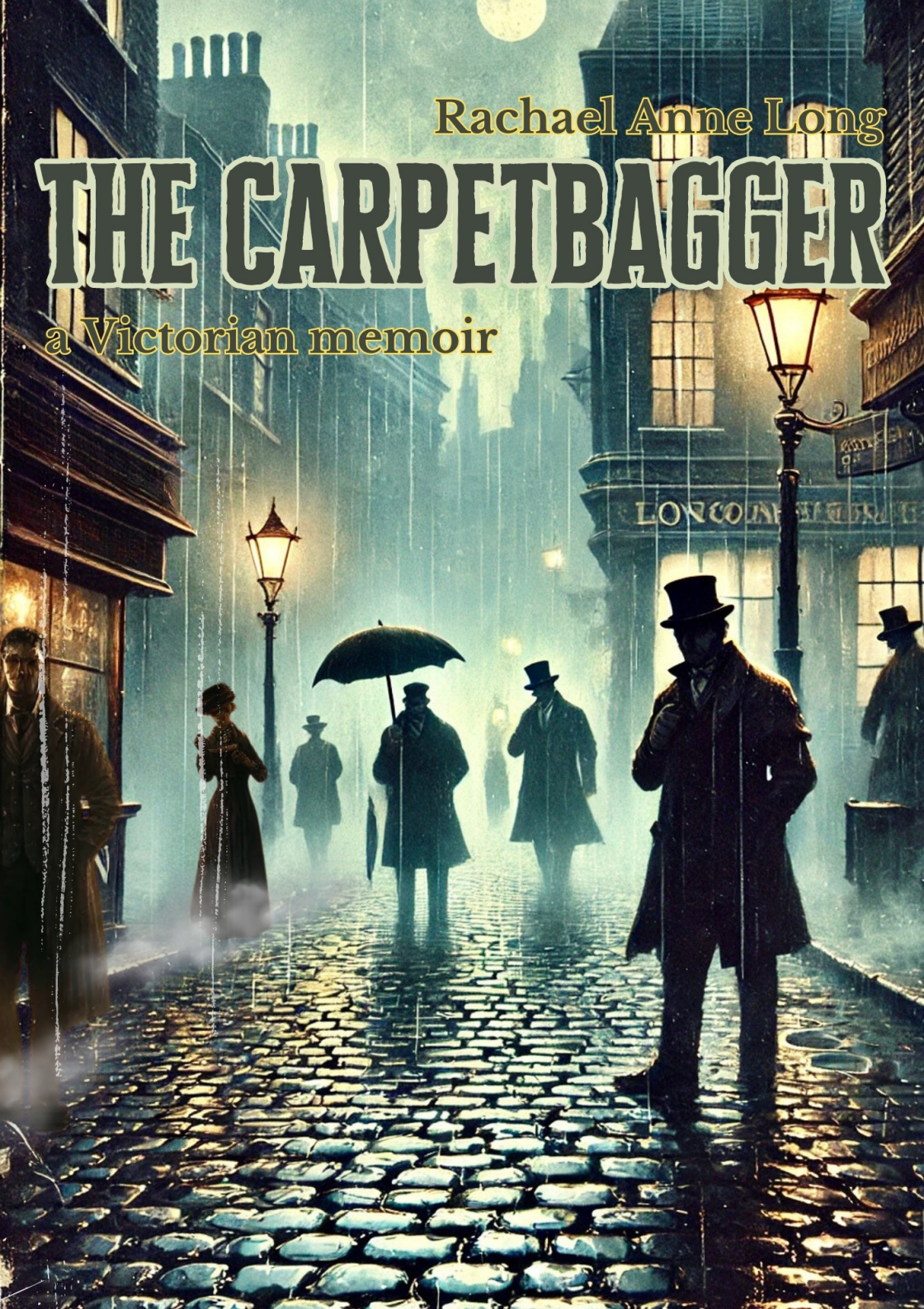


Rachael Anne Long

THE CARPETBAGGER

a Victorian memoir



The Carpetbagger

~ a Victorian memoir ~

by

Rachael Anne Long

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Author's Note

This memoir is narrated
anonymously,
in the first person.
It employs various vernacular terms
and idiosyncratic speech phrasing,
in keeping with the narrator's
north east England accent.
It also contains descriptions of
immorality,
drug use and violence.

The story begins in
Summer 1882
And concludes around
Spring 1883



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~ **Bill** ~
August 1882

There should've been sun-baked pavements, sticky-warm beer and bread that had been made stale an' dry by nowt 'cept the heat of the sun. Instead, all we'd got so far had been a wet, drizzle-bedevelled summer. It were the sort o' weather that turned beer flat an' made bread go mouldy. Oh, aye, it flooded the pavements with puddles an' all.

I sniffed in heavily an' wiped me nose on me jacket sleeve, it were still a bit damp from the downpour I'd been caught in earlier, but at least here in the Albion pub it were warm and dry. Mind you, the Albion weren't what you'd call a cosy pub - too many rough edges to be thought of in that way. The landlord kept things in check though and didn't brook any rough trade - unless he were in for a cut of the action. An' believe us, there were a lot worse pubs around this part o' town than the Albion.

Half-standing, half-leaning at the end of the bar, I had a good view of most of the pub; it weren't that busy, steady is what you might say. I motioned to the landlord to refill me drink. He winked and nodded in the direction of the door. The two well-to-do gents, over by the far wall, I'd had me eye on for the last hour, were glancing around an' readying themselves to leave and like-as-not casting about for 'a little something' to finish off their evening of slumming - a dollymop for a quick knee-trembler or a missus in need o' some coin offering a finger-pull.

Now slumming were a phrase used by the well-to-do, mostly men, toffs, and I needs to get this right - I heard it somewhere or other, to describe -

...their sojourns into the poorer, economically deprived areas of a city or large town for their edification and amusement; pretending by bestowing their philanthropy upon establishments such as pubs, brothels and street prostitutes, they are doing a public service!

There, that's it, bit of a mouthful as they say. What I think it means, in other words, in plain speak like, is the usual sort of abuse by those that have upon those that haven't.

I returned the landlord's wink, took one more look at the pair of well-to-do's, and slipped out of the pub.

Outside, on the cobbled road, puddles from the earlier downpour reflected the moonshine. I looked up at the sky; now that the day were over, the clouds, emptied of their load had gone home. Some nights when I had more time or were just plain bored, I'd while away a minute or ten finding the right size puddle, in the right place where I could see the moon reflected good an' proper-like. It weren't that easy though - 'specially on nights with too much cloud. Oftentimes I mostly settled for a bit o' moonshine making a puddle look a little brighter.

I ran the short distance to a nearby alleyway, glancing back at the door of the pub to check the toffs hadn't come out yet.

"You took your time. Must ten o'clock if it's a minute. Had a jar or two an' all judging by your breath."

