

MONEY
POWER
LOVE

Joss Sheldon

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“Let us control the money of a nation, and we care not who makes its laws.”

HOUSE OF ROTHSCHILDS

INSPIRED BY REAL EVENTS

WRITTEN WITH FICTICIOUS LICENCE

BOOK ONE

**NATURE AND
NURTURE**

THE END

"Endings are not always bad. Most times they're just beginnings in disguise."

KIM HARRISON

Picture the scene, if you will...

Our three heroes are sitting in a traditional British pub. They do little to stand out. If you were to see them, you probably would not give them a second glance.

The first man sips half a pint of cheap ale. He is still on his second drink, despite his companions being on their fourth.

The second man, drinking whisky, spreads himself out across the booth. He takes up more space than the other two men combined.

The third man, mulling over the fine notes in his glass of claret, twirls a diamond-encrusted ring around his index finger.

These three men were once three babies, born on three adjacent beds, a mere three seconds apart. Their mothers had screamed in unison as they endured what were not so much three separate sets of labour pain, but one unified agony; an agony so immense, they all agreed it was three times greater than any pain womankind had ever known.

These three men were once three toddlers, who lived in three adjacent houses, which were each three metres wide. Each house had three windows. All three families shared a single latrine.

These three men had once been three teens. They had been three adults. You get the picture...

But these men are not toddlers, nor are they teens. Age has wizened them, serpentine scales have cut craggy ravines from their skin, grey has replaced colour, and baldness has replaced hair.

Their shared nature has not been forgotten; at times, it has been so strong that they have felt each other's emotions, as if those emotions were their own. They have always looked the same, and have often acted in a similar manner.

Yet nurture has triumphed over nature. Cast adrift by the whimsy of circumstance, our three heroes have been shaped by three very different sets of events, and three very different sets of people.

As a result, they have spent their lives chasing three very different goals.

This man here, his fingers moist with warm beer, has spent his life chasing love. This man, throwing back whiskies with conscious indifference, has spent his life chasing power. And this man, well, you must have guessed it by now. This man, with his diamond ring, has spent his life chasing money.

But to leave it there simply would not do. So let's start, as all good stories should, back at the very beginning...

THE CAULDRON

*"The fire inside me burned brighter than the fire
around me."*

Joshua Graham

Our story begins at three minutes past three, on the morning of the third of March, sometime in the late 1700s.

Everything was aflame, ablaze, and drenched in smoke. But the flames were too hot to feel, the blaze too bright to see, and the smoke too fragile to mount a case against the moonless sky.

Three terraced houses, built from one set of bricks, were falling victim to an infinity of flames. Three families, of common stock, were taking their final breaths.

How did this fire begin?

It would be easy to blame Mayer's father. Coming home late from the pub, intoxicated, with an alcohol soaked hunger, he placed a hunk of bread and the remains of a lamb shank in his oven. Turning to look for more liquor, he tripped over his toe, stumbled, fell, and knocked himself unconscious. There he remained, cradled in Azrael's arms, whilst bread turned to flames and meat turned to fury; spitting charcoal-flecked sparks out across the room.

But to lay the blame solely with that man would be to ignore the role played by Hugo's father. Whilst Mayer's father was stumbling, drunk, around his larder, Hugo's father was sound asleep; wrapped in a quilt he had inherited from a reclusive aunt. But that did not stop his flapping arm from knocking over the gas lamp on his bedside table. Nor did it stop that lamp from smashing onto the floor; igniting the clothes, tally sticks and books which had been scattered there during a night of frenzied copulation. Fuel sped across the floorboards, and flames gave chase.

Whilst Mayer's father was tripping, and Hugo's father was flapping, Archibald's father was pacing. Aimlessly wandering from one room to another, this would not have been an issue, had it not been for the fact that he was asleep. In his mind, he was doing his family's laundry; collecting their dirty undergarments and placing them in a bucket of soapy water. In reality, he was putting those clothes in a fire. When he sleepwalked back to bed, he left a trail of burning garments in his wake. Blazing socks joined the dots between blazing jumpers. Flaming knickers touched flaming shirts.

Whilst three fathers could have shouldered the blame for that fire, little Hugo could not. Asleep in his cot, Hugo's mind was consumed by his dreams. Those dreams were soon consumed by the flames. Hugo saw himself lighting fires in every room: Lighting lamps, torches, ovens and stoves. His dreams were so lifelike, so real, that Hugo was convinced he had lit those fires himself.

His family fell, unconscious, into the embrace of toxic smoke; smiling at death with angelic faces. But Hugo awoke with a jolt. Rattled by a sixth sense, his torso bolted forwards and his lungs thumped into his ribs; propelling him onto the floor, where he instinctively crawled outside.

Archibald and Mayer were also compelled by this impulse, which they felt in the same way, at the very same time. They too were jolted awake, thrown from their cribs, and propelled to crawl outside.

