

## **SHADES OF DARKNESS**

A Mystery Novel Set In The 1930s (Literary Fiction)

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### **SYNOPSIS**

For the wealthy residents of Westcliffe the 1930s depression is just a blip on their cosy horizon. For those unaffected and uncaring life is nothing but a continuous round of pleasure. The most dominant families are the Westerners and the Mayfields. And some members of the Mayfield line are more than happy to benefit from those suffering the effects of the slump.

But one young member of the Mayfield clan, Ben Appleton, is more discerning when considering the plight of the underprivileged. Often reviled and neglected in a house devoid of human warmth, Ben yearns for the love of a normal family. For a while his only friend is Tommy Woo, a Chinaman running a curio shop and laundry. By chance one day, he comes under the tutelage of librarian Miss Eleanor Whitaker, an elderly spinster, and subsequently develops an independent and caring view of the world, despite the evil in his midst.

When he learns that several members of his family are estranged and discovers that his grandfather was murdered, he sets out to catch up on his family's history. Then, after an eventful eight years and while nations prepare for war, Ben remembers the unsolved mysteries of his early days. He has never forgotten his childhood aim: to unmask the killer of George Mayfield and see him punished. But there are those who would murder him to keep their secrets.

## PROLOGUE

*It starts as a soft murmur, barely perceptible, a few strung out notes, and weirdly discordant as if a tiny creature has suddenly found itself trapped, is fearful and becoming distressed.*

*The sun is still high but spiralling towards the western horizon, its radiating beams casting a glorious orange glow on the exposed glass panes. Inside the conservatory, every now and then the sprinklers make a momentary whooshing sound as they wheel about to cover an over abundance of lush, leafy plants hosting a myriad of blazing, multi-coloured blooms, heads dipping majestically to soak up the daily shower; giants, dwarfs, burgeoning shoots and buds that sparkle with the promise of fresh rewards in return for thirsty work.*

*Everything seems calm, unaffected, the quietness strangely eerie, barely an intrusive sound save for a few invasive insects buzzing in from the open door, and that low, whispering hum of anguish. The air, made hot and humid from the day's heat, thickens in the swirling damp mist, making breathing difficult. The creature sucks in several rasping, shocked breaths, swallowing steamy puffs of moist air from the swirling morass.*

*The sprinklers keep on spinning, churning the earth into a dark, puddly quagmire. But the greedy soil goes on guzzling water and sucking at sinew, flesh, and the river of blood from the narrow stone path. The murmur grows to a muffled keening sound, the creature's stress slowly metamorphosing to reveal the escalating panic that all humankind feel when they know there is no going back. Such a sad, diminished creature now: fearful shaking taking hold and feet finding little purchase in the slippery red lake of death. The resonance of that mismatched sound ends*

*abruptly on a muted, wet sob. Just a few moments more of uninterrupted quiet, then a loud cry rents the air, slowly transmuting into a long, earth shattering scream of pain, denial, culpability and, last of all, grief. The scream goes on, and on, and on, and the world still turns.*

**PART ONE**

**MEDICAMENTS, MYSTERY AND MURDER**

1930-1931

## CHAPTER ONE

Something about the day wasn't right. There was an unearthly buzz in the air, a momentary shift in time and space. Ben rubbed the sleep from his eyes and kicked off the blankets. As he swung his feet out of bed, the peculiar feeling persisted: reality just beyond his grasp, something missing from the moment, or someone. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he put the sense of impending doom down to the remnants of a mixed-up dream. How could you remember a dream with full clarity one moment and barely put the bits together the next? He yawned, his feet absently wandering the carpet in search of his slippers.

He lurched to his feet and traipsed over to the window with a desultory sigh. As he opened the curtains he wondered what time it was. He couldn't be bothered to find out by tracking back to the little bedside clock he had bought at the curio shop. Anyway, it was surely time for him to be up and about.

