



IREMONGER

FOULSHAM

written and illustrated by
EDWARD CAREY

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IREMONGER

BOOK 2

FOULSHAM

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 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

For Gus



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Part One

Foulsham Streets



James Henry Hayward
and his Governess Ada Cruickshanks

OBSERVATIONS FROM A NURSERY

The narrative of James Henry Hayward, property of Bayleaf House Factory, Forlichingham, London

They told me I was the only child in the whole great building, but I wasn't. I knew I wasn't. I heard them sometimes, the other children. I heard them calling out somewhere down below.

I lived in a mean room with my governess. Ada Cruickshanks was her name. 'Miss Cruickshanks' had to call her. She gave me physic very often from a tablespoon, it had a strange enough smell to me but it felt very warming inside, as if it took away winter. I was given sweet things to eat, I had pound cake and tea cake, I had Forlichingham Pie too, which, in truth, was not my absolute favourite, the taste of it being somewhat burnt according to tradition and the insides rather a swill bucket of left-overs all covered over in sweet black treacle to disguise the taste. Miss Cruickshanks said that I must eat it all up, she would be cross with me if I didn't. So then I ate it.

She would tell me odd stories, Miss Cruickshanks would, not from a book, but from her head, she should sit by me and looking sternly she should begin, 'Now listen, child, this is the truth of it.

'There are two types of people, those that know about objects and those others that don't. And I'm one of the former grouping, and so I can tell you. I can tell you that once there was a place where things and objects didn't do what they were told. In that place, I shan't tell you its name, I shall not be so bold, but in that place people had got so thick and muddled about with things that things may have appeared to be human and a human likewise be struck down a thing. In that place you must have been very careful with whatever you picked up, for you may have thought it just a common teacup when in fact it was someone called Frederick Smith who'd been turned into a cup. And amongst that place there were high lords of things, terrible bailiffs, who may turn a person into a thing without ever much caring about it. What do you think about that?'

'I hardly know what to think about it, Miss Cruickshanks.'

'Well then, consider it until you do.'

Often she would ask me, 'Do you still have it? Show me now! Show me!' I would take the golden half sovereign out of my pocket and show it her. I always had to keep this particular coin with me, my own sov it was. What a fuss they made over it. If I took it out in public the people around in the big old place gasped at it, and then Miss Cruickshanks shrieked,

'Put it away! Put it out of sight! It isn't safe! It's not safe! You never know who's looking!'

Once in a while I would be summoned out of the nursery rooms to visit an old man. I should be sent into his grand room with all its shelves, and he would let me look at the things on the shelves, but not to touch them. Such odd things there were, some of it just rubbish, bits of old pipes, or a roof tile, or an old tin mug, but others that shone and were silver or golden. I did not know why he kept them all, I supposed they were his special collection. I thought I would like to have a collection of my own someday.

The first business I had always to do when visiting the old man was show him my sov. I brought to him and I dropped it into his large wrinkled hands. He studied it and turned it over and over. He was very content to do this for some time. At last he would return it to me and watch me place it deep in my pocket.

‘I am pleased with you, young James Henry. You do good work.’

‘Thank you, sir. I should very much like to work, sir, if it is with you.’

‘Owner Umbitt is a very busy man,’ said Miss Cruickshanks.

‘You must never spend that sovereign, James Henry,’ the old man told me.

‘I know, sir. I do know that,’ I said, because he reminded me of it each visit.

‘Say it to me, James Henry.’ Very serious now.

‘I am never to spend my sovereign.’

Where ever should I spend it anyway? There was certainly nowhere in the factory, and I was never allowed out into town. How they went on about it, over and over. Do not spend. Never to spend.

‘Good child,’ the old man said. ‘Mrs Groom shall bake you something. She is a most excellent cook, the best in all Forlichingham. How lucky we are that she sends us food here to Bayleaf House. And then I should have to make a small bow to him and be taken back to the nursery.’

Bayleaf House, my home, was the tallest, grandest place in all the whole borough. Built like a great weight it was, like an anchor. It was a certain place. It wasn’t going anywhere. You might sleep easy in such a place, knowing that when you woke up in the morning Bayleaf should still be standing. Yes, what a place it was! How fortunate I was with all the good things to eat!

Actually, it was them that told me how fortunate I was to be there, over and over. I was not sure I felt very fortunate. Bayleaf House was some sort of factory, though what exactly it made I could not tell. It was very hot in places. There were ovens and chimneys that poured out smoke. They smothered the rest of the borough with soot.

There were pipes all over the house, great metal pipes that snaked over the ceilings that columned the walls, sometimes a hundred thick and more. They got everywhere those pipes. I doubt there was a single room in the whole place that didn’t have pipes inside it. Some of these pipes were cold to touch, very cold, and some were awful hot and could scald you.

There were so many rooms where I was not permitted. You’re not to go in there, boy, do you hear? That place is not for you. Keep clear of the second floor, of the third. Where are the bells sounding from? I would ask. That is none of your business, they would say. What do all the whistles mean that blow day and night, I wondered. That need not concern you, they replied.