They reached the street, three seconds after the other, in the order they had been born.

By the time their parents and siblings had turned to ash, and the cinders of their homes had ceased to glow, our three heroes were surrounded by adults.

Archibald and Mayer answered every question they were asked. As a result, they were soon rehoused; Archibald with an uncle and aunt; Mayer with a woman who just happened to be passing.

But, overcome by an unbearable sense of guilt, Hugo was struck dumb. No matter how hard they tried, no-one could prise a word from his lips. The offer of sweet toffee, normally reserved for Christmas, could not encourage him to speak. Kisses, cuddles, pats, back rubs, tears, smiles, jokes, and other assorted pleas had no effect. Hugo refused to hold the stuffed toy which was thrust into his hands. He refused to react in any way.

Unable to help himself, no-one was able to help Hugo. The crowd shrugged, sent him to a distant workhouse, and departed the scene.

United by birth, our three heroes had been divided by tragedy. Their lives were about to head in three very different directions...

BUCKINGHAM TOWERS

"There are people who have money and people who are rich."

COCO CHANEL

So, what of Mayer?

Mayer would never forget the lightness he felt when he first entered Buckingham Towers; the semi-detached Camden townhouse his adopted parents called home. He felt like an alien, incapable of comprehending the new planet onto which he had stepped.

His eyes wandered from the upholstered settees to the inlaid cabinets; to the paraphernalia of gentility; the chintz and chinoiserie, doilies and drapes.

To Mayer, the dark, oak doors seemed older than time and heavier than space. The fact that every child in that house had their own bedroom seemed like wanton luxury. Even Molly, the house cat, was fed a better diet than Mayer had been accustomed to.

Mayer could barely comprehend what he was seeing.

Open mouthed, he allowed himself to be led inside. He said "Thank-you", rubbed the pins and needles from his feet, and collapsed.

Abe, Mayer's adopted father, had not been born into such luxury. The son of a wheat farmer, he passed a modest childhood in the company of donkeys and dung.

If you had asked Abe for the secret of his success, he would have told you it came down to two important factors.

"The first," he would shout, "was hard work. You can never work hard enough.

"And the second," he would continue, "was even more hard work!"

Yet, whilst hard work was no doubt a factor in Abe's ascent, chance played an even greater role.

Abe was born in the village of Hillmorton; a sleepy idyll where mills flecked the earth like daffodils in spring. Whenever he sold his wheat to those mills, his father carried Abe on his shoulders, which endeared him to the local millers.

During the harvest, Abe was sent to stay in London with his aunt; the wife of a baker, who introduced him to the other bakers in his guild.

As soon as he was old enough to carry a rake, Abe started to work with his father.

And, when he was not working, he passed his time in the company of Ole Jim Diamond; a family friend who had a penchant for telling vivid tales about countries he had never visited, and battles he had never fought. Ole Jim's life had actually been somewhat prosaic; a shipbuilder in the navy, he had retired to

Hillmorton to take care of his elderly mother; but that did not stop him from spinning a good yarn.

It was thanks to these connections that Abe was able to profit from the opening of the London canal.

In return for a share in his business, Abe convinced Ole Jim Diamond to build him a barge. Because they had known Abe all his life, and could therefore trust him, the local millers were happy to sell him flour on credit. Using the canal and his barge, Abe transported that flour to London, where he sold it to the bakers in his uncle's guild. Those men were keen to buy whatever flour they could, to satisfy the increasing demand for bread in that expanding metropolis.

Abe reinvested his profits. By the time his wife adopted Mayer, he owned a whole fleet of barges, and supplied almost every bakery in north London. He was a respected merchant, with a small fortune to his name.

Yet, had it not been for his father's and uncle's connections, the opening of a canal, and the growing demand for bread, Abe would have remained a humble farmer.

Still, that was not the way he told it. According to Abe, his rise was due to two factors, and two factors alone: "Hard work and hard work".

Whilst Abe built empires in suburbia, his wife became the empress of their home. Sadie was a strong monarch, with sturdy thighs and a stout personality. She ruled in a manner which even Abe was not brave enough or stupid enough to challenge.

Like Abe, Sadie was a farmer's child. Unlike Abe, she was well aware of her good fortune. This made her all the more determined to maintain her newfound position.

Whilst her husband toiled like an ordinary member of the working poor, Sadie lived an aristocratic life of idle luxury. She invested in books with titles such as "How to Behave" and "Hints from a Lady". She read how to act at dinner parties and in public, how to shake hands and bring conversations to an end, how to dress herself and adorn her home.

She scoured the pages of "Sam Beeton's Magazine" for items to buy, believing that owning fine things would impress her peers and profit her nation:

"I say, this modern economy of ours requires two things. Supply and demand! Men must work hard to supply nice things, and women must work hard to demand them.