“We tossed a coin, didn’t we? And I can’t just be standing at the bar, staring at them, now can us? Besides I were only drinking short measures. I ain’t wasting money on beer an’ the like, ‘specially when I don’t care for it.”

“That be as may. But ain’t nothin’ stoppin’ you sendin’ out sommat for me to sup on, eh? A nice big full measure.”

I shrugged. Bill or Battlin’ Billy No Mates as he were called during his bare knuckle prize-fighting days were a useful sideman, but he’d had one too many bangs on his head, fallen over too many times and, in all truth, what little brains the Lord let him be born with were...

Bill poked me in the ribs with his elbow. “That ‘em, there? Them two, comin’ out the beer house?” Look like they got a pretty penny or two way they’s dressed.” He rubbed his hands together.

I nodded. “Ready, then?” Bill nodded back.

I slipped out from the alleyway and began to stagger toward the two gents in a drunken, shuffling way. One o’ them pointed at me and passed a comment and as they both began to laugh, I fell against them, making sure to grab drunkenly at their clothing.

“Spare us a penny or two gents.”

Needless-to-say, they bundled me to the ground and carried on their way, each checking his pockets. I stood up, counted to ten then raced after them.

“Well, gentlemen,” I slipped an arm through each of theirs and put on me poshest voice;

“Pleasant evening slumming it up, eh, what?”

Before they could say or do anything, I steered them into the alleyway and delivered them into Bill’s burly arms.

If Bill were good for one thing, it were pinning well-off types against alley walls and demanding money, and anything shiny they might have, with menaces. Quite a lot o’ menaces. We had this routine down to a pat. Grab ‘em, put the frighteners up ‘em, unload ‘em. And tonight were no different except one of the toffs pissed himself...

After we had taken their wallets an’ owt else we fancied that seemed of worth, we scarpered, as always in the opposite direction and made our way round to mine - a room above a print shop in a small square off a main-street. You see, we is quite seasoned at this sort of thing, me an’ Bill; relieving the well-to-do of their money and valuables like. It’s not as if they can’t afford it and I’m sure some of them got a thrill from it; “Dined out on it for months, old boy!”

We laid out our takings on me bed and stood back.

“Not a bad haul, that.” Bill was impressed. “Turn yer oil lamp up. Let’s have a closer look at what we got, then.”

I turned up the oil lamp and brought it a little closer. Bill continued.

“I see one, two...four sovereigns; a few shilling, some half crowns; couple o’ farthings an’ pennies. There’s a nice pocket watch, and is that a hair pin?”

I shook me head and picked up the pin and the pocket watch. “Not a hair pin, it’s a tie pin - fancy one, might be a ruby in the middle.” I tossed the pin back onto the bed and opened the pocket watch.

“Hah! Not engraved. That means we can sell it to our favourite pawnier, you know, round the back of Copperfield Street. Get much less for an engraved pocket watch. He always complains if he has to spend time filing off an inscription.”

“What’s this?” Bill picked up a folded piece of paper. “What you think, love letter?”

I took the paper from Bill and unfolded it. “A five pound note! Very nice. If ever I get all wealthy and fancy-like, I’ll write all me letters on five pound notes.” I nudged Bill in jest. “You know what? We should have had their fancy shoes an’ all. I could do with a new pair.”

Bill looked at me quite seriously. He wore the scars of an unsuccessful prize fighter; missing teeth, broken, squashed nose, drooping eye. There was a cruel story that Bill had been so bad during his fighting days that he’d been knocked clean out by Hattie Field with her very first punch. Hattie were a one

time sheep drover from Dorset and known as being a formidable fist fighter.

Bill spoke, "Look, I-er been thinkin' like. Well, me and the missus...I mean what we do, me an' you, it ain't what you'd say were honest work..."

"No, likely as not, Bill. But it keeps us fed, don't it? And it's not like these rich folk can't afford it. Sometimes I think they expect it, go looking for it. Bill, we are providing a service here."

"If you's says so, but my missus, she says I should get out of it. She wants a cottage near the coast, an' some chickens an' geese. See, she comes from farm stock. Well on her ma's side...an' she wants sommat like that..."

She got an uncle with a small farm down Kent way an' he's gettin' on, wants some help he do..."

I looked at Bill. He weren't that bright, could hardly read let alone write his own name but he was honest and he were definitely worn well beyond his years. "I think what you be saying Bill, is you want this five pound note, maybe the watch too, for your new life."

Bill nodded. "Not the watch though, can't we sell it to the pawner and split the money? We done well over the last few months. I managed to put a bit aside. Sometimes I thinks we done too well and now feels a good time to get out, aside from what the missus been saying."

I knew Bill were right, we'd had a good run these last few months and I knew I already had enough to see me through the winter. "Tell you what Bill, I'll buy the watch off you. What say you take that note, the sovereigns here and the shillings. Leave me the florins an' that tie pin. Those pennies an' all."

Bill hastily stuffed the note, shillings and sovereigns into his pockets, shook me hand very keenly then scrambled out the room, down the stairs and across the square as fast as he could limp - that limp another injury from his fighting days.

I watched from the window as Bill disappeared into the gloom of the night, hands jammed in pockets, protecting his 'winnings' and silently cursed; I should have kept a few sovereigns back to keep the landlord of the Albion sweet. I could offer him the watch but it's one thing to accept a bit of coin, quite another to take stolen goods and the trouble that can lead to. 'I see you got a new watch, Landlord, present was it? Where'd you get it from?'

Aye...coin was a lot less trouble. I'd need to visit the pawnbroker and see if he'd be interested in the watch. Luckily he wasn't very discerning, just tight fisted. I dropped the watch in me trouser pocket, the tie pin in me jacket pocket and the coins in me other trouser pocket. Stretching under the bed I lifted up a loose floorboard and fished around until I found an oilskin wrapped cigar box.

This little box were me stash; some florins, shillings, half a dozen sovereigns and two bank notes. There was also a fancy handkerchief - unused as best as I could tell. I took out two sovereigns - these'll do for the landlord - there were sommat

about gold coins that always made them seem worth more than what they were. I rewrapped the box in the oilskin and this time reached up inside the chimney breast and stashed the box in a small cubby hole there.

I then placed a chair by the door, pushing its back up under the handle, wedging the door closed - you never knew who might fancy calling on you unexpected like.

The night were beginning to wane and soon dawn would begin to think about kicking night back into bed and, for a few hours, that's where I'd be. I flopped down on top of the bed and drifted off.