A pale sun was peeping through the grey dawn. He could see all the way down the long tree-lined hill to Fenchurch Street, but there was very little traffic yet. On Fenchurch street, Chetstone bridge was a sort of informal line that separated the east side of Westcliffe and its poorer residents from the upper crust or more affluent members of the community. The west side was made up of high rollers with bank balances to match, facilitating proud ownership of the pristine-kept properties that started at the top of Elm Hill.

Ben wondered if Hattie had arrived. She always came early and got through the household chores in record time. It would be noon, at least, before his mother emerged from her bed, only to remain in her room for the rest of the day if she were

not going out. On the last strike of the hall clock, at noon precisely, Hattie would take in a tray, draw back the curtains and ask, as always: 'Ready for your pills, Miss Patricia?' Though it was never really a question. And barely five-minutes later she would toddle off home. She would return in time to cook dinner, stay just long enough to serve it and wash-up, then hurry home again. Since she lived alone with no family to speak of, except for a niece somewhere, his father had often tried to tempt her with a generous sum to live-in, but she always made excuses. No one could blame her; this house exuded a funereal quality most of the time, not helped by spontaneous outbreaks of alcohol-fuelled quarrels, followed by brooding silences.

In the bathroom Ben glanced at the locked unit. Not once, but several times his father had told him to *keep his nose out* because there were dangerous medicaments in there. He had had to look that one up in the dictionary. The medicines were Mother's, of course, all prescribed by the slimy Dr Marsh-Smith.

Ben washed and dressed in an air of despondency. In spite of this, he planned his day with a determined rush of ideas. The library was, of course, a foregone conclusion: he always spent most of his mornings there; reading was his favourite pastime, a passion, even.

It was well known that, apart from official holidays, Miss Whitaker, senior librarian, had taken only one day off in forty-odd years, and that was to head the mourners for her eighty-nine-year-old mother's funeral. Most regarded her as eccentric, though to Ben's eyes there was nothing strange about her, except perhaps her old-fashioned style of dress: billowing black capes and matching long skirts, always nipped at the waist with a gold buckle. Throughout the year she could be seen walking to and fro, carrying the habitual parasol during summer months and a large black umbrella for the remaining seasons, plus a great black bag containing galoshes

and roll-up Macintosh. She was always genuinely kind and helpful to Ben, and that was enough to put her on his short list of people to be trusted.

All things permitting, there were some places he visited on a daily basis, like Tommy Woo's. Several years ago, Mr Woo had rented vacant commercial premises on Fenchurch Street to set up a curio shop. While he waited to become established, he put up a sign offering to take in washing. Of course, it was his wife and three daughters who slaved in the steam-filled back room. It was now a thriving laundry business and the curio shop more of a sideline.

Ben had once asked him what his real name was – his Chinese name, that is.

“No say. English have plenty big trouble speaky Chinese,” came the sing-song reply.

“Speaking,” corrected Ben amiably.

But he loved browsing the many foreign novelties on Mr Woo's clean and well-defined glass display sills. And he enjoyed solving the elaborate Chinese puzzles which Mr Woo expertly hand-carved and decorated with beautifully hand-painted designs of fire-breathing dragons, heavily armoured warriors, and winsome maidens. Ben was Mr Woo's best customer, and was always pestering him for a new brainteaser.

“You plenty big trouble. You no see plenty hard work makey blocks. Next time, you pay through eye.”

“Nose. Pay through the nose.”

Mr Woo only pretended to be angry at his constant harrying for new puzzle blocks. Ben knew that, secretly, he was flattered by his patronage. Also, Mr Woo knew that after solving the complex puzzles, rather than discard them Ben would add them to his growing collection. Thinking of Mr Woo brought a smile to Ben's face.

He wasn't to know it would be his only smile of the day, and the last to come for a long while.

As he tied his shoelaces the idea of checking out the east side of town popped into his head. Having been warned innumerable times not to venture there, curiosity had begun to get the better of him just lately.