"If we left it to the men, nothing would ever get bought. And then where would we be? I tell you, being a consumer is a patriotic duty. It's because of us that expensive fabrics have to be imported from India. We keep the wheels of empire turning!"

Sadie had enjoyed a similar conversation before adopting Mayer, when her friend, Mrs Winterbottom, had opined:

"It's the responsibility of the wealthy to help those with less than themselves.

It really does soothe one's conscience to know one is not *only* spending one's money on oneself."

Sadie nodded along in agreement.

When her carriage passed by the smoking remains of Mayer's home, those words rang loud in her ears. Without thinking, she disembarked, swooped down on Mayer, lifted him up by his collar, and dropped him inside her carriage.

"I'll take this one," she said, as if selecting a puppy. And that, as they say, was that.

Mayer reminded Sadie of herself as a child; helpless and in need of good fortune. This had a dual effect. A part of Sadie loved Mayer; she wanted to raise him up, just as she had been raised. But a part of her hated him; he was a constant reminder of the humble origins she had worked so hard to forget.

Sadie adopted Mayer out of love; a desire to do something truly kind. She housed, fed and clothed him. Such acts of philanthropy were a mainstay of the middle-class existence she had worked so hard to embrace. But respectable members of the middle-class did not associate *too* closely with the poor. So Sadie kept her distance; she did not speak to Mayer once in all their years together.

This left Mayer feeling as though he was just another object in Sadie's collection, bought to boost her status, like a piano or a pony. He felt like a stranger in another family's home.

Whilst that family dined together, taking their silver cutlery and fine food for granted, Mayer ate with Maggs, the housekeeper, in the funerary darkness of the pantry. It was Maggs, not Sadie, who dressed Mayer as a gentleman's son; in a beaver-hat, surtout coat and black necktie; and it was Maggs who walked Mayer to school.

When Mayer was told he was to receive an education, he had asked if he would be attending the same private school as his adopted brothers. Sadie responded with a look of condescension which was so violent it teetered on the brink of outright war. She did not issue a verbal reply.

But Mayer still appreciated his Church School. Whilst the lessons were basic, taught by the older pupils rather than by the teacher, Mayer realised he was learning more than he would have done had he lived with his birth family. None of his blood relations had ever received any education at all.

Nor did Mayer mind that school's emphasis on religion. In fact, religion was the one thing which brought his adopted family together. Each night, just before bed, they gathered in the evening room, drew the curtains, lit a candle, and prayed as one. For Mayer, it was the only time he felt like a member of the family. And for Mayer, that was enough.

LAMBETH MARSH

*"Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear
and the blind can see."*

MARK TWAIN

So, what of Archibald?

Archibald was adopted by his Uncle Raymondo and Aunt Ruthie.

Two things should be noted, when it comes to that shopkeeper and his wife. Firstly, they were old. Archibald could not be sure how old they were, but he was certain they were antique. Uncle Raymondo, with his long white beard and hearty laugh, reminded Archibald of every image he had ever seen of God himself. Aunt Ruthie smelled of lavender.

The second thing to note, was that despite their advanced years they had never had any children. It was not for want of trying. Theirs had been a healthy love, but not a fruitful one.

Ruthie and Raymondo had tried to conceive, day and night, ever since they married, aged fourteen. On realising their predicament, they tried every remedy in the book. Raymondo was circumcised. He ate curds and meat. Aunt Ruthie tried vaginal steaming, using a brew of rosemary, lavender, oregano, marigold, basil and rose. They made love in the dark and beneath the glow of a hundred candles, inside and outside, in the presence of both northerly and southerly winds.

Nothing worked.

Raymondo was sure the blame lay with Ruthie, who was sure it lay with him. But both husband and wife were too kind to blame their partner. In fact, they each admitted fault, to soothe their spouse's conscience. They each believed their partner's confession, which confirmed their own belief in their innocence.

Whoever was to blame, they grew sure of one thing: They would never sire a child.

Then, out of the blue, Archibald arrived on their doorstep. For Raymondo and Ruthie, it was the miracle of all miracles. They felt as though God had finally answered their prayers. They celebrated with ale, which they shared amongst their neighbours, and they lavished young Archibald with all the love and affection they had been saving for years.

Archibald's childhood played out in three arenas: His home, his uncle's shop and his village, Lambeth Marsh; a sleepy hamlet on the south bank of the River Thames.

Lambeth Marsh was a patchwork of market gardens and boggy ditches; held together by the family's shop, a church and a pub, "The Three Horseshoes". Raymondo visited that place each evening, sat Archibald on his knee, lit his pipe

and played cribbage. Archibald held his uncle's cards. The other villagers congratulated him whenever Raymondo won, and ribbed him whenever he lost, as if it was Archibald and not his uncle who was playing.

Whereas that pub was the centre of evening life, it was Raymondo's shop which united the community during the day. Everyone popped in. They spent a little time picking up the things they needed, but could not produce themselves, and a lot of time nattering about village life.

