

~ THE SMITHFIELD ~
MURDER

FEBRUARY, 1892

Archie Walton hated these February mornings. In all his eleven years he'd never known hardship like it. As all around him the city slept, he was obliged to eschew his bed and open the trader's stall held by his master at Smithfield Market. On account of a clear night sky, tonight felt especially cold. His eyes stung as he blinked into the freezing air. Already his fingers were numb. As he walked away from the Thames up Old Bailey, he looked around him at the buildings. Newgate Prison stood imperious and forbidding, as if in warning. Behind, the dome of St Paul's dared show itself on the skyline. The road narrowed as he approached St. Sepulchre's church, and already he could hear the squawking and swearing of the early traders at Smithfield. Archie had been in the church just once. He had filched some apples from a street stall last summer, and found himself on the wrong end of a Peeler's wrath. Giving a holler, the constable gave chase, his hobnailed boots skidding on the streets beneath him. Archie was young and fast and had soon left his pursuer behind on Hosier Street. He had taken sanctuary amongst St. Sepulchre's broad, uncluttered interior and wide supporting pillars. As he took the time to catch his breath, he had allowed his eyes to wander to the church's broad, coffered ceiling. A series of vaults and arches held the great roof aloft. A pattern of sunken square panels led the eye to the centre of a dome. There, as the light of a summer's day had bled through the stained glass, Archie ate his apple. He walked to the chancel and let his hand run across the altar. The wood had felt alive and warm to the touch. As he spat pips to the floor, Archie took a final look around. If the majesty of St. Sepulchre's had made any impression at all on his young mind, he didn't show it. His feast concluded, he had simply wiped his mouth on a sleeve, allowed himself a chuckle at the afternoon's events and made his way out through the transept door. That summer's day seemed a long time ago now. Archie shivered to his core as he made his way round the church onto Snow Hill. The bell chimed twice from its tower, heralding his arrival at the market on his appointed hour.

Before him, there was a circus of activity. The hustle and bustle seemed quite at odds with the early hour. The grand, vaulted entrance was crammed with carts and drays, each disgorging themselves of their loads into the waiting arms of butchers and traders. Great sides of beef were heaved onto shoulders. Cuts of pork were passed aloft from man to man. Geese, chickens and rarer fowl were slung over arms and carried gracelessly through the iron arches at the market's entrance. Livestock was shepherded in from their carts

to be shown at their best in the hope of a sale. Nearing the entrance hall to the ostentatiously named Grand Avenue, the sweet, ripe odour of raw meat and manure pricked at Archie's nostrils. He shouldered his way through the throng, stepping this way and that across a curious dance floor. Each man embraced his load as a partner, waltzing his way to his allotted stall. Cleavers fell and knives struck. The air was rent with the rasp of saw on bone. Cattle that had been driven through the streets of London were herded to their pens, chickens clucked from their crates and pigs bedded down in their straw. Kicking through the sawdust at his feet, Archie found himself at his stall at last. Blowing on his fingers to restore some feeling, he reached into a pocket for his keys. He had been entrusted with them by his master.

Solomon Hibbert was always late. He had held his place in the market for forty years and felt his longevity alone entitled him to certain liberties. Being late for the morning's work was one of them. He had taken Archie on just a year previously. Taking a young lad from a poor house and putting him to work chimed with Hibbert's ideals. Paying him a pittance chimed with them even more. It was Archie's job to open the stall, direct the deliveries and await the arrival of his master. If he was lucky, he'd get a penny for his pains or a sausage to throw on the brazier beneath Holborn Viaduct. Archie pulled up the shutter with a clatter. The lamps in the hall barely penetrated the gloom within.

'Shift yer arse, boy!' Archie turned to see a thickset man with a haunch of beef at his shoulder. He rolled a cigarette between his teeth. 'Or I'll drop this on yer 'ead like a ton of bricks.' He slammed the carcass on the block in Hibbert's stall, wiping blood from his hands with his apron. 'Foreman'll be round in a minute for payment.'

Dropping ash to the floor, the man returned to his cart at the market's entrance, ready to shoulder another burden in the name of commerce. Archie rolled his eyes. Stamping his feet against the cold, he turned his attention to the meat on the block. Room would have to be made. Pausing only to light a lamp on the wall, he crept to the back of the stall where it was due to hang. A rail ran the length of the right hand wall, some eight feet from the ground. It was crammed with sides of pork, haunches of beef and lambs wrapped in muslin cloth, all suspended on hooks, and all to be sold in the next three days. Hibbert was overreaching himself again. Bracing himself against the first carcass, Archie leaned against it to give it a hefty push. The meat swung back an inch or two then came to a stubborn halt on the rail. It had snagged. He pressed his shoulder to the animal, trying again. Still it stayed resolutely where it hung. Muttering under his breath, Archie grabbed a wooden stool from the counter and dragged it through the sawdust to the rail. If he could make room for the beef on the rail, Hibbert could lift it up on his arrival. Shifting his weight on the stool, Archie stretched up, feeling with his fingers where the snag might be. He felt nothing. Leaning against the side of pork to his left, he felt the blockage was behind it. Giving it a push, he unbalanced himself and fell to the floor. A peel of laughter rang out behind him and

Archie turned to see a passing tradesman with a string of sausages about his neck. 'Best laugh I've 'ad all mornin',' he chuckled. As the man passed on about his errand, Archie looked up and behind the side of pork that had defeated him. There, some three feet from the ground, hung a pair of feet. Panicking, Archie grabbed the side of pork and swung it towards the front of the rail. It revealed a spectacle so grisly that the boy was suddenly lost for breath. Looking up beyond the feet, he saw a slick of blood had dried on the unfortunate man's legs. His arms hung limp at his side, his chin resting incongruously on his chest as though he were simply asleep. Archie's hand went involuntarily to his mouth. There before him, hung Solomon Hibbert.

'How the devil did you know I'd be here?' Detective Inspector Ignatius Hicks sat at the fireplace in The Silver Cross Inn, a look of incredulity on his face. His hat lay on the table before him, next to a steaming plate of kippers and a tankard of ale. He was clearly irritated at the interruption to his breakfast.

'A lucky hunch?' sparkled Anthony Graves from the door. The sergeant was his usual ebullient self. Inspector Bowman marveled that, even on this coldest of mornings, his companion had refused to wear a hat. They had been despatched from Scotland Yard and instructed to pick up Inspector Hicks on their way.

'You're to accompany us to Smithfield,' Bowman growled.

'They've found an unexpected carcass at the meat market.' Graves gave Hicks the flash of a smile. Bowman, not for the first time, marveled at how his colleague could find such sport in something so grim.

'Smithfield?' Hicks roared loud enough to wake the landlord from his stupor at the bar. 'I can't go to Smithfield at this hour. Think of my constitution.'

'Your constitution?' Bowman raised his eyes to the heavens as if in silent prayer.

Hicks had leaned forward conspiratorially. If he knew he was brushing his kippers with the ends of his beard, he didn't seem to care. 'I suffer terribly with the gas,' he elucidated in hushed tones. 'To see such sights as they have at Smithfield would be enough to turn a man's stomach.'

Bowman's moustache twitched at his mouth in irritation. 'I would think such a man as could stomach kippers at this hour could stomach anything.'

Hicks threw him a look of reproach. 'I have a delicate digestion, Bowman, and that is that.' He tried not to react to the sudden delivery of a large pile of devilled eggs at his elbow. Bowman stared at the portly inspector, his eyebrows raised almost to the brim of his hat. 'Eggs help,' Hicks offered, meekly.

'Sergeant Graves, would you be so good as to settle the inspector's tab at the bar?' Bowman turned on his heels to head for the door. 'Time is of the essence.'

Reluctantly, Hicks delved into a pocket to retrieve some change for Graves. As he leaned over to take Hicks' payment, the young sergeant plucked an egg

from his plate with a cheery wink.

‘Why is there need for so many of us?’ Hicks implored, shrugging on his coat.

‘We’ll need numbers to keep the crowds at bay,’ Bowman explained. ‘The market is about to get busy.’

‘Boothby,’ announced the market manager in his flat, northern vowels. ‘Arthur Boothby’. He was an officious-looking man, marked Bowman as he shook his hand. A large, white apron was tied at his waist to protect the full tweed suit he wore beneath. A cap balanced precariously on his head, beneath which jutted a pair of particularly bushy brows. His nose was flat and wide as if the result of some past altercation, and his mouth was thin and perpetually pursed in a look of disdain. A leather pouch at his side bulged with papers. Bowman took the opportunity to glance around.