There was always the town shops where he could wander at will. He especially liked the second-hand bookshops with their musty smell and stacked shelves, the books in no specific order. Once, he had managed to pick up an old periodical that had been the first to publish a Charles Dickens serialized story, albeit devoid of the revered author's name in this particular edition.

There was an early morning chill in the air and Ben shivered on entering the empty kitchen. With a goosepimple shudder he cut two slices of bread and lit the grill.

Just as he was carefully buttering his toast, his father trudged in, his loose slippers making clapping sounds on the terrazzo-tiled floor. Ben felt the inevitable crunch hit his stomach. As he added milk and sugar to his tea, he glanced up into the bloodshot eyes of Charles P. Appleton.

"Not waiting for Hattie, then?" his father asked.

"No. The weather's not too bad. I thought I'd get an early start."

"Harrumph."

Ben concentrated hard on his toast. From the corner of his eye he saw his father light up the habitual cigarette and wander over to the coffee pot. Plumes of white smoke drifted over him as he hurried to finish his breakfast.

"Want some fresh juice?"

"No thanks, Father, I made myself a cup of tea."



“Dr Marsh-Smith will probably call in this afternoon. Your mother’s been worse lately.”

Ben nodded absently. All that meant was a top-up of the various drugs the doctor prescribed for his mother. He was a surgeon and head of administration at Mayfield Hospital, a private facility that had been built on Mayfield money. And to some extent it was still heavily reliant on the trust fund set up by George Mayfield, Ben’s deceased grandfather on his mother’s side, but Ben didn’t know this.

Although Marsh-Smith was outwardly cheerful and pleasant, and always asked after Ben, Ben didn’t like him. Intuitively, he felt there was something not quite right about the doctor. He couldn’t understand why he kept his mother permanently befuddled on a cocktail of drugs. After all, there never seemed to be anything wrong with her physically – unless you counted her permanent state of tiredness, which he was bright enough to realize was down to the drugs, anyway.

Ben scraped back his chair from the table and gathered up the dishes. After putting them in the sink, he ran some water over them and then dashed upstairs to grab a light summer blazer. The grumbling voice of his father mumbling about school holidays being a nuisance followed him through to the hall, but he chose to ignore it, hoping to escape any further interaction. But when he came back down the stairs, his jacket draped over his arm, his father was waiting for him.

“What about lunch?”

“I’ll get something in town.”

He knew his father had been expecting this answer since he was ready with a few coins to shove into his hand: three shillings, this time. More than enough to see him through the day, and practically a fortune as far as Mr Woo’s Curio shop or the

bookstalls were concerned. Ben carefully dropped the silver into his back trouser pocket and made sure the button was fastened as he took his leave.

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At the bottom of the hill, Ben paused on the pavement of Fenchurch Street and hesitated for a moment. He could either turn right and head for town or disobey his parents and explore the east side of Westcliffe. After a furtive glance over his shoulder, he turned left, walking briskly along the litter-free pedestrian area. Though still early, there was already traffic on the road, mostly steam-driven delivery trucks and a few horse-drawn carriages. Motor cars were still an exciting rarity.

On reaching the bridge, Ben again paused, dithering as he looked about to see if anyone he knew was observing him. Nobody was. He stood transfixed before the invisible sign: FORBIDDEN TERRITORY.

On the other side of the bridge was Haverly Road, the start of *no man's land*, or so he had been repeatedly told. *Don't ever cross that bridge* was playing through his mind like a recurring mantra. But his foot went forward as if it had a mind of its own. Halfway across the bridge he paused and leaned over the side of the guardrail to look at the churning muddy-brown water below. The racing torrent triggered a moment of dizziness, prompting him to grasp the rail. Only then did he notice the jutting scaffolding erected on this side of the bridge. The loud honk of a horn made him almost jump out of his skin. Forced to plaster himself flat against the guardrail, he watched as an open-topped green lorry packed high with sand rumbled past him, its big funnel belching out clouds of steam and the vibration of the wheels on the iron platform causing a shower of golden flecks that clogged the air. The momentary flare of a bunched fist and the mouthed words – “Catch you next time!” – from the driver, prompted him to move on.

