inhaling bruised mint. How many times had she walked this path? Here was the cave where a band of village children had conspired to sleep one night, until a flurry of lights sent them shrieking home again. Joshua, their leader, had said they were the torches of dead Roman soldiers, hunting children to work in their mines.

There had been peculiar objects buried in the dirt, she remembered now. Turned to stone by witches, they had seemed, the blackened knives, spearheads and bracelets; all of them magical, especially the thumb-sized figurines like petrified fairies. Sometimes their finds were snatched and used as charms by the village women. Mostly, she recalled taking relics up to Bold Hall, where the De Vallorys' steward paid a penny for every trifle they found. She paused at the hollow oak where the children had often played and now found warm embers and charred animal bones. Tinkers, she thought, or tramps halting on the road.

She left the wood, and soon Eglantine Hall and its park came into view. The ancient Tudor tower stood intact and impressive,

THE ALMANACK

but the house had been shot to a soulless shell in the Civil War. The sun flashed on only a few mullioned windows rising above the ruins.

A stone fish pond glittered through the undergrowth; a boon to a sore-footed traveller. Slipping through the shrubbery, she crept to the water's edge. Above her, she caught sight of a wisp of smoke, rising from the tower's barley-sugar twisted chimneys. So Eglantine Hall was tenanted, for the first time in years. She must be silent and secret – but no one was going to stop her bathing her raw toes.

II

A Riddle

It bears me many miles away,
Yet in my room it's there.
It has no wings to soar and play,
Yet lifts me through the air.

It is the craft of fastest motion,
Yet has no need for sail nor oar,
With speed of thought I cross an ocean –
One instant and I'm on the shore.

The 31st day of July 1752

Lammas Eve

Luminary: Moon rises 24 minutes
after 4 of the afternoon.

Observation: Mercury the Messenger
is with the Moon.

Prognostication: Unsettling change is at hand.

Nathaniel Starling lifted his spyglass to his eye and surveyed the view from his lofty perch on the roof of Eglantine Hall. Over in Netherlea, groups of villagers moved like ants, dragging branches across the green to the unlit bonfire. It surprised him that such customs had survived the wars, but tonight was Lammas Eve, accounted by antiquaries a most uncanny night. If the old rites were followed, tomorrow the loaf-mass would be baked from the first corn and carried to church to be blessed. Tonight, however, would be rather less holy. Did these rustic maidens and their swains still chase each other in the greenwood? That plump-cheeked dairymaid was forever playing the coquette when he called at the farm. He resolved to stroll over when the first fire was lit.

Nathaniel pulled aside a lock of unwashed hair and, through his eyeglass, surveyed the road to Chester. He saw none of the usual passers-by: the vagabonds heading for Tinkers Wood, or Mr

Dilks the parson bowling along to Bishops Court, or Sir John's brother, Doctor De Vallory, returning from a consultation in a coach that bore the family crest.

Neither was there anything astir behind the diamond panes of Bold Hall. It was a fine old manor from the days of the Tudors, three storeys of blackened antique timbers laid in stripes and chevrons over white plaster. In what luxury that man lived. Sir John De Vallory had not a care in the world, save for pocketing his rents and choosing how to spend his money.

The task Nathaniel was set upon – to introduce himself to the man and gain his trust – made him sick with apprehension. Yet he had to do it. Death and bones, even the contemplation of it made Nathaniel weary. He yawned. All night he had been puzzling his imagination hot with slow stranglings, the anatomization of cracking bones and steaming guts, and today his spirit felt as filthy as his stained hands. Later he would strip himself of his night-stinking clothes and dive into the pond to sluice himself of these horrors. His every atom felt unclean.

Taking a draught of ale from the leather jug, he turned his eye to the woods: massy green foliage intersected by twinkles of silver dancing on the river. Sir John's fields were a chessboard of ashen oats, silk-green barley and yellow, ripening corn. He yawned. The zephyrs cooling his cheek were perfumed with flowers, and wood pigeons cooed from their roosts in the stone walls below him.

SUDDENLY THE SOUND OF splashing water reached his ears. Perhaps that fat drake had returned and he might have roast duck for dinner? But leaning over the battlement he saw

instead a woman seated on the banks of his private bathing pond. He made a silent inspection of the intruder. Not the usual coarse village girl, but a fine-looking woman, tantalizingly half-dressed in expensive underclothes. Nat held his breath as she dabbled her toes and leaned back lazily on her palms, her strong face uplifted in the sun's beams, eyes closed and unpinned hair tumbling groundwards. A garland of Ophelian wildflowers crowned her head.

