

Mist

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There are rather few ways for a boy of thirteen to survive in the slums of late nineteenth century London.

The first, of course, is by thieving. Robbing the rich, though, is a very risky business. In areas like Belgravia and Kensington, with their lovely tree-lined avenues, freshly swept pavements and uniformed governesses pushing costly prams, the policemen keep a close eye on youngsters like us, looking for any excuse to arrest us. Robbing the poor, on the other hand, is even riskier: being chased by a bloody tanner or by a blacksmith armed with a hammer is anything but pleasant.

Believe me, I know.

The second way to survive in the slums of late nineteenth century London is to have yourself locked up in the workhouses by the Venerable Ladies of Holy Charity. Don't be fooled by the name, though: those ladies have very little "holy" or "charitable" about them.

Imagine for a moment that you are standing on a bridge looking over the Thames. The sun burns your skin, the sound of the water gently lulls your ears and the many scents drifting up from the boats passing below tickle your nose: spices from India, fruit and vegetables from the countryside, hops for the breweries, white bread for some rich Lord or other... There you are in the middle of it all, enjoying your freedom at the heart of the biggest, most powerful city in the world, when a posse of ladies dressed in black surrounds you, pins you down and drags you into a huge redbrick monstrosity where they undress you, scrub you down like a horse, wrestle you into a wretched uniform and force you to slog away ten hours a day in return for three awful meals.

It's enough to make you regret leaving that bloody tanner be, if you ask me

So, then, the third way to survive in the slums of late nineteenth century London is to practise the noble art of sorting yourself out.

This is how I go about it.

"Oy, Nucky, why don't you tell us about the Great Stench of '58?"

It was a warm morning in late June. My friends and I, at work on the muddy banks of the Thames since dawn, had already collected some fair spoils: a few copper nails, a wooden pipe and a leather boot – things that would, once we sold them, earn us the pennies we needed to feed ourselves for a couple of days.

I straightened up with a yawn, stretched and looked around. The grey waters of the Thames were shining in the sunlight and on the opposite bank the white dome of St Paul's cathedral stood out against the bright blue sky like a heap of sugar.

"Well?" I urged.

Nucky shot me a grin while still rummaging in the mud. The story of the Great Stench of 1858 was his favourite and, even though we already knew it by heart, Nucky always managed to add a few new terrifying details or colourful anecdotes.

But not everyone shared his enthusiasm for the story.

“Oh no, Clay. Not *again*” grumbled Tod, kneeling beside me with his arms deep in the mud, right up to his elbows.

“What d’you mean by that?” Nucky burst in.

“That I’m fed up of hearing you blether on about corpses, filth and animal guts” replied Tod. “We get it: in 1858 the Thames stank of carrion. What a great story.”

“In summer 1858 the Thames didn’t just stink of ‘carrion’” retorted Nucky, sounding insulted, as though it was somehow his responsibility to keep the memory of the Great Stench alive. I had no idea how he had become so attached to this particular affair; he was already obsessed with it when we met.

Nucky cleared his throat and threw a punch into the air, ready to launch into one of his detailed accounts. “It was weeks since it had last rained and the water level in the river had fallen by *yards*. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert even aborted their boat ride, turned around and went back to the palace because they were appalled by the *nauseating stench*. The waters of the Thames turned into a *putrid, purulent well* of guts, excrement and maggot-ridden corpses...”

“I thought they were flies?” I taunted him. “Yesterday you said the corpses were covered in flies.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?” retorted Nucky, wiping his nose on the hem of his shirt. “Before flies you get maggots.”

“Heavens, Nucky, you really are fixated on this!” exclaimed Tod, disgusted. “As for you,” he said, turning to me, “stop encouraging him, or sooner or later I’ll have to shut him up good and...”

SPLAT!

A mud ball had narrowly missed Tod’s head, whistling past his ear and landing on his shoulder.

Infuriated, Tod jumped to his feet and pointed his finger at Nucky, who was trying his hardest to stay serious. “Now I’m coming to give you a good...”

“*Tod.*”

“What? Clay, you can’t always stand up for him just because he’s the littlest!”

I shook my head and nodded in the direction of the dark figures that were drifting towards us like a silent swarm of cockroaches.

