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CHAPTER FIVE

The kitchen at Longacres, the residence of Mrs Lonsdale and her niece Henrietta, was of cavernous height. The afternoon sun streamed through the tall windows infusing the grey tones of the room with a comfortable, peachy warmth. Mrs Grundy, the long-time cook-housekeeper of the family, stood before the massive central table, the ingredients of a plum cake set out before her.

Over the years Mrs Grundy had grown to suit her kitchen, much as her kitchen had been arranged to suit her. So much so that those acquainted with her would be hard put to imagine her in any situation outside its stone walls. She had a heavy, foursquare body tinted in soft shades from white to grey. The only obvious colour about her was a touch of pink in the veins of her cheeks and the pale blue of her watchful eyes.

Hannah Grundy was never seen to bustle or to be flustered. Her every action spoke of her culinary philosophy summed up in her two favourite maxims. To everything its proper place and proper time; and cleanliness is the first and leading principle of a well-run kitchen. The ingredients of her plum cake were arrayed in a neat semi-circle of bowls before her. The pound of sugar, freshly crushed and sieved by Betsy the scullery maid; the butter pat standing in its cooling dish of water; the glass of brandy to give the fruit that extra zest; the basket of smooth brown eggs, the spices and the almonds, and the flour in her favourite large blue and white mixing bowl. She was concentrated on her task, her steady hands moving about their work with economy. Her chest was bad and her breath wheezed a steady counterpoint to the rustle of the fires in the stoves. She looked up as Black-Eyed Sal walked in from the drying yard carrying a small basket.

'That's my day near done,' the girl said cheerfully. 'Four baskets they left me today, and that overgrown damask cloth that's such a devil to press.' She put the basket on the table and stretched her back, her hands on her hips. She managed to bring a supple sensuality to even that every-day motion. Whether or not she was conscious of this effect

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was hard to tell. The ill-natured said that Sal never made a movement that was not calculated. Many others (though it had to be admitted, most of these latter were men) swore her naturalness was a considerable part of her charm.

'And what's that great laundry room for, miss? Must you come dirtying my kitchen table?' asked the cook as Sal took a fine embroidered scarf out of the basket along with a pot of powder and a soft brush. The girl returned an affectionate, teasing smile.

'Give over, Nan, it's only a little job and there's room enough on this great table. Betsy, girl,' she called across to the little scullery maid who stood near a window chopping vegetables, 'how about a cup of tea? The laundry and me's all wrung out!' Sal got up restlessly and strolled, swinging her hips, to bend over the trays of currants drying before the open ovens.

Mrs Grundy was soon beside her. 'You leave Betsy to her task and those currants alone,' she said, emphasising her words with a brisk slap on Sal's pilfering hands. Nevertheless she fetched the teapot down from the stove and poured a cup for them both. She called the scullery maid to her: 'Pin up that hair, Betsy. I'll not have hairs dripping about my kitchen. Oh, come here, lass.' She turned the girl about and briskly pinned up the straggling strands. The maid, a thin wench of thirteen in a washed-out grey print dress, stood submissively. 'There. Get you to the store room and fetch me a plate of sweetmeats. The third deep drawer by the window - and mind you make sure the paper's covering those left or they'll spoil.'

Mrs Grundy returned to her mixing bowl. She looked under her brows at her lively niece. 'You're telling me all's stowed away in the laundry?'

The girl filched an almond between tapering white fingers. Her long-lashed eyes twinkled in contrast to her assumed air of innocence. 'Tom's cleaning the mangle for me.'

'You're the laundry maid. That's your job, not the gardener's boy's.'

'But he's so willing.'

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'That's as may be, but now I'll have the gardener cluttering up my kitchen fretting about how his boy's not at his tasks because he's doing yours.'

'Gardener never frets at me.'

'Aye. I'll be bound. It's a plain miracle how the sight of a pretty ankle can tie up a man's tongue.'

'Yes, Nan.' Sal laid out the scarf she had brought into the kitchen. It was of fine silver lace worked in floss silk. 'Fancy dropping this in the mud,' she commented as she sprinkled an area with fine powdered alum and brushed it clean with delicate dabs. 'Miss Henrietta does have some nice things, for all she's so plain.' Mrs Grundy shot her a disapproving look. 'Well, she is! I'm not saying she weren't fair enough when she were younger but, my, she's well on the shelf by now.'