Smithfield Market was truly a cathedral to the carnivore. It seemed as tall as one of Brunel’s greatest stations, and no less ornate. The ubiquitous London pigeon had made its home amongst the great girders that spanned the entire length of the roof and a network of glass, wood and steel gave out to a still dark sky. The horizon, noticed Bowman, was painted with paler colours and he fancied he could sense the imminent arrival of the morning sun.

‘Looks like our Solomon has gone the way of William Wallace,’ Boothby was saying.

‘How’s that?’ Graves asked, nonplussed, his clear blue eyes clouded with confusion.

‘Smithfield is the site of the old Tyburn tree. You might well be standing where William Wallace swung from the gallows. Aye, and Wat Tyler, too.’

Everywhere Bowman looked, he saw flesh of every sort, plucked, rolled and stuffed for consumption. Buckets of offal littered the floor, cuts of meat hung at every stall. Pig’s heads were displayed with no little ceremony amongst cuts of lamb and guinea fowl. The fetid air mixed with the smell of tobacco from Hicks’ habitual pipe which he held tight in his teeth as if it were a prize. Bowman resisted the urge to retch. Catching Hicks’ eye he affected a more nonchalant air. The last thing he wanted was to show weakness to his bluff companion. The affair with the severed head in the ice had cost him dear, both in terms of his own sanity, but also with his standing in the Force. Bowman was becoming used to the sideways glances and whispers behind hands, but he could not bear to be exposed to Hicks.

Swallowing hard, he continued. ‘Mr Boothby,’ he soothed, ‘we are here to investigate the death of Solomon Hibbert. Whilst the history lesson is engaging, it would be of greater benefit to us if we could see the body.’

With a barely contained snort of disappointment, Boothby adjusted the cap on his head and turned about. ‘Number thirty-four,’ he barked. ‘That’s where you’ll find him. And I’ll thank you to be quick. We open in twenty minutes and I won’t turn trade away.’

‘How are you bearing up, Hicks?’ teased Graves as they walked through

the great iron arch at the market's entrance.

'Tolerably,' Hicks mumbled, picking errant scraps of kipper from his beard.

Ahead of them, the great hall was split into avenues of stalls that stretched as far as the eye could see to the left and right. Shutters were thrown open in anticipation of the day's custom, stalls were laden with produce, boys mopped the floors with steaming water and blocks were scrubbed and scraped.

Arthur Boothby was warming to his theme as they approached stall number thirty-four. 'Seven hundred years ago, you'd be walking amongst the throng of Bartholomew Fair,' he expounded. 'We like to think we're following in illustrious footsteps.'

Inspector Hicks cast a glance around him. 'Though perhaps with fewer freaks and wire-walkers,' he offered.

Conscious that his other companions were only feigning interest at best, Boothby stopped and cleared his throat. 'Stall number thirty-four,' he announced, gesturing towards where a young boy sat on a stool. The boy regarded the assembled inspectors with doleful eyes. 'This is the lad that found him,' Boothby explained. 'And there is the man himself.' With more drama than Bowman felt strictly necessary, Boothby lifted an arm to point grandly up at the rail.

Inspector Bowman fought the urge to vomit. Solomon Hibbert was held suspended by a meat hook through the back of his neck. Bowman could plainly see the point of the hook protruding through the man's Adam's apple. His entire torso was caked in a sheen of blood which dripped down his arms and onto his fingers. Casting his eyes to the floor, Bowman could see Solomon's blood mixing with the sawdust. Sergeant Graves was standing next to the body now, prodding it almost playfully with his fingers.

'Has anything been moved?' Bowman asked of Boothby.

'No one has approached the body. Save the boy who found him, of course. I think his name is Archie.'

Sergeant Graves had sidled up to the inspector, lowering his voice in the throng. 'Look around you, sir.'

Bowman did just that. 'I see nothing Graves, just people going about their business.' Hawkers were filling the aisles with produce for sale; pies and pasties, raw meats and offal. Traders argued over prices while competing stallholders gazed with envious eyes at their neighbour's displays. 'There's nothing out of the ordinary.'

'Precisely, sir.' Graves gave a knowing look. 'Three inspectors have just arrived from Scotland Yard to investigate a body found hanging on a meat hook. And no one seems to be the least bit concerned.' He cast a sad look at the ruffian on the stool. 'They've not even seen fit to comfort the boy.'

Graves was right. Aside from some sidelong glances and knowing nudges between the stallholders, their arrival had passed without interest.

'What does that tell us?' Bowman asked.

'That he had no friends here?' Graves offered, brightly.

Bowman nodded. 'Inspector Hicks, speak to these men. I want to know more about Solomon Hibbert. What of his character? Did they have any dealings with the man?'

Boothby gave a snort of derision. 'I wish you luck in finding any man that had a good word for him.'

Inspector Hicks pulled himself up to his full height. 'Perhaps, Mr Boothby, I should start with you. Might I trouble you to tell me all you know of the deceased?'

Boothby gave an obsequious tip of his head. 'Aye, you might. But I'd rather do it beyond the sight of the traders. You can accompany me to my office.'

'Excellent,' Hicks smacked his lips. 'Then perhaps I might avail myself of a pasty on the way.'

Seemingly pleased to meet a kindred spirit, Boothby allowed himself a smile. Alarmingly, he exposed the greatest display of crooked teeth that Bowman had ever seen. 'Oh, and inspector,' Boothby turned to face Bowman as he left. 'You will appreciate that we open for business at seven of the clock. I would not wish our customers to face such a sight.' He cast a look of distaste in the direction of Hibbert's body. 'Such a thing might put them off their purchases.' He gave a ghastly wink. 'And we all have debts to pay.'

As Hicks led the man away, Bowman heard them fall into easy conversation concerning the variety of meats available and the favourable terms that might be met for a man who wished to purchase them while in the company of the market manager.

'Graves,' barked Bowman irritably. 'Get that man down.'

While Graves made it his business to raise a working party from the traders about him, Bowman approached the lad on the stool. Archie Walton looked up as the inspector crouched beside him, his coat tails trailing in the sawdust. He had a haunted look, thought the boy. Troubled.

'What will I do for work?' Archie asked, plaintively.

'Some other of the traders will employ you,' Bowman offered, absently smoothing his moustache between his fingers.

The boy looked sadly about him. 'He was not liked,' he said quietly. 'And nor am I.'

'Who would have keys to this stall, Archie?'

'Only me and Mr Boothby.'

'Hibbert trusted you with his key?'

The boy nodded. 'So I could open up.'

'And when was the last time you saw Mr Hibbert?'

'Yesterday at midday. He gave me a sausage for the journey home. I cooked it with the tramps under the viaduct.'

'So he was good to you?'

'Better than he was to his wife.'

Bowman's eyes flashed wide. 'I'll pay no heed to gossip, boy.'

'Everyone knows it. He beat her somethin' rotten when he was in his cups.'

A sudden thought occurred to the inspector as he rose. 'Has she been told?' The boy shrugged with indifference. It was plain he neither knew nor cared. With a sigh, Bowman looked about him, wondering how best to proceed. Hicks had begun his interviews and Graves was busy at the rail. Three burly men had reluctantly been pressed into lowering Hibbert's body. By resting its weight on their shoulders they were attempting to lift it off its hook and onto the floor. Bowman let his gaze wander to the ground. Absentmindedly wiping his coat tails free of sawdust, an idea came to him.

'Wait!' he commanded. The note of authority in his voice was enough to stop the men in their tracks.

Graves turned to face him, a look of enquiry in his bright, blue eyes. 'Sir?'

'Step back from the body,' Bowman ordered, his face a mask of concentration.

The three men stepped back, bemused. Inspector Bowman was circling the body, looking all around at the man's feet, legs and torso.

'Archie, when was this sawdust laid out?'

'Put it out meself before I left yesterday,' Archie said simply. 'I do it every day.'

Bowman looked his fellow detective up and down, then turned his gaze to the men he had enlisted. 'We all have sawdust on our clothing, Graves. You and I have been here a matter of minutes, and yet there is sawdust on my coat and on the hems of your trousers. You even have some in your hair.'

'Gets everywhere,' pronounced one of the men in a strong cockney accent.

'Perks of the job,' offered the other with a laugh.

'Plainly.' Bowman was frowning again. 'And yet Mr Hibbert has not a speck upon him.'