Jerkily, he directed his lens across her form, wondering who in Heaven's name she might be. And why was this nymph so scantily dressed? To bathe, perhaps? Or had she a lover nearby, for whom she had pulled off her gown? No: his spyglass showed him no companion; she was as self-contained as a nut in a shell, lost in languorous oblivion. He leaned forwards, wondering where he might have seen her before. Was she an actress perhaps, a beauty he had once admired on the London stage? Her lips parted, and a moment later her song drifted upwards, fainter than the murmuring brook and the fluting of the pigeons.

*'And then my love built me a bower,
bedeck'd with many a fragrant flower;
A braver bower you ne'er did see,
than my true love did build for me.'*

The savagery of the night was banished at once. The air was magically still.

'Oh, fragrant flower,' he whispered. 'Oh, glorious nymph.'

He was resurrected from his long sojourn in the stews. Why did he sink to such vileness when he so longed for beauty?

MARTINE BAILEY

Perhaps he could compose poetry again, poetry worthy of this Euterpean muse. He turned the brass dial to frame the woman's languid, dreamy face, and her image filled his eyes, so close he might reach out and caress her cheek. Oh, sweet God; it was happening again, as it did almost every sap-high summer. Would he never learn? Imbecile that he was, he was falling in love.

III

A Riddle

Though I'm nothing that breathes, I'm dreaded by all,
And strange to declare, owe my rise to a fall.
I am always around, but I've never been seen,
You take pains to avoid me, but can't escape me,
I may choose to visit when you're old and grey,
Or if fortune foretells it, I'll grasp you today.
Manners dictate I give you strong embrace,
As I settle a final cold kiss on your face.
Whether I meet you in prayer, dread, or hate,
I will find you, I promise –
I am everyone's fate.

The 31st day of July 1752

Lammas Eve

Luminary: Sun rises 24 minutes
after 4 of the morning.

Observation: The Sun enters Leo at
which time Saturn is retrograded.

Prognostication: A complication that is worse
and better, good and bad.

Hearing voices raised in merriment, Tabitha slowed her pace as she neared Netherlea. Through a gap in the foliage, she saw the familiar great oak, spreading its branches over Church Common, and behind it Netherlea's ancient church and splendid modern parsonage. A bonfire was being built, by a crowd she knew only too well. There was Zusanna the dairy-
maid, whip-tongued queen of the village gossips, laughing shrilly with the young bucks, one hand at her waist and the other holding a tankard. Cam, her black-bearded giant of a husband, reclined on the grass with a jug at his side – perhaps dozing, perhaps watching his wife. Huddled at the church wall were Zusanna's mother Nell Dainty and her two cronies, passing judgement on their neighbours like three grey-haired harpies. Tabitha felt a powerful reluctance to show herself

there so ill-dressed. Instead, she took the shady lane that followed the brook, wondering how in the Devil's name she might find herself a fashionable costume in such a backwater.

Soon the brook broadened where the tide ran down from the mill race. At the ford, she lifted her hem and strode nimbly across the stepping stones. She had sung ten verses of her ballad before the thatch of her mother's dwelling peeped above the treeline; she quickened her pace, anticipating an affectionate greeting. Rounding the final turn, a squat wattle-and-daub cottage came into view, golden brown thatch sagging over the windows like a bonnet pulled low over two wide-set eyes. Behind the wicker fence, pink, yellow and purple blossoms ranged around canes of green beans. It was hard to credit that she had lived upon that tiny square of earth for nineteen years, reluctantly drilled in every homely art by her mother, from baking to brewing to mending and cleaning. This time, prodigal though she was, she would try to be a worthy daughter. She must fortify herself to talk with her mother and ask forgiveness for calling her a hypocrite, and worse.

From the perfumed garden, she entered the gloom beyond the open door. Not a jot had changed. The blackened fireplace cast a thin red glow across the rag rug to her mother's empty wooden chair. There were few possessions: a shelf of ancient platters, oddments of brass, a few pieces of time-polished furniture, while above her head hams and herbs hung from the ceiling beams.

'Is the kettle boiling?' she called, an ancient jest of theirs, for her mother's kettle boiled perpetually on the fire hook.

A figure stepped out from the back room – a slender young

woman who pulled up, stock-still, like a frightened coney. Tabitha started too – dressed in a white cap and apron, the girl had the uncanny appearance of being the phantom figure of her own younger self.