Sal spoke with the unconscious arrogance of her pristine eighteen years. She smoothed the scarf, then picked it up and draped it over her raven curls with an air. 'I'll have things like this one day. And not by thieving neither.'

Mrs Grundy tut-tutted. 'And who'll be buying them for you? Stop dreaming, girl. We've all a place in life, and yours and mine will never lead us to wear finery like that. Now stop your peacocking and drink your tea before you get that shawl all dirty again.'

A moment of seriousness stilled Sal's mobile face. 'Nan, I'm not stopping here,' she said with conviction. 'I will have things like this of my very own one day. I'll improve myself in life, you'll see.'

'Improve yourself! That's not what folks call it. You'll improve yourself right into the river, my girl. Your wild ways do you no good. Why won't you settle?' Mrs Grundy bit back the words as she said them. She knew it did no good preaching at the likes of Sal, but she feared for her girl. 'You're wilful, Sally Grundy, that's what you are.'

'Aye, I know, and wild ...' Sal responded with a cheeky grin. She stretched over deliberately and picked out another almond. She rolled it into her red mouth, her eyes brimming with mischief.

'You!' Mrs Grundy's face warmed with plain affection as she jabbed at the mixture in her bowl. 'Lord knows you'd have no trouble

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getting any of the unmarried men in the district if you set your mind to it,' she commented briskly.

'Or the married ones ...' added Sal. She was deliberately provoking her aunt. Her dark eyes never left the older woman's face. Hard as she tried, Hannah Grundy's fears could not be concealed. 'God forgive you, Sally Grundy, what mischief are you up to?'

'None that ain't deserved!' Sal softened before the concern on her aunt's face. She put out a hand towards the woman in a gesture of reassurance. 'Never fret, Nan, you know I'd never do nothing very wrong.'

Hannah looked full at her niece. 'You're not fretting after that Will Roberts?' she asked. She dropped her eyes and her voice, striving to sound detached. 'Didn't I always teach you that no man could be depended on out of sight? They're like dogs or cats; they'll go with whoever feeds 'em.'

'I know, Nan. I'd not fret after a man. Not while I've plenty fretting after me,' Sal ended, preening herself in a deliberately comic fashion.

'Well. You have a care, do,' insisted her aunt. 'Not that you ever would,' she continued softly. 'Not even as a little girl. Wild and wilful, that's what you are.' Mrs Grundy gently stroked Sal's porcelain cheek with work-roughened fingers. Then she snatched her hand back. 'Now away!' she said, nodding towards the clock that hung over the door. 'There's scarce an hour and a half to their dinner time and here's me but barely started!'

Sal wrapped her arms about her aunt's solid waist and hugged her.

'I've an early start tomorrow, Nan. I've been recommended, I have - to a Lady that's taken a big grand place near Gainford. A real Lord's Lady. I'm resting at the house there's so much to do.' The girl was vibrant with anticipation at the prospect.

The cook was suspicious. 'You look mighty excited just for two days in a nobleman's laundry. I know you, Sal. You're not meddling with gentlemen, are you? You'd not be such a fool?'

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Sal was not to be drawn. 'Don't fret, Nan,' she repeated, her face shimmering with suppressed mischief. 'I know my own business. I'm not such a little girl any more.' Then she gathered up her goods and danced out, pausing in the open doorway, her face bright with laughter. 'Besides, I've to be back Wednesday night. I've mischief to attend to!' Blowing a graceful kiss to her uneasy aunt, Sal was swallowed up by the bright sunshine.

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The George at Greta Bridge was a fine and well-known inn. It stood close beside the elegant bridge that curved gracefully over the river Greta. To many a traveller it was the last oasis of civilisation before the Roman road launched into the expanse of wild moorland that lay between the prosperity of Yorkshire and the comforts of Carlisle.

It lacked but a few minutes to four o'clock when Jarrett rode into the yard. There was a pallor under his tan and his face bore a set look from his struggle to keep control of the pain in his wounded leg. It took all his concentration to dismount with any semblance of normality. As he regained his breath he took stock of the bustle about him. The yard simmered in anticipation of the arrival of the mailcoach from Carlisle to York.

