Penny Dreadful

by MickleDitch

Summary

[A sequel to the one-shot 'Cherrystones', which you should read first]. When a chance conversation alerts Oliver Brownlow to the fact that his old companion, Jack Dawkins, may be headed for trouble, he sets out to warn him, but instead becomes responsible for an escapade which will finally convince him where his deepest feelings lie. Contains m/m erotica.

Notes

1) Dickens began producing the first chapters of Oliver Twist in early 1837, before Victoria's ascent to the throne - and in the story itself, Sikes's pursuers demand for a door to be opened 'in the king's name', referring to William IV. So I'm saying that it took place in 1836. This story is set in the spring of 1853; Oliver is 27, and Jack 28.

2) Please to be noting that this is musical canon - movie musical canon, to be precise. Therefore Mr Brownlow is Oliver's biological great-uncle, Fagin and Dodger escaped arrest, and Oliver's complicated family history and related characters are expunged. Several other minor details also place the story firmly in myu-verse.

3) Most OT fanfics - and the various sequel novels that I call 'official fanfics' - center on Dodger, and it's no surprise why. I really wanted these stories, though, to focus on Oliver as
the main character, because I felt that he could grow up to be so much more than 'boring rich toff' - and I ended up being intrigued by his life quite apart from his relationship with Jack. Jack is a very powerful personality, and there had to be a reason for him to love and respect Oliver as he does here; Oliver had to be more than a match for him. Hopefully I at least partially succeeded in that.
Chapter 1

The child is a cripple. Oliver remembers some of them growing that way in the workhouse; children deprived of food, of all fresh, clean things, growing twisted like gnarled trees, like some reverse emergence of butterflies. His constitution had somehow been strong enough for his youthful limbs to escape the same fate, but he sees it again sometimes, these afternoons that he gives his time to what in respectable society are termed 'charity cases'. He knows what it is that they need, good air and sunlight, but that's as hard to come by in the bowels of the city as it is for their families to find money for the prescriptions that he writes for the apothecary. Epsom salts to break fevers, acetate of ammonia to purge some of what racks their innards. He tells them to make beef-tea and mutton-tea - although he knows that it's more likely to be broxy than mutton - for the children, to nourish them; the curved bones, the small hunched backs and knobby growths of the joints, as if the miasma around them has slowly seeped through and corrupted them from the inside out.

Oliver washes each time that he returns home, functional and inelegant, shirt sleeves up and half a can of water from the copper in with the carbolic soap in the kitchen sink, but he can't make it leave him, either.

He gives her syrup of squills because she's so small, in cold water; she only manages a few sips and then begins her hacking cough, rattling her tiny frame to the degree that most of the liquid ends up spilt. The cough actually troubles him much less because he knows from experience that there's a possibility that she'll live through it, unlike her other ailments. "I don't want to sleep," she says, when he tucks the blanket in around her chest, "it's not night," then coughs again. The woman, who there seems a possibility of being either mother or sister, frowns slightly, as if it's his fault for allowing it to happen.

"Two teaspoonfuls," Oliver says, "four times a day. And as soon as she's out of bed, open one of these windows and let some fresh air in, for heaven's sakes."

"Our dad'll belt me if we get a chill in the house."

The sister, then. She looks older, in the way that a hard life, not well lived, changes a face; the pretty roundness that should have been present ironed out. If Oliver were less polite, or had been practicing long enough to carry the weight of opinion that it would bestow, he could have simply retorted, *I am the doctor, madam, and I advise you to pay me some heed if you want to give any of these children their best chance of survival.* Instead, he says, tiredly, "Then please tell him that I'll call again and explain my theories to him."

"He doesn't hold much with doctors. Do more harm than good, he says." Her eyes move back to the child, and the frown returns as she brings her hand to her mouth to chew on a thumbnail. "She has to stay in bed?" she asks.

"For a week."

"But dad takes her up the market with him."

"Is there nobody who can stay with her? Not one of your family? A neighbour?"

She shakes her head, deliberately, as if that's the way for there to be neither.

Oliver touches the back of his hand to the child's forehead, relieved to at least not feel the unnatural
heat of fever. He suspects that her presence is as much for the purpose of drawing an extra shilling or two of sympathy from the crowds as it's due to the lack of a caretaker. "I don't want this girl kept out on the street until five in the evening when she ought to be resting."

She folds her arms across her chest. Even here, and like this, there's a pride about her; an awful sort of dignity. "With respects, Doctor, there's not many of us get what we want. Even those ones with lily-white hands like yours, who don't know what it is to do a day's work."

Oliver looks down at his hands, and in his mind's eye, he sees the calluses there once again, feels the sharp slivers of tarred rope pricking their way beneath his nails. The taste of oakum dust fills his throat, and he clears it, reflexively.

"No," he says, after a moment, "no. You're quite right. I don't."

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Despite his growing to manhood within its walls, the house in Bloomsbury has never seemed quite like home to Oliver. Rather, the feeling has always tugged at a small part of his mind of having been the guest there of his doting uncle, the permanent resident of a hotel where he has the urge to ask permission before touching the silverware. It's a gentle house that belies Edward Brownlow's bachelor status, full of heavy pots of lush green plants, books to read and always time to discuss them, and a grace that once settled as quietly and welcomingly as a warm blanket over a tired child, and that even business conversation around the drawing room table seems incapable of significantly disturbing.

Into this serene atmosphere a ten year old Oliver had been drawn, enfolded in the assurance that he was now back to stay, the sweet spritely face of his mother, captured for eternity, looking over him from the wall of the girlhood home where she had lived as her uncle's ward. Yet, from time to time, he would still find himself thinking of it as more hers than his own, it seeming more suited to her ways than to those of a boy accustomed to sleeping on hopsacking and pricking his thumbs with sewing needles; those of a parish boy who ran away and walked to London.

And even though seventeen years have stolen away since the last day that he was ever cold, or hungry, or in danger, there's not been another day again when he's been filled in quite the same way with the fear and excitement of walking so precariously the fine line between death and the very fullest experience of life.

His uncle had hoped that he might follow him to the Treasury. Having no natural sons of his own, Oliver knows that it would have been a source of pride for his adopted guardian if Oliver had gone into Whitehall, to perhaps one day inherit his own post. Yet, to his chosen profession, his uncle has nevertheless remained unfailingly supportive, seldom missing an opportunity to slip discreetly into a conversation a mention of my nephew, the physician, so that the foundations of Oliver's reputation are being quietly laid, brick by brick, on a ground made as solid by the respect awarded to Edward Brownlow's name as by his own practice. Some of Oliver's patients can't pay him what they should. He takes what they can afford and never gets round to sending them the real bill for one reason or another. He writes them prescriptions for their weak nerves and aches and pains, then goes home to help Sarah, his housemaid, turn his waiting room of the morning back into the dining room of the evening. He keeps his anatomy books in his small study across the hall in case they worry any of the men, let alone the ladies. He shouldn't be reading any of them, but he's fascinated; he can't stay away.

His appointment this afternoon is less fascinating. The shipping company that Richard Manns owns provides him with the income to pay Oliver as often as he cares to have him make a call, which is frequent, and a great deal more frequent than Oliver would have chosen. Not even the
reliable flow of neatly-wrapped sovereigns waiting on the table near the door for Oliver to discreetly collect on his way out, the only correct way for a gentleman to be paid when he cannot according to convention carry out a paid service, feels worth the endless perusals of Manns's recurrent malaises and Oliver's own distaste in being treated as personal physician by a man about whom he likes not one single thing, if his very name had not already been one that he had hoped never to encounter again. Manns's attempts at humour don't mean anything to him, so they don't mean anything to Oliver either. But the lack of change about his eyes when his face otherwise carries a smile means something, and it means something that the maids flinch when he addresses them, as if they're waiting for some real or imagined blow to fall. That a temper lurks only a very little way beneath the righteous and gentlemanly surface, Oliver has little doubt. When he steps across the threshold of Manns's door, the air invariably seems to take on a quality that makes Oliver feel as if he himself might be suddenly and mysteriously ill.

He recently obtained a binaural stethoscope of his own. How much more clearly one can sound out the lungs and hear the rhythms of the heart with the modest instrument, constructed along the lines of a pair of small, flexible ear trumpets, has captured his imagination from the first day, only reinforcing his conviction that the key to diagnosis is observing the body as closely as possible. Oliver's own persistent feeling that there's something not quite nice about it is frustrating, but not as much as the inference of none other than Doctor John Forbes that uncertainty is and ever should be the hallmark of the field of medicine. Manns for his part appears to share the royal physician's view of the use of such apparatus by a doctor as being not a little ludicrous. He smiles, tightly, when the stethoscope is taken out of its tin case.

"Come, Doctor, surely both your sensibilities and mine have both advanced beyond children's playthings? Where is the philosophy and humanity of medicine to be found in such an article?"

"Mr Manns, the stethoscope is more than a plaything. It allows far more efficient detection of any fluids than laying the head on the chest. The fever is gone once more and the cough is much improved for the most part, but this may be the reason for your slight shortness of breath. If fluids have accumulated, the capacity for air in the lungs is reduced."

"That's as may be, Doctor, that's as may be. I wonder, though, how our mutual acquaintance, your good uncle, views your methods of practice? Do not lean on your own understanding, as the Proverbs tell us."

"My uncle respects my work, Mr Manns," Oliver replies. The ire already beginning to rise feels almost ill-suited to him. He presses the chest piece of the stethoscope into the palm of his hand for a brief moment, which might pass for an attempt to make things more comfortable for the patient, but, in truth, is just his own wish to cool his twitching pulse against the ebony wood. "It would be of assistance, sir," he says, "if you were also to remove your shirt. I'd like to listen at several locations on your chest and back."

"Given your unsettling curiosity, sir, I'm certain that you would. However, I shall fight for what little respect I have for as many more years as it's permitted me, before we must all be stripped naked for the physician to conduct an examination of the ear or the nose." Manns's cadence drifts infinitesimally on the words that he emphasizes; a way of flattening 'a's and softening 't's that Oliver can never quite put his finger on, and that always seems to hint at a different sound buried beneath a studiously adopted one. It strikes him as not a little ironic that Manns's pursuit of all things gentlemanly originates from the likelihood of he himself being a made man.

"Lifting the shirt," Manns advises him, as if addressing a small child, "will, I believe you'll find, suffice."
During his years of study, Oliver had learned that no end of body parts can become congested, either with blood or with unpleasant fluids and biles, leading in turn to all manner of complaints, fevers and even handicaps if left untreated. He has, nevertheless, made a profound rejection of bloodletting, it seeming to be impossible to relieve the afflicted organ without weakening the rest of the body. The lungs are easier to drain, with the right medicines. He tells people to fill a basin with hot water first and inhale the steam as it billows up, to loosen them. Today, he's found things quiet, none of the tell-tale rattle, when he gives the instruction to breathe deeply. "It may be nothing more or less than a nervous condition, brought on by your recent physical distress," he says to Manns.

Manns finishes straightening his shirt, and pulls his waistcoat from where it hangs on the back of a chair. "The condition of my nerves, Doctor Brownlow, should come as no great surprise when I no longer feel as though my home is my own - rather that it belongs in part to the villain who calls on me in the night and takes his leave with a good number of pounds worth of my belongings."

"You were robbed, Mr Manns?"

"Indeed. Four times, to date. A lock was picked. I had all changed for Chubb locks, which, I am reliably assured, are unpickable. The next time the shutters of the parlour window were forced. Most recently, entry was made through an attic window, that the wretch evidently accessed by going around to the back of the house through the ginnel and ascending the wall in, what one may only deduce, the manner of a human fly. I am not a man to be made sport of, Doctor Brownlow, and the entering of my house has very quickly become a sport and a game."

Despite knowing that, as an upright member of society, there's nothing that he should find remotely amusing about the situation, Oliver finds himself almost wanting to tip his hat to the resourceful felon. He excuses the impulse with the thought that it's hardly as though Manns cannot afford his losses, before realizing, abruptly, that this is exactly the line of reasoning that he might have followed had he himself carried out the heists. "It may be a spate of bad fortune, sir. You can't be certain that all of the burglaries have been carried out by the same man. News may simply travel from one criminal to another if they can be sure that your premises are worth their while."

"Let me assure you, Doctor, it is most certainly the same man. Shall I tell you how I know?" Manns reaches for the pocket of his coat. Oliver barely has time to identify the small scrap of paper before it's tossed onto the table. "Because following his failure on his last visit to make off with what little I have left, owing to it being secured overnight in my own bedroom, he left his card!"

Oliver raises an eyebrow. "His card?"

"A mockery of one, on the writing desk in my study. Remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, how that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. Jude chapter one, verses seventeen and eighteen, sir."

"May I?" Oliver asks. He slides the card towards him across the polished table, and turns it face up. At top and bottom of the note, a little flourish has been drawn, in the style of a printer's embellishment.

With my utmost disappointment
at not carrying out business with yourself
& wishing to do so once again very soon
Your faithful servant

Oliver frowns vaguely, something familiar striking him about the slope of the script, as if it's
something he hasn't happened to see for a long time, but ought to recognise. Then he moves his thumb aside, and, suddenly, there's no mistaking. The author has compounded his errors of penmanship by blotting the ink and then smudging it, but still managed to avoid obscuring his signature. Just a little to the right of the second flourish is a distinctive J.

The boys in the thieves' kitchen run by Fagin had had an edge of a sort over many neighbouring gangs of juveniles, as the elderly Jew had taught all but the very youngest of them at least the rudiments of literacy. Although Oliver and the companions of his own early childhood had been utilized as unpaid labourers as much as they had ever been 'fitted for service', the poor laws had dictated that they be schooled for three hours per day in reading, writing, arithmetic and the principles of the Christian faith. There had often been more of a preference for honing their minds and spirits through hard work than for allowing them to spend the full three hours in the schoolroom, but, nevertheless, Oliver finds it almost impossible to recall a time in his life when he did not know his letters, and it's perhaps the sole legacy that he's grateful for. He had been delighted in his innocence that Fagin's boys could, for the most part, read and write, although he had quickly discovered that their tastes rarely extended beyond the Newgate Calendar and the most thrilling and grisly of the penny dreadfuls.

Jack's most prized acquirement, however, had been several copies of Bentley's Miscellany containing a serial by Mr Ainsworth of the exploits - some real, and some imaginary - of the notorious thief of old, Jack Sheppard. He had not been above circulating the volumes for the other boys' education, but had gone to the trouble of inscribing each cover with his name. It seemed that they always found their way back to him after a time, albeit slightly grubbier. The Artful Dodger had been Fagin's second-in-command, so to speak, and although he was not the eldest, his station had still awarded him some degree of respect.

Oliver can still see the enraptured gleam that had been in Jack's eyes as he read aloud from the papers in the flickering, dancing light of the candle-stub stuck in its saucer of grease beside the bed. "Look after him, Dodger," Fagin had said, when he had put Oliver to bed, and Jack had carried his pillow and blanket over and creaked his way in beside him. Sikes's shadow seemed to have left the room darker, but Jack's face had been bright, and Oliver's shivering had gradually stopped as he listened, with an intrigue tempered only very slightly by horror, to Jack stumbling a little over tales of Sheppard's bold crimes and even bolder escapes. There had been illustrations on a few of the pages. Jack had pointed them out to Oliver with quick fingers.

"Caught four times, he was. They had him in Newgate, clapped in handcuffs, irons and chains, and he escaped. Tied the bed linens together and climbed out of the window with the dollymop what was in with him."

Oliver had been unsure as to the identity of a 'dollymop', but decided to pursue the even more confusing of the two matters. "But how did he free himself? From the chains and - what else was there?"

Jack had rolled his eyes a bit at that. "Picked the locks, didn't he, with a nail. See, he was what they call a screwsman." He sniffed, nonchalantly. "Done a couple of my own, as it happens."

"Doors?" Oliver whispered, fascinated despite himself, but half-afraid of what he might hear.

"Nah. I ain't been out with him much since I grew a bit. Old Bill." Jack fidgeted a little, clearly still disturbed about the evening's events. "He always wants snakes. Like what you are. Jewel boxes, I done - that sort of thing. Nice swag what Fagin don't want breaking." He elbowed Oliver underneath the blanket. "You stay here, and you can have a go, and all."

Oliver shook his head. "I have to go back to Mr Brownlow. He'll think I stole his books and
money. I have to," he repeated, quietly.

Jack shot him a look, his expression unreadable for a moment. "Did you peach on us to that toff or didn't you?"

"I didn't! I told the truth!"

"Then you stick with me," said Jack, and a sudden grin flitted across his face, "and I'll do you all right. Teach you everything I know." Leaning in more closely, he tapped the paper. "I'm going to be like him, ain't I? Jack Sheppard. Dress in fine suits like a gent with rings on my fingers, and have the Queen's jewels out of the Tower if I want 'em, and there ain't going to be a prison in London what'll detain me." And he had folded the dog-eared volume and lain there for a time, gazing at the cover with its black-inked signum, the capital letter of which would not notably deviate on any occasion that it was seen over the passing of the years.

Being unexpectedly presented with it again after an immeasurable amount of time causes the same peculiar mixture of feelings somewhere inside Oliver as chance encounters with Jack himself. Two parts are probably frustration, three exasperation, two amusement, and three -? A tangible warmth, one that runs beyond the habits of childhood attachments. Oliver suddenly finds it difficult to keep his voice even.

"Have you reported the incidents to the police?"

"I have not - and nor do I intend to trouble myself doing so. What would be the worth of it when Sir Robert Peel draws his forces from the very same drunken, thieving underbelly of London that he instructs them to control? How they go about on first name terms with urchins and criminals is common knowledge to every man, and doubtless it suits them very well to look in the opposite direction in exchange for a guinea or two. No, Doctor, an Englishman's home is his castle, as they say, and as an Englishman, I shall personally defend my stronghold to the best of my finances and ingenuity."

Oliver's put in mind of the viscount who was said to have ordered his coachman to run down a policeman in the street. It's not an uncommon sentiment, among wealthy and poor alike. Most of the pickpockets and housebreakers in the city have more friends than enemies, and just for one, brief, moment, he's perversely thankful for it. He begins to repack the remainder of his equipment.

"I wish you luck in apprehending your thief, Mr Manns."

A smile curls the ends of Manns's mouth. Like most defined expressions, it seems to rest with discomfort on his face. "My goodness, Doctor, no. Luck won't be needed. I mean to entrap him by playing to his greed."

Oliver hesitates in his task. "You'll forgive me, sir, for being interested in your methods," he says.

"I thought that you might be." Manns crosses the room and rings the downstairs bell, before returning to a chair beside the window. He indicates the seat opposite. "Please."

Placing his bag beside the table leg, Oliver follows, and settles himself, trying to find a position in which he can avoid an overly-starched antimacassar that scratches his collar in an unpleasant way. After a short time, one of the maids brings in a tray with a teapot, and scurries out again just as quickly. Manns shakes out a handkerchief, wraps it around the pot handle, and pours two cups. For such a large house, the rooms always seem remarkably quiet; not the same calm that pervades his uncle's home, but in the sense that Oliver always imagines that at any moment there might be a loud and sudden scream.
"Sugar? No?" Manns shrugs a little, and drops two pieces into his own tea with the tongs. "A person acquires the habit, I suppose. Like snuff, although undoubtedly cleaner." He stirs it. "Do you fancy yourself as a thief-taker, Doctor?"

"Only a concerned citizen."

"Very good, then." Manns takes a sip of tea. "As you correctly observe, news travels fast from the mouth of one felon to another. I intend to have the word put about on the streets, by men in my employment, that I shall have a considerable sum of money - government bonds, perhaps - under my roof on a particular night, awaiting transfer the following morning. Our gentleman friend will without question be unable to resist the prospect of fresh pickings." He pauses, apparently for the effect. "But this time, I and several able-bodied men posted throughout the house shall be waiting for him."

A unease begins to crawl through Oliver that seems almost disproportionate to the other man's words. Jack, he feels certain, is well accustomed to living up to his old nickname and dodging capture and arrest on an almost daily basis, and, given Oliver's knowledge of his nature, probably relishes it more of the time than not. His senses, though, seem to be alerting him to a troubling wrongness about this entire situation. "And then, sir?"

Manns glances up. "Then? Then, sir, he will hang."

"Housebreaking and burglary haven't been punishable by death since I myself was a child, Mr Manns. No judge or magistrate would pass the sentence."

"Doubtlessly. But this is of no great concern to me, since I have no intention of taking him to trial. I shall be taking care of the matter myself, and I consider it unlikely that the law will be any the wiser about the removal of one rat from the streets, or mourn the fact if it were. I shall be his salvation, by liberating him from this life of larceny and evil."

Oliver meets his gaze. The anger that had risen up in such a lively way before now feels like slowly congealing iron in his veins. It's paralyzing, leaving him almost literally unable to react, to move, to breathe deeply. "The Bible says thou shalt not kill, sir," he says, very steadily.

"It also says, Whosoever a man soweth, that he shall also reap. Galatians chapter six, verses seven to eight. And I, Doctor, say amen."

"Amen," Oliver repeats. Slowly, he lifts his cup.

When he remembers, later, he thinks that it was at that moment, without logic or plans as it was, that he took his first step out on the journey that anyone with honesty or sense would have told him that he was a fool to attempt.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

All of the streets mentioned may be found on the map, although some have had a change of name over the years; New Street, for example, is now known as New Row.

Some mornings, as a child, Oliver would half-waken, and as he drifted in that strange place between two worlds, where both seem simultaneously real and unreal, he would once again be Oliver Twist, his stomach clenching in the familiar knot of hunger, and he would hear the soft hiss in the voice of the one calling him my dear and see the alert hazel eyes of the other, watching him curiously, set above a wide mouth and a snub nose. For a moment or two he would not know where he was, or where the blankets and white sheets that he was enfolded in had come from. And then it would come back to him that he was Oliver Brownlow, and that the clean-smelling bed that he was lying in was his own. He remembers it being extremely perplexing.

Now, an hour or two before dawn, he dreams, and in his dreams, it seems to him that he's listening while Jack, as Oliver recognizes him these days, and another full-grown man who he somehow knows to be Charley Bates, sit on the floor in the midst of the boys in Fagin's den and read the execution broadsheets aloud. "Dodger," Charley says, "what's this here name? I don't get a bit of it," and Jack shakes his head and reads out. "Jack Dawkins, also known as the Artful Dodger, hanged for grand larceny. He conducted himself admirably on the scaffold and approached death with the greatest of dignity."

"Don't!" Oliver hears himself say, because Jack seems to be completely unaware of the noose around his neck that's pulling itself more and more tightly the further he reads. Slowly, he turns, and stares up at Oliver. The expression remains unchanged in the pallor of his face as the rope begins to wrench his head into a grotesquely unnatural angle, bringing into bloom a ring of great obscene, purplish bruises, squeezing the veins in his neck, temples and hands into greater and greater prominence until they protrude like knotty twigs, and it seems that not even a stone could withstand such pressure and that they must at any moment burst from the skin.

"What's the matter?" he asks. "Ain't you never seen a corpse?"

Oliver wakes sweating, his nightshirt wrapped about him like a clammy second skin, and stares out across the room for some minutes, picking out the shapes of wardrobe and washstand that assure him that this is his own house and not a sleep-world where memories and fears walk arm in arm. He finds, though, that it fails to bring much comfort; rather, his escape from the relentless fantasy of night only emerges into a less absurd but equally grim reality. When he rises and draws back the curtains, he can see the first subtle glimmer of light in the sky through early spring mist. It's too soon for Mrs Phillips, his cook-housekeeper, or for Sarah, or Hester in the scullery, though not greatly so for himself, habitually an early riser. The boot and odd-job boy, Jonathan, arrives a little after six, when the maids go about their work. Not yet six o'clock, then. He washes and shaves in cold water, dresses, and goes downstairs.

Somewhere under the fog outside, although he can never begin to imagine where, is Jack, the real, living man, not a childhood ghost. Oliver feels unsettled; confused, restless. He unlocks the front door, swings it wide, and stands there for a while, looking out into the morning. Then he fetches
his coat, hat and cane, steps over the sill, and closes it behind him. He usually breakfasts before the short walk he takes prior to the start of consultations, but, for the time, his appetite seems to be absent.

He walks steadily, but purposefully; the studied intent of walking, in the way that a simple and repetitive action of the body's often the best way to clear the mind. It always has the effect of focusing his thoughts for the day, and so it does now, to a degree that almost shocks him. He was born from gentle stock, from honest society. Yet, in the years before chance once again made him a part of it, that same society had brushed him and many more like him aside as unwanted afterthoughts; as burdens that they had to bear, the very knowledge of the existence of the poor resting on their shoulders as their designated penance as Christians. The criminal world, the scourges of everything that's decent, had taken him in as though he were family. Oliver had needed the moral sponsorship of his uncle's love, and his uncle's home standing behind him like a mountain, to be accepted by decent people. To be accepted by thieves, he had needed no more than a grubby hand to take his own and an introduction as a new friend.

Even as a child, it had not taken very long for the chipping away to begin at any innocent belief Oliver might have held that Jack's act of charity had been without ulterior motives, and he certainly doesn't retain any of it now. Nevertheless, despite how the other boy's offer of lodgings might as well have been a press of the King's shilling into his hand for a conscription into a life of crime, the fact remains that, unlike children who had lived most, if not all, of their lives on the streets of London, Oliver had come possessed of no knowledge of how to take care of himself and would very probably have died remarkably quickly on those same streets of hunger, cold, or some form of assault and battery if Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger, had not picked him out. Fagin, the money-hoarder, the fence, and Nancy, the villain's mistress, had been two of the only people to ever show him kindness. Jack had been the first person since his sad fellow occupants of the workhouse to display his own idiosyncratic brand of friendship, telling the other boys that he was all right with the confidence that doing this made it so. From the beginning, Jack had treated him not as a migrant to his world that needed to be carefully evaluated, steered and enticed, but one of his own kind.

It's said by many that villains look after their own. The possibility begins to break over Oliver that, through the years, Jack may have looked out for him on a number of occasions that he hasn't been aware of at the time. Perhaps now he may have an opportunity to return the favour. And perhaps that makes him, similarly, a villain. Unconsciously, he squares his shoulders to the idea. Very well.

The fog seems a chill curtain, dividing him from the muddy outlines of houses and homes. When he turns back onto the square from Princeton Street, he feels himself half a burglar, trespassing where he has no natural cause to be. It persists after he opens the door, and Sarah comes to take his hat and coat, and even after she sets breakfast, and brings the morning newspaper and the first post, and puts them beside his plate.

Having decided what it is that he unquestionably has to do, Oliver begins to realize that he can't imagine how to actually go about it. He knows the location of no thieves' dens and haunts; no paths into the rookeries where such people can reliably be found; has nobody to approach who might both be able to advise him, and be trustworthy enough to ask. He considers making enquiries through some of his charity patients, but flinches inwardly at the possibility that it might be taken as a suggestion of their own criminal tendencies. The notion of his interest becoming common enough knowledge to somehow reach his uncle is no more appealing. The truth is that his sole link nowadays with the underworld of London is the man that he needs to find, and finding Jack by himself seems akin to nothing less than searching for a needle in a haystack. Despite the affinity between them, this most base aspect of Jack - his habitual location - has remained a mystery to Oliver. Jack has always been the one to find him. And trusting that their next meeting will come
sooner rather than later is simply not a risk that he feels prepared to take.

He manages to finish the mutton, and some of the eggs, but puts the toast and the marmalade aside. Eventually, he rings for Sarah, asks her to check what appointments he has with Mrs Phillips, and sits, deep in thought, listening to the gentle chinking sounds of glass and china as she clears the table.

"Doctor Brownlow?"

Oliver looks up. "Yes?"

"Shall I ask for the kitchen to send up something else, sir?"

He blinks, then realizes that she's referring to the uneaten food. "No," he says, "thank you. Please make sure that you tell Mrs Phillips it was delicious. My stomach just seems to be lacking enthusiasm this morning. I may have risen too early for its liking."

"We thought, Hester and me, you'd been called to a patient, and we hadn't woken to the door."

Sarah speaks quickly, the pinkening in her cheeks keeping pace. She always sounds very slightly out of breath, as if forcing the words through her shyness requires physical exertion. If Oliver remembers correctly, she's his own age. Although the sweet, wholesome quality of her face makes her seem younger, he imagines that many would-be followers have passed her over in favour of less pretty but more effervescent girls.

"I think that I was the patient. I'm not sure that I've found the cure for what concerns me yet, but the air does help straighten out one's thoughts."

Sarah begins to stack the dishes, then pauses. "Doctor, I hope something ain't wrong," she says, all in a hurry.

"Not with myself. Perhaps with a friend, though. A close one."

He feels a little shocked by the frankness of his talk. When Jack had sought him that night, in need of him as a doctor, only to end their meeting by kissing him so abruptly, Oliver had not known what to say. He's still unsure how it is that he should reply to an enthusiastic and uninvited kiss when it's from another man. Yet when the kiss had been from Jack, never seeming to be one given to unnecessary displays of sentiment, Oliver had had the distinct feeling that it had not been abrupt at all, nor uninvited, but rather a quite natural progression that only left him faintly surprised that it had never happened before. Whether he ought to find it natural is a matter that he's studiously avoided considering until now.

"Is it an old friend, Doctor?"

"A boyhood companion," Oliver says. He's never certain of how much of the story of his own low beginnings is common gossip, but he opts not to elaborate on the exact circumstances in which he and Jack might have first encountered each other. "He may be in trouble. I need to speak with him. But we haven't been in contact of late, and I don't know where I might find him."

"Mightn't some other gentlemen have his whereabouts too?"

"I would doubt it. He isn't a gentleman."

Sarah looks confused. "Is he in trade?"

A wave of trust for the quiet girl suddenly comes over Oliver. Servants talk among themselves, he
knows this; he knows that he could easily be setting himself up for scandal, and yet he has the strange and all too rare feeling that he can speak almost completely freely. "No," he says. "He's a scoundrel. And a rascal, and a rogue. And no decent man would give him the time of day."

Sarah drops her gaze a little. She picks up the plate of toast and moves to put it back on the tray. Then she says, "But your friend, sir, nonetheless."

"Yes. He is. He matters a great deal to me."

She hesitates for a moment. He sees her worry at her lip slightly, as if trying to reconcile something in her own mind. "Doctor," she asks, after a time, "would you visit a beer-house? Or a skittle-ground? Where the costermongers and the like do?"

"I wouldn't know which ones to choose."

"All the working men go those places, sir. Like the tradesmen and their boys. They see what people are about, and hear what's going on. Sometimes when they call, they make conversation while they're at the kitchen, and we hear news from them, or could find it out if we'd a mind to."

Oliver observes her. "And if you were to ask," he says, "do you think that they might see fit to enquire after a man, or the places that such types of men might be found?"

"They might, sir."

It's instinctive when Oliver reaches out, rather than with any thought to propriety. He touches her sleeve. She looks up.

"Sarah," he says, "will you help me?"

-oOo-

It was as a boy, too, that Oliver had acquired the interest in medicine which has steered his life's course.

During the year that saw his thirteenth birthday, his uncle had been taken briefly ill. Afraid, accustomed to his feeble fellow inhabitants of the workhouse who, once taken to their beds in the infirmary, often failed to rise from them again, Oliver had hovered at Mrs Bedwin's side by the sickroom door. Engaged through a competitive process based upon which man demanded the lowest salary, the workhouse medical officer had been poorly qualified in his profession and little better than a common apothecary, but Oliver had been both soothed and intellectually intrigued by the physician who had attended Edward Brownlow. His instruments had seemed like magic wands, his calm and encouraging manner a panacea to his uncle in itself. Above all, Oliver had been reassured by the doctor's approach to his uncle's illness as the simple mending of an apparatus that had broken down. The notion that humanity was at least partly in control of its own destiny, rather than merely pawns in the system of an Almighty God who worked his mysteries as and if he saw fit, had captured his imagination. If a man went wrong, he could, through the rebalancing of his nerves and blood and the clearing of impurities from his body, be put right. Herein, Oliver felt certain, lay his chance to help those who needed it most. The household copy of Doctor Buchan's Domestic Medicine had quickly become his most oft-thumbed book, followed in time by the Poor Man's Physician and Surgeon and the Anatomy of the Humane Bodies, the last of which had also been rather eye-opening and some of the earliest steps along the road of his sexual instruction. He had brought diseased and cat-mauled mice inside and caged them while he attempted to cure them of their ills, carefully opening the ones that he found expired with his pocket-knife, in order to pin them out and observe the miniature organs packed tightly beneath the skin. It had all been utterly
mesmerizing.

As his education at Westminster drew towards completion, the issue of his further studies and future profession had arisen. Unhesitatingly, Oliver had expressed his wish to pursue medicine. He had finally emerged from London University with the suffix of M.D. after his name, and taken up a four-year assignation to the hospital wards, always observing, always reading, always learning. These habits he has still to fall out of, and sincerely hopes that he never will.

On Tuesday, while he's making his afternoon visits, a card and an accompanying letter are left at the house by a former schoolmate, recently relocated to the Holborn district. William is in law, but very interested in and not in the least ruffled by the technicalities of Oliver's field. He comes for an informal dinner on the Friday. His wife, expecting their first child, is indisposed, although Oliver privately feels a great relief at not having an opportunity to engage in physiological and medical discussion impeded by respect for ladies' sensitivities. They shut themselves up in the study with their drinks after the meal and look over his case histories. William has recently visited the anatomy museum on Oxford Street; over three hundred natural examples in spirits, as advertised, and very faithful wax reproductions, "Not as much use as the real thing, no doubt, more for we gents in the street's education, but all very good. Not just dirty French models." There's a room set apart at the museum for members of the medical profession only. "Where I presume that you can learn all about the finer details of the clap and the pox," says William, and Oliver laughs with him, at the joke itself, and at the fact that not only the museums, but such studies, feel obscene, and at the slight despair in it being so.

"Where do their dissections come from at the medical schools now?" William asks.

"Usually unfortunates who were unclaimed at the end."

"Hm. Awfully sad that there's so many of them. At least they don't have to wait for the felons to be hanged any more, I suppose."

Oliver puts down his drink.

William leaves at about half-past nine. Oliver waits for Sarah to lock the door, then asks her to come and take away the glasses while he commences tidying his papers, feeling that the room looks as though a wind of some strength has blown through it. To his surprise, she bustles in with haste. Her face is pink again, and she appears even more flustered than is habitual for her. He interrupts his task to study her.

"Is something the matter?"

"No, sir - but I couldn't speak while the gentleman was here, all the same."

The speed at which Oliver arrives at the conclusion only proves to him how much it's occupied his thoughts. He places the stack of papers and books that he's gathered up on the table. "Is there news?" he asks.

"I think so, sir."

Oliver pulls out a chair and sits. "Tell me. What have you found out?"

Sarah takes a short breath. "Doctor Brownlow, do you know New Street by Covent Garden?"

Oliver is under no false impressions regarding the sort of area under discussion. Physicians and surgeons are reluctant to enter the rookeries even on missions of mercy, for fear of contracting some disease or being set upon. Yet he feels a curious absence of the qualms that he should by
rights have, as if determination's made him bold. "I believe so," he says, "and even if I'm wrong, I can very soon find it."

"There's a pawnshop there, sir - it ain't far along, a little past an inn called the Three Crowns. If you were to walk from St Martin's Lane, you'd come to it pretty quickly."

"I see; please go on."

"Well, it's run by a man named Davy Gilpin." She pauses again, then rushes at it headlong. "He made something of a success and acts like he's above board, sir, but he's a fence. Everyone knows it. Half of what's behind his counter they say never belonged to who he bought it from in the first place, and the fellow who told us said he'd wager there ain't a villain north of the river whose name he doesn't know."

"Did that sound as if it were true, or just a manner of speaking?"

"It seemed like it was true, sir. Or else, that if he doesn't know, he's on terms with someone that does."

Oliver's aware of something stirring, faint as the heart of a chick, too weak yet to pin more than hope on. "And does he think that this man may be able to get me the information I need?"

"Yes, sir, although I never once said who I was asking for. If he was to trust you. They all take care of their own, you see, sir."

Oliver wonders if the wistful smile that he seems to feel inside shows through onto his face. "I know," he says.

-oOo-

St Giles parish is dedicated to cripples, beggars, lepers, and everything low and miserable, and nothing could seem more apt. It crawls with idlers, drunks, gay women, barefooted children, and shabby menagerie cages full of turtle-doves, nestling hawks, hedgehogs and assorted rodents, all sharply contrasted with the occasional overly flash loiterer doubtlessly funded by his pilferings from someone else's pocket, shop or house. Something in the region of every fourth building seems to have the appearance of either a gin shop, a circulating library of tasteless literature, or, to be frank, a bawdy house. Seven Dials is a maze of streets, lanes and courts, through which those persons of interest to policemen might routinely make a clean escape simply by knowing the alleyways to take and the residents who are willing to hide them, and, Oliver imagines, which a stranger to the district could easily tramp many a mile around before discovering that he's been walking in a circle. Mustard and cress sprouts on flannel laid out for the purpose, covered with a liberal sprinkling of blacks. Washing hung out to dry suffers much the same fate. On the occasional windowsill, the mignonette and London Pride of the root trade grows, although one might imagine the latter finds little to be proud about in the vicinity.

