

AN ORIGINAL

LOVEJOY

MURDER MYSTERY



FIREFLY GADROOM

JONATHAN GASH

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The Lovejoy series

The Judas Pair
Gold from Gemini
The Grail Tree
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The Vatican Rip
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The Sleepers of Erin
The Gondola Scam
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The Possessions of a Lady
The Rich and the Profane
A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair
Every Last Cent
Ten Word Game
Faces in the Pool

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CRIME

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A story for Susan and Germoline,
Erica and Betty,
with thanks to Paul for the rock bit.

This book is most humbly dedicated to the ancient
Chinese 'Unpredictable Ghost' god, Wu Ch'ang Kuei,
in the hope that He will favour this story with
His prolonged readership.
One glance from that god that brings a
fortune in treasure.
Lovejoy

Chapter 1

This story begins where I did something illegal, had two rows with women, one pub fight, and got a police warning, all before mid-afternoon. After that it got worse, but that's the antiques game for you. Trouble.

I was up on the auctioneer's rostrum. But all I could think was, if that luscious woman crosses her beautiful legs once more I'll climb down through the crowd and give her a good hiding. She was driving me out of my skull.

As soon as I clapped eyes on her I knew she'd be trouble. We'd turned up for the auction that morning to find Harry the deputy auctioneer was ill. That caused a flap. Gimbert's auction rooms had three hundred assorted antiques – some even genuine – to auction off before the pubs opened. Old Cuthbertson caught me as I arrived and quaveringly asked me to stand in for his sick assistant. It's not exactly legal to do this but, we antique dealers often ask ourselves, what is?

'Why me, Cuthie?' I asked sourly. It was one of those mornings. I felt unshaven, though I'd tried.

'You're honest, Lovejoy,' he'd said earnestly, the cunning old devil. It's a hell of an accusation. That's my name, incidentally. Lovejoy. Crummy, but noticeable.

The trouble is I'm too soft. Anyhow Cuthbertson's too senile to lift a gavel these days, and he offered me a few quid, knowing I'd be broke as usual. So, amid the jeers and catcalls of my fellow dealers, I took the rostrum and got the proceedings under way.

Gimbert's is a typical auction, such as you'll find in any sleepy old English market town. That means corrupt, savage and even murderous. Beneath the kindly exterior of contentment and plastered-and-pantile Tudor homeliness there beats the scarlet emotion of pure greed. Oh, I'm not saying our churches hereabouts aren't pretty and the coastline invigorating and all that jazz. But I've always found that when antiques come in at the door morality goes out of the window. You can't blame people for it. It's just the way we're made.

It was a blustery September market day with plenty of people in town, refugees from the stunning boredom of our unending countryside. Gimbert's was crowded. Naturally the lads were all at it shouting false bids and indulging in a general hilarity as soon as I'd got going. I soon stopped that by taking a bid or two 'off the wall' (dealers' slang: imagining an extra bid or two to force the price higher and faster). I got a few million glares of hate from my comrades but at least it brought orderliness, if not exactly harmony. Old Cuthbertson was at the back silently perforating his man's ulcers.

'Here, Lovejoy,' Devlin called out angrily. 'You on their side?'

'Shut your teeth, Devvo,' I gave back politely, and cruised on through the lots. The girl crossed her legs again. Devlin's one of those florid, vehement blokes, all front teeth and stubble. You know instantly from his dazzling waistcoat and military fawns that he's a white slaver, but even his eleven motor-cars can't prove he's not thick as a brick. He's supposed to be Midland porcelains and earthenware silver, which is a laugh. Like most antique dealers, he couldn't tell a mediaeval chalice from a champagne pan. I once sold him a Woolworth's plate as a vintage Spode (you just choose carefully and sandblast the marks off). Pathetic. Devlin's been desperate to get even with me for two years. Thick, but unforgiving.

By Lot Twenty-Nine we'd settled down to a grumbling concern with the business of the day.

Between bids I had time to suss out who had turned up and let my eyes rove casually over the crowd in the warehouse while the next lot was displayed by the miffs (dealers' slang, to mean the boozy layabouts who indicate to bidders which heap of rubbish comes next). There was the usual leavening of genuine customers among the hard core of dealers, but most were housewives. The lovely bird with the legs didn't seem a dealer, yet . . . She crossed her legs. Everybody noticed.

'Next lot,' I intoned. 'Regency corner shelves, veneered in walnut.'

'Showing here, sir!' The miff's traditional cry turned a few heads.

'Who'll bid, who'll bid?'

They were quite a good forgery. Most of us there knew that Sammy Treadwell made about one set a month in his shed down on the waterfront. A grocer from East Hill started the bidding, thank God, and we'd be there yet. He got them for a few quid, cheap even for a fake. A minute later there was the usual bit of drama. An American chap in a fine grey overcoat was bidding for a manuscript letter which some rogue had catalogued as being from Nelson's father, the Reverend Edmund, the year before Trafalgar. Even from my perch I could see it had all the hallmarks of a forgery. From politeness I took a bid or two but the Yank seemed such a pleasantly anxious bloke I decided on the whim to protect him and knocked it down to a loud antique dealer in from the Smoke. I didn't know who then, but I'd just given myself a lifeline. The Yank looked peeved because I stared absently past him with my waving arm, but I'd done him a favour. By Lot Fifty the bird was worrying me sick.

I kept wondering what the hell she was up to. She was neither bored housewife nor dealer, which leaves very little else for a good-looking bird in a sleazy auction to be. She'd obviously sat down merely to flash her legs more effectively, which is only natural. She'd dressed to kill, with that kind of aloof defiance women show when it's a specially risky occasion. Throw of the dice and all that. And her gaze kept flicking back to the same place in her catalogue, something on the seventh page. Items in the high hundreds at Gimbert's are usually portabilia, small decorative household objects or personal pieces, snuff-boxes, scissors, needle-cases, scent bottles and visiting-card cases, suchlike. There's always a display case full.

I started looking about at Lot One Sixty to give Tinker Dill my signal. He's my barker and 'runner' for me. A barker's a dishevelled alcoholic of no fixed abode whose job is to sniff out antiquities wherever they may lurk. Tinker has a real snout for antiques. I pay him for every 'tickle', as we dealers say, though most other barkers only get paid when a purchase is completed. As Tinker can't afford to get sloshed twice a day without money, you realize how strong the stimulus actually is.