The two men were silenced, the smiles frozen upon their faces. Their eyes fell upon Hibbert's body. Sergeant Graves was walking all around him now. 'What does it mean?'

Bowman had thrust his hands deep in his pockets. 'It means,' he began, 'that Mr Hibbert was killed elsewhere, carried here then hung up with his wares.'

Alice Hibbert had once been a beauty. Looking from her clear, sparkling eyes to her even clearer skin, Bowman could see that perhaps only a few years before, she would have turned many an admiring head. Her steel grey hair was pinned up, secured with a glittering clip in the shape of a butterfly. She was dressed conservatively in a frilled dress and sat, demurely, with her hands clasped at her lap. Looking about him, Bowman's gaze was drawn to an ornate clock at the mantelpiece. It was framed on a plinth of green marble, its numerals etched in a dark Arabic text. It stood proudly amongst some other trinkets; an ostentatious picture frame decorated in fine gold filigree, a representation in china of a skating couple. The paneled walls around the room were inlaid with a floral print, punctuated periodically by tasteful landscapes. A fire blazed in the grate, dispelling the morning cold with a

fierce heat. If it hadn't been for the purple bruise that adorned her cheek, Mrs Hibbert would have offered the perfect picture of domestic bliss. Bowman swallowed hard and waited. The woman stared at him, her voice caught in her throat.

'Are you sure?' she whispered, barely audible above the crackling of the fire. 'Are you sure it's him?' Her voice had an Irish lilt that, even in these circumstances, Bowman found appealing.

The inspector nodded. 'His boy found him.' He had spared her the details. It was enough for her to know that Solomon Hibbert was dead. The manner of his death could follow in due course. Her hands were shaking now, and she lifted them to her face. Her eyes creased in an effort to contain her feelings and Bowman found himself wincing in anticipation. And then she did the last thing he had expected. She laughed. Rocking back in her chair, it was as if some great relief had come to her.

'Mrs Hibbert,' he began, confused, 'I'm not certain you understand the implications - '

'So the bastard is dead. Well, he had it coming.' She took a breath and sighed. 'You must forgive me, inspector, but if anyone deserved a drubbing, it was Solomon Hibbert.'

Bowman turned his hat in his hands. He had heard stories of such women from his own wife, Anna. She had taken work with the Salvation Army in Hanbury Street and would often talk of the cases that presented themselves. Women who were beaten by their husbands like dogs, others who were thrown out of house and home with nothing to their name. Such men were often drunk, sometimes mad, and rarely punished. Marriage was considered a private affair and many a man felt free to use his wife as he wished.

'Do you have a wife, Inspector Bowman?'

The question brought him up short. She was the first to ask since his release from the asylum. The first to ask since Anna had died. He was unsure how to answer. Did he have a wife? Bowman felt his face flush. He swallowed hard. Blinking away a memory of Anna on their wedding day, he turned to Alice Hibbert.

'Yes,' he replied simply. It was not the response he had thought to give. 'Yes, I have a wife.'

'And a fine husband I'm sure you make.' Alice's eyes sought Bowman's, as if some understanding might be found there. 'But not all men are the same.' She had risen now, and walked to the mantelpiece. Warming her hands at the fire, she turned to face the inspector. 'My husband was a brute,' she said boldly, her chin jutting forward in defiance. 'And I hated him.'

'Mrs Hibbert, would you know of anyone who might want to see your husband dead?' Bowman sensed the ridiculous nature of the question even as he asked it.

Alice threw back her head and laughed again; a full-throated laugh, released without care. 'It might be quicker to make a list of those who would want him still alive.'

‘When was the last time you were in his company, Mrs Hibbert?’

Alice thought. ‘Last night, inspector. He spent the evening asleep in that very chair until the clock struck eight. Then he sprang from the chair and ran from the house. As he does every week at that time.’

‘He does the same thing every week? He leaves the house at eight o'clock?’

‘Every Wednesday,’ Alice confirmed. ‘To see a man about a dog, he would say.’ Her soft Irish lilt rendered the phrase all the more charming. ‘And then an hour later he’d return with money in his fist. Except, last night, he never returned at all.’ Bowman raised a quizzical eyebrow. ‘There is a loose tile at my feet, inspector. It conceals a hole where you may find a tin box, locked with a key. It’s where he kept his notes. He was never one to trust his money to a bank.’

‘May I see?’ Bowman leaned forward where he sat, his eyes searching the hearth for the very tile.

Alice Hibbert seemed to weigh the question in her mind. ‘I will happily show you the box and its contents, Inspector Bowman, but I would ask that you look away while I retrieve it.’

Bowman turned his back to the fire. As his eyes focused on a picture of a pastoral scene before him, he heard the scraping of brickwork at his back. The tile lifted, the widow bade him turn. She held a tin box some twelve inches long and six deep. He was surprised to see the lid already open on its hinges.

‘He allowed you access to the box?’ he enquired.

‘I keep the key about my neck,’ Alice replied, holding it aloft on its chain so that he may see. ‘I was free to take as much and as often as I saw fit. Solomon kept me well so I wanted for little. I rarely had recourse to take his money.’

‘But did it never occur to you - ’

‘To leave, inspector?’ she interrupted. ‘I had the means, certainly. Such a man has a hold over a woman you would not understand. Why does a beaten dog not run?’

‘Because he is afraid,’ Bowman nodded in sympathy.

‘Quite right, inspector. Afraid of being caught.’ She held the box forward so that Bowman could see its contents. There were notes of practically every denomination held within.

‘There must be a hundred pounds,’ he gasped. Half what a detective might expect to earn in a year.

‘Very likely,’ Alice conceded, snapping the lid shut. ‘Look about you, inspector. I live a comfortable life, my every whim is catered for. These trinkets and baubles,’ she waved a hand at the ornaments on the mantle and the pictures on the wall, ‘Are merely reparations.’ She smiled at Bowman’s questioning look. ‘To assuage him of his guilt. The more he beat me, the better gifts he would bring. It helped him, I suppose.’

Bowman felt his anger rising. How could marriage be held in such low regard by some, when he had been denied its gifts? He bit his lip. ‘Where did his money come from?’ The inspector doubted a humble butcher could bring

home such a wage.

‘You think I would ask?’ Alice Hibbert’s eyes scolded him. ‘You cannot comprehend of a life with Solomon Hibbert. To ask him anything would be to risk his wrath.’ Bowman felt chastened under her gaze and rose to leave.

‘I would ask you, Mrs Hibbert, to report to me anything you might think to be of use in my investigations.’

‘Investigate all you want, Inspector Bowman,’ She was seeing him to the door now. ‘And if you find him, bring the murderer to me that I might shake his hand.’

Hibbert’s body lay face down on the butcher’s block. As Bowman approached, Graves ran towards him, waving his arms in alarm.

‘Hicks has opened the market!’ he yelled. Bowman quickened his step to join his companion. ‘Boothby’s charmed him, now Hicks has acquiesced. There’s a hundred people at the gates, all champing at the bit to get in.’ Graves’ curls bounced on his head in agitation and his face was flushed with concern.

‘We can’t have people tramping through this market,’ seethed Bowman, ‘while we are in the midst of an investigation. Where is Hicks?’

His question was answered by the appearance of the inspector himself. Hicks was carrying himself at full stretch, his chest puffed out in direct challenge to Bowman. ‘Worry not, inspector,’ he began. ‘I have arranged for the removal of the body on a cart. There is no reason to delay the prospect of a day’s living to these unfortunate souls.’ Hicks gestured widely to indicate the traders and sellers who milled about him. ‘They can’t all be guilty of murder.’

Bowman was fuming. ‘Inspector Hicks,’ he spat. ‘You should know that you are here against my better judgment. If it were not for the commissioner’s insistence, you would still be scoffing eggs at the inn.’

Hicks’ eyes were wide with incredulity. ‘Where was your precious judgement on Lambeth Bridge, Inspector Bowman?’ Bowman was taken aback at the remark. He stole a glance to Graves who could not meet his gaze. So, he had been talking.

‘What do you know of Lambeth Bridge?’ Bowman felt his face flush against the cold morning air. He was fighting hard not to swallow.