The bell of St Paul's at Covent Garden chimes hollowly, as if tolling his doom, as he turns into New Street. A narrow thoroughfare, reasonably unsullied but without a great deal of character, it still falls well within range of the sulphuric cabbage smells emanating from the market, and every so often along the cobblestones, fruit, burst and crushed, rots where it's lain since the morning procession of the traders' barrows. A central gutter runs with watery sludge. The windows of the Three Crowns inn, a little way along on the right, as described, are heavily swirled and floretted and not easy to see through to observe the exact kind of clientele that might frequent the area. Oliver feels even more excluded than he'd anticipated as he finally halts in front of his destination.
The window of the pawnbroker's establishment is clearly his showcase, given over to attractive enamels and miniatures, rings, bracelets, pins, handsomely bound books, cases - to Oliver's interest - of scientific instruments, and a large quantity of porcelain and plate. Inside the shop, accessed with the accompanying clatter of a bell above the door, the wall behind the counter is lined with shelves, on which flat irons and portraits nudge clocks, silver spoons, several sets of chessmen, and all manner of hats, handkerchiefs and wearing apparel. Bales of blankets and sheets and folded table-cloths occupy the top positions, with a ladder in the corner to reach the highest. Running the length of one wall, and each backed by a narrow door that likely opens into the same side passage, are a number of small boxes or cubby-holes, intended for embarrassed customers fallen on hard times to wait in out of direct view of other curious eyes. The place is neat, if crowded with goods; the floor recently swept. Given the knowledge he has of the proprietor, Oliver imagines that it must be considerably worth his while to present at least a facade of repute. Nonetheless, he finds himself wondering whether he has in fact come to the wrong address.

A boy, presumably an assistant, has been brought out of a back room by the noise of the bell, and situates himself on the other side of the counter, tapping his fingertips lightly upon it, full of good humour and expectancy. Despite dressing as plainly as he's able to avoid drawing obvious and unwanted attention, Oliver knows that the cut of his clothing, if not his manner of speech alone, must mark him as a man of at least modest means and therefore very likely a supplier of good merchandise. He takes out his watch, having decided to use the pretence of asking after a price for goods as a method of assessing the situation, and gambling debts as a reason, if asked. It was a gift from Oliver's uncle on his twenty-first birthday and is of some monetary value, and still more sentimental, and the idea of having to actually pawn it makes him blanch inwardly. He clears his throat as he proffers it.

"I'd like a price," he says. "It was purchased for around forty pounds, I believe. The case is gold."

"Well, you tell me what price you was looking to get, and I'll tell you what I was wanting to pay, and the two of us can come to an agreement."

"This is quite a valuable item. I want to be sure that I get a fair offer for it. I was advised to speak directly with the owner here."

The lad returns a smile. "You'll get the best offer what I can make, seeing as how we're speaking already."

Oliver is taken aback. He hesitates, his fingers curling reflexively around the watch. Now that he looks more closely, he can see that the other man's somewhat older than he first estimated. He's likely around Oliver's own age, but his littleness only accentuates his boyish appearance. Even at first glance, Oliver would put him at shorter than Jack, and Jack is wanting several inches of height to match Oliver himself. As a humanitarian, the knowledge causes a slight ache inside him that so many young men of the poor classes have simply not received the food that they needed during a crucial period in their maturity, and, as such, never managed to catch up. He sees fourteen and fifteen year olds that he would imagine are closer to twelve, more often than he cares to count. "Are you Davy Gilpin?" he asks.

"I am, but there ain't many strangers what ask for me by name. You must be a friendly sort. Or if you was sent here, it's for more than a ticker."

"I'm not a policeman," Oliver says, quickly.

"Why should I give tuppence if you was? This is a respectable establishment, not a dolly shop. But in them togs, you seem more like a cove with something to say for himself than a bobby or a customer." Davy pulls up a nearby stool and hops onto it. He has a pert, amiable face with a ready
grin, and hair the same shade of yellow as Oliver's, although it sits neatly about his ears as opposed to spiralling into curls like Oliver's own. His hands look as though they can work with speed. Is his manner natural to him, or all part of a habitual ruse? Oliver finds himself wondering at how a such a youthful and agreeable man can hobnob willingly with robbers and thieves. And then he remembers that he himself is standing in this very shop with the studied intent to do the same.

Davy nods towards Oliver's watch. "Do you want a price for that, or don'tcher?" he asks.

Oliver turns the timepiece over in his hand. "No," he says, after a moment's decision, "not really."

"Didn't think you did. You look like a toff, and not the sort of toff what sells off the family silver for Burgundy and broads." Davy watches him with bright, curious eyes. "So, what's your game, then? You must be after something, to come asking for me."

Oliver has no good reason to trust this man, and yet, conversely, he feels as though he has no other option left but to do so. "There's something that I'm looking for," he says.

"Something," Davy says. "Dontcher mean somebody?" Then, in response to the expression on Oliver's face, he winks. "Most things what I don't know, I can guess. And the rest of 'em I can find out."

"I've been told," Oliver says, "that there isn't very much that you don't know. Or very many people."

"Worthwhile to keep your ear to the ground in my trade, that's all that it is."

"While it's there, do you ever hear particular men talking about where it is that they stay?"

Davy shrugs, ambivalently. The dance is becoming evident; the steps easier to follow. "P'rhaps I might. And p'rhaps I mightn't like to tell a man's private business, if I hadn't a good reason." He rubs his chin in a thoughtful manner. Abruptly, he says, "Who do you want, what brings you around here? A feller what picked your pocket?"

Again, Oliver pauses. "No," he says. "An... acquaintance."

"Very good. Did your acquaintance ever have a name to call his own?"

"Yes. His name's Jack Dawkins."

"Can't say that it's one I've heard lately."

"He had a nickname," Oliver says, "as a boy." It's been seventeen years since Sikes and Nancy both went to their graves in the same night and Fagin's gang was consigned to the annals of history; a lifetime. He holds fast, though, to the faint possibility that Jack's former sobriquet might somewhere strike a chord. "He was known as the Artful Dodger."

"Colourful sort of cove, like?" Davy grins. He appears to be thinking for a moment or two, then shakes his head. "I ain't familiar with your pal. I'd say you're at a dead end. But I could ask a bit, if you want."

Oliver doesn't feel that he has a great deal of choice. His journey ends with Davy; beyond that lies hopelessness. "I'd appreciate it," he says, "a great deal."

Davy gives him a slightly odd look. "I think you would, too."
Oliver places his watch on the counter, and takes out his wallet. He’s been foolish to carry money today as well, but he removes a sovereign. He holds it out to Davy. "Please use this as you need it, for anything that might cost you."

Davy moves to reach out for the coin, then stops. He cocks his head, regarding Oliver. "I'll take it off you after you've found what you're looking for," he says.

"Thank you."

"I wouldn't thank me yet, if I was you. Where shall I put it about that a feller can find you?"

"I'll call in again, in a few days. To hear any news."

"And what makes you think that anyone what knows Jack Dawkins's address is going to give it out to a toff what won't give his own?"

Debating the issue, Oliver realises that there's truth in the other man's words. If his search is to come to fruition, a degree of confidence will be needed on both sides, not merely his own. A man in the street has no more reason to believe Oliver than he does him; perhaps less, as the element of risk involved in such a relationship is on his part considerably greater. He slips his hand into his breast pocket and retrieves a card, placing it between them. "Make it known that Oliver Twist is looking for Jack Dawkins and needs to speak with him urgently."

Davy flips the card over, taking a quick glance at the modest lines of print, a glance which undoubtedly misses nothing. "Thing is, you say Twist, but your card says Brownlow."

"Twist," Oliver says, firmly and adamantly. "Please give that name. He'd recognise it, if he was to hear it." Jack will recognise it, for certain, but it's of benefit to Oliver's efforts to remain inconspicuous that few other people these days would do so. He's never imagined, before now, that a name allocated to him simply for entering the world at a particular point in the alphabet would one day be of use to him again. He has, he supposes, an alias, as Jack does. Wherever and however far they travel, it remains; the bond with the past that the two of them share.

His watch still lies on the counter. Oliver hesitates for just a brief moment, and then, reaching out, pushes it forward. "Keep this for me," he says, in answer to Davy's quizzical look. "I'm not asking to be paid for it, but I'll still buy it back."

"Your show of good faith?" Davy says. He suddenly grins again, the gesture splitting his face. "You're a queer one. You deserve to get what you want, if a feller ever did. Good luck."

A good dose of luck is exactly what Oliver feels that he'll need, but mixed into an equally generous helping of aptitude. Even if it didn't concern him to make himself available to every back-street ruffian and bludger in the city, he could, alone, travel half of London and still fail in his quest. Linked to and compelled towards this world as he is, he's yet a stranger in it; an explorer without a guide, map or compass to navigate by. As things stand now, he needs someone to undertake the task for him. Davy, he hopes, might be that man.

The fog of the past week now has the blackish-brown of mid-day, as if the smoke from every chimney ever fired has fallen down at once; worst, as always, in this part of the city near to where it rolls off the Thames. The brightest illumination is, rather than the sun, the artificial daylight provided at ground level by the gas lit in the windows of the shops that have it, and, every so often, the pinhead lights of the link boys' torches. Carriages appear eerily like Flying Dutchmen and then are largely invisible again within a few hundred yards. So much shouting out and hulloing goes on in a fog that Oliver is not optimistic about a hansom distinguishing his call, and elects to use his
cab-whistle instead. Some of the cab drivers have abandoned actually driving, instead leading their horses by the bridle, and Oliver feels tempted to tell his own to do the same. The previous month, the evening paper had run a story about two small boys who had been run down and killed by an omnibus in fog little worse than this. Near Southampton Street, he asks to dismount, and commences the remainder of the journey on foot. His fellow pedestrians come at him through the mist like souls emerging from Hades. When he almost collides bodily with Richard Manns in the middle of a pavement, the comparison seems still more appropriate.

"Most unpleasant conditions indeed, Doctor. I had hoped to go to my offices, but my coachman fears being run into in the poor visibility and having our brains dashed out. Still, I assume that the number of asthmatic lungs and bruised limbs must keep you in business. Even in our diseases, we do not seek the Lord, but the physicians, as the Chronicles say."

"My wish would be that there be no call for doctors at any time, Mr Manns," Oliver replies.

"A worthy sentiment, but idealistic. No, as long as a need exists, sir, there will always be someone to profit from it, whether it is my ships bearing tea and tobacco, or a hooping cough waiting to be attended by yourself." Manns touches his hand to his waistcoat pocket, creases his brows, and then smiles. "Doctor Brownlow, I will trouble you, if I may, for the time. I appear to have left my watch behind."

Oliver returns his gaze. "I believe that I have also."
Chapter 3

The letter comes when Oliver's near to abandoning the hope that one, or something like it, might. Not by the letter-carrier; both Mrs Phillips and Sarah are certain, when he asks each of them, that there was no knock, and that it was put through the door by persons unknown at some time between the five-thirty and six-thirty deliveries or one of them would have seen it sooner. The envelope is addressed informally, and not in a hand that he's ever seen, but the implications of that alone make him hasty to see the contents. It could, in all likelihood, be no more than a plea from a current or prospective patient, but an odd curl of tension in his stomach, like the momentary awakening of a sixth sense, seems to tell him that that isn't so. He takes it to the fireside in the drawing room to peruse carefully and at length. To his surprise, the note, directed to Dr Oliver BROWNLOW, with the Brownlow capitalized and underscored as if poking a little fun, has not much length to peruse.

Sir!

Lamb & Lark inn Aldersgate St is given good custom by one GENTLEMAN by name of Jack Dawkins. Suggest that you visit late on a Monday evening or a Friday same if you still wish to find your ACQUAINTANCE.

Oliver's put in mind of the way that the old-time broadsheets referred to a victim as 'a man', and the highway robber as 'a gentleman'. He turns the paper over and about several times, looking for some more explicit clue, but at last finds himself admitting defeat and not feeling overly sore about it. He has a place and, roughly, a time; the wherewithal to find Jack, rather than having to wait to be found, and for that he's grateful, suddenly more profoundly so than he knows how to express. A friend, he had said to Sarah. When he repeats it to himself, it feels distinctly lacking, but he's at a loss as to what other term to use when Jack had never, until their last meeting, directly invited him to do so. Yet the question of what that more might mean now fascinates him, as if he had needed the possibility to be physically demonstrated to him. The days of curious showings and examinings between schoolmates hardly counting, Oliver's discreet sexual encounters have been purely with women, yet he's fairly aware of what occurs between men. That Jack has no objection whatsoever to the latter and has become frustrated enough to press the point seems obvious, but Oliver's still unsure of what degree to answer to. Their tie is one that they forged as boys, but that is now touched with men's understanding. He sits for a long time in the quietness, listening to the intermittent thump and chime of the clock, until Sarah comes in to light the gas, and he realizes that the light has faded and the room is becoming lost in shadows.

The fog lifts fractionally at the start of the week, as if in conjunction with Oliver's mood, the outlines of the city beginning to reappear. The weather is chill but bright during the day, with a little breeze blowing about, and when evening falls, the darkness has somewhat less of the murkish quality of past days. He travels through Holborn and past the twin sentinels of St Sepulchre's church on the north side and Newgate on the south, the one long accustomed to acting as gloomy messenger for the other. It's at St Sepulchre's that the great bell is sounded to mark a prisoner's end, and from the same church comes the clerk with the handbell, rung solemnly outside the condemned man's cell before his execution. In his adolescence, Oliver had had a recurring fancy that passing felons stopped to salute the walls of the prison and the gallows within, like highwaymen are said to have done at Tyburn tree. Half-morbid as it was, and no doubt without any truth to it whatsoever, it had seemed almost romantic.

Oliver's concern is that the inn might be an establishment where he's as likely to receive a split lip
as a drink, or be robbed of the few pennies that it costs, not to mention anything else that he's carrying. For the second time in a few short days, though, he's surprised. Jack must be able to present himself as a man of at least reasonable credentials to make this his drinking house. The Lamb and Lark is a coaching inn that, as with others of its kind, has doubtlessly seen a drop-off in trade since the growth of the railways, but appears to have continued to make good. A long, high building with courtyard behind, it announces itself with a sign creaking gently from an iron bracket, on which the eponymous lamb and lark that surely last parted company in a country meadow meet again above the hustle of a London street. The frontage is white-painted and luminous in the dark; the cobbles, by contrast, are treacherous with mud, but this in no way does the inn any disfavour, expected, as it feels, with the busy comings and goings. The patrons give off the appearance of honest citizens; working men, tradesmen, merchants. Varying degrees of affluence rub shoulders both figuratively and literally. A small town carriage arrives, disgorges a large number of slightly crushed passengers, and departs again. Inside, once accessed through a small brick passageway, the bar room welcomes with the smell of tobacco smoke and a lively fire jumping and cracking in an inglenook.

The table in the window bay seems to Oliver to be the best place from where he might be able to watch the main door and the majority of the room, and, in turn, where he himself is most visible. If Jack opts to slide in through some as yet undiscovered side entrance, he might well notice Oliver even before Oliver sees him. He seats himself. When the landlord comes across to greet him heartily, a broad, good-humoured man with an enormous brace of keys at his belt, he asks for a porter. To his relief, he neither looks nor feels overtly out of place; some of the more prosperous merchants, in fact, are dressed more finely than him. The inn has quite the feel of a melting pot, a place where a man from most walks of life might blend in and go unnoticed.

He turns things over mentally while he sips. Now, he realizes that he's at a loss as to how to actually broach the subject of his visit with Jack; in this sort of environment, at least. Oliver has his speech already set out in his head, but exactly what Jack will do when they first see each other here, and what he will say in return, is something that refuses to come quite clear. He waits, observing his fellow patrons. As the bar grows busier, individual faces start to be lost, and it becomes harder to keep track of the new arrivals. Oliver finds himself craning his neck at regular intervals, and, after a time, the landlord approaches him again.

"Either you're waiting for someone, sir, or you're worried about who's waiting for you. I've won a few bare-knucks titles in my time if you could use the help."

Despite his current uncertainty, Oliver laughs a little. "I'm waiting," he says, and adds, "And enjoying your excellent porter, which is as strong as I like it."

"Imperial stout. Straight from the Hind Brewery, just up the road." The landlord folds his arms on the back of a chair, and rests his weight upon them. "Business, is it? Plenty of the traders'd rather talk in here than their premises. Better refreshments, better food, and better company." And he gestures as she passes to a plump and particularly buxom barmaid whose dress, although fairly modest, would have had its work cut out to completely disguise her charms.

"An old friend. I was told that he drinks here, but I'm afraid that I've missed him tonight."

"If he's a regular, I'll know him. Make it my duty to - wouldn't keep my customers, otherwise. How about you furnish me with his name?"

"Jack Dawkins."

"Dawkins? Been here for the best part of an hour."
Having only just taken another drink, Oliver now has to cough it uncomfortably out of his windpipe. Reaching into his pocket for a handkerchief, he throws a glance over his shoulder with the full expectation of seeing Jack standing there with a glint of derisive humour in his eyes. When he finds nothing of the sort, he quickly turns back. "Where?"

The landlord nods towards the stairs. A tall, slightly fastidious-looking man with macassared hair and appropriate sidewhiskers is seated at a small table there, heavily engrossed in the composition of a letter. Every so often, without looking up, he dips his pen into a small leather-bound travelling inkwell, and, as Oliver watches, once by error into his sherry glass. "Linen trader, ain't he? John Dawkins. Always comes into town on the weekly - if you want him of a Monday, here he'll be, regular as clockwork."

Oliver's spirits sink. "It isn't him," he says.

The landlord glances back at him. "Same monicker, wrong feller?"

"Yes, completely."

"Sorry to hear it. Ain't rare though; Dawkins."

"I know," Oliver answers, wearily. To be passed from pillar to post and come this far, only for it all to end in a case of mistaken identity, leaves him feeling depressed, and the idea of having to begin all over again, almost despairing. "I'd only hoped -" he says, and lets his shoulders rise and fall, leaving the rest of the words unspoken.

The other man watches him for a moment, then, straightening, gives him a sympathetic clap on the back. "I'll leave you to your drink. Have a free one on me if you like. Tell the girls that Tom says you're good for credit. What name is it, sir?"

"Brownlow."

"Have a good evening, Mr Brownlow." And he moves away once more, his sturdy shoulders manoeuvring him easily through the crowd.

Oliver pays the well-built barmaid when she bustles over for his cup. Although not truly beautiful, she has a round, merry face. "All the girls wish you'd stay a bit, sir," she says, when he hands over his pennies, "you're the handsomest man in here tonight," and Oliver manages a half-smile despite his mood.

"I'd stay if you promised to serve me," he says, sportingly.

The girl gives him a quick wink. "Just remember, we've got plenty of good food, but I ain't one of the dishes. I'll give you a kiss any time, though."

"I'm very flattered."

She grins. "I'm Kate."

"Then it's nice to have met you, Kate."

"You as well, sir." She jingles the coins a little, and appears to be about to return to her duties. Then, looking down as if by chance, she stops. She shakes her hand lightly, letting the coppers spread out on her palm, and picks one out, holding it edgeways between the thumb and forefinger of her other hand. Her previously cheerful countenance takes on a slight frown.
Oliver leans forward, puzzled. "Is anything wrong?" he asks.

Kate closes her fingers over the money. "Tom!" she calls across the room. "Snide coin!"

The next few minutes prove to be very odd indeed. That the penny is counterfeit - snide, they call such coins, and snide-pitching the practice of circulating them - can be of no question to anyone but a blind man. It looks only half as thick as the genuine article, the attempt at the Queen's portrait is risible, and several letters have been stamped the wrong way around, as if the forger were making coins for children's playthings. It's precisely how poor the copy is that makes Oliver certain that he would have noticed it among his own money; would have examined the thing the first time that he set eyes on it and then quite possibly reported it himself. That he didn't pass this coin, and that some sort of caper is being played out here is of no doubt to him whatsoever, but he can only begin to guess what his host hopes to gain from it. There are characters who set their marks up, making them appear to be the perpetrator of the crime, just to be able to pocket a reward. Oliver's more than willing to be hanged for his sheep, but not for a lamb.

The landlord, however, doesn't play out the role of an unreasonable man, nor one given to seeing a conspiracy where none exists. If this is indeed a trick, he displays a healthy respect for the one being taken. When Oliver offers to himself go out into the street and attract the attention of a policeman, he scratches his head, contemplatively.

"Now, look," he says. "Far be it from me to bring the weight of the law tumbling down on a feller over a misunderstanding. That just ain't my nature. Never has been. Smashers are bad for business, but customers seeing me having to call in the bobbies doesn't leave it too lively, neither. What would you say to having a talk with me in the back room, and deciding between us how to sort matters out?"

The far door leads into another passage with a parlour-room off it and a stairway going upwards. Oliver expects to be directed into the parlour, but it seems that he's mistaken in his assumptions; up the stairs he's hustled with a hand on his back until they emerge at the rear end of the gallery. Here, the guests' rooms take the sweet smell of barley and the bitterer one of hops from the light ale in the brewhouse behind. The landlord knocks upon the nearest door. It cracks open a little at the sound of his knuckles. His size blocks any seeing inside.

"Oliver Brownlow," he says, "as requested."

Oliver, now thoroughly stunned, begins to open his mouth to ask just who he really is and how he came to know a Christian name that Oliver's never given, but before he can speak, the door is tugged open. The narrow strip of the room's very familiar occupant expands to a broader one.

"Wotcher, Oliver," Jack says, leaning himself against the frame and crossing one boot over the other. "Hope you're in good sorts this evening. Permit me to make a proper introduction of Tom King, landlord of the Lamb and Lark, the nicest flash-house in London."

After the uncertainties of the past week, followed by the suddenness of Jack being deposited practically in his lap, so much is eddying around inside Oliver's head that he barely knows where to begin. He had closed the door of the room behind them with a dozen questions of his own on his lips that he feels that he's quite entitled to answers to. He's tired, and not a little angry, partly at having been played for a fool this week not once, but - he's quite sure now - twice. And partly at himself for being so; at his own arrogance, his presumption at the start that not only Jack but everyone connected to him should have unblinking trust and confidence in Oliver because of what he appears to be: a gentleman. It's been years since he's felt less like one. He turns to Jack, tired as
he is feeling as though he could have made a quarrel of things. But then Jack's mouth moves in the first faint suggestion of a grin, with something in his eyes that might have been pure amusement but is too focused for that, too affectionate, and the impulse fades away almost as though it had never been.

"I always did say," Jack says, "that you were the rummest feller I ever met." He dips into his pocket, lifting out what Oliver immediately recognizes as his own watch. For a brief moment, he holds it in his hand, his fingers tightening around it in a way almost imperceptible to anyone not watching closely. Then a sorry expression flits across his face, and he shakes his head a little and hands the timepiece back to its owner, looking for all the world like his namesake; a jackdaw forced to drop its findings.

Oliver runs his thumb thoughtfully over the surface of the watch case where his initials are engraved, the clues beginning to fall into place. His own countenance must have shown something, because Jack adds, "Sharp like a pin, Davy is, and there ain't even a Jew what loves his money more. But he'll never let a pal get into trouble if he can help it. Those what makes a friend of him have got another pair of eyes for the backs of their heads."

Oliver exhales. "I feel as though I've had a pair or two of those eyes following me for the best part of the week. Though he'd have been happy enough to have my business."

"He'll do business with anyone what makes it worth his while."

"I'll take it as given, then, that he's every bit as dishonest as I was told when I was given his name. Particularly if he's a friend of yours."

"Bent as a nine bob note," Jack says, taking no offence to this. "And just as rare and worth double. Not all that bad a judge of character, neither."

"He didn't believe a word that I said," Oliver says, regretfully. "He wouldn't admit that he even knew who I was talking about at first - let alone where I could find you."

"Oh, he believed you, all right. If he'd have thought you was a bobby, or a detective, or just somebody what wanted to know more than was good for him, you'd never have had sight of him again, or your value-ables, and you'd have likely met up with some interesting coves who'd have given you a right royal welcome if you'd cared to make a second call. He just wanted to talk with me first so I could tell him for certain who you was and that you was my acquaintance what I'd mentioned from time to time, and Tom had to see that you wasn't being followed, because his establishment's where I live for the most part."

"Who did you tell him that I was? A toff, naive but well-meaning?"

"No, Oliver, I told him that you was the love of my life. So, what's afoot? Come and sit for a bit and tell me all about it."

Oliver tries to remember that, in the case of anything that Jack does or says, it's hard to tell what's real from forgery, so naturally does the latter come to him. As far as the material profits from his underhand activities go, he appears to be living quite well. The room is more than adequately furnished, a brass half-tester bed with a heavy woollen blanket partway over clean-looking linens taking centre stage. A great area of the floor has been laid over with a carpet printed with a blowsy flower and leaf design which, although not exactly in the best taste, certainly gives an opulent feel, and reminds Oliver in both respects of articles of clothing that he's witnessed Jack sporting at various times. It's a far cry from a kinchin den in Saffron Hill. The ale smell is wholesome compared to tallow-wick, gin and open sewerage. Some of the youngest boys' beds had had a
distinct urine odour that Oliver had understood usually earned them either a taunt or a thump from their peers, depending upon their proximity to the source. Oliver thinks of Jack as advancing himself from a more primitive form, like the ancient creatures in the *Vestiges of the Natural Order of Creation*, rising out of the slime and reaching his version of dry land with nothing but sheer determination. The knowledge that there’s barely a farthing of the cost that hasn’t been stolen struggles with instinctive gladness at seeing him well and in comfortable surroundings. Slowly, almost infinitesimally, the scale begins to rise in favour of the second.

He sits down and tells Jack everything that he knows.

Jack in turn relates to him a yarn or three that Oliver would have received with at least a little scepticism had they not been already confirmed in part. Two other ' pals' had indulged in an afternoon's housebreaking at a nearby property, although there had not been a great deal to break, as a servant girl walking out with one of the pair had let them in. This young lady, very much into the spirit of things, had suggested that they go on to rifle the premises of Richard Manns, who did business with her master and was wealthy, but, satisfied with their initial booty, they had not wanted to take chances again too soon. Jack, however, requiring regular funding for his somewhat more lavish tastes, had decided to try his luck. He had watched the house for more than a week, taking particular note of the lights at night and deducing from these where Manns and the servants slept and the respective times that they rose and retired. On the nights of the burglaries, he had generally arrived in the area around or a little after midnight, and made his entrance when the police were being changed. He had accessed the property in no time on his initial visit with a skeleton key and passed undetected past a maid sleeping in the kitchen and the butler in the pantry.

Pleased with his loot, he had been saddened to discover that he had been put off from paying further calls by the new door locks. He had pushed back the parlour window catch with a knife and opened the shutters with a crowbar, a venture which had netted him a nicely full carpet bag of silver plate. As it would have been unwise to use the same trick on his next visit, he had clambered up the ivy and onto a wall at the rear of the house, walked along it, and then made his way up a waterspout and in through a garret window. As he had been about to continue down into the house, he had heard footsteps outside, and had just barely time to drop to the floor and crawl under the bed before a servant girl had walked in, closed the door behind her, and proceeded to remove every last item of clothing. There he had to stay, very distracted, until she had employed a basin of water for personal usage, put on a nightgown and out the light, and slept, allowing Jack to creep out of the room and go about his work. "Why she made such a job out of washing it out," he says, "I ain't got any idea. But someone must have been at her downstairs. I could have gone in the door instead and said 'Good evening' and they wouldn't have minded, nor noticed."

Oliver feels much the same tonight as he had upon seeing a pocketful of stolen jewels scattered in front of him on his kitchen table, in the sense that while he knows how Jack makes his living, he never has any burning desire to be told. It's cowardly, perhaps, on his part; this small wish somewhere to imagine his friend as something other than he is. Yet by telling him, Jack makes it impossible for him to do so. If Oliver wants one part of him, Jack seems to say, he must take it all, just as he takes all of the man that Oliver is. It shocks for merely a moment or two, then acclimatization sets in with disturbing speed.

"Why do you take so many risks?" he says. The question isn't rhetorical, but nor is it accusatory.

Jack puts an elbow on the arm of the chair and props his chin on his hand, as if inwardly contemplating the matter. For one of the few times in what's perhaps years, Oliver has the opportunity and time to examine him closely. In his childhood, he had fitted no image better than that of a black imp, a ball of wits and ill intentions scudding through the City. Grown, he's taller, but still retains a pixie-like quality. The turned-up nose that so well fits any airs he might choose to
adopt is the same. The tips of his slightly protuberant ears show through his thick dark hair. His mouth is wide and soft; he has high cheekbones. He's an oddly attractive man, and Oliver imagines that he must not often have been left wanting for whatever company he's desired over the years; both female and male, if his behaviour is to be interpreted correctly. Oliver isn't so naive, or egotistic, as to imagine that Jack makes an exception for him alone.

"I like taking 'em," he says, "always have. The more I heard as a kinchin that nice things wasn't meant for the likes of me, the more I wanted 'em, and the more I meant to prove that I should have 'em anyway. A man what can't look after his goods don't deserve to have any, not when I can put 'em to better use."

"Even when he's paid for them honestly and you haven't?"

"Who's to say what's honest and what isn't? If a cove's in trade, and he can buy in a dozen candles for three shillings, but makes another cove buy 'em from him at seven shillings instead of telling him where he can get 'em for three, ain't he stolen those four shillings from him, same as if he took them from his pocket? I steal by rifling a feller's house, and he steals by making him pay for the privilege of walking through his door, and he don't keep his thieving to persons what can afford it. Everything's stolen and borrowed. We all come into this grand world with nothing, and there ain't any of us what are going to leave it with anything. So myself and the wealthy man engage in the mortallest of combats, that most exciting of battles: who's to enjoy it all in the meantime. If he mounts a challenge, I must rise to the occasion. The harder it is to win, the more I like it when I do. Thrill of the chase, like they call it. Did you ever fuck and try to wait it out, to make the spend better?"

"Is it worth risking your life for?"

"There's nobody who ain't thought at one time or another that he might risk his life for a fuck."

"Thieving," Oliver says, "not fucking."

"See, it's the same thing to me. It's living. And if you ain't living; if you ain't doing something what gives you a jump of the heart, or a cock-stand, then you might as well die and be done with it." Jack looks at him, intently. "Why was it that you decided that you was going to be a doctor? Why not be a gent of leisure?"

Oliver blinks at the abruptness of the question. "Because I had to help," he says. "Those who were suffering. Those who were poor and who the city had abandoned. Just as I was, once. I couldn't stand and look, and remember that, and do nothing. And," he adds, after a moment's consideration, "medicine interests me. It's a disgrace, how we chart the stars and hypothesize about other worlds, but still know so relatively little about our own physical functions. And absolutely ridiculous how little most of us want to know. Death and sickness from ignorance is what offends me. We have a universe to explore inside our skins."

"Anyone who knows how to breathe air, eat, piss, shit and fuck gets along pretty well, I find."

"If you'd read even half of the surgical and anatomy books that I have, you'd think of yourself as a lot more than that. The human body is the definition of a miracle."

Jack grins, suddenly. "Ain't you realized it yet? You've found what makes your heart jump as well. Your line of work makes you feel like you're living. The same," he adds, pointedly, "as what mine does."

They sit, looking at each other, the physician and the thief. The pair of them are like the two sides
of a shilling, Oliver thinks; it had only depended on which way up the coin fell to decide the direction of each of their lives. Heads, and the thrower is a gentleman. Tails, and he's a felon. Polar opposites on the surface, they are yet made fundamentally out of the same metal.

"I was there when Bill died," Jack says. "I saw him hanging there, like he was on the gallows, before your old man came to get you. If that bobby wasn't so handy with his firearm, the mob would have had him instead. I swore that night I'd never be a bludger or a killer; I'd turn a barker on myself before I'd do to any girl what Bill did to Nance. Fagin always let us watch 'em hang the murderers. 'A nasty business, boys,' he'd say, 'very nasty indeed. A violent man always meets with a violent end. Let our friend on the scaffold be your teacher in that.' I swore it to myself. I'd go for a stretch, and fair do's to the man what sent me, but I wouldn't do nothing what I'd swing for."

Oliver closes his eyes. He can still feel, even now, the rolling, dizzying sensation of clinging to the beam, hugging it with his arms and knees, pressing his forehead to it. Memory isn't kind enough to reject the bad and retain only the good. A pistol shot explodes through the air, and Sikes spasms, chokes for a moment, and then falls. The weight of his tall, burly figure at the other end of the rope makes the wood creak sickeningly. A silence falls that's louder than the ringing in Oliver's ears. In the dirty, flickering light of the torches below, the beam is the ghost of a gibbet, the body beneath it horrifically and unnaturally suspended between heaven and earth.

"It won't happen," he says, "because I'll be damned if I'll let it. A person taking the law into his own hands and plotting a murder, using God's word to justify it, is obscene. The law isn't relevant any longer here. The man disgusts me."

"We live in disgusting times, and the sooner you realize that most every cove with money's a hypocrite, the better you'll get along living amongst them." Something shifts in Jack's face. "I ain't never been caught yet. That doesn't mean I ain't very touched that you was worried I might be."

"I know," Oliver says. He leans forward in the chair, his forearms resting on his legs. "But it isn't enough." When Jack makes a show of raising his eyebrows, he clarifies matters. "I thought that I'd be content with simply knowing that you were safe. But now I believe that I wanted more from the start. I wanted to see what I thought of as justice carried out; moral justice."

"Last time what I looked, I was a burglar, not a beak."

Oliver looks at him. As he does so, a series of arbitrary thoughts begin to come together in his brain, and finally create something that makes him feel as if he must have gone suddenly quite mad. He tries to unseat it, but it refuses to leave. *I believe that it could be done*, he thinks, *if I were to have a part in it*, and is immediately gripped not by horror at the idea, but a strange, grim delight.

"Jack," he says, "what would you think to a wager? A practical one?"

"Nobody'd say I wasn't a sporting man."

"So certain people that we both know insist. How would you rate your chances of successfully robbing Manns again?"

"I'd call 'em 'good'. And the likelihood of my trying it, after what you told me, 'better'."

"And if I were to help you do it?"

Jack eyes him. "Oliver," he says, presently, "sometimes you're a prince among men, and sometimes you just ain't right in the head, and I'm starting to wonder if it ain't more often the second one. In
case you've poured out your brains tonight along with your heart, may I remind you that you're what's most commonly referred to as a gent, and a gent, I presume, what doesn't want to take a chance on his next address being Clerkenwell? I look out for you, and you don't peach on me; that's how it's always been." His mouth crooks. "May I ask if this is due to the way what our friendship's been blossoming of late?"

"Partly, yes. The rest of it's about me."

"Leave it, Oliver. This ain't your fight."

Oliver folds his hands. "Suppose that I were to tell you that whatever the value of the goods that you've taken, you could double it - triple it, several times over."

Jack cocks his head. "I've had a nice haul of plate and trinkets," he says, "but there ain't never been all that much cash around the house. What's your plan, guv'nor?"

"Upstairs," Oliver says, "his own bedroom. Manns banks for business as he must, but he doesn't favour the Threadneedle Street vaults for his gold; he's been self-assured enough to mention it. He keeps some considerable cash sums in the house in sovereigns at any given time. It's what he pays me from."

"I presume it ain't in a trunk under the bed?" Jack enquires.

"It's locked in a private safe," Oliver says, carefully. He watches Jack for his reaction to this information. Whether the lock of a safe in any way differs from the lock of a door when it comes to opening it illegally, he doesn't know. He knows, he realizes, very little. He's as much of a stranger in this world as Jack would be were he to seat himself behind the desk in his consulting room.

Jack touches a finger to his chin in apparent thought. "All the safes what I've seen had Bramah locks. That's to say, there's a round key with notches what go into the lock flat. A skeleton key won't work, or a wooden one. I've met fellers who broke the heads off the rivets with a hammer and chisel and took the top of the safe off, or forced the door with a jack-in-the-box, but that makes a right bloody row. You'd have someone up them stairs before you could say 'Bill Sikes'."

"You can't open it."

"Oh, I can open it. But I'd like to look it over first, nice and quiet, like. Walking in through the front door used to be our good friend Davy's speciality. You and me are going to call on him again."

"All right," Oliver says, wondering. "When?"

"I'll come and fetch you. You ain't changed residence in the past week?"

"Jack -"

Jack grins. "Oliver, I can be discreet. Whether it's business or pleasure."

"And is this business?" Oliver asks, softly.

"For the most part. But any sort of business what I might undertake with you would always be my pleasure."

Oliver knows for certain what the reason is that he would do everything that he's already done again, and twice over. This is the man who will always prevent him from being a gentleman; not for the past, nor for any forthcoming escapades that they might engage in together, but for the
simple reason that there's nothing remotely gentlemanly about the way that he makes him feel.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Not a misspelling in the case of the blood protein. Haemoglobin had certainly been discovered by the 1850s, and some of its functions were known, but its first name was haematoglobin.

Jack Sheppard, the notorious 18th-century crook, managed to be pretty damn awesome. A burglar and housebreaker, but one who abhorred violence, he escaped from prison not just once, but four times, even after being clapped in irons and chained to the frigging floor in his cell.

*Artful Dodger* Jack had been named once for his talents in dodging the grasping hand of the law, and so he's remained in spirit, having neatly avoided the fates - prison, transportation, the noose - that typically befall his contemporaries, and that many years ago abruptly ended the career of his self-proclaimed boyhood hero Jack Sheppard. Sheppard had been immortalized in ballads and broadsheets within his own lifetime, and in pantomime on the stage within two weeks of his execution. Oliver is fairly certain that his Jack would sooner be somewhat less famous but in a better state of health, and that this is where he and a ghostly Sheppard have somewhere along the way doffed their hats to one another and parted company. That robbery has been to both, at various times, a jaunt and a lark is where they remain joined in spirit.