They spoke about the weather, the harvest, and the key issues of the day; about how London was crawling out towards them, about the new factories which were popping up, and about the botanical gardens, which were still viewed with suspicion, even though they had been open for almost two decades.

Archibald listened to those conversations, sat by his uncle's feet, whilst playing with his one wooden toy; a figurine made by Bobby Brown, the village carpenter. Bobby had not asked for anything in return, but Raymondo had still issued him with store credit, and allowed him to take a pack of candles the next time he popped in.

Raymondo tried to convince Archibald that figurine was a soldier. "Bang! Bang!" he joked, bending his fingers into the shape of a gun. But Archibald insisted that it was a lady. He dressed it up in any scraps of cloth he could find, and made it a head of hair using the remains of an old mop.

Archibald also enjoyed playing with the other villagers his age. He was never one for rough and tumble, but he soon became a favourite amongst the girls.

"You're a regular Casanova," Ruthie joked, whenever she wasn't saying "I love you" or "Whose Auntie's favourite little boy? You are. Yes you are!"

Aunt Ruthie was a jack of all trades. She worked in the shop when Raymondo was away, taught Archibald to read and write, and maintained their small home.

That place possessed all of life's necessities, but few of its luxuries. There were walls, but no wallpaper; floors, but no rugs; a roof, but no ceiling; windows, but no curtains; shelves, but no cupboards; pots, but no pans. Uncle Raymondo owned a bible, but even that lacked a cover. His ink pot contained just one type of ink: Black. There was one fireplace, which blazed cheerily, a single knife, and a solitary chair which the family took it in turns to use. Other than that, there was not a single atom of furniture in their home. Ruthie had once bought a doormat, but had decided it was too much of an extravagance, and so chopped it up into squares which she used to scrub the floor.

Archibald was given an outfit made from Raymondo's one frock coat, which Ruthie cut apart with her one pair of scissors, and sewed back together using a borrowed needle. After much debate, they agreed to buy Archibald a new set of underwear. The only other item of clothing he was given was Raymondo's hat, which was so large it came down over his eyes.

Archibald liked these clothes, but he did not love them. He *loved* using Ruthie's one piece of make-up; an eyeliner she had not touched in over a decade.

Unaware of social conventions, and indifferent to gender stereotypes, Archibald took an enormous amount of pleasure from using that eyeliner to make himself look pretty.

He stopped using it as soon as Ruthie told him off:

“Now, now, my love; boys don’t wear make-up.”

Instead of using that eyeliner, Archibald put on Ruthie’s Sunday dress. For him, it was a compromise; he was still being true to himself, exploring his feminine side, but he was also respecting Ruthie’s wishes. He loved Ruthie so much that he would have done anything to please her.

It was not enough. When she saw him in that dress, Ruthie flew into a rage, and threw their only wooden spoon towards their only wooden door. Then she hugged Archibald for several minutes; smothering him with an abundance of oppressive love:

“Oh, I am sorry. I love you more than anything in the world, my little miracle child. Yes I do! Oh, yes I do!”

Archibald never wore women’s clothing again.

Such was Archibald’s youth.

He slept under a desk, next to a pile of coals, from where he could hear the sound of cocks crowing and wheels turning. He spent his mornings at home, his afternoons at the shop, and his evenings in the pub. He had few possessions, but he was loved by many people. And that, for Archibald, was enough.

ST MARY MAGDALEN'S

"The rich have become richer and the poor have become poorer."

PERCY SHELLEY

So, what of Hugo?

Whereas Mayer was schooled in the ways of individualistic consumption, and Archibald in the ways of communal life, Hugo was simply left alone.

He was dumped, unceremoniously, on the doorstep of the St Mary Magdalen Workhouse, Bermondsey, like Moses in the rushes. He lay there in the shadows, whilst sewage crept up towards his feet.

When, in later life, he was asked about his time at St Mary Magdalen's, Hugo would struggle to give specific details. He would remember the sheer quantity of children, but would be unable to recall their faces. He would remember the pain, but not the punishments; the fatigue, but not the work. One thing, however, would stick with him: The unremitting stench of that place. He would still be able to smell the malodorous fumes emanating from the urinals, and the bittersweet rankness of the deadhouse. Simply being asked about that place would make Hugo want to vomit.

That smell was the last thing he remembered all those years later. It was the first thing he noticed when he arrived.

"Well I suppose we'll have to take youse in," the Drillmaster said, looking just as unimpressed as he sounded.

"I'm sorry," Hugo replied. Bearing the guilt of his family's demise, he was happy to receive any sort of welcome at all.

"Just don't expect an easy ride boy. Everyone has to pull their weight here; young and old alike. We shan't be tolerating no slackers! This ain't no place for no goldbrickers."

"Yes sir. I'm grateful sir. I'm ever so sorry sir. I really don't deserve your kindness."

"True that. Tut, tut, true that. Tut, tut, tut, tut, tut."