I needn't have worried. At Lot One Sixty-Two in he shambled, filthy and bleary-eyed as ever. He has this sixth sense, helped no doubt by a few pints in the Ship tavern next door. I suppressed a grin as the dealers near the door edged away from him. Tinker pongs a bit. Outside it was coming on to rain which made his woollen balaclava and his old greatcoat steam gently. Still, if you're the best barker in the business you've talents Valentino never dreamed of. He gave a gappy grin, seeing me on the rostrum. I signalled in the way we'd arranged for him to bid on Lot One Eighty. To my relief I saw him nod slightly. He was still fairly sober. It would go all right.

We plodded on up the lot numbers. Helen was in, being amused at the way I was struggling to keep my eyes off the flashy bird's legs. Helen's too exquisite and stylish to worry about competition. She gave me one of her famous looks, a brilliant smile carefully hidden in a blank stare. Helen's good at porcelain and ethnological art. We'd be together yet but for a blazing row over a William I davenport desk about which she was decidedly wrong. I was in the right, but women are always unreasonable, not like us. Anyway, we split after a terrible fight over it.

Big Frank from Suffolk was lusting away between bids, and the Brighton lads were in doing the

share. Our local dealers formed a crowd of sour faces in the corner. We were all mad about the Birmingham crowd turning up. They were here because of a small collection of Georgian commemorative medals, mostly mint. I knocked the collection down to them for a good price. Nothing else I could do but take the bids chucked at me, was there? The whole place was in a sile rage, except for the Brummie circus. A group of early Victorian garnet and gold pendants went cheap after that, though I sweated blood to get the bids going. A glittering piece of late Victorian church silver went to Devlin for five of our devalued paper pounds. I thought, what a bloody trade. If I knew Devvo he'd advertise it as an Edwardian ashtray. It hurts, especially when nerks like him are the ones with the groats, and deserving souls like me stay penniless.

So, in a cheery mood of good fellowship, while pedestrians hurried past outside in the rain and visitors sloshed up to the Castle Park to feed the ducks, in happy innocence I gave Tinker his signal and bid for the next item. My heart was thumping with pleasurable anticipation. It'd be mine soon, for maybe a quid.

'Item One Eighty,' I called. 'Small portable Japanese box. Maybe bamboo. Offers?'

'Showing here, sir!' Bedwell, the head miff, called from one of the cabinets.

I beamed around the place as the mob shuffled and coughed and muttered. There was very little interest. It'd go cheap.

'Anybody start me off?' I called brightly, gavelling merrily like the overconfident idiot I am. 'A few pence to start?'

Tinker was drawing breath when the bird cheeped into action. 'Ten pounds,' she said, to my horror and we were off.

That's how the frightening trouble began. There was no way I could have stopped the evil that started then. And none of it was my fault. Honestly. Hand on my heart.

I'd be completely harmless if only people would leave me alone.

The crowd of bidders usually divides as soon as it's all over. Some throng the tea bar at the back of the dank warehouse and slurp Gimbert's horrible liquid, moaning about the prices of antiques. The rest surge into the Ship and sob in their beer, full of tales about missing a genuine Stradivarius (going for a couple of quid, of course) by a whisker last week. As I feared, the big Yank collared me as I climbed down from the rostrum.

'Excuse me, sir.'

'Eh?'

The rotund weatherbeaten face of an outdoor man gazed reproachfully down at me. He was the sign of a bus.

'You missed seeing my bid, sir. For Lord Nelson's father's letter. I've come a long way—'

I glanced about. Most of the mob had drifted – well, sprinted – pubwards so it was safe to speak. 'Look, mate. Nothing personal. But Nelson's dad snuffed it two years before that letter's date. And he began, "Dear Horatio". Wrong. He was called "Horace" by his own family.'

'You mean . . . ?'

'Forged? Aye. Go to the Rectory in Burnham Thorpe and have a butcher's – I mean a look – at his dad's handwriting. He got little Horace to witness the various wedding certificates sometimes. Always look at originals.'

His gaze cleared. 'I'm indebted—'

I had to be off. 'No charge, mate.'

He was eyeing me thoughtfully. 'If I may—'

But I shot out. The girl had vanished in the scrum. I was blazing. I collared Bedwell, miserable sin among the tea-drinkers. He's a long thin nicotine-stained bloke. Funny shape, really. Miffs an usually sort of George III-shaped and sleek as a butcher's dog. Good living.

'Where is she, Welly?' I tapped his arm.

He grinned and nudged me suggestively. 'Always after skirt,' he cackled. Then he saw my face and went uneasy. 'Gawd knows, Lovejoy. Took that little basket and went.'

I groaned and bulleted into the yard. There's a side door into the tavern, but nobody's allowed to use it. Dolly intercepted me. Luckily she had her umbrella up against the drizzle or she'd have clouted me with it.

'Lovejoy! I knew you'd try to sneak off—'

'Oh, er, there you are, love,' I tried, grinning weakly.

'Don't give me that!' She stood there in a rage, shapely and expensively suited. Blonde hair in the costly new scruffy style. I glanced nervously about in case other dealers were witnessing my discomfiture. 'You've made me wait hours in this filthy hole!'

'Er, look, angel—'

'No. You look, Lovejoy.' She blocked my way. I danced with exasperation. I had to reach Tinker to get him to find the bird who'd got my beautiful antique bamboo cage. 'I'm thoroughly sick of your high-handed—'

'See you later, love.' I tried to shift her gently but she struggled and stayed put.

'That's just the point, Lovejoy! You won't see me at all. Do you seriously put me second to a cartload of junk?'

I stared, flabbergasted. Sometimes I just don't understand women. She actually meant antiques.

'Course,' I told her, puzzled.

Her aghast eyes opened wider. She gasped. 'Why, you utter *swine*—' I saw her matching handbag swing but deflected it and she staggered. I held her up while her legs steadied.

'Listen, chuckie,' I said carefully. You have to be patient. 'Antiques are everything. Cheap or priceless, they're all that matters on earth. Do you follow?' Her horrified eyes unglazed but she was still stunned at all this. 'And *everybody* comes second. Not just you. Even me.' I straightened her up and gave her a quick peck to show I almost forgave her.

She recovered enough to start fuming again. 'Of all the . . .'

'Meet you tomorrow, love.' I let go and darted past.

This door leads to the back of the saloon bar. A chorus of insults rose from the solid wall of barflies as I emerged.