‘Who are you?’ The girl had a sweet voice, high-pitched with surprise.

‘I am Tabitha Hart, Widow Hart’s daughter. I might ask you the same.’

Making a curtsy, the girl said, more warmly, ‘It is me, Miss Tabitha. Jennet Saxton. You gave me such a startle, I couldn’t think who you were.’

Tabitha could barely remember Joshua’s stepdaughter, save as a slinking, silent child. Had she grown so quickly in the last year?

‘Mother!’ she called towards the bedroom. ‘I’m home.’ She had pulled up a wooden chair to the fire before she noticed Jennet’s woebegone expression. ‘What ails you, girl?’

Receiving no reply, she sprang up and lifted the curtain between the parlour and the bedroom. What she saw there threw her heart hard against her ribs. On the narrow bed stretched a figure that was her mother and yet not her mother at all, a small figure lying as if asleep in a nightgown and cap. Behind her, Jennet mumbled, ‘It were only yesterday . . .’

Her mother’s face was swollen, and mottled with patches of bluish red. Like the round eyes of a hideous doll, two copper pennies lay upon her eyelids. Tabitha sank to her knees at her mother’s bedside, taking a cold, resistant hand and pressing it against her cheek.

‘I’ve come too late,’ she whispered. If only time might turn around. If only she could have been spared a few moments more before her mother’s spirit had left this earthly realm.

SHE WAS STILL KNEELING by her mother’s bed when the bass notes of men’s voices in the parlour roused her. Jennet pulled back the curtain and whispered, ‘Miss Tabitha, the parson and the doctor have come a-calling.’

Tabitha hauled herself up, woefully aware of the sun-pinked flesh displayed above her stays. Damn that plaguey thief! Her mother would have been mortified by her appearance. Rifling through the few garments in the room, she found a modest grey linsey gown and bodice. She was a good hand’s-breadth taller than her mother, but beggars, as she was coming to comprehend, could not choose their dress. She swallowed back a little sob. The fabric felt like arms enfolding her, very soft from long wear, and smelling of lavender and her mother’s body.

‘Parson, Doctor.’ Tabitha cast her eyes to the floor – whatever rumours Netherlea might whisper of her, she was determined to behave with propriety.

The doctor rose, a puzzled look on his grave face.

‘You are Widow Hart’s daughter, newly returned from London? Tabitha by name? A sad homecoming for a daughter.’ With kindly condescension, he touched her hand; she rubbed her nose, and tried to smile, despite her wet eyes. The doctor wore the black fur-trimmed robe of his profession – though, as Sir John’s own brother, it was said he practised medicine only

from a noble vocation to help his fellow man. As he sat, Tabitha drew up a wooden stool for herself.

‘Sirs, pray tell me what has happened? Mother wrote to me to come home. I cannot comprehend—’

Parson Dilks broke in. He was as different from the doctor as a sow’s ear was from silk; a bloated toad, squashed into her mother’s narrow chair.

‘God moves with hidden intent,’ he rasped. ‘You must console yourself that your mother is safe with Christ now. Your neighbour, the constable, Mr Saxton, found her drowned in the river. He tried his best to rouse her, but . . . too late, on this occasion.’

‘Drowned? But no one knew the river better than Mother.’

The doctor nodded in sympathy. ‘I am afraid your mother’s mind was disordered somewhat since the springtime. We all observed how she forgot her duties, arrived and departed at unexpected times, went wandering in the night. I am afraid the softening of the brain is a common plight of those who age before their time.’

‘But she was no more than forty-five years of age.’ Tabitha’s voice rose in indignation.

‘It is a hard life for a widow, I fear, though it was agreed that young Jennet here should call each day and help her.’ The doctor nodded at the girl waiting in the corner. ‘Yester eve, alas, she must have had one of her fancies, and gone out wandering in the woods.’

Tabitha closed her eyes tight, trying to hold back tears. ‘Come quickly, dear,’ the letter had begged, ‘before July comes to an end.’

When she recalled herself again, the parson was speaking in his grating voice, familiar to her from a thousand sermons.

‘Tomorrow will do, after the Lammas service. And, you’ll need to borrow the pauper’s coffin.’ He cleared his throat. ‘That is, unless you mean to purchase a coffin yourself?’