So, all in all, it must be said, I knew very little of Bayleaf House. Sometimes I heard the house about its business. I might hear people calling out, calls that sounded as if someone not very far off was hurting. They were children’s voices, I’d swear on it. When I heard the calling I got unsettled. And then Ada Cruickshanks picked up a hammer and banged it upon the pipes. Then, after a moment the calling would often stop.

‘I heard them, Miss Cruickshanks! I heard children!’

‘You did not.’

‘I know I did.’

‘You know nothing.’

Well, and that was true enough.

I knew that my name was James Henry Hayward, that I lived in the London borough of Filching, just

by the great waste heaps. I knew that I was born here, in Filching. I have the place in my blood. But ~~was Miss Cruickshanks who told me all that, it was not something that I remembered. She called me gutter-born.~~

I tried so hard to remember my family but I could not. What did my mother look like, my father? Did I have any brothers or sisters? Why was I stuck inside with her and not out there with them? How did I come to be in this great house? Why did I live in a factory at all?

‘Might I go out?’ I asked her, ‘Are my family still living there? I can’t really remember them. May I go and see them?’

‘No, no!’ she snapped, ‘Dirty! You’ll get filthy out there. You’d get yourself lost, out there in Forlichingham. It’s not safe, there are terrible people, thieves and murderers. Come away from the window, how many times must I tell you!’ Then she’d turn on me. ‘Do you still have it? Show me. Show me!’ And I’d show her the coin.

It was all smallholdings, Filching was. I saw it from the window, little places a bit derelict here and there, smashed windows, holes in roofs, buildings propped up, jerry-built, that sort of thing.

I saw the heap wall that protected Filching from all the mass of dirtheaps, and on the other side the dirty town was the other wall. The wall that kept Filching from London itself. That wall was taller than the heap wall and more recently built. It had spikes on the top it did, and beyond it was London, true London, so near to us, so close but so far away because that London we should never enter. London was an impossible place to us people of Filching. No Trespassing.

Beneath my window, just beyond the factory railing, was the very nearest part of Filching – Bayleaf House. It was a tall white building, people kept running in and out of it. I liked to watch them. When I looked out from the windows and saw the crooked town I knew I loved it. I knew that I longed to get out into it, to be in those winding dark streets. Somewhere out there was my family.

I got terror headaches, and when I got them, when my poor old top smarted from all my thinking, the Miss Cruickshanks brought me the physic on the tablespoon. You felt so warm inside after eating it and the headache went right away and it all rather fogged over, but in a very nice way. All in all, I think I say, it was always foggy for me. I knew so little, so much was kept from me, that I lived in a smog. And on top of that, or confirming it really, was Miss Cruickshanks who wore a black bonnet that had a veil to it, so that I could not see her face properly. It was kept from me. I saw just hints of it, shadows under the veil. I never saw it properly. I could not say what she actually looked like.

But even after taking the physic, I could not stop thinking about my people out there in Filching.

‘Do you know where my parents are?’ I asked her.

‘There are greater matters at stake.’

‘I would like to visit them. If they are there, beyond the gates.’

‘Well, you can’t, boy. You mustn’t.’

‘Why may I not?’

‘Questions! Questions! Nothing but questions. Your questions peck at me like beaks, they scratch into me and send me into a fury. Let me tell you then, that which others would spare you: the place is dangerous and rickety, full of disease and cruelty. They don’t say Filching any more, the common people, they call it Foulsham these days, because it is a stinking, quagmire of a place, thick with pestilence.

‘A man they call the Tailor hides in the alleys out there and murders people – and the people out there are of such little worth that no one makes much of a fuss about it. Step out, James Henry Hayward, and you would not last a minute. You cannot be safe out there. The very air is pestilential.’

Step out and die, step out and crumble, step out and shatter.'

'But there are people out there. I have seen them in the dark streets.'

'Rat people, roach people. Ill people, dying people.'

I think it must have been the mention of rat people that jogged my memory, for I suddenly found myself remembering something I hadn't before. I remembered a house, I recalled a room in a house with a dirt floor. There was a cupboard there, a door to it. I remembered opening the cupboard door and there was a little girl inside putting her finger to her lips to shush me. I remembered that! I remembered something! I couldn't tell who she was, at first, or where I'd dreamt up such a thing. But I liked the thought of it. I kept trying to picture that face, but each time when I went back to it in my mind, when I opened the cupboard again in my thoughts the girl was not there, and in her place was a rat.

The night after I'd remembered the girl in the cupboard, I heard Miss Cruickshanks muttering away in her side room. I wondered what she was muttering about so furiously. She'd already twice come tiptoeing in to see if I was asleep and to make sure I had the half sovereign beneath my pillow, and so I think she must have felt sure I was finally sleeping. I wasn't though and I quietly, so quietly, got out of my bed, and so, so silently moved across the floor and then looked into her room and there she was sitting on the side of her bed with a looking glass in her hands, and I saw her lift up her veil. And then I saw her face. Oh, the shock of it!

There was a great crack down the centre of it! A great rent running down the middle! Like she was a bit of pottery and not a person at all!