Tod followed my gaze and dropped whatever plans he had for taking his revenge out on Nucky. “Damn them. Do they still not understand this patch is ours?”

“Apparently not,” I sighed wearily.

I didn’t want a scuffle this morning. Being a mudlark was exhausting enough without having to constantly defend oneself against other bands.

Nucky, Tod and I were known to everyone as the Terrors of Blackfriars Bridge. It hadn’t been easy to conquer this part of the riverside, and now that it was ours

we had no intention of sharing it with other mudlarks. Everyone knew that the best areas were the ones nearest the bridges: every now and then someone in a passing carriage would throw out a penny or two or some remnants of food. That's exactly what had happened years ago when the three of us won this spot in a fight with another gang of mudlarks over a half crown that had been tossed over the bridge by a rich lord, who stood there looking down at the whole scene with an air of amusement while smoking his pipe.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted. "Give me a good show!"

And he got his show, that's for sure. Tod, Nucky and I fought like ferocious terriers and sent the other band of mudlarks scarpering even though they were bigger and more numerous than us.

"I'm too old for this," I added, shaking my head, as Nucky and Tod flanked me, ready for battle.

I let Tod do the talking. He was the biggest of us three, and with his ruffled black hair, dark eyes, thick eyebrows and scar-ridden forehead he succeeded in instilling a fair amount of fear in his enemies. Provoking Tod was never a good idea: phrases like "think before you act" and "keep calm" were utterly foreign to him.

Nucky, on the other hand, who was blonde, pale, with a graceful and sickly air, compensated for his poor physical fitness by being astute: he was the one who negotiated with buyers about the objects we pulled out of the riverside mud, always fetching the best price.

And then there was me: not too fat, not too slender, brown eyes and hair, a sufficiently anonymous face that I could pass unnoticed, and an apparent calm about me that meant enemies tended to underestimate me – which, more often than not, turned out to be an advantage.

There were six mudlarks encroaching on our territory now but, taking a closer look at them, they didn't look like they had come to pick a fight. They were younger than us and had a frightened look about them as though they had not yet found their place in the world. For a moment they reminded me of myself, at the age of five, when I was orphaned and found myself with nowhere to live and no adult to turn to. I had wandered along the riverbanks for a few days, eating what leftovers I could find at the backs of the pubs and inns, with the terrible awareness that I could not go on like this for long. Then Old Sal appeared, out of nowhere, with his long beard and his hooked stick, and took me under his wing, teaching me all about the life of a mudlark.

The Terrors of Blackfriars Bridge had a territory and a name to defend and, even if the group of children approaching inspired pity, to me at least, the concept of "compassion" was not one Tod was familiar with, while Nucky only thought about money (and the Great Stench of '58, of course). We couldn't show ourselves to be too soft.

"This patch is ours" began Tod, straight to the point. "Be off."

The head of the other band of mudlarks, a thin boy with red hair, raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

“We’re not looking for trouble. We just want to walk through.”

“To get where?” I asked.

“Vauxhall Bridge” he replied.

“Terrible idea. That stretch has already been taken.” I glanced at Tod for confirmation. “By the Blond’s Rascals, wasn’t it?”

Tod nodded and touched a scar below his right ear, a sweet bequest from the Blond thanks to a little misunderstanding a couple of years earlier. It was a miracle that we came out of it alive, actually. But that’s another story.

“Those people aren’t to be joked with,” I warned. “If I were you I’d aim for somewhere else.”

The group exchanged worried glances. “You don’t happen to have something to eat, do you?” asked the redhead hopefully.

“Why not, maybe we’ll offer you a nice cup of tea, too,” sneered Nucky.

“What we *haven’t* got is any time to lose,” snarled Tod. “Clear off now, snotty.”

“I can pay,” he put in quickly. “Well, kind of,” he added, seeing Nucky’s sceptical look. He put one hand into the pocket of his jacket and rummaged for a few seconds. “Here,” he said, taking out a little wooden box. “I found it this morning on the Isle of Dogs.” He held it out to me and, after a quick glance at Nucky and Tod, I took it.

It was as big as my hand and, under the layer of dried mud, I could see that it had detailed inlay decoration. I wiped it on my trousers to clean it off and then opened it, sliding the wooden cover out. Inside, perfectly preserved, was a set of hand painted tarot cards. Nucky came closer to get a better look at them.