There was a narrow footpath on the other side of the bridge. After a quick glance in both directions, Ben crossed over to the safer side, absently shaking off sand and grit. But still he hesitated over which direction to take. It wasn't so much the fear of being found out, but rather the sense of the many warnings he had received, mostly from his father. It was then that he spotted Uncle Edward, his mother's brother, drawing up to the kerb in Haverly Road. Anxious not to be seen, Ben tucked his head into his chest and watched from the corner of his eye as Edward parked his new, Lee Francis two-toned silver and black motor car a little way down from a narrow entry that ran almost parallel with the bridge.

Without glancing round, Edward locked his car and pocketed the keys. He nodded to a scruffy young girl on the corner of the entry and tossed a few coins at her. Several quick strides saw him disappear around the corner and Ben breathed a sigh of relief. But he was puzzled at his uncle's foray into the east side. Surely, he had no business there? Why would he risk venturing into such an unsavoury district, renowned for its violent occupants?

As Ben gazed at the spot where his uncle had disappeared, he noticed two boys turning into the same entry. Without stopping to ponder the consequences, Ben made the snap decision to follow his uncle, intending to solve what he thought was a mini mystery.

He couldn't know that his decision to follow Edward Mayfield on this day would reach far into the future and influence events that would see the present shade of darkness surrounding his family pale in comparison.

## CHAPTER TWO

As he crossed Haverly road, eyes pinned to the entry, Ben reasoned that if Edward happened to look over his shoulder, the two boys would hopefully mask his own slight figure. The taller of the pair had his fists bunched inside torn pockets that seemed to be bursting at the seams. His friend, obviously much younger, was taking long strides to keep up with the pace of his tall companion. One was as dark as the other fair; certainly no relation, then. Both looked as if the rag-and-bone man had outfitted them. The studs on their string-tied boots made loud clicking noises as they negotiated the cracked and uneven paving stones. Ben calculated that the shorter, fair-haired one was close to his own age of ten. If that lad wasn't afraid to roam the east end then why should he be? Because, a little voice told him, he lives here, you dolt!

Ben just managed to catch sight of Edward as he turned the corner of the long entry. As he too reached the corner, he noted the name of the shadowy unmade access, dark and harrowed with age: Petticoat Alley. What an odd name, he thought. At the end, it led into a cobbled road called Rose Avenue.

The two boys were chuckling softly, and then the younger of the two started to shout at Edward's retreating back. As the dark-haired boy clamped a filthy hand over his companion's mouth, Ben began to worry that they were planning to waylay his uncle.

When Ben rounded the bend of Rose Avenue, he saw at a glance there was nothing rosy about it. The rickety terraced buildings were dark and gloomy. At the end of the avenue, he lost the cover of the two boys as they suddenly turned off into a

back entry. It left Ben exposed to Edward's rear and the chance of being caught out with a rearward glance. Although it was somewhat of a relief in that it seemed that Uncle Edward was not to be accosted by them after all.

Edward's distinctive blue-ribboned straw boater, set at a jaunty angle, bobbed up and down in strict tempo to his confident steps. Clad in one of his expensive, tailor-made dark-blue silk suits, he cut a strange figure through this eerie quarter of increasingly rundown structures. Wherever he was going it was obvious that he knew the area well.

Ben paused to take in his surroundings, hoping to memorize the way back. His hesitation lost him precious time. When he returned his gaze to the road he realized that his uncle had switched directions yet again. He put on a spurt to catch up, his leather-soled shoes making only dull thudding sounds as he ran to the end of the first half of Rose Avenue. He arrived at a minor intersection where Rose Avenue took a downward dip, and he wasn't sure if Edward had carried on or turned off.

For several fretful moments he cast about for signs of Edward, hesitant to proceed in case he lost his bearings. He was about to give up when he caught sight of him emerging from behind a rotting, overflowing dustcart that was leaning precariously as if it had been left there for years.