From the ink spilled about him and his excursions around the city in between confinements, it might be deduced by readers that Sheppard's downfall was his complete lack of desire to be discreet. On the morning that Oliver wakes to some indistinct sound that might have been inside his head, and at last lights a candle and ventures down to the drawing room to find Jack half-dozing on the sofa there in his stocking feet with his hat on his lap, he deduces that the Artful Dodger's desire to be so is selective. He puts the candlestick down on the card table and folds his arms.

"Jack," he says, in acknowledgement.

Jack opens one eye. "Allow me to express my full approval, Oliver, of your residence. Very nice. Handsome but tasteful. Really ought to get yourself some better door-locks fitted, though."

"To secure the house from burglars? Or from guests?"

"Guests what happen to be burglars." Jack swings his feet to the floor and reaches for his boots. He cuts quite a handsome outline himself in a dark coat and trousers set off by a more flamboyant damson-coloured waistcoat embroidered with sprigs of tiny flowers, clothes which, despite the early hour for it, are clearly for visiting rather than working. Around his neck is knotted a cravat which rather reminds Oliver of the ridiculously oversized thing that had been on display beneath his chin the day that they met. While the boys' clothing had been restricted to what could be filched that would fit them, it seems decidedly fitting to his nature that Jack's eye had been drawn to the most ostentatious. "You always was an innocent at heart," he adds, busily lacing, and then, glancing up, "and I always was the one to cure you of it."

"And I always was the one who could peach you in an instant," Oliver answers, with a small smile.
Jack smirks back at him. "Not any longer, since you decided that you was up for a bit of financial
revenge. There ain't much to choose between the two of us now."

"That isn't altogether true, but I do see your point."

"My point, my old covey, is that you was just a late bloomer." Jack finishes tying his boots and
looks up at the fixture above them. "Have you got gas in here?"

"Downstairs and in the kitchen, but not upstairs. The girls usually turn it on first thing, but I will do
in a moment. And you're lucky that I walked in on you before either of them did."

"Pretty girls, are they?"

"If it matters in any way," Oliver replies, finding it difficult to maintain a straight face.

"You must have heard a different meaning of the word 'lucky' to what I have, then. But I ain't one
to complain much." Jack rouses himself from the sofa, and moves across to stand near. The
candlelight makes his eyes look darker and softer, and the lack of distraction in the stillness of the
house sharpens Oliver's physical awareness of him, as if the barriers created by sound are currently
absent. Deliberately, he reaches up and straightens Oliver's collar, brushing off imaginary specks of
dust. "You'll do for me. Most definitely."

Oliver can sense the sparkle that he sees in the other man's eyes being reflected in his own as
Jack's fingertips skim off the edge of the starched material and graze his skin, very lightly, in a way
that could appear almost accidental to an onlooker. "This collar is new on."

"Am I being falsely accused of having dirty hands?"

"I didn't say that."

"I could soon get 'em dirtier, if it took your fancy."

"Not while standing in my drawing room."

"May I take it from that that you might be agreeable to dirting other places in your fine house?"

Oliver hesitates. "I'm not sure," he says. The gentle banter between them turns a corner and goes
off course. Yet he knows that he's spoken his thoughts, and furthermore, could not have done
anything else; at least one part of him, it seems, is still honest. Jack's closeness, and the sudden
pleasure that rises up in him at the touch of skin on skin, makes him feel as though he could be
agreeable to a number of things. That Jack should incite such a thought in him seems less
surprising due to his male sex, and more so for his simply being Jack. Familiarity, it would appear,
does not always breed contempt. It feels not uncomfortable, and yet extremely peculiar.

Jack grins a little, ruefully. "It's all right, mate," he says. "Just wanted to let you know that the offer
stands. I reckon it wouldn't take us long to get some other things standing, too, if you'd give it a
try."

Oliver exhales, half in laughter, the momentary awkwardness dissipating. "I have no doubts about
your past talents. Up skirts or down trousers."

"You got me banged to rights on that," Jack admits. The distant squeak of a door punctuates the
quiet, followed by the creak and give of the upstairs floorboards. A moment or two later, footsteps
sound on the stairs, accompanied by soft voices; Sarah first, then the shriller tones of Hester
behind. The water will be on down in the scullery soon, and the kettle for Mrs Phillips's tea; Sarah
will be in to clean and light the fire, as mortified as ever to find him in the cold and unfed, despite his choice in the matter. Here, at the cusp of the day, swings the door between Oliver's two lives, and here he must invite Jack over the threshold if things are to go as planned. As ever, Jack takes care of the issue himself. Briskly, he smooths down Oliver's shirt and waistcoat front.

"Well," he says, "now that I'm above stairs, ain't you going to give me a grand tour?"

They tour. Jack displays the same appreciation for all of Oliver's living rooms. He goes over the study with a vexing degree of interest, tugging open bureau drawers and leafing through books. Some of the case studies in the *Journal of Medical, Surgical and Obstetrical Science and Practice* draw more than a few mild jibes, but he balks at the autopsy records, saying irreverently that he hopes that when he finally croaks, a few righteous gents in the vicinity will rush him off to a nice quiet grave before Oliver or his friends can lay a finger on him, and then voicing a heartfelt wish to move on to the consulting room. Here, both Oliver's certificates and diploma in their oakwood frames and his glass-fronted cabinets of instruments are duly acknowledged, the former with all proper respect, and the latter rather more dubiously. "I ain't sure what half of those are for," Jack says, "and if they was anywhere near my personal body, I ain't sure whether I'd want to know or not, either."

He prefers the microscope. Intrigued, he lets Oliver light its slim paraffin lamp, set up slides, and adjust the objective lenses to bring into magnified clarity the cells of frog's skin, the hexagonal lattice within the cross-section of a geranium leaf and the forest of hairs and needled jaws belonging to a half-transparent spider. Leaning lightly over Jack's shoulder where the other man sits at the desk, Oliver points out the mass of corpuscles in a preserved droplet of blood and explains how the haematoglobin protein flushes them red.

"I've acquired a good few boxfuls of these. I could show you a section of human liver or a slice of diseased vertebrae, if you'd be interested."

"Think I'll stay with the blood. I ain't had breakfast yet, and I don't want to lose my appetite."

Oliver smiles. "It is known as morbid anatomy," he says, and then, a slightly impish urge coming over him, "How about a curiosity, for want of a better word?"

"Oh, miniatures, like? I've seen 'em for sale. Although why anyone'd want to peer at a picture of St Paul's through a glass when he could get a better view standing outside it, I can't say."

"No, something quite organic." Oliver opens a cabinet drawer and shuffles through a tray of slides until he turns up the object of his search. He secures it on the microscope's stage, and gestures to Jack to observe. "How would you identify this particular specimen?"

Jack bends over the eyepiece, perusing the mount of tiny, threaded cells. "Whatever it is," he observes, sagely, "I hope it don't spread too fast."

"Very fast indeed, but harmlessly as often as not. And frequently, I believe, it's quite welcomed."

"Oh, is that so? And where would a medical man such as your good self find this specimen?"

"That would depend very much on the circumstances, but a patient of the male gender is always a good place to begin looking."

Jack draws back in the chair. A dark eyebrow approaches his hairline with the same momentum that starts to curl his lips. "Being outside of the profession myself and ignorant of correct terms, may I instead, Oliver, call it 'spunk'?"
"I'd write spermatozoa on the cover, personally." Oliver feels his own mouth twitching again. "But yes - you may."

"I beg to know whether the doctor ain't above producing his own samples."

"He isn't, but not for microscope slides."

Their gazes meet for a second, and then both of them succumb to the joke, grinning like boys. This, Oliver thinks, as much any desire, is what makes it right; this gift that Jack gives him of permission to be himself.

"Thank you," Jack manages to say at length, at least somewhat seriously, "for the demonstration. Very impressive indeed. Though I have to say, no matter how close you look at bits of people what you already know are diseased, it ain't going to make it go away any quicker, or stop 'em getting it in the first place."

Oliver moves to sit on the corner of the desk. "Microscopes have been showing us marvels for three hundred years that we never knew to exist before. One day we might be able to see diseases."

"Oliver, if you don't know what a disease looks like, I'd like to show you a feller with a bloody wipe, and another one what's taken up residence in the shit-house. And then ask the one what licensed you as a doctor some questions."

"If a man were to die of arsenic poisoning, I could have a test carried out that would show arsenic present in his body tissue and the contents of his stomach. If he's been sickened by foul air, it stands to reason that we ought to be able to find physical evidence of that poison too."

"Before he dies, I'd hope," Jack adds.

"Take the German paper by Friedrich Henle that was circulated, and the Italian by Agostino Bassi."

Jack throws him a look of utter disbelief. "Sorry, Oliver. I must have been dining with Lord Aberdeen and the Chief Commissioner on those days, and had to forsake my constitutional to the British Museum library."

Oliver inclines his head, apologetically. "Doctor Bassi," he says, by way of explanation, "examined diseased silkworms in Italy and found small, living spores on their bodies. If healthy worms were placed alongside, the spores could soon be found on them also, and then they too quickly died. Doctor Henle's papers draw from another Italian physician. He proposes that disease is caused by parasitic organisms - passed by touch, or soiled linen, or through the air - that invade human and animal bodies and multiply inside."

"Oh, really?"

"Think on it. If a bacterium - a type of microscopic animal - can be only barely large enough to detect, suppose that a spore were smaller still?"

Jack draws himself up in the chair. "Oliver," he says, "if I was to swear to report to you any spores unfamiliar to me what I happen to notice flying about, would there be any danger of a plate of something from your kitchen?"

Oliver pauses, then relaxes and smiles. "Two, at least," he replies.

The doorknob rattles, and Sarah comes in to pull the curtains. Upon seeing the unexpected visitor,
she emits a small, confused, "Oh!" and retreats a step or two to hover at the threshold. Oliver
stands, reassuringly.

"Do go about your work, Sarah - we were about to leave the room. May I have breakfast for my
guest as well. He'll be more than happy with the same as me."

"Delighted," Jack puts in.

"Yes, Doctor. Mrs Phillips'll be down directly." Sarah smooths the folds of her apron a little; a
light, nervous movement. "I'm sorry, sir; I didn't know that a gentleman had arrived -"

"It's quite all right," Oliver says. "It was something of a surprise visit." Out of the corner of his eye,
he sees Jack watching with an expression of what appears to be the greatest amusement. "Jack," he
says, "may I introduce Miss Sarah Macinnery. Sarah, Mr Jack Dawkins."

Sarah looks quite lost now. From time to time, Oliver experiences the sensation of stepping back
from himself, and observing his own words and actions as an outsider, and it's often only in these
moments that he's fully aware of the subtle differences in how he and others of his class interact
with the armies of varying sizes who run their households. His innate feeling that his servants are
on more of a par with him than is considered correct is on display in a manner that is even less so.
Although they might have grown used to most of his eccentricities over time, being formally
presented to a guest is clearly still beyond imagining. "Good morning, sir," she says, uncertainly.

Jack rises and inclines his own head with a solemnness in which Oliver suspects that only he would
detect both the extent of the mockery, and the fact that it's squarely aimed at him. "And a fine
morning it should always be, was I under the good Doctor's roof and certain to wake to sweet
greetings what cause the uplift of the body and soul."

Oliver coughs in a manner that draws both Jack and Sarah's attention, though for differing reasons.
"Sarah, may I have hot water upstairs for my shave, please. Mr Dawkins will make himself
comfortable in the drawing room with some tea; there are plenty of newspapers, and I'm sure that
the Ottoman question will interest him. Or perhaps the Eclectic Review will appeal to his
intellectual nature."

"I'm a man of fine tastes," Jack confirms. He watches until Sarah closes the door behind her, then
looks back at Oliver, twitching his eyebrows questioningly. Oliver returns a stern frown, and
shakes his head. Jack shrugs. "Can't blame me for being curious. There's those who would, if you
wouldn't."

"With anyone who didn't want it as I did and agree to it," Oliver says, firmly, "I wouldn't."

"Queer how I'd swear that I've been in full agreement, then, because I still ain't got anywhere."

"No," Oliver acknowledges, and then adds, more softly, "but I haven't asked you to stop."

Jack also approves heartily of breakfast, which he wastes no time in pitching into: cold tongue and
sole, and buttered eggs. The rolls are from the day before, the bakers' boy only just having arrived
for the orders, but a warm in the oven has softened them, and they're very acceptable with
preserves; one dish of pear, plum and apple jam, and one of blackcurrant. Oliver invariably takes to
the study with just a pot of tea upon rising at an ungodly hour, and makes use of the more peaceful
time until the deliveries begin to bring his correspondence up to date. Today, seated further
towards the front of the house than usual, he takes the opportunity as they eat to imagine that he's
never heard the noise of the early morning before and listen to it anew: the dustman's bell and his
call of, Dust-ho! as he halts periodically, and the clang of the milkman's smaller can being lowered
through the railings of the area. He almost feels himself part of a different world that exists only while his fellow members of middle-class society sleep; as if he has the clairvoyant ability to see things hidden from others. Jack's presence always seems to re-introduce him to experiences, both great and small, that he has long left behind.

Mrs Phillips enters after the meal is over, and also seems rather taken aback by the visitor, but recovers herself as speedily as ever, and says that she will certainly discuss the week's menus with Oliver later in the day, the laundry, which comes back today, and the accounts. There's a school of thought that bachelors are both partly feminized by their necessary attention to domestic concerns, and deprived of the sanctuaries from business that the living rooms of their homes ought to be by their direct interactions with the servants as employers. Not only does Oliver hardly feel that this applies to his uncle, but he's inclined to view the household as a less painful version of the treadmill in the workhouse, in that every occupant has his part to play in keeping it running satisfactorily for all of their benefits. As a boy in Bloomsbury, he had delighted when he was not at lessons in running errands, fetching and carrying, and opening the door to the letter carrier's double rap. His uncle had had to call him to his side during his first weeks in the house to tell him gently that he was not expected to clean boots there. He still feels restless when idle or tardy; unsettled, as if he hasn't been put back into his proper place. When he tells Mrs Phillips that there will be no surgery this morning due to his appointment, he feels an unpleasant pang of conscience.

"Yes, Doctor. Ought I to tell the patients to call later in the week, or advise them of the whereabouts of another physician?"

Oliver hesitates. "Please tell them that surgery will be open for three hours immediately after dinner instead," he says. "I'll take a light meal this evening."

He's quite sure that a gentle smile disturbs her otherwise flawless composure for a moment. "Yes, sir, of course."

Jack, on the other hand, is shaking his head almost before she's left the room. "Oliver, you ain't been caught yet. You don't need a punishment."

"No," Oliver replies, "but neither do my patients, save the one."

Jack untucks his napkin from his collar, and wipes his mouth deliberately fastidiously. Depositing it upon his plate, he throws Oliver a wink. "Well, then? Ready to gather the troops, are we, my captain?"

Oliver takes a short breath, then rises from his seat. "Lead on," he says.

In the hallway, Sarah hands them both their hats and coats, and Oliver his walking cane after looking about her, expecting to also find one for Jack. "I'll be returning home in time for my usual luncheon," he tells her, "but very likely not before then. Mr Dawkins and I have an extended call to make."

"Yes, Doctor."

Oliver deliberately looks across his shoulder to where Jack's contemplating the barometer on the wall as if trying to decide upon the best way to slip it inside his coat unnoticed. He's not certain whether this is actually the case, or whether he simply never expects Jack to fundamentally change. He turns back to her. "Thank you, Sarah," he says, trying to express the full implications of the word through his eyes.

For a moment, she looks confused, and then she says, "Oh!" for the second time that morning, and
her cheeks flare rapidly. She quite clearly remembers his words about scoundrels and rogues, and is now unsure of what to do about being in immediate proximity to one. "The gentleman, sir, who..."

"Who wasn't a gentleman," Oliver finishes, quietly, in confirmation.

He lets his gaze drift briefly over the familiar shades and outlines around him; the gold-leaf wallpaper that had already been hung when he took the house and that he had quite favoured; the print of the road in Athens leading to the Acropolis that hangs opposite the drawing room. Soon Jack will leave, and Oliver's home will return to its natural state, with nothing to show that he's been through it; comfortable, well-ordered, and suddenly rather unexciting for the most part.

'Your line of work makes you feel like you're living,' Jack had said, and Oliver would not dispute it for a second. Yet in recent days, it's no longer seemed to be enough.

Jack leads on, and he follows.

-oOo-

"The thing with a fence," Jack says, "is that you got to know you can trust him. He knows what you look like and most probably where you live, and he can peach you any time what he likes. So you trust him because he's reliable, or you know you can trust him because you got as much on him as what he's got on you. Fagin always had old Bill over a barrel, because if everyone started peaching everyone else, Bill'd come out of it a lot worse than what any of us would. So Bill never did trust him, and a right nasty affair that was for us all. But Davy's the reliable sort. He'll do right by us."

"Is he your partner?"

Jack shakes his head. "Work alone, don't I? I'm my own man. I'll take a partner for a job if I need one, but I don't like to. Live alone, too," he adds, "always best not to start depending on someone."

Oliver begins to open his mouth to ask another question that he's been curious about the answer to, but Jack cuts the possibility off by striding ahead as they approach the cab stand on High Holborn. Despite Jack having the shorter legs, Oliver has to walk briskly to keep up. He doesn't feel confident about besting him were they ever to be in a flat-out sprint together; the former Artful Dodger has been accustomed to having to move smartly in both pursuit and escape for too long. By the time that he reaches the stand, Jack has already almost completed the discussion with the first driver in line. The Holborn stand is one of the few in the city open all around the clock, and the drivers of the early morning hours have to do without the ease of 'sheltering' in a nearby inn while a boy watches the horse and cab, which at least eliminates the chances of a collision or a fallen horse being increased by an intoxicated cabby. Swathed in their capes, they shiver a little in the keen air. At this hour, the mist is still ash-grey; largely untainted as yet by the smoke and blacks that will soon evolve it into one degree or another of what is termed a 'London particular'.

As he climbs into the cab, Oliver absently recalls a tale of a passenger smothered by a winter fog who was suddenly struck by the realisation that the horse was boldly going forth up the steps of a house instead of along the road. Jack clammers in beside him, and the stout waterman, whose greatcoat turns him into the shape of a giant bell, shuts the doors in front of them. Jack takes up Oliver's walking cane and uses it to rap in a showy way on the roof of the cab, causing the conveyance to rock into motion so violently that both of them are compelled to make an undignified grab for the handles on the insides of the doors to avoid being almost flung out over the back of the horse in front. Jack thumps the roof again with the cane, this time in less of an aristocratic fashion.
"Oi! You got paying customers in here! My companion might be a physician, but he ain't in the habit of needing to heal himself!"

"I drive how I drive! You don't like it, you walk it!"

Oliver manages, with some force, to retrieve his cane. "Take a little more care, please!" he calls up, and then, with a flash of inspiration, "This man's wife is at time, and I'm the doctor for the confinement!"

The driver gives a disparaging bark of laughter audible even over the sound of the hansom's wheels as they start to move. "I got four of my own," he shouts back, "and they all wanted it their own way, too!" And the rumble increases in volume over the granite setts as they swing out into the street and pick up speed.

The cab rattles along through Broad Street and into the new road, Endell Street, that had been built shortly after Oliver completed his schooling, partly to help manage traffic in the area and partly to cleanse it of a scant few of the many slums. On the left stands the workhouse of St Giles-in-the-Fields and St George. As a boy, Oliver would have simply tried not to let his thoughts linger for too long on similar places. Now, he feels the instinctive pang of distress of a man of medicine possessed of the knowledge of what passes for infirmaries and nursing under the poor relief of many parishes. The ticking on the narrow iron bedsteads will be dirty, the blankets ragged, the coals for the house brought into the wards and shunted into the cellars through holes in the floor and producing obnoxious smells that combine with those endemic to the bedridden who are unable to wash by themselves. Such a miasma must be conducive to all manner of ailments. The breeding grounds that could be created for malevolent spores, if truth were ever to be found in the theory, hardly bear thinking about. He has a sudden desire to wash his hands, repeatedly.

Jack bumps Oliver's shoulder with his own, utilizing the bounce of the hansom to do so. When Oliver turns, he finds the other man sitting with his arms folded and his head tilted to one side. "Penny for your thoughts?" Jack says.

Oliver returns a small smile, and shakes his head. "They aren't worth as much as that. I just have a bee in my bonnet about certain matters, as the Scotchmen say."

Jack's gaze flickers to the irregular collection of brick buildings that form the workhouse as they pass. "We done bloody well for ourselves," he says. "Places like that never gave nobody nothing, so the sharp ones go out and find it. One of life's winners, that's what you are. Just like me."

For some reason, the idea has never before occurred to Oliver. "Were you a workhouse boy, too?"

"Might have been, once," Jack says, mysteriously. A faint grin crosses his face. "Fagin always said us boys was all hatched in a gutter by the sun. Liked that notion, somehow. But we're two peas from the same pod, you and me."

"Yes," Oliver says, slowly. "I've only been beginning to realise that recently."

They disembark on St Martin's Lane, and Oliver is taken into the pawnshop not through the front door this time, but by a back entrance accessed by an alley behind that runs from a little court. Jack refers to this as the tradesman's entrance, a statement which he finds a fine joke, and even more so when he alerts the proprietor to their arrival by way of a secondary bell. When Davy bobs his head around the door and sees them, he shuts up the shop very promptly, and up a little staircase they go to the rooms where he lives above his premises. Although this is only their second meeting, he's as affable to Oliver as he is to Jack once proper introductions have been made, and serves them both with a tankard of ale. He listens with the utmost interest to Jack's telling of the tale, then looks at
Oliver and grins from ear to ear. Davy is as cheery and clean-looking as Jack is dark and sly, but cut from the same cloth. Jack appears to be immensely satisfied with himself. "I told you how he was bent," he says to Davy, sounding as pleased as he might were he personally responsible for the fact.

"There *are* mitigating circumstances," Oliver points out, "largely centred around you. And I don't intend to keep any of the money for myself. If we were to succeed."

"Oliver, I don't care if your intentions is to put your share in the poor box at the police courts."

"Thank you for the suggestion; I may just do that."

Jack turns to Davy. "I could weep, I could."

Davy manages to control a snigger. He takes a mouthful of ale, and smacks his lips a little, thoughtfully, then turns to Oliver, contemplating him with very bright blue eyes. "Oliver... Oliver is all right, ain't it, between friends?"

"Of course."

"Then, this safe is upstairs in the house?"

"The master bedroom. Apparently Manns likes to be certain of having plenty of gold close at hand."

"This ain't a complete mystery to me, personally," Jack puts in.

"Undoubtedly, but I think that he also likes to have as little recorded in his ledgers as possible. He's something of an enigma, by all that I've heard. It's said that his background isn't known, so there may or may not have been wealth in the family, but to all appearances, both he and the money for his first business venture came from nowhere."

"Interesting feller," Davy says, with a slow nod. "But I ain't as interested in him as what I am in his cash."

"That is what I anticipated, given how Jack described you," Oliver says.

Jack shrugs. "Never let it be said that I ain't a reputable character witness."

"Jack knows me pretty well, but not as well as I know him. He's sung a few of your praises to me too." Davy quirks his mouth in a fashion that makes Oliver wonder exactly what sorts of songs Jack *has* been singing. "How much is it that we're talking about here?"

Oliver adjusts himself slightly in his seat. He's beginning to himself feel like a villain from one of the penny dreadfuls, skulking in low places and plotting with his fellow mischief-makers. He wavers. And then he looks at Jack, and he remembers Jack taking him by the hand as he wandered alone on the street, and he remembers his dream.

"This is only speculation on my part," he says.

"Naturally," Jack says, pleasantly.

"After engaging a few mutual acquaintances in conversations about business, I made a rough calculation of Manns's probable income. I also considered how much of it it would likely be necessary for him to bank or keep in other trust, coupled with how much it would be preferable or
reasonably practical for him to retain as gold at any given time. My guess would be that there's an absolute minimum of five hundred pounds in that safe, and quite possibly over one thousand."

Jack and Davy exchange glances. Davy's eyebrows twitch, suggestively. Jack gives a low whistle, and leans back in his chair, tilting it onto two unsteady legs with a boot braced against the table. His manner is casual, but his eyes glint with all the delight of a boy's.

"If I had that money under my roof," he says, "it'd be a worry to me."

"Wouldn't be able to sleep at night," Davy agrees.

"I say that we ought to do the cove a good turn and relieve him of this troublesome burden of his."

"Only what any man with a kind and considerate nature would do."

"You said that you wanted to look at the safe first?" Oliver asks.

Jack nods. "Without leaving any evidence of my having called again. Last thing what we want is our good friend Mr Manns having a fit of nerves come over him sudden, and removing what's left of his pretty things to securer premises."

"You want a key, dontcher?" Davy says. "A door key's what I mean, not a screw."

"I do indeed."

"Where exactly do you intend to get that from?" Oliver says, in confusion.

Davy leans forward, propping pointed elbows on the table top. "Has Manns ever been known to have a latch-key on his person?"

Oliver nods. "At almost all times, surprisingly. I carry mine so that if I have to go out to a patient late at night, my servants don't have to sit up. I doubt that the consideration is the reason behind his preferences. But it's in a pocket, I believe."

"What if someone who couldn't get near the housekeeper's keys without getting himself noticed, but had a good reason to get close to our mark, could lift that key?"

For a moment, Oliver has no idea what it is that he means, but it slowly begins to dawn on him as he looks from Davy to Jack, and then back to Davy. Both of them are now not just smiling at him, but positively smirking, and the more disbelieving he feels his expression becoming, the wider their smirks grow. "You can't possibly," he says, "be suggesting what I think you're suggesting."

"Fancy having a try, Oliver?" says Jack. "P'rhaps you're better at keys than what you are at wipes."

"If you was to get the key to me," Davy explains, "I can press it in a block of wax in a moment. Then I pass it back, and you replace it. Or if you can't, you drop it on the floor, on a carpet where it won't make a sound, and let him find it. He never knows what's happened, and I get the right blank at a lock-shop and fit a new key from it."

"And what would you be doing in the house?" Oliver manages to ask.

"The servants' bells are a good flim-flam. Feller can pretend to work on 'em in any room what he likes and not get a second look. I'll be a step or two behind you."

"Everyone believes him," Jack says, "on account of that innocent face what he's blessed with. That's what he used to do. Say how he was the baker's boy and rifle the kitchens, or the piano-
tuner, and leave the pianoforty sounding as bad as what it ever was, but the cupboards with a few movables less. Right angel of virtue, he looks like."

"And Jack looks like what he is," Davy adds, in a cheerful manner.

Jack inclines his head. "Thank you, mate, I'm flattered. Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Jack," Oliver says, helplessly. "I'm not a pickpocket. You and I both know that. I'd be noticed in an instant. I couldn't pick pockets when I was at the best height for it, let alone now."

"Oliver, I always clocked a born dipper the first time I saw 'em. Some proper lessons is all what you need. I'd be delighted to be your teacher, and there ain't no better day to start than today."

Before Oliver had been apprenticed from the workhouse, Bumble, the beadle, had told him sanctimoniously that he was both an ungrateful and thoroughly wicked boy, and that he had most undoubtedly been so before he had even departed his poor mother's womb. Now he wonders if the man, otherwise a fool, had been closer to the truth than he knew, and whether it's a part of what draws he and Jack together.

Somewhere in his memory, he hears a voice politely enquiring of him, 'Is it gone?' and his boyish self replies, 'Yes, Mr Fagin! Look!'
Chapter 5

Oliver argues his case all the way to the room at the Lamb and Lark, predominantly the fact that pickpocketing skills like his are more of a liability than an aid, but his doubts are dismissed. Jack is quite taken with the idea, and nothing will change his mind. "Confidence," he says, as they climb the staircase and trample along the narrow landing, "is what all of it comes down to, in the end. And remember, if you feel a bit of a tug: just because you felt it, it don't mean your mark did. A distracted mark don't feel all manner of things."

"On a crowded street. I highly doubt that Manns is going to be sufficiently distracted by simple conversation."

Jack gives an odd grin. "Don't you believe it. If the eyes don't see it, the mind don't notice it; that was what we was always taught. If his eyes and his thoughts is elsewhere, he won't notice your hand at his pocket."

"I do believe it, though; that's the problem."

"Please yourself." They stop before the door. Jack pats at his coat in a somewhat theatrical way. "Now, who'd've thought," he declares, "that I'd forget where it was that I had my own key? Oliver, be a gent and hold the rest of my sundries while I search for it."

Oliver's recurring feeling that he's missing something, somewhere, passes over him, but he holds out his hands for Jack to disgorge his pockets into. Some loose coins and a fat-looking wallet are deposited on him, closely followed by a second wallet that looks strikingly familiar. So do the handkerchief and the pocket-knife that accompany it. When the watch changes hands for the fourth time that week, he says, "Jack," so reproachfully that the other man opens his eyes very round and wide in feigned innocence.

"Yes, Oliver?"

"These are my sundries."

"Well, ain't that a surprise! How d'you suppose that it could have happened? I must have lifted 'em without you noticing while we was engaged in simple conversation."

"All right. Very well. I'm not afraid to admit it when I'm wrong. It can be done. But I'm the one who you're suggesting attempts it with Manns, and I don't have your touch." Oliver returns his own possessions to their appropriate places, placing them in particularly carefully, although he's under no false impression that they won't vanish again when he least expects it. "These really are yours, I presume?" he asks, referring to the remaining wallet and coins.

Jack secretes the money away in an unrevealed location inside his coat, then takes the wallet, and flips it open to display the contents. Inside are a number of leaves of fine paper, folded and printed so as to have the appearance of banknotes if glanced at in a hurry; Oliver would have certainly taken them as such. Confidentially, he taps the side of his nose. "Keep a nice-looking wallet out in the open where anyone can have at it, and your real cash under wraps. Best advice ever given by one dipper to another."

"Except that I'm not a dipper. But thank you all the same."

"Give it time, give it time." A key appears in Jack's hand, and he rattles it into the door-lock and lets them both in, turning it prudently again behind them. The care that he takes to lock them in
leads Oliver to assume that there are valuables about, and so it proves to be the case. Jack turns out samples of all kinds of artefacts that shine and sparkle as he makes his way around the room; gold seals, rings, brooches, gold and silver pencil-cases. They surface from every imaginable hiding place. Pinned inside his linens so as not to fall even if the clothing were shaken. Inside a large book that's no longer a readable volume but has had a shape cut out of all but the first and last few pages so as to transform it into a cunning box. On the floorboards beneath a bottom drawer that he lifts out. He unrolls a cloth on the table and spreads out a selection of them, gleaming beneath the lamp that he lights like starlight; like a swarm of exotic insects. Accustomed as he himself is to such things, Oliver's forced to admit that there's an enchantment in seeing them heaped together like this.

"Nice, ain't they?" Jack says.

"Extremely. Are they all from burglaries?"

"Some of 'em," Jack says, carelessly. "Hooked the rest. Always like to keep my hand in. Easier than when I was a kinchin - all it takes is a few nice togs to look the part. You look like you belong where you are, and you're never the one what a feller looks at when his wallet goes for a walk." He takes the fabric of Oliver's coat-sleeve between his thumb and forefinger, and tugs lightly. "That's how it's going to work for you. Who'd think there was anything rum about the good doctor?"

"It might look rum when the good doctor begins trying every single pocket. I'm sure that Manns carries his key, but I don't know where it is."

Jack releases the sleeve. "And what are you going to do about it?" he says.

Oliver opens his mouth to reply with something of an acerbic nature, but hesitates as he realizes that the question is largely rhetorical. "Why don't you tell me?" he says, on the assumption that Jack will derive great enjoyment from doing so.

"You're going to fan him. Touch the outsides of his pockets and check what's in there. If you was on the street you could bump into him, like it was accidental, but I'm pretty sure you can find an excuse to put them physician's hands wherever you like and he'll stand there and let you get away with it. Dream come true, that is. Was you watching when I put my wallet away?"

"No, not really."

"Come here."

Oliver complies, circling the table to bring them face to face. He's beginning, he thinks, to understand a little of what Jack refers to as 'the thrill of the chase'. There's a certain sense of anticipation not entirely unlike the prospect of fucking. How much of this is brought about purely by his lessons in larceny and how much by his tutor, he finds it near impossible to say, but he recognises it: the heightened awareness and the question, pleasurable in itself, of whether and when the event will occur; whether he'll succeed in his desire. Their eyes meet, and he sees the interest gleaming in the other man's.

"So," Jack says, "where d'you think that it is?"

Oliver considers this carefully. He doesn't recall Jack raising his hand again after slipping the coins away, so it seems unlikely that the wallet would have taken the same route. "Outside coat pocket," he says.

"Certain of that, are you?"

"No," Oliver admits.
"And so you shouldn't be. Feel for it."

Oliver reaches out his hand. Before it can find the pocket, however, it's swatted away quite roughly. "And just what d'you bloody well think you're doing?" Jack demands.

Oliver blinks, half-startled. "I beg your pardon?"

Jack's features relax into their natural state again, and he rolls his eyes. "Oliver," he says, patiently, "that's what anyone's going to say what sees your hand going for his pocket like it was the last bread roll on the dinner table. Don't let him bloody see you! Use some of that matter what I know you've got behind them lovely brown eyes."

Instantly, Oliver sees what he might do, but he allows his face to arrange itself in a modest expression. Although he lacks such innate dexterity as Jack, he isn't altogether lacking in ingenuity, and he feels that any skills he possesses in this area may originate from his brain more than from his fingers. "Oh," he says, mildly. "I understand, yes. Perhaps I could try it from behind, the first time?"

Jack mutters something which sounds very much like, "Chance'd be a fine thing," but waves him on. Oliver begins to move around him, placing one hand briefly on his shoulder as he does so in the reassuring manner of one individual passing another, as if he means either to steady them from falling, or keep them at a respectable distance. "Do excuse me," he says, and as he edges past, he draws the fingers of his other hand across Jack's coat pocket, as if it were all part and parcel of the same action. And there it is, the squarish shape of the wallet.

"I felt that," Jack remarks, apparently to nobody in particular. Being positioned behind him, Oliver only has the back of his head in view, not his expression. He's wondering whether or not Jack meant for him to try a different tactic, when the other man turns to him, and he can see that his mouth is slowly stretching into a very approving smile. "But it was still fine work," Jack adds, "very fine indeed."

Oliver returns the smile, feeling strangely exhilarated. Of all the ways in which he's ever wished to impress, thieving, or the preparation for it, is the one that comes as a surprise. "Shall I try to take it?"

"Wait a bit." Jack leans over the table, sorting through his spoils, choosing some; considering and then discarding others. He begins to tuck them away all over his person, bedecking and adorning himself with silk handkerchiefs, cufflinks, and all the trappings of a potential victim of wealth. A watch goes into his right waistcoat pocket, and a pair of gold spectacles into his left. A snuffbox joins the wallet in his coat. Finally, he produces his door key, brandishes it very pertinently, and returns it from whence it came. "You watch," he says, "and then you copy. Come and have a walk with me."

Quizzically, Oliver joins him, and they parade up and down as though they were two gentlemen of means on their morning stroll. Before they have travelled more than a length or two of the room, however, Oliver finds his own handkerchief being brandished before his face. He's left so utterly lost for words that he simply stops and looks at Jack; pickpocketing, he feels, is one thing, but Jack must have talents akin to those of a magician. Even with no distraction in the way, he had never felt the item go. Jack smiles in a modest sort of fashion.

"Fogles are for beginners," he says, and hands it back. Still eyeing him, Oliver moves to replace the handkerchief in the same pocket, then thinks better of it, and switches it to another. They fall back into step. Jack appears to find how closely Oliver is watching him very amusing. He slings an arm about him. "Lesson number two," he advises, "is that a man can't feel two things at the same
time; it's the way what the mind works. One strong touch means you're numb to the other one. If you was to bump him, it's that what he'll feel, and not your hand going in his pocket."

Oliver turns his head to observe the hand at his waist, which is giving him a squeeze that he can't help enjoying. "These all sound like excellent theories, Jack, but I have to say once more that I'll believe it when I see it happen."

As if in reply to his challenge, his handkerchief promptly appears again, dangling provocatively from his companion's hand. "Believe it now?"

Oliver cedes the point. "Yes. But you must admit that you weren't playing fair just then."

"I never play fair." Jack passes back the handkerchief again and releases him, then walks a little way ahead. He tweaks the corner of his own silk wipe further out from the pocket of his frock coat, so that it lolls like the tongue of a dog. "I'm asking for it," he says, without turning around.

Oliver subtly increases his pace, shadowing him, step for step. He finds himself deliberating the merits of a quick snatch at the object, and those of attempting to draw it out slowly and gently. The first method would create a narrower window for possible detection, but, on the other hand, it also seems to him that the second would make his actions less likely to be felt in the first place. He moves to make a grasp at the handkerchief, but, at the last moment, Jack abruptly shifts his path to the left. Frowning faintly, Oliver tries again, but each time, Jack's agile rear seems to manage to keep itself just out of his reach. If he steps in one direction, Jack immediately steps in the other, for all the world as if he were possessed of eyes in the back of his head, and no matter how intelligently Oliver tries to pre-empt him, he always seems to make the wrong choice. Jack begins to whistle a merry little tune. Finally, after some minutes of this, he stops so abruptly that Oliver almost walks into him.