'Evil child!' she screamed, turning round.

'I'm so sorry, Miss Cruickshanks. I didn't mean to.'

'Horrible little thief!'

'Does it hurt, Miss Cruickshanks? Your cut I mean? I am very sorry for it, I did not know you were hurt. Excuse me, miss.'

'I hate you!'

'Yes, Miss Cruickshanks.'

'I hope you rot!'

'Yes, Miss Cruickshanks.'

'Take your medicine. Now.'

'Yes, Miss Cruickshanks.'

'We are stuck with each other, child.'

'Yes, Miss Cruickshanks.'

'Go to bed!'

Seeing her wounded face made me feel different about her. Poor old Cruickshanks, I resolved to think of her more kindly. Cruickshanks was a person and a woman to boot, with all those woman things around her, all those bits and pieces signifying a female. I didn't like to credit the thought.

I preferred not to take my physic so much afterwards, I didn't want to be so fogged over. I began to pretend to take it. I'd slip it in my pocket. I'd spit it out when I had a chance. All that thick whitene went away and I could focus again. My head hurt perpetually, but I remembered more. I remembered the girl in a cupboard, I saw her better.

She was hiding there; it was her secret place. She kept her rag doll in there. I began to wonder if the girl was my sister. I began to be certain she was. And with that certainty I remembered more than

cupboard. I saw a whole room and people in it. An old woman coughing, a younger woman and man. There was a boy then as well, all busy about some activity. I could not tell what it was at first. Then forcing myself, I began to see more. I could look over their shoulders. They were making small cages. Cages, cages for what? I looked up, there were cages, any amount of them, hanging from the ceiling. There were birds in some of these cages, scruffy seagulls and dusty pigeons.

And there were other cages on the ground. The ones on the ground had a sort of shutter to them on a spring. Then I knew it! Then I had it! Traps! Rat traps, they were rat traps. That's what they were, the ratters, these people. They were champion rat catchers. How my heart raced at that. Yes, yes, I knew them. I knew them and I loved them. They were my family. My family were great ratters. Filching!

There was my father, strong and burly, scratches all over his hands and face, what a champion rat catcher he was! There, my mother, scratched over a good deal too, fierce and fond. Yes I know you Mother. My brother, learning to make a mouse trap. My sister and her rag doll, not a rag doll, a rag rat she had, a rat in a dress. My grandmother in the corner, fixing traps, two of her fingers missing from her early hunting days. What stories she used to tell us of those, of grandfather and wharf rats! And there was my grandfather, bent over, but grinning. Oh my family, my family. They all came flooding back to me. How I loved to be there with all of them.

There was more I saw, there was me amongst them all, going out with father in his leathers to hunt to lay down the traps. And there was the outside of the house, a one-storey place, fairly rickety, but with a shop sign flapping merrily in the wind, HAYWARD RAT CATCHERS FULLY LICENSED BY APPOINTMENT TO TUNCRID IREMONGER, GENT. Yes, home, what a home it was! And there were posters pasted on the walls, the bill stickers, RATS FOR SALE, and MOUSETRAPS, FLYPAPERS, GULLTRAPS, GULL MEAT, RAT RACKS, TAXIDERMY, WE ARTICULATE!, FEATHERS BY THE SACK, SKINS! What a home it was, what a place! That was it, the House of Rats, that was my place, that was where my people were. I had to find it.

The House of Rats.

Home.

That was the start of it. From then on I needed to learn more. Miss Cruckshanks kept a diary. I had seen her at it often enough, but I never should have thought to look at it, not until after I stopped taking the physic. She went out every day, locking the door behind her, to give her report to the old man. And so I took out her diary, and I read there all the thoughts of my governess, and those words brought even more confusion into my head,

I split. I crack. I am coming apart. Every day a little more.

One day, one day soon, I shall be in pieces.

Do not let me shatter, keep me in one part. I want, I so want to stay whole. But they say that I shall not. They say it is hopeless for me. They say I have the fever and that in time I shall fall to pieces. Shall I be tomorrow, I ask. Shall I be broken tomorrow? They tell me perhaps, though it is not likely. There is some time yet. Probably.

A little further on I read,

Sometimes, in the night, if I am very quiet, I can hear myself splitting. My skin when I tap it lightly

~~makes a noise. It should not make a noise. I should not sound like porcelain. I look at cups and saucers, at plates and bowls with disgust now. Is that what I am? A china thing?~~

I heard her outside then, and was quick to put the diary back. The next chance I had I read further and longer.

My parents were from Italy, from Napoli, they were cheap performers, they sang and danced a little. They had a dog who did tricks, and they had me too. The theatre they were working in, The Heaviness in Filching, always a braced-up building, never a steady place, one day collapsed. So many died that night, the night that I was left alone. I hadn't been performing with them. I was outside the theatre with the sandwich board trying to get people to buy tickets. I was ten then already and so able enough to stand up on my own. My family name was Crenzini and that came with much prejudice; it showed me up as foreign and alien, so I called myself Cruickshanks after Mama and Papa died because I thought it sounded hard and respectful and English. And no nonsense. The Ada I have always had with me.