'Here he is, lads! Our auctioneer!'

Tinker was already halfway into his first pint. I honestly don't know how he does it. He never stops from noon to midnight. I gave him the bent eye while Lily the barmaid scolded me for coming in the wrong way.

'Typical, Lovejoy.' She pushed me under the bar flap into the smoky bar to get me out of her way.

'Don't serve him, love,' the dealers shouted.

I'd nicked a bottle of brown ale on my way through so I didn't mind whether she did or not. Tinker's horrible aroma magically thinned the throng about us.

'Who was she, Tinker?' I breathed the words so the hubbub covered my interest.

'The bird with the big knockers?' He shook his head. 'She's new round here, Lovejoy. I didn't know whether to keep bidding or not—'

'Shut it,' I growled. She'd been so determined I'd knocked the precious One Eighty down to her

amid almost total silence. Dealers love a dedicated collector, especially a luscious bird intent on spending a fortune for a worthless wickerwork box. I was furious because it wasn't worthless at all. I'd hoped to get it for a song and make a month's profit. Instead I was broke again and the girl had vanished.

'Pint, Lil.' Tinker hardly muttered the words but Lily slammed a pint over. Tinker's ability to get served is legendary. I paid, this being my role in our partnership.

'Then why the hell aren't you out finding her, you idle berk?' I spat the insult at him, but kept smiling. Disagreements mustn't be obvious in our way of life, especially among friends.

'I am.' Tinker grinned a gummy grin. 'Lemuel's following her.'

I subsided at that and swilled my ale while he chuckled at my discomfiture. Lemuel's an old derelict who still wears his soldier's medals on his filthy old coat. He sleeps in our parks and church doorways and looks and ponges even worse than Tinker, which is going it somewhat. He has a nifty line in conning our wide-eyed and innocent social services ladies for every shekel they possess. Luckily for the nation's balance of payments, Lemuel recycles this colossal drain on sterling through the merry brewers of East Anglia and the sordid portals of our betting shops. He hasn't picked a winner since he was eight.

'Taking it up regular, Lovejoy?' Devlin's beloved voice boomed in my ear, getting a few laughs at my expense. Nobody hates auctioneers like a dealer.

'Maybe.' I gave the world my sunniest beam. 'You got a job yet, Devvo?' A laugh or two my side this time.

'I've a bone to pick with you, Lovejoy.' He loomed closer. He's a big bloke and never has less than two tame goons hovering behind his elbows. They follow his Rolls everywhere in a family saloon. They were there now, I saw with delight. It's at times like this that I'm fond of idiocy. It gives you something to hate. 'That Russian niello silver pendant. You didn't see my bid.'

'You bid late,' I said evenly. 'I'd already gavelled.'

'You bastard. You nelsonned it.' He meant I'd looked away deliberately – after Nelson's trick at Copenhagen – another illegal trick auctioneers sometimes use. The place had gone quiet suddenly. People started spacing out round us. Devlin became poisonously hearty. It's the way every berk of his sort gets. He prodded my chest.

'Don't do that, please,' I asked patiently.

'Gentlemen . . .' Lily pleaded into the sudden silence. 'I came especially for that pendant, Lovejoy.' Another prod. Thicker silence.

I sighed and put my bottle down regretfully. I've never really seen that whisky-in-the-face thing they do in cowboy pictures. Maybe one day. Helen moved, white-faced, as if to stand by me but Tinker drifted absently across to block her way, thank God. I didn't want her getting hurt.

'Ooooh! There's going to be *blood* everywhere!' That squeal could only be Patrick, our quaint – not to say decidedly odd – colleague in from the arcade. He had his latest widow in tow to buy him ping-pong gins from now till closing time. I saw one of Devlin's goons turn ominously to face the main saloon. The other Neanderthal was grinning, standing beside his master with a hand fumbling in his pocket for his brass knuckles. You can't help smiling. Imagine chucking your weight about for a living. I despise you of us sometimes. Where I come from, nerks like him would starve.

Good old Devlin dug my sternum again. 'I reckon you owe me a few quid, Lovejoy.'

'Don't do that, please,' I said again. 'Last warning, lads.'

The Neanderthal mimicked me in a falsetto. 'Don't do that, please.' He laughed. 'Shivering Jimmie?' A Glaswegian, if I wasn't mistaken. He reached out to prod me so I kneed him and broke his

nose with my forehead as he doubled with a shrill gasp. He rocked blindly back, clutching himself. Blood spattered across his cheeks and mouth. You can't blame him. It doesn't half hurt.

'You were saying, Devvo?' I said, but he'd backed away. His other goon glanced doubtfully from Devlin to me and then to his groaning mate. 'Look, girls,' I said, still pleasant. 'No fuss, eh? The auction's over with. And everybody knows you're too stupid to handle antique Russian silver, Devvo.'

I was honestly trying to cool it but for some reason he went berserk and took a swing at me. A table went over and some glasses nearby smashed. I snapped his left middle finger to stop him. It's easy to do, but you must make sure to bend it rapidly back and upwards away from the palm – keep the finger in line with the forearm or it won't break, and you'll be left just holding the enemy's hand politely and feeling a fool. Devvo's face drained and he froze with the sudden pain.

'Well, comrade?' I was saying affably to the third nerk when the crowd abruptly lost interest and filtered away back to the booze. Sure enough, there he stood in the doorway, shrewdly sussing the scene out, the Old Bill we all know and love. Neat, polite, smoking a respectable pipe, thoroughly detestable.

'You again, Lovejoy?'

'Thank heaven you've come, Inspector!' I cried with relief, hoping I wasn't overacting, because Maslow's a suspicious old sod. 'I've just separated these two.'

'Oh?' Sarcasm with it, I observed, and a uniformed constable in the doorway behind him.

'Some disagreement over an antique, Inspector, I believe,' I said smoothly, staring right into his piggy eyes with my clear innocent gaze. 'This man set upon Mr Devlin—'

Maslow asked, 'True, Lily?' She reddened and frantically started to polish a glass.

'Aye, Mr Maslow,' Tinker croaked. 'I seed it all, just like Lovejoy says.' With his record that took courage.

Maslow swung on Tinker and pointed his pipe. 'Silence from you, Dill.'

'Perhaps I can help, Inspector.' Helen lit a cigarette, head back and casual. 'Lovejoy merely went to try to help Mr Devlin.'