"Oliver," he says, "don't go against me, follow me."

"Surprising as it may be, that's what I'm trying to do."

"No, you ain't. Well, you might be, but you ain't going about it in the right way. You're watching my pocket; you ain't watching my body or my feet. Look, hold onto me. Use the hand you ain't going to dip with."

Oliver takes a firm hold of his shoulder. Jack shifts under his hand as he takes a step sideways, drawing Oliver along with him, letting him predict his motions with both his eyes and his touch. When he next steps forward, they move fluidly, like two unconventional dance partners. They dance well together, Oliver thinks, as the other man meanders about the room and he follows, astonished at the ease of it when he pays the proper attention. He suddenly has the conviction that he's never danced as well with anybody as he does with Jack.

"Try it," Jack says. Oliver catches at the handkerchief, and as soon as he has the corner in his hand, Jack immediately orders, "Now, let go of me, and stand still." He stands. Jack begins to walk away, and, as he does so, the remainder of the handkerchief is pulled smoothly from the pocket without Oliver having to make an ounce of further effort.

"That, Oliver," Jack says, over his shoulder, "is called, letting your mark do your work for you."

Oliver exhales, and laughs a little. "So, hardly a show of skill on my part," he says, yet he does feel more co-ordinated. His fundamental fault is that his natural patterns of thought are too logical, and the task in hand requires a certain degree of instinctive response during which the perpetrator, rather than spending too much time thinking, simply does.
"You'll come to it," Jack says, confidently. He swipes back the handkerchief, folds it, and replaces it. "Now," he instructs, with the briefest of grins, "pick me clean."

The two of them are like boys, set on a game of tag. Oliver seeks while Jack apes the mark, then the tables are turned and he becomes the pursued. Jack shows him how to not delve too deeply for a wallet, but to pull on the lining of the pocket, lifting the wallet higher so that it can more easily be slipped out. How to hold out a coat so as to create a shield for your actions behind it. Oliver finds himself almost forgetting for moments at a time the purpose behind his unusual studies and simply enjoying the play, as, practised as Jack is, he's not yet above being playful at times. By the time that Jack has emptied half of his pockets, with increasingly fewer pains to hide his activities, Oliver is starting to feel as though he's been subtly poked, pinched, stroked, groped, and handled to a degree that must constitute gross indecency with a man and that he ought to vehemently object to. Instead, he has merely an irrepressible and slightly wicked urge to respond to the baiting. Jack's hand snakes under his coat from behind, in search of his waistcoat pocket, and Oliver surprises him with a step backwards to let them both enjoy for a moment the feel of Jack's front pressed to his back through the wool. Warm breath stirs the fine hairs on his neck. Released, he turns around to find Jack gone. He follows him as he saunters down the room and falls into step just a little behind his elbow, so that when he swings his arm between them, he makes a preliminary push of the wallet out of the pocket, the way that he's been shown. The corner of it rises into view, and Oliver dips, plucking at it gently with first and second fingers, but Jack thwarts his ambitions. His hand darts down and grabs Oliver's wrist.

"Last lesson but one," he says, "don't try picking a pocket in front of a mirror."

Oliver looks up, only just now registering the fact that they're standing perfectly in line with the mirror with the gold-leaf frame that hangs rather surprisingly and splendidly upon one wall. Jack winks at him in the glass, and he stifles a smile. "And I thought that I was doing so well."

"Oh, I'm very excited about your future performances." Jack gently creases the loose skin on the back of Oliver's hand, massaging it in little circles. Oliver watches the tiny movement as executed by their mirror counterparts, thinking how it feels more improper to watch than it does to feel. They seem clandestine observers of a private moment between two other men. The initial mild tingle of interest that he had felt when Jack touched him at home, earlier, starts to become warm and nothing short of delectable, yet, at the same time, formless, as if his body wishes to act but requires guidance to its destination.

"I've found it quite exciting, too. But I'm curious about what my final lesson involves."

Jack's fingers move away from Oliver's. He turns, and scratches his head a little. "Well," he says, "that's up to you, ain't it? Depends on whether you know what you want."

"What I don't know is whether it's right or not."

"With all respects, Doctor B., you started deciding for yourself what was right and wrong when you told me that we was going to thieve off one of your patients together."

Oliver shakes his head, faintly. "How do you always know just what to say to me?" he asks.

"'Cause I say what you can only think." Jack takes a step closer.

For the first time, Oliver is vaguely relieved that they're not of perfectly equal heights. He knows for certain that, if they were, Jack's eyes staring parallel into his would be more than would allow him to retain what remains of his sanity, but the other man looking up at him in sultry fashion is little better. "And what am I thinking about now?" he asks, softly.
"About this, I reckon." Jack reaches up to slide his hand around the nape of Oliver's neck, pushing his fingertips into his hair. "And definitely about this," he goes on, using his grasp to pull them flush against one another. Very, very wickedly, he nuzzles Oliver's jaw, breathing over his skin. "Am I right?"

Oliver feels himself shiver, treated once more to an adolescent rush of newness and wonder, this time made all the more pleasurable by the accompanying confidence of manhood. He's known touches from Jack both casual and sudden, but it's the deliberateness of this touch that arouses him; how methodical it is. "Yes," he answers. "But this too."

He slowly draws back. Jack's mouth brushes across the corner of his, teasing. Oliver's astonished at how simple it is; how all he needs to do is to turn his head just fractionally to catch at it with his own. And how all that's needed is one, perhaps two, of these testing, darting little motions before he finds himself instinctively guiding his friend in to meet him, just as Jack guides him. "Yes?" Jack asks, and Oliver nods, shocked and decisive, Yes, again; more. And then Jack's lips are on his, doing what Oliver's been accustomed to doing with women, but with the subtle strangeness and the differences of texture and taste that come from doing it with a man. Through the stunned awareness that he's kissing another man - kissing Jack - a little awkwardly but with some passion, Oliver's yet conscious of one of the most palpable contrasts between being with one and being with a woman. Jack responds to him with neither of the expected actions of submitting, or attempting, through reluctance and rejection, to force submission on him. Rather, he pushes and challenges him at every step; encourages Oliver to best him, and relishes any attempt. One who has always been determined to remain gentle with women, he realizes that Jack's desires would be, rather, akin to his own. He would not want them to be gentle at all.

The thought causes such a powerful and base urge to well up in him that Oliver pulls his mouth away, less concerned about what Jack might initiate than what he himself might. With effort, he manages to release his grip on the other man's shoulders. The two of them stand, looking at one another, chests still heaving a little. "Well," Jack says, in a matter-of-fact tone, but the way in which his eyes are dancing betrays him.

"Well," Oliver manages to reply.

"That was quite nice."

"Thank you."

"Bit soft. You ain't never been away from girls." Jack's voice has taken on a rough, husky edge. "Nothing we can't get sorted out, though," he adds, his gaze moving to where his hand still rests on Oliver's neck. It slides downwards, beneath the collar of his coat, and begins to push it off his shoulder.

For a moment, Oliver wants nothing more than to take his oldest friend in his arms and let all that's happening go on doing so, whatever may come to pass. The familiar hot cloudiness is starting to build up in his mind that tells him to let the consequences go to hell. He closes his eyes. Then he exhales, and puts a hand over the top of Jack's.

"Jack," he says, "not now. Not yet."

"Oliver, there's a bloody great bed over there, and it ain't only for sleeping in. And what's more, I'd be happy to give you a demonstration of the fact."

"I know that you would. And I thought that I'd say yes. But -" Oliver stops, and sighs once again. "I'm a coward," he says.
"You ain't scared of anything. You wasn't a coward as a kinchin, and you ain't now, or you wouldn't be a doctor. All that bleeding and sweating and shitting turns my guts, always has. I only had to look at it up close once, and I'll be buggered if I'll ever do it again. But you do it all the time, for people what you don't know and don't give a toss for. You do that, and you don't have to put yourself down 'cause of a few nerves."

"What makes me a coward is that I can accept it in you, but when it came down to it, I couldn't accept it in me. I'm not afraid of the law. I'm afraid of myself."

"I say what the owner of a prick likes to do with it ain't nobody's business but his own and who he does it with. And you're just a healthy feller with a prick, to put it simple. You ain't got to be perfect. You're close enough to that already."

Oliver shakes his head, with the faintest of smiles. "And you're incorrigible."

"I ain't planning to change, either." Jack's thumb moves gently against Oliver's palm for a few moments before both of them release their hold. "Oliver," he says, after a pause, "it ain't all that much different. And a lot less hard work, if you ask me."

"The last time that I looked, it was. As you mentioned yourself, I am a doctor."

"Everybody's got to start somewhere. You had to work out how to be nice and do things right the first time you was in a cunt, didn't you?"

"I've always found them to be rather different to cocks, though. That's how the two fit together, believe it or not."

"If you know how to please your own cock, you could please mine just as well. We'd get to the rest later."

"The rest, being?"

"Whatever you happen to feel like making it at the time. When you're fucking a girl, it comes down to rules in the end - though I grant you that there's some of 'em what are prepared to bend them rules quite adventurously. When you fuck a man, there ain't no rules. You broke 'em all when you decided that you was going to fuck him. You just do what feels good."

Oliver realizes that it's been quite some time since it crossed his mind that he's standing in the private room of a thief, diligently practising his own part in another robbery. If there are rules to be lived by, he must have at least seriously infringed a good number of them himself already. He finds himself thinking of the indignity levelled at such simple tools as his stethoscope, and how vociferously Doctor Snow's cholera paper was rejected, simply because his suggested route of transmission is unpleasant to contemplate. Perhaps rules, if they must be broken in the pursuit of professional or personal truth, are meant to be so.

"Jack?" he asks.

"What?"

"If I were to say that kissing you felt very good indeed, and that I'd like to do it again, do you think that you could live with that?"

Jack tilts his head, as if pretending to deliberate this. Then he nods, slowly. "Think I might be able to put up with it. If you was to make it a good one, that is."
Oliver puts his arms around Jack's waist; Jack does the same to him, only a little lower. Their mouths meet in a long, searching press. Jack manages to give a certain area a surreptitious fondle. "You're improving already," he remarks, when they part.

"I know. And you should know better than to fall into your own trap."

"Come again?"

Oliver lifts his hand. In it, he holds Jack's wallet with its counterfeit money. "Although you were right, when you told me that a man who was sufficiently distracted wouldn't watch his pockets."

Jack looks very briefly bemused. Then the expression is replaced, rapidly, by a broad grin. "Got it wrong when I said you was close to perfect, though."

"How so?"

"You ain't just close. You passed the winning post a long time back."
With the plan in place for Davy to arrive close behind Oliver when he pays his next visit to Manns, all that's left to do is wait the week out. Oliver feels as though he moves through the days as an actor, who plays a role upon a stage knowing all the while that he has a second, private life hidden in the wings from his audience, yet the curious thing is that he seems not to fully belong to that life any more than he does the first. At one turn, he's a guileless, inexperienced toff attempting to find his way through Jack's world; at another, a wolf in sheep's clothing seated at his own table. He works harder than ever, opening the house for several more evening surgeries, while not being entirely certain whether he's trying to pass the time, or trying to compensate. And constantly, he struggles to come to terms with his new feelings for his childhood saviour, his foil, the imp on his shoulder, and one of the most unique men that he has ever known.

On the whole, he tries to distract himself. A year or so ago, Oliver and four medical colleagues and friends had formed themselves into a supper and debating club to discuss surgery, anatomy, the ethics of the same, and, in general, the rewards and complaints of their professions, without accusations of impropriety. After various more irreverent suggestions, they had decided to name their group loosely after Thessalus, son of Hippocrates and founder of the Greek dogmatic school of medicine with its passion for the exploration and workings of the body, and the more pleasing sounding Thessalonians had come into being. They meet on alternate Fridays at the Pelican tavern.

Their evenings invariably end with light-hearted arguments and some good drinking, and Oliver feels himself even more in need of both than usual. There had once been a brief incident caused when James Harrop, one of the surgeons, had brought along a certain preserved specimen in a glass jar and set it in the centre of the table, but for the most part they're always made very welcome on the premises. Each evening has a chosen quote or theme for discussion. Tonight's is, 'The physician as perennial student'. They've all soundly agreed that there's never any formal end to their training, only milestones along the road of a lifetime of accumulating knowledge. "Our memberships and qualifications are less than nothing," Oliver declares, "we began our careers as pupils, and we'll end them no differently, because the man won't be born for a thousand years yet who can call himself a master," and they dedicate another of many toasts to the sentiment. Martin Treacy, the other emboldened physician in the group, places his empty glass down with care, and folds his hands before him.

"Consider this," he says. "According to Plato, a doctor should never attempt to treat an incurable patient, but spend his time ministering to only the basically healthy. It would be best for the patient and the state if those diseased through and through were left to die. That should be his decision as a true -"

"Son of Asclepius?" Oliver finishes.

"Despite the fact that Asclepius raised from the dead," Harry Collett puts in, "and if that doesn't
qualify as taking on a damned hopeless case, I don't know what would."

"Perfectly correct, sirs, in both cases."

"The question, though," Oliver says, tracing a finger slowly around the rim of his own cup, "is whether or not we can ever deem a case truly hopeless, when the next medicine that we would have administered, or the next surgical procedure that we would have attempted, would have brought about the cure? If we all learn continuously, how can we say what we might learn tomorrow that we didn't know today?" Noises of agreement. "Perhaps one day we might follow in Asclepius's footsteps and rid the world of death."

James looks from one of them to the other, grinning. "Is the consensus that our founding father of philosophy was a bit premature, then, chaps?"

"Aye! Aye!" they all repeat, enthusiastically. Charles, James's younger brother and a surgical apprentice, drums upon the table with both hands. All are full of the as yet inoffensive egotism of their trade and their relative youth. Plato goes unneeded; each man has the public, if not private, conviction tonight that he is going to live forever.

"For what might be seen as wrong now, my friends," declares Martin, "may be found to be not wrong at all, when we learn more about ourselves."

"Yes," Oliver says, "I do believe this," and he helps himself to more punch.

The Pelican is not a large house, nor an overly disreputable one, squeezed between a haberdashers and a barber that advertises 'bear grease for hair', but promises whisky, brandy, gin, and rum, a hot supper, and a comic song to titillate. A pianoforte invariably plays, and a considerable press always develops as the evening wears on and more would-be revellers drift in from the street. The singer has already been regaling the room with a rendering of 'My Beautiful Muff', the tale of a young man who complains that he is 'stiff with the cold' and begs the lady owner of said red-lined muff for the use of it, but when this changes to an even more off-colour version of 'Advice to Young Gentlemen', various cries are taken up of, "You'd be lucky!" "Too early for all that!" and "Bad show!"

"Ladies present!" bellows James, in defence of the bar maids, who are popular girls. "This is not the Coal Hole!"

"Ladies? I can't see any ladies!" A few laughs, but a considerably larger number of complaints.

"And I can't see any gentlemen!" calls Oliver.

The singer draws himself up to his full, unimpressive height, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. He has an imperial moustache which he's developed the ability to make quiver. "May you be stricken by the pox, sir, and all of your damned humourless companions along with you!"

"We're doctors and surgeons! We'll either cure it, or we'll cut it off!" And applause breaks out around the tables.

They're a merry band, but even as Oliver joins in the laughter, his ears unconsciously strain, as if fruitlessly and illogically attempting to detect a riper accent amongst it. He's been determined to focus his mind elsewhere tonight, but instead, he only aches more for what the usually cheerful atmosphere suddenly seems to be missing. He can run away from the Artful Dodger, he thinks, vexed, but he can't run away from himself.

-oOo-
If Oliver had not disliked Richard Manns so much, he might have found him a compelling case. Even as it is, it not only still remains that he took an oath to treat his patients to the best of his ability and judgement, but a conundrum has occurred that simply sparks cold professional curiosity. Fits of mild chills, fever and sweating, in that order, have arisen as though from nowhere, troubled the patient in cycles, then subsided, leaving a period of exhaustion and shortness of breath. Privately, Oliver's now reached the opinion that it resembles nothing less than a milder case of the ague, recently called malarial fever, but he's at something of a loss as to why Manns would develop such a thing, it being uncommon nowadays away from the damp, gaseous air of the marshy districts along the eastern coast. He has a test that will almost certainly prove his theory either correct, or not, but while this would usually be enough to focus his attention, his thoughts waver wildly today between his duties, and the second task in hand.

Many well brought-up men would have been shocked by the prospect ahead, but, as he waits for his appointment, Oliver finds his mind teeming like a busy bee-hive. He considers Jack's most pertinent pieces of advice: have confidence, and be an opportunist. Above all, he should be alert, always watching and waiting. These are things that come naturally to Jack, born of long habits, and Oliver can only hope that they do to him. He wonders at his old friend's innate trust in his own skills. Jack takes him unquestionably to be like himself.

He lets himself glance about. Familiar with the drawing room from his many visits, he sees it for the first time today in a different light: as a hunting ground, one that he should learn the geography of to place himself at greatest advantage. He takes note of the bell-pull, the vicinity of which Davy will undoubtedly be working in. It occurs to Oliver that, at some point, he'll need to get almost as close to his partner of today as he will to Manns, in order to both pass the key and take it back, and nor will he have any excuse to linger there. He'll have to move not only quickly, but with extreme subtlety. He observes which parts of the room are reflected in the mantel mirror, wincing a little. Although Jack had reassured him by approaching it as a joke, he can easily picture having been fool enough to make his mistake here had it not been pointed out, and it worries at him what else he might not have taken into consideration. Forewarning him about everything is simply impossible; a certain amount, in the end, must come down to his own wits. It's a second by second game that they're engaged in, and one still hours away from being won.

Manns is not inclined towards false pleasantries this afternoon. Oliver listens impassively to the news that his plan has not been a success and that the thief failed to appear as expected. Manns's mood due to this does nothing to put his nerves at rest, but it does serve indirectly to further set his resolve. As he watches his patient pace resolutely up and down, he grasps more than ever that the task of a pickpocket is not always the easiest.

"It's quite obvious to me, Doctor, that our friend was warned off. Most likely by one of the servants who had wind of the operation. Any householder knows from bitter experience that he may just as well post a notice for a footpad as for a footman, for the staff that he shelters beneath his roof are more likely than not to harbour the same tendencies."

"If you'll pardon my disagreeing with you, Mr Manns, I can't say that I've experienced the same trouble. Perhaps I've been fortunate."

"Fortunate, sir? 'Naive' I would wager is closer to the truth. I think you'll find that your servants have taken advantage of your nature on numerous occasions. Certainly my own generosity and kindness has gone unappreciated in this house on the whole, this being why I have been forced on occasions to resort to admonishment. You would do well, Doctor Brownlow, to place a little less blind trust in your staff, and keep both your eyes and your ears open for any early signs of resentment."
If any of Manns's servants have ever stolen from him, Oliver struggles to feel anything but empathy with them. He can think of a good many people more in need and deserving of the proceeds from said articles than their current owner, not least the ones that he's seen packed three, four and five to a bed in the slums of Clare Market and St Martin-in-the-Fields, where the filth from the cesspools leaches through the bricks and up into the cellars when it rains, and drinking water is drawn from the same ditches into which the privy waste drops. Theft seems to him less of an appalling and sinful affair than it should, in a city where a small fraction of society is rich and a far larger one heartrendingly poor. Perhaps that makes Oliver, raised among that smaller faction, a deviant, or perhaps it makes him unusually insightful. Perhaps it makes him more open to influence, when under the heady spell of love and want, than he'd ever imagined that he could be.

He feels his fingers beginning to itch. He wants to do this. He wants it as much as he wanted to give a kiss to Jack.

"I understand your frustration, sir," he says, "but I think that the thief has tired of his japes and moved on to fresh pastures."

"Become bored, you say?" Manns halts in mid-step and turns on his heel to face Oliver. His lips press into a line so thin that they almost disappear. "I wish that I were bored and had no care but to amuse myself so. It would be a luxury. Instead the Lord chooses to besiege me with assaults on my property by criminals, on my person by bodily complaints, and on my livelihood by the easterly winds. And when trade becomes favourable once again, matters will move to the dockside, where the quay-gangsters struggle to source men with some strength and gumption to unload my cargoes."

"Many of them are starving," Oliver says.

"Men starve who will not work. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."

"Some of the men who come to the docks as a last resort sleep there, hoping to be engaged in the morning. If they're not selected, what choice have they whether they work, or go home to their families empty-handed again?"

"There is always a choice. There is never a last resort."

"For you and I, Mr Manns, who always sleep comfortably in our beds, and, what's more, are childless bachelors with little responsibility save to ourselves. Many of my patients have fewer options."

Manns lifts a steel-hued eyebrow. "Have a care, Doctor Brownlow, before comparing your own perceived lack of accountability with my own. After gathering more experience of life, you may think differently. Greater age brings obligations that youth is still able to sidestep, regardless of marital status."

"My apologies," Oliver replies, flatly.

"And now may I remind you that your current patient is not one of our absent dockyard workers, but myself?"

The doorknob rattles, and Davy enters so promptly and with such timing that it seems obvious that he's been eavesdropping on the state of play from the hallway outside. He carries a tool-bag; depositing this on the floor, he goes back out and returns a second later behind a step-ladder. Oliver catches his eye, and Davy returns such a fine, blank stare that for a very brief moment, he fancies that he must have dreamed the whole affair, and that he had never searched for Jack, they had
never decided to carry out a robbery together, and that this young man is simply a tradesman like any other who has never set eyes on Oliver before and who has somehow become woven into his dream. Then Davy touches his cap politely, and in the instant during which his hand shields him from Manns's line of vision while still leaving his face wholly visible to Oliver, he flashes him a wink.

'Well,' his expression seems to say, 'the game's afoot.'

Manns catches Oliver's glance, though not Davy's response. "The bell-hanger," he clarifies. "My butler is on his half-day today, but apparently before departing this week, he reported several bells not sounding in the kitchen. Pay the man no mind. These are hardly dignified meetings, so his presence will make little difference to us here today."

"I try to make them as much so as I can, Mr Manns."

"Medicine is and always has been an art, Doctor. I am reminded more often now of an instruction handbook."

Oliver takes a pulse, the fingers of one hand on the wrist of his patient, his watch in the other, watching the sweep of the second hand. He finds it satisfactory, steady and even. It had been elevated during the hours before the fever would break. He'd wanted to ask for permission to come to measure body temperature at intervals, via the axillary blood-flow, having found it an informative way of tracking the progress of a feverish complaint before. The thermometer, though, must be held fast for almost half an hour to obtain a reading, and he hadn't anticipated any cooperation with this from a patient who refuses to expose any skin beyond the collar. The possibility has occurred to him that the man has scars from some disfiguring past illness.

His eyes flicker - unnoticed, he hopes - to the coat pocket. "Have you experienced any more chills or sweats?" he asks.

"Thankfully they appear to have passed as usual, but it is only in the past few days that I seem to have fully regained my energy."

"If your breathing is shallow, that may be the answer, in part."

"In part?"

"Yes. Would you remove your coat once again?"

Manns moves to start divesting himself of his outer clothes. "This is beginning to wear on me, Doctor Brownlow," he remarks, tightly.

"Please, Mr Manns," Oliver says, "indulge me. I have an idea, but I need to investigate a little further." As if it were the most natural offer in the world, he adds, "Shall I take the coat, sir?"

As he accepts the garment, he can't help imagining the tremendous stroke of luck that it would be if his prize were being calmly handed to him - a beginner's luck that's undoubtedly too much to ask for. He folds the coat carefully over a low chair. As he does so, he takes a step to his right so that his position obscures it for the most part from its owner, and in the same movement with which he lays it down, smooths a hand over each pocket. His pace is calm and careless; he does well, he thinks. The search, though, proves fruitless. Oliver presses his lips together in silent, worried frustration. What if, today of all days, there is no key? Having only barely managed to sum up the courage, he's unsure whether he could rise to the task mentally a second time.

He sets his sights on his patient again. "And if you would open your waistcoat. I'd like to palpate
the area of the spleen. It should feel no more than slightly tender."

"And I should like to know how this relates to anything."

"Because, sir, I expect to find the spleen swollen. I believe that you have malarial fever - marsh fever, or ague. All of the other symptoms would fit. And when the fever rises, excess blood accumulates in the spleen and it becomes engorged and quite detectable. The phenomenon's widely known as an ague-cake."

Manns pauses. "Is this your diagnosis as my physician, Doctor Brownlow?"

"Yes, sir," Oliver answers, "if I find what I expect to find."

The two of them stand, practitioner and client, would-be thief and mark, regarding each other.

Manns clears his throat.

"Let us suppose that this is what ails me," he says. "Can it be cured?"

"Yes. I can write a prescription today."

"Then, proceed."

Oliver's done this before. His hands know what to feel for, just beneath the patient's rib-cage, and how to manipulate the area carefully to avoid causing the distended spleen to bleed. He can detect a round and fibrous edge quite easily; the sclerosis of repeated bouts of fever. His professional mind is satisfied, but as he moves the breast of the waistcoat further aside, he touches a distinct metallic shape through the pocket lining that causes first a slight jump in his chest, and then an immediate sinking sensation. Jack might be deft enough to steal from waistcoat pockets that lay within full sight of their owner, but what are his own chances?

Resolutely, he gathers himself. He tries to remember his notion about looking to his brain rather than to the speed of his touch. He removes his hands.

"My prescription will be for Warburg's Tincture. You will be given a one-ounce bottle to take in two equal doses, three hours apart. The preparation purges many recurrent fevers, and especially the ague-fever, within a day - sometimes in as little as three hours."

"I shall place my confidence in you, Doctor. Let us hope that it's well founded."

"Mr Manns, have you visited the fen country? Or the Romney Marshes?"

"No, I have not."

"Then I can't identify a clear origin for this. The ague is found only occasionally outside of those districts these days. But I'm certain of it."

Davy stands back and looks up at where the bell wire emerges from the wall and runs around the room below the plasterwork. He scratches his chin in a very natural way, as if deliberating a minor setback in the work, yet Oliver's certain that he's not missing a single trick. He sets up the step-ladder and retrieves a quantity of wire from his tool-bag. The bag he leaves rather carelessly some way across the floor. Oliver instinctively begins to stoop towards it as he passes, intending to shift it to somewhere where it will pose less of a risk to tripping over.

And then he stops, as the word trip seems to echo over in his mind, and a memory tugs at him of something he was once shown, very briefly, a very long time ago.
He can't tread on his mark's foot, but if he were to employ just a little careful direction, he would have something to carry out the task for him.

Oliver tugs at his collar a little. He packs up his own bag, retaining only his prescription book and one of the small glass bottles that he carries, the latter of which he holds out to Manns. "If you would produce a standard sample, sir, before my next visit, I'll take it away with me then."

Taking the bottle, Manns sets it down upon a low table, and begins to button his waistcoat again. "This has been a more productive visit than usual, Doctor Brownlow. You have a number of - shall we call them - interesting ideas, but we shall see if this one, based on past experience rather than speculation, comes to fruition. That which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Ecclesiastes chapter one, verse nine."

"Perhaps these things have been given to us to see what we may make of them, Mr Manns," Oliver replies.

Manns regards him fixedly for a few moments. Then, still arranging his wardrobe, he turns, and crosses to where a bookcase of handsomely-backed volumes stands beside a case housing a stuffed fox. The animal crouches upon a rock among dried grasses, tiny teeth bared and empty glass eyes staring into eternity. For what purpose? To make that which was a hunter in life finally a captive in death; to demonstrate one's power to become a gaoler? As a boy, Oliver had seen little point to such household ornaments.

Manns picks up a book and studies the spine. "How is your uncle?"

"Well, thank you."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Do give him my regards, won't you? I have purchased a number of new books of late that he may be interested in looking over. He and I are both enthusiastic readers, as you know. Do you spend time in the company of papers and literature that cultivate the mind, or do you prefer fantastical works? A novel-reader, perhaps?"

"The cases put forward for further public health acts are topics that I never tire of, as you might imagine."

"A social reformer as well as a physic. Very ambitious." Manns replaces the book and faces him once again. "Do you see this as necessary within the City alone?"

"No, sir, in every parish, because there are no parishes without their share of those who have no means to reform."

"So we come full circle, Doctor. I say that simple willingness to carry out a day's work is the solution to poverty, while you favour the charitable approach." Manns folds his own hands behind his back and resumes his steady stride about the carpet. "I wonder what your opinions are of Mr Chadwick's theory? That the only forms of relief should be made abhorrent, thus lowering the poor rate because only the truly destitute would still find it a comfortably feathered bed?"

Oliver's nails press into his palms. In his mind's eye, he sees the crescents dug into the flesh reddening and opening like tiny mouths. Slowly, he begins to follow, parallel to his quarry; a fox, stalking. Not yet does he move too deliberately. "Are we discussing the impotent poor, or the able-bodied poor?"

"There are no able-bodied poor, as we all know in truth, only idle poor."

Davy is squatting at floor level, preparing a new bell wire in a thorough fashion, but Oliver is sure
that he senses a slight bristling about his person. The official standing, truly believed by no-one but adamantly adhered to by everyone, is that servants and tradesmen are deaf and dumb, and Oliver still finds himself on occasions wincing in either concern or embarrassment at what's seen fit to voice and air in front of them. His reaction now would be acute embarrassment, were the other man present not his partner in crime.

"Employment isn't always a simple thing to come by, Mr Manns. If a fellow is unskilled and without character reference because he cannot find work, how does he obtain the skills and references which would enable him to find it?"

"You are trying to present me with a paradox, Doctor Brownlow."

"I am, sir," Oliver replies. He draws subtly nearer. His aim is to shunt the other man in the direction that he wants him to go without laying a finger on him, and he succeeds by cutting ahead of him at the opportune moment, so closely that Manns not only halts, but takes the instinctive step backwards of someone who feels that their space has been uncomfortably invaded. Davy's bag lies a few more paces behind him, so near and yet so far. "A paradox without a simple solution."

"The solution is very simple indeed. Where an idle hand exists, there always exists a task that it may be set to, distasteful as that task may be." So briefly that a less sensitive listener would never have noticed, Manns pauses. "Have you heard whether or not the workhouses still mill satisfactory corn?"

Oliver moves. He doesn't hesitate, and for all his earlier decision, he doesn't think. Not, at least, for more than a fraction of a moment; the time that it takes to make the decision to scoop up Manns's coat for him. "Please allow me," he says, aloud, and turns, on his heel, straight back into his mark's path.

Manns steps backwards once again, and this time, he treads upon the corner of the tool-bag. Oliver's left hand darts out to grasp him as he stumbles. He pushes into him, clumsy and deliberate, and the coat looped over his arm drapes tent-like between them. Under the garment goes his right hand. He feels for the pocket, pushes until the top of the key protrudes, and slides his fingers up to hook it out in the same movement. Before the coat can fall away and expose him, the key is out of Manns's pocket and into Oliver's own. The entire thing has taken only seconds.

"Be careful, sir."

Oliver had wondered if guilt would instantly flood him, having actually carried out the act, but although he waits for it, it never comes. Instead there's a faint, lightheaded feeling of disbelief at getting away with it; something akin to gratification. He straightens, handing over the coat.

Manns seizes it, throwing a quite murderous look towards Davy. "If this man does not be careful, sir, he will find my stick about his shoulders!" Then, as if swiftly remembering who and where he is, he composes himself, and completes his dressing. When Oliver looks to his prescription book and clears his throat, he waves him across to the bureau. "Your idealism might be admired by men of your own age, Doctor," he says, almost conversationally. "Perhaps when you are a little older, you may come to understand more of the ways of the world. And to accept them."

As Oliver passes out of his field of vision, he stoops just briefly to touch Davy's shoulder. His friend immediately lifts his smaller hand without even glancing up, and he slips the key into it. Barely having broken his stride, he continues to the bureau and pulls out the chair with the tapestry seat. "There are some wrongs in the world," he says, "that I shall never be able to accept."

"I shall only regret that."
Oliver lifts the lid of the inkwell and stirs the contents. "Yes, sir," he replies, taking up a pen and
dipping it, "I'm sure that you will."

Davy returns the key to him unseen, having used it successfully to his own devices. Filled with his
newfound confidence, Oliver feels that he might have slipped it into Manns's coat, but privately
admits the unlikeliness of his mark not noticing that the item has changed pockets of its own
accord. Worse still, he might not find it at all until later, think it stolen, and raise a premature
alarm. He chooses to drop it as suggested. On the thick Chinese rug, the key makes barely a sound;
a seemingly accidental scuff with his boot enables him to 'discover' the lost item for his patient
with little trouble. Despite the excitement, he feels relieved for everything to be outside his control
again for a time.

Returning back along Southampton Row, he begins to have the vague impression of being
followed, or, at the least, watched. A hackney coach has stopped and is loading up its fare,
observed with great interest by a small crowd of boys already drawing straws, the winner of which
contest will be the one to chase it to its destination and carry the bags for a penny or two.
Southampton Row being a fairly active thoroughfare, there's a good deal of to-ing and fro-ing, but
as he passes the growler, Oliver immediately sees his co-conspirator's perky figure round the side
of it. Davy falls prudently into step at Oliver's elbow. By their dress, the two of them might readily
be taken for master and servant on the street, and it seems a sensible assumption to encourage, to
enable them to remain freely in one another's company if their talk is quiet. There's a certain irony
to the performance, when Davy and Jack have been the instructors today, and he only an apt pupil.

"Did you do it?" he asks, carefully.

Davy taps his pocket. "I had the easy bit to do. You should have been watching yourself, Oliver.
You was as smooth as silk. A real fine-wirer."

Half of Oliver wants to refuse the compliment, and the other to accept it with a strange sort of
pride. "I'm not sure that Jack would agree with you. I was very nervous. I nearly fumbled it."

"Jack told me you was one of Fagin's boys before you found out you had some family, is that
right?"

"Partly." The story is too long to tell in full.

"Well, in them days pa had died, leaving us with the shop, but my ma was still living and I helped
her about the place. But it was an honest set-up that she had then and we hardly got by. So the rest
of the time I used to do some palming and area diving with a pal and I knew some of Fagin's gang;
used to see 'em about - Nick Chaplet, and Charley Bates, and Toby Scatters - and they was the best
at their game; all us kinchins knew it. If you was one of 'em, you must be a natural."

"Perhaps I am," Oliver answers. He feels as though there have been two of him inhabiting his body
of late: one who craves the excitement like a starving man, and one who stands horrified by what
he sees, yet the less scrupulous Oliver constantly succeeds in seducing his better by appealing to a
dep deep private morality common to them both. It would be easier to accept his shadowy twin, he
thinks, were he not enjoying him so much. He frowns, and Davy regards him, head tilted curiously.

"I heard everything what you heard today," he says, "and I might have heard some more in it, what
you had too decent a heart to. If I was a feller what wanted to try his hand at thieving just once in
his life, I couldn't find a cove what deserved any better to be thieved off. When you trusted me, it
had to be 'cause you was decent, or 'cause you was stupid. And I never took you for stupid." A grin
suddenly breaks over his face. "Except p'rhaps when you handed me a red clock and never asked
for the receipt."
Oliver returns a crooked smile of his own. "I haven't kept my promise to you yet, though."

"What promise?"

Taking his wallet from his pocket, Oliver reaches inside and removes two gold sovereigns. He proffers them. "You said that you'd take my coin after I found Jack. I'd like to make it two."

"I'll take 'em, and gladly," Davy says. He jingles the money in his palm, his grin growing wider. "But I think I'd like to spend a bit of what I don't need right away. Will you come and have a bite to eat with me? Or have you got another visit what you have to make?"

"No, I haven't just yet, and, yes, I'd be happy to," and so they travel together along Holborn, with Lincoln's Inns of Court and its fields over the rooftops to the right; Gray's and its gardens to the left.
The plot thickens...

The Horse Guards, barracked in Hyde Park, were the military unit most notorious for supplementing their low pay with prostitution. "Of course we all do it for money," one was quoted as saying. "We also do it because we really like it, and if gentlemen gave us no money, we should do it all the same."

The smell of beef, mutton and apple-sauce comes strongly through the door when opened; trotter and bacon, stewed tripe and onions, for the Holly Bush Tavern is a chop-house. Straight-backed wooden seating is arranged in boxes, in order that a group of diners might enjoy a modicum of privacy for their meal, smoke, or game of draughts or dominoes. The table linen is blue and white. On the wall by each box is a rack into which customers can slot their hats, hanging them upside down by the brims. A plate of mutton chops proves to be eightpence, with potatoes and carrots at twopence; Davy asks for bread and Gloucestershire cheeses and buttered scones at extra, and half-pints of porter to wash it all down with. Two-pronged forks are brought along with their plates. The hot food is well-cooked and more than palatable.

Davy objects to Oliver's company not in the slightest, asking him how he does and about his current state of affairs. Having witnessed an examination and diagnosis first-hand, he shows a good deal of curiosity about his work. "You make a tidy living at it, then," he says, as he munches.

"Comfortable, but as much at the moment from an advanced inheritance while I build up the practice, I'm not ashamed to say. My uncle put my name forward to most of my first patients, and I'm fortunate that their admiration for him extends to me by proxy. But I've managed a fair number of personal recommendations since then."

"Word soon gets about if a feller's good at what he does. Ain't no use for those what can't afford him, though."

"Anyone can afford me."

Davy grins in a very crude fashion. "Really? Do a lot of business in Hyde Park, do you?"

Oliver rolls his eyes. "I don't wonder that you're a friend of Jack's. I feel as though it's him who I'm sitting here with. I ask people for what they have," he adds. "What I charge the patients who can easily afford it makes up for what I lose elsewhere."