Hicks looked directly at his fellow inspector. ‘I know what I know,’ he said unflinchingly. Bowman blinked. The events on Lambeth Bridge seemed a lifetime away. It came as some surprise that they had only happened four weeks since. ‘Now,’ continued Hicks gruffly, ‘I will have that body moved and I will open this market.’ He reached beneath the folds of his great coat and, almost improbably, retrieved a ledger. ‘In the meantime,’ he teased, ‘I will leave you with this. It is from Boothby’s office and contains a list of every man to be employed here. I’ve had my fill of intrigue for the day.’ He thrust the book into Bowman’s hands and retreated through the throng. With a pipe between his teeth and a spring in his step, Hicks had every intention of

spending the rest of the day at The Silver Cross.

It took four men to lift Hibbert's body and lower it onto the cart. With the block now clear of its grisly burden, Bowman placed the book upon it. 'Where do we start, Graves? There must be over two hundred names here. And who's to say the killer is amongst them?'

Graves threw him a cheery look. 'It's a start though, isn't it, sir?'

Bowman studied his companion. He had thought Graves dependable. A friend, perhaps. Bowman supposed it only natural that he should have been talking. The inspector had almost frustrated the investigation into the head in the ice. But for a moment of clarity, the end might very well have been different. He had not been himself. He knew that now, and wondered whether he would ever be himself again. 'Yes, Graves, it's a start. Have a word with Boothby, would you? Get those gates closed again so we can proceed, ask him of his whereabouts last night, then direct your attention to the stall holders along this row.'

Sergeant Graves nodded his assent, turning away to Boothby's office while Bowman closed the pages to the ledger. It made sense, he thought, to interview those traders directly adjacent to number thirty-four to begin with. Hibbert's immediate neighbours struck the inspector as an unlikely pairing. The older of the two, a man who introduced himself as O'Sheehy, was a middle-aged man of Irish stock. A shock of ginger-red hair was barely contained beneath a bowler hat, his wide girth strained against his blood-stained apron. A pipe clamped between his teeth, O'Sheehy regarded Bowman with suspicion.

'I had nothing to do with the man if I could help it. He was a drunk,' O'Sheehy sniffed. 'He went about his business and I went about mine.'

He was joined by a much younger, wiry man with a pockmarked face. He stood with his hands in his pockets as he looked Bowman up and down. 'I wouldn't give him the time of day if his life depended on it,' he drawled.

'And where were you last night, when Hibbert was killed?' Bowman licked the stub of his pencil, ready to record such information as the two traders would deign to give him.

'With Boothby. At The Bishop's Finger across the way,' O'Sheehy pointed beyond the market entrance to the street beyond. 'We need a pint or two to get us fettle before we put ourselves to bed.'

Bowman made a note and looked to O'Sheehy's companion. The younger man looked the inspector straight in the eye. 'We often head there after a day at the market.'

'Were you in company?' Bowman asked.

'Aye,' confirmed the older man, filling his pipe with fresh tobacco from a pouch. 'With a good many of those you see around us. Until the bell was rung and we were sent to our homes. If Gladstone hadn't had his way we'd still be there now.' The two men shared the joke, O'Sheehy jabbing his companion in the ribs with an elbow.

Bowman sighed. William Gladstone had believed alcohol to be the curse of the working man. To curb his excesses, he had enacted a Bill while Prime Minister to close public houses in the towns and cities at midnight.

‘Then you had but two hours’ sleep?’ Bowman’s raised eyebrow was enough to betray his scepticism.

‘Does no harm once a week,’ O’Sheehy proclaimed, airily. ‘We don’t keep Scotland Yard hours here, inspector.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘We work hard and we play hard.’

As a preliminary interview, it had yielded nothing. Bowman nodded in understanding, tipping his hat in thanks as he snapped his notebook shut. With an impending sense of futility, he moved to the next stall. He was confronted by a frail looking man with mean eyes and a shifty countenance. He introduced himself as Griffiths and retold the same story almost word for word.

‘I closed the stall as the bells struck four, inspector,’ his voice had a nasal quality to it which under other circumstances could have been described as comical. ‘Not a minute later. I know there are some here who will stay to mop up the dregs of custom but, as I always say, a day’s work is a day’s work.’ Bowman couldn’t help but agree, pencil poised for anything of import. ‘I passed Hibbert on my way out. I said nothing to him,’ Griffiths’ voice rose as if in anticipation of a dramatic climax. ‘And he said nothing to me.’ He folded his arms, in the clear hope of saying nothing more.

‘And then?’ asked Bowman.

Quite predictably, the man lifted a bony digit to point beyond the market’s entrance. ‘I had an evening at The Bishop’s Finger with Boothby. Me and a few others here go way back with him. Ask around, inspector, you’ll find I was in good company. We sometimes need a pint or two to get us fettle after a busy day.’ He threw Bowman a defiant look. It was plain he considered the interview to be at an end.

Bowman suspected that every trader in the market would tell the same tale. He was happy to be disabused of the notion at the next stall along. The young man at the counter was busy at his trade. A sharp knife was brought to bear on a cut of beef. Bowman took the time to stand and watch the youth at his work. With expert skill, he cut around the bones, removing them without a trace of meat attached. The resulting joint was rolled and skewered, with a layer of fat held in place with string.

‘Fine work,’ Bowman offered in admiration.

The young man lifted his gaze to meet the inspector. He was the first of the traders to offer his hand in greeting. Bowman felt he should reciprocate.

‘Stanley Kelley,’ the man announced, pointing with his free hand to an ornate sign above his stall. There his name was emblazoned, along with the legend ‘A Butcher To Trust’.

Reaching for his notebook, Bowman paused with his hand in his pocket. Perhaps it might be better to just converse with the man. ‘Been here long?’ he enquired.

‘Since Christmas,’ Kelley replied, carrying the joint of beef to a shelf. ‘It was busy enough but a butcher’s trade is not a way to get rich.’ He lay a leg of lamb upon the block and set about it with a cleaver. ‘I’m hoping you’ll get this market open soon so I can make enough to keep a family.’

‘You have children?’ The man was clearly older than he looked.

‘Three of the blighters.’ Despite the tone in his voice, Kelley’s eyes lit up as he spoke of them. ‘The oldest, Molly, she’s five now. Then I have twins of two years old. They’d eat all the contents of my stall if I let ’em.’ He winked at the inspector, a charming smile bringing colour to his cheeks. ‘And I probably would.’

‘You take pride in your work, I see.’

Kelley was wiping his hands on his apron. ‘Couldn’t face me missus if I didn’t. She’s with the bairns all day, bless her. I couldn’t go home to her at nights if I’d spent the day skiving.’

Bowman couldn’t help but smile. Every now and then, but rarely, he would meet a man or woman in the course of his duties who restored a faith in humanity. Heaven knows he needed it. Stanley Kelley was just such a man, and all the more welcome in this investigation for it. ‘The Empire would be a better place with more like you at its vanguard, Kelley.’

Kelley’s eyes lit up at the remark. ‘I’d agree with that, inspector. There are too many men content to sit back and play the country for a fool.’ He leaned in conspiratorially, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. ‘There are many here to whom I would ascribe such behaviour. Men who are not afraid to break the law for a profit.’ He moved back to his block again, sharpening his blade on a stone. ‘Not me, inspector. Sweat and hard work will see us through,’ he was back at his work again, deftly slicing meat from the bone before him. ‘And put meat on my table, too.’

‘Could you tell me where you were last night?’

‘I was where you’ll find me every night. In the warmth of my own bed with my family about me.’

Bowman nodded in thanks and looked about him. Perhaps Graves was having better luck. Whistling through his teeth in exasperation, Bowman returned to Hibbert’s stall to look through the ledger. There were over a hundred stalls numbered in its greasy pages. His heart sank at the thought of addressing every man inside them. If Hicks had still been here he could have sent back to the Yard for manpower. He made a mental note to reprimand the man upon his return. Looking up, he saw Sergeant Graves approaching. He was shaking his head in despair.

‘This is like a labour of Hercules. If truth be told, I’d rather be tasked with catching the Cretan Bull than taking statements from every man here.’

‘Agreed,’ concurred Bowman sadly.

‘And if I hear the word ‘fettled’ once more,’ continued Graves, frustrated, ‘I shall not be responsible for my actions.’ The sentiment was all the more surprising given Graves’ usually cheerful disposition.

‘You heard that, too?’

Graves nodded. 'I'd never known the word before, yet I've heard it four times in the last forty minutes. Heaven alone knows what it means.'

Bowman lifted his hat to smooth his troubled brow with the back of a hand. 'They've been schooled by someone.'

'Why?' Graves looked around him, suddenly seeing the market and its traders in a new light.