A quick glance at the corner of the winding street told Ben that he was now in a place called Jackhays Row. He set off again, his breathing becoming less ragged as the pace became more manageable.

A few of the low-slung houses had been demolished; others were boarded up. But some were still plainly inhabited. The brick houses still standing, almost black from a century or more of pollution, were bereft of any homely values: ramshackle, leaning badly, and everywhere a projection of abject abandonment. The unpainted

doors opened directly onto the pavement. Jackhays Row was clearly the worst deprived area of the quarter. Again Ben wondered what could possibly be so important to bring his uncle to such a derelict part of Westcliffe.

Perhaps he was about to find out. Edward had stopped at the end terrace. Without knocking, he pushed open the door and stepped inside, closing it after him.

Ben ducked behind the dustcart as he pondered his next move. Apart from the two scruffy boys, he had seen very few individuals on this precarious venture into the east end of town. That changed abruptly when an old man emerged from another of the dilapidated houses and immediately pinned his eyes on Ben as if he had already been watching his every move. Two large dogs – vicious-looking mongrel hounds – bolted out on to the unmade road, teeth bared.

The old man, shabbily dressed in patched shiny trousers and a faded blue shirt, raised a scrawny arm. It was enough to halt the dogs in their tracks. He glared at Ben with a predatory eye. And then, recognition – or something like it – seemed to flutter across his features.

“Get away from there!” he yelled, moving forward ominously, his shock of white hair gyrating wildly along with the angry shaking of his head. Continuing to glare, he advanced towards Ben threateningly.

All at once, creaking hinges heralded the appearance of yet more unsavoury characters as they emerged from tumbledown dwellings to stare at him. Sweat broke out on Ben’s brow as his attention was drawn to the end terrace door, now beginning to swing open.

Frightened even more by the prospect of facing the certain fury of his uncle, Ben spun around and sped back along Jackhays Row, intuitively turning right into Rose Avenue when he reached the intersection. There he risked another terrified glance

over his shoulder and was mortified to see the two dogs racing after him. He could almost feel them blasting him with their foul breath, about to tear him to pieces. A chorus of raised voices assaulted his ears, mixing with that strange buzzing sensation that had bothered him earlier.

Willing his feet to respond, he sprinted along the uneven cobblestones. Heedless of the stitch in his side, he kept up the pace until he reached the end of the road. Then he jerked another terrified look behind and his terror eased at the realization that the vicious brutes were no longer chasing him and must have been called back.

He bent over, gasping harshly as his lungs fought for air. But the respite was short-lived. His relief gave way to dread as he spotted the two boys, the ones he had seen previously, bearing down on him. Were they after him now?

They jogged towards him, the tall one smirking with wicked intent as they homed in on his vulnerability. There was something about the younger boy's grimy face that momentarily captured Ben's attention, but it got waylaid on a fresh wave of terror when he spotted the glint of a knife blade in the hand of the elder of the pair. He took to his heels again, frantically trying to remember his incoming route. On recognizing the entrance to Petticoat Alley, he prematurely thanked heaven for his good luck. Then, as he ran on, he caught the sound of the boys' boots smacking the hard ground behind him and knew the chase was still on.

Chetstone bridge was in sight now. If only he could reach the other side of the bridge before they caught up, he felt sure he would be safe. The morning's rush hour traffic on Haverly Road was in full swing now and he flew in the face of safety as he weaved in and out of the slow-moving vehicles with a skill driven by fear. Hair plastered to his forehead and briny sweat dripping into his eyes, he felt his wet shirt sticking to his back as he rushed up the small incline to the bridge, and safety.

Dodging a wobbling cyclist, he was diverted away from the footpath to the wrong side of the bridge where labourers were erecting a barrier to shield the working area. He jumped over it, chancing a frantic glance over his shoulder. They were still with him, the elder boy grinning victoriously, his dark eyes simmering as he surged forward on a final spurt with arms outstretched.