"There's a lot of 'em about the Rats' Castle what ain't got nothing."

"Then, that's what they'll be asked to pay." Oliver pursues a small potato around the plate, and spear it. He eats a few mouthfuls, then puts down his fork. "If anyone needs a doctor," he says, "send a message to me. If I'm not at home, my housekeeper will accept it and tell me as soon as possible. I'll come. I give you my word."

Davy pulls a foot up onto the bench, resting the crook of his elbow on his knee and studying
Oliver, the smile still hovering about the corners of his mouth. He could be taken for a boy squatting there, but for his knowing manner. "I said you was a queer one, and you're definitely that. But if I wasn't strictly a ladies' man, I might be starting to catch on to what it is that makes you worth fretting about so much."

"I think that I fret about Jack a good deal more than he does me. If I were all that I supposedly am, I should have reported what I know, a long time ago. But instead, I've always found myself protecting him."

"Jack can look after himself."

"So can I. But I don't 'risk my arse', as he once put it to me, on a regular basis."

"You ain't got any idea, have you?" Davy says. "You really ain't."

"About what?"

"Ain't you never wondered how you get home from some of them kens what you get called to without having been nobbled?"

"I do look over my shoulder from time to time when I think that it's necessary. I'm not quite as green as I used to be, despite what certain people think. What are you trying to tell me?"

"Only that Jack's fond of putting it about who you are, and that if any bludger gets ideas about laying a finger on you, he'll peach 'em all the way up to the Lord Chief Justice. Or he'll dewskitch 'em, personal, like."

"That's absurd."

"That's what Mags Lewis said, more or less."

"Who's that?"

"Feller with a broken nose, and some teeth what he misses something terrible."

Oliver stares at him for a moment, then shakes his head. "Jack said that he'd peach?"

Davy nods. "Put the finger on all 'of em, if he got pushed to it."

"But he can't bear informers."

"No, he can't."

"If Jack led the police to any of the men he knows, it would make him an outcast. It would seal his own fate. Nothing would stop their friends peaching him in return, and he'd be sentenced within a week. He'd need to be mad to do something like that," he says, and then stops, as these last words seem to echo over and over again, as if coming through sleep, or water. He recalls having a thought akin to this very recently, and, moreover, he remembers who it concerned.

"Some fellers go mad with it, and some go madder than others," Davy says, and turns his attention innocently to the fat on his chops.

Oliver feels a little warm about the collar and brow, not least because his personal madness over the past days has consisted of the recurring thoughts of Jack that his head has been full of; Jack's quick fingers that had led up to their teasing, enticing kiss. Although nothing explicit has been said, he finds himself glancing from face to face around the tavern, searching for signs of a reaction.
Relief steals cautiously over him as he determines that their conversation is going either unheard, or possibly just ignored. This is not the world that he's accustomed to, where every minute of a man's life is under constant scrutiny, and he might risk setting off an endless round of gossip, discussion and speculation with a mere word or gesture. Working men, as make up many of the tavern's regulars, simply have more practical matters with which to concern themselves most of the time than strangers' business. Davy's joke about Hyde Park had been precisely that in context, but those that circulate about the Guards, with their weapons in hand, are more than insinuation. The young soldiers, like certain others of their class, are said to care little for propriety.

"Exactly what has Jack said? About madness, that is?"

"Jack says a fair bit after he's been on the gin."

"And does it trouble you?" Oliver asks, hesitantly.

"Why should it? It don't make no difference to the quality movables what he brings me. I always thought that one thing he likes about fellers was that most of 'em don't want him to make the living arrangements permanent like what some of the girls do, anyway. But I wouldn't be much of a businessman if I was to turn down cash just 'cause my source is as partial to cock as he is to cock alley."

Oliver has the perception of watching himself sink lower and lower in his seat under the weight of embarrassment. Davy's grin reappears, and he fishes in his coat and pushes something square and silver across the table. "While we're talking of movables. Nice keepsake what I suddenly found in my pocket while we was working. Can't imagine how it happened to get there."

With abject horror, and greater speed than he's ever realized that he's capable of, Oliver whisks out his handkerchief and drops it cleanly over the object, which he just barely registers as a snuff-box before it vanishes from public display. Throwing a severe frown in Davy's direction, he lifts the hem with thumb and forefinger, and steals a glimpse beneath. The box is weighty, with a relief of exotic flora on the lid, and it comes as no great surprise to him that it might set light fingers twitching. "Then you're the only one of the two of us who can't."

"Fetch seven or eight shillings, that will. Sort of thing what finds its way back in the end to the cove what lost it. There's some hock-shops in Covent Garden what the toffs make a bee-line for after they've been robbed to look for their own goods."

Oliver turns the snuff-box upside down under cover of the handkerchief. Immediately, he notes that the bottom bears a somewhat worn emblem. He pushes it a little further into the open, until he makes out the rampant lions of the East India Company, bearing up their shield and staffs. "This is army issue," he says, a little surprised. "Or privately engraved for a veteran."

Davy shrugs. "Family trinket, p'rhaps."

"Perhaps," Oliver agrees, yet for some reason he isn't immediately believing of the fact. He moves the box around the table cloth, trying to angle it into the light, then grasps at it, the letters that he sees suddenly making him far more intrigued than concerned about their pickings. The owner's name has been engraved on the box just as it is on the case of his own watch, but it identifies him as one Thomas James, First Bengal European Regiment, rather than one of the paternal Manns family as expected.

Oliver feels more and more curious. It stretches his imagination to its limits to picture Manns as hoarding sentimental mementos, yet he wonders if the snuff-box owner is, or was, a relation. He wouldn't object in the slightest to the opportunity to pry open the cupboard of their mark's
unknown past a little way.

"Davy," he says, "may I ask another favour?"

"For another sovereign," Davy says, straight-faced. When Oliver begins to reach for his wallet once more, he laughs out loud, and darts out a hand to stay Oliver's own. "You might not be as green as you was, mate, but you've still got a way to go. What can I do for you?"

"Don't sell this snuff-box just yet. I want to investigate it further."

"All right. Where d'you intend to start?"

"Why not at East India House?" Oliver says. It seems a simple enough matter.

This proves to be not entirely true, but he finds himself no less astonished by his discoveries.

-oOo-

Numbers eleven to twenty-one Leadenhall Street are a hive of activity. Civil, military and naval personages mingle on a daily basis in these corridors of power that oversee a full half of the world's trade and a fifth of its population, and make it difficult not to be at least a little awed by the notion. South, east, and west and up and down many staircases from the large circular hall are a multitude of offices and apartments: the Grand Court Room; the Room for the Committee of Correspondence; the Old and New Sale-rooms. Portrayed in white marble on a plinth, Britannia herself reposes on a globe amongst the waves, while Asia, Africa and India pay homage, these respectively leading a camel, presenting an open casket of jewels, and with a hand resting upon the head of a great lion. Oliver ascends to his appointment at the military department beneath the painted gazes of the Marquesses Cornwallis and Wellesley. Other canvasses depict far-off coastal scenes of Madras and Calcutta, with lines of East Indiamen dashing towards them in billowing sail to claim their treasures. Everything is intended to speak of the exotic; of conquest and splendour, so as to attract the Honourable Company's shareholders.

At the first floor, he asks his way and is hurried efficiently down many passages towards the back of the building and finally left at a sturdy door with a brass nameplate. A knock, a slightly muffled reply from within, and then he enters into a wood-panelled room packed floor to ceiling with countless volumes and an equal quantity of letters both opened and unopened. The clerk, a Mr Hanley, greets him from behind an equally strewn desk and invites him to be seated. Even here amongst the paperwork, Oliver imagines that he can smell cloves and cinnamon; musk and ginger. Hanley reads from a letter that Oliver recognizes as being his own.

"Your correspondence has been passed to myself as chief clerk, Doctor Brownlow. I trust that you're happy for me to assist you?"

"Of course, Mr Hanley. I appreciate your sparing me the time."

"Well, I hope to be able to provide you with at least a few answers to your questions. Are you a doctor of medicine, sir? Or of theology or law?"

"Medicine. I practice in St George, Holborn."

"I see. Is the man of ours that you wish to enquire about a relative of your own? A patient?"

Oliver shifts in his seat. "A patient," he says, "indirectly. I'm asking on behalf of his widow, having been physician to the family for some years, and quite close. The lady, Mrs James, has
requested that I represent her."

"Ah." Hanley emits a small sound, and inclines his head respectfully. At the crown of his hair, there's a sprinkling of grey amongst the dark, as if dust has settled on him as it does on the highest shelves. "Eheu fugaces labuntur anni. Please do offer my condolences to the relatives."

"It was some years ago now, sir. In fact, she and the living children have always believed her husband killed in battle. She's a proud woman and has never been one to accept charity, but the family have unfortunately fallen on difficult financial times, and she wishes to know whether he was registered for a pension under the Lord Clive Fund. It would make her eligible for assistance."

Oliver has formulated his story carefully, and rehearsed it in his mind several times before satisfying himself that it sounds plausible. He feels a little guilty in using the badge of his trade in his mild deception, but the fact remains that there's a certain degree of respect awarded to it almost by default; it spreads about him like a mantle, invisible to the eye but unquestionable by the mind. Trust is immediately placed in Doctor Brownlow and his word, despite his relative youth, that a mere Mr Brownlow would find more difficult to gain.

Hanley nods again, although now there seems to be a slight doubtfulness about it. "It's certainly quite possible that he might have been accepted to the Fund even if he were a common soldier. A good many deserving men who find themselves in need are. The company prides itself in caring for our employees, military and civilian. But it would be difficult to provide you with access to the right papers, Doctor. We close files to the general public; the financially-related, personal records... The best option for the lady would be to submit a letter of application to us. We would be happy for you to assist her as advocate, but..." He lets another sentence hang, the remainder of the words implied.

Oliver feels his brows pucker faintly, although he had half-anticipated the response. All is not lost, however. "I can understand that," he answers. "Perhaps I might be able to look at the muster rolls for the regiment in the meantime, to confirm the details?"

"That would also be difficult. They would be restricted by the Keeper of Records."

"Even the casualty lists would be of use, I think. The family might be able to gain a sense of closure at last, if he were listed as one of the fallen."

Hanley looks quite unhappy. He shakes his head. Oliver's frustration is only compounded by the knowledge that the man is simply carrying out his duties. He considers pressing further, then changes his mind and exhales, looking across to where through the window he can see the roofs of the butchers' market through the dark afternoon drizzle from a forest of firing chimney-pots. He turns back. "Then I should apologize for wasting your time, Mr Hanley."

"On the contrary, Doctor Brownlow, I think that it's you who deserves my apology. I wish that I could assist you."

"Is there no way, sir?"

The other man spreads his hands, somewhat helplessly. "But, please," he adds, "encourage your patient - Mrs James? - to contact the company. We'll try to confirm her husband's death during service and whether or not he was in potential receipt of an allowance. I'll be more than glad to look into it personally."

Standing outside in the passage again, Oliver considers his options. Short of finding a more unscrupulous employee than the polite Hanley, and offering him a monetary incentive to permit
him a glance at the papers that he wants, there appear to be few. Despite everything, some
remaining strength of character still recoils at this last idea. Their plans have not been affected,
and, indeed, are progressing with a quite shocking ease, yet he cannot help the disappointed
feeling that he's failed to learn something that would have interested him a great deal. He's built up
an appetite, only for it to be left unsatisfied.

He's about to commence retracing his steps, when he hears a gentle, slightly Irish voice saying,
from somewhere behind him, "Doctor Brownlow? It is Oliver Brownlow, isn't it? My son's
friend?"

Oliver turns to see a tall, elegantly rangy man standing there. He wears a neat black cravat fixed
with a pearl pin, and has a long nose that supports a pair of wire spectacles. Smiling, he continues,
"I feel sure that it was not so very long ago that we encountered one another, although briefly. You
might remember me. Stephen Treacy."

Surprised but pleased, Oliver reaches out to shake the hand that he's offered. "Yes, sir, of course.
We met at Martin's wedding last year. It's good to see you again."

"As it is you, although I must say that I'm wondering what it is that brings you here." Treacy leans
closer. "A change of profession? Are you after joining up?"

Oliver returns his smile, unable to help feeling somewhat lighter at heart. "I'd like to see the Orient
one day, sir, but I'm not sure that I have the mettle to wear the uniform. I think that Martin and I
are more suited to serving Britain with linctuses than with rifles."

"And it's proud he is of his vocation, as should you be. But I shouldn't have thought to see you in
my department, or at the India-house at all. Is it a function that you've been invited to, or are you
about a business matter?"

Oliver outlines his predicament. Treacy listens to the tale, and then taps the side of his nose in a
confidential manner. "All things are possible, Doctor Brownlow, when the right doors are opened.
And sometimes it is merely a matter of asking the man who holds the keys. The names on our
casualty lists belong to men who are proud of their scars, or whom God has taken beyond caring,
and I do not see the hurt in a trustworthy man wanting to assist an impoverished woman. We will
find out whether I can use my influence on your behalf."

"Mr Treacy," Oliver says, sincerely, "I hope that I might properly thank you for this in time."

"A good deed done for a family friend is thanks enough." Treacy holds up a finger as if to say,
'wait, please', raps smartly upon the door that Oliver has just quitted, and enters. There is some
quiet conversation within. Several minutes later, he emerges, smiling once more, and beckons.
"Come with me now."

In a little high-windowed room located at the dead end of a corridor that overspills bound files,
Oliver is presented with a junior clerk who is instructed to offer him any assistance required. He
exchanges another warm handshake with Stephen Treacy before the other takes his leave. His
contrition at lying so blatantly to the father of a good friend almost makes him decide to reveal the
existence of the snuff-box after all and simply state that it came to him by way of a benefactor -
which, taken in a certain way, is not entirely untrue - but this sudden change in his story would, he's
forced to admit, cause a good deal of surprise and perhaps suspicion in even a trusting
acquaintance. In the centre of the room is a large square table where he might sit to read.

Having committed the box to memory, Oliver realizes that he has no idea of the age of it, only that
it had seemed not overly worn and of reasonably modern design. He decides to begin with the lists
from the turn of the century and move forward. The young clerk climbs ladders and fetches boxes from the tallest shelves. The room only possesses one lamp, and Oliver's eyes begin to ache as he ploughs doggedly through the campaigns of Bengal, Madras, Nepal and the Pindari War. The names listed as 'killed' and 'wounded' make for sober reading, though not as much as those 'missing', as if they were linens gone astray at the laundry; simply lost in native territory without trace. By the time that Oliver reaches the senior officer's report regarding the final storming of the fortress at Bhurtpore, the strings of names feel as though they're shifting and blurring into one, and he's approaching the point of abandoning his efforts when he finds himself reading the name Corporal Thos. James amongst them. There! He blinks himself awake, scanning it again. A common enough name, yet he feels a leaping conviction that this is their man. Craning over the words, he traces a finger across the page, but stops when he reaches the last column.

"Mr Abbott?" he asks, addressing the clerk.

The young man turns from his work. "Yes, sir?"

"Have I been right in supposing that the word 'ran' beside a name indicates a soldier who abandoned his post?"

"Yes, sir. Ran from battle. Some of them come back and are court-martialled, sir, and some they never see again."

Oliver raises his head from the paper. "Then I think that the man that I'm looking for deserted," he says, in surprise. Could this be the simple reason for the reluctance that Richard Manns has always had to discuss his past - family shame brought on by a near relative who left the army dishonourably? But hundreds must have done so, whether for good reasons or poor. And if the embarrassment were so acute, why keep such a reminder of it? Oliver rubs at the back of his neck, trying to ease the stiffness there, still bemused by the affair. The name, with the smear beside it, lies mutely; no further secrets to give up. He would not make very much of a detective, he thinks.

It's a linear train of reasoning that follows: detectives and police; the police station; the police newspaper. A little more than an hour later, Oliver is seated at another table, this time in the Divisional Clerks' office in the station next door to Bow Street Police Courts. Before him is an archive of the Police Gazette's Supplement, issued fortnightly and retrieved for his citizenly perusal from a store across the passage by a burly and cheerful caricature of a constable: absentees and deserters from His Majesty's Forces for the months beginning June, 1826.

This time he finds his information almost at once. Retrieving his small pocket-book and a pencil, he copies the notice onto the last pages in case any further research on it is needed elsewhere. Only then does he re-read it in order to absorb it fully.

**DESERTERS FROM HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE.**

*On and after this date, until further notice, the Reward given by the War Office for the Apprehension of a Deserter will be TWENTY SHILLINGS instead of TEN SHILLINGS, the object being to prevent the crime of Desertion, and to hold out a greater inducement for the recovery of Deserters to His Majesty's Service.*

**DATE OF DESERTION 17 June 1826**

**NAME** Thomas JAMES  
**REGIMENT** 1st Bengal European Regiment  
**AGE** 28 years 1 month  
**TRADE** Commercial clerk  
**BIRTHPLACE** Burnley, Lancashire  
**DESCRIPTION** 5ft. 9in. high, fresh complexion, dark brown hair, grey eyes
MARKS AND REMARKS Deserted February 1825, returned to duty, regimental court martial, charged with desertion and theft of uniform and musket, sentenced 4 mos. solitary confinement. D on left shoulder. Deserted from Bhurtpore, India and absconded in June 1826. ROBBERY AND MALICIOUSLY WOUNDING: charged with robbing and seriously assaulting the now deceased Cpt. W. LEES.

Twenty shillings! A fair and generous price, for information about deserters. And Thomas James was - perhaps still is - no common deserter, but a criminal, and a despicable one at that. Oliver is shocked. He would almost be able to sympathize with the desire to leave behind such a dubious connection did he not, privately, question whether the taste for violence is common to the family to one degree or another. Suddenly he finds himself wavering, unsure. Perhaps his line of thinking is no more than the wildest speculation, there has never been any mystery, and Manns simply acquired the box as an attractive purchase, ignorant of its past. Doubtless any warrant for James's apprehension and arrest is still valid. If the man lives, he must now be in his mid-fifties. His life for almost thirty years must have been spent as Jack or Davy spend theirs, forever glancing behind him, save that while they - or Oliver himself - might face several years in the 'Stone Jug', James's stay at Newgate might easily be a short one followed by a few steps upward and a quick drop.

He calls the stout constable over. "What does it mean, mentioned this way; 'D beneath left shoulder'? A former sailor's tattoo? Are identifying marks on a soldier recorded in the papers of the court martial?"

"They brand 'em, sir."

"Brand them?"

The constable puts down his stovepipe hat on the table and squats briefly upon another chair, seemingly glad of the opportunity to take the weight off his feet. He scratches his whiskers. "Yes, sir. When the fellows are charged with deserting their posts. It's a thing with pins in it - making the shape of a 'D', like - and they put it in ink or gunpowder and brand 'em. There's another one, 'B C', for 'Bad Character'. It marks 'em for life, sir, so's that if they jump a ship and make their way home, any man that hires 'em knows what they are, or what they was."

"Is it always put in the same place, then?"

"Sometimes it's on the hands. Which is worse for 'em if you ask me, 'cause it's all the harder to hide. The ones that have it on the shoulders or the chest just make sure they don't take off their shirts when anyone who cares might be watching -" Abruptly, he stops, regarding Oliver with mild concern on his face. "If you don't mind me asking, sir, are you out of sorts? For a moment there, you looked right... well, like a fellow that's seen a ghost."

Quickly and carefully, Oliver re-arranges his features. He's aware that he must have been staring at the constable with the stunned intensity of someone who has, indeed, witnessed a phantom, or possibly a murder. He clears his throat. "No," he says, "I'm quite all right. I was just a little surprised."

The constable looks disappointed as he realizes that the visitor's attention has already traversed elsewhere. He rises with the slight exhalation of one whose considerable strength nevertheless does not quite compensate for his bulk, and makes to move off once again in the pursuit of justice. "Well," he says, "you let me know if I can help you with anything else today."

"Thank you," Oliver answers, mechanically. He manages to maintain a neutral expression, but inside, his mind is falling over itself.
Such a harmless comment, and yet, slowly at first, and then all of a rush, like bacteria dividing under the microscope, the entire story begins to take shape. The existence of the snuff-box; the wiped slate of Manns's background; his refusal to disrobe, as if he wished to hide some blemish. Oliver has always failed to place the accent that he catches playing about Manns's words, but now he recalls with sudden clarity where he last heard similar speech: a fellow medical student at the university whose family originated from Wigan, and who had not entirely lost the sound of his childhood. He would be willing to wager that if Manns's tongue is particular to one Lancastrian town, it would be that of Burnley.

And then, there's the matter of the fever.

The gaseous air of Britain's marshlands with its damp green stink lays low with the ague many who live and work in its vicinity, and Oliver had been surprised at the surfacing of the illness in a man who had, by his own account, never resided in any such area but lived a strictly urban life. Now he can hardly believe that he's never thought to ask his patient, even in innocence, if he had ever travelled to the Indies. The narrow streets of Calcutta and Mathura are said to pant with fever; the heaving ports with their sultry air to be a hotbed of sweat and plague. The ague poison has been known to live and grow in the blood for years if not thoroughly purged, returning long after the patient removes themselves to healthier climates. Whether the tincture that he prescribed will prove a cure in this case has yet to be seen, but Oliver does not feel that he's wrong.

Richard Manns is a man living under a pseudonym, as much as he had ever lived under 'Oliver Twist' or Jack 'Artful Dodger'. The two of them have managed to plan, in complete ignorance, to rob another thief.

That the entire affair could be a string of outlandish coincidences is not altogether impossible, but he doesn't believe in coincidences anymore.

Before he leaves, he begs paper, envelope and wafer, and composes a short and discreet note, to be sent care of Mr Thomas King, of the Lamb and Lark inn, Aldersgate Street, and expressing the wish of an old friend from Saffron Hill that Mr Dawkins join him at his home for dinner the following evening. There, they can discuss the turn of events. His servants are now acquainted with Jack, if not exactly with what he is. Exiting the station, he walks a short distance to find a ticket porter at his post before returning to his own day. The sun is still two hours from setting when he finishes the last of his visits, but no more than a tarnished penny behind the afternoon smoke.

Oliver wends his way home to bathe before settling to a meal that he discovers a newly robust appetite for.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Because so much of the story featured Oliver trying to make his way through Jack's world, it was a fun change to write these chapters where we get to see Jack as a guest in Oliver's - and, on occasions, similarly out of his depth. (The idea also amused me no end that Jack was squeamish. If he and Oliver were watching a surgical procedure, Oliver would be fascinated and taking notes, and Jack would be the one with his head over a bucket.)

The ice man and his cart, with its two horses and distinct ICE painted in tall letters upon the side, make domestic deliveries in the mornings after supplying the butchers and fishmongers. Oliver has a block sent directly down to the larder, where, in spare moments, Jonathan has at it with a pick and helps Oliver pack it into boxes to store vaccine. One physician notoriously destroyed a vial by carrying it in the warmth of his pocket, and, since then, Oliver's erred on the side of caution by not performing the smallpox vaccination on calls, but asking that children be brought to the surgery so that he can administer it on the premises. Jonathan is not altogether happy about the fact that the vaccine's produced by inoculating and then scraping the skins of calves. "But it's still a cow-pox, ain't it," he says, dubiously, "if it comes from cows?"

"Actually, it's a particular type of cow-pox. Most people suffer only the few days with slight fever, but there have been unexpected effects observed afterwards. Notable extension of the tailbone, growths on the head, and changes to the vocal chords that cause a sound like a bleating - or possibly a lowing..."

Jonathan's small, freckled face falls a mile. The ever-curious Hester, whose nose has been appearing around the door in between washing the breakfast pots and pans, emits a little shriek, as everyone in the house has been given the vaccine. "That was a joke, by the way," Oliver finishes, in a hurry.

"Doctor Brownlow, sir, I ain't going to turn into a cow, am I?"

"Jonathan, I give you my word that both of you will remain fully human." Oliver keeps one of the vials back; he's due to carry out two vaccinations this morning. "Make sure that these stay on the floor, where it's cool and away from the food," he adds, and returns back upstairs.

On Monday, the House of Lords had sat for the first time on the Vaccination Extension bill. The Lancet had previously published an extensive editorial on the matter, and an account of the debate had afterwards appeared in The Times, with the participating peers quoted almost to the point of tedium. If the bill is taken up, vaccination against the smallpox will be no longer merely advised for newly-born children, but enforced. Oliver has perused the articles repeatedly, in two minds. The doctor in him throws his hands into the air in celebration that controlling the disease has been acknowledged as a public health matter; the citizen has doubts that enforcing the issue to the point of imposing penalties for 'non-compliance' is the method by which to go about it. A man who feels that an action is being forced upon him will always have the natural reaction of balking at it. Oliver favours education and demonstration. As he climbs the staircase, he wonders idly about the likelihood of Jack allowing a lancet near him. Morning surgery lasts until half-past twelve;
Hunger once more carries him back across his own threshold in the evening; today, however, it seems less of a hunger for food alone - although his stomach informs him that this will also be not at all unwelcome. He bursts to tell someone of his recent discoveries, but, more than that, he has the desire to simply see Jack again; to have him under his roof; to, as always, know simply by his presence that he's safe and well. He has, he feels, always been the contemplative sort, much given to debating rights and wrongs, what might or might not have come to pass if circumstances had been different to what they are, and the depths and intricacies of the human character, and he finds himself aware once again of the fleeting wish inside him for Jack to become something, if only for an evening, that would make inviting him to his home not such an irresponsible risk. And then he realizes, just as abruptly, that while there are men who might have fallen into their ways through need alone and would readily fall out if offered honest work, and men who might have been enticed to go against their natural inclinations by poor company and are open to reform, and men like himself who have qualms about their deeds, if Jack were not what he is, he simply would not be Jack.

Later dining is not the best for digestion, but Oliver typically has little choice, not having the timetable of a man in the City who puts down his pen or locks up his door at a designated chime of the clock. Although he sets hours for practice, he's constantly aware that he could, in theory, be asked for at any time. Dinner at seven enables him to return in good time, perform his routine ablutions with sponge and soap, change his clothes, and rest for a short while with a newspaper or book, and it's the last that Jack's sudden arrival this evening cuts short. Sarah looks so startlingly pink by the time that she enters the drawing room with him that Oliver devises wild theories about what the other man has managed to do within the space of just a few minutes.

"Please finish setting the table, Sarah," he says, quickly. "Mr Dawkins and I," rising slightly from his chair and indicating for Jack to take the other, "would like to have a few words before dinner."

Sarah exits in such a hurry that her skirts almost take the lady fern near the door with her. Oliver turns to his visitor. "Jack," he says, for what feels as if it were the hundredth time, although it has a distinctly softer edge to it now.

"Oliver," Jack acknowledges. He makes himself comfortable, his mouth straight, but something subtle in his eyes. The previous tension between them is now more of something resembling a delectable secret. He seems to be intrigued as to whether this evening is - as they had previously phrased it - business or pleasure, but determined that if it should be the former, the latter will still accompany it as an uninvited but very prominent guest.

"Can I ask what you said to my housemaid in the hall?"

Jack shrugs. "Only that she seemed like she was a very tidy and handy girl, and I was certain that she must please you about the place."

"That could be interpreted two ways, and if you'd care to remember what I told you before, the second one would be wrong."

"By your choice more than hers, I'd say."

"What in the world are you talking about now?"

Jack looks at him, quite incredulously. "She's sweet on you."

"Don't be ridiculous."
"Oliver, you might read a lot of them books of yours, but you still ain't half slow to catch on some of the time. Now, I'll grant you that it mightn't be the first thought in some fellers' heads that someone else with a cock has a personal interest in theirs, leading to my having to elaborate in our own situation. But I'm having a hard time with this one."

"You have an interesting imagination, but I sometimes wonder what it is that sets it off."

"And I sometimes wonder how it is that you've ever managed a fuck."

"I've made a friendship, and asked," Oliver says, honestly.

"You've done the one, but I'm still waiting for the other."

"You're beyond any hope." With a smile of his own, Oliver rises to fetch the pocketbook containing his notes from the bureau. He only half-believes Jack, yet the idea is a strange one to consider, perhaps because of, rather than in spite of, the fact that he thinks of Sarah with some fondness. If he had ever been one to approach his servants as a man, it would have been in search of a companion, not a conquest; a girl with a simple nature who he cannot help but feel would have suited him far better in marriage than many of the wealthier young ladies whom his uncle holds quiet hope that he might make a match with. In another life that had not been destined to be so inextricably bound up with Jack's, he might still have flouted convention.

He turns to the back pages, and, returning to stand before Jack's chair, hands the book to him, holding it open. "Tell me what you make of this," he says.

Jack accepts it and reads obediently. He has the habit of shaping the words with his lips as he does so, speaking a few of them aloud. When he reaches the deeply-scored *Robbery & Maliciously Wounding*, his eyebrows twitch upwards. "May I suppose that this is all about your snuff-box cove? Davy told me how he filched it and you'd got it into your head to look him up."

"You'd suppose correctly."

"Well, I can't say he did himself any favours. Never did care all that much for violence, unless the other feller started it first. As for leaving a poor bugger to die -" Jack's mouth twists, as though in distaste. "I reckon he deserved whatever he had coming to him."

Oliver nods. He wonders if Jack considered that Mags Lewis started it. "Would you say that he deserved to be robbed himself?"

Jack opens his mouth to continue, but stops. He looks at Oliver. Thoughtfully, he sucks at the inside of his cheek, a small hollow appearing briefly on his right hand side. Then he releases it, and slowly, very slowly, a grin begins to grow. "Oh, Oliver," he says, "oh, my fine old covey! Are you telling me that the first owner of this here sneeze-box and our good friend Mr Richard Manns happen to be one and the same?"

"I'm almost as sure of it as I can reasonably be. His age; the accent that he speaks with; the illness that I've been treating him for." In short terms, Oliver explains the malarial fever, so prolific among the natives in the Indies. "What I really need," he goes on, "is to have the man remove his shirt. If I'm correct, the reason that he refuses is because he has the tattoo beneath his arm that deserters are given. Even if he tries to disguise it with some sort of paint, something should still be visible. The aim is that everyone about them should recognize it. If he'd ever been hired, it might have been found, but, as I've said, he appears to be a self-made man. I don't believe that he was fortunate and assisted by his family, as I was. I believe that he stole those first funds."
"I presume that you was struck by the irony of one thief stealing off another when this came to light?"

"It wasn't altogether lost on me," Oliver replies.

Jack closes the pocket-book and hands it back. He looks Oliver up and down. "Speaking of Davy," he says, "he also informed me when I went to collect our key this morning that you in action was a beautiful thing to behold. Now, I was about to confess to a fancy or two about that, but it seems that he meant that you picked that pocket like you was born to it."

"I hardly went about it like an expert. But I managed it, and without his noticing, so that does constitute success, I admit."

"Oliver, it might have taken you 'til now, but you finally done old Fagin proud."

"I think that he had even more of the devil in him than you do." It seems strange to Oliver that he should feel nostalgia, even a sort of fondness, at the memory of a man who had tried to corrupt him; to make him a common criminal. And yet it always remains so. Skinflint, cheat and liar as he was, Fagin had nevertheless taken in an unknown boy from the streets, sheltered him, and told a child who believed himself less than nothing that he could be the greatest man of all time. The law would insist that Fagin was a man who stole childhood for his own gains, but if he had not put a roof over the heads of boys whom no-one else would, the fact remains that many of those same boys would have either met their ends remarkably quickly, or been forced to support themselves by far more horrific methods than lifting wallets or robbing shops. Suddenly Oliver feels a little empty, as he realizes how natural it seems, even without knowing for sure, to think of the man in purely the past tense. As a doctor, he forms one half of the industry that deals in death, his partner for the second leg of the journey being the undertaker. He supposes that he has only moved throughout his life from one to the other. Yet, 'dead', to him, describes the shrunken, anonymous faces for whom his last gesture was to issue a certificate stating the cause of their passing. It doesn't seem to fit a man who he ate with and whose roof he slept beneath, if only for a short time. And yet he asks, "He is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"No need. Long time ago now. I was fifteen, sixteen - somewhere thereabouts."

"It still stands. I know that you thought of him as a true friend."

"The way I see it, Oliver, there's plenty of us what has the bad luck to be orphaned. And then there's some of us what are orphaned twice." Something flits across Jack's face. Then, almost as quickly, it vanishes, and he sniffs the air. "Now, is that eels on the way what I can smell?"

"Almost," Oliver answers. "Lamprey." His brows crease a little. For a brief moment there, he'd seen a glimpse of someone else.

-oOo-

There are two sofas against the wall in the dining room as well as the surplus chairs. Oliver explains about the fact that he also uses it as his waiting room, the surgery being adjoining, at which point Jack requests to change seats so that he can eat with his back to the latter. Conversation over dinner should be by the laws of etiquette kept light so as not to spoil the food, but Oliver remembers many thoughtful discussions around the table as he grew up that never seemed to ruin
his uncle's satisfaction with the meal, and he's personally inclined to find his appetite stimulated by
the same.

Sarah stays to help serve if Oliver has a larger number around the table; if not, the dishes are easily
passed from one to the other. After the first remove, they focus on a very good pair of roast fowl.
Jack turns his plate about a time or two in great interest, prods the meat extensively with a fork,
and, taking his first bite, finally speculates it to be duck.

"Wigeon, to be exact," Oliver says, enjoying his enthusiasm. Having Jack as a guest is a delight in
a multitude of ways. There might be business to be transacted here this evening, but the pleasure is
fully present. Jack, he thinks, is the reflection of the cruder, more sensuous side of life, and perhaps
in some ways the truest.

"Well, wigeon or pigeon, it tastes a treat. I'll be more than happy to clear any of yours what gets
left over, and the same with that sherry trifle what you said was over there. You can have the
vegetables."

"Trifle. And I don't have any worries at all with regards to vegetables, as long as they're cooked
well. I don't believe that Mrs Phillips has once generated a cause for complaint throughout her
entire time in service. They help to regulate and stimulate the bowels, in my opinion. I've never met
anyone who could take much fruit in its raw state without the colic, though."

"My bowels is quite happy, thank you, and seeing as how I ain't got the luxury of a privy seat all to
myself, I'd just as soon not stimulate 'em any more. If you've taken a liking to shitting morning,
noon, and night as well, I wish you all the best in your labours." Noticing Oliver's expression, he
pauses, cocking his head quizzically.

"I'm not sure if I could even have these conversations with another doctor."

"You couldn't have had our last conversation with anybody."

"The part where you taught me to pick pockets?" Oliver says, softly. "Or the part where you asked
me to bed?"

"Oh, there's lots of fellers what could show you how to dip."

"And the other?"

"That," Jack replies, "was personal."

Oliver cuts another slice of his bird. "I did pay honest money for this," he says, innocuously,
nodding towards Jack's own. "I hope that you're going to finish it."

"Oliver, I always finish what I start."

Footfalls on the kitchen staircase and the creak of a door serve as a poignant reminder that the two
of them are not alone in the house, even if they might be, temporarily, in the room. They exchange
glances. Such, Oliver thinks, is the way. His exchange for comfort will always be a fundamental
lack of the privacy that Jack takes for granted. He straightens himself in his seat.

"So, to business, then?" he says, firmly.

"To business," Jack agrees.

"Manns is to travel next Monday. The eleventh of April. I found this out when he requested to
change the visit that I'd wanted to make to another day. He'll be returning home that night, but late; he expects it to be after twelve o'clock. The butler is sitting up to attend to him when he comes in, but I should think that he won't stray far from the pantry before Manns arrives. If you want to look at the safe, I think that you have an opportunity."

Jack's nodding before he finishes speaking. "Could do with knowing how many sliders the lock's got, if it's a Bramah. There's different models, see. And how good the spring is. Cove I know tried one of these and found out his regular instrument what he carries wasn't strong enough for the job."

"I'm sure that you know what you need to do, Jack, although I don't pretend to understand the technicalities."

"I'm a dab hand in my field. Exactly the same as what you are in yours."

"No," Oliver says, smiling. "you're just a wonder. Even if I thoroughly disapprove of your motivations most of the time."

"I could show you a few wonders if you'd give me half a chance." Jack reaches forward, still chewing, and taps Oliver's plate with his fingers. "Now, eat. And when I've had a taste or two of that trifle, we can talk some more."

Although London is engaged in the protracted turn from winter to spring, the evenings are still drearily chilly more often than not. The fog that creates a form of twilight during the day, its damp, saturating particles already more of a mizzle than a mist, now changes to a more defined fall of light rain that the breeze patters against the window-pane. Oliver imagines that Jack is as pleased as he is when they return to the drawing room to pull forward two easy chairs and take their seats closer to the fireplace. They cup their brandy glasses in their hands for a while, for the glowing arrival in the mouth that disperses through the veins like the lick of an inner flame. Sarah brings a plate of bread and butter after a short time, and one of plum cake, then shuts the door quietly behind her. The sounds of her boots die slowly down the hall. Jack swirls his liquor about his glass, well stuffed with food and clearly delighted by the prospect of the escapade ahead.

"I prescribe it for colds," Oliver explains, "to be taken in hot tea. It helps to clear the sinuses. The fruit brandies are lighter and better for women. Simple remedies can still sometimes be quite effective."

"You're a considerate physic," Jack says. He takes a trial sip and lets the brandy slide over his tongue. "Very considerate indeed," he adds, with obvious pleasure.