~ The Uncle ~

The six panel glass front window of the pawn shop were crammed with what I took to be unclaimed items - a stuffed fox, a fancy looking oil lamp, assorted boots, a fiddle but no bow an' a pair of off-white gloves resting on a lace shawl. It were hard to know if this stuff were meant to lure people into the shop or deter them - yer pawned goods are goin' to be put on show for all to see. Or perhaps it's just an idea of what a needy person might pawn? Judging from the small street the shop were in and the local area, the stuffed fox seemed aspirational or were it meant to say, 'any item considered...' The door to the shop had a sign fixed to it;

*Money advanced
Plate, rings, tableware,
wearing apparel &
more accepted*

Someone had crossed out 'Money' an' put 'Misery'. I let out a short laugh.

Inside the shop, hidden away were the real value stuff; wedding bands, assorted jewellery, silver plate, fancy table spoons, good un-mended clothing, even false teeth... Not all of it had been come by honestly.

The shop were a dark and musty place tho', the scent of promises made and of hopefulness mixed with disappointment hung in the air; the hope of getting some needed money and the disappointment of it never being enough.

At the back behind a small counter sat Fistie; around these parts he were known as Uncle. Everyone's friend when he were handing over money for your best bed linen and a miserly old git when he took his cut when you went to reclaim, if you bothered to reclaim at all that is. But under the surface, Uncle Fistie here were one of the best fences in this part of town.

I tapped on the counter and waited for Fistie to set down his magnifying glass and newspaper. As he did every day, he pored over the classified advertisements, always looking for an opportunity. There were a rumour he had a warehouse down on the docks but under a different name. Likely as not Fistie were not his name at all, just the name of the shop: the sign outside, above the window, actually read, M R Fistie, Pawnbroker. The sign were all weathered and peeling, the spacing of the letters were uneven and it could, just about, be a little older than the man himself.

“Back again? Hope whatever you got this time ain't got no name on it. Told you plenty of times afore, it makes it too easy to trace and it's too much fuss to try and etch something over.”

I nodded but I also knew some of his, shall we say less than honest customers and, frankly, Fistie were definitely not that honest himself, were not really bothered by names or inscriptions on watches or jewellery. Once or twice they'd even managed to 'return' a stolen item to its owner for a suitably profitable reward.

I fished the watch out me pocket and placed it on the counter with the tie pin. Fistie looked over the watch, checked the winder then gave it another look over using his magnifying

glass. He barely glimpsed at the tin pin but I were pretty sure he had taken in its small ruby.

“I takes it you are selling rather than pawning?” He says without looking up.

“What do you think?”

Fistie turned the watch over in his hands. I idly glanced around the nearby shelves, me eyes falling on a revolver. “Is that a Webley? You sellin’ guns now?”

Fistie looked up, sensing a trade. “Interested? It’s one of the new Enfield revolvers. Army started using them a couple of years ago. That one don’t work - bits missing.”

“Be cheap then?”

Fistie shrugged and returned to the watch. I noticed the tie pin were no longer on the counter.

“Are you going to make an offer or just keep trying to rub the gold off?”

Fistie placed the watch on the counter. “I’ll give you a couple of sovereign for it.”

I laughed. “A watch like that’d set you back a good five pounds, maybe more...”

“You see, that be where you is going wrong, me lad.” Fistie cast his hand around the shop. “This ain’t no fancy uptown

emporium. I buys stuff in and sells it on. An' stuff like this that is clearly stolen, otherwise you'd likely be pawning instead of sellin', is always goin' to go for half or less than what it's worth. You know that."

I did know an' Fistie were right. But I did wonder how much he'd have given me if I were just pawning the watch - likely the same and he'd probably up his interest amount, given it were stolen. No winning in here, but...

"Right then. What about, I takes this revolver and you gives me," I held up four fingers, "Four pounds!"

Fistie made a choking sound, reached up to a shelf behind him and took a cigarette from an open packet. He made a slow show of lighting the cigarette then blew smoke over the watch. "Smoke damaged now, lad."

I reached out to take the watch back.

"Wait up. I didn't say I wasn't interested." He spat out a tiny bit of tobacco. "The revolver and two and a half sovereigns."

"No. You're a crooked piece of workmanship, aren't you, Fistie. Four guineas and the revolver. Oh aye an' an extra guinea for the tie pin. It's a ruby innit?"

"Well, well. Guineas is it? Your price rises up like the tide. You'll have me drowning soon. I'll give you four sovereigns and that's it. And it ain't no ruby. More like coloured glass."

I took the revolver from the shelf and turned it over in me hands, it were heavy an' made me hands look small.

“You say it don't work?”

Fistie shook his head. “They was being shipped out to Natal colony but someone got to them afore they was loaded on the ship and spiked ‘em.” A smile flickered across Fistie's face. “Bloody Boer sympathisers, I bet. I got a crate of ‘em on the cheap.”

I set the revolver down on the counter. “You got a deal then. This revolver and four sovereigns for the watch and the tie pin.”

Fistie nodded, reached under the counter and produced four sovereigns. I quickly scooped them up and tucked the revolver into me jacket pocket. “Until next time then.”