I found work as an assistant to a Filching schoolmistress. I was very strict. I worked so hard not to sound Italian, and I must have had some of my parents' theatrics because people found me clipped and upright and quite believable. "You're quite a woman already, Ada, aren't you? I suppose you were born grown up," she told me. I learnt from the mistress and soon could teach English myself. A great bully she was, Mistress Winthrop, but so thick with gin that she was ever more gin than human, more bottle than body. It may as well have been that transparent perfumed stuff swilling through her veins and not blood at all. I did more and more of the teaching.

She could not be blamed perhaps; she had been brought low. Her husband who had been the schoolmaster was nowhere to be found. He'd upped and left, and the mistress remembered him often while polishing a small rubber truncheon that she never let out of her sight. This truncheon, it now seems to me, actually was her husband only in his changed state.

And then one morning several of the children had gone missing, one whole form – my form. There was no one there, but such a chaos of objects that I had never known before: a brass cymbal, a milk jug, a horse whip, a fish hook. I said I did not know how such a thing had happened. I was called for and given something to eat by a very kind-seeming man and that is the last I remember.

That much, and no more. It is enough. I wish to go forwards not back again. I wish to remain Ada. To make her more solid than she has ever been before, it was a tenuous hold I had on life when I worked in Filching schools. I would like to live. This is the testament of Ada Cruickshanks. I am Ada Cruickshanks.

The last time I read from the diary, I found this passage:

Each person in the Iremonger circle must keep his thing to him, his birth object. You shall not leave long without it; the disease shall come upon you. But I have lost mine. It was a clay button I am told but is lost, lost for ever. And to think I must spend my precious time with the child who takes his birth object, that shining sovereign, and polishes it and plays with it not knowing how he thus mocks me. How he clings to it, and how they make such a fuss of it, for, they tell me so, there's a person trapped inside that half sovereign, an important person.

The person that is trapped in the sovereign has power over objects enough to rival Umbitt. I have been told that he, when he was a person, had somehow – because he had fallen in love with a common servant – sent all the objects into a turmoil. And so, if he could do that, if he could upset all because he had fallen in love – because in those moments he had such feelings – then what else might he do

capable of? He was dangerous, I am told, and a wonder. For now, he must be kept as a sovereign where he may do no harm. He may be terminated. Umbitt might murder him, it has not been decided yet. They debate whether to ever let him out again. How could I tell the child that they are waiting to decide if he should live or no?

Sometimes I look at the sovereign and I wonder if it were a person again could it help me? And what then, I wonder, should happen to the poor dumb child? How I should dearly like to warn him, but what good should that do?

We are bound by some dark love. We are its opposite, its reverse. We suppress it, James Henry Hayward and I. We have snuffed it out, that forbidden loving. It is not our choice perhaps. And yet it is so.

And yet, and yet, despite their efforts, I think it is already coming undone.

They who live here around us see it, that old passion finding itself again. The truth of it is in me cracking. I am breaking up.

I could not fully understand the passage, though there was surely that within the diary which terrified me. I resolved that the first ever opportunity I had I should be out of there and run into the Foulsham streets. I should search for my family. I should find my people. All my thoughts were on my escape, on my freedom, all I could think of was breathing air beyond Bayleaf House. I should have to take their precious coin with me, for a half sov was a deal of money and I should need to have that about me.

I waited. I tucked myself up in my bed and waited. I waited for them to make a mistake. I lay blank before them, feeble and compliant, but my head inside me raged and raced!

It happened right enough one morning. One early morning before the sun was quite up, when there were less people about, before the ritual of medicine and prodding and coin lifting.

The mornings should generally begin with Miss Cruickshanks shaking herself up from the room beyond and then coming to talk at me through her veil. But she never came, not that morning.

I crept out then. I looked over. Still nothing. I slipped out of bed. I crept over to the door, even braved myself to look beyond into her room. And she was not there. No Cruickshanks not for love nor money. She had been there though, sure enough. Her bed was unmade. Very unlike Cruickshanks that was. Then I saw that there was something in her bed, something other than sheets and blankets, something in the middle where the Cruickshanks body should generally be. I couldn't see it very clearly. It was still dark, but a grey light was beginning to come. I got closer and even put my hand out towards it. It was a box of matches, an ordinary box of matches. How did that get in there? Perhaps it had fallen from her bedside table, for there was a candle there in a brass holder, and yet there was a lucifer beside it. Bringing the box from the bed up to my face I saw that it said SEALED FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE.

I needed more light, some light to help me, so I tore it off and straight away took out one of the matches. Struck it, it didn't light. Struck it again, and what a sizzling strange flame came off it! A weak, sad flame, barely enough to light the candle before it fizzled out.

'Miss Cruickshanks? Miss Cruickshanks?' I whispered.

Not a sign of her, her clothes were there though. Her black dress laid out on the chair ready for her to put on, lying there like a deflated Cruickshanks, and there too was her terrible bonnet with its black veil, and all them outer things of Cruickshanks, waiting in the place. Waiting for Cruickshanks to take them on to herself to cover herself up. Had she gone out in her nightdress?