“Golly,” he remarked, “that’s good stuff. Look at the colours.”

I closed the box and tossed it back to the redhead, who caught it mid-air. “Sell it. You’ll make enough to buy yourself some bread and a bit of cheese.”

The redhead shook his head. “I wouldn’t know who to go to.”

“Boy, this job ain’t for lazy people,” Tod burst in. The conversation had already gone on too long for his tastes. “If you want to survive, you’ve got to put some effort in. Now get lost or I’ll give you a thrashing.”

The redhead and his little band began to walk away sadly, filing past us with their heads bowed.

“Madness” commented Tod, pulling his sleeves back up and plunging his hands into the mud again.

“Yup” agreed Nucky.

“Such a bunch of idlers expecting us to give them charity... Who did they think we are?”

“Yup” agreed Nucky again.

“As if we didn’t already have enough problems... Ain’t that right, Clay? *Clay?*»

“Mmm-hmm” I murmured distractedly, while still watching the band of mudlarks wandering away from us.

“Oh, he’s at it again,” sighed Tod dejectedly. “You’re about to go and help them, aren’t you?”

I replied with a smile. Then I shouted over to the redhead: “Oy, you! Stop!”

“Heavens, Clay,” commented Tod. “Your heart’s too soft.”

“Only because those cards are worth a mint and that lad’s too stupid to realise,” I responded.

Tod uttered half a dozen swearwords of the more serious kind, while Nucky tried not to laugh.

“Clay’s right,” he said. “Those cards are wasted in his hands.”

“Of course, agree with him for a change why don’t you,” grumbled Tod.

I left Nucky and Tod to their umpteenth quarrel and went over to the little group of mudlarks.

“Here.” I took a little cloth packet out of my jacket pocket and held it out to the redhead boy. “Bread. It’s fresh.”

It really was. Old Sal had given it to me that morning when I popped into his shack to say hello. He, in turn, by some strange turn of events the details of which I hadn’t wanted to know, as usual, had got it from a maid in Kensington, who was apparently, would you believe it, his latest romantic conquest.

“Those cards are worth more than this, mind you,” I told him.

The redhead didn’t have a great nose for business. Without stopping to think even for an instant, he tossed me the wooden box and grabbed the bread as though he were starving. Then, clasping it tight against his chest, he ran off, followed by his companions in misfortune.

“I’ll drop by at the Queen’s Head. Some of Ma Lorna’s customers might be interested in these,” I told Tod and Nucky, shaking the cards.

“A spoon!” rejoiced Nucky, pulling it out of the mud. He wiped it on the hem of his shirt and gave it a good bite. “Pewter,” he declared expertly, “worse than silver, better than wood.” He slipped the spoon into his pocket and looked up at me. “Good idea, Clay. Ma Lorna’ll know who to sell them to.”

“As long as the cards actually get to Ma Lorna,” grumbled Tod. “If this morning’s anything to go by, Clay will end up giving them to the first lame gypsy he sees.”

“Thanks for the trust,” I laughed. “See you later.”

Before climbing up the bank, I wandered on a little way looking for a slightly less muddy bit of water in which to wash the worst of the mud off myself. Not that there was any real likelihood that Queen Victoria would ever set foot in the inn dedicated to her, but if there was one thing Ma Lorna didn’t put up with on her premises it was mud-caked mudlarks and toshers stinking of the sewers.

Talking of toshers, I found a pair of them busy washing exactly at the place I had come to.

“Morning” I greeted them politely as I began to undress.

“Morning” they replied in chorus. They were a few years older than me, around sixteen or seventeen, and had that typical unhealthy complexion of people who spend most of their day scavenging underground. Even though London’s sewers were full of more interesting objects than those we found on the riverside, I far preferred working out in the open. The dark, the stench, the oppressive brick walls... No, as far as I could see, a life in there wasn’t worth living.

I grabbed a piece of porous stone and rubbed it vigorously over my arms and legs before turning to my face and hair. Once I was all polished up – in as far as a mudlark ever can be, of course – I cleaned up my clothes. Then, soaked from head to toe, I put them back on and started to walk towards Cheapside, the area around the back of St Paul’s cathedral, a maze of narrow, winding lanes lined with craftsmen’s and traders’ shops.