Outside the shop I looked at the stuffed fox in the window. Perhaps I should have asked Fistie to throw that in as well - maybe next time. I could stand it outside me room. Scare off unwanted callers, like.

~~~~~

~ **Frenchie** ~

I returned to me room, after the visit to Fistie, wrapped the revolver in a sock and hid it beneath the loose floorboard under the bed. For a while I sat on the bed, staring at the faded wallpaper. Now that Bill had gone I really needed a plan. A good one. The money I had in the cigar box were plenty enough to get through winter... But the thing is, when you're in this line of work, a dry spell might be just round the corner. I needed to carry on working. Well, carry on turning over toffs - or should I say, gentlemen visitors to the eastern end of our city of London.

Toffs, gents, stuck-ups, whatever; they usually gave up what they had without too much fuss. It were only the working classes, those like me at the bottom of the pile that had to graft and toil for us money that put any value on it. Them upper classes, as often as not, were born into money or had it given to them. For them money really did grow on trees, aye, family trees.

I put me head in me hands to try an' think. Bill weren't goin' to come back, I were sure of that much. I supposed I could use the revolver as a threat in place of Bill an' that were what went through me head at Fistie's. That would mean anyone I took on as a new partner wouldn't need to be big... It were always easier to work as a twosome, safer. Suddenly a thought struck us - what about Frenchie?

Frenchie were quite possibly the best finger-smith I'd come across. No one could pick a pocket as smoothly as Frenchie. Time to head uptown then, to Frenchie's patch. We had a bit of

history, though, me and Frenchie. Not good history, just...the sort of history that were better left unsaid...for time being at least.

Now Frenchie were a creature of habit. Tuesdays and Thursdays it'd be pocket dipping around the upmarket shops and then Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, depending on the time of day; the theatre district or perhaps a racetrack, maybe a public lecture of some or any description. It didn't matter what or where, as long as there were a crowd an' the chance of reasonable pickings.

Frenchie were what were known in the trade as a wire, a thimble twister and even a tooler; Frenchie's fingers were slender like wire, perfect for lifting someone's wallet. An' Frenchie were also quite good at relieving certain classes of gentlemen of their pocket or fob watches - something known as thimble twisting.

Lastly, Frenchie had an ingenious device for opening out a pocket, to make the dipping into it all the more easy; a home made contraption claimed Frenchie, but I don't know. And of course, sometimes on a Saturday night into Sunday morning, Frenchie might be found in a local police cell if that light, deft touch had failed. But Frenchie being Frenchie always managed to avoid appearing before the local magistrate by way, Frenchie'd say, of ineffable charm. Effing charm me unwashed socks! More likely by the generosity of a handful o' coin. Oh, if you didn't realise already, Frenchie is a woman.

It took me two days to track Frenchie down. A gang of so-called natty boys had encroached into her territory, causing her

to hit upon straitened times. Natty boys were rough sorts who liked to dress smart, slick back their hair an' cause mayhem an' mischief. Subtle they was not an' tough they could be. So she had that as well as a couple or three new constables on her patch who were so tight-laced they made a whalebone corset look loose. "The pickings have become thin, only trouser fluff left," She told me later.

"Come on," I said when I eventually found her. "Let's get to a coffee shop."

Frenchie made a play of looking in the chatelaine bag hanging from her waist. I smiled and waved a hand. "It's on me and I might have some work for you."

"Work? I hope it worth it because, as you know, I am not speaking with you." She closed up her bag and nodded across the road. "That one closest, 'The Coffee Bar' but I am banned from there. Owner say every time I go in, things walk out door. I say, it just coincidence. But he want none of it and tell me, 'You are banned.' I have last laugh though; last few days I see local natty boys going in and out and they are not hiding what they have lifted."

"In that case," I pointed up the street. "We can go to the Temper House. It's one of them Temperance Movement places. They like to smell your breath on the way in - unless of course you are dressed fancy-like." And indeed a small number of the Temper House's patrons were ladies of a certain class who liked to be seen lending their support - if only by drinking coffee and eating cake.

Thirty minutes later we were being escorted out of the Temper House by two of the staff; Frenchie, having decided on tea rather than coffee, poured some of her tea into the cup's saucer to drink - an eyebrow or two were raised by the table opposite.

"Is Russian tradition," Frenchie had loudly exclaimed.

Someone at another table muttered something about how foreign people don't understand polite ways.

Then, after refilling the saucer, Frenchie placed three petit-four biscuits around the saucer's edge, letting them soften in the tea. "Also Russian tradition." It wasn't and the shop manager knew exactly what it meant - Your biscuits are stale! They weren't, at least I didn't think so. Frenchie then added, as if anything needed adding,.

"In Russia we make good tea and our biscuits..." She didn't get a chance to finish.

The manager asked us to leave and to underline his annoyance sent a waitress out to look for a constable.

We therefore, in some haste and, in the parlance of the local constables, moved on.

Two or maybe four things I'd forgotten about Frenchie; she were not Bill, although I wouldn't want to get on her wrong side when she were riled. Despite her moniker she were Russian, although her father were allegedly French. She had quite the laudanum habit too and it were that rather than the

saucer slurping and stale biscuit alleging that caused us to be ejected from the Temper House.

Much like alcohol, the Temperance Movement abhorred the casual use of laudanum. So, seeing someone brazenly an' openly 'sweeten' their tea with the evil tincture from a 2oz bottle were not looked upon favourably. And fourthly, above all, Frenchie was just, well, Frenchie...

Don't worry, I told me-self. She'll come good...

We spent the afternoon walking a nearby park, me explaining how I'd got things done with Bill and how I thought it'd work with her. She were interested and became more so when I gave a rough idea of how much Bill and me had been able to 'make' over the last few months.

We agreed to meet up at the Albion pub around 9 o'clock that night and then set out to see what stick swinging, mugging, we could get up to.



The next morning I lay in bed motionless, staring blankly at the ceiling. Although I were sure I had been asleep, I still felt drowsy; me head dull, like it were full o' thick fog.

Slowly, I slid me legs over the side of the bed and sat up. For a moment I wanted to yawn but me stomach felt like a churning sea of bile. I gripped the edge of the bed, waiting for the moment to pass, fearing any attempt to stand might cause me to retch.

I glanced around. Good, me own room - the way I felt I did not want to be waking up in someone else's room. No Frenchie, though. I closed me eyes - the room didn't feel like it were about to spin, something to be thankful for. I started to piece together the previous night.

It had started fairly promisingly; Frenchie were only half an hour late but were keen. We left the Albion pub and headed a short distance to Chez Georges or as Bill had liked to call it, Cheesy Georgies. The place were a brothel. From the outside it looked tidy and well kept. More important though, it were the haunt of toffs. Not every toff was adventurous enough to go with a street prostitute; there were some who preferred to undertake their dalliances in a bed, just not their marital bed. And that were where Chez Georges came in; it were exclusive (at their prices, definitely), discreet (apparently so) and just on the edge of the East End - handy.