'There's a young man in stall number thirty-one,' Bowman traced his finger along the names in the ledger. 'Stanley Kelley.' He tapped the name in the book. 'He seemed to suggest there are those amongst the traders who are not as honest as they could be. Perhaps Solomon Hibbert was one of the worst.'

Turning from Hibbert's stall, Bowman's attention was drawn to the steps by the market entrance. He was presented with a doleful sight. There sat Archie Walton, the young butcher's boy who had found his master on the hook that morning.

'He's got nothing, sir.' Graves cast a saddened look in the boy's direction. 'And no other traders will touch him.'

'Where will he go?' Bowman's moustache was twitching. It seemed to him that Archie was an incidental casualty of the night's events. The inspector felt sorry for him.

'The street?' suggested Graves, matter-of-factly.

Bowman thought for a moment. 'Sergeant Graves, I'm going to The Bishop's Finger to speak with whomsoever I can concerning these men's stories. I'm of a mind to take him with me for a plate of eels. How would that please him, do you think?'

A wide smile spread all over Graves' face as he considered the proposition. 'I should imagine it would please him greatly,' he beamed.

The Bishop's Finger stood not even a stone's throw from the market. Crossing the road at West Smithfield, Archie Walton could barely contain his excitement. It was an airy, welcoming establishment with an ornate bar and a fine selection of ales. As the two men sat at a table by the window with their charge, an order was made for two jars of ale and a plate of jellied eels.

'Take us through your day, Archie.' Bowman was leaning forward, one hand on Boothby's ledger as the boy ate.

'I open the stall at the stroke of two. Never early, never late. The carts are there by then and I show the men where the stock should go. They'd leave it on the block more often as not and Hibbert would hang it when he arrived.'

'What time would that be?'

'Always on the half hour.'

'Why so?' Graves took a sip from his jar, leaving a moustache of foam on his upper lip.

'He reckoned havin' been so long at his trade, he had earned an extra half hour in bed. Can I ask you a question now, inspector?'

Bowman shared a look with his companion. The boy had spirit.

‘Anything.’ Bowman spread his hands wide in supplication.

‘What did the other inspector mean by talking of Lambeth Bridge?’

Graves spluttered on his beer. Bowman suddenly felt very hot. Pulling at his collar with his fingers, he swallowed hard. Of course, Archie had been mere feet away during his altercation with Hicks at the market. He chose to ignore the question. ‘Graves, would you call the barmaid over? Let’s see if she remembers anything of her customers last night.’

Grateful for the diversion, Graves looked around. He fixed on a comely woman cleaning glasses at the bar. Her hair was heaped up on her head, a pinafore tied tight around her waist serving only to accentuate her generous shape. He downed the last of his beer and wiped his mouth salaciously on the back of his hand. Eyes gleaming, he swaggered to the bar to engage the lady in conversation. Ignoring Archie’s look of confusion, Bowman went on.

‘The market opens at seven o’clock. What would you do for those five hours?’

‘Hibbert would cut and saw the meat.’ Alfie slurped on his eels, spooning the liquor into his eager mouth as he talked. ‘I’d dress it for the counter, mop the floor and scrub the block. Sometimes run errands.’

‘Until noon, when you would be let go?’

‘And I’d be in me bed by ten minutes past. That’d be me done in for the day.’

‘Where do you live, Archie?’ Bowman leaned back from the table.

‘Limeburner Lane. Me and me sister found a room.’

Bowman imagined what a life the boy must lead. By rights he should have been in the workhouse. There at least he would have been schooled. And yet he was doing well enough. He’d found a roof for his head at night, and even an apprenticeship to a trade. Bowman had a feeling that, his present circumstances resolved, Archie would do well. He resisted the urge to ruffle the lad’s hair.

‘This is Lily.’ Bowman turned to see Graves had brought the barmaid over. She twisted her cloth in her hands nervously. ‘It’s alright, Lily,’ Graves soothed. ‘Just tell the inspector what you told me.’

‘They was in here right enough. Seven of ’em there was, sat at that long table there.’ She pointed at the long trestle nearest the fire. ‘Drinking and swearing, like they was ’appy with themselves. Came in about four and left at the bell.’

‘Was that unusual?’ Bowman looked up at the girl from where he sat.

‘Not so much. Though maybe during the week. Their normal night’s a Friday, on account of ’em not openin’ at the weekend.’ Bowman allowed himself a wry smile. O’Sheehy’s jibe at ‘Scotland Yard hours’ suddenly rang rather hollow. ‘And there’s normally eight o’them, too. They take up the whole table.’

‘Would you know them if you saw them?’

‘O’course! Spent all me time trying to keep their hands off me, didn’t I?’

‘And you are certain there were seven of them?’ Bowman’s voice had

taken on a tone Graves recognised. He was on to something, he knew.

'I'm not so daft as I can't count. If I say there was seven of 'em, then seven there was.' Lily turned with a harrumph and strutted back to the bar and her business, clearly trying her best to look as insulted as possible. Not so insulted though, noticed Bowman, that she didn't find the time to give Sergeant Graves another look as she passed. The sergeant took his seat at the table, dismissing Bowman's look with a wave of his hand. The inspector had Boothby's ledger open at the table now, leafing through its pages with a look of concentration on his face.

'The men we spoke to all said Boothby had been here with them last night,' he muttered, almost to himself.

'Who's to say he wasn't?' Graves was trying to follow Bowman's train of thought.

'Lily, for one.' Smoothing the pages open with a hand, Bowman directed Graves' attention to a table of numbers and names, all written in an angular, spidery hand.

'Here's a list of stalls, from one to a hundred and eight,' he explained. 'Together with an inventory of the names attached to them. Sergeant Graves, which of the men did you interview in the course of your duties earlier?'

Graves had drawn a notebook from his pocket. 'One man at number thirty-five, one at thirty-six and two at thirty-seven.'

Bowman rattled off their names from the ledger, 'Prentice, Adams, Wallace and Samuelson.'

'They all said they were here last night,' Graves confirmed, leaning over the ledger to read further. 'Johns and Carter at thirty-eight had both gone home to their wives, Hudson at thirty-nine met his sweetheart at Covent Garden.'

Bowman nodded. 'I spoke to O'Sheehy and his lad at thirty-three and Griffiths at thirty-two. All three said they were here last night. To get fettle after a day's graft.'

'Then there's our seven,' Graves concluded.

Bowman turned to his companion, his eyes alive with the thrill of the moment. 'Then where was Boothby when Hibbert died?' Bowman was about to slam the ledger shut, but something in its pages had evidently caught Graves' attention.

'Wait, sir, see here.' He was pointing to the rows next to each numbered stall. Tracing up with his finger, he could see each entry in the row denoted the rent each trader had paid to Boothby on each successive week.

'What of it, Graves? It's as you would expect, a list of the rents paid for the market stalls.'

'I'm not looking at what has been written, sir, I'm looking at how it's been written.'

Bowman angled the ledger to the window, the better to see what was written there. In the morning light, it was clear what Graves had meant. Each entry had been written in the same ink until November the twenty third. A

different ink had been employed from then on. That was nothing unusual in itself, thought Bowman, but placing the book in the light had brought Graves' point into sharp relief. The new ink had started earlier along Hibbert's row, from September of the last year.

'What do you think that means, sir?' Graves' eyes were wide in thought.

'One of two things, Graves. Either Boothby used a different ink for Hibbert, and only Hibbert, for two months. Or, he went back later and filled in blank entries so as not to appear suspicious.'

Graves was confused. 'Why would there be blank spaces? Surely Hibbert paid his rent each week?'

'I can't imagine Boothby giving him anything but short shrift if he didn't.' Bowman was suddenly all action. 'Come on Graves,' he barked, snatching his hat from the table. 'We need to get that market open.'

'But you gave the order that the gates should be shut. I told Boothby myself.' Graves couldn't help but be incredulous.

Bowman turned. 'They're traders, Graves. So let them trade!' The inspector left the table with a flurry, leaving Sergeant Graves to gulp down the last of his pint and Archie Walton to finish his eels.

'The man's not worth the bother,' proclaimed Arthur Boothby, his flat northern vowels all the broader in his passion. 'The market's better off without him.'