'Are you positive, miss?' He sounded disappointed but kept his eyes on me. I blinked, at my innocence.

She shrugged eloquently. 'Difficult to see clearly. It's so crowded.'

'Very well.' He jerked a thumb at Devvo's goons. 'Outside, you two.'

'Here, boss,' the uninjured nerk complained to Devlin in a panic. 'He's taking us in.'

'Be quiet.' Devlin was still clutching his swelling hand, pale as Belleek porcelain. 'I'll follow you down.'

Maslow turned to give me a long low stare as the heavies went out. He leant closer. 'One day Lovejoy,' he breathed. 'One day.'

I went all offended. 'Surely, Inspector, you don't think—'

Maslow slammed out. Patrick shrilled, 'Ooooh! That *Lovejoy*! Isn't he absolutely *awful*?'

A relieved babble began. Devlin left for hospital a moment later, the constable delightedly piloting the Rolls. From the pub window I watched them go.

'Hear that, Tinker?' I demanded indignantly. 'Maslow didn't believe me.'

'Yon grouser's a swine,' Tinker agreed. Grouser's slang for an aggressive CID man.

'All clear, Lovejoy?' Lemuel ferreted between us and clawed my bottle out of my hand. His eyes swivelled nervously as he downed it in one.

'One day I'll get a bloody drink in here,' I grumbled, ordering replacements.

Lemuel wiped his mouth on his tattered sleeve.

‘That’s an omen,’ he croaked excitedly. ‘Blood Drinker, tomorrow’s two o’clock race at—’ It was becoming one of those days. I put my fist under Lemuel’s nose. ‘Ah,’ he said, hastily remembering. ‘That bint. I found her, Tinker.’

I glanced about, making sure we weren’t being overheard, and met Helen’s eyes along the bar. She raised her eyebrows in mute interrogation. Don Musgrave and his two barkers were with her. Don has antique pewter and English glass, and does a beano among tourists on North Hill. He’s been after Helen for four years, but he’s the kind of bumbling bear type of bloke that only makes women smile. Anyway, he hates cigarettes and Helen even smokes in bed. I gave her a brief nod of thanks and turned back towards the yeasty pong of my two sleuths. Owing women makes me edgy. They tend to cash in

‘Any chance of a bleedin’ drink?’ Lemuel croaked. ‘I had to run like a frigging two-year-old.’

Irritably I shoved my latest pint at the old rogue. He absorbed it like an amoeba.

‘She’s a souper,’ he said at last, wheezing and coughing froth at me. I tried not to inhale but being anaerobic’s hard.

‘Eh?’ That couldn’t be right.

‘Straight up.’ Lemuel nudged Tinker for support. ‘I was right, Tinker.’

‘Souper?’ I couldn’t believe it. Anybody less like your actual starry-eyed social worker was harder to imagine than that luscious leg-crosser. She’d seemed hard as nails.

‘I got money from her for my auntie’s bad back.’

‘Which auntie?’ I demanded suspiciously, knowing him. He grinned through anaemic gums.

‘Got none.’ He and Tinker fell about cackling at this evidence that the Chancellor too can be connected with the best of them. I banged Lemuel’s back to stop the old lunatic from choking. All this hilarity was getting me down. Tinker spotted my exasperation as Lemuel’s cyanosis faded into his normal puce.

‘The Soup’s down Headgate, Lovejoy.’

‘Here.’ I slipped Tinker three quid. That left me just enough for two pasties, my nosh for the day. ‘Tell Helen I’ll see her in the White Hart, tennish tonight.’

‘Good luck, Lovejoy.’ Tinker made his filthy mittens into suggestive bulbs. This witticism set the two old scroungers falling about some more. I slammed angrily out into the wet.

Chapter 2

The rain had stopped but town had filled up with people. I cut past the ruined abbey and across the Hole-in-the-Wall pub yard. Our town has a gruesome history which practically every street name reminds you of. Like I mean Head Gate isn't so called because it was our chief gateway in ancient days. I'd better not explain further because the spikes are still there, embedded in the ancient cements. The heads are missing nowadays. You get the message.

I hurried through St Peter's graveyard, envying the exquisite clock as it chimed the hour. These beautiful church clocks you see on towers are almost invariably 'London-made' early nineteenth century, which actually means Lancashire made and London assembled. You can't help thinking what valuable antiques these venerable church timepieces are, so casually unprotected on our old buildings. The thought honestly never crossed my mind, but don't blame me if one dark night some hungry antique dealer comes stealing through the graveyard with climbing boots and a crowbar . . . I trotted guiltily on, out into the main street among the shoppers, towards the social security dump.

You may think I was going to a lot of trouble over a modern bamboo box, and you'd be right. It wouldn't cross the road for a hundred as a gift. But for a genuine eighteenth-century Japanese bamboo firefly cage I'll go to a great deal of bother indeed.

A question burned in my brain: if scores of grasping citizens and greedy antique dealers can recognize an *oiran's* – star courtesan – firefly cage, then how come this bird can? And she had bid for it with a single-minded determination a dealer like me loves and admires – except when I want the item too. Of course I was mad as hell with the sexy woman, but puzzled as much as anything. I don't like odd things happening in the world of antiques. You can't blame me. It's the only world I have and I'm entitled to stability.

You can't miss the Soup. Our civil servants have naturally commandeered the finest old house in Cross Wyre Street, a beautiful fifteenth-century shouldered house where real people should be living. I eyed it with displeasure as I crossed the road. The maniacs had probably knocked out a trillion walls inside there, true to the destructive instincts of their kind. The smoke-filled waiting room held a dozen dishevelled occupants. I went to the desk that somebody had tried to label 'Enquiries' but spelled wrong. This plump blonde was doing her nails.

'Yes?' She deigned to look up – not to say down – at me. I peered through a footage of sequinned spectacle trying to spot her eyes. I'm a great believer in contact.

'A young lady, one of your soupers – er, dole workers—'

She swelled angrily. 'Not *dole*! Elitist terminologies are utterly defunct. Sociology *does* advance, you know.'

First I'd heard of it. Elitist only means greedy and everybody's that. I'd more sense than to argue and beamed, 'You're so right. I actually called because one of your, er . . .'

'Workers for the socially disadvantaged,' she prompted. One of the layabouts on the bench snickered, turned it into a cough.

I went all earnest. 'Er, quite. She dropped her purse at the auction an hour ago.'