"A frustrated one at times, though, when I see patients who can't afford the prescriptions. Nor can they afford to stay in bed and forfeit a day's earnings - although sometimes I wonder if they aren't better off away from their homes. Rooms that barely see daylight, no dust-bins to be found, so much damp that it runs down the walls, courts that sit on giant cesspools..." Oliver breaks off, realizing that, if he continues, he will simply have no idea where to end.

Jack eyes him. "You spend your time in places like that, and you're going to end up one of your own patients."

"If they need me, what option do I have?"

"They don't need you dead. Neither do I."

"Adequate hygiene and clean air do go a long way. The first thing I do at home is wash. My clothes are hung outside to fumigate in the sun when the weather's fine; by the scullery window,
otherwise."

"Oliver," Jack says, patiently, "if you've breathed it into your guts already, you ain't going to flush it out at the wash-stand."

Oliver turns his glass between his hands a few times, studying the golden refraction of the gas and firelight through the brandy. "Well, that would depend on whether it's in the bowels, in the lungs, or lying upon the skin, wouldn't it?"

"Now, what is it what gives me the feeling that the word 'spores' is going to feature in this conversation?"

"Only a percentage of people living and working near filthy water or fouled air are made ill by it. Can you come up with a better reason why?"

"Yes." Jack sits back in his chair, and swings a foot up onto the small stool. "It's all down to your own constitution, whatever life's got planned out for you, and a dose of luck to decide whether you live or die of it." He meets Oliver's gaze, levelly. "I always did have a bit of luck on my side."

It takes Oliver a moment or two to realize what it is that the other man means, but when he does, he feels the trickle of the brandy through his blood cool rapidly. "What else did you have?"

"The typhoid."

"Typhoid? Dear God!"

"Me and Fagin. He died; I lived. I had it first and he tried to nurse me, what he knew about nursing, which wasn't much."

Oliver cannot help feeling something akin to a hatred of himself; a disgust that there should have been a point in time when he had been unutterably fortunate and the scale of fate had been so weighted in favour of him, and so heavily against Jack. While he slept peacefully among clean sheets, Jack had been left to alternately rave, dream, and vomit in a hovel perhaps not unlike the one that they and Fagin's other boys had inhabited together. While he had dabbed the light sweat of a summer's day from his brow as he bent over his sums or his Latin in the schoolroom, Jack had burned with the fever that threatens to consume one from the inside out. Oliver has heard of sudden outbreaks of typhoid fever to which close to half of those affected succumbed. But the Dodger had once more proved his nickname apt. With a hop and a wink, he had sidestepped death.

"You stayed with him, after all?" he finally asks.

"Partners, wasn't we?" Jack shrugs, in a matter-of-fact fashion. Yet it's clear to Oliver. The wily old Jew, who had been friend and mentor to Jack, is the only figure whom he might have called 'father'. Jack seems to him to have a good many friends nowadays, but no family. A man on his own, who never draws quite as close as he might, can never again have anything taken from him that matters.

He thinks on it for a minute or so. Then he puts down his glass and holds out his hand.

"Fagin's boys?" he says. That there's no real truth in it on his side is irrelevant. All that's important is that it's good for Jack to hear.

Jack considers this. Then he accepts the hand and shakes it. It feels strangely formal, almost gentle, compared to what's already passed between them, but there's something good about it; something strong and true. "Not many of us about, now," he says. "Who'd've thought that it'd come down to you and me in the end, Oliver Twist?"
"I always wondered what became of Charley," Oliver says.

"Oh, are you referring to the gent what still is, as far as I'm aware, the merriest grazier in all Northamptonshire?" To Oliver's astonished look, he adds, "Went straight, didn't he? A country farmhand. I heard it from a cove in the dairy trade, sometime after."

"I can only say that I'm somewhat surprised."

Jack shakes his head in a manner resembling acute sorrow. "No more than I was. My old cocker, Charley Bates, one of the best Adam-Tilers you could have ever had, shovelling cow-shit. The world just ain't put together right."

Oliver lets his eyes drop to where their fingers still clutch. He could develop, he thinks, a great love for the feel of a man's hand in his. "Sometimes I think that it's put together perfectly."

"Us boys used to have a competition going. We was always at it - who got to be the man what made the best haul of the day. Used to love waiting to see old Fagin look the goods over. Knew quality when he saw it, he did."

"Let me guess. You always won?"

Jack looks modest. "Usually."

"For what it's worth, I'm sure that Fagin would be proud of you if he were here now."

"Of the both of us, I'd say."

"A lot prouder," Oliver says, soberly, "than my uncle would be. When he took me into his home, he believed in me from the first. He had confidence in me; trusted me. It looks as though that might have been misplaced."

"How is Mr Brownlow, Senior, these days?" Jack enquires.

Oliver manages a smile. "Elderly, but well, and refusing to consider a retirement. I think that he'll only leave the Treasury when they carry him out."

"Well, I should like to send my good wishes to the determined gent, though I don't think I'll leave him my card. Ain't the Treasury the place what looks after public spending? Deciding where it is what gets what?"

"Yes," Oliver says. He feels that he can see where this is going.

"A distribution of the wealth, like."

"Yes, Jack."

"Well, all it is that you're doing is re-distributing a bit of wealth to some fellers what need it more that what its first owner does. You're just following in his footsteps, ain't you? And dispensing a bit of home-made justice along the way. I reckon that he might understand that, if he was to give it some thought."

"He might. I'm not sure, though, that he'd understand that I first set out to do it because of what I felt for another man."

Jack's eyes grow warmer, like the brandy. "Oliver."
"Not to mention that I violated the Hippocratic Oath by engaging in intentional ill-doing in the house of my patient."

"The ill-doings is all going to be mine, mate. You're off scot-free."

Jack's thumb brushes the tiny hairs on the back of Oliver's hand. For a while, he concerns himself with other thoughts than the fact that he's sitting in his drawing room planning a housebreaking, with a known housebreaker, and with a forgery of a key that he stole tucked firmly in the other's pocket.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

For the next three chapters, the rating will be for a reason.

A Bramah lock was picked in 1851 in a demonstration by a locksmith, but it took him 50 hours spread over several days. That was an 18-slider lock rather than 6, but nevertheless, let's say that Jack is just really, really, really good.

That Jack is a man of some considerable skill when it comes to the plying of his chosen trade, Oliver is thoroughly convinced, but he nevertheless endures several days of worry. If Jack were to be caught, that night of all nights - if the house were to awake, the alarm to be raised - the blame would rest squarely upon his own shoulders, unchanged by the fact that Jack had been as eager as he, and had, indeed, proposed this particular visit. Even now, on the occasional night when he fails to drift into sleep as quickly as usual and lies looking into the dark at nothing, listening to the quiet creaks and knocks of the settling house, questions and possibilities about another episode in his past have rolled on more than one occasion through his mind. If he had not volunteered to carry his uncle's books that morning...if he had not cost Nancy those few crucial seconds, at the bridge, by turning to embrace her, and she had been able to run, to a place that would give her shelter... Far down the years, the guilt knaws at him, like a cancer, that he had been the catalyst in the events that had led to her death. If Jack were to be taken, while executing the plan that they had devised together, Oliver doubts that he would be able to live with the fact. He finds himself pacing the floor a good deal, unable to rest for long periods at a time.

He also feels, frankly and undeniably, randy.

He's been without an arrangement for some time, it being something that he seems to have drifted out of the habit of seeking; something that feels as if he were no longer being quite honest with himself, nor with his potential female friends. Although he has few pangs of conscience about relieving his own needs - all that he has ever observed having convinced him that masturbation is harmless in moderation - there are limits to the satisfaction that it supplies. In the past, he's been driven to speculate whether, despite the numbing ecstasy of climax, he would not rather fuck and be prevented from spending, than achieve a release of sperm but be denied the same heart-deep joy of sliding his cock into a glove of warmth and feeling it drawn in and welcomed; of simply being cradled in the arms of a lover. Strange as it is, he fumbling like a blind man around the motions and etiquette of romantic interaction between males, Jack's unashamed desire is stoking a similar need in him.

Oliver had been eminently practical as a boy, though far from being ruled by his head; compassion had been strong in him at an early age. He'd been practical in the respect that he had never been able to understand the value in denying that which is so for the sake of politeness. Upon receiving instruction about what the sexual act entailed, through boys' talk both implied and crude, and books smuggled hurriedly from hand to hand and hidden beneath coats, he had not been overly shocked or confused, merely curious. Newly fascinated about the workings of the human body, that procreation should occur in the way that it does had seemed largely logical to him almost from the start. The most surprising thing about it had been its reported ease, and he had set out to educate himself of the finer details as fully as was possible without having gone through with the
deed. At eighteen, a friend in the same straits suggested that they go together for courage to a bawdy-house, but Oliver had hesitated, fearing disease. One of the kindest and bravest women that he had ever known had been - he knew, by then, his innocence long gone - a prostitute, yet the sores and stinking genital emanations that it was bandied about were caught from fallen women filled him with horror. The prospect of satiating himself under the knowledge that the woman wanted only the coin in his pocket; that the only attraction that he had for her might be as a means to keep from starving, had, in addition, thrown cold water upon his enthusiasm. From the beginning he had felt as though the entrancing ache that he felt should be mutual.

The propensity of prostitutes to have their occupation recorded on the police books as 'milliner' or 'seamstress' is so widely known that both are almost a byword for the girls, communicated with a snigger and a wink. She had been a milliner, or the assistant of the same, with no secondary meaning; an honest girl; as soft and fragrant as a flower herself in his gaze, among the festival of ribbons, fowls and blooms that adorned every size of hat and bonnet imaginable. She had smiled so sweetly at him through the window of the little shop as he stood transfixed before it, with no suggestion that he was simply an amusement to her, that Oliver, wavering on the unsteady brink of adulthood where selfish urges vie with a man's wish for companionship, had been suddenly taken with the idea that he would like to speak to her, to sit with her a while, and know her. Astonishing himself with his impulsiveness, he had gone into the shop and asked her name. It was Polly.

They had shared the joke of how they could make a rhyme together with their names, and any remaining ice had been broken.

He had called on her after hours for two months with small gifts from his allowance: flowers, sweets, books, handkerchiefs. Sometimes they would take strolls, and once went to a tea garden, Oliver still being not altogether sure of the sorts of places that would appear decent while still affording the moments of privacy that might allow him to express himself. She had had a sweetheart who abandoned her, but, in her words, was not as kind as him. On the last day of the second month, she had led him upstairs to a garret room above the shop with a narrow wooden bedstead and a wool mattress. He had helped her to spread a blanket upon it, and they had fucked. It had been simple, so simple that Oliver could hardly believe, following that first attempt, that it had really occurred. His body had seemed to find its way and move of its own accord. More valuable than the pleasure of the scent produced by his own intimate flesh combined with another's, and that of his cock being so closely and completely enfolded, had been the first discovery that his instincts would always prove a truer path to him than what he might find written down in books.

It was during this same period in Oliver's life that he had begun to see Jack about more often than he'd been accustomed to, although whether it was a case of Jack putting in more frequent appearances, or only that he had begun to notice them more, he found impossible to determine.
intellect, and it becomes a source of enormous gratification merely to possess a penis, is, he's been forced to admit, inevitable. He relaxes quietly for a time, simply letting it build, waiting as the desire begins to rise; his heart to beat a little harder.

He handles himself, slowly at first. A wonderful feeling of heaviness grows as his cock does. It's as if there's suddenly something very much present that he's usually barely aware of. The chill becomes less noticeable as he continues; he feels comfortable. By the time that he finishes, the comfort will have turned to sweat. The response of the body to sexual stimulation is akin to fever, and the mind, to delirium. He approaches and tips over the precipice of the point at which his cock moves beyond his control and continues to fill and stiffen despite any way he might try to stop it.

Oliver presses back into the pillows, liking the contrast of the cool material at the nape of his neck and the heat between his legs. He wraps his hand around his cock and slides the loose skin back and forth, delighting as always at how it simply glides over the smoothness of his glans; how, even when the latter is beyond touching with the barest fingertip, the foreskin is still gentle and perfectly suited. Perhaps the sole advantage over fucking is that he's able to watch this occurring from beginning to end, rather than only feel it. Seeing his body perform fills him with a strange, primitive pride incomparable to any other achievement.

He permits his thoughts to wander, shifting from one to another picture; some recalled, some that have only ever existed in fantasies conjured at these moments, some a mingling of both. There are things that he would not find acceptable in a calm frame of mind that seem both acceptable and attractive when aroused. Oliver sometimes has the fancy that he's leaving a theatre in Covent Garden, and a gay woman in a gaudy satin dress propositions him. Instead of politely refusing, he lets her lead him into a low alley, away from the street and respectability, deeper and deeper into the shadows until he has to grope for her in the blackness, and then he pulls her skirts up and takes her against the soot-blackened wall, hard and urgent. Often he imagines a lover not only accepting but begging for the attentions of his cock, and using the bawdiest words to do so. He would undoubtedly be shocked out of the moment were a woman to actually do this, but here, in his privacy, he craves such things.

A memory flits abruptly and unexpectedly through his mind of Jack sitting in front of him, talking about fucking and pricks. Instantly, he feels his stomach tighten and a surge of new excitement in his cock. His mental picture shifts, and suddenly it's Jack that he's watching in the sexual act, his rigid shaft rhythmically appearing from and disappearing into the woman's slippery folds; Jack whose lusty sounds his imagination is stubbornly conjuring up. Unbidden, Oliver begins to lengthen his strokes. Does Jack ever fondle himself so shamelessly, he thinks, and the image that follows, of Jack alone on his bed, thrusting his hips and fisting his stiff cock, causes the flame inside him to burn the longest and hottest that he's ever known. Jack touches the bodies of other men in ways that he never should; has taken this pleasure with them.

Oliver might have attempted to build a case in his defence. He's alone with his own nakedness, he has his hard cock in his hand, and he's urging himself closer and closer to his climax. Everything about the scenario is purely male, and he could claim only a short step from enjoying his own body to speculations about the experiences of fellow men. He could try to think of it that way, as fleeting curiosity. But he would be feigning.

His breathing grows harsher until he's huffing lightly through his nose. The time for gentle coasting on the waves of pleasure has passed now, and his want deepens. Blood throbs through his shaft, and his hand moves faster of its own accord. A deliciously wet, sticky trail is slowly emerging from the tip of his cock that heightens the sensitivity still further. Oh, more. More. Oliver grips tighter, milks harder, feeling every stroke. He remembers the teasing flicker of Jack's tongue over his, and the press of a body as strong and hard as his own, and feels an instant pull in his groin in
response. His balls are beginning to tighten.

His cock pulses steadily, rhythmically; first one, then two, then one, two, three. The warmth begins to rise swiftly up his shaft - filling, coming - until he finally convulses in a white-hot rush of overwhelming feeling. He stills his hand and allows his hips to do what they wish to do and thrust madly into it as he spends warm, wet sperm onto his stomach. He feels as if he could sob in these all too short moments for the sheer relief. Even after the spurts diminish into nothingness, his cock continues to pulsate, and his body to twitch and shudder. It continues for what seems like a long while, but is, in truth, no more than a minute or so. Finally - finally, he rests.

After a time, Oliver reaches for the handkerchief waiting beside the pillow and cleans and dries himself. He'll rinse it discreetly in the wash bowl the next morning before he sends it for the laundry. The drowsiness of comfort and intense physical gratification is starting to flood his brain now. He covers his newly soft, quiescent organ with his nightshirt again and straightens the bedclothes. Then he snuffs the candle, plunging the room into the calm of night, where silence reigns and each man is alone with the most secret of his wishes and dreams.

On Wednesday, as he's making his way through an early luncheon before leaving the house, he hears from the hall the smart single rap of the postman upon the door. Presently, Sarah comes in in her clean dress, apron and cap, and with a letter on the tray. Oliver's glance at the slope of the pen that formed the address as he accepts it is habitual, but as he does so this morning, a flicker of heat stirs reflexively in his abdomen. Opening the envelope, he reads, in Jack's hand:

My dear Dr Brownlow,

I am delighted to confirm that on this past Monday I saw fit to call on our mutual acquaintance, and that my visit was altogether a great success.

I sense that our acquaintance will not be an easy man to do business with, but I have all confidence that my natural skills will prevail and I shall be able to complete the transaction in question very soon indeed.

I am, Dr and Dear Sir, Yours Truly

J Dawkins

-oOo-

In the vaulted nave of St George Bloomsbury, Oliver watches his uncle from his seat beside him on the pew bench as the older man follows the lesson. Since he was a boy, the service has been to him as much of a time to contemplate Edward Brownlow as it is God. His strong-jawed profile and silvery head inclined thoughtfully over his prayer book has always seemed to Oliver to be the same personification of dignity and wisdom that he had held in his mind in the workhouse when he imagined a true gentleman. After he had taken him into his home, his uncle had become, in Oliver's mind, more of a seat of righteousness than had a God who had seemed to have closed his eyes to countless others like him for so many years. God had once abandoned him; Edward Brownlow had cared for him unhesitatingly without paying any heed to the fact that the boy, despite being his natural great-nephew, was a stranger to him. And with this, Oliver had taken his first steps towards humanitarianism and the belief that men have a responsibility to one another that may not be dismissed with a wave to the Almighty to provide as and when he sees fit.

He wonders if it's only by coincidence that the first publisher of atheist literature in the country was a physician. The understanding of man as being at least partly an earthly organism goes a considerable way towards building compassion for that aspect in the here and now, rather than
seeing suffering only as a way of fitting the soul for heaven.

The second reading ends, and he obediently accompanies the other worshippers in the response: "This is the word of the Lord. All thanks be to God."

Although now living in the parish of the second St George in Holborn, he's still affiliated with the church where he was first taken to pray, and the great baroque arches are long familiar. As a respectable and moderately wealthy man, Oliver has an obligation to attend church to set a good example to the less fortunate than he, but the Sunday Evening Prayer enables him to visit his uncle's house to dine first and spend a little much-valued time together before journeying out as a family. As they sit straight-backed, side by side, he aches with the awareness of Edward Brownlow's pride in him, the pride of a father to a son. If anything were to make him feel ashamed, it would be this weight rather than that of the scriptures.

And yet - his uncle had moved swiftly to make amends and see true justice done when Oliver was wrongly accused. When the dishonesty of the Bumbles had been discovered, his anger, usually slow to rise, had been unleashed. And, most pertinently of all, he had loved, once, hard and faithful; the fiancee of his youth had died before their wedding could ever take place, and he had locked her away in his heart forever. Beneath the surface, he, too, is passionate. Perhaps the fire in one man might let him comprehend it in another, surfacing though it has done in different forms.

The recitation comes of the Nunc dimittis with following Gloria Patri. Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. Oliver had found the canticle pleasant and comforting as a child. Despite his loss of faith, he finds himself looking for comfort in it again this evening, asking himself for acceptance for whatever he may do; not, this time, in Richard Mann's house, but in Jack's room. Asking himself to accept his desire, and his emotion. And the response comes, swift and sure: if either were truly wrong, and an aberration against his intended nature, could they seem so good, and so right?

He doesn't feel wrong. He feels as though, at last, he's been granted the ability to see an unexpected gift for what it is.

All is bustling outside on Bloomsbury Way when they emerge back into the secular world, passing between the church's high colonnades and descending back down to the street, pausing to shake hands and exchange a few pleasantries with a fellow parishioner here and there. As they reach the foot of the steps, a working man, hovering beside the railings, breaks away from his post.

"Doctor -?"

Oliver stops. "I'm Doctor Brownlow. What can I do for you?"

"They said at your house you was gone to church, sir, so I waited outside -"

Edward Brownlow lifts a hand as the man looks from one of them to the other, as if unsure whether he should intrude. "It's quite all right. Doctor Brownlow and I are family. What brings you here?"

"My wife, sir - she had a baby come last night. Boy's fine; couldn't be better - but she's been having pains again since this morning. There's blood -"

Oliver glances to his uncle. "Uncle, I'm sorry. I have to go."

The older man touches Oliver's shoulder briefly. "Your duty is clear, Oliver. You have a calling, and you must obey it. Take my carriage, and I'll make my way on foot."
Practicing medicine, Oliver thinks, or embracing Jack: when the heart speaks, there's nothing that can be done but answer in kind. He's still turning it over in his mind while he attends to his patient with a strengthening tonic and a decoction of oak bark to stem the emissions, and when he climbs back into the landau, and asks his uncle's coachman to drive him home again.

The evening, however, it seems has not yet been put to rest.

A visitor awaits him in the spaces between the vista of the lamps, where the gaslight is lost in and swallowed up by the swirling, woolly darkness. He's sent the carriage on its way and is about to approach his door, when he suddenly becomes dimly aware of a figure perched opposite upon the edge of the little stone wall that runs beneath the iron railings of the square's garden. Another patient? Oliver supposes that he should take it as a distinct compliment to either his medical skills or his bedside manner that clients are prepared to loiter to see him rather than go in search of an alternative physician, but it's, nevertheless, almost ten o'clock. The selfish side of him would sooner have retreated inside and locked every door against the outside world in favour of a light tea and a long, dreamless sleep. Yet he feels it against his principles not to speak.

"Sir," he says, aloud, "you ought to have announced yourself with the door-knocker. My housekeeper would have attended to you and asked you to wait. Do you need a doctor?"

"Just one what I happen to know." The voice that floats across the street is immediately recognizable as belonging to Davy Gilpin. Hopping up from his seat, he trots over with his hands stuffed deeply into his pockets, the lamp changing him abruptly into a man rather than a silhouette. "You get about a bit for a Sunday, dontcher?" he says, shifting from one foot to another in the way that encourages the circulation. "I've been freezing my ballocks off waiting here."

"I do have obligations - social and professional." Oliver frowns a little, still surprised. "I also wasn't expecting either you or Jack. Is anything wrong?"

"No. The contrary, as it happens." Davy cocks his head to one side. "Have you got too many of them obligations late tomorrow afternoon?"

"I don't believe so. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Only that Jack's at something of a loose end, and he was thinking how he might pass the time with this one particular robbery what he's been considering."

Instantly, Oliver feels his heart start to beat a little faster. Something worms in the pit of his stomach, a strange mixture of nervousness and - yes - excitement. He glances about them, half-expecting to see his own conscience in the shape of a policeman loom out of the night to clap a hand on his shoulder. None appears, but he lowers his voice all the same. "Jack's ready to make his move?" he asks.

"Both of us are. That's if, you ain't changed your mind."

Rather than merely teasing him, Oliver realizes that Davy is in fact giving him a final chance to do exactly as he says: change his mind. He's being offered a get-out clause, and if he chooses to take it, there will be no hard feelings harboured; nothing to pay. If he chooses, he can bid Davy goodnight here and now, cross the street to where the welcoming yellow light streams determinedly through the arch of leaded glass above his door, and go back to his ambitious but ultimately very safe life. He can go back to being simply a gentleman physician. But that isn't him, and never has been. If it were, he would have peached Jack, a long time ago, and therein lies the rub.
He looks at his house once again. Then he turns away, and steps further into the shadows.

"If I'm not home by half-past ten," he says, "my housekeeper knows to lock up. And I mentioned to her earlier, as it happens, that there was a possibility that I might spend the night at my uncle's house. There won't be a surgery in the morning. Is there a place where we can talk?"

"Plenty of 'em," Davy answers. "Want to come and find Jack with me?"

"I have the distinct feeling," Oliver says, "that he may be as likely to find us."

They trudge east into the City. Near the top of Shoe Lane, they ease their way down a narrow unpaved passage and through the door of a drinking den therein with a low ceiling, hardly higher above street level than a wine cellar. This is an altogether rowdier place than the Lamb and Lark, and while it had surprised Oliver to find Jack's residence of choice a criminal abode, this surprises him not at all. While Tom King might excel at putting up a reputable front, the proprietor of these premises makes no such effort. He feels more than a few suspicious, or perhaps covetous eyes flicker over the tailoring of his clothing as he threads his way through the room at Davy's heel; a brief word here and there from his companion appears to communicate to them some degree of reassurance. His own public house is lively in the evenings, but the raucous banter from the assorted thieves, gamblers and Irish navvies in this room and shouts for another jug is jarring rather than welcoming; it feels a physical assault upon the senses. The tobacco-cloud is so thick and smarting to the eyes that it seems a mimicry of the smoke outside, as if the underbelly of London were reflected here on miniature scale. Gay women, undoubtedly finding it a more preferable haunt to the damp street, drape themselves about prospective clients' shoulders as their men sit deep in conversation. Oliver had also been less taken aback than he would have imagined by the young males loitering about the alley as he and Davy had passed, whose presentation of themselves and unsubtle glances had marked them as being in the same trade. Here, if he could ever have imagined it, is the opposite side of the coin to his own life.

His apprehension is clearly on display, as Davy touches his shoulder before drawing him to a table half-hidden under the stairs.

"Don't stare about, mind your own affairs, and you'll be all right," is his advice. "The fellers come here for business transactions. Some of 'em's ruffians, but if you're with someone what they know, you won't get no trouble off most of 'em. Don't try coming around on your own, that's all what I can say."

"And do they know you?"

"Everyone knows me," Davy says, easily.

Oliver cautiously takes his seat. "That was what I heard, before I came looking for you. That there wasn't a villain north of the river whose name you weren't familiar with."

"Familiar don't mean doing business. There's villains and there's villains. There's honest prigs what are just after making a few bob like me, and there's ones what I wouldn't touch if you was to give me twenty sovereigns for it."

"Jack neither?"

Through the smoke, Davy looks at him in a sympathetic way. "Jack neither."

Their place has been chosen well. It affords both of them a good view of the room without being overly conspicuous themselves, and Oliver, seated beneath the slope of the staircase, is the least
visible of all, something which he takes to be in no way accidental. In discreet voice, a few more of the *persona non gratae* present are pointed out to him. There's Bill Tucker, a pal of Jack's, who's done 'a couple of jobs in the West End' with him, beaming with his arm around Sally, his lady-bird. Near at hand is Boots Malloy, whose nickname is not difficult to fathom the origin of, given the quite enormous nailed boots he has propped upon a vacant chair. Ned Bowen, with his head of wild hair, has just been released from the gaol at Horsemonger Lane. Tom Dainty and Will Cat's-Meat can hardly show their faces after being almost caught during a robbery, hiding in desperation up the chimney, and exiting the property black from head to feet: "The kinchins still shout, 'Sweep!..' after 'em," Davy adds, in great amusement. And there Oliver sits, in the midst of these, watching them scheming and exchanging news and looking altogether like the choicest band of reprobates ever to crawl out of a gutter.

It never truly occurs to him to think on how the anonymous hand recorded in the newspaper as having slipped a wallet from a pocket, or turned a skeleton key in the lock of a jewellers’ door might belong to a person; a person called not only Jack, but Ned, or Will, and the notion makes him feel a little better, or, perhaps, a little worse. He's distracted, however, from either possibility when a body moves behind him and a voice says, "Oliver," into his ear in a confidential way that focuses his attention so instantly and acutely that it seems impossibly loud over the background of noise.

"Jack," he replies. This is becoming a game, of sorts.

"Did you run the gauntlet outside, then?" Davy says.

"Nice to look at. Shame a prick on fire for six weeks ain't so pretty." Jack pulls out a chair and slides into it. "Don't mind me, will you, Oliver?"

"Not at all. I could treat you with mercuric salts."

"Spoken like a man of his trade." Jack turns to Davy. "Given him the low-down yet?"

"I thought how I'd let you have the privilege," Davy says, amenably.

"Well, I do feel privileged tonight. A safeful of gold crying out to be loved like what it should be, and two quality mates next to me. Makes a feller all warm inside." Pressed in between the two of them, Jack shifts all the tighter against the one. "What about you?" he enquires.

Oliver feels the flex of the muscles in the other man's thigh. "Decidedly," he says. In from the cold as he is, Jack still feels hot next to him. His midnight ecstasy of a week ago had begun to seem distant and unreal, as if he must have become very briefly unhinged and then returned to sanity; as if, perhaps, the figure in his mind's eye had not really been Jack, but only some abstract image resembling the same. With the other man close once again, however, he immediately senses the connections in his brain beginning to spark; to reforge themselves. He becomes aware of his colour rising.

Davy grins. "Not too warm, if you ain't got any objections. Watching a couple of fellers bill and coo is interesting, but we got work to do. This is an opportunity you dropped in our laps, Oliver, and I ain't letting it get away."

"Man after my own heart." Squeaking his chair abruptly on the bare boards, Jack leans across the table, play temporarily ceased and all business. "Now, did you see how many servants was on the premises?"

Davy nods. "I had the chance to ask about a bit," he says, lifting his hand and commencing a swift reckon up on his fingers. "Two maids and a man chef in the kitchen and the scullery. A butler,
footman, two maids and a housekeeper above stairs. The butler's married, only he ain't told his master out of fear he'll lose his place. He creeps off to see the family on his half day, which just so happens to be a Monday."

"Also a coachman and groom," Oliver puts in, "and, I should expect, a boy about the hall or the stable. It might affect the direction you plan to enter from."

Jack makes little if any effort to hide a delighted look at Oliver's ready contribution. "Six down and four up."

"The housemaid acted pretty friendly," Davy says. "I reckon I could keep her occupied."

"What's she look like?"

"Big girl - bigger than me, anyhow. I hope anyone's got a cast iron bedstead what climbs on it with her."

"Oh, yes. Looked like she might be the friendly sort, from what I saw of her."

Oliver clears his throat, pertinently. "If I call on Manns unexpectedly an appropriate amount of time before dinner, then manners will force him to ask me to stay for the meal - much as he might resent it to the core. I've dined with him accompanying my uncle, and he doesn't serve past the fish, soup and joint. His parlour maid and footman will be kept busy waiting at table if he has a guest."

"So," Jack observes, "that only leaves our lady housekeeper."

"She'll oversee the dessert and confectionery. But I'm afraid that, other than that, you'll need to take your chances. I'm sorry."

Jack rubs his chin, thoughtfully. "I need everyone away from that bedroom for at least an hour and a half."

"Will it take you as long as that?" Oliver asks. He feels faintly uneasy.

"I'm cracking a safe, Oliver, not an egg."

"How many sliders has it got?" Davy asks.

"Six. I ain't had a go at more than that when people was still on the premises."

Oliver hesitates, then releases a breath. "I'll try, Jack," he says. "If I can find any way to prolong the dinner, I will. I can't promise anything, but I'll do whatever I can for you."

"You already did, twice over." Jack nudges him, then turns to nod at Davy across the table. "Warn me if she starts getting too close."

"Four tugs on the bell?" Davy suggests.

"Perfect, mate."

Davy fishes a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper from the depths of his coat. He lays the paper on the table between the three of them, and, flattening the creases from it with the palms of his hands, begins to sketch a crude map. His tongue protrudes from between his teeth a little as he composes a drawing of Manns's house and the surrounding area. "How are you going in?" he says to Jack.
Jack reaches forward to jab an angular finger at the pencilled outline of a building a little along the 
street. "This here's a vacant property. I watched it. If I get up the wall around the back there, I can 
go over the rooftops and straight in at the garret."

"You intend to walk on the roof?" Oliver says, with some degree of horror. He knows that Jack is 
one of the quickest and most agile people that he's ever met, but he doubts the sureness even of his 
feet at the sorts of heights that are being discussed. He tries to visualize the uppermost storeys of 
the building, and something like a shiver passes over him. It would be a long way down. Jack 
would certainly break limbs, if he were fortunate enough for it not to be his neck.

"Why not?"

"Because, as a doctor, my aim is to preserve life, and this becomes increasingly difficult after a 
fifty foot fall."

"Oliver, let me promise you, a monkey's got more chance of falling than what I have."

"I'm putting my trust in your confidence. For God's sake, don't let me down."

Davy is writing on his makeshift map. "What time does Manns sit to dine, Oliver?"

"Five o'clock, and I can make sure that I arrive at four. He'll hardly be able to turn me away."

"Very good! He'll have already found that his man's had reason to call for the bell-hanger again, 
not that the feller'll be there to agree with or deny it." Davy glances up, his eyes dancing. "If I didn't 
have another supplier to meet here soon, this is about the time what I'd say that we oughter drink to 
our future success."

Jack claps him on the back, without resentment. "We'll leave you to it," he says. "Fence needs 
peace and quiet to look over his goods. And it ain't stopping the two of us sharing a drink, if the 
good doctor here feels inclined to accompany me back to my abode for a few hours."

"Are you sure that there's nothing else to be discussed?" Oliver asks, not without a little surprise, 
but he knows Jack's answer before the other man speaks. Pushing back his chair to rise, he flashes 
Oliver a brief and brilliant grin.

"Oliver, when you got the right gang, sometimes it really is that easy."

For the first time, Oliver finds himself walking a little way in Jack's footsteps. Not for them are the 
busier thoroughfares of Skinner Street where it leads into Newgate Street; rather they traverse 
warrens and labyrinths of narrow alleys through which Jack rambles as one long familiar with each 
and every one. The dome of St Paul's against the skyline dominates to the south; the reek drifting 
on the air from the square at Smithfield to the north, as the morning will see the weekly fat cattle 
and sheep market. Some of the streets are only poorly paved and some not at all, more of a mire 
than an urban walkway in the damp spring weather, and Oliver's feet would have been almost from 
under him in several black spots had Jack not been as quick to steady him by the arm or shoulder as 
he is. But not even in the shabbiest court is there silence: rather gin-fuelled singing that breaks 
down here and there into the scuffle of a fight, the calls of the common prostitutes, and the laughter 
of those bent on bargaining for their favours. These are the parishes of St Sepulchre Newgate, 
Christ Church and St Anne and St Agnes.

One girl, leaning out of a poor tenement window, offers to take both of them for a shilling apiece, 
on account of their good looks and her liking to have a cock with dark hair about it straight after 
one with yellow for the novelty. Jack rebuffs her amiably, but the bawdy suggestion lingers,
conjuring up images at risk of taking their place in Oliver's solitary fancies. He feels as though he has seen Jack for the first time exactly as Jack's made it plain that he sees him; associated pleasure and the act of fucking directly with his friend, and now he cannot unsee it. Their previous flirtings and fondlings seem to pale against the bodily awareness of a man who carries an organ between his legs as eager as Oliver's own.

"Look like you know where you're going and what you're about," Jack instructs. There is no gas-lighting along these pavements, and in the glow of the oil lamps hung out on the fronts of buildings by residents who can do so, he looks eerily reddish. "And don't get distracted," he adds, pausing only briefly before finishing, "yet, anyhow."

He ushers Oliver ahead of him, always close enough at his rear to shove him onwards, and by and by, they emerge from the maw of a passage adjacent to the uneven flagstones of the Lamb and Lark. Heavy though the shadows under the arch leading to the inner yard are, it seems a gateway leading back to a world of some civility after the streets where danger and rude unbridled lusts walk hand in hand. Oliver breathes a little more easily as they stride beneath it. His muscles are aching a little with the tension that has been present until now, and he wills them to relax, looking forward to mounting the stairs to the comfortable, private place where he and Jack might exchange words over an ale and see the rest of the evening out in whatever fashion may come. Safe in the other man's wake, he does not immediately sense that they are not the only ones present until he sees Jack suddenly turning, suspicious and alert as a fox. Before he can react in kind, he feels the slam of a fist in his back, and is pushed so roughly forwards that he stumbles hard against the cold stones of the wall.
Mags Lewis is tall and lanky, with a misaligned nose that curves sharply to one side like the bend in a stream, light watery eyes and a head of reddish hair. Oliver knows that this is who he is due to the name that Jack speaks as he picks himself up from the floor and dusts down his coat, before spitting casually but pointedly on the ground in front of their assailant. His companion, the man who put his hands on Oliver, is a broader fellow with a soft, undefined face. Both of them are positively twitching, poised for any hint of retaliation from Jack or himself that will give them the excuse to mount their next, more serious assault.

"Now, Mags," Jack says, very, very slowly, "I know you ain't the sharpest cove out there. You proved it often enough. But trying it on outside my own door's got to be the daftest move what you ever made. You want another round, let me have a place and a time, and I'll let you have some more of what I was so generous with when we last met."

"This is the place, Jack," Lewis says, "you can be sure of it." His speech has a pitched, sing-song quality to it that no doubt has him convinced that he sounds very clever indeed. "And there ain't no better time what I can come up with than when your fancy man's there to see it happen."

Jack takes a step forward, and, reflexively, Oliver grasps his shoulder. "Jack. Walk away. It isn't worth it."

"No," Jack answers, "he ain't. But it'd make me feel a bloody sight better."

Lewis jerks his head towards Oliver. "He's got the idea. Knows I don't take a thrashing without paying it back double. P'rhaps when you're in no state to protect him any more, we'll give him a taste as well."

"I don't need protecting, Lewis," Oliver replies, steadily. Theoretically, the two ruffians before him could as easily be armed with knives or bludgeons as with their fists alone, but he doubts that this is the case, for various reasons. The first is that, had either he or Jack been the target of an attempted killing, it would have been foolish not to take the chance to strike the blow from behind when it was available. Even if they were to survive, their assailants would be a mystery to them. The fact that Lewis and his cohort have such a strong desire for Jack to see their faces seems to indicate that their fate is intended to be a beating, not murder. Oliver hasn't had cause to use his fists for many years, his maturity having been focused on healing rather than hurting, but he feels a strange lack of objection to the idea of participating again.

"He thinks you do," the round-faced man pipes up to Oliver's left. "You oughter be paying him as your body-guard. You're a miser as well as rich."

"Whatever Jack's felt that he wanted to do for me has been as a friend."