'He was murdered, Mr Boothby,' Bowman sounded an exasperated note. 'And violently at that.' He stood opposite the market manager in his office high above the trading floor. Below them, the public had at last been allowed to enter and they flooded in as if a dam had burst. They spilled into every corner with a bustling, eager activity. The inspector had surprised Sergeant Graves with his sudden insistence that the market be opened, but Bowman was formulating a plan. In order for it to work, each butcher would have to sell his wares today in order that another delivery would be made that night. He was pleased to see from his vantage that trading was brisk. To his left, a parade of sheep was fetching a good price at auction. To his right, O'Sheehy was haggling with his customer over a consignment of beef.

'For The Savoy, no less,' remarked Boothby, joining Bowman at the window. 'They do their business with us and us only. They're renowned for their beef as you may know, inspector.' Boothby knew the menu at The Savoy to be well out of reach of a detective's salary. 'Well, that beef comes from our market. And the commission doesn't harm, neither,' he winked. 'Did you make much progress on the floor?'

'I did,' Bowman lied. He was never one to show his hand, especially if he was lacking in the crucial cards. 'Mr Boothby, could you assure me you were at The Bishop's Finger last night?'

'I can that. I went for a drink with some of the men. I go back years with O'Sheehy and his boy. Aye, and some others, too. We make a point of drinking together once in a while.' He narrowed his eyes. 'Is that a crime,

inspector?’

Bowman took the time to look around the office. A large, ostentatious desk was set against a far wall, laden with piles and sheaves of paper. A battered, leather chair stood behind, its upholstery torn and tattered. This was the only furniture save a simple wooden chair for visitors and three sets of shelves that groaned under the weight of boxes and files stuffed to bursting with yet more paper. Windows at either side gave out to the market. As Boothby stood at the centre of the room, his eyes darting occasionally to the traders as they went about their business below, he looked to Bowman like nothing less than a spider at the centre of its web. Bowman was sure the man was alive to every quiver on every thread, perhaps with an intent just as deadly. He slammed the ledger down on the table by way of a response. Two or three papers fluttered to the floor. Boothby’s eyebrows twitched in agitation.

‘You are thorough in your bookkeeping, Mr Boothby?’ Bowman looked directly at the man, watching for any signs of hesitation.

‘That I am, inspector,’ Boothby sighed. He spoke slowly and deliberately, as if for the benefit of an elderly relative. ‘There’s men down there that rely upon it.’

‘You collect the rent each week?’

‘I do.’

Bowman nodded, leafing through the pages of the ledger until he reached the list of names he had noticed in The Bishop’s Finger. ‘What does this table represent, Mr Boothby?’ he asked, simply.

Boothby snorted. Could a Scotland Yarder be so devoid of nous? ‘That is the table of payments, inspector. You’ll see from there that every man must pay on a Friday.’

‘And they are all up to date?’

‘They are.’ Boothby had folded his arms across his not insubstantial chest.

‘Could you tell me why Solomon Hibbert ceased paying his rent in September of last year, yet you allowed him to continue at your market?’

The silence was palpable. Bowman felt he could reach out into the room and touch it. Arthur Boothby cleared his throat. Bowman knew he was buying time.

‘Well, inspector, I see you have the better of me.’

‘Hibbert’s row in the table was originally blank from September twenty first,’ Bowman continued. ‘Yet you went back and filled in those spaces with another ink, which you started using in November.’ Boothby’s eyes were darting about him. He had the demeanour of a trapped man. ‘Why?’ Boothby was tight-lipped. The inspector ploughed on. ‘He had not paid his rent in nine weeks, Mr Boothby. In fact, I would venture that he had not paid his rent from that day to this. How could you countenance such a thing?’

Boothby stood swaying slowly on his feet. With a slow, deliberate movement, he loped towards his chair and flung his weight upon it. ‘I’m a charitable man, Inspector Bowman. You’re right about the rent. Hibbert hadn’t paid me since September. I altered the ledger to save myself. If the

other traders twigged he'd been getting his stall gratis, they'd be all over me like flies at a window. Truth be told, I was on the point of throwing him out. Enough is enough, Inspector Bowman, and Hibbert had been tweaking me by the nose for too long. He was a scoundrel and a drunk, and I let him take advantage of my better nature.' Boothby tried his best to affect a pious air. 'I knew he was poor. He'd drunk his money away and scarcely had enough to pay his boy.' Bowman knew he was lying. Mrs Hibbert's dress and collection of trinkets, let alone the box of money beneath her hearth, spoke of a wealthier man than Boothby was painting. 'I dare say he owed money elsewhere too, and it was that that got him fettled.'

The sudden tilt in Bowman's head was almost imperceptible. 'Fettled?' he echoed back, raising an eyebrow.

Boothby laughed. 'Fixed, inspector. Sorted. It's a hang-up from the old country. I've lived in London almost thirty years, yet still I'm drawn to the northern way of things. Hibbert was fettled; sorted good and proper.'

'The men I interviewed this morning spoke of having a drink to fettle them after a day at the market.'

Boothby's eyes glittered in defiance. 'So?'

'Why would they say such a thing, unless they had been schooled to say so?'

There was a pause as Boothby considered what next to do. 'I am a busy man, inspector,' he began, rising to his feet. 'As I expect are you. If you are done with your questions, I had rather get to work. There is, after all, a market to run.' Boothby gestured to the crowds out the window.

'Of course.' Bowman placed his hat back on his head and straightened his coat about him. It was clear he'd get no more from Boothby. As he descended the steps from the manager's office, he mulled their conversation over in his mind. Boothby was hiding something, that much was certain. Why did Hibbert refuse to pay his rent though he had money enough? How to explain where his money had come from? Frustratingly, his short interview with Arthur Boothby had furnished him more questions than answers.

The temperature had plummeted. Much to Graves' surprise, Inspector Bowman had called a halt to the investigation immediately following his interview with Boothby.

'There is nothing further to be done, Graves,' Bowman knocked sawdust of his hat as they walked back to Farringdon Street station. 'At least not until tonight.' Even here on the platform, the ripe smell of livestock hung in the air. Bowman knew the line was shared with Smithfield Market, used as a boarding point for newly purchased cattle on their way to the slaughterhouses and abattoirs around London. 'Go home for now, Graves.' The inspector had to raise his voice against the squeal of an oncoming Metropolitan Railway train. Steam and dust filled the platform as it hissed to a halt before them. They took their seats.

'For now, sir?' Graves wiped soot from his eyes.

‘Yes, Graves. We’ve got a long night ahead.’

‘How so, sir?’

They felt the motion of the train as it pulled away from the platform and into the labyrinth of tunnels that would take it, ultimately, to Paddington.

‘It’s clear Hibbert had a hold over Boothby somehow. How else could he have withheld his rent and not been ejected from the market? Yet Boothby went to some lengths to cover up the fact.’

‘By altering the records in the ledger.’ Graves was nodding, slowly.

‘What doesn’t he want us to know, Graves? And just where was Hibbert’s money coming from?’

‘I suppose with no rent to pay, he was a sight better off than the other traders.’

Bowman smoothed his wide moustache with a finger and thumb, his frown cutting deep on his forehead. ‘There’s more to it than that, Graves. There was more in that tin than I could earn in a six month. Get yourself home, brush the sawdust from your clothes and get some sleep. It might be a long night.’

The sky above them was clear. Stars pricked the sky. A full moon lit the way as Bowman and Graves moved carefully through Middle Street into Cloth Fair. They had both made something of an effort by way of disguise. Sergeant Graves wore a shabby cap and overcoat with a greasy apron tied around his waist. Inspector Bowman peered out from under a shapeless, felt hat. His lean figure was swamped in a pair of overalls and a tradesman’s coat. He was confident that, provided they kept out of the way of Boothby and the other men they had spoken to, they would not be recognised. The bustle would be such that they could observe unnoticed. At least, that was the hope.

Already they could hear the cries of the deliverymen and the traders at the market. The moaning of cattle mixed with the occasional bleat from the lambs as livestock was corralled into pens within the huge structure before them. The Grand Avenue was crowded with men laden with cuts of meat, livestock being herded to their enclosures and marshals and foremen pointing the way. Through it all, Bowman could see Arthur Boothby. He was standing on an upturned crate, directing proceedings with a cane. Ticking off items in his ledger as they arrived, he was clearly in his element. Pages were drawn from the leather pouch at his side and handed to traders and deliverymen for signing. Now and then, his flat northern vowels would sing out with a command or a jest to be answered with a laugh, a curse or an oath from one or other of the traders around him.

‘What are we looking for, sir?’ The two men had stepped back into a doorway across the road.