'How kind.' The blonde smiled. 'Shall I take it?'

'Well, I feel responsible,' I said soulfully.

'I quite understand.' She went all misty at this proof that humanity was good deep down. 'I think

know who you mean. Maud Endacott.'

The bird hadn't looked at all like a Maud. The receptionist started phoning so I went to wait with the rest. George Clegg had just got in from the auction, and offered me a socially disadvantaged cigarette. I accepted because I can't afford to smoke them often and tucked it away for after. He's a vannie mover of furniture for us dealers. He labours – not too strong a term – for Jill who has a place in the antiques arcade in town. Jill too is a great believer in contact. She's mainly early mechanical toys, manuscripts, dress-items and men. Any order. George leant confidentially towards me, chuckling.

'That tart frogged you, eh, Lovejoy?'

I shrugged. He meant that she'd got what I wanted, which is one way of putting it. 'Don't know who you mean.' George was shrewder than I'd always supposed.

The phone dinged. 'Maud will see you now,' the receptionist announced, still Lady Bountiful. First names to prove nobody was patronizing anyone.

I gave her one of my looks in passing. She gave me one of hers. I leant on her counter.

'I wish I was socially disadvantaged,' I told her softly. She did the woman's trick of carefully not smiling. I waved to George and climbed the narrow stairs looking for the name on the door.

Sure enough the bird's room was crammed with radiators. I sat to wait, smouldering. The bloody fools had drilled the lovely ancient panelling full of holes for phone cables. Mind you, it was probably only oversight that had stopped our cack-handed town council flattening the lot into a carpark. I rose humbly as the bird entered. I noticed her stylish feminine clothes were now replaced by gungy tattered jeans and a dirty tee shirt. Back to the uniform, I supposed. She too was being humble – until she spotted who I was. Her concern dropped like a cloak.

'Oh. It's you.' She turned and slammed the door. 'I bought that box quite legally, so—'

'I know.' I thought, box? You don't call a precious antique firefly cage a *box*. Unless, that is, you don't know what the hell it is. Odderer and odderer.

'Then what are you here for?' She sat, legs and all. I watched her do her stuff with a gold lighter and cancer sticks. No offer of a cigarette, but she blew the carcinogens about for both of us to share.

Meekly I began, 'Er, I wondered about the box . . . Her eyes were unrelenting stone, but it's always worth a go. I smiled desperately like the creep I am. 'I'm trying to make up a set,' I lied bravely. 'An auctioneer isn't allowed to bid for himself, you see.'

'And you want to buy it off me?' She shook her head even as I nodded. 'No, Lovejoy.'

'Perhaps a small profit . . .'

She crossed to pose by the window, cool as ice. 'I've heard about you, Lovejoy. The dealers were talking.'

'They were?' I said uneasily, feeling my brightness dwindle.

'If *you* want something it must be valuable.' She sounded surprised. 'Is it?'

'I'm not sure.' Another lie. I gave as casual a shrug as I could manage, but my mind was demanding: *Then why the hell has she paid so much?* You can't do much with an antique firefly cage except keep fireflies in it.

'They say you're a . . . a divvie.' Oho. My heart sank. Here we go, I sighed to myself. She inhaled a trickle of smoke from her lips. Everything this bird did began to look like a sexy trick.

No use pretending now. 'That's my business.' I got up and headed for the door.

'Is it true, that you can tell genuine antiques just by feeling, intuition?'

I paused. Failure made me irritable. 'Why not? Women are supposed to do it all the time.'

She stared me up and down. I felt for sale.

'Then why are you in such a state?' she asked with calm insolence. 'Just look at you, Lovejoy.'

skill like that should make you a fortune. But you're threadbare. You look as if you've not eaten for a week. You're shabbier than the layabouts we get here.'

I swallowed hard but kept control. Never let the sociologists grind you down, I always say. 'It's taxes to pay your wage, Maudie,' I cracked back and left, closing the door gently to prolong its life.

I was halfway down the stairs when this harridan slammed out and yelled angrily after me from the landing. 'Lovejoy!'

'What now?'

'You've turned the central heating off, Lovejoy! It's freezing.'

You have to be patient with these lunatics. 'Your door's the only one on the staircase that's original eighteenth-century English oak,' I said tiredly. 'Heat'll warp it. The others are Japanese or American oak copies and don't matter. Think of it,' I added nastily, 'as socially disadvantaged.'

'You're insane,' she fumed down at me.

For a moment I was tempted to explain about the rare and precious beauty in which she worked so blindly each day. About the brilliant madrigalist who once lived here, and of his passionate lifelong love-affair with the Lady of the Sealands. Of the delectable ancient Collyweston stone-slatted roof so unique in these parts, which covered the place. Of the fact that the cellar was still floored by the genuine Roman mosaic and tiles of the oyster shop nearly twenty centuries old. Then I gave up. There's no telling some folks.

'Cheers, Maudie,' I said, and left it at that.

Downstairs George Clegg was whining at the grille for his handout as I passed the main room. If he'd got a move on I could have cadged a lift home in his new Lotus.

Pausing only to see if the Regency wrought-iron door plates were still securely screwed in, but regrettably they were – I stepped boldly out on to the crowded pavement and saw Devlin and his two berkies getting into their Rolls outside the police station at the end of the street. Devvo's hand was strapped up. He saw me and paused, glaring. He ignored my wave.

Oh, well. Anyway, it was time for my lesson.

Chapter 3

Buses to my village run about every hour, if there's not much on telly in their drivers' hut at the bus station. I waited uselessly by the post office over an hour, finally getting a lift in Jacko's rickety old coal van. There's no passenger seat. You just rattle about like a pea in a drum and slither nastily forwards every time he zooms to a stop. Jacko's an ancient reformed alcoholic who fancies himself a singer so you have to listen to gravelly renderings from light opera while he drives. He can't drive too well, just swings the wheel in the vague hope of guessing the van's direction. He dropped me off on the main road. The van stank to high heaven of bad cabbage.

There's a narrow footpath down the brook. It cuts off a good half-mile because the road has to run round the valley's north shoulder. I set off along the overgrown path, Lovejoy among the birds and flowers. Some people actually leave civilization to tramp our forests and fields, the poor loons. One couple I know do it every Saturday, when they could be among lovely smoky houses and deep in the beautiful grime of a town's antiques. No accounting for taste.