The Drillmaster led Hugo through a fever-nest of an infirmary in which tuberculosis, cholera and general decay were eating their way through the decrepit bodies of the capital's poor. He led Hugo through a tall set of prison gates, past a sign which read "God is love", and into the infant nursery, where he shaved Hugo's hair and threw him into a uniform made of brown druggit.

Cracked walls looked down on the cracks in the floorboards with a lofty sort of scorn.

Babies cried, toddlers coughed, and children clung, screaming, to the last possessions of deceased parents; to chipped crockery, faded dresses, ledgers,

candlesticks and quills.

Hugo was shown to his bed: A narrow orange crate, stuffed with straw, which he would have to share with two other boys.

The Drillmaster turned and left.

One day passed in pretty much the same manner as the next, and one hour was spent in pretty much the same place as the last: Their dorm. The orphans at St Mary Magdalen's only ever left that place to attend chapel.

The food was so pitiful it left Hugo fearing he would eat another boy; washing, using water from the chamber pot, was so ineffective that he avoided it if he could; and the work was so tedious it made him doolally.

The boys in Hugo's dorm were made to pick oakum fibres out of rope. It was hard work. It was meant to be hard, to discourage people from entering a workhouse in the first place. But it was worthwhile, as the Drillmaster was at pains to point out:

"You're serving your county, helping the navy like this. Only way a bunch of gutter rats like you ever will. Tut, tut, too right. Tut, tut, tut, tut, tut."

At times, Hugo grew angry. At times, he grew resigned.

He told himself he did not deserve any better; that he was a despicable child who had murdered his family. He told himself he could not expect any better; that he was doing penance for his crimes. And he told himself that if he did want anything better, he would have to earn it; work was good for him; the Drillmaster did care; his was a tough sort of love.

"Sorry", he said each time he was told off. Only "Sorry", never anything more.

In his mind, he was apologizing to the family he believed he had killed. But he never spoke of such matters, for fear of being sent to the hangman. As a result, the Drillmaster assumed he was saying "Sorry" for his lacklustre work, which confirmed his belief that Hugo needed to be disciplined.

He was flogged whenever he dropped his rope. He was whipped whenever he sneezed. When he was punched by Stevie Davidson, the skew-whiff child who shared his bed, they were both made to scrub the nursery floor. As soon as they had finished, the Drillmaster knocked over two scuttles of coal and made them start again.

Hugo did not complain, boys were punished for complaining; and Hugo felt he deserved that punishment because he had wet their bed, and therefore incited Stevie to punch him.

Hugo believed he deserved every punishment which came his way. But, at the same time, he also felt a subtle nagging; a voice which told him he could do better; that anyone could do better than that.

Such was Hugo's youth: Born in guilt and lived in confusion.

For Hugo, it was not quite enough.

MUDLARKING

"Please sir, replied Oliver, I want some more."

CHARLES DICKENS

Hugo held out his empty bowl:

"Please sir, can I have some more?"

"Why of course, dear boy!" the Drillmaster replied. "Tut, tut, too right."

Hugo waited, but nothing happened:

"Please sir, can I have some more gruel?"

"Of course you can, young squire. You can have anything you want; crumpets with cream cheese, afternoon cat-lap at the Ritz, caviar and foie gras. Why, my lord, I dare say you could wash it down with a glass of the finest champagne in Christendom. All you need do is go and get it."

"Go where sir?"

"Anywhere! Anywhere but here. We've fed you enough, and it's cost us more than your work has ever made. Tut, tut, too true. What are you: A man, who seeks his own living? Or a plant, who expects it to be brought to him?"

"Go on! Pack your bags and bugger orf. Go get your lobster frittata with smoked salmon. Tut, tut, tut, tut, tut."

Hugo was thrown out of the workhouse in much the same fashion he was thrown into it all those years before: Ingloriously.

He trudged out onto Bermondsey's muck-paved streets.

To his left were the tanneries, hide dressers and skin sellers whose premises clung to the south bank of the Thames. To his right were a line of chemical works, and the noxious ditches they produced.

There were people, so many people. And there were rats, so many rats; the sort which startled horses, the sort which would try to bite you, and the sort which would actually bite you. Hugo gave them all a wide berth.

Tired and hungry, Hugo needed help. It came in the form of a muddy little creature with mud-caked hair, mud-covered clothes, mud in her shoes and mud in her pockets. Perhaps that girl warmed to Hugo's appearance; he was a sooty shade of drab himself. Or, perhaps, she just took pity on our pathetic hero. We shall never know.

What was indisputable, however, was that she did call out:

"Wha' a blazin' sight for sore eyes if evers I saws one. Corr blimey guvnor. Wha' ahvs we 'ere then? Well, well, well. Jiminy crickets!"

She ran her muddy finger down Hugo's cheek:

"Wells then? Don' ya speak Mr Crickets?"