‘Anything out of the ordinary, Graves.’ Bowman had pulled his hat further down his head and turned up the collar on his coat, the better to hide his face. ‘If we get separated, we’ll meet at St. Sepulchre’s.’ Graves nodded in understanding. Keeping to what shadows there were, the two detectives stepped across the road behind a passing cart. Three sheep stared balefully out

at them as it rattled past. Comically, Graves raised a finger to his lips to bid them quiet. He smiled at Bowman, impressed at his own joke. The pair slunk close to the edge of the great entrance, timing their movements with when there was the most activity around them. Stepping carefully through the dung and straw, they made their way off the Grand Avenue and into the market proper.

‘You there!’ A voice rang out amongst the hubbub, coarse and commanding. ‘Hey!’ The two men paused. To ignore such a shout would be to arouse suspicion. Bowman adopted an affected nonchalance as Graves turned to face a thickset man with half a pig slung over his shoulder.

‘Make yerself useful,’ he rasped. ‘And get this pig to number thirty-eight.’

Graves seemed to relish the opportunity. Stepping forward eagerly, he took the weight of the carcass and shrugged it over his shoulder. ‘Then get yerself back to the cart,’ continued the man, oblivious. ‘There’s more to be carried and we’re short on time.’ He cleared his throat. Spitting phlegm to the floor, he wiped his mouth with a sleeve, jammed a soggy cigarette between his teeth and loped back towards the entrance and his cart.

Graves turned to Bowman so the pig and he were face to face. ‘Looks like I’ve got the perfect cover, sir.’

‘Very good, Graves,’ Bowman swallowed hard to quell his disgust. ‘You’re a natural.’

‘Hang about, sir,’ Graves’ voice had fallen to a whisper and he gave a nod to a corner across the hall, ‘What’s going on over there?’

Bowman turned to where Graves had gestured. Away from the crowd, a single cart stood by the farthest wall. Looking about him, Bowman could see the majority of traders were avoiding it. Some affected sideways glances or shook their heads as they saw it. Others nodded and shrugged or rolled their eyes to their colleagues. The cart was clearly the subject of some discussion, but no one seemed keen to approach it. No one, except the seven men who presently rounded a corner, rubbing their hands with anticipation. They were led by a portly man with a shock of ginger hair and a pipe.

‘O’Sheehy,’ breathed Bowman. ‘And his lad. That man behind them is Griffiths. I spoke to him this morning.’

‘As did I the other four.’ Graves had manoeuvred himself so as to be hidden behind the pig at his shoulder.

‘What are they doing at that cart, Graves? And why is it being given such a wide berth by the others?’

‘Only one way to find out, sir.’ Before the inspector could object, Graves had stepped out into the throng, using the pig as a shield as he skirted round the hall to the farthest corner. Glancing to the men once more, Bowman could see them being led to the back of the cart by the driver. He pulled aside a blood-stained sheet to reveal a pile of meat. The men nodded their heads with enthusiasm and shook the man by the hand before each taking a substantial joint of meat and slinging it over their shoulders. Bowman watched aghast as Graves neared the cart. As the men staggered back to their stalls with their

load, he saw his companion discard his pig in a pile of hessian sacks. Keeping low, Graves rounded the cart. Choosing his moment as the driver mounted the cab, the young detective sergeant ran for the trailer and flung himself under the bloodied sheet. Bowman fought back the urge to shout an objection. With a crack of his whip and a whistle, the driver bade his horse move on. Bowman shrunk back into the shadows as the cart gained speed. It kicked up dirt and dung as it passed, the traders regarding it suspiciously as it rattled away. Bowman raised his eyes to the ceiling and hissed through gritted teeth.

‘Graves...’

Detective Sergeant Anthony Graves lay low. He had felt every bump and rut in the road as he was carried along the narrow streets around Smithfield. Only once had he feared discovery. The cart had slowed as they left the market and Graves heard Boothby’s distinctive vowels but a few feet away.

‘Drive safe now, Absolom. I take it you’ve left us some nice, choice cuts this morning?’

Graves heard a chuckle from the driver and then the whip cracked again. With a jerk, they left the market at speed, careening round the corner onto West Smithfield. Graves tried to keep a track of their direction. Once or twice he peered through a hole in the sheet, but beyond Clerkenwell Road he had lost his bearings. Some forty minutes passed. Every muscle in his body complained at being held in such a cramped condition on such a cold night. Just as he feared he would freeze, Graves felt the cart slow. They were passing over rougher ground now, and Graves hazarded they had left the main road. Daring to peek from beneath the sheet, he saw that they were now in open country. At the speed they had travelled, Graves guessed a distance of some eight to ten miles had been traversed. In which direction, he knew not. They passed a forbidding farmhouse and pulled up beside an old outbuilding at which the driver jumped from his seat. From his cramped location, Graves watched as the man disappeared inside. A lamp was lit at a window. The sergeant waited a few minutes then slowly pulled the sheet back. Crouching low, he dropped from the trailer and ran to a nearside wall, being sure to keep his body flat against the brickwork. He took the time to get his bearings. The outbuilding was of a single storey and backed onto a rough yard surrounded on three sides by a wall. Long wooden poles were slung along its length, each studded at intervals with chains. A dozen hulking shapes loomed from the darkness. Graves moved a step nearer, the better to peer into the gloom. As a cloud passed the moon, the shapes revealed themselves. They were horses. Graves knew they had seen him, but none seemed to have the strength to react. Approaching carefully, he saw that they were old and grizzled. One had protruding ribs and running sores upon its back, another had legs so thin Graves feared they would snap at any moment. Looking about him he saw one on the floor. The unfortunate creature was lying prone in the dirt, its sides rising and falling in time to a hideous rattle. Clearly, the beasts were near death. Graves uttered a soothing word or two under his breath then mad his

way to the end of the yard. There, in an unceremonious heap by the door of a smaller building, was a pile of bones. Shoulder blades protruded from the mire, great leg bones lay in haphazard heaps. A horse's skull lay on top of a pile, its sightless sockets staring blankly into the night. Graves shuddered at the sight.

Putting his shoulder to the door, he eased into the shed behind the yard to be greeted by a stench like nothing he had ever known. It stung his eyes and caught in his throat. Before him in the gloom, he could just make out a great, steaming vat. A viscous liquid bubbled and popped within. To his right he saw a long butcher's block piled high with rough cuts of meat. Graves had seen enough. It was one thing if O'Sheehy and his ilk had been fraudulently selling horse meat at Smithfield Market. That the meat had its source at such a wretched and despicable charnel house was another matter entirely. A hand held over his face to stifle the smell, Graves made his way from the shed and into the yard once more. He regarded the horses sadly, standing for a moment in silence with them. Then, his face a mask of resolve, he took a breath to steel himself.

landmark to guide him back to London. As he rattled through the gate, Graves noticed a hand-painted sign fixed to the fence at a crazy angle. Pushing the horse to give him yet more speed, he nonetheless had time to read the words printed on it as he passed; HARRY ABSOLOM, KNACKER'S YARD.

St. Sepulchre's stood like a sentinel in the night. A haven of divinity in an area given to carnal fulfillment, it had withstood fire and plague and civil war. Inspector Bowman stood regarding the altar, lifting his eyes to the crucifix above. The figure of Christ was a fragile thing. How could such a slight figure withstand such pain, he wondered. How could anyone bear such pain? Bowman fought the inclination to kneel. He would not bend or he would break. For a moment she was with him, her hand on his shoulder, her head inclined to his. She met his gaze and smoothed the furrow at his brow. And with a kiss, she was gone. Bowman felt alone. Turning about, he saw Sergeant Graves walking briskly through the transept door, his footsteps echoing up to the vaulted ceiling.

'That was reckless, Graves,' Bowman admonished him as he approached.

'Desperate times called for desperate measures, sir.'

'That's as may be, sergeant,' Bowman snapped. 'But I had rather you consult me first before embarking on such adventures.'

'Some adventure,' Graves sighed.

'What did you find?' Bowman asked.

'Hell, inspector.' Graves had lost his customary smile. 'I found Hell.'