As I trudged I remembered Maud Endacott's face and got the oddest feeling. She'd been so determined, sure of herself. She'd paid over the true market value for a little cage – yet she didn't know what it was for, where it was from, its age or its value. And from the way she'd behaved she'd been prepared to pay every shekel she possessed to get her undeserving hands on it. None of it made sense.

For the last furlong I kept thinking about the exquisite Japanese masterpieces of the Utamaro school. His lovely woodblock prints don't look much at first, but with familiarity their dazzling eroticism blinds you. The truth is, Utamaro loved women. Women are everywhere, even – or maybe especially – in his *The Fantastic Print-Shop* series. You can't help chuckling to yourself. Of course he tried his hand at prostitutes, star courtesans and all, as well. The point is that the brilliant lecher made lovely erotic art out of everything he saw. There's nobody else in the Ukiyoe School quite like him.

The reason the famous old Japanese prints kept haunting me as I walked was the fantastic live detail they crammed in among all that sexy eroticism. One famous picture came into my mind's eye as I entered my long weed-crammed garden. Eishosai Choki's lovely silvered night painting, say 1780 give or take an hour. In it, a luscious courtesan holds a small cage on a cord. It's a firefly cage. And straight out of that desirable print two centuries old, had come the little bamboo cage I'd auctioned off to Maud Endacott this morning.

My thoughts had gone full circle. I fumbled for my key, and found I wasn't smiling any more.

After swilling some coffee and chucking the birds a ton of diced cheese I felt a lot better. Rose the post-girl had called and pulled my leg about fancying Jeannie Henson who now runs old Mr Weddell's grocer's shop, our village's one emporium. 'Make an honest woman of her,' Rose cracked merrily, shovelling a cascade of bills on to my porch. 'I would,' I gave back, sidefooting them aside for the dustbin, 'but her husband's a big bloke.' She mounted her bike and bounced suggestively on the saddle. 'That's never put you off before,' she said sweetly. 'Get on with you or I'll tan your bum.' It was the best I could manage to that. 'Oooh, Lovejoy. When?' She pushed off down my gravel path towards the nonexistent gate. I waved as she pedalled up the lane, grinning. Funny how women have this knack of always getting the last word. Something they're born with. Usually it's irritating as hell. Today, though, it cheered me up and I went back in smiling.

I fried tomatoes for dinner, dipping them up with brown bread and margarine. They're all right but the actual eating's not a pretty sight. I had tried to make a jelly for pudding, only the bloody thing never set for me. It's supposed to be easy, just pour water on these cubes and hang about for a few hours, but I've never had one set yet. I always finish up drinking them and they're not so good like that. By the time I'd washed up it was nearly time for Drummer. I'm always nervous at this stage, so I whiled away the time phoning a false advert to our local paper.

This is the commonest of all secondary tricks in the antiques game, and my favourite. I'm always up to it. It creates a demand for something you want to sell, like this Bible box I had. I had to cash it in urgently, my one remaining asset.

I dialled, putting my poshest voice on because I knew Elsie was today's newspaper adverts girl and she'd rumble my trick unless I was careful. I used to know her once.

'An advert for the antiques column, miss,' I bleated in falsetto. 'Wanted urgently, English Bible box, oak preferred. Nineteenth century or older.'

'Address to send the bill, please?' Elsie put her poshest voice on too. Cheat. She's even commoner than me.

'Ah. Hang on, love.' I fumbled quickly through the phone book at random. Riffling the pages a name caught my eye. Oho. That posh address which kept getting burgled of its antiques, the careless berk. Hall Lodge Manor in Lesser Cornard. Who deserved conning more? I read it out in full to Elsie, pleased at the idea of giving that snooty village something to talk about. 'And please include the name,' I added, still falsetto. 'Mrs Hepplestone. Send me the bill.' Damn the cost.

Happily I settled down with Hayward's book on antique fakery, pleased at having 'done a breadder' as we dealers say. By tomorrow evening enough dealers would have read the advert, and my Bible box would be in great demand once I flashed it. Tough on poor old Mrs Hepplestone, though. Still, I thought indignantly, what was the cost of a grotty newspaper advert, for heaven's sake? And serve her right for being careless with her antiques. If I remembered right she'd been in the local papers at least three times for having her place done over. Paintings, ornaments and medallions had all gone in a steady stream. You'd think they'd learn.

The knocker clouted three times, bringing me back to earth. Drummer, I thought nervously. I got up to answer the door, my palms sticky like a kid at school meeting his teacher, and me the best antique divvie in the business. I ask you.

'How do, son.' There he stood, looking like nothing on earth. Old tartan beret, scarf at the tra, battered clogs, shabby overcoat and enough stubble to thatch a roof. He lives down on the estuary with this donkey since he retired, giving rides to children. What a bloody waste of the world's labour surviving handsilversmith. You'd think he'd live better in his old age, but he likes drunken idleness.

'Er, wotcher, Drummer.'

'Nice day.' Nervously I started to lead the way round the side of the cottage. 'How did it go, Lovejoy?'

'Er, not so good, Drummer,' I confessed nervously.

He smiled and paused to thumb a bushel of tarry tobacco into his pipe. 'Improving?'

'Well . . .' My throat had gone dry. I waited with nervous politeness while he did the fire magic.

The old man is gnome-sized, a mobile bookend. He's one of these blue-eyed Pennine men who are gnarled and grey-haired from birth. They seem a special breed, somehow, weirdly gifted and imaginative beyond the ordinary. They tend to speak in odd sentences which have most of the meaning in the breaths between. He looks dead average – until you see him at a benchful of raw silver. Then he

rheumy old eyes spark and clear and his arthritic hands instantly become as tough as a wrestler's and as graceful as a temple dancer's.

In a puff of grey tobacco smoke we walked into the back garden, Drummer's smile twinkling brighter at the unkempt state of it all. I ignored his silent criticism. Plants have enough trouble without me making their lives a misery.

My forge is actually a garage with a couple of brick structures – furnace and hot-sand table erected near one wall. There's an end window opposite the up-and-over door. That's about it, except for a bench made out of old packing cases for tools and any stray pieces of wood I can cadge.

I offered Drummer the only stool. He sat and reached across the bench for my gadroon. I stared. The instant transformation in him gets me every time. It's remarkable. From an old codger in clogs he becomes slick, certain, completely in command. He hefted the heavy steel plate about with casual ease. It cripples me just to hold it upright.