Lewis emits a laugh, one akin to a gobbling turkey. His Adam's apple bobs in a manner that serves only to increase the resemblance to the barnyard fowl, and would have been comical in other circumstances. "You're green, ain't you? Might only be friendship to you. It ain't to him."

"Does the shit that comes out of your mouth ever leave your arse jealous, Mags?" Jack enquires.

"I think that I can safely say that I understand Jack's intentions," Oliver says. "I'm a very old acquaintance of his, you see. I trust him a great deal."

"Now, ain't that nice? Shame that, for all that time that's passed, you don't know him all that well."
"There ain't nothing what he don't know about me what matters," Jack says. He starts forward again, just a slow, casual swing of his foot that draws no undue attention. "Course, there's still a lot what he's got to learn about you. Like how your own tastes in company make a wicker privy seat look clean."

Lewis's pale eyes protrude, his features creasing into something far uglier and more revealing of the nature beneath. "Then he'll know how you're a whore, won't he? A bloody Mary-Ann what takes it up the arse -"

What the rest of his accusations were to be remains unknown, as his words choke off when Jack's knee finds a home in his groin, to be followed a second later by his fist smashing into his face. His companion makes a grab for Oliver's arm, but Oliver feels only the start of the pull, the attempt to twist it behind his back, before he reacts instinctively. With all the strength that he has in him, he drives his elbow back into the man's ribs, and the instant that he feels the grip release, turns on his heel and sends his fist in the same direction.

Lewis's accomplice gasps and stumbles backwards, winded. Sucking air into his own lungs, his heart thumping with both shock and a glorious anger, Oliver waits, watching him, assessing him. When the other man lunges with a powerful but clumsy punch, he takes it in his midriff, but not with the strength intended. He feels the spot bloom with hot pain, and nausea rushes momentarily up in response, but his movement backwards is enough to not only deflect the force somewhat, but throw his opponent off balance. As he wavers a little, Oliver lashes out with another blow that, by skill or fortunate accident, lands square on the man's jaw. The ruffian sways for only a moment or two before sinking to his knees, like one of the bellowing cattle hocked at Smithfield.

Out of the corner of his eye during all of this, Oliver has been able to see Jack laying into Mags Lewis with great enthusiasm. His shorter stature is an advantage to him rather than a handicap as he uses it to deliver a number of vicious and joyful body punches, and as the jerking momentum brings Lewis's head lower, Oliver hears the dull sound of Jack making contact with both of his cheeks in turn. Lewis spits back at him, a diffused, angry spray. "Sod," he says, heavily, before driving his bunched fist straight into Jack's face. The two of them go down in a tangle of limbs. With a glance that satisfies him that his own adversary has no present urge to continue matters and his chest heaving with both exertion and a fierce excitement, Oliver is searching for a window in which to drag Lewis off and deliver another punch himself, when the two wrestling men fetch up heavily against the wall of the arch. Lewis takes the worst of the collision. Swift and slippery as an eel and none the less so for his beatings, Jack rolls over to straddle Lewis, a knee planted on either side of his chest. Gasping a little, he grabs a handful of his hair and yanks his head up so sharply that the stunned Lewis croaks in both surprise and pain.

"Mags," he says, thickly, "you know what your bloody trouble is? Your trouble's that you don't know when you're out of your class." And he releases his hair and shoves him backwards to let him crack the back of his skull audibly against the slimy flagging.

There are comings and goings about the yard now, and the sounds of loud and interested conversation, and, after a short time, a shape looms up out of the dark close to them, revealing itself as it does so to be the sturdy form of Tom King. Grasping the shoulder of Jack's coat, he hauls him up with a grunt, a little roughly, but without anger. He peers down at Lewis, who is attempting to struggle to his hands and knees, then turns and disappears around the wall for a moment, before returning with a pail of water. With calm unhesitation, he throws the entire contents over the unlucky felon, who rises up coughing and swearing, his orange hair flattened like a wet cat's.

"Bugger off out of here, Lewis," he says, shortly, "and take your pal with you." He jerks his thumb towards Oliver's adversary, who is still half-sitting, half-sprawling in the spot where he fell. "One
of my potboys saw this business start up, and I ain't having any thumping of the regulars."

Lewis crawls to his feet, and, still cursing beneath his breath, begins to edge back out towards the street, cuffing loosely at the head of his companion as he goes in what passes for an order to follow. Tom King stands with folded arms, watching, until they withdraw from sight. Then he shakes his head a little, and turns back to Jack and Oliver.

"The lad saw who started it," he says, "but you two fellers decided to do a fine job of finishing it between you. Less of the fisticuffs, eh? You'll have the bobbies down on me for an unruly house, and it'll be the worse for all of us."

Oliver inhales, filling his lungs, which have been starting to ache a little from breathing so shallowly. A twinge grips his abdominal muscles where the punch from Lewis's friend had landed, but he feels that, as a boy fighter now long out of practice, he might have come off considerably worse than he has. *I didn't go down*, he thinks, with a modest rush of pride. His trousers and coat are largely unmarked. Jack, by contrast, is quite stained and smeared on both cloth and face from his roll on the muddy floor, but he appears to think it worth it.

"Our apologies, Mr King. I'd never seen the man before, myself, but he was certainly waiting for Jack somewhere hereabouts. It was no coincidence."

A man could be forgiven for imagining that Tom King is doing his utmost to hide a grin of his own. "You don't throw half bad punches for a gent, Mr Brownlow," he says. "Just try and keep 'em off the premises in the future."

"I'd be glad to, sir," Oliver replies.

Tom shakes his head once again, and gives Jack a good-natured push. "Go on. Clear off upstairs while I finish closing, and I'll send Kate up in a bit with hot water. And see that she comes straight down again, mind."

"Tom, me and Oliver'll be licking our wounds, and as much company to each other as we can handle."

Jack's words echo in Oliver's head as they climb the stairs to the gallery floor where the rooms lie. Both of them are breathing hard with the crude rush of excitement, their blood still up. The buxom Kate brings a large pitcher of steaming water, and leaves them with a good fire catching in the hearth. Jack locks them in as before: then to keep safe his takings, now to do the same for their privacy. Stripped bare to the waist, with clothes from coats to undershirts slung over chairs, braces hanging unfastened, they keep themselves warm before it as they press hot cloths to where bruises will later come. Despite Jack's scorn of thugs and of violence, he's never looked so alive, as if this is all manna to him. The memory of the peculiar, disconcerting moment when Oliver had seen him slam Mags Lewis against the wall, straddling the man and gasping, now brings home to him the realization of how slim it is possible for the divide to be between a throb of pain and one of pleasure. Jack's eyes glow with intrigue and heat. "Oliver," he says, a tiny reflected flame dancing within each pupil, "I have to say that so far tonight, you're doing quite well. I might even call you 'magnificent'."

Oliver's smile won't seem to leave him. "I managed to land two lucky blows, that's all."

"Lucky for you - wasn't so lucky for him. Stand up." When Oliver obeys, Jack prods about his lumbar regions, producing a slight grunt when he hits the tender place. "Hurts, does it?"

"Somewhat, but my diagnosis is that I'll live."
"Mine's that you're a better pugilist than what you credit yourself with." Jack glances at him curiously, his fingers tapping an idle tattoo on the taut skin beneath. "I thought you'd shout for help when I walloped him. Like the law-abiding gent what you of course are."

Oliver lets this last irony pass without comment. "Actually, I think that if you hadn't swung first, I might have."

"'Cause of that shove what you got?"

"No. Because of what he said to you. I didn't like it."

The fingers stop moving, but rest where they are. "Oh. The Mary-Ann bit, or the arse bit?"

"No, the whore part. It struck a personal chord in me. I've always found love offered for money rather than passion distasteful. As strange as some men might think me for it."

"It's the way the world is for some, but if you're strange, it ain't in such a bad way. And I can't say I've disagreed with you." Jack looks down to the floor, then back up again. "Can I take it that if passion's in play, there ain't much what you find distasteful?"

Each time that Oliver breathes, Jack's fingertips make tiny brushes of his skin that draw his entire attention. "No," he says, after a moment, "not distasteful. Or not as much as strange... in the case of what Lewis saw fit to mention. I'm not sure what would make a man want to receive it. To be sodomized."

"Did you ever ask one of your girls why she wanted your prick? Why she wanted it in her cunt, before you ever got it in?"

"Indirectly," Oliver says. Before his knowledge of intercourse had extended beyond bawdy stories, he had been greatly concerned with those that declared that women bled and cried when they were fucked, and had sought to confirm later in his youth that he was causing pleasure, and not pain. It had been of supreme importance to him, and his anatomical curiosities had also played not an insignificant part in his pursuit of information.

"And what did she tell you?"

"That when she were roused, she felt as though she were empty, and missing and wanting for something, and when my cock was inside, she felt full again. And that sometimes she liked to think about how I had a certain power and could do all that I wanted."

"Ain't it ever occurred to you that it could be the same way for a feller at times?"

"But for a woman, it's -" Oliver says, and then stops. A word hovers on the tip of his tongue.

"Natural?" Jack suggests.

"Yes," Oliver admits.

"Oliver, let me tell you, it feels very natural to me as well."

The heat from the fire that divides him in half, burning one side while the room chills the other, coupled with the loose talk, is beginning to focus the blood rushing in Oliver's veins into something specific and deeply intimate that builds between his legs. Like the ticking of a clock-hand, every beat of his pulse sends another throb of warmth into his cock and fills it a little more. It seems impossible to keep his eyes away from Jack, half-naked, with his square shoulders and taut
stomach and small, rosy nipples; not to be aware of his own similarly bare skin. Oliver feels almost lightheaded. For all his soft mouth and soft eyes with dark locks of hair straggling over, Jack's body looks as hard as nails, as hard as it had felt when he had pushed it against Oliver's own.

"Course," Jack adds, "there's some other things what make it enjoyable too."

Time seems contracted, as if it were only a few minutes since they had been together like this, in the same room, and Jack's mouth had been so compelling against Oliver's. There's a feeling of continuity, as if none of the events in between have ever happened and they are simply now resuming where they had left off. When Jack moves in to kiss him, he responds, as he had before, slowly at first, their lips meeting almost delicately.

The second time, it's with a swifter, stronger hunger that the pleasure that he had felt upon their last encounter seems to pale beside. They have fought side by side tonight, and now both of them desire spoils. Jack steps forward into the kiss, and his pelvis bumps and rubs against Oliver's. There's a high chance that it's deliberate and a somewhat lower one that it's accidental, but the result is the same: the press of a thick, fabric-contained lump of cock against Oliver's own that makes him suddenly self-consciousness. Had his female friends, feeling such a demanding thing, ever been afraid, or had their longing to be filled by him at the moment of consummation equalled his to perform the action? Nature would dictate that men and women be thrilled by their counterpart, but for a man's arousal to burn still higher at the feel of another's is something beyond nature alone.

Jack has evidently felt his momentary stillness, because he briefly stops, to ask, "All right?" When Oliver nods, faintly, Jack's hand leaves his stomach and runs up his back, beneath his shoulder blades, gripping him closer and tighter. Oliver cups and holds his jaw as they meet again to keep him there, his heart pounding as though it might burst through his ribs, feeling the shock of bare skin against bare skin. He's not gentle, not at all, but Jack only seems to delight in it, mashing his lips onto Oliver's, working his mouth, and sliding his tongue about his own. Oliver has neither kissed nor been kissed like this before; with an intensity that borders on violence, yet is anything but. Rather there is to it a rude and brazen sensuality.

"Don't you say 'no' tonight, Oliver. Don't you bloody say 'no'!"

"I won't," Oliver answers, hoarsely. No longer is he even able to. Each time that Jack's chest presses and rubs against his, new waves of warm, voluptuous want break over him that rush to culminate in his rapidly engorging cock. Jack emits something akin to a low, thankful groan, and begins to pull one-handedly at the fastenings of his own trousers, then with those of his linens beneath. Oliver watches with breathless anticipation as the cock beneath the flap is released and stands freely, the head protruding from beneath its fleshy hood like a plum.

"Feel my prick," Jack says, "frig me." It sounds closer to an order than a request, but Oliver finds himself stumbling to comply. He reaches down, and wraps Jack in a shaking hand, feeling his intimate heat; works long and slow up and down his length, alternately hiding and baring him, attempting to adjust his grip as he goes to accommodate the unfamiliar angle and fascinated by how another man is the same as him and much the same size, yet different. He's no stranger to genitalia in the examining room, but how much more apparent the subtleties are, when a cock is rigid. Jack's glans flares a little less from the shaft than his own, the knot of the frenulum is more widely spread, and, beneath, the sack of his balls hangs a little more loosely. His strokes grow steadier as Jack, by way of soft grunts and sounds of encouragement, lets him know the speed and pressure that he likes. He favours Oliver with a few more kisses before relinquishing his hold on his bicep and turning his attention to the remainder of his clothes, ever a treasure seeker, hungry for what lies within.
The second button of Oliver's drawers is barely open before he's bouncing stiffly out, bumping up against Jack's hand as if his cock has been waiting like a faithful dog to meet it. A confusing blend of pride and shame brings heat welling up and slows his own hand, but Jack seems to find his discovery ample compensation. His tongue flicks visibly over his lips before they spread into part of a dirty expression that makes every muscle in Oliver's pelvis tighten.

"Now, you see, Oliver? I was right all along."

"About what?" Oliver manages.

"You are magnificent." Jack reaches out a hand again, running a finger so lightly and swiftly up the seam of his cock that a spasm rocks him and makes it jerk in mid-air. "You're begging," Jack says, roughly, rubbing the underside before closing his fingers around him and treating him to a twisting rhythm that makes certain to cross the crown at the end of every upstroke.

Unlike Oliver's, his angle is perfect, born of practice; the ability to lace another's boots. The increasingly slick, viscous sounds move beyond lewd and enter the realm of indecency. Jack is mad and he is madder, and part of him is still afraid, but the same part is being swiftly overridden by that which only wishes to do it, and soon, and all else be damned. He clutches Jack's shoulders as his cock pulses with a particularly powerful surge of pleasure, and something like panic takes him as he feels his balls tighten.

"Jack -" he says, shakily, "Jack - I'm going to -"

He would have shouted out if Jack had not, as always, moved more quickly. With admirable reflexes, he grips the head of Oliver's cock, his fingers just short of the glans, and squeezes, unsympathetically hard.

"No you ain't, Oliver! Not until I want you!"

Oliver gasps, and he feels his hips thrust uselessly, but his climax does not come. Jack holds him for another few seconds, until he's satisfied himself that the inevitable has been staved off, and then he releases him entirely, turning instead to stripping himself bare and running his eyes over Oliver when he's tardy in commencing the same. Jack's boots and stockings are lost, his trousers dropped. Oliver mirrors him, the ties of his drawers defying his clumsy fingers. Jack moves behind him, unlaceing him deftly and then pushing his hands inside the linens to slide them down over Oliver's buttocks.

The bed-sheet feels chill against the skin of Oliver's back, and he shivers, but it's not in displeasure. Jack moves over him, his shadow looming eerie and giantlike across the ceiling, handling him, not allowing his erection to wane. Oliver feels as though he must be in a dream; it seems dreamlike, that he should be naked, and that an equally naked Jack should be clambering atop him. When Jack slips a hand down between his legs, Oliver catches his breath, reaching out to stay it, suddenly uncertain of what is expected of him next in these sorts of encounters. Jack's eyes meet his.

"Oliver," he says. "It's Dodger. It's me. Trust me, will you?"

"It's myself that I don't trust. Not to lose control with you."

"If you ain't losing control, I ain't doing my job." Jack ducks his head and mouths a nipple, sliding the flat of his tongue over it and using the tip to tease it into tumescence. Sensations dart through Oliver, different to and subtler than the pleasure in his cock.

"I don't know what job you have in mind."
"Loving you," Jack says, matter-of-factly. The two of them grip one another in their different ways bruisingly tightly; he Jack's wrists, and Jack at the same time his thighs, but his friend's eyes are still sharp, watchful; reassessing the situation each moment, deciding whether or not to change his plans. He bends again with wiry ease, and draws Oliver's other nipple briefly into his mouth before releasing it with a wet sound. "How'd you like to go about that?"

Oliver has never derived much feeling from this part of his body before, much less pleasure, but he hasn't been caressed before in the same way. There seems to be a nervous connection to his cock that only makes it grow larger. He could never have imagined himself to feel so lusty with a man rather than a woman, and nor could he ever have imagined a man to have such lust provoked by him. Jack is placing the choice in his hands, certain that whatever Oliver might want can be nothing else but what he does also. What is it that he wants? To touch Jack. To take him in his arms; feel his warmth, his weight, his bare skin. He takes a breath. "Just come close," he says.

"My prick against yours?"

"Is it done that way?"

"Oh, it's definitely done. Actually, it's done quite a bit."

Slowly, Oliver loosens his hold, feeling Jack follow suit. He allows Jack to settle between his legs. Almost instantly, he gasps as their cocks brush; the first delicious moment when sensitive tissue meets. "You got a prick," Jack says, a hairsbreadth away from his lips, giving him a squeeze to drive his point home, "and I got a prick," taking Oliver's hand and moving his fingers up and down his own length, "and two pricks soon work out what to do if you bring 'em together." He lowers onto Oliver, aligning them perfectly, and makes a steady, sensuous grind.

Jack is right. As the cock above him slides over his, Oliver simply cannot respond to it in any other way than by rocking his hips. It should be awkward; like poles should repel, but, instead, their bodies seem to know and seek out what is good for the other. Jack leans forward, rubbing, taking him in another hard kiss, gliding his velvety glans back and forth over Oliver's, teasing and coaxing. As they both grow slippery, the stimulation intensifies, until every stroke unleashes tiny bolts of lightning. Through them all, Oliver is aware of the undulating rhythm of Jack's body, and he moves in counterpoint, lifting into it, pushing when he pushes. He runs his hands over the small of the other man's back and down his legs, wanting to know all of him; instinctively grips his buttocks and feels their alternating clench and relax. Jack's skin is hot beneath his palms, so hot, rougher and muskier than a woman's, damp with sweat. Between their thighs, their balls roll heavily together. "Jack -" Oliver says, "oh, damn, damn!" and burrows his face into the hollow of his friend's shoulder to inhale the smell of him.

All he feels: hot, stiff, slick, need.

"You're bloody wonderful," Jack says. He's panting hard. "If you don't want my spunk on you, you ain't got much time left."

"But I do," Oliver says, breathlessly. The words shock him coming from his own mouth, yet he's unable to remember having craved anything as he does this. All his life, he's known nothing but the repetition that to engage in unnatural acts is to un-man oneself, yet he's never felt as utterly masculine as he does at this moment; never felt such a freedom or burning desire to share with a lover all that they are. He feels Jack shudder as his breath whispers over his skin. His own climax rushes dangerously close.

"Oliver, shove me off! We'll frig each other!"
For answer, Oliver ruts up against him hard, giving himself over to the marvellous moments when the body knows nothing but fucking, and wants nothing but to spend. "You asked for it," he hears Jack say, "you asked for it," and then he thrusts and jerks, and Oliver's stomach and chest are coated by long, obscene splatters. Pleasure curls for one more brief and beautiful moment before he feels it start to come. His cock throbs and pumps, and throbs and pumps again, out of his control; everything out of his control. He feels Jack's mouth upon his throat in what might be a kiss and might be a bite. He cares little which. He never wants it to end.

Inevitably, it does.

Shudders periodically rack both of them as they lie on the sheets, warm and weak. Jack is a dead weight upon Oliver's chest, but the pressure is pleasurable in itself, a satisfaction unlike anything that he's ever experienced. He feels as though a dam has broken and emptied him of something that he's been holding back for years, leaving his mind perfectly still, conscious of nothing save naked skin, the minute flexes of Jack's hips as he rides the aftershocks, and the breath that rushes into their lungs and out again.
Chapter 11

Oliver is unsure exactly how long it is that they sleep for, but he guesses it to be an hour; perhaps two. Stirring, he's aware that the iron rumble of carriage wheels over the stones outside has finally faded, not to grow in volume once again until dawn, yet he doesn't feel as though he has slept a full night away. Two o'clock? He's just begun to listen, out of habit, for the vibrating strike of the clock in his hall to answer his question, so that he can drift off once more, when the sudden recollection of where he is banishes the notion entirely and replaces it with a flame as hot as the fireplace.

He realizes what it is that's awoken him when he feels a wet kiss at the nape of his neck. He's lying on his side, with Jack close behind him, his arm draped loosely over his hip, the hollows and angles of their bodies tessellating them together rather than clashing. Still stunned by the earlier turn of events, the surge of desire that had driven him half out of his mind and the strength of his coming, he nevertheless cannot fight down the pleasure that stirs.

"Jack," he says. He feels uncertain of whether he actually speaks, or whether he simply shapes the word.

"Wotcher," Jack says, his lips brushing Oliver's skin and producing a gentle shiver. He shifts nearer, stroking the warm hair between Oliver's legs, and Oliver feels a stiff length press against his buttocks and move back and forth a time or two. Touch in such an area is vaguely unnerving, but, ever a slave to the sexual search for novelty where the strange is erotic as a result of its strangeness, his own groin betrays him with a first distinct twitch. "Felt that," Jack comments, against his ear.

"I'm not surprised," Oliver answers. He's audible this time.

"You was quite lusty this evening." Jack's fingers curl around Oliver's length and begin to move, wickedly slowly, using his touch as he does his words. "In fact, I reckon I could see another cock-stand on you in a couple of minutes. What do you think?"

"I don't think that I'll need very much encouragement." It's both arousing and peculiarly easy to talk like this, merely listening to Jack's voice and feeling the movements of his hands. The fire alternately rises and dances. Oliver fancies that he grows in accordance, the flame in his blood rising as that of the wood does. The light of day will turn him back into a coward, and, knowing it, he stubbornly allows himself to relish this a little longer. The feeling of his cock engorging in Jack's hand is indescribable.

"You have the finest prick," Jack says. He thrusts shallowly, penetrating the crook of Oliver's thighs at the end of each stroke.

"Thank you."

"And I ain't got any objections to your arse, either."

"So I can guess," Oliver says, softly. He feels the other man pause, and adds, "I wasn't asking you to stop, Jack."

"No, but you was wondering where we was going to end up tonight."

"Yes," Oliver admits.

Jack rests his chin upon his shoulder, stroking him in a rhythm that's enough to keep him stiff and
give pleasure, but not enough to set him on the journey towards the edge. "I ain't going to say I wouldn't like to. I also ain't about to fuck any arse what ain't begging to be fucked. I know when a feller's interested and ready for it, and I know when he wants to run a mile."

"Not quite that far."

"Well, the other side of the bed, then."

He's never laughed during sexual congress before, Oliver thinks, with amazement; not in the same way. He could never have imagined being stripped and practically rutting with Jack, and still being teased by him as he might seated like gentlemen at his table, or during a fleeting encounter on the street. It seems nothing short of miraculous, that this can happen, and that it still does nothing to diminish either his erection, or the fierce longing that he feels inside. He lays his hand over Jack's, feeling the motions on his cock from the other side, sharing it.

"The last time we laid in the same bed," he says, "Fagin told you to look after me."

Jack nips lightly at his skin. "Going to look after you tonight, and all."

"I'm confident of that," Oliver answers softly. Then, after a brief hesitation, "But I'm still curious."

"Killed a tomcat was what curiosity did - as the Irish'd say it."

"I've still a few more lives left to use up than you have," Oliver says. Suddenly restless, he shifts, pushing his rigid cock, which is beginning to ask for more, a little more strongly into the hand caressing it. To his disappointment, it gives him only a squeeze before withdrawing completely. The bed frame creaks a little, and he feels the give of the mattress behind him. Half on his back, he watches the other man cross the room to a cupboard from which he retrieves a bottle of lamp oil. As he walks back to the bed, Oliver's eye is drawn almost involuntarily to the bob of his cock before him; the tremble of his balls. Only when in the role of an observer, he realizes, is one reminded of the boldness and impudence of an erect penis. To not look is simply impossible, and the desire that it gives him to touch his own equally impossible to resist. Jack swats his hand away as he clammers back on beside him.

"You gave up all rights to that prick when you got on my bed. It ain't spunking tonight without my being involved."

"Too much longer, and it's going to be taking matters into its own hands, let alone mine."

"You need to learn some patience. Like I've bloody had to. But I ain't an unreasonable man."

Gripping him once more, he begins to slide slowly up and down. "That good?"

Oliver allows a sigh of relief to escape. "Very," he says. Jack's hands fit him beautifully, he thinks. The heightened stimulation of a touch not his own, combined with the owner's knowing of exactly what will be good to Oliver, simply because it's good to him, is the most intense and remarkable thing that he's ever experienced. He feels the rhythm break as Jack reaches to uncork the bottle, the distinctive smell immediately noticeable, but not intolerable.

"Well, this'll be better," he says, exposing Oliver's glans. He lets greasy fluid drip over the flushed skin before taking hold of him again, and no more than half a dozen strokes pass before Oliver is shuddering from head to toe.

His own natural secretions already have him slick, but the addition of the thick, glutinous oil increases the sensations tenfold. His abdomen clenches; his thighs shake. "Oh, God," he says, "oh, God, yes!" He reaches back, grasping at Jack's hip, trying to anchor himself. The pleasure is so
intense that it trembles on the border between pleasure and an agony that is almost sweet in itself.

Jack dribbles more oil over his fingers, and sets the bottle aside before slipping them into Oliver's cleft. He strokes up and down, each stroke ending in an exquisite pressure behind his balls. At length, the movements seem to grow more deliberate, and a fingertip drags slowly over his anus before returning to and circling it. Oliver waits to see what will come about, and Jack pushes with the pad of his finger, suggesting. Oliver quivers. The suspense of it is powerful beyond belief; the anticipation. Jack nudges him with his hips, hand caught between them.

"Well?"

"All right," Oliver hears himself saying. He feels dazed, wondering what he can be about, yet a part of him wants to experience this, just to go some little way towards understanding the corresponding part of Jack. The need to do what he must to be close to him tonight is strong.

"In the arsehole?" Jack says, coarsely. Not for a moment does he intend to allow Oliver to pretend that he's doing anything other than what he is. "You want me to put my fingers in your arse? You certain of that, Oliver?"

Another press of Oliver's perineum, one that sends deep tingles through him. "Yes," he says. "Do it. I want it."

"No, you don't." Jack leans over Oliver's shoulder to brush his jaw with a swift kiss. "But it's going to be as good for you as I can make it, mate."

It seems unbelievable that what is to happen will indeed happen. In direct violation of his anatomical knowledge, Oliver's brain seems to insist that the action will not work; that it's simply impossible. Jack's little circles begin to combine with pressure, making a gentle but insistent demand for him to yield. The oil on his skin makes it too simple, and a fingertip makes a sudden slippery advance, wrenching a gasp from him. There's no pain, but panic wells up instead as he battles not to reject something that seems wholly foreign, as if it simply ought not to be there.

"Easy," Jack says, "settle down. Let it in," and a moment later, his whole finger slides the rest of the way and rests quietly within.

It's difficult to speak, and beyond consideration to move. Oliver finds that he can only lie very still indeed, his heart thumping madly. He tries to make himself relax around it, but however he wills it, he can't seem to make his body obey. Jack fondles his cock with his free hand, but although Oliver is still aware of pleasure, he can't lose himself in it; whenever he tries, he only homes in on that tiny pressure within him once again. His mind is fighting against it a good deal more vehemently than his body is; he recognizes that. He has to try to see it in a different light.

No woman would do such a thing to him or with him, he thinks. This is a secret that he will share with Jack alone. Something sinful. Something private. Something intensely intimate.

Little by little, agonizingly slowly, he feels his muscles begin to loosen.

"Good," Jack says. His voice has dropped an octave. "You let me explore a bit." Smoothly, he slides his finger in and out, accustoming Oliver to the movement. After perhaps half a dozen times, it progresses into a circular motion that presses inquiringly against the walls of his rectum. "Two, now," Jack warns, and Oliver feels nerve endings burn and spark as the finger draws out and then slides back again in the company of a second, stretching him. Jack takes his hand and brings it to his cock.

"You look after your prick," he says, "while I look after this lovely arse, and we'll get to something
Oliver can imagine what it is that Jack intends: that penile stimulation while simultaneously being penetrated will help to forge the connections in his mind between the latter action and pleasure. He listens to the heavy sound of Jack's breathing and tries to concentrate on touching himself. Jack's fingers probe softly in him, seeking, until they skim what he immediately guesses by the sudden intense, almost urinary urge to be his prostate. His cock twitches, and Jack bites at his ear.

"There you are," he says, rather huskily. "That's nice, ain't it? Some more?"

Oliver feels himself torn into two pieces. One is the familiar excitement as his trembling hand strokes his cock up and down; the other, the sharp almost-hurt that flickers through him whenever Jack finds that small, swollen bump. It's as though he's unsure which to concentrate on and can't accommodate both. "Yes," he says, hesitatingly, "a little more."

The twin pleasures are excruciating, but something around the outskirts of his thoughts interferes with them whenever they come. Being stretched as he is is uncomfortable, rather than the closeness that he had hoped for; distracting.

*I can't spend like this.* The thought alone begins to blunt the edge of his arousal.

Jack's fingers draw half out of him and then return even slipperier, simply gliding within this time, stroking and working him with a new depth of purpose. Rough kisses scatter over his shoulder and are pressed to his neck. "Oliver," he hears Jack saying, "Oliver," as if his name alone is glorious, and then the other man moves and his fingers are all but gone, only spreading Oliver's buttocks and holding them apart for his warm, firm cock to nestle in between. The tip finds his anus and rubs against it for a few seconds, then positions itself, and he recognizes, as a man, what is to come: the push forward; the demand for entry. And, one final time, he balks. Once again, he is a coward.

"No," he says, "no. I can't. I'm sorry," and pulls away, out of the warm curve of Jack's arm and away from his seeking thrust. Hurriedly, he lifts himself into a sitting position, as if that's the way to ensure safety. His heart is pounding with something other than excitement. 'I'm sorry, Jack," he says again, and shuts his eyes for a moment, despising himself for the sense of relief that he feels. "I wanted to try. Truly, I did. But -"

"I was right and you was wrong?"

Oliver lifts his head, forcing himself to meet Jack's gaze again. The other man has turned onto his back and is propping himself up partway with his elbows, his cock stiff upon his abdomen. He's breathing hard from his thwarted activity, and, yet, about his mouth plays what could be the start of a grin. "I said you wasn't ready for it," he adds, for explanation.

"But I wanted to be," Oliver says, unsteadily but forcefully. "I wanted -" He breaks off, searching fruitlessly for the words with which to express himself. "I wanted to try to understand you," he finishes, at last. "At least a little."

Jack looks at him so intently, and for such a time, that Oliver begins to fancy himself a specimen under the microscope. He could not be more carefully observed if he were. He comes to the sudden realization that it's very seldom that anyone can be entirely certain of what is going on behind Jack's eyes. And then this hint of trickster nature is forgotten, and Jack is leaning back on the fat feather pillow behind him, making himself comfortable. He holds out a hand.

"Come on," he says, "come here." When Oliver reaches for him in turn and allows himself to be drawn down, Jack takes him in his arms. He kisses his mouth, his face, and his throat. "We
understand each other pretty well already, my old covey," he says, "and if we can't sort out a problem between us, something ain't right."

"What would be your suggestion?" Oliver says. He concentrates upon Jack pushing his fingers through his hair.

"Well, Oliver, you mightn't be ready for me, but I'm more than ready for you."

Oliver feels something akin to being punched again, in the sense of all of the breath being knocked out of him, but what clenches his stomach is not hurt, but rather a wave of hot, dark pleasure. That Jack is blatantly asking to be buggered is staggering, and more so is the knowledge that he wants it; that he has asked for it before.

"We can stop if you don't like it," Jack says. "I reckon you will."

"I should take you?" Oliver finds the voice to ask.

"What about it? I have to say, since you showed me this nice fat prick, I ain't been able to stop thinking about how it'd feel -"

"My God!" Oliver says, heatedly. His cock, far from being repulsed by all of this, is becoming so stiff again that it seems to twitch in its tautness with a life of its own. Jack reaches down and fondles it, rolling his skin back, tugging and teasing.

"Well, this is interested, if you ain't. Want to spunk in my arse, Oliver, while I do it on your chest again? Or in your hand. I ain't got any preferences."

"I don't know that I'll last that long."

"We ain't got no time to waste then, have we?" Jack takes up the bottle again and, grasping Oliver's hand with his other, douses his fingers thoroughly with the dark goldenish grease. Then he opens his thighs and thrusts it between them, guiding it swiftly to the creases of his anus.

From somewhere outside himself, Oliver has cause to marvel once again at how soft is the skin here. Professional and personal affairs alike have familiarized him with every inch of the human body, and this is among the most tender places. Perhaps it's his profession also that enables him to move carefully and unflinchingly about it as he imagines that many men who have loved women and cunts alone would struggle to. He can certainly understand the necessity here in the oil, and the memory of the heightened sense of touch and intense pleasure when Jack had used it on his cock makes him wonder whether, if the smell were more amenable, women might also enjoy such a thing, needed or not. With fingers trembling from his own arousal, he tries to work the substance smoothly around the private opening, daring to press in a little as the slow rotating squirm of Jack's hips confirm that how he is going about matters is very right indeed. His balls roll across Oliver's hand.

"You got a lovely touch," Jack tells him, in a low voice, "Wish I'd fucked a doctor sooner. Give me a couple, now," he adds, and, his chest tight, Oliver makes himself slip his fingers through the close-gripped ring of muscle to where it's warm and smooth.

Jack's pleased response gives him the confidence to enter further, seeking the little gland. The other man spreads his legs wider to admit Oliver between them, and Oliver sinks against him, using Jack's inner thigh to push at, his fingers buried in Jack's body, Jack with his own cock in hand, thrusting and rubbing and stroking in pleasure. For any man to be permitted to feel this way must be the greatest sin of all. Part of a woman is forever hidden from him behind a veil: as deeply
as he might penetrate her body, he will never truly understand it. There is no veil tonight. Jack and
he move together, bring their mouths together; perfect synchronicity, each meeting the other's
desire almost before it can be expressed. This is what it is, Oliver thinks, to make love with another
man.

His cock aches and throbs where it brushes Jack's skin, demanding fulfilment. He is reaching the
level of consciousness where a new purpose of being comes upon him: to pleasure it, and nothing
else. Rubbing is no longer enough; he wants to be engulfed. "I want to be inside, Jack," he says,
brokenly. "God help me. God help me."

"About time, too," he hears Jack's breathless voice say. He moves beneath Oliver, bringing them
into position, hooking his knees up and locking his ankles loosely at the small of his back. His hips
wriggle judiciously as the crown of Oliver's cock taps against his skin. His head swimming, Oliver
uses a hand to guide himself into place. He presses, feeling the slight resistance and afraid to hurt.

"Oliver, your arse might be virgin, but mine ain't! Just bloody push!"

Oliver inches forth, expecting the gentle slide, a gradual opening of the channel to admit him, but
upon the slippery pop of the crown through the tight entrance, the rest of his cock is simply drawn
in the rest of the way without opposition. Almost instantly, he sheaths himself in Jack's body,
able to prevent the escape of a moan. Jack wraps his arms about his back, pulling him close with
soft words, obscene words. Oliver thrusts slowly into warm muscles that clench and squeeze about
his cock as though fucking him in return, trying to coax his spend from him. Jack guides him
through it, the new angles and the right rhythm, telling him all the while what he wants from him.
Faster. Deeper. "You're a nice fucker," he says, panting his pleasure over Oliver's skin, and, after a
time, "Turn me over!"

"Onto your stomach?" Oliver can't bear this; no-one could. He feels mad with it.

"Like this." Jack heaves upwards, and then Oliver is abruptly out of him and he's climbing to his
hands and knees and presenting himself. His thighs are trembling. Oliver has been the one to make
him this way. "Good and hard. That'll do it for the both of us."

Positioning himself behind Jack, Oliver clutches briefly for anchor on his hips before sliding in to
the hilt. It seems to be even easier this time, as though they were formed to do this, to fit together.
As he moves again, the tingling tension that is born on the underside of his glans and runs the
entire length of his shaft returns. The dirtiness and unnaturalness of the act that he's committing
fades to nothing. He wants to thrust forever, to send the tight wave of pleasure higher and higher.
Jack sways beneath his hands, and Oliver is dimly aware that his friend is taking hold of his own
cock and using their momentum to fuck it into his hand. He feels that he could die. Jack's tight,
silky muscles, his wicked mouth and his even more devious mind, have been put into the world to
be both Oliver's bane and his joy.

He loves it. Loves him.

"Jack -" he says, "Jack - I can't hold on! I have to!"

"I ain't going to break," he hears Jack answer.

"Tell me if I hurt!" Oliver's voice sounds harsh and desperate in his own ears.

"Oliver!"

For the first time in his life, Oliver lets himself loose. He slams into Jack so hard that the other man
almost lurches off balance, plunging himself into the core of him. In and out, over and over again, he rejoins their bodies with a slap of skin against skin, each repetition of the act seeming to succeed the last in heat and ecstasy. He can see Jack frigging himself furiously, his full, swollen cock drooling through his fingers, little droplets of it thrown off onto the sheet. Oliver's hair rasps against the other man's buttocks as he drives deeper, and the sound that Jack makes in response is almost a snarl.

"Go on, Oliver! Go on, go on!"