The Empire might well span half the globe, mused Arthur Boothby as he stood at the top of the steps leading to his office, but he could give it a run for its money. Looking below him, he felt a sense of pride at his dominion. Counters groaned with meat in anticipation of the day's trade, butchers stood

poised for the sale, cuts of every size hung from every wall. To his right, livestock awaited their fate, their nostrils steaming in anticipation. Shepherds and farmers gathered in knots to talk. And, over it all, Arthur Boothby held sway. Walking down the steps to the main gates, Boothby let his eyes wander from stall to stall. Few traders met his eye, some even looked away as he passed. No matter. If they wanted a stall at Smithfield they'd have to lump him. He chuckled to himself, his mean mouth stretching into something resembling a smile. The Scotland Yarders had disappeared as fast as they had come. Boothby fancied the Bowman fellow had given it up as a bad job. With Hibbert out the way, all was clear. In a little less than ten years, Boothby mused, he would leave the market and buy a smallholding near the sea back in the old country. Morecambe Bay had always been a favourite, and he fancied he might live out his final days in comfort, staring at the sea from his modest house. Now he must be certain that O'Sheehy and his gang would be true to their word. Perhaps Hibbert might prove an example to them. Pulling a chain of keys from his pocket, Boothby put a hand to the gates to steady himself. It was going to be a busy day.

'Let's leave those shut, shall we?' Feeling a hand at his shoulder, Boothby turned to find himself face to face with Sergeant Graves. 'Inspector Bowman wants a word.' The sergeant stepped aside to reveal the inspector standing some way off. Beside him stood O'Sheehy and his lad, Griffiths, Prentice, Adams, Wallace and Samuelson.

'The market's sealed, Boothby. No one's coming or going.' Bowman had his hands in his pockets, his coat pulled tight around him.

'The game's up, Arthur.' O'Sheehy's Irish drawl was thick with defeat. The seven men behind the inspector looked downcast, their shoulders slumped in dejection.

'They've as good as confessed, Boothby,' Bowman called.

Boothby sensed he was trapped. With his back to the gates he had nowhere to run. 'Confessed to what?' he hissed.

Bowman took a step forward, the lamps on the wall behind him lengthening his shadow across the floor. 'To being accessories to the murder of Solomon Hibbert.'

Looking about him, Boothby could see a crowd was gathering. Traders were leaving their stalls to watch the proceedings. 'Then take them away and lock 'em up!'

Graves was smiling at him now. 'He said accessories to murder. There's another who took the lead.'

Boothby stared wildly about him. 'Then catch him! String him up!'

'They might yet do that, Arthur.' O'Sheehy was holding up a conciliatory hand. 'Give it up, man.'

Boothby appealed to the detectives. 'But I was at The Bishop's Finger all that night. The men'll tell you that.' At the mention of the public house, Bowman stood aside to admit another. A young woman took his place, blinking into the cold, morning air. The crowd exchanged nudges. Graves'

eyes grew wide. Swathed in a coat and scarf, Lily looked all the more voluptuous. By rights she should be warm in her bed, she thought, but this inspector chap was quite the persistent sort.

‘Lily,’ Bowman was saying, ‘do you know these men?’

Lily looked around at the ramshackle group. ‘Know ’em? I spend half me time tryin’ to avoid ’em.’ The spectators laughed at this. Lily, enjoying her audience, gifted them a smile.

‘Could you tell me,’ Bowman continued, ‘which of these men were at The Bishop’s Finger the night before last?’

Lily looked around and raised an arm to point at each man in the group. As her accusing finger damned them in turn, they each looked to the ground.

Bowman raised an eyebrow in mock enquiry. ‘But not Mr Boothby?’

Lily shook her head, ‘No, not him. Not that night.’

Boothby stood stock-still. ‘Your story was a lie, was it not, Mr Boothby?’ Bowman was circling him now. ‘Cooked up to cover your absence. It was unfortunate that none of your gang had the wit to find their own words.’

‘To what end?’ Boothby demanded, his arms wide. ‘Why would I want Hibbert dead?’

Bowman turned his head to his companion. ‘Graves?’

‘I took a little ride this morning, Mr Boothby. Or rather, I was taken.’

‘What is this?’ Boothby jeered.

‘The inspector and I were party to some unusual activity last night,’ Graves continued, ‘Right here at Smithfield Market. While your traders took their deliveries in the small hours of the morning, we found a Mr Harry Absolom plying his trade.’ Boothby blanched at the name. ‘I jumped his cart. As you bid him have a safe journey, I lay under a sheet just four feet from you.’ Graves smiled again. Boothby’s eyes darted left and right, thinking through the repercussions of the sergeant’s words.

‘We know your deal with Absolom,’ Bowman was face to face with Boothby now. ‘And so did Hibbert. Didn’t he, Mr Boothby?’

Boothby remained tight-lipped.

‘Hibbert wasn’t happy,’ O’Sheehy interjected. ‘We all knew that. The inspector tells me he stopped paying rent in protest, but that you covered it up so we wouldn’t know.’ Fists clenched before him, it was clear O’Sheehy was itching for a fight.

‘He threatened to expose us!’ roared Boothby, cornered. ‘What would you have me do?’

‘You paid him hush money,’ O’Sheehy was flexing his hands. ‘Our money.’

The traders around them had started to protest and jeer. ‘We knew there was something crooked going on,’ declared one. ‘We wanted no part of it,’ proclaimed another.

Bowman understood. ‘Stanley Kelley!’ he called. A young man stepped forward, his face a mask of defiance. Bowman clapped a hand upon his shoulder. ‘This is Stanley Kelley. An upright man if ever there was one. And I

should imagine there are many more such men here.' Shouts of agreement rang out.

'You have debased our trade.' Kelley's lip was quivering with emotion.

'It's only horse meat!' Boothby threw back his head and roared. 'It's good enough for the Frenchies.'

'Good enough for The Savoy, would you say?' Bowman's moustache twitched. 'That meat is culled under such conditions as to be unsafe. It is not fit for consumption. That alone would be enough to see you lose your licence.'

Voices rang out to punctuate the morning air, 'Take it off him!' called one.

'As low as he was,' continued Bowman, the crowd at his back, 'Hibbert would not see his trade perverted. But soon, you lost your patience. Concocting a story to protect yourself, you sent your men to The Bishop's Finger while you lay in wait. Alice Hibbert told me of your weekly meetings, after which her husband would return with fists full of notes.'

'Our money!' snorted O'Sheehy, his feet scuffing the ground.

'Two nights ago, Hibbert left for his meeting, but he was never to return.' The crowd was silent now. They may have shared no love for Hibbert, but none amongst them would have seen him harmed. 'You set about him, did you not?' Bowman looked around at the butcher's stalls. Each had the instruments of their trade hung from hooks. 'It is not hard to see where you might have found your weapons.'

'He put up a fight, for sure,' Boothby relented, his shoulders slumped.

'And then O'Sheehy and the others returned from the inn to help you carry him here.' Bowman was toe to toe with him again. 'Only you had the keys to the gate.' Bowman held out a hand. Boothby hesitated before handing over the keys. The inspector's hand closed around them. 'Your men stuck him on a hook,' he continued. 'As a warning to others to hold their tongue. It took four men to get him down, I dare say it would have taken double to get him up, slippery with blood as he was.'

There were murmurings amongst the crowd.

'He deserves to hang,' said Kelley, his eyes ablaze. 'They all do.'

Boothby looked about him, suddenly exposed. He would never go down at the hands of a baying mob. His eyes fell on O'Sheehy. The Irishman had broken ranks. Whatever he had told the inspector, it had been too much. Boothby felt his blood rising and the prospect of a comfortable retirement in Morecambe Bay slipping away. With a roar, he charged at the man, barrelling into him at speed. Caught off guard, O'Sheehy fell to the floor with a thud, his head cracking hard against the stone.

At a signal from Bowman, Graves took a whistle from his pocket and blew. There was an immediate stillness in the market. Even Boothby let his quarry go in surprise. O'Sheehy took the advantage of the moment to punch his assailant square in the jaw. Approaching footsteps could be heard from around the corner near the market entrance. They were running.

Bowman sprung to the gate, deftly turning the key in the lock to admit half

a dozen constables in uniform and Detective Inspector Ignatius Hicks. As the constables ran to apprehend the gang under Graves' direction, Hicks approached Bowman with a swagger.

'Well done, Inspector Bowman,' he breathed. Bowman was careful to show no emotion. 'Of course, I would have had all this wrapped up if you'd called upon me sooner.'

'Indeed,' agreed Bowman, deadpan. 'But I did not think it wise to disturb you at your breakfast.'

As the constables rounded up their charges, Bowman turned to Stanley Kelley and met his eye. 'Mr Kelley,' he called across the concourse. 'Get this market open and you may proceed with your trade.' With that, he threw him the keys and turned away, the faintest of smiles playing upon his lips.

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