For a while me and Frenchie loitered across the street, just down a bit from Chez Georges. A few men went in, a couple of sailors got turned away by the doorman - he were a big fellah and I do mean fellah rather than feller. Went by the name of Khalid - some say he were Egyptian. He were big, tall an' all and well built. For whatever reason, he liked to wear a butcher's leather apron and a battered top hat. If he said you wasn't getting in, well that was it, you's better move on.

We watched the sailors wheel drunkenly down the street after being turned away by Khalid and thought about robbing them. But we decided, as they were obviously half-shot already, any money they had left were likely to be just pennies.

“A lot is said about of a place when common sailors not good enough.” Frenchie remarked, spat at the ground and continued watching the door of Chez Georges.

Eventually two toffs emerged, one a little unkempt, shirt not fully tucked in, hair very ruffled. The other though, seemed very pleased with himself. Both looked like university types, out in daddy’s evening wear. We watched as they headed down the street. I nudged Frenchie.

“They’ll do for starters, come on. There’s an alley we can push ‘em into.”

We quickly caught up with the two toffs and quietly fell into step behind them. I nodded to Frenchie; she took the unkempt one and me the one on the right. We grabbed their outside arms.

“Evening gents. Been out for a bit of fun, eh?”

Without further ado we bundled them into the alleyway and against the wall.

“Now, none of us want any trouble, do we?” I said. “So why don’t you just hand over what you got?”

I put a foot between the legs of my toff and pressed him against the wall with the palm of me right hand and reached into his jacket with me left hand.

Frenchie's toff was a bit on the feisty side and kept knocking Frenchie's searching hand away until...he pushed Frenchie hard, knocking her to the ground and took off at a pace down the alley.

"You alright?"

Frenchie picked herself up and nodded.

I looked at the remaining toff. "That wasn't very gentlemanly of your friend, now were it? Normally we might be inclined to leave you a bit of coin for a cab but now..." I shrugged and waved the wallet and cigarette case I'd pulled from his jacket pocket.

Meanwhile Frenchie checked his trouser pockets, pulling out a couple of coins. I passed her the cigarette case and flipped open the wallet. It were empty except for a sovereign tucked neatly away in the corner.

"Beggars can't be choosers, eh? But why is it you toffs never come down here with stuffed wallets? You's only bring enough for the night."

I removed the coin and stuffed the wallet into the top of his trousers. "Now take off your right shoe."

"My r-right shoe?" The toff stammered.

Perhaps he thought we were going to strip him bare? I nodded and repeated, "Aye, right shoe."

At that moment, a police whistle blew. Most likely from the far end of the alley. I took the shoe, threw it down the alley, towards the far end and pushed the toff after it, telling him; “Go find.”

I then grabbed Frenchie’s hand and we ran out of the alley and across the street and into a dead end.

“Stand in this doorway. It’s the office for the builder’s yard at the end there.”

For what seemed like an age we stood with our backs pressed into the doorway, ears straining for any sound. Then it came; the familiar tackety-tack of hobnail boots. Closer and closer. Then the dull glow of a police lantern.

“Well, well. What have we got here? A couple of lovebirds or is it thieves? Come on, step out. Let me see who you are.”

We stepped out of the doorway and stood motionless as the constable illuminated our faces with his lantern.

“Might have guessed it’d be you. No Billy then or is he going to jump out on me?”

Luckily I knew this particular constable and for a price he would play fair. Or foul, depending on how you viewed corruption.

“Bill’s quit,” I said, “Gone to raise geese or some such with his missus down Kent way somewhere.”

“So this be the new Bill then, eh? Quite a bit prettier, if I do say so.” The constable chuckled. “I take it that was you two, upsetting them slum sneakers?”

“They were no slum sneakers. Dollymop pokers more like; they came outta Chez Georges. All spent up they was.”

The constable nodded at Frenchie. “Don’t say much, do she. Wish my missus were more like that. Anyways, if they are down here for whatever reason, in my book they is slum sneakers.”

I reached into me pocket and pulled out the solitary sovereign. “Here you go. Treat your missus to a good bit of gin.”

The constable took the coin then prodded me chest with his finger.

“Less of your cheek or I’ll run you in. Next time, a couple or more sovereign will go down nicely. Now give me a couple of minutes then be on your way.”

We watched the constable, his tackety-tack hobnail boots and lantern-glow disappear into the night.



I stood up from the bed, reached out an arm to steady me-self against the chest of drawers on the opposite wall and shuffled to the two lyre-back chairs in front of the fireplace, cursing as me foot kicked an empty bottle. Sitting down heavily on the nearest chair, I glanced back at the bottle and thought, if we’d

only had the one between us, why did I feel so rough? I grabbed me trousers from the other chair and pulled them on. I'd slept in me shirt and socks - not owning any nightwear - plain, fancy or otherwise.

Left overnight, beside the fireplace, me boots were dry and stiff - I pulled them on without doing up the laces. Next I took me jacket from the door hook and slipped it on. I looked around, I couldn't half do with a drink of something.

Through the half opened window I could hear muffled voices. I shuffled back across the room an' leaning out saw Prentice, the printer's boy from downstairs - it weren't his given name but as he was apprenticed to the printer that's what he got called.

"Prentice! Up here!" I called out raspily, pushing the window wide open.

Prentice looked up and gave a grunt by way of reply.

"You going on an errand? Can you get a pie?"

Prentice nodded. "Cost ya."

I felt in me pocket. All I had were a sixpence. I tossed it down.

"Make sure it's a good pie. You can keep what's left if - " I paused feeling the bile trying to fight its way up.

" - If you bring us up a cup of your printer's tea."

Prentice gave a nod and was on his way.

Turning from the window, I picked up the empty bottle and were about to put it on the chest of drawers when I noticed the empty laudanum bottle. I gave it a sniff then I sniffed the bottle in me hand. Although it had contained port, it were possible to detect the faint odour of laudanum...

Damn you, Frenchie, I silently cursed. No wonder I felt so rough. She'd obviously laced the port with her laudanum to knock me out. I thought she'd been drinking a bit slow. Suddenly I felt really sick, not the bile but the realisation that... I lurched to the fireplace and reached up into the chimney breast and stopped. No, I'd taken the oilskin-wrapped cigar box out from its hiding place last night and foolishly placed it on top of the chest of drawers, when I made up the fire to dry our clothes. Cause, like always this summer, it had rained. The box were now gone. No honour among thieves, eh Frenchie? I slumped down heavily on the bed.

After the run-in with the constable we'd started walking back in the direction of Chez Georges but had carried on towards the Britannia Theatre, twenty minutes walk further on.

Frenchie reckoned we'd get some easy dipping trade there, least that were the idea until we came across another couple of university types out slumming. Except this time one of 'em had clearly had more than he could take and were sat, legs splayed out in front of him on the pavement, with the contents of his stomach spewed down his front. And by the looks of things, he weren't finished. Not only that, it seemed likely his friend were goin' to join him.

For a moment we thought about robbing ‘em both but decided given their state, they was very likely all spent up. Besides, the drizzle that had been on and off all evening now turned into a downpour with thick, splattering rain drops. Before long we was soaked. I said we ought to call it a night an’ go to mine to dry out.



Prentice banged at the door. “I couldn’t knock,” he extended his arms, a pie in one hand and large cup of tea in the other. “I used me foot.”

He peered around the room. “Alright in ‘ere innit. Suit someone like me a right treat. By the way his nibs, the bossman, says to remind you rent is due tomorrow and he says, can you stop nicking his coal.”