I walked down Bread Street, trying to prevent my mouth from watering at the sight of the brown crusty loaves in the windows, and carried on until I reached the Cheapside Road. There, on the corner between the wide, busy road full of horse drawn trams and carriages and narrow, poky Milk Lane, stood the Queen’s Head inn run by Ma Lorna. It was a typical inn; the ground floor had dark wood panelling around the walls, large rectangular windows divided into several small lights and a golden sign lit up by lanterns.

Despite the early hour, the inn was already full. As well as the usual crowd of regular idlers, various workmen were taking a short break, resulting in a bizarre mix of shapes and colours: bakers’ boys, their hair turned white with flour, stood next to itinerant knife-sharpeners whose faces were black with iron filings, stout potato sellers whose fingernails were brown from the soil, and florists with their colourful baskets.

I pushed my way through the crowd and found my way to the bar. Ma Lorna was there. She was a lady of nearly sixteen stone with plump cheeks, coal-black hair and a spotless apron tied across her enormous bulging belly. I found her concentrating on one of her favourite tasks (apart from eating and drinking), that of tormenting her husband. He was a slight fellow with a low forehead who can’t have weighed more than about six stone including his shoes, hat and walking stick.

“Alfie, I’ve told you a *thousand* times that it’s your job to deal with the rats!” thundered Ma Lorna slapping her hand down on the bar. “I hope you’re not suggesting I should go down into the cellar!”

The poor little man hid his head between his shoulders. “No, no. Of course not, dear.”

“No what?”

“You don’t have to go to the cellar.”

“So how do you intend to solve the problem?”

“Ch-cheese?”

“Cheese?!” thundered Ma Lorna. “You think I should waste good cheese on fattening up those horrid vermin?”

“No, no! Of course not!”

“What do you think about a cat, then, Alfie?”

“D-d’you want to feed a c-cat to the rats? I think we c-could do...”

“Yes, with a nice side of potatoes,” Ma Lorna retorted in exasperation. “For the love of God, Alfie, go out and find a damned cat and put it in the cellar! *Alive.*”

Poor Alfie had been waiting impatiently for a chance to escape his wife’s clutches. He muttered something indistinct and slipped away from the bar, aiming full speed towards the door with the haste of a castaway within sight of the shore.

“Oh, Clay” said Ma Lorna then, heedless of what had just happened. “I hadn’t seen you.”

A lie. She had been perfectly aware of my presence, and it was no coincidence that she had laid into her husband as she had. She loved showing off to an audience.

Ma Lorna poured herself a glass of Pimm’s and downed it in one. She gestured to offer me a drop, but I shook my head. “Know what a fortune that bastard James Pimm made with this here concoction?” she laughed, “My mother knew him. A nobody who started selling oysters on the street just out the back here. Then he invented this stuff.” She picked up the bottle of amber liquid and slammed it down hard on the table, “And he got rich!”

“It must be good then,” I commented, as Ma Lorna poured herself a second glass.

She shot me a frown as she drained the glass. “Where have you left those fellow delinquents of yours?”

“At work,” I replied, sitting down on a stool. I took the box of Tarot cards out of my damp jacket pocket. “I want to sell these. Do you think one of your customers might be interested?”

Obviously, I wasn’t referring to her usual pub customers but to the party of frivolous women to whom Ma Lorna gave “séance classes” once a week. A gust of wind, a slight movement in the curtain, a candle extinguished, and they would start wailing as though they were possessed, convinced as they were that their dead loved ones were trying to communicate with them.

“*Top hat and stick, rich but thick; umbrella in the rain, tiny little brain,*” Old Sal liked to repeat. And if Ma Lorna’s tales were anything to go by, he was right. The richer one got, the more stupid one became.

Ma Lorna took the box and opened it, looking carefully at its contents. “It’s quality stuff,” she remarked. “But my customers are too respectable to take things of this sort home. Their husbands might get suspicious.”

“How stupid,” I muttered, “I hadn’t thought of that. They meet you in secret, don’t they?”

Ma Lorna nodded. "Imagine what a scandal it would be if someone discovered that the Duchess of Whoknowswhere or the Countess of Tralala were associating with a woman like me."