Tabitha shifted uneasily. ‘Sirs, upon any other day I should have provided my mother with only the finest oak, and an engraved headstone too. But I was robbed this morning of all my money by a rogue who rides the coaches. I had no choice but to walk from Chester with only the garments on my back. I am entirely penniless.’ She lifted the corner of her mother’s apron and wiped her eyes.

Parson Dilks could barely hide his satisfaction. She would never forget his tirade when she had left Netherlea. ‘Strumpetting baggage!’ he had shouted down the lane after her. ‘Abandoning your brat to the care of your mother!’

As if at his cue, he asked, ‘I trust you will soon return whence you came?’

‘Certainly. But you must understand that my lack of funds constrains me at present.’

‘Dilks, you are not for setting this unfortunate out on the road tomorrow, are you? What of charity, man?’ demanded the doctor.

Through his clenched, yellow teeth, the parson replied: ‘My dear doctor, it is the parish that pays for this cottage, and Widow Hart’s stipend. I must consider who is worthy to be lodged here.’

The doctor tapped his cane impatiently on the floor. ‘May I make a suggestion to you and to your parish board? Appoint this young woman as her mother’s successor as village searcher. Else she is left without a roof for her own head – or her child’s.’

Tabitha shook her head. ‘I cannot do that, sir.’

‘Where else will you go without funds?’ the doctor asked.

The parson turned his unwholesome features to Tabitha. 'Are you even aware of the searcher's duties?'

Bewildered, Tabitha gave a little nod. 'Yes, sirs. I often accompanied my mother in her duties. To lay out the dead when the doom bell rings. And to write down the cause of each death in the Book of Mortalities.'

The parson shook his head. 'What of Nell Dainty? She has herblore and has waited long for this cottage. You employ her yourself in your garden, Doctor. She is deserving of charity.'

'Alas, I regret I cannot recommend her as searcher. She is competent at lesser tasks, preparing herbs and simple distillations, but her penmanship is poor. Tabitha, I recollect that you can read and write to a good standard?' The doctor was watching her closely, coaxing her to comply.

'I can, sir. I can read any book fluently, thanks to my mother's teaching, and I write a good gentlewoman's hand.'

'There were certain allegations made,' the parson retorted. 'This . . . female . . . is not respectable.'

The doctor turned to him, still courteous, but very cold. 'Should you like me to refer the matter to my brother? He always had a certain fondness for Widow Hart and her daughter, as I recall.'

As Tabitha listened she had time to gather her wits. 'I confess, a few weeks here to tidy my mother's affairs would be a great kindness, Doctor. Then I will be on my way.'

'Then it is agreed. I will recommend the appointment to my brother.' She felt the doctor's smile fall upon her like a benison.

From a second curtained chamber came a sudden raucous sound of wailing, growing ever more insistent. As both men

made ready to leave, the doctor pointed his cane towards the curtain.

‘And here is another reason to lodge Tabitha here, Parson. Now the child need not be paid for by the parish, either.’

The parson’s expression brightened. ‘That’s very true, sir. You are ahead of me in your arithmetic.’

As Jennet carried the struggling, bawling infant into the parlour, both men turned and made a hasty escape.

Two hours later, the child at last lay red-cheeked and exhausted in her linen-cushioned basket. Tabitha watched her warily, as if she might at any moment rouse herself again. Little Bess was no longer the drowsy babe-in-arms she had last seen; she was a stocky creature, as tall as Tabitha’s knee, and every inch of her bold and wilful. From the moment Jennet carried her into the parlour, the little maid had stared at her with undisguised dismay, her tiny lip trembling as she clung to Jennet’s gown. Dressed in a stained bonnet and smock, she toddled round the room, her grubby fingers poking everywhere they shouldn’t. After a long and tedious period of assessment, Bess had bravely made an approach to Tabitha, gaping upwards at this tall woman who was entirely a stranger.

‘Ma-ma,’ she babbled, and Tabitha stepped dutifully forward, forcing a rigid smile. But from the expression of terror in the child’s face, she might have been an ogress. Bursting again into tears, the child scurried at surprising speed back to Jennet and buried her face in the girl’s skirts.

‘See how my mother has spoiled her,’ Tabitha complained; the child would not even take a spoon of bread mush from her hand. But then, she had not given Bess a thought this last year

or more, save only to earn the five pounds she paid yearly for the child's keep. The notion of being this peevish brat's new guardian appalled her. She could think only of one solution, and that was to rid herself of her quickly, before she hurried back down the highway to London.