I took the tea and pie and nodded. “Rent tomorro’ an’ no more coal.”

Prentice nodded back and, his task fulfilled, left.

I sat down on a chair, balanced the cup of tea on me knee, broke off a piece of pie crust and used it to scoop out the filling. As far as pies went, this one would have been better off being given to an unhungry dog to play with. I finished the meagre filling and slowly made me way through the crust, dipping the heavier, harder bits in the tea to soften.

By the time I'd finished the pie and tea, I felt better. Me bilious stomach had settled an' to be frank, it'd take a volcanic eruption to bring up that heavy pie crust.

I stared at the two empty bottles sitting atop the chest of drawers. I didn't blame Frenchie; she were nothing if not an opportunist. And if I knew Frenchie, she'd have been on the first train out of London, likely down to Brighton. Off to enjoy a few nights of fun 'n' frolicking, no doubt. She could afford it, she had a cigar box of money.

I stood up, placed the cup on the chair and stretched. Then I carefully moved the chest of drawers away from the wall. Hanging on a nail fixed at the back of the chest were a small bag. I removed it and looked inside. All present and correct.

This little cloth bag contained me portable wealth, me secret stash: half-a-dozen gold rings; stolen, bought, acquired over the past year or two. These were good quality rings. Real gold not polished brass like the ones they flogged in the local street markets. I picked out a plain wedding band. "If things don't pick up, it's goin' to be time for you to visit our friendly local tight fist, Fistie." I slipped the ring onto a finger, replaced the bag and pushed the chest of drawers back.



~ **A Short History of Me & Frenchie** ~  
*and Me Before Frenchie*

Like I said, we had a bit of history me and Frenchie, going back. Nowt special tho'. Not what you'd call buried treasure. You might call it wasted time, given that what we might have had between us never really went anywhere, except bitterness. A music hall joker might say we were so good at being bitter, we'd make good brewers. A fancy writer though might be grand and call the relationship, *Remembrance of Time Lost with Frenchie*...at least from my point of view anyway. But like all things involvin' Frenchie, it were complicated.

I'm not a native of London and 'though I've been in this city for around three years now, might be a little longer, might be a bit less, I couldn't tell you any street names. I make me way around by sights, smells, local landmarks and such like.

If I walks out of the small square where I live above the print shop, with its smell of paper and ink, then turn left, I come to the pie stall. Best days for pies is Mondays and Fridays - I can smell the fresh pastry half-a-street away if the breeze is fair an' the pies are truly fresh, not just warmed over. The in-between days, the pieman plies his trade elsewhere and then he's back down this way on a Saturday. But by then he's likely, if it's been a slow week, selling all those pies that never got sold any other day an' the pastry just looks an' smells tired.

Now if you want a proper fresh pie, you needs to get along to Maw's Pie Shop first thing on a morning and get one straight from the oven - not from under the counter, them's from the day afore.

The pie shop's half an hour away up past Wilson's Music Hall which is a street over from Chez Georges and just down from a wash house, with its sound of bristle brushes on washboards an' stench of starch and soap.

On heavy wash days in winter, stray children and dogs wander into the wash house yard an' try to warm themselves on the hot steam coming from the boiling washing. Sometimes a cheeky urchin might look at the bed linen being scrubbed and call out, "Oi, missus, you scrub your little 'uns like that an' all?"

Of course I knew the names of some roads; Whitechapel Road, Commercial Road and Mile End - who didn't know them? And naturally, the Wicked Quarter Mile, where there were no pickings to be had by the likes of me and where likely as not I'd get roughed up and done over. I knew me boundaries and on which side of the road I'd be safe.

I first came across Frenchie when I arrived in London. I were running from a constable who'd been alerted by a train guard. I were a fare dodger you see or I should say, I'd been fare dodging on train after train all the way from up north, slowly making me way down to London.

I'd been lucky but knew I were bound to get caught at some point. At Leeds I came close to being nabbed and in me haste to get away, jumped on the wrong train and ended up in Hull - travellin' east instead o' south. An' let's face it, there ain't nowt to be had in Hull 'cept for the smell o' fish. Beyond that I managed to head southwards - slow going at times, changing trains here and there. Took me nigh on four days to get to

London and Kings Cross Station, an' just as I were crawling out of me hidey-hole in the guard's van that I'd crept into the night before, I were discovered...

The guard had slept the whole journey from Peterborough, where I'd stowed aboard, down to London - blimey did he snore! But as soon as we pull into Kings Cross Station, he were up an' all eyes. Saw me trying to creep out of his van he did - I'd been pressed up tight behind a couple of big luggage trunks.

Anyway, I easily slipped from his grasping hands but his shouts got the notice of a nearby constable who chased after us. That were when I met Frenchie. I ran out of the station and slap bang into her. Never being one to assist an officer of the law, Frenchie shoved me under a nearby hand cart until the constable had gone...

But before all this and before I met Frenchie, and afore I were a fare dodger, I were in domestic service up in the north east of the country. Northern born and bred, that's me.

There I was toiling and sweating away in a posh house for a well-to-do type who fancied himself as a parliamentarian and were waiting for a place to come up. At least that were me understanding. He were a batchelor and styled himself as the most eligible batchelor in the county of Durham. He also fancied himself as the next Lord-Lieutenant of Durham but that position were already taken and the holder didn't seem in any hurry to give it up. Hence him wanting to be a parliamentarian.

He were a rogue tho'. A right nasty piece. And a magistrate to boot! Thought just because you worked for him an' lived in his draughty attic, he owned you's.

A lot went on in that house that no one talked about. Like Agnes the laundry maid. He had a thing about her, our lord and master. She wasn't stuck up in the attic like me. Agnes had her room lower down, easy access for him. She were sure once he got into parliament, he were going to do her right. Marriage.

Poor mare. She were more pit donkey than thoroughbred. Just a nag for him to clamber on top of when the fancy took him. I told her straight, she'd be out on her ear as soon as he found someone fancy. And it'd be worse if she found herself in the puddin' club. But she wouldn't have it - told me I were jealous.

Anyways, I s'pose Agnes rubbed along alright as did cook, mostly. He'd send her packing at least once a month tho'.

"You call this dinner? I wouldn't feed this to my dogs for breakfast!"

But anyone lower in the pecking order like me and the boot-boy, we got it all. We were pushed, kicked, cursed, shouted at, had plates an' whatever thrown at us. Especially if we had to fill in and serve 'im at dinner: we served 'im from the wrong side, passed the wrong plates, used the wrong serving spoons and don't get me started about passing the port.

Look, if there were only two of 'em for dinner, one at either end of the table, the port only needed to go up an' down, didn't it? No! He screamed and banged the table. Clockwise! Port

always and only ever goes clockwise! Threw his glass at me for that one.

After six months I'd had enough. Seemed everyone in that house were just looking out for themselves. Who could blame 'em. So I hatched me-self a plan. I weren't going to leave that house empty handed. I fancied a bit of silverware - recompense you know, for what I'd had to endure. There was a couple of candlesticks I liked the look of. Solid silver they was.