'This it, Lovejoy?' he said at last, squinting along the rim.

My heart sank. He actually meant: and you've brought me here to see this travesty, Lovejoy, you useless berk?

'Er, yes, Drummer. That's it.'

He laid it down and smoked a bit. I looked dismally at my gadroon and waited for the verdict which Drummer gazed out on the bushes. It was honestly the best I could do. My arms and elbows started to creak.

I'd better explain here about the Reverse Gadroon because it's important.

I'd been lucky to find Drummer, lucky beyond belief. He's the last of the real hammermen, a genuine 'flatworker'.

In days of yore silversmithing was silversmithing, every task done by eye and hand. The polisher, modelmen, finishers, all *did* their work. They actually *created*. And of all these master craftsmen the greatest was the hammerman, because he had the terrifying responsibility of beating plain silver into a thing of miraculous beauty. Without skill and love the final form would be piteous, sterile. But with these two utterly human qualities the luscious virgin silver catches fire. The design draws life and love from its hammerman, finally glowing and throbbing with a pulsating beauty of its own. This explains why some silversmiths were superb, while some silver – even good antique – is only moderately good. There's a million designs, almost as many patterns as silversmiths. But of them all, none is so difficult, risky and beautiful as the Reverse Gadroon.

Drummer used to be an apprentice silversmith at Gurrard's in the Haymarket. Now he's the last of the line. I first realized who this old duffer was in a pub about a year ago, and just couldn't believe my luck. I might have missed it if I'd been casually gazing the other way. Through the barroom fug I saw this pair of crooked old hands take a bent halfpenny from the Shove-Ha'penny board and straighten it against the brass pub-rail with a flick of a metal ashtray. Mesmerized, before I knew what I was doing, I'd pushed through the mob in a second and collared the old scruff, and demanded, 'Can you do that trick again?' Everybody laughed, thinking me sloshed.

'Aye, son,' he'd smiled. We were in people's way trying to reach the bar. He took the coin and tapped once, bending it literally like paper. Then straightened it perfectly flat again with another tap on the rail. And all the time he looked at me, smiling.

I'd cleared my throat, daring the question. 'Have you ever heard of a Reverse Gadroon?'

His amusement lit with interest at the reverence in my voice. 'I've done it, son. Now and then,' he said, by which he meant for half a century.

And that was it. There and then I'd started learning from him, twice a week in my homemade forge. I even began exercises trying to strengthen my arms and shoulders, with dismal results.

It sounds easy. You take a tray of solid silver and hold it by the bottom edge over a patterned tool held in a vice. The idea is to hammer the silver's perfect upper surface over the die, thereby impressing the die's design. Then you move the tray a fraction, and hammer again. Do this all the way round, using even blows every time. If you've held it right, judged every single blow to perfection, struck with the massive hammer at exactly the right spot and with the same force, if you've turned the silver exactly the same distance for every blow and never stopped until the whole piece is finished, and if you are possessed of Olympian strength, endless stamina and unerring judgement, then you've done a Reverse Gadroon. But make a fractional error, pause a split second or weaken, and you've ruined the whole solid chunk of precious silver. Nowadays machines do it all, without the slightest risk of a human error – or human love – creeping in. It's called progress.

Drummer's the last living original silversmith. I don't mind his eccentricities, that he's been made redundant by the onward rush of mechanization. I don't mind that for the past twenty years he's lived in a shack down on the estuary giving donkey-rides for a living. To me Drummer's a great man, a genius. But when he's gone, God forbid, I'm determined there'll still be somebody to pass on his priceless skill of the Reverse Gadroon.

Me.

Only at this particular moment I'd made another balls-up. Drummer gazed at me, puffing.

'Not so good, son, is it?'

'No,' I said miserably. The last time he told me off like this I felt suicidal, except living's hard enough as it is. I practise on thin steel sheet, cut in ovals. To take the weight I'd rigged up a wooden grip on a counterpoised cord. Old Drummer screwed his eyes at it.

'Look, son,' he said at last. 'Pretty soon you'll have the strength. After that it'll just be practice in direction and power.'

That sounded hopeful. 'And then I'll do a proper silver pattern?'

'No, son.' He rummaged for more tobacco. 'You're a divvie, son. Stick to your trade.'

'Sooner or later I'll do a Reverse Gadroon,' I said doggedly.

'You're too immersed in antiques, lad. A new hammered silver's not antique. That's why you'll never do it, never in a million years.'

I ticked off on my fingers, narked at the old duck egg. 'Strength, Drummer. Practice. Direction. Level power,' I snapped. 'You said yourself I'll soon—'

'Give it up, son. Germoline could do better.'

Germoline is his donkey. I watched his match flare between puffs. 'Then what's missing?' I honestly couldn't see.

'Fire, son. In you.' He rose sadly and gave me the stool. 'Listen, Lovejoy. There's no such thing as a weakness, getting tired, making a mistake. It does itself.' He opened the door. 'When you've got the fire in you, the Reverse Gadroon does itself.' He gave a slow grin. I was so mad I didn't smile back.

'But—'

'You've got it for antiques, son. Not for new things.' His gaze saddened me. 'Got a motif?'

I spoke without thinking. 'A firefly,' I said. Why I said that I'll never know.

'Fireflies? Never heard of a firefly gadroon, but why not?' He nodded and made to go. 'Might as well ruin a firefly pattern as any other, mate.'

We parted after that, still friends, but me in low spirits.

‘Look, Drummer,’ I began at the gate. ‘Er, I’m a bit strapped . . .’

He chuckled. ‘The money? Forget it, Lovejoy.’ I give him a quid every lesson when I can. I said I owe it. ‘I don’t need any fare. Joe’s picking me up at the chapel.’

‘Cheers, Drummer.’

He gets a lift from a chap called Joe Poges, our coastguard on Drummer’s bit of coast, who comes into the village to see his sister. Her husband’s one of these characters mad on racing pigeons. Drummer sets them free on the river and they fly home again. Have you ever heard of such waste of effort?

I stood until Drummer’s small figure had vanished up the lane. Then I went back into the garage and tried and tried on a new sheet of iron. All I did was make it look like a clinker. After an hour I sagged to a stop, sweating and exhausted.

It had been a hell of a day. First losing the firefly cage like that. Then crossing Devlin and antagonizing Inspector Maslow. Then losing out with Maud. And last but not least getting the elbow from Drummer. Well, I thought in my cretinous innocence, it couldn’t get much worse, could it?