At the fringes of the crowd a group of postboys lounged in their short blue jackets, leather breeches and top-boots. One stood ready dressed to be called out, booted and spurred with his false leg strapped on to protect him from the carriage pole. Holding his pair of horses negligently with one hand, he looked into middle distance in a world-weary way, detached from the excitement of the onlookers who milled around him. The district was not so rustic that grown men and women would walk any distance to have a sight of the mailcoach passing, but several found their business happened to lie in the way of the George of an afternoon and loitered to witness the spectacle of the Change. Loud, skinny boys, burnt brown from long summer days of mischief, weaved about the sellers preparing themselves for the lightning moment of opportunity to come. A pedlar settled the strap of a tray of ginger

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nuts more securely about her neck. A foxy-faced boy hugged a basket to his chest as he polished the shine on the apples it contained. An old man in a battered straw hat arranged about himself an armful of nightcaps, pillows and fans to cool the face of the over-heated traveller. The journey by mailcoach was speedy but arduous and the privileged passengers were offered the purchase of an imaginative range of comforts.

Jarrett found the innkeeper putting the finishing touches to his post list, the mailbags in a heap on the counter beside him.

'I have a letter for York.' The innkeeper looked up from his lists.

'The mail's near due and my bags are all done up, sir,' he objected.

'It is urgent,' insisted Jarrett. He felt in his pocket and drew out a coin. The innkeeper looked him up and down.

'You look a mite rough, sir.'

'No matter,' Jarrett brushed his concern aside, 'a misadventure on the road. This letter?'

The innkeeper cocked his head to look out the window and down the empty road.

'Well, I reckon we can squeeze another in. For York, you say?'

'Yes. For the Marquess of Earewith to await collection at the Red Lion.'

'For the Marquess, is it?' The postmaster perked up at the name. 'Well, now, why didn't you say so before - always a pleasure to oblige a lordship.' The innkeeper's shrewd countryman's eyes noted the stiffness with which his customer moved. 'Trouble on the road you say?'

'Two ruffians attacked me on the way from Woolbridge. After my purse, I dare say, but I saw them off,' replied Jarrett briefly. 'Do you have a pen, ink and sealing wax?'

'You was attacked? Well, sir, that is too bad. We don't get much of that sort of trouble round here. That's bad news, that is.'

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'There is a postscript I must add before the mail comes,' prompted Jarrett, urgency giving his words a pronounced edge. He tried to add a conciliatory smile. 'I would be most grateful.'

With a slight sigh at the difficulty of serving the gentry the innkeeper went off to fetch the necessary items.

Jarrett broke open his letter, dashed off a hurried postscript about the attack and his misgivings and resealed it while the innkeeper carefully added the new arrival to the way-bill. The man was just refastening the York mailbag when the sounds of a coach horn were heard in the distance and everyone hurried out to watch the arrival of the mail.

The fresh horses stood prepared under the charge of ostlers. Directly opposite the inn's main entrance, the two leaders fretted, ready harnessed and coupled together. Another blast of the horn and the mail appeared bearing down the straight moor road in the grand style at full gallop. With nice judgement the coachman reined back his horses to bring them to a halt, the red body of his coach settling precisely between the two fresh wheelers lined up on the road. The ostlers leapt up to unthread the buckles and unhitch the four foam-flecked horses. The guard, in his fine scarlet jacket, sprang down from his box, the pedlars surged forward to clamour for the passengers' custom and the innkeeper pressed through the scrum to exchange his bags for the down mail. The George prided itself on performing the Change in less than the five minutes prescribed by the Post Office.

Above the confusion, the coachman sat in a heap on his box, his shape and aspect reminiscent of a comfortable and competent toad. He wore a squat beaver hat with a rakish curl to its brim, and his overflowing chins were supported by a silk handkerchief printed with bilious spots on a chocolate ground. Despite the heat of the day he wore a light overcoat thrown open sufficiently to hint at the several layers of miscellaneous coats underneath. He tied up the reins and stowed his whip in a stately fashion, while the passenger who had won the privilege of sitting by him eagerly wrestled to unbuckle the lead reins.

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The guard was a well-made young fellow with curly black hair. He consulted the clock he carried in a sealed case slung over his shoulder.

'You're five minutes late,' said the innkeeper, as he checked the timepiece and filled in the guard's way-bill.

'Aye,' replied the guard, 'an affair held us up at the last stage. There's been a murder up on the moor.'

The crowd picked up the sound of the word. 'Murder? What murder?' 'There's been murder done?'

The guard looked up to the highest authority present. The coachman prepared to come down from his box.