Just as he reached that metaphorical dividing line between east and west, Ben was sure he felt the fleeting brush of a hand on his back – or was it the fickle finger of misfortune? Whichever, he stumbled blindly against the loose paling and felt his world turn upside down as he tumbled through the rails and plummeted on to the unyielding scaffolding. He barely had time to cry out as, like a rag doll, his body zigzagged through the maze of jagged pipework, gaining momentum before falling into the murky depths of the fast-flowing river with an awful splash.

But long before that, a thick blanket of darkness encompassed him and he knew no pain.



### CHAPTER THREE

When he regained consciousness, all Ben knew was pain. His head felt swollen to the size of a football. His vision was so blurred that he was barely able to focus on anything. Completely disoriented, an involuntary flail of his arms brought an immediate collision of sensibilities and he released an agonized howl that soon changed to a sob.

“Lie still.”

The only thing he could make out was a white blur bending over him. The softly spoken words and a calming hand on his forehead stilled him for the moment. But the pain tearing through his limbs was so great that he continued to whimper.

“It’s all right. The doctor’s on his way. Just stay quiet. Look, he’s here now.”

“Well, young man, so you’re awake at last. We were beginning to get a little worried.”

Recognizing Dr Marsh-Smith’s voice, Ben’s only response was a long, rasping groan.

“The X-rays show you have multiple fractures of –”

“What’s happened? Where am I?”

“You’ve had a very nasty fall. You’re in Mayfield Hospital. But you mustn’t worry, I’m confident you’ll make a full recovery. You’ve already had one minor operation when you were first brought in, on your shoulder. Later today we’ll be repairing the damage to your leg. It’s broken in three places so we’re going to have to do something to help fuse the bones. You’ll be good as new once we’ve finished

with you. I'll be performing the operation myself, so that should set your mind at rest."

*Hardly!* Every word saw Ben's heart sinking deeper into a pit of despair. "It hurts."

"Where, exactly?"

"Everywhere."

"Don't fret, I'll get Nurse Crabshaw to banish it all with just a little prick of a needle."

Whether or not he received a narcotic knockout, Ben had no way of knowing, since, at that moment, he blessedly passed out once more.

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Over the course of the next few days, between regular analgesic injections, Ben learned that his injuries included two cracked ribs, a dislocated left shoulder, two separate fractures of his left arm, at the wrist and elbow; a broken fibula, tibia and femur of the right leg; and an awkward break in the pelvis. It was the serious fracture of his hip that necessitated an operation lasting one hour and fifty minutes, during which two pins were inserted to strengthen the upper thighbone. Thinking of his mother's condition, he steadfastly refused any further painkillers after five days.

After continually pestering Dr Marsh-Smith for an answer, he was devastated to learn that his stay in hospital was expected to be four months. He thought he would go mad. The plaster casts were extremely uncomfortable and he was constantly being chided to remain still. Since his right leg was in traction, he had very little choice in the matter, anyway.

There was nothing in the sterile surroundings to relieve the boredom. Even the window was too high to see out of in his present position. He would go completely barking if he had to spend four months in these conditions, he thought, utterly despondent by this time.

The highlights of his daily routine consisted of the arrival of three desultory meals, the tea trolley at regular intervals with the cheery salutation of ‘Hello dearie’, and little else, except for the various appearances of cleaners and nurses, by whom he could tell the time. Dr Marsh-Smith visited him every morning at 9:05 on the dot, made a cursory examination of his various injuries and then left, usually some ten-minutes later, after spouting repetitive comments on his progress to date, much the same as the day before, which did little to bolster Ben’s optimism.

“Never mind,” Nurse Crabshaw said one day, on seeing his deepening glumness. “Just think, you don’t have to go to school and sit through all those boring lessons.”

“I like school.”

“Oh well, I’d mention that to Dr Marsh-Smith if I were you. Perhaps it could be arranged for a tutor to come in now and again.”

Ben did ask Marsh-Smith about this the very next morning, but nothing ever came of it. He made up his mind to obey all instructions and cooperate fully, hoping this would speed his recovery. He found the only way to remain sane was to escape within his imagination.