And that was what gave me the idea.

Could I?

Could I do it?

The sun was still not all awake. It was dark yet. It was better to do it now. I'd have a greater chance if I was about it straight away. Yes! I would do it! I would dress myself up in Cruickshanks' clothes. I'd be Cruickshanks with the veil over me and that way I'd get me out of there. What a plan! What a recklessness! To wear all them women's things! It wasn't to be countenanced. Well then, show me another plan. Give me another way. There was no other way. It was only this or nothing else.

So then.

I put my own clothes on underneath. I tugged Cruickshanks' dress over me. It was tight, she was such a lean one. It felt horrible, but I must do it. On, on! Hurry yourself James Henry Hayward. You're more James Henry Hayward today than you have been in many a day, whether you wear women's clothes or no. I tied the bonnet on, I pulled the veil down. I picked up Cruickshanks' looking glass and looked through it, well there was a shadowy face beneath the veil, one that was not like Cruickshanks' but maybe, I thought, maybe in the half-light: get you going!

I was in her black lace-up boots, which gave me some extra height. I was all ready by the door. I had the key, it was around her belt. I had the key in the door, ready to head out. Wait though! Wait up! I went back to my bed, lifted my pillow, took up my half sovereign. There then! I plopped it fair and square in Cruickshanks' pocket and then, only then did I turn the key in the lock and open the door.

There was a guard there. I was expecting that, right beside me, upon a high stool. He stood up when he saw me, drowsy he was, napping I think. He stirred himself.

'Sorry, Miss Cruickshanks,' he said, 'I was awake, honest mum.'

I made a Cruickshanks-like snort. That was the advantage of pretending to be such a strict one that I grunted so: I did not have to speak.

'Going out are you, Miss Cruickshanks?' the guard asked.

I locked the nursery door, put the key back on the belt.

'Not like you is it, Miss Cruickshanks? Not like you to go out of a morning. Everything all right with you, is it?'

I gave a single brief nod.

'Anything I could do?' he asked.

A very brief shake of my bonneted head, and I threw in a grunt for good measure, to tell the guard that he should not presume. I went down then. I clacked down the stairs in that horrible bootwear. I wobbled a bit I suppose, and nearly fell upon my face.

'Are you sure you are quite all right, Miss Cruickshanks?' the guard called down.

My answer was a furious, 'Sssssshhh!'

I had to hope that had done it. I turned the corner then, the nursery was out of sight. I went down down Bayleaf House, even to the ground floor. No one had stopped me yet. Every trembling footstep took me closer to victory. I was soon enough in one of the offices below, people readying for the day's business, all the desks there, all the pipes and people running this way and that. I passed through them.

Sometimes people stopped and bowed to me, but on I went, on and on. There was a sudden loud shriek which nearly set me screaming: I've been found out, I've been discovered. But it was only the noise of the black steam-engine coming in from the heaps. The old man would be arriving now, coming up into Bayleaf House for the day's business. In former days I should be made happy by the sound, comforted by it. But not now, not any longer. I walked on, people passed by. Keep going, I told myself, keep going, with purpose. And there, there right ahead was the main door, the entrance way

out of this place, and I walked to it, didn't I, and the doorman opened it, didn't he. And I walked out just me doing that, no one else, I walked to the gate, right up to the gate. I spoke then, clearing my voice,

'Let me out,' I said, as strict as I may.

'You want to go out, miss, into Foulsham?'

'Out,' I said.

'Yes, miss, if you're certain.'

I nodded, and the gate was opened, and I was through. I hurried on down the street, I was outside. Passed the tall white building that I had often watched from the nursery window. I could see the other side of it then, see more of it than I ever managed before. There was writing on the front wall of it. MRS WHITING'S CLEAN HOUSE it said. ROOMS TO LET. There was an odd little man sweeping the steps with a broom who quite glared at me. And so I rushed on then, into Foulsham!

It was so cold out there. Hadn't felt it at first, so cold out from the factory, cold like I'd never be warm again. Steam out of my mouth, like I was an engine. How I missed my physic then, what I should have done for a spoonful. But I was free, I was out. There were tumbled down houses and not many people about, not that early. The sun up now, but only just, doing its best to break through. I could hear the waste heaps in the distance, waves of it smashing against the wall. There was ash in the air, and soot.

I hid behind a gloomy hut. I tugged off the clothes, ripped off all Cruickshanks' things and stood in my own togs, myself again. I had no shoes, I'd forgotten to bring them. It did not matter much. Most of the children of Foulsham I had seen from my window had no shoes or wore rags on their feet. I ripped some of Cruickshanks' dress and tied myself some shoes from them. There I was then, out of away from Bayleaf House! All I wanted at first was to get me as far from that great factory as I made so I just stumbled along, not looking in anyone's face, not daring to, just making progress. I wouldn't have to ask questions, get directions. I knew that I must. I had my half sovereign in my pocket. I held onto it. I warmed it. It felt a little like company. Perhaps this sov was a person once after all. Only how could that ever be so, that was some fancy surely? Oh my own sov, whatever and whoever, I'm that glad to have you.