I gave the day up and went back to reading Hayward on fakes.

Chapter 4

I'm not one of these constant blokes, urbane from cockshout to midnight. By the time the pubs open I'd cheered up. Life is variation, after all, and I'm up and down with the best of them. Late that afternoon Tinker rang in with word of an inlaid early Victorian knifebox going cheap at Susanna Palmer's antique shop on the wharf. And he'd sent Lemuel after a set of Shibayama knife-handles. Dedham but didn't sound very optimistic. Neither was I, to put it bluntly, because Lemuel knows more about astrophysics than antiques. Anyway, the horse-racing at York never finishes till five and I knew he'd lose the bus fare on some nag because he always does. The good sets are real ivory with inlay, the rare Shibayama being a composite of bronze and iridescent stones. (Always check that it is ivory and not synthetic ivory; and the more varied the inlays – insects, birds, butterflies – the more pricey.)

'I'll bet,' I told him sardonically over the blower.

'Straight up, Lovejoy,' he croaked. 'Brad's going over tomorrow.'

Oho, I thought. Brad's mostly flintlock weapons and lately Japanese militaria, but he never goes anywhere without good reason.

I decided after a quick think. 'Okay, Tinker. Suss it.'

He caught me before I could hang up. 'Lovejoy, she come after you today.'

'She?'

'That sexy souper, the one with the big bristols.' He cackled evilly. 'You'll be all right with her. Lovejoy—'

'Shut it,' I told him. He did, but I could still feel his gappy grin down the wire. 'What did you tell her?'

'White Hart, eightish. That all right?'

I let him go, feeling much chirpier. Maybe she'd seen sense and wanted to sell me the firefly cage after all. Perhaps it wasn't what she'd expected. People commonly make this sort of mistake, assuming some trinket box has secret compartments crammed with jewellery. You have to learn that the antique game is one of dashed hopes.

Served her bloody well right.

Dusk was falling as I plodded up the lane. I have a lump of corrosion shaped like an old Austin Rubicon somewhere in the long grass but its road licence ran out at an inconvenient moment of poverty. So until I strike a Rembrandt or two it waits, patiently oxidizing in the evening mists, and I wander everywhere. We have no street lights owing to the simple fact that we have no streets. Our three pubs are the only nightlife, except for a maniacal crowd of sweaty badminton players straining ligaments at the village hall, and a church choir murdering Palestrina twice weekly to the utter despair of our new choir mistress. The desirable Hepzibah Smith is a pneumatic young graduate from the Royal College of Music. She was attracted to our village not so much by an impressive musical tradition as the job we wangled for her bloke, a gigantic pear-shaped blacksmithing hulk called Claude who farries horses on a local farm. Nobody laughs at his name, unlike mine. I could hear our choir from the park through the graveyard as they lumbered through the *Agnus Dei*. It came on to rain about the heavenly retribution I suppose.

Most folk shun the Tile and the Queen's Head but the White Hart's always heaving like noodle soup.

by seven-thirty. It's here that local antique dealers congregate for nocturnal boasting about deals they haven't actually made, in order to make sure everybody else is misinformed about deals they actually did pull off. Naturally our eternal wail is one of having sold the Crown Jewels too cheaply, of missing a cheap John Constable by a split second. The game is never to question the tales too deeply. They're all false. You'd only embarrass everybody by making some antique dealer admit that he couldn't have just snapped up Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* from a bloke in the flea-market. Just go along nodding and tut-tutting with sympathy. You can even make up a few tales of your own. The sober truth is that deep down in all the smoke and crap of the taproom every single dealer has had his hands on at least a few precious glowing beautiful antiques in the past few hours. Except me, that is, I thought standing dripping in the doorway. And even I have a Bible box.

After the silence of the dark hedgerows outside the cacophony from the crowd dinned my ears. I was always blinded for a minute while the light and the smoke tear at my eyes. Then my lungs adjust to the taproom smog and I push in, aiming for the bar.

'Hello, Lovejoy,' came from all sides.

'Watch your women, lads,' from some wit. 'It's our favourite auctioneer.'

'Make much profit, Lovejoy?' That was Joe Lampton, antique musical instruments and books.

I grinned. 'I charged Cuthbertson commission, Joe.' I got a few approving laughs.

Tinker was among the boozy crowd. I slid into the space his noxious vapours kept clear. Lemuel was over by the fireplace unerringly selecting cripples from tomorrow's Newmarket line-ups. Joe Lampton followed, pulling a first edition of Anne Cobbett's housekeeping handbook from his pocket. My chest clanged from lust, but I kept a calm face.

'This any good, Lovejoy?'

While Ted the barman got round to me I felt the book gently. In her day Anne Cobbett was as famous as Mrs Beeton. Be careful, though, because good modern photo-lithographic productions exist of many old books including *The English Housekeeper* – the paper and binding give them away. Any genuine old item, though, will scream its genuine character as soon as you get in reach. Joe's book was genuine all right. I told him so and valued it for him, loving the touch of the pages and the thud of the spine.

'Thanks, Lovejoy.'

I carefully wiped my hands down my trousers a few times as he merged happily with the mob. As I'd opened the book a fine chalky powder had fallen out. Doubtless some diligent housemaid had wished to protect an important household asset against bookworm by powdering the flyleaves with mortared white lead in a muslin bag. It's poisonous to *Homo sapiens* as well as to bookworms. Don't forget this when bookshop browsing.

Tinker was complaining. 'Here, Lovejoy. You could have charged Joe for pricing that bloody book. You always do it bleedin' free.' He was only worried where the next pint was coming from.

I shrugged and paid my pasty money over for a pint for him. I got the half. Mercifully Lemuel was still absorbed with the horses.

'Shut it,' I said. 'Run round.' Dealers' slang: summarize the main antique business of anyone knocking about. He slurped a gill and wiped his mouth on his oily sleeve before beginning. Sometimes I wish he wasn't so horrible. People are always on at me at the state he's in, as if it's my fault.

Helen wasn't in yet, I observed, but through the mirrors I could see Olive and Bill Tatum deep in an alcove, probably plotting their new stall in the town arcade. That's the glass-roofed monstrosity which ruins the High Street. Bill hasn't much go in him, but Olive's fierce determination to out-Sotheby the rest of us spurs him on to a greater glory than his handbarrow of disintegrating trinkets in the Castle

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