Hugo looked into her muddy eyes and tried to reply. He failed. He bowed his

head, inhaled, and mustered all the strength he could find. Finally, he was able to exhale six measly words:

“Sorry. I’m ah Hugo. What are you?”

“Wha’ am I? Wha’ am I, Mr Ah Hugo Crickets? Dearie me. Do Ize looks like a ‘What’ to you?”

“Sorry.”

“Ah, that youse are, Mr Ah Crickets. That youse are!

“Wells, young cricketty, Ize is a scavenger. Or a mudlark, as wees likes to call ourselves. Wees scavenge, we does. Wees find wha’evers treasure we can in the mud o’ low tide, and sells it on to who evers might buy it.”

“I see.”

“But Ize don’t thinks that’s what youse is worried about now, is it Mr Ah Crickets? Methinks youse is more interested in some grub for your belly, and some singsong for your gullet.”

“Some food? Yes. Sorry.”

“I thoughts as much. Ah yes. As soon as Ize seen ya, Ize thoughts to myselfes, ‘Now ‘eres be a lad who needs ‘imself some food.’

“Wells, Mr Ah Crickets, today is your lucky day. Wees gots ourselves some jellied eels, straights off da back o’ Mr Ribbett’s truck, yes we did. Your lucky day indeed!”

Hugo grinned.

The girl continued:

“My name’s Delilah, by da way, but my friends all call me Dizzy. Youse can call me Delilah.”

Hugo ate his jellied eels with ferocious delight. To him, they tasted better than caviar and foie gras. They were not just dinner, they were a family homecoming.

The home to which Hugo came was an abandoned barge, with sacks for bedding and crates for beds. Reeds peeked in through the panelling and rootworms infested the boards.

Hugo’s new family consisted of Dizzy and two Irish youths, Izzy and Jo, whose parents had been sent to America as indentured servants.

“White slaves,” Izzy said. “Debt slaves. Let’s go the whole hog and call them what they are. Or, at least, what they were. They’ve probably kicked the bucket by now.”

Izzy was a majestic example of the power of dress. She had turned her shabby vest and raggedy blazer into an outfit which almost resembled a waistcoat and frock. Her crusty hair had been combed in such a manner it seemed to shine, as if moulded by beeswax, and the dust which circled her eyes had all the elegance of cheap mascara.

From a certain angle, Izzy could have passed as a nobleman’s daughter. From another, she looked like a beggar. As is the way with abandoned children; people

without a past, connections or status; Izzy was able to appear as a member of any class at any time.

Jo, on the other hand, looked like a regular tramp. His corduroy trousers contained more holes than a piece of Emmental, his vest had grown yellow through constant wear, and his socks were nothing more than collections of loosely connected threads.

But, whatever you may think of their appearance, there was warmth in those children's hearts. It poured from them as they sang gypsy songs; "The Dark Eyed Sailor", "The Female Cabin Boy" and "Gentle Annie"; songs which had been sung by waifs and strays for countless generations.

After they sang, they talked. And, after quite some time, they broached the subject of theft.

Hugo did not mind that his food had been stolen, only that his belly had been filled, but he was determined to earn an honest crust himself.

"Aye, we all start off that way," Jo replied. "But there'll come a week when you don't eat a crumb. That'll have you changing your mind, just as quick as the wind."

"Ah, leave him alone, wills ya?" Dizzy rollocked. "If this 'ere Mr Ah Crickets don't wanna pilfer, so bees it. Leastways, he's a skinny lil' devil; there's no way in 'ell he'd be able to swimmy away from da traps."

Everyone chortled apart from Hugo.

"By da by," Dizzy continued. "This 'ere mudlarkin' malarkey ain't for evers; Ize for one plan to go to sea just as soon as Ize find a captain who'll 'ave me; but it keeps us fed for nows."

Hugo's first day in the mud started at sunrise. It started in filth, and it advanced in excrement.

Hugo took particular care to tiptoe around the pools of raw sewage which washed up against the banks of the River Thames. Dizzy skipped right through them.

Hugo almost screamed when he saw a dead cat, half rotten, and infested with flies. Dizzy just laughed, picked it up, and threw it aside.

"Mr Ah Crickets," she sang. "Now wha' are youse like? Cat got your tongue 'as he?"

She laughed to herself as she skipped ahead.

Hugo gave chase, like an apprentice following his master.

It was in this fashion, knee-deep in mud, that Dizzy and Hugo filled their bags with scraps of iron, canvas and fat. Whenever a bargeman dropped a lump of coal, Hugo was quick to grab it. He scurried through the mud to collect the rope and copper which fell from boats. And, when the tide came in, he filled a basket with the wood chips which washed ashore.

By the end of the day, his legs had been cut to ribbons, his body had browned, and his arms felt hollow:

“What now?”

“Now wees go to work.”

“Work? I thought we’d been working all day.”