Never has Oliver felt this wanted and this welcomed. Jack's hips swivel back and forth to meet every thrust, fucking with him rather than submitting to his actions, accepting everything Oliver has and then demanding more. He gives and he takes, and Jack does the same. There are no more subtleties or complexities. He only wants to fuck. He begins to shudder, the unmistakable sensations arising around his anus and his balls.

"I'm coming!" he says, raggedly, and almost instantly feels Jack spasm and the bone-deep groan that vibrates through him as he spends; sends thick ribbons of sperm over his fist and the sheets. Even as Oliver watches, slack-jawed and dizzy with lust, his hips moving with their own volition, he starts to erupt; from the pit of his stomach, from the base of his spine, from the depths of his balls. He feels himself spurt inside Jack, filling him, shock blending with the sweetest, strongest pleasure that he could ever conceive of. His sweaty hips adhere themselves to Jack's buttocks as his cock pulsates and pumps deep within. Even after the last drop has been milked from it, it continues to pulse, as if attempting to catch its breath.

He never wants to leave, but, eventually, his cock grows too soft, and he can't help but slip out.

Jack comes to lie on top of him again, something he seems to take great delight in doing. Oliver's wet groin cradles his as their hands slide slowly over one another's skin. The ripe smell of fucking is heavy in the air.

"You going to stay a bit longer?" Jack asks.

"I could," Oliver says.

Opposite the bed, the fire pops and crackles, smoking a little as the logs shift and the flame licks at damp moss.
Chapter 12

Oliver is alone when he wakes again, the bell of the Saints Anne and Agnes this time the loudest one to mark the hour of seven. He rattles carefully into the chamber pot, then washes and dries himself at the bowl the best that he can to remove the sticky traces of oil, and would have been cautious and made use of some cologne, but there is none to be found. When he dresses, he finds that Jack has left a note in his coat pocket, and one that brings such heat to his face that he wonders if it might not be best to tear it to shreds or burn it before any other eyes are cast over the lines. *I will of course see you later,* Jack closes. Self-conscious at leaving the room in which it would be clear to anyone who had seen him arrive that he had spent the night, Oliver is not a little relieved to find the comings and goings up and down the stairs already so regular, and the bar room so busy with beer and breakfast, that he can hardly move, let alone see a familiar face for the customers.

The astonishing night, faded so recently, has raised a maelstrom in him that sends his thoughts tumbling. The shocking intimacy of their naked bodies and then the way that each had seemed to melt into the other; Jack's fierce want for all that he has to give; the mind-numbing pleasure with its uncontrollable climaxes; the certainty that, having known Jack as a lover, he will never again be satisfied with anything less - not a wink; nor an ironic tip of the other man's hat; nor a casual exchange of words as Oliver passes him, loitering innocuously on some street. He has watched Jack grow through these fleeting encounters; tiny moments captured like the carved portraits of a cameo. And just as closely has Jack, it would seem, been watching him. Oliver feels the first stirrings of new arousal now to imagine the heat that has been slowly building behind that curious, impudent gaze. Simply knowing that Jack desires him with the strength that he does had rendered him powerless to do anything but respond; to willingly commit with him that which the law deems the grossest of unnatural offences. He has never experienced this depth of feeling with a woman; never experienced it with anyone. Always having believed himself perceptive, Oliver is almost aghast now. How could he have been so wilfully blind for such a time as to have not understood what the exact nature of the emotions and urges were that drew him to Jack?

The morning fog feels extraordinarily fitting, cloaking men on the street as it does in mystery and turning them merely into passing ships. All manner of secrets might be hidden in a fog, from the smugglers that bring their boats up every branch of the confused river, to the respectable gentleman who steps up to speak to women on the street whom he would not dare acknowledge in brighter light, but Oliver imagines, perhaps self-centredly, that few are as powerful or as private as his own.

Holborn is already pressed: long lines of clerks directing their steps towards Chancery Lane and the Inns of Court in one direction, and to Threadneedle Street and the City in the other; the coffee-stall keepers carrying their cans of coffee from yokes; carts laden with goods - a fishmonger's light chaise, a brewer's dray, the fruit and vegetable barrows of the costermongers. Pitches successfully claimed with a few flying fists, the newsboys cry shrilly.

*Paper, paper, to-day's paper! Daily News, Morning Post, Times! Lord Stratford landed in Constanple - all the news, news, news!*

Oliver might readily have stopped amongst the working men at a stall, but a change of clothing is as necessary as a meal is becoming, prosaic as both seem after his voyage of discovery. Forever practical by nature, he continues across the steep plunges of Holborn Hill through the Fleet Valley, where extra horses are stabled to help drag the omnibuses up the inclines and men posted to dash into the road to skid the wheels for the descent, quickening his pace as he nears home. Thick and clinging one moment, wispy and near transparent the next, the fog hangs about him as he walks.
Jack had once told him that the pickings were good in a fog.

Behind his own door, he asks Sarah and Hester to fill a bath for him before he eats, explaining that he had quit his uncle at dawn for a patient and not wished to inconvenience his household at that early hour. As steaming jugs travel from the copper to his dressing room and back again, Oliver lays out fresh clothes and linens for himself. He had seen no need when engaging his staff to take on a manservant for such tasks at which he considers himself more than able to manage. Alone at last, he undresses and immerses himself in the water. The healthy action of the pores is stimulated by warmth, and he recommends an immediate hot bath as the first course of action to patients who fear having been exposed to a contagious malady to urge it to make its way out of them by the same route, but the sensuality of it cannot be ignored. The slight roughness of the sponge as he moves it in steady circles is exciting to his skin, bringing his nipples to tight stiffness as he slowly retraces the paths of Jack's fingers and tongue. His own body seems new again, as it had after his very first completion of the sexual act; as though it doesn't entirely belong to him. The complicated human skin needs to be kept free and open, so that the body may free itself through it of internal impurities, but if that which is moving within Oliver is impure, it's also too much a part of him to ever be purged.

He fucked a man the night before. In a few short hours' time, he intends to act as an accomplice for the same man while he steals.

Not since he was a parish boy has the blood ever thrummed so hard in his veins, nor has he felt so terrifyingly alive.

He makes his appointed calls that afternoon, none too far from his own parish, and, therefore by default, from his quarry's. Several times he whistles for a hansom, but wherever possible, he dismounts and takes the journey on foot, testing his fortune, hoping that Jack might suddenly appear, elf-like, to fall into step with him earlier than planned. Whatever the skill is of being able to consistently find Oliver among two million souls, whether it's simply the enjoyment of a network of pals and informers, or some kind of sixth sense where he is concerned, Jack has it in spades. But today Oliver, Jack, or both are out of luck. Pickpockets, dragsmen and dandies there are aplenty, but not a one with a rakish twist to his mouth and soft hazel eyes.

From Grays Inn Road, Oliver makes his way to the house opposite a little park planted with ash and London planes. A quiet, old-fashioned place, it's inclined to make Oliver feel as though he assaults it with his masculine presence, so like a cote of cooing birds are his lady client, Emma Jerningham, and her plump housekeeper and clutch of maidservants. Miss Jerningham - she has never married - is as gentle as her home, and sufficiently favoured by inheritance to have spent her entire sixty years being protected and cossetted first by parents and then a string of staff who plainly adore her. Much given to lack of appetite and an exhaustion that Oliver is certain is merely nervous but too kind to openly declare so, she often takes to her bedchamber for long periods at a time. The room to which the lady's maid escorts him resembles with its fringed draperies and bed-hangings and fancy covers nothing so much as an infant's cradle; a nest within which the occupant is shielded from the worries of life.

Her chest has been troubling her: "It flutters so," she says, in concern. Oliver listens, with the maid as a chaperone in the corner, and takes a pulse, and finds it to all appearances strong. He ponders the dilemma, unwilling to simply make an exit on the heels of the phrase there is nothing wrong with you when the patient is of a delicate emotional nature. As a student, he was taught that a great deal of practicing medicine is comforting and relaxing the patient whilst nature takes its course, and he still feels there to be a certain amount of truth in the declaration. At length, he writes a prescription for laudanum, a few drops only to be taken in hot tea late in the evening to promote a quiet night, and takes a small pill box from his own bag.
"One to be taken three times daily," he says, holding it between finger and thumb, "or when you notice symptoms - whichever's the most frequent."

She begins to reach for it, then falters. "Is it... a medicine for the heart?"

"Ma'am," Oliver replies, very firmly, "with plenty of rest, and some light reading to occupy the mind, you ought to be feeling a good deal better within a few days. I make you a promise, as your physician." Placing the little box in her hand, he carefully and pointedly closes her fingers over it.

They are bread pills.

Miss Jerningham looks down at the box, turning it over and about. For the first time since his arrival, the shadow of a smile crosses her face. "Do you read yourself, Doctor Brownlow?" she asks, after a few moments.

"Little other than medical texts, I'm afraid. I find my work rewarding, but some would say that it makes me rather staid."

"Staidness is not such a character flaw. I think that I should be more content in the end with a staid husband than an exciting one."

Oliver shakes his head. "I am unmarried, Miss Jerningham."

"You are still a young man. You have years ahead of you. Not forever, though - as I once thought."

"Once?"

"There was a man who adored me. He would have wed me in a moment, but my family were proud, and I was a timid girl who obeyed my parents. They thought that I should refuse him, as I might do better." Miss Jerningham's hand tightens almost imperceptibly on the pill box. "I never did."

"Sometimes the plans that life has set out for us are not what we expected them to be," Oliver says, softly, "but, in the end, we still choose what to make of them."

"Doctor Brownlow, if you should find yourself with a choice to make -"

"Yes, ma'am?"

Miss Jerningham lifts her shoulders a little and lets them drop. Her smile changes, growing wistful. "Please do choose happiness."

She seldom feels strong enough for callers. Oliver sits with her for a while longer, and, for once, she is the one who spends the quieter afternoon and the one less consumed by thoughts.

-oOo-

On the corner of a street very near Russell Square, Oliver stops to draw his watch from his pocket. His timing is crucial. He means to negate the discourtesy of calling with no appointment with the professional concern of a physician: passing, he had wished to check the progress of his patient. His hope is that not even Manns can - openly, at least - condemn the intentions behind it, however inappropriate his calling without invitation nor appointment. He opens the watch and glances at the dial. Is it late enough? Slowly but steadily, Oliver begins to walk again, homing in on his quarry. It will take him a few minutes to reach the house and make his arrival known. That should give his chief accomplice time to move into position.
Little over an hour later, he is seated opposite his patient in the dining room with its arabesque paper and Turkey carpet, and Manns has the fish knife and fork in hand and is lifting filets from the bone of a fine trout, his mouth pursed, his eyebrows slightly lifted.

"It appears as if your theory may have held water, Doctor Brownlow. It has been a full month since I was last forced to suffer with my affliction. I should have expected to be weathering the symptoms of a relapse by now. To my surprise, this has not occurred."

"I'm very pleased to hear it, sir."

"And, no doubt, gratified. I hope that I have at least proven an interesting experiment for you."

"Despite my belief in scientific exploration, Mr Manns," Oliver replies, "the health of my patients is of the most interest to me." It will be of benefit to all of them for him to continue with a masquerade of civility. He has no desire to be asked to leave the house sooner than is absolutely necessary, as long as his presence provides some degree of distraction from what's happening elsewhere. If he's intending to stay long, he can do without inviting more open animosity from Manns than he already has. With the new knowledge that he now possesses, keeping both his tone and his expression calm borders on a physical effort.

As the footman moves between them with a silver sauce-boat, Oliver finds himself observing his host, with not only care but fascination. So accustomed is he to gritting his teeth and deferring politely to Manns as one gentleman to another, that the notion that the other man is no gentleman at all is something that his mind hardly dares to accept. For the first time beneath this roof, Oliver feels as though he wields power, and in other circumstances, he would have been ashamed at how he relishes it. He feels certain that he could have seen Manns arrested by now had he alerted the authorities. It would have been Jack's revenge upon him.

Lust for revenge Oliver might have satisfied, but not his own lust for excitement.

"And do you see medicine as a science, or as an art?" Manns is saying.

"As both. As an art which is based upon applied science."

"The art of being a physician. Would you agree that an art consists of a skill acquired by experience?"

"Yes, and that applied science is the application of basic scientific truths to a problem. But truth is short-lived in science, and what we learn to be true today may have been proven wrong by tomorrow."

"'Always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.' First Timothy, chapter three, verse seven. And what would be your solution, Doctor?"

"That we never cease to learn, Mr Manns. That man never ceases to be inquisitive."

From another room comes the tinny noise of a bell. Oliver lets his gaze drift idly to his plate, but not a hair of him is anything less than alert and watchful.

"The bell-hanger, once again," Manns says, as though answering Oliver's unspoken question. He looks irritated by the slight interruption. "I have already advised him to remain well clear of me today. I found his manner peculiarly insolent during his last visit here, and it has not improved to any discernable degree."

"I find that men respond for the most part in the way that they are treated," Oliver says, blandly.
Manns has little interest in Oliver's opinion. The footman is now taking up the clean plates from the sideboard, and the maid removing the potatoes and brussels sprouts on the table from warming, releasing a gentle puff of steam from the dishes of water beneath. The ham that accompanies them would admittedly, at any other time, have been delicious, but Oliver barely tastes what he eats. He can fancy his ears pricking, like those of a horse, acutely aware of all that goes on around him, and of nothing so much as what must by now be going on little more than a staircase away. The not knowing is what's hardest to tolerate; the uncertainty. Having been the one to first suggest this to Jack - although Jack would doubtlessly have come around to the notion very quickly of his own accord - he now feels responsible for him: a fierce protectiveness. He had expected to be incredibly unsettled by this point in time, but he's astonished at how focused he is, almost coldly so. Should a man planning to commit a crime feel this way?

Jack asked for a minimum of an hour and a half to work. Oliver will give him every minute that he can.

He takes a sip from his wine glass. "What are your politics, Mr Manns?" he asks.

Manns lifts an eyebrow. "My politics, Doctor?"

"With regards to the Eastern Question. If the Sultan should accept the Russian treaty -"

"Then Russia would undoubtedly use its guardianship over Ottoman Christendom as a means for expansion, therefore posing a challenge in the Mediterranean."

"But if he were to choose Napoleon," Oliver says, "Nicholas would hardly be likely to stand idly by. We may be destined for war regardless."

"If Britain wishes to preserve her interests."

"They say that all wars are ultimately fought for money, sir. And that there are always those who profit from them."

Manns shrugs, lightly. "Perhaps so. It is the way of things. God awards the spoils to the righteous; those that he deems worthy of them."

"And men die because both of their commanders thought themselves righteous."

"You speak out of concern for your fellow man, Doctor Brownlow - as I might expect from your profession. But to achieve a goal, one is often forced to make a sacrifice."

Oliver forces himself to harden his heart. He has too much to think about at this point in time, and there is too much at stake. Every footfall draws his attention, every sound becoming, to his ear, a creak on the stair. Inwardly, he reprimands himself. He's in severe danger of letting his imagination run away with him. But no picture is more pervasive in his mind than that of Jack, squatting before the steel hulk of the safe, working magic with his tools and fingers, eyes sparkling like those of the covetous bird that he shares a name with; stealing - as Mr Gay has Matt of the Mint tell it - what he was never made to enjoy.

"My uncle thinks that Mr Gladstone would offset the costs of a war by raising taxes," he says.

"No war can be waged without cost, Doctor. And, as always, those deemed wealthy will bear the cost for the idle masses."

Salad and cheese are carried around at the appropriate moment, and for sweet, candied fruit and peel, and the little round French pastries, *macaroons*. They seem a peculiarly airy and insubstantial
thing, ill-suited to Oliver's thoughts. In the dining room of the same house that Jack is robbing, he
sits munching upon confectionery. It cannot be for very long that he continues to eat; perhaps
fifteen minutes. And then comes a hullabaloo like nothing that he's ever heard.

The first sound is that of the servants' bell being rung again, this time closer by. Four times it
jangles, long and loud, as if someone were swinging from the pull. Instantly, Oliver's veins flood
with ice, the nauseating chill of panic. His muscles flex, his entire body urging to move, but he
might have been tied to his chair for all that he's able to. All he can do is sit, helplessly. He flicks
his eyes to Manns, who is frowning, lowering his knife and fork.

"What is that now -" his host begins, but a high scream suddenly slices a rude interruption through
his demand. More noise follows: running footsteps, a thud upon the stairs, a sharp whistle. And
then, soaring above it, a woman's cry of, "Thieves! Police! Thieves!"

As though they had been runners under starter's orders, everyone begins to move at the same time:
Manns first, throwing down his napkin and leaping from his chair to stride forth, Oliver at his
heels, the slower servants following. Manns has barely flung open the door and taken more than a
few paces outside it when he's knocked squarely back again by Jack as he vaults over the banister
and cannons into him. Halfway up the stairs, the screeching shape of the stout woman who is the
housekeeper pants in his wake, clutching her heavy bosom as she continues to make her
observations about thieves and murder. The footman runs forward, attempting to throw himself
bodily in the intruder's way, but too late; Jack has righted himself with great sprightliness, and if he
had not needed to turn to pick up the carpet bag dropped heavily down to the hall ahead of him, he
might even now have sprinted for the back stairs, from there to the kitchens, and been clean away.
It costs him only a moment, but that moment is enough for Manns, cursing the footman, to push the
man far enough aside to allow him to deliver a heavy boot to Jack's seat that sends him sprawling.
Jack's sideways roll is fast, sufficient to take him out of range of a second and similar kick.
Manns's hand grasps for his coat. Then he himself is suddenly and unexpectedly restrained by a
grip upon his shoulder like iron.

"I don't think that that's a good idea, Mr Manns," Oliver says.

"Let me assure you, Doctor, I am capable of taking care of this, with or without the intervention of
the police! And I shall be neither as soft nor as lenient as they!"

"No, sir. You grossly misunderstand me."

"Then you will put it into words that I do understand, if you'd be so kind!"

Oliver has the sensation of standing on the edge of a precipice, to which there will be no climbing
back up when he leaps. "Take your hands off him, Mr Manns," he says. "Leave him alone."

He observes the effect of his words on his host. As though they were both actors, going through
their paces upon a stage, Manns turns to look at Jack once more, then at the carpet bag at his side,
and then, once again, across his shoulder at Oliver behind him. For a moment, he seems incapable
of speech. But then he recovers himself, and, in a voice that drips with ice, says only, "You."

Oliver has never known anything happen so quickly. In a flash, Manns's hand is at his own collar.
"Police," his host says to the footman, through gritted teeth, "this minute. Shout, damn you," but
the stunned servant, his back to Jack, has failed to notice the latter rising to his feet, sliding his
hand into a pocket as he moves. The soft snick of the knife is audible as it unfolds, but the
footman's reflexes are not fast enough. Jack has it pressed between Manns's shoulders, digging into
the cloth of his coat.
"I wouldn't think about it, mate," Jack says. "Be a shame if it was your man there what made me have to spoil them nice togs of yours. Lovely bit of material, but it'll slice as easy as what you will. Touch him again, and I'll gut you like that fish what I can smell."

The servants stand posed in a tableau, the footman and the maid frozen, the housekeeper grasping the banister. For a few moments, no-one speaks. Then, very, very slowly, Mann's hand unclenches, but he remains staring into Oliver's face, his nostrils quivering slightly in the impotence of his anger. "This is an outrage," he says, in a barely controlled voice. "You are a madman. You will not take thirty paces along the street before the hand of the law is upon you. 'He who is a partner with a thief hates his own life; He hears the oath but tells nothing.' Proverbs, chapter twenty-nine, verse twenty-four."

"Better than the Bishop of London, ain't he?" Jack suggests.

Manns grits his teeth against the subtle but unrelenting poke of the knife. "You have betrayed your profession and your name, sir," he says to Oliver. "You may be of your uncle's blood, but poison had entered it before he ever took you under his roof and into his affections. You may treat cancers, but you have not treated the one grown daily larger inside yourself. The bastard of a whorish female and the scum of society you were born, and the same is what you will always be. I know, Doctor Brownlow, precisely what you are."

There had been a day, many years ago, when Oliver had knocked down Noah Claypole at Mr Sowerberry's undertaker's shop, for speaking very similar words. It had boiled over in him, spilling out with flying feet and fists that had sent the charity boy to the floor. Now his voice is colder and calmer than he can ever recall hearing it. "Yes, Mr Manns," he replies, "you know what I am. And because I know what you are, I should like to be quite sure that I address you by the correct name from this day on. May I use it?"

"What in damnation are you saying to me now! What name?"

"Why, Mr James, of course."

Every ounce of colour drains from Mann's face. For a moment, Oliver thinks that he might drop where he stands. Then he says, "I'm quite certain that I have not the slightest idea what it is that you mean."

"It would be no trouble at all to provide clarification. And I should be quite happy to do so in front of your household. It may be of great interest to your servants. I've always known the working people to be extremely astute."

"You are a liar, sir! How dare you stand in my home and make insinuations about my character!"

"I dare, sir, because if I am a liar, we appear to be two of a kind."

Manns hesitates, as though deliberating whether or not to call Oliver's bluff. Finally, he wrenches his eye from him and lets it fall upon the footman. "Get out," he says, and then, louder and more vehemently, looking wildly about him, "All of you! Get out! Leave this room, and close the doors! Any of you that I find eavesdropping, I shall thrash, God help you!"

Confused and uneasy, the servants withdraw. Manns watches them go, waiting until the last has disappeared before turning once again to Oliver. His voice trembles just barely discernibly as he says, "You will explain yourself to me, Doctor, before I take it upon myself to call for the police."

"I think," Oliver answers, "that the police would be very appropriate visitors. You see, Mr Manns,
"Your thief happens also to be my friend, whom I was not about to see walk to his hanging. Therefore I set out to warn him, and to offer him my help. You may imagine my surprise when, during the course of gathering information, I discovered that my friend was the innocent party in comparison to his victim."

"I am waiting to hear what draws you to this defamatory conclusion."

"I believe you to be living under a false name, Mr Manns. I believe you to be Thomas James, an East India Company soldier who deserted his post more than twenty-five years ago during the second siege of the Raja's fortress at Bhurtpore in India. That is where you first caught the malarial fever that stayed with you until I purged it with the right medicine. You were responsible for the death of your commanding officer. You are a wanted man, sir, and your fortune was begun with stolen money."

"You are a madman, and the voice of a madman makes very little sound. The shouting of lunatics, Doctor, is lunatics' shouting."

Oliver holds his gaze. "I need only one more thing to prove my claim, sir. At least to a sufficient degree for the police and the India House to show an interest."

Manns gives a short imitation of a laugh, without opening his mouth; a laugh that comes from his nose, and that in no way alters his expression. "Then name it, do!"

Over his shoulder, Jack's eyes meet Oliver's, and understanding sparks in them. Slowly, his mouth pulls into something near to a smirk. "Tell me where, Oliver," he says.

"Left arm," Oliver answers. Instantly, Manns is shoved forward by Jack to fetch up against the wall, his coat wrenched from his shoulder, and Oliver has hard hands on his back to hold him there and cow his struggles. Manns is heavier set, but Oliver is younger, and has not only youth on his side, but a strength borne of both hatred for one man and love for another. Jack takes the shirt in his fist, punching and twisting the knife into its material to start a tear. He hooks his fingers into the hole and pulls; holds the knife between his teeth and gives both hands over to it, and the cloth bursts open. Beneath it, he tears another zig-zag into the undershirt, jerking and tugging. Seams rip, leaving the sleeves of the garments hanging. Oliver could have gasped as he catches the first glimpse of the mark; the blackened capital 'D', inscribed on the skin that he's never been permitted to view.

He was right. If there could ever be such a thing as a crime with something good and right about it, this must be the nearest thing to one.

"See," Jack says, behind Manns's ear, a lot less tenderly than he had spoken into Oliver's the night before, "you ain't hanged for housebreaking any more. The magistrates is too busy these days with all them coves what needs hanging for murder. Shocking, the amount of 'em running around, it is. If my good friend Doctor Brownlow and me was to get hauled off by the peelers for the sakes of a few coins of the realm, we might just recommend they extend the invitation to you, and all. And I'd like to make a wager that you'd come out of this sorry business a lot worse than what we would."

Oliver clears his throat, pointedly. "Do you think of yourself as a lucky man, sir?" he says.

Manns's struggles cease, and he becomes briefly very still. Then he seems to sag a little beneath his own weight, all the fight going out of him, as though it's finally become clear just how very much is stacked against him and how poor are his odds. "What I was driven to -" he says, faltering. "I was left with no choice." His voice grows louder, more ragged. "Do you hear me? I was left with no choice!"
"But, Mr Manns," Oliver replies, "there is always a choice."

From the corner of his eye, he grows aware that Davy has some moments ago slid around the drawing room door to join them, and has been watching silently. Now the pawnbroker ambles across the hall and hoists aloft the carpet bag. He taps Jack on the shoulder. "'Scuse me," he says, with a glint in his eye, when the other man glances down. "Believe this might belong to you."

The knife still in one hand, Jack releases his hold on Manns's clothing to free the other. He begins to reach out, but abruptly stops halfway, his grasping fingers closing upon thin air before retracting. Turning towards Oliver, he looks him over, carefully and thoughtfully. "I reckon," he says, "it belongs to him."

Davy obediently proffers the loot again, accompanied by a little mock-polite touch of his cap. "Oliver," he says, boldly enough that matters would have been clear to even a blind man. The look of astonishment on Manns's face is one of the most satisfying things that Oliver recalls ever having seen. He could almost have laughed, as cruelly and foolishly as a boy. Instead, he clears his throat and accepts the bag.

"Thank you," he says, and then, on a sudden impulse, places it on the floor and kneels beside to open it.

Despite familial wealth, Oliver realizes that he has never actually looked upon an amount like this in coins before. It stuns him, mesmerizes him. Slowly, he scoops up some of the gold and lets it trickle through his fingers, watching it wink and gleam beneath the gaslight as it sings its siren song of alluring dreams. He finds himself wondering whether Jack is purely a mercenary, or a romantic. Does he only see the monetary value in his booty, or does he perhaps like to hold his pilferings in his hands as well, if only for a short while?

"I've been forced to raise my professional fees recently, Mr Manns," he says. "For a complete cure in a case such as this, I estimate that my bill will come to between five hundred and one thousand pounds. I would recommend that you seek medical advice further afield in the future. Perhaps far away from London. If I were to be compelled to spend time in your company, the cost of engaging me might ultimately prove to be too high for you."

Jack gives the other man a prod. "Putting it simply, mate, you're in the market for a new doctor."

Manns's jaw is tight. "You will not get away with this. You will never - you would not dare -"

Oliver closes the carpet bag with a snap. "But I would dare. And I believe that I have got away with it. Just as you did. Of the two of us, I'm certain that I'll be the one to sleep far more easily at night. You see, sir, I've never stolen before, because I'd never steal from a man who hadn't earned it. And my two friends here would hesitate to steal from one who would miss it. They see the world a little differently than I, but leaving a man to die is very far from being a habit of theirs."

"You have no idea what happened," Manns says. His voice shakes. "No idea at all."

"Then perhaps you would like to tell your story to the magistrate, sir."

When Oliver lifts his head, he half-expects to see flags and victory banners being hoisted aloft. This past month has been his war; his deeply personal war with his own nature, and now he has the conviction that he has in some strange way won, or at least arrived for now at a temporary cease-fire. He looks to Jack, and then to Davy. Both of them have amused, satisfied looks on their faces that seem to be directed more at him than at Richard Manns.
"Shall we leave, gentlemen?" he asks.

The lamplighter is making his way along the street outside, setting his ladder beside each in turn and climbing it to turn the cock. The fog-smoke makes yellowish coronas around the light, the shape of the man appearing within them as he holds his own lamp to the mantle, then withdrawing again as he returns to street level. They descend the steps into it, and it swallows them up like a vast ocean, the house fading rapidly behind them as they put as much distance as possible between it and themselves until it seems no more than a mere phantom in the growing dusk.

"Well," Davy observes, "you did it."

Oliver blinks. "Shouldn't you be saying that we did it, if anything?"

"He had it right the first time," Jack says. "This was your idea, you know. Beginning to end. What do you suppose he'll say to them servants of his about what just happened?"

"I'm sure that he's quite capable of coming up with a plausible tale for them. He's had a great deal of practice. And for my uncle, about why I was disengaged as his physician."

"You sorry about it?"

Oliver considers it for a moment. "No," he answers, at length, "not at all." He isn't sorry for anything, he thinks; not for helping Jack to thieve, nor for all that he and Jack did together on the bed. He feels vindicated, liberated.

Jack eyes him, keenly. "Oliver," he says, with a surprising depth of conviction, "you're a better man than what you take yourself for." Then the play about his mouth stretches into a smile that seems to fit him better, and he places a hand upon Oliver's shoulder. "And one who I'm guessing could use a drink round about now, that right?"

"How about we drink the night away," Davy says, "once you've got the money safe. You got something to celebrate, ain't you?"

Oliver looks at Jack, still smiling at him, with that hot, private glimmer in his eyes that speaks to Oliver alone. He feels grateful for the air that cools his face a little. "Yes," he says, and nods. "Something to celebrate."
It isn't until Oliver walks with Jack in the City some evenings later that they have the chance to speak of personal matters.

"You never told me," Jack says, "what you was intending to do with your share of the money. 'Cause a third of it is yours. Two hundred and fifty pounds. If you still want it, that is."

"I thought that I might divide it between worthy charities. Perhaps the Bloomsbury Dispensary for the poor. Or a military benevolent fund. The latter would be very apt."

"I despair of you," Jack says, with a shake of his head. He's got up stylishly in a well-cut frock coat with peaked lapels and a large pair of gold buttons to the back, and a flash-looking silk waistcoat with a lot of bird and foliage designs. His cravat is more pretentious than ever. The clothes having been bought with the ill-gotten gains, or Jack having the mettle to stroll about wearing that which he's stolen, are both equally likely and possible. Even after all that's occurred, a part of Oliver can still hardly believe his audacity. But Jack is entirely untroubled about such things; rather, he looks supremely contented. If he seems to walk a little closer to Oliver than would be proper and usual for what should be two gentleman friends taking the air together, it might be Oliver's imagination and might not. Either way, he has no objections; quite the opposite, in fact.

"You always did," he replies.

"Not always." Jack gives him a sidelong look from beneath his dark lashes, and for all the rough quirkiness of him, Oliver is struck by how, in odd moments, he can be so very lovely. He only realizes now what makes it so. There's an undeniable sensuality about him. "In fact, there's skills of yours what have left me distinctly impressed."

"I hope that you're not disappointed when I say that I won't be trying my hand at picking pockets again. That isn't a deviance that I intend to make a habit of."

"Not as much as I might be." Carefully, this next, out here in the open air, although there are no obvious listeners, "Be disappointed if you wasn't intending to make a habit of some other deviances, though."

Oliver feels warmth stir slowly in him. "It's sodomy," he says, as much to himself as to Jack.

"When you put your prick in me, was you thinking that it felt like a crime?"

"No."

"What did it feel like?"
Oliver considers his answer, and realizes that there is only one that he can truthfully give. "Love," he says.

"Well, now," Jack says, after a pause, "that sounds nice to me. Can't go far wrong there, can you?"

They're on Upper Thames Street; one can see the lamps on the bridge as they draw nearer. From a long way off they are visible, pinpoints through the falling darkness. Oliver had once read of how, in years gone by, the severed heads of traitors to the crown were shown on pikes above the gatehouses. The marshalmen had brought them there, to where the eye would have been drawn and made it an impossible thing not to look with fear as one approached, as a warning to men who might harbour similarly black intentions. The blank eyes of the tar-dipped heads would have stared as sightlessly at the bridge as Nancy's had after her own pretty red-haired skull had been caved in by Sikes's bludgeon, unyielding wood connecting with and mashing through flesh and bone. In the nightmares that had visited Oliver afterwards, the blows raining down had crushed her head into powder, or taken it clean off her shoulders. Always, London Bridge by dark seems to him to have an air of menace to it.

True to his promises, they travel as far as the guild, Fishmonger's Hall. They pause, near by the steps, that pedestrian ascent onto the bridge.

"I got some business over the river," Jack says. "Like to come with me a bit further? I've a couple of good pals what'd be happy to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you for the offer, but I think that I'd rather go back to being a dull gentleman physician for the rest of the night."

"Thought you might," Jack replies, but without resentment. Then he falls silent, following Oliver's line of sight to where the great grey stone arches of the bridge span the street and start out across the water. Black as pitch beneath, they stand like crypts; like mausoleums.

Here, Oliver thinks, the world had once been divided between heaven and hell. Above, where the lamps shone, his uncle had stood waiting for him, risking his own safety by coming alone. Below, the demons had been let loose as Sikes enacted his bloody revenge on the woman who had loved him. And then somewhere in the streets nearby there had been Jack, who seems to belong not to the dark, nor quite the light, but to walk a path all his own. For all his analytical brain, Oliver had not understood until now what it is that consistently draws him to Jack. The answer is that Jack is the mirror of a part of himself; the part that is bold and defiant and seeks to carve out his own way in life.

"Oliver?"

"Yes?"

"Nance would have thought you was worth it. She'd be pretty happy, seeing how you turned out." Wryly, Jack shrugs. "Me - p'rhaps that's another story there."

Oliver feels a strange tightness in his chest. He reaches out, just to touch Jack a little. "You're not such a bad sort," he says softly.

Something glints in Jack's eyes. "You believe that?"

"It's up to you to prove me right or wrong. We've been friends for seventeen years. Now I'd like to get to know you."

"You're dafter than what I gave you credit for."
"And I'll credit you with being a scoundrel. But one who's very dear to me."

Jack turns to him; takes hold of the lapels of Oliver's coat. "Come here, then," is all that he says, and he's pulling Oliver, and Oliver's pushing him, and they're moving together, sinking deep into the shadows that have haunted Oliver's dreams, where the fog settles around them like a cloak. The stones are cold and hard against Oliver's back, but Jack's lips are warm, and he kisses him, as though he's burning for it; as though he's willing to jeopardize everything. He kisses him right here on the rough, dirty street, like a whore, their fingers digging bruisingly into one another's flesh through their clothes. When and if they might have stopped he almost fears to imagine, but their activities are subtly disturbed by a low and suggestive whistle. His body stiffening in response, Oliver braces to thrust Jack far from him, to save both their skins, and would have done so had he not, glancing swiftly about him, abruptly met the eyes of the taller of the two men.

The fellow flashes him a grin, and wraps his arm tightly about the waist of his companion, and the two of them withdraw, their shapes melting into that of the bridge until they can no longer be distinguished from it; into one of the nooks where the wall is darkest.

Beside him, Oliver hears a throat being cleared, in a way that doesn't sound especially perturbed by the turn of events; certainly not anywhere close to as much as he feels.

"I told you it happens," Jack says, by way of comment. "Anywhere fellers can find themselves a bit of privacy, it happens."

"You're determined to introduce me to an entirely new world," Oliver says, trying to keep his tone light, and unconvinced of how successful he is.

"We'll take things as they come," Jack says. He steps back just far enough to allow himself room to lift his hands and pat Oliver's clothes into place, as he had done in his house, setting him straight, making him decent. "But," he adds, "it's definitely going to be interesting."

As they regard one another, an ache about the heart reminds Oliver both that they are at the point of parting company, and that he minds losing that company more than he has ever before. That Jack alone will see to it that they are not away from each other for long seems certain, but wherever this new course that they have set may take them, Oliver does not see himself as a passive bystander. He does not think that he will wait a great deal of time for Jack to propose another encounter. Rather he thinks that he will be the one to seek out him.

"Take care of yourself," he says.

For a single, fleeting moment, Jack's face holds such a strange expression that Oliver cannot make it out. At length, he realizes that the strangeness is only so because of how surprising it is to see it. If Oliver were to be asked to describe how Jack's gaze fell upon him, it would be shyly. "Oliver," he says.

"What is it?"

Jack hesitates. "I ain't half fond of you," he says, finally. "You know it, dontcher?"

Oliver exhales, a breath that he's been unaware of holding, as if he's releasing either laughter or tears. Perhaps it's both, at the same time. "I'm fond of you, as well. I'm sure that I'm damned for it already, but I am."

"Took me 'til that night a few months ago to really work it out. Couldn't find anyone else what measured up after that. Probably why I was so bloody randy."
"I think that I worked it out sooner than you."

"You must know more about tossing off than what you do about medicine."

"I shouldn't be surprised."

Jack cocks his head. "You're all right, then? About everything?"

"Yes," Oliver answers. "I'm all right."

Jack kisses him again. Then he's gone from Oliver's space with only a lingering warmth left behind him, climbing the steps, jauntily, taking them two at a time. Oliver sees the shape of him step onto the bridge, and then it halts in the pool of light cast by the first of the lamps and there is a movement above the balustrades. Jack has taken off his hat, and, as Oliver watches, waves it to him a time or two. He had thought to see banners flying after they robbed Richard Manns. And this is Jack's personal banner, hoisted as if in salute to the city that deems him a scourge, but that Oliver suddenly feels him to be as much a part of as the chime of the bells that once drew Whittington back to it; a lifeblood, like the dark, endless roll of the river.

As he turns, a sound floats back to him. Jack is whistling as he strides out in the direction of the Surrey bank, something quick and cheery, sending his pleasure out into the evening. Oliver is still listening to it even as he begins to walk, now brought close by the wind, now indistinct; thin silvery notes dropping through the air as a torn pocket scatters sixpences.

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