One night, when everyone were tucked up in their beds - even Agnes because the lord and master were away on 'business', I raked through the laundry and got a pair of trousers and a shirt. Most likely Arthur the boot-boy's - he were younger than me and quite slight in his build. I helped me-self to his best jacket an' all. I say best, it were his only one and a hand-me-down at that; he'd left it out to have a button sewn back on. Then I got me carpet bag and stuffed the candlesticks in and covered them over with a pillow case.

Now for whatever reason, I decided to cut me hair. Thought I'd make me-self look different. All I could find were some big kitchen scissors. Anyway they did the job. After that I took a hunk of bread, a bit of cheese, nabbed a flat cap that were lying around and walked the three miles to the train station. I stole onto the first train that were going out, just to get some distance. And here I am in London.

It's a strange thing but 'til I got to London and had to speak to someone, I never knew I had a northern accent. Came as a bit of a surprise did that. I mean, our lord and master or should I say, him that was, talked well. As in posh-well. But the rest of

us in the house just spoke the same - normal like. Or so I'd always thought. And so, I write as I talk, as you might have guessed.

But back to Frenchie and me, tho'. When I crawled out from under the hand cart, I thanked Frenchie and as I were dusting me-self off she looked at me for a moment then asked.

"You are bag thief? You steal bag from old lady and make runny, runny away?"

I thought, she speaks a bit strange and shook me head. "No, it belongs to me, I did'na steal it. I were running because I didn't have a ticket."

"If you run long enough you not need ticket."

I frowned and said again I were not a bag thief.

"You have funny accent, not speak like London person. Show me inside of bag or I call you old lady bag snatcher."

A couple of people had stopped to see what were going on. I really didn't want to attract a crowd, in case it brought the constable back, so I slowly opened the carpet bag, lifted up the pillow case a little and showed Frenchie the candle sticks.

Frenchie quickly pressed the bag closed and said out loud, "It not old lady bag. It full of dirty, smelly clothes. You are stupid boy, today not wash day."

She took me to one side then whispered, “You are thief. You steal candlesticks from church, now they have no light and no-one can go to evening service because of you.”

I shook my head. If she was a Londoner then I must have arrived in a very odd land. I told her where I’d come from and why, and that I wanted to sell the candlesticks - I needed some money. For a moment or two Frenchie stood looking me over, sizing me up.

“You steal clothes as well?” She waved her hand at my jacket. “I hope you steal these clothes because there were no others. If I were to steal clothes, I steal ones that fit, make me look like...” Frenchie paused. “...like better than I was before and not poor cousin of scarecrow.” With that she pulled off my flat cap. “You also steal haircut?”

I’d had enough of this and turned to walk off but Frenchie grasped my arm, quite firmly and all.

“I like you,” she said and added, “I take you somewhere you get good price for candlesticks and better clothes. Then I take you for proper haircut, not ‘I close my eyes and chop, chop, chop and hope for best. Proper, good haircut.”

In Russia, where I come from, we all have good haircuts. Only see bad haircuts in paintings and that’s why painters always paint people with hats and scarf on head. They spend all their time getting hands right and no time to paint good hair. Sheep farmers also give bad haircut. That’s why no sheep in Russia. We send sheep farmers away with their bad scissors. I look at your hair and think, Russian sheep farmer come to England.”

I stared at Frenchie quite bewildered and not really knowing what to say, I just nodded.

“Good. You nod head, it mean we have contract. I only charge you small fee for selling candlesticks. I also have place you can stay. You pay me rent and I let you work with me. Now we walk.”

And that was it. To be honest me head were spinning - County Durham never seemed as busy as London, even on a market day. And frankly, I would have gone off with anyone; I hadn't eaten for a good two days. I were fit to drop.

We left Kings Cross Station with its stream of people and smell of coal and steam and walked for what seemed like an age along wide pavements, narrow backstreets; past noise and distractions, sweet sickly smells, foul pungent ones too; all blended together into a vaporous accent that were London's own, until we reached a small nameless shop. This were me first visit to a pawner, a pawn shop.

The inside of the shop were dim and, like London itself, had its own accent - an odd smell that were part anticipation an' part disappointment mixed with mustiness. I wandered around while Frenchie bartered with the owner until;

“Oi! Tell your boy to sit on that chair there.”

Frenchie beckoned me over and pointed at the chair, a wooden hoop-back chair with a well-worn seat. I plonked me-self down.

“Hands.” The pawnshop owner scowled at me. “Sit on yer hands, boy. Ain’t havin’ no light fingers in here whilst I’m distracted.”

I did as he said, hands under me thighs.

“Very well. I take offer. But I say they worth better.” Frenchie had clearly hoped for more for the candlesticks. “But, I also want clothes for boy here.”

The pawnshop owner stared at me thoughtfully then pulled a brown-paper-wrapped package out from under the counter.

“This came in earlier. I gave good money for it.” He shrugged, he said that to everyone about everything in his shop. “Course, they didn’t think it were good money. It ain’t a pawn, so ain’t no one coming back for it. You can have it. Call it a bonus on top of what I just give thee for the candlesticks. Trousers, jacket and a decent enough shirt. Should fit yon boy.”

Minutes after leaving the pawn shop I were having me hair cut. The barber wanted to know if a cat had cut me hair but Frenchie said, no, a sheep farmer. The barber laughed so hard his scissors nicked the edge of me ear and drew a little blood.

Frenchie then took me back to her place; a large room above and at the rear of a music hall that had closed for refurbishment a year or two before. According to Frenchie, the owner had run out of money and died. The building were now tied up in chancery with only lawyers profiting. Frenchie nodded at a well-worn box bed pushed up against the far wall and said I

could use it as me bed, for the time being. She handed me a blanket, smiled and repeated she liked us. There were something about me she said. I took the blanket and crumpled, exhausted onto the box bed.



Over the course of the next year, Frenchie taught me how to pick pockets, cheat, con and swindle. I were never as good at pocket dipping as Frenchie - she had a real smooth touch; outside pockets, inside pockets, even trouser pockets. She could take anything from anywhere. Me, I weren't bad at outside pockets; inside ones I needed to pretend to stumble into or fall against the person - create a bit of distraction - while me hands darted in and out.

But it has to be said, not everything were plain sailing with Frenchie. As I were to find out, Frenchie suffered from melancholia. Her black moods was the darkest of storm clouds sent by the god of storm clouds.

Now, there was those, different kinds of folk, who when melancholic medicated with bath-tub gin of the roughest sort, to get them over the melans, as I called it. Others liked to comfort themselves with pies like that fat king I'd heard about that were one or two afore the queen we got now - an' it must've been a long time afore, cos the queen we has now is gettin' on.

Every melancholic had their own cure or remedy. Frenchie liked laudanum. Liked it a lot. She always had three bottles to hand; one in her chatelaine bag, another by her bed and a third

in a drawer as a spare. She reckoned taking a bit each day, a few times every day, held back her melancholy. Me, I just thought she liked it too much - the laudanum that is not the melans.

When Frenchie's melancholia would get really bad and when laudanum weren't enough, she'd go down to the dockland area an' get herself some opium. The opium dens had long since had their day but Frenchie said she knew a place or two that still catered for those with a need. They weren't the most pleasant of places an' tended to be frequented mainly by foreign sailors of the roughest type. Frenchie would get what she needed then bring it back and out would come her long, fancy opium pipe.