“All day? The day’s still young, Mr Ah Cricketty. Dearie me, youse really is as green as da spring grass. My oh blimey my! Come on chuckaboo, we needs to be gettin’ on our rounds.”

They walked to Limehouse, where they sold all the rivets and washers they had scavenged. The marine dealers in that part of town were always keen to buy such things. Then they knocked on doors, selling coal and wood chips to any family who needed fuel.

By the time they were done, the sky was full of stars and their pockets were full of pennies. They bought themselves some bread, and retired for a night full of songs and sandwiches.

They were the best of times. They were the worst of times.

Mud-filled days bled into song-filled nights.

Hugo did not have toys and had little time for games. He did, however, collect things he could never keep; snowflakes, which melted; conkers, which rotted; dormice, which escaped; and frogs, which leapt away.

Hugo and his friends survived. Their earnings were meagre, but they could usually afford to eat, and what they lacked in income they made up for in independence; they had each other, and they did far better than the elderly mudlarks, who were unable to keep up with their pace.

In the winter, there were barely ten mudlarks on their stretch. Without much competition, times were good. In the summer, however, they were joined by another fifteen souls. Life got tough.

Most of the other mudlarks were the children of coal whippers; robust Irishmen who earned money for lugging coal onto the vessels moored in Newlands Quay. Hugo envied their clothes. Their trousers were patched, whilst his were full of holes. They had shirts with collars, caps with peaks, and real jumpers. Hugo had to insulate his clothes with old newspaper.

Such was Hugo’s life.

Whilst he was slow to speak, he was quick to observe things such as these. He watched the labourers as if they were actors on a stage; loading and unloading vessels; their muscles bulging, their backs stooped, and their brows drenched with sludge. He watched lumpers, porters, heavers, riggers, packers and pressers; men with the strength and endurance of an ox, but less in the way of an education. And he watched the thieves; the dredgermen who pilfered coal, the smugglers who dodged import duties, the river pirates who snuck out at night, and the lighter-men who guided ships off course in order to rob them.

Hugo learnt from all those scallies, but he did not put his lessons into practise. For as long as he had the means to survive, he saw no need to steal himself.

No-one wants to be a bad person, but not everyone has the opportunity to be good.

So it was with Hugo. He had gone eight days without eating, and Proverbs Chapter Six was ringing in his ears:

“People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.”

‘Would it be so bad?’ he asked himself. ‘Really? I’m just a wretched little mudlark after all; a fire-starter who murdered his family. Would becoming a thief really make me any worse than I already am? Could I truly expect to amount to anything better?’

Hugo was famished. He could feel his muscles disintegrate and his heartbeat jitter. A lack of vitamins was turning his skin a pale shade of yellow; leaving him short of breath and lethargic. He felt compelled to act whilst he still had the strength...

During the year in which Hugo had been a mudlark, he had noticed a group of shipbuilders who took material, such as fabric or cord, at the end of each shift. Their foreman never stopped them.

When Hugo investigated, he discovered that those men had not been paid in months. They had been granted permission to take those items as interest on the wages they were owed.

Curious, Hugo kept watch, keen to see what they would take. He saw a carpenter named Honest Jim, who only ever took the smallest items; a bit of cloth or wood, never anything more. And he saw a joiner called Crafty Chris, who took whatever he could. Hugo saw him take benches, troves, ladders, and a sail from a dingy.

Hugo spied on those ship builders, imagining what they might do with the items they took. It was by such spying that he finally saw them get paid. Only they were not paid with coins. Pennies, shillings and pounds, which contained precious metals such as silver and gold, had been in short supply for as long as anyone could remember. So, to tide them over, those ship builders were paid with branded nails. Hugo considered this bizarre, until it was explained to him that the local establishments accepted those nails in lieu of real coins. They knew they would be repaid just as soon as the shipyard had the cash.

It was with this knowledge that Hugo embarked Honest Jim’s boat. With a broom in one hand and a cloth in the other, he offered to sweep the deck, as he often did when times were tough.

The foreman, as always, gave him short shrift:

“I ain’t got two coins to rub together me-self. How d’ya think I’m gonna pay a cadger like you?”

The foreman turned his back in a gesture of mock offence. And Hugo, seizing the opportunity, grabbed a handful of nails from his desk.

“You’re a mean old one,” he shouted as he disembarked. “A right old bad

'un!"

Hugo had acted without thinking, which was probably for the best. If he had thought about it, he might have stopped himself, and he might have starved.

As it was, he headed straight for Brown's Bakery, where he exchanged his nails for three loaves of bread. Mrs Brown looked at him with a judgmental frown which verged on a guilty sentence, but she knew his nails were as good as coins, and so thought better than to ask any questions.

Hugo and his friends ate together that night.

"Youse has paid us back for them eels, youse has," Dizzy told him. "Ize knews youse would. Ize saids so. Oh yes, Mr Ah Cricketty, as sure as houses Ize did!"