Here I was then, back again in what was Filching and is now Foulsham.

There I was at last.

I plunged in. I told myself, go on, make a meal of it. I turned a corner and entered more populated streets, rough people in dirty clothes sitting in gutters, rag children running around, so different how I was, so dirty. I walked on, less and less happy. I hadn't thought I'd stick out so. Despite my rag feet, I was too well dressed for them. People everywhere looked up at me. I didn't fit in, I didn't belong there. And yet I could hardly go back.

'Can I help you?' someone said.

And rather than answering I turned and ran.

'What's up with him?'

'Up to no good.'

'What's he done then, to make him run like that?'

People came after me, more of them, calling out, 'Who are you? What's your name? Stop a moment. Stop and have a word with us. Not the Tailor himself, are you? Hey, Nice Togs! Come and talk to us.'

Children got up and followed me, finding the whole business delightful, running and skipping after me, singing,

*Spit spat sputum,
Whither are you walkin',
Forlichingham Mound
You are bound.
Crick crack sternum
You shall fall in.
Slip and trip and smack your head
Foulsham Mound, that's your bed.*

I knew that song. I felt in my head that I knew it, that I had sung it myself as a child, no doubt skipping along these same dirt streets. Help me, oh help me. There must have been twenty of them and more coming along after me.

'Leave me alone!' I called, but still they followed. My way was blocked suddenly by a tall grumpy man in a battered hat.

'Have you got something?' he said. 'Something I'd want? Do you? Have you? What have you got? We share here in Foulsham, give it me. Hand it over. I mean to have it. Who says it's yorn when it's mine all along.'

A huge ugly hand was put out, and I pretended to search my pockets, but then I bent down and sprinted for all I could into a different street.

'It's mine!' I heard the man call. 'Whatever he has it's mine! Grab 'im! Take that fat child down!'

There was a house in front of me now with a crooked chimney pouring smoke from it. There was writing on the window, FOULSHAM PIESHOP. And in there I rushed. People at rickety tables in the half-light of the smoky room. Everyone looked around when I came in. I shut the door behind me. There were the grubby children peering in at the window. I couldn't go out there, I shouldn't go out there. I'd stop here a while. I'd stop here and catch my breath and after a time those children were certain to get bored, then I'd step out, but not a moment before.

A very skinny girl with a filthy apron came up to me.

'Do you know the House of Rats?' I asked.

'What are you havin'?' she asked.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'truly I am. I don't mean to disturb, but do you –'

'Don't care about your sorriness. No interest in it. What are you havin'?'

'I *am* hungry,' I said, 'and that's the truth. I haven't had breakfast, I've usually had breakfast but not now.'

'Quite a regular one, are you then?'

'Yes, I suppose, yes I am.'

'What are you havin'? Can't stay here if you're havin' nought, don't cater for that lot. Got any money have you?'

'Yes, yes I have.'

'So then, sit you down and for the fiftieth time, what are you havin'?'

'What have you got?'

'Pies!' she bellowed as if there were no other way to utter the word, and she followed it with one even louder, 'Buns!'

'Yes,' I said, 'a bun, please, thank you, and a pie.'

'Well then, hand it over, nothink for nothink.'

'What?' I asked.

‘Your lolly, you clown. Pay first, pie follows after. That’s how it is, if not you’ll be back out with your chums there. They look most eager for it.’

‘I need to find the House of Rats,’ I said, ‘I’m looking for my family, for the Haywards, do you know them? Could you give directions? Could you tell me? Hayward. House of Rats. Most urgent.’

‘What’s the rush? Done something have you?’

‘No, no, I haven’t. No rush, no rush. It’s just ... do you know the House of Rats?’

‘Certainly I do, but sit you down have something to eat first, then I’ll tell you anything. That’s you have any money.’

‘I do have money.’

‘So you says.’

‘Though I’d rather not spend it.’

‘And that’s a common enough sentiment. E’en so, cough up!’

I put my hand in my pocket. I felt my half sovereign there. Held on to it.

‘I’ve no time for this,’ she said. ‘I’ll set Charley on you and he’s a brute. Charley! We’ve one that won’t pay here, he needs tossing out. Charley!’

In the background, from a room quite full of steam, a very large shape began to stir.

‘No,’ I said, ‘please, miss, not to be so hasty. I said I have money and here it is indeed. Here.’ I took it out, out in the open. The wretched girl looked down at it, she lay her hand out flat.

‘This is my money,’ I said.

‘That’ll cover it,’ she said. ‘More than cover it several times over.’

‘It’s a half sovereign,’ I said.

‘So I see,’ she said.

‘It’s my half sovereign,’ I said. ‘My particular half sovereign.’

‘Is it though?’

‘I’m to look after it.’

‘Loyalty’s first to your stomach, I always say.’

‘I’m never to spend it.’

‘Shan’t do nothing for you if you don’t.’

‘It’s mine you see.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘you’re wrong there. Mine now.’

She had it in her own filthy hand then.