I hated the sweet pungent smell of opium, it hung in the air and clung to clothes. It's not something I've ever tried and it don't really appeal to me. So I'd leave Frenchie to get on with it but I'd check in on her, holding me flat cap over me mouth and nose when I entered the room.

Normally it lasted a night and a day; smoking on and off, drifting and sleeping. She said she'd tried cocaine from a needle, courtesy of a fancy doctor she'd had a dalliance with, but couldn't face injecting herself so kept to her opium pipe. On the morning of the second day I'd open the two windows next to her bed, give the room a good airing.

It were on one of her trips to buy opium that Frenchie came across Captain William Bennett of the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot. Exactly how they came to meet I'm not sure - I don't know if he were buying opium as well, or just happened to be there.

The dockland area attracted a strange mix of characters; apart from the expected sailors and merchants, there were cheap knee-trembler purveyors - male and female; chancers, crooks, warehouse thieves and those that traded in anything and everything not legal. Captain Bennett must have really charmed Frenchie though, in all the ways she wanted charming - enough for her to bring him home. Like the rest of us, Frenchie liked to be noticed and flattered. I mean, what better distraction from her melancholia?

The captain introduced himself to me with a flourish, being particular to say he were in the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot an' said he and Frenchie would like to be alone. I honestly thought, as anyone would, if she were as taken with him as she seemed, she'd not need the opium or the laudanum - least not this time or even for a while...

Now, I will not deny that on occasion me an' Frenchie shared a bed, Frenchie's bed, on bitter winter nights. An' I'll say we found comfort in each other's arms. But Frenchie were always quite clear, she wanted a proper man.

"In Russia we have proper mans. Good tall mans. Mans who big and smell like mans. But sometimes Russian mans a bit rough round edges. English mans all girls!"

I guess Frenchie thought Captain Bennett fell in-between Russian and English men or mans as she would put it. Me, I just didn't take to him. There were something about him - I did notice his boots looked over-mended - one repair too many and his moustache lacked a little something. If an army captain

couldn't wax his moustache what did that mean? Careless, lazy, no money?

That first night Frenchie brought the captain home, I slept outside. I thought give the two lovebirds a bit of space. It were a pleasant enough night, so it weren't much of a thing. Besides, I knew a couple o' places that was sheltered and off the path of those that, after a night spent in a pub or gin palace, thought it fun to piss over someone sleeping out.

The next morning I went back to Frenchie's. Or as it really were, mine and Frenchie's. Anyways, I walked in, never any need to knock. Frenchie were still abed and there were the captain, britches on but shirtless, goin' through Frenchie's stuff. An' that were the start of where me and Frenchie fell out.

If you bring someone home, leastways to me, you don't expect them to rob you's, which is what the captain were trying to do or so it looked to me.

Well, me and the Cap'n, as I decided to call him, had a bit of argy-bargy as they like to call it down at the Albion pub, over his rummagin', and had Frenchie not woken up, it might have become a serious bit of fisticuffs.

I'm not really the fisticuffs type - for a start I'm on the slight side and don't have a lot of clout. You'd never say I were a 'one punch and down' kind of hitter; more give a slap an' run away. But I might've clobbered him with a pan, most likely the bed pan...

Frenchie were not impressed when I said her new love were trying to rob her.

“You are jealous person and suck away happiness.”

And after a few more words, some hurtful from both of us, I were shown the door.

Now I will say, I’m not the sort of person to hold a grudge. Well, that ain’t completely true. But in this case it ain’t here nor there. I didn’t want Frenchie gettin’ strung along and conned, especially by someone I had doubts about. A few days after Frenchie turned me out, I found me-self up by Kensington Army Barracks an’ fancied I’d do me some asking at the barracks gate...



It seems that going up to the entrance of an army barracks an’ saying to the guard on duty, as I did, “Do you have a list of deserters?” ain’t the best way to go about things...

I didn’t know if Captain Bennett were a deserter, he might not be. He could be a forgotten hero. It could even just be that he were the sort that enjoyed shacking up with the likes of Frenchie when he were on leave. You know, a bit of a slummer but goin’ for the full experience; like those that go to be baptised but insist on being half-drowned in a river rather than just a quick splash of water to the head. Anyhow, I were escorted inside the barracks to what I supposed were the guard room an’ brought in front of the sergeant of the guard.

The soldier who'd brought me in said I were a deserter handing myself back in!

"Here, I ain't no deserter." I said, looking around to see if I could make a run for it. "I wanted to find out about someone who might've deserted."

The sergeant seemed quite the strict sort. He stood up from the desk he were sitting behind, picked up his swagger stick and began barkin' at us.

"Stand up straight, laddie! Get those shoulders back and that chest out! Speak when you're spoken to. Get that chest out!"

I went along with the sergeant's commands an' stood up as straight as I could. I were worried in case he hit me one with his stick.

"That is a sorry excuse for a chest you have there, lad. You is also too short an' scrawny to serve your Queen. You need to get yourself along to St Thomas's Hospital and ask to be a midwife!"

The two other soldiers in the room laughed. One smirked, "Ya can't desert afore you've joined."

It must have been a slack afternoon I thought and I were being used to ease their boredom.

"All I want to know is, have you got a Captain Bennett here or has he gone missing and are you's wantin' him back?"

The sergeant sat back down. He looked over at the two soldiers. "You know that name?" They shook their heads. "What's he look like, this captain of yours?"

"He ain't my captain. He got black hair, a bad moustache, looks like he don't eat much. Oh and his boots have been mended a few times."

The sergeant leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling for a moment. "No, can't think of anyone with that name or who looks like that. Got a regiment or anything?"

"He tells anyone who'll listen that he's in the King's Foot Regiment?"

"King's Own Regiment of Foot? Now that narrows it down." The sergeant looked over at the two soldiers again. "Smith, go and find Lieutenant Robertson, give him my compliments and ask him if he would kindly mind attending the guardhouse. Say it is in regard to a deserter."

Twenty minutes later, the smartest and tallest soldier I'd ever seen walked into the guardhouse. This was Lieutenant Robertson. The sergeant passed on what I'd said about the so-called, Captain Bennett.

"Well I am sorry to say, this Captain Bennett is not a deserter but he is an imposter. We have had various reports of an army captain of that name touring the immediate area and running up diverse bills.

The constabulary are not interested - they say it is an army matter and frankly, as long as he is not selling our munitions to the Boers, we haven't been that interested. However, as we now seem to know where he is..." The lieutenant paused and looked at the sergeant.

"You would like us to get him, sir."

"Splendid idea, Sergeant. Take a couple of men and a covered wagon. Bring him back and lock him up. We can pass him on to a suitable magistrate in a day or two or just shoot him, eh what, sergeant?"

The sergeant saluted the lieutenant. "As you wish, sir."

And that was how me and Frenchie parted ways; I had her new man, who she were quite taken with it has to be said, taken away an' locked up for impostoring an army officer and amassing unpaid debts at various inns and taverns in and around London.

It ain't really a surprise then, that at the first opportunity, Frenchie would rob me.

And so endeth a short history of me and Frenchie and me before Frenchie.