I got up off the stool and put the box back in my pocket. "I'll try over in Whitechapel. Maybe there..."

BANG BANG BANG! BA-BAM! BA-BAM! BA-BAM!

"What on earth is that racket?" exclaimed Ma Lorna, looking out at the street. At that very moment the door burst open and a young man ran in, stopping in the middle of the pub, his face red and sweaty.

"The circus parade!" he shouted in a hoarse voice. "There are camels! Elephants! Clowns! And... and..." Overcome with emotion, the lad gasped a few times, searching for the right words to do the event justice, before giving up and dashing back into the street.

A few moments later I found myself walking along the Cheapside Road, alongside most of the locals, waiting for the parade to pass by. It was quite common to see showy processions in the streets announcing the arrival of a circus in town, led by a brightly coloured cart and a large number of animals and performers.

This circus was no different.

The first thing I saw was a huge carriage painted in red and gold, pulled with great panache by six white horses. Its wheels were the same height as I was, with swirls and curls between the spokes. The boards were engraved with images of open-mouthed lions and elephants with raised trunks.

"Gosh," I heard someone say over my shoulder, "these ones have certainly gone for it in a big way."

"They're from the north" explained another. "They've taken their show all over, but this is the first time they've brought it down to London."

When the carriage came close enough, I managed to read the name carved on the side: SMITH & SPARROW'S EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUS – SINCE 1789.

"Look! Elephants!" squealed a child.

"Goodness..." I muttered. I had seen plenty of parades but I had never seen elephants this big. They must have been at least fifteen feet high, with smoke-coloured leathery skin, long waving trunks and lavish scarlet harnesses. A costumed juggler rode on each elephant, balancing coloured balls on the tips their noses.

After the elephants came the camels, irritable-looking beasts with their humped backs. They reminded me slightly of pompous city bankers, with their goaty beards and heavy eyelids.

"And what's that?" asked a woman next to me.

At the very end of the colourful parade there was another cart, as large as the first, painted in blue and silver. It was carrying a huge cage with dark bars, inside which was a man wrapped in a long sparkly cloak, who was uttering frightful verses while throwing leaflets into the crowd.

I caught one of the colourful pieces of paper as it fluttered through the air.

Tuesday 29th June, 1880
SMITH & SPARROW'S
EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUS
presents
The Great Rozkov Brothers on Trapeze
Kyoto the graceful steel dragonfly
Musto the sword-eater

Saturday 17 July 1880
THE SAVAGE OF THE NORTH
THE LAST LIVING WOLF IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
in public for the first time ever!

“What does it say? What does it say?” pestered a dirty-faced child, tugging at the sleeve of my jacket. “I can’t read!”

“It says they’ve got a wolf at the circus,” I replied. “The last living wolf in the United Kingdom.”

“Of course they haven’t,” retorted a nearby potato seller. “Wolves have been extinct for three hundred years!”

“They just want to take us for a ride,” continued the knife-sharpener. “It’ll be an overweight dog, I’ll bet.”

“A *wolf*?” The child looked up at me, incredulous. “Does it really say that?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“And you believe it?” he asked.

Before I could answer him, my attention was caught by a figure riding on a mule just behind the blue and silver cart. A frail old lady, dressed in red from head to toe, with numerous gold rings on her ears and her wrists. Next to her was a girl of about thirteen with dark hair and a dress with golden frills was dancing to the rhythm of a tambourine and bells.

“A *didicoy*,” muttered the potato seller, crossing herself. “Don’t look her in the eye: they can cast the evil eye on you.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” retorted the knife-sharpener. “She’s just an old woman wearing a bit too much junk.”

The man was probably right, I thought as the parade disappeared up towards St Paul’s. This was probably not a real *didicoy*, but just any old woman dressed up as a gypsy. In any case, where she had come from wasn’t important; as far as I was concerned, I had just found what I was looking for: a buyer for my Tarot cards.

And, quite apart from the opportunity to make a good sale, I’ll admit that my decision to go to the circus was also driven by curiosity. The only wolves I had ever

seen were on pictures hanging in the windows of print shops. The idea of seeing a live one fascinated me.

“The last living wolf in the United Kingdom,” I murmured, glancing once again at the coloured leaflet. “Who knows if it’s true...”

There was only one way of finding out.