She was walking away with it.

My sovereign!

Why did I feel so sad of a sudden? Why was I crying, the tears coming so fast?

My own sov!

My bloody sov!



Binadit

DEEPDOWNSIDE

The narrative of the Former Ward of the Borough of Forlichingham, no longer resident at that address
disposed, thrown out into the heapland

I found it and so it is mine. Takes one such as me to find such a thing as that. I scrambled upward. Hadn't been on top for many a day. The weather had been so miserable that it wasn't safe to go up, so I lived under, in the dark. I sees in the dark and am comfortable enough there. I live under, in the deeps. I knows it, knows it well. Sometimes, when I get the fancy, I surface. I find me a spot, a place to perch, and I sing out. I cry out. I groan and whoop and make my big noise.

'Binadit!' I screams. 'Binadit! Binadit!'

That's what I sound most. That's much of my vocabulary. They threw me out here in the Heaps sent me out over a mile in distance and left me here to drown. But you can't sink me. I'm made of such stuff I am. I survive. I live out in the Heaps and have grown big on it. I'm twice the size I was before who was already much. They're frightened of me, those indoor dwellers, terrified of me. Whenever they catch sight of me they run inside for cover. I'm the outdoors, I am.

I made a deal with the objects. We're one. We're of a piece, me and the wastelands. We're familiar. Intimate. The people from over the wall don't spot me mostly, lumbering in their distance. I'm invisible to them. I'm every piece of rubbish. I can be big. I can be monstrous as a mountain when they call all the rubbish to me, and it plays and throws around me and we are BIG BIG!

I'm everywhere all about.

You can't see me.

Here I am.

But where was I? I move in my mind about from bit to bit. I'm no constant thinker, I tell a bit of this a bit a that. I'm as varied as the Heaps, which to the unfamiliar observer is only brown and greyish, but to me is a kaleidoscope of experience. I move from object to object and with it shifts my mind, roll me over, lift a cover, drag out a bone: I'll tell you another story. Binadit am I. 'Tis home. 'Tis mine. I found it! There we are again! That was it. I found it! And so it's mine. Wot is it? Nothing much you might say, but I knows it. I feel it's good. I take it, I grab at it and hold it to me safe, and quick down I take it, deep deep under where I sleep in the deeps. Drowned dead. I am rubbish. Yes, yes, but wot is it? The new thing?

Wot?

I didn't say again?

No, I never.

Dumb old Binadit, foolish old Binadit, wobbly old Binadit, forever moving on, living heap, man of filth, heaphead, idiot, idiot. Meant to say. Well, I'll tell you then, I mean to.

Didn't say again.

Wot again?

No, you never.

Well then, here it is:

A clay botton.

My clay botton.

I found it.

I've a nose for it, always have had. I know your fresh filth from your old filth, I knows new stink from ancient stunk. I can smell a mile off. I knows it, I feels it. I hop about upon the surface rummaging here and there finding my grubbing. I love it, I love it, it's all my living. Picking it up, putting it in, swallowing, sometimes sicking it back up, not often. I do digest most things. Rubbed cloth, rich pickings for me they are, metal sometimes. I like the slice of it, like blood it is.

But so, there I was up above after the big winter storm and out in the sunlight, and moving me here and there seeing wot's come up, wot's new, a bit of this a bit a that. Have a bite of seagull. That I will thank you very much. Maybe I'll catch me a rat, alive or dead doesn't much signify. Iron gut, that's wot I am. Mister Eat All, ever have been. And there it was, very near the top. I picked it up, a botton, a clay botton, so wot? So very much. I like bottons. I keep bottons, shiny or dull. I'll have the lot. I've got me a tin Deepdownside and in that tin I keep my bottons. I smelt the clay botton, put it to my orifice, those sniffing tunnels of mine. Where'd you come from? And I looks up and I sees the House of the Sun way over yonder and I says, you're from there, from that ugly heap, the foul heap, the big blood heap, the spit heap, the dung heap, that heap of heaps where the real filth is, that's where you've been, ain't you? You've been tossed out. Why did they? Wot did you do? You're a botton, you are. Why do they hate you so? Well, I'll have you, little thing. Come under. Come down. Come deep down into the darks. My botton. Come along.

Past. Future. Present. Wot's that to me? Every day for me is like the one before it, just as much the one after it. They tumble in on each other. I can't tell any from the other. It may as well be a Tuesday as a Friday. I see times of the year only when I come up. Sometimes I'm down so long the seasons have shifted while I've been in the dark places eating my fill of the ooze at the bottom, where the black rivers run, and I hadn't noticed the spring come till I saw the flowering weeds growing out of the dirt. We do got flowers here, even here they shall grow. There's beauty for you. Tenacious, beauty is, you can't blot it out.

Deep down where I live with me, there's no summer and no winter. There's no Mondays or Sundays. We don't do Christmas or Michaelmas or Candlemas or Martinmas, never no Lent, never was an Easter to speak of. All's the same down deep in the dark, all year, day and night, all the same and down here, down below in the thick black of it, it's always the same temperature, never varies. Down here, at this depth, down here in Deepdownside (my address, that is, my castle, my shed, my lean-to, my kingdom, my box, my place), in the thick black, deep black, pitch black, black black.