Once he had started, Hugo could not stop. He stole every time he went for three days without eating.

He began on the docks, where he climbed aboard boats and grabbed anything he could; wool, sugar and cotton from the colonies; headfasts, wires and chains from the boats themselves. Sometimes he sold wood chips, accepting stolen rope as payment. At other times, he simply stuffed that rope up his shirt.

Wracked with guilt, Hugo felt even more wretched than before. He called himself a *'Fire Starter'*, *'Gutter Rat'* and *'Thief'*. He whispered the word "Sorry" whenever he stole.

Hugo was confused. He drew a fuzzy line between theft and graft; never entirely sure where one ended and the other began:

'Am I not stealing when I find things in the mud? Am I not working when I'm stealing? Both put food in my belly. Is that not the most important thing?'

Hugo could not be sure. What was certain was this: Hugo's theft spread from riverbank to town, and from town to townhouse.

Sallying forth in search of food, he dived into the crowds at public executions, knocked property from people's hands, picked it up, and then disappeared into the heart of the hullabaloo.

He jumped over the brick walls which surrounded the gardens in Kensal Green, Camden Town, and Kensington, before stealing the laundry which had been hung out to dry.

What he could eat, he ate; what he could not eat, he sold to a pawnbroker; and what he could not sell to a pawnbroker, he sold on the street.

Once, whilst stealing laundry from a Camden townhouse, Hugo saw a child who reminded him of himself. As if peering into a sorcerer's mirror, he felt he was seeing a life which might have been his.

That child was sitting on a windowsill, alone, with a book in his hand; abandoned by the rest of his family, who could be seen through a different window.

He seemed lonely.

Hugo felt his loneliness.

His blood turned to ice and his feet turned to run.

In certain societies, both in Europe and the Middle East, it is the culture not to harm anyone with whom a person has shared bread or salt.

At times, this mundane custom can lead to scenarios which verge on the absurd.

This was the case with an Arab house robber who, having filled his bags with bounty, stuck his finger in a jar to see if it contained sugar. On tasting it, he realised it was salt. Having shared the homeowner's salt, he felt duty bound to return every item he had stolen.

Like that robber, it would be wrong to consider Hugo amoral; he had an ethical code of his own. Hugo only stole when he had gone for three days without food. He never stole from the poor, elderly or homeless; from other mudlarks, beggars or thieves.

But of all of Hugo's rules, he was most loyal to one: The Eleventh Commandment: "Though shall not get caught".

Getting caught was a private matter in Georgian London.

Victims and onlookers were expected to capture thieves and pass them on to a "Constable"; a volunteer who escorted them to a "Justice of the Peace"; a man who prosecuted them if their victims could prove their guilt.

In addition, watchmen roamed the streets at night; searching for fires and petty crimes. It was for this reason that Hugo only ever stole whilst hidden by clear daylight.

Such a tactic worked. In fact, Hugo only came close to being caught once during his three years of thieving.

Seen slipping a screw into his pocket, a deckhand sounded the Hue and Cry: "Stop! Thief! Stop the thief!"

Everyone turned.

A ship squealed.

Another ship covered the dock in steam.

Hugo fled; his feet rapping an allegro beat on the deck, *tap-a-tap-tap*, as his hands sliced open the air.

Four men gave chase, each of whom was larger than the last, and each of whom was more determined. The first was the son of an overweight mother, the second owned a three-legged cat, and the third was missing two toes.

The fourth, who wore an eye patch, reached out to grab Hugo.

Hugo dived into the Thames.

Splashing like a river rat, he crashed into a locket, thrown overboard by a shunted lover; a frazzled sack, which had once contained tea; a message in a bottle; a complete set of cow's teeth; and an Anglo-Saxon spearhead, which had not been touched for millennia.

His final pursuer jumped into the river, with his eyes closed and his fingers pinching his nose. He too flapped through the mud. Silt slithered inside the

deepest recesses of his crotch, sludge weighed heavy against his thighs, and miasmic slime seemed to burn his skin alive.

The sporadic, muffled light began to recede; the river darkened and the water cooled.

For a moment, it seemed as though Hugo would be caught.

As his pursuer's fingers skimmed his foot, Hugo's heart beat with such ferocity it created ripples in the mud, which encouraged a frog to leap aside and a dragonfly to awake from its slumber. Hugo's face turned a fiery shade of red, and his hands lost all their colour.

That moment did not last for long.

After years of mudlarking, Hugo had grown accustomed to the ways of the mud; able to flow with its rhythm and bend to its needs. He accelerated away from his pursuer, who panted so much that purple phlegm oozed out of his mouth.

"Sorry," Hugo whispered as he disappeared from sight; hidden by flotsam and jetsam, barges and boats.

"Sorry," he whispered as he returned home.

"Sorry," he whispered as he slept.

"Sorry. Sorry. Sorry."

END OF EXCERPT

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