Uncle Edward was the first of the family to come and see him. His visit lasted barely ten minutes, and he spent most of it berating him for the grief he had caused his mother, one of the excuses given for his mother’s absence. In fact, he rarely saw his parents throughout his entire stay at the hospital. And on the few occasions that

they did visit him, the conversation was always so stilted that he was glad when they left. It was only later that he learned all three of them had been at his bedside on the day of the accident, and this made him feel slightly less neglected. Nevertheless, within the restrictions of his room, his only source of treasured exchange was with Nurse Ada Crabshaw who always found time to stop and chat to him, long after she had finished the necessary administrations to his slowly healing bones.

During the three-and-half months he spent in the bland white room at Mayfield Hospital, he received very few visitors to break the monotony. Amanda Westener, the only peer he could claim as a friend, came twice, bringing him a potted polyanthus the first time. Peter Draymore, his near neighbour and classmate, and almost a friend, came just once bearing a greeting card – signed by his mother, for whom Ben felt a greater kinship. She bestowed on a grateful Ben three visits.

Ben and Amanda had one unique thing in common: they each belonged to the two most prominent and influential – or richest, depending on one's perspective – families in Westcliffe. Stretching back generations, the heads of these families (presently Edward Mayfield, Ben's uncle, and Henry Westener, Amanda's father) had a hand in every lucrative venture undertaken in the locality.

But Ben had arrived at this realization only after an incident involving the theft of Mr Threadberry's pocket watch from the school's changing room, barely three years ago. It later turned up on Mr Threadberry's desk and no one ever did find out who had pinched it. Speaking to Amanda in the garden one day, Ben mentioned that he had been the only one not to be questioned about the theft. And it was she who haughtily told him that they wouldn't dare, since it was largely Mayfields' and

Westerners' money that had built not only the school but practically the whole town – or all the civic buildings that mattered, at any rate.

And the two families weren't slow to recoup the building costs of private constructions by means of extortionate rents, either, not to mention the revenue from the two finest hotels in Westcliffe, aptly named the Mayfield and Westerner respectively.

Ben received only two regular weekly visitors: Tommy Woo and the esteemed Eleanor Whitaker. Just when Ben thought he couldn't stand another minute in the barren confines of his bed, salvation would arrive in the form of his two unlikely best friends, Mr Woo and Miss Whitaker. They came on different days, naturally. And he looked forward to their weekly visits with a keen anticipation bordering on wild excitement, which could quickly change to a threatened panic attack if either was more than a few minutes late.

Mr Woo would waft in with the faint smell of incense clinging to his clothes and a wide smile of greeting, always cheerful. He kept Ben entertained with exciting stories about his revered ancestors, all of whom he claimed were from the highest echelons of the social hierarchy in the province of Guilin, just outside Xian. Ben suspected that this colourful background was something of an exaggeration on Mr Woo's part. Nevertheless, the tales kept him enthralled.

“When fingers free, me have new puzzle block for you. It velly hard. You no solve like others plenty quick.”

Although he tried to hide it, Ben always felt a sense of crushing desolation when Mr Woo got up to leave. At this moment Mr Woo would always present him with the

customary fortune cookie – which was a tradition usually kept for after dinner on important occasions, he told Ben.

“They’re delicious, Mr Woo. Who bakes them?”

“My wife. She velly good cook.”

“If all of her food tastes this good, I’m sure people would buy it. You could start up a restaurant, if you had the room.”

Mr Woo’s eyes lit up like one of the Chinese lanterns strung across the ceiling in his shop. After pondering deeply for a minute or so, he said, “That plenty good idea. Me speak to Mrs Woo. But if she no like, she smacky ear.”

“Smack. Smack me round the ear or cuff me round the ear.”

“Is what I say. Smacky ear.”

Ben laughed. He really shouldn’t bother trying to correct Mr Woo’s vernacular when the idiosyncrasies of it gave him so much pleasure.