Despite his formidable bulk the coachman proved surprisingly light on his feet. He descended rapidly from his perch, neatly shifting his feet in turn from footboard to step, to hub, to ground, in one smooth flowing action. He had the timing of the natural-born showman. He paused, gazing mournfully at the crowd, before he spoke.

'Crofter's boy come down from moor all covered with blood,' he announced with relish. 'On Stainmoor, it happened. He's but a speck of a lad but he'd run all the way. A murdering blackguard done in his da. A great tall fellow, a sailor.'

'What would a sailor be doing so far inland?' questioned Jarrett.

The coachman turned to look at the interrupter of his tale. Seeing it was a gentleman, he deigned to explain. 'The boy said his hair were braided up with a tail behind. Dick and me, we told 'em it sounded to be such as sailors wear. Dick has a brother in the navy - that right, Dick?' The guard nodded in studious agreement. 'Justice in Brough told us to hand these about,' continued the coachman, drawing some roughly printed handbills out and handing them to the innkeeper. 'And I took it upon myself to agree. The Post Office may set great store by its timetables, I told him, but His Majesty's Mail is honoured to be a purveyor of Justice's fearsome Wrath.'

Jarrett looked at the handbill being passed around the crowd. It was headed in bold type.

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TWENTY POUNDS REWARD HORRID MURDER!!

Whereas the dwelling house of Ruben Gates, Crofter of Stainmoor, was entered the morning of this Sunday last between the hours of four and six by a person unknown who did most foully murder the said Ruben Gates.

A tall man, thought to be pock-marked about the face, wearing a blue frock coat torn at the left shoulder seam and having yellow hair, braided and worn in a queue behind, such as is the custom of sailors, was seen bending over the body of the murdered man by his lad who was woken from his sleep.

The Churchwardens, Overseers and Trustees of the Parish of St Clements, Brough, do hereby offer a Reward of TWENTY POUNDS, for the Discovery and Apprehension of the Person, or Persons, who committed such Murder, to be paid on Conviction.

The bill was signed by the vestry clerk and dated that morning, Monday, 29th July, 1811.

‘Murder!’ exclaimed the innkeeper. ‘Why, this gentleman was just set upon on his way here from Woolbridge!’ In his excitement he grabbed Jarrett's arm, causing him to wince as he stumbled on to his bad leg. ‘See - they hurt him, though he fought them off. Might have been the same crew as fled down from the moor.’

‘But there were two who attacked me, and neither fitted the description given here,’ objected Jarrett, none too pleased at the attention he was receiving from the crowd.

‘Well,’ said the coachman, his rubicund features managing to convey the impression that he suspected more than he was saying, ‘in your servant's humble opinion the gentleman ought to report the event

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to the magistrate - and maybe he could give him a copy of this notice, too.'

With these words of advice the coachman reascended to his high seat. He ceremoniously drained the cup of ale offered up for his refreshment, returned it with a stately nod of thanks and collected up his whip. The guard leapt on to his box and blew a fine loud sequence on his horn. With a lightning flash, the coachman cracked the thong of his whip above his leaders' heads. The horses sprang forward in their collars. The pole chains rattled as they took the strain. The black varnished wheels began to roll and the mail was off again.

The crowd spread out as the mailcoach disappeared, reviewing and exclaiming over the news in knots.

'Will you see the magistrate, sir?' the innkeeper asked the gentleman who stood gazing off down the road. Jarrett turned to give him a surprisingly charming smile. He regretted being short with the man who had, after all, done his best to oblige him.

'Yes, I think I will. Can you direct me? I am new to these parts.'

Flattered, the innkeeper gave the question his serious consideration.

'We're blessed with three justices in this district, sir. There's Colonel Ison - he's Chairman of the Bench and Member of Parliament, sir. A much respected gentleman, lives half an hour down the road towards York.' The innkeeper checked himself as he pointed in the general direction and shook his head. 'But there's no use going to him because he's in London at present. No. Then there's the Reverend Prattman at Woolbridge. Likely you've met him sir?' Jarrett murmured something about having shaken hands with the Reverend gentleman that Sunday at church. 'Very likely,' the innkeeper responded comfortably and resumed his contemplation of the problem. 'The Reverend Prattman, however, is not best to be relied upon, being too Christian a gentleman and a scholar to be very handy in such matters. No,' he concluded decisively, 'to my mind, sir, you should visit Justice Raistrick. A professional man, sir. An attorney at

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law and best suited to murder - failing the Colonel. You'll find him at his chambers in the Horsemarket in Woolbridge.'

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