Down here the creatures alongside me, the deep ones, are all blind. Little white eyes. There are rats deep down here and white things which once upon a time were perhaps seagulls but now are closer to fish than birds, all blind. There's no use in seeing this deep under, no future in it. Sometimes I think I might go blind, and that didn't use to worry me much, but every now and then I have a fancy to see something and then I clamber up, gets harder to go all the way up there. I heaves and pushes and eats my way up and then how the light stings. After a while all that terrible light spooks me, the great height of the sky, the cold bigness of it, and back down I go into the darkness. It's constant, it's peace, it's forgetting: it's home.

Home is a big metal room, was a huge safe room from a banking house that went bust and was thrown out, the whole jimmy of it. That's where I keep me deep under, with drawers and treasure sharp and soft and crackling and spiking and dead and forgot and rescued and remembered and that and that I have for my liking, to stroke or to eat or to have for company. My home.

Was home.

Not no more.

Not the same after, was it? It was home but home was taken from me, different afterward suddenly very different. After I found the clay botton time came back to my life. I began to remember I thought of things I hadn't thought of for years in the dark. I joined candlestubs collected and made me light below, hadn't had light down there for so long.

They called me 'It'.

I am It.

It of the Heaps.

Wot thoughts! All because of that newest botton. And then I seem to know streets and leaning buildings. I remember people just over the wall, people on the edge of Lundin, and another wall keeping them in in their turn. For they are not loved either. The Lundin ones think them horrible and build a wall 'tween them, and they think the Heaps horrible and build a wall to keep Heaps away. So much walling there is. Filchin', the place is called. Filchin', the town between the walls. One wall keeps Lundin away, the other keeps the Heaps out. Heaps! Heaps! How they fear them! And something else I know: I was born out here in the Heaps. It was my own mother, the Heapland was, a loving mother to me. That other mother, she that bore me, flesh mother, she that tried to poison me inside her, she left me out here in the Heaps, hoping I'd never be seen by anyone. Didn't happen, did it? She left a little token, a scratch on scrap tin. BINADIT read the wobbly hand. She must a done it after I was born, made the name with some hair claps or shard of glass or rusting nail. Put it there, my own name in faint hand, BINADIT. And beneath that, RIP. Only I didn't rip, no, no I didn't. Why did you not want me, Mother? Why did you leave me there? I wasn't alone though. Heaps, heaps all about me the Heaps they protected me, they fed me. I don't like to remember.

Didn't think of it till the botton.

Why does that botton make me remember so?

I curse that botton then. I hate it and want it gone. I want to forget! It hurts me so to remember. I'll smash it, I tell myself. I'll stamp upon it, I'll crush it. I'll eat it, I'll crunch it and then it shan't come again ever more.

Oh a botton, a botton! A botton's a thing!

I have such other lovely bottons. Bottons that never did me no harm. Brass bottons with anchors, brass bottons with crowns, mother-a-pearl bottons, tin bottons, embordered bottons. Bottons, pretty bottons. Not that clay botton, not pretty one bit.

'Orrid botton.

Wot it has done to me? I was happy enough before now.

'Binadit!' I shout at it in my darkness. 'Binadit!'

I put my fist out. I mean to thump it. I want to see it broken and rubbed into dust. I want to see it hurting. I strike a flint against a wall. I fire up my candlemess. Not enough. Spluttering sun. There to I have a little paraffin salvaged, but once in a rare while I flint it alight. There, how the flame makes the botton look like it's dancing, makes it look like it's shifting from side to side. I'll crush it!

'Binadit!' I howl. I screams at it. I shake the light at it.

That thing dances, that 'orrible botton thing. It shifts and flips, and makes a dance all of its own.

It's just the light upon it, it's only the flames that are wobbling so. I hold the light still. The light steadies but the bottom doesn't. It flips and turns and makes a general nuisance of itself.

A bottom dancing in the dark.

Hold you now! Stop that!

But it don't, not a bit. It flips and spins on, spins faster and faster and seems in fact to grow. A great bottom. Wot will you do, shall you do damage unto me? I am the one to doubt it. I hate the bottom the more I'm frightened of it. It stretches and twists and moves until it is no longer bottom shape at all, and there in my dim light is something else.

Not bottom no more.

It's a great rat.

No, it isn't.

'Tis.

Is not.

It's a person-thing. It's a person, an unleathered person. When did I last see a person out of leathers? This one in a thin black dress. So much pink! Then I think, then I have it: I'll eat it. Yes, I'll eat it. It's very fresh. But then that thing, that person-thing, it shifts in its place and looks out and then it makes a noise. It says some sounds that I cannot make any sense of. It says the same sound over and over and then at last I think I have it. I seem to have it in my head, a new sound sitting beside me.

Binadit. This is the call it makes, here it is, very fast,

'Loosypinnnott.'

Eh wot?

'Loooseee Pennnint.'

Eh?

'Lucy Pennant.'

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