Following Mr Woo’s departure and unable to unwrap the sweet biscuit, Ben would patiently wait for one of the nurses to pop her head round the door and help him out. Mr Woo would have gladly lent a hand, but Ben preferred to have something to look forward to after he had left. Once alone again, he would gobble up the delicious wafer before reading what his future held on the slip of paper written in Mr Woo’s typically neat hand; he kept every prediction.

Miss Whitaker, on the other hand, would sit and mostly read to him. Her quiet, modulated voice had a hypnotic, soothing effect on him. Her choice of reading material was always diverse, and he never knew quite what to expect. Sometimes she would give beautiful renditions of classic poems, such as ‘Gunga Din’ and ‘Morte d’Athur. He particularly liked Kipling and Tennyson. ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’

by Oscar Wilde, new to Ben's critical ear, was very soon a great favourite, too. It always moved him, to tears on the first occasion he heard it, since he could relate to Mr Wilde's incarceration and understood something of the man's anguish. (Although Miss Whitaker chose to be rather vague when Ben asked how the renowned playwright had ended up in prison.)

At other times, Miss Whitaker would read passages from some of his favourite novels, which consisted mainly of timeless tales like Kipling's 'Just So Stories', or 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' by John Buchan. His absolute favourite, though, was Mark Twain's 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer'. And Miss Whitaker's also, it would appear, judging by her enthusiastic interpretation of the colourful characters when it came to a rendition of their respective dialogues; he was sure she practiced beforehand.

"Once the cast is off your arm, I'll bring some books that I think you should read. For a long time, now, I've watched you progress through material that would baffle some in this town as think they're on a par with Einstein, and not an ounce of intelligence between them – unless you count moneymaking. Yes, my darling boy, I'm sure you'll go far if you but set your mind to stretch for it."

Ben would have loved her to name the people she had in mind, but he could guess at some of them, anyway.

During his stay in hospital she was the only one to ask what he was doing on the bridge that day. Ben was reticent at first, but before long he blurted out the entire story of his prankish adventure in the east end, ending with an impassioned account of the moment he fell headfirst over the bridge. He surprised even himself with an exhaustive description of all the characters he had encountered, not least the two

rogues, hurriedly adding that he didn't think either of them had pushed him over the railings. And though he didn't mention it, he had a vague recollection of something strange about one of the boys, rather like a misty patch of residue from one of his mixed-up dreams, like the one he had had on the morning of his accident.

Miss Whitaker listened with barely a flicker of emotion. At the end of it, she nodded several times as if she had digested the information with something more profound than a sympathetic ear, though she made no comment.

\*

Towards the end of his long confinement, Ben was profoundly disappointed to find that he was unable to walk without the aid of crutches. But he soldiered on, hoping that his determination to discard them would soon prove successful.

One morning, leaning heavily on his crutches, he was in his room dreamily watching the world go by through the freshly cleaned panes of the long sash window when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Turning slowly, he saw his father standing in the doorway watching him.

No hello, just: "Dr Marsh-Smith says you're ready to be discharged. But you're not to go back to school, just yet. He says you need about another month's convalescence. You know your mother can't look after you. And Hattie's adamant that she can't stay. Then there's my job, of course. So it's been decided that you'll be staying with Great Aunt Alice on the coast."

*Great Aunt Alice?* Who the dickens was she? No one had even told him he had a great aunt.

"I-I've never heard of her," Ben stammered.



“She’s your grandfather Mayfield’s sister. What you might call a poor relation. A bit strange by all accounts. You should suit each other very well.”

Ignoring the unkind remark, Ben asked, “Is it agreed? Does she know I’m coming?”

Charles shook his head in irritation. “Edward wrote to her last week with a generous offer. We received a reply this morning.”

Ben gave his father a tight nod. After so many years in an emotional desert, he shouldn’t have expected anything to change just because of his current disability. So, he was to be dumped on a very old lady whose only interest would be in the money she would be paid.