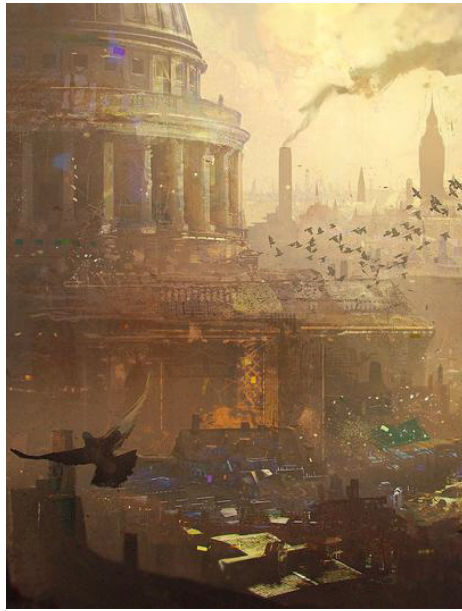


LONDONIA

KATE A. HARDY



Tartarus Press

Londonia – First Chapter pdf

by Kate A. Hardy

First published 2020 at Coverley House, Carlton-in-Coverdale,
Leyburn, North Yorkshire, DL8 4AY, UK

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Cover art © Karl Fitzgerald, 2020

ISBN 978-1-912586-19-6

Author's acknowledgments:

Many thanks to all my readers who have encouraged me
since the very first draft, and special thanks to Bob
for his goodly editing help.

The publishers would like to thank Karl Fitzgerald
(karlfitzgeraldart.com), and Jim Rockhill
for their help in the preparation of this book.

Principle places featured in this tale.

Londonia (also called the Pan)

Cincture (hyper-centre of old London Town, also called the Egg)

Important terms

wwW - the great collapse, also casually known as The Final Curtain

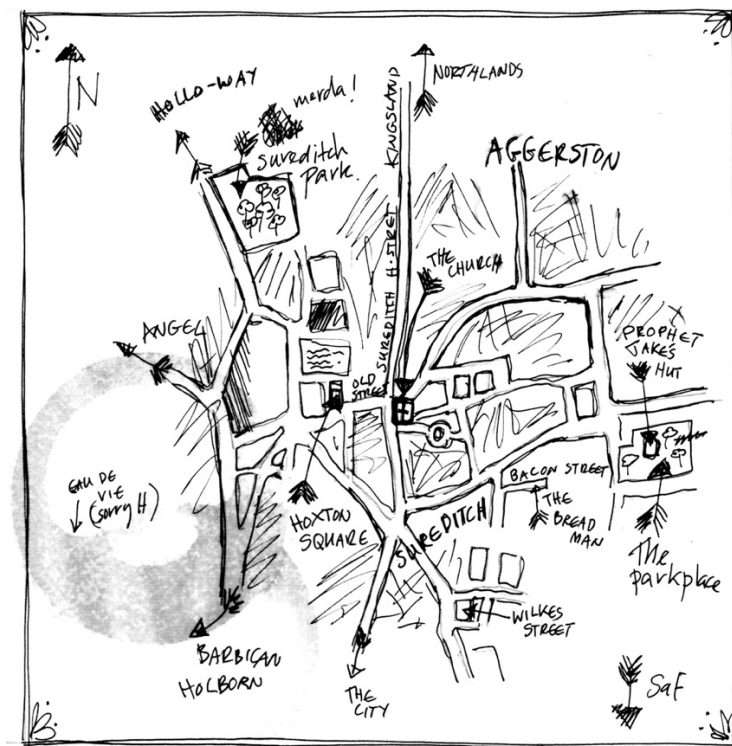
Unknown time/Un-time, following wwW

The full book contains a glossary of possibly unfamiliar words,

Dedication:
To my brother, Adrian

Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers.

Bleak House, Charles Dickens



Rough map of Sureditch

Created by Spike the route-master and Jarvis
(during a night of drinking plum eau de vie)

Ouverture

Londonia dark-quarter 2070

‘Oi! Second floor. Is Tom Ov-Brixton in there?’

Tom takes a drag on the clay pipe and squints at me through the smoke. ‘*Scrote*. That’s my hitch—gotta get to the Forrist before darking.’ He abandons the pipe, rolls on top of me and kisses my forehead. ‘Beauteous, you are.’

I trace a finger over his lips. ‘You too.’

As we gaze at each other a brassy note sounds in the street, followed by the same voice, now more insistent. Tom leaves the bed and starts stuffing things into his kitbag.

‘*Merda!* Can’t find my wrist-clock.’

I hold the weathered disc out to him as he hops about, one leg trousered, the other a naked white streak in this dim room. ‘Here—it was under your felty.’

He pulls on the rest of his jeans, yanks the belt’s teeth into a well-used notch and takes the timepiece from me.

‘Wouldn’t want to go without that.’

‘What’s the point of wearing it?’

‘Hands still move, don’t they? Useful for calculating how much worktime’s been done—a clockface, two, three . . . anylane, it was Dad’s. Not worth nothing but it’s a . . .’

‘Mascot? Talisman?’

‘Where d’you come from, wordsmith dame?’ He grins at me, face still rosy after the activity that has made this bed so warm. I risk the icy chill, slip out from the covers and scoot to the window, a blanket about me. A makeshift carriage waits outside

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fronted by two horses, their breath pluming white. A man sitting behind them looks up at this window, waves his arms in a gesture of frustration and yells.

‘I foitling *said*, is Tom Ov-Brixton in there?’

Heaving up the sash I call down. ‘Just coming.’

Tom snorts a laugh, shoves the last item into his bag and envelops me, blanket and all into a hug.

‘Sorry, I gotta go, and so sorry you can’t stay here.’

I kiss his now-anxious face. ‘It’s fine. I’m ready to explore this . . . Londonia—find my way.’

‘D’accord. They’ll be here soon-time. Tell ’em thanks for the loan of the room.’

‘I will.’

‘Can’t xactly take your address, can I?’

‘Not until I get one.’

He smiles sadly. ‘Write me, p’raps. Ov-Brixton, Hepping-forrist—might find me. There’s a horse-letter-mec what goes in that direction—from Bethy-green.’

The brassy note shrills again and I look out to see the now furious-looking man, trumpet in hand.

‘Pizzin’ *come on*—got three more to pick up and Clasher territory t’get through.’

Tom shouts out a response, hugs me tight once more then he’s gone, footsteps clattering on the stairs.

I consider the vast everything and nothing before me. I should perhaps layer-up and get out there to pace the streets and find . . . the next piece of this life, but the bed beckons again even with its biting population. The people that own these two rooms will return when the sun is directly overhead but as the sky is once again a sullen mass of cloud, it’ll be impossible to anticipate their arrival. Tom said the merde-mec always passes late morning with his cart of shit-filled buckets, so I’ll wait until then.

The bed is still warm. I burrow down into the crackling straw and sweet-stale wool covers; curl, foetus-like, try to remember—

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anything from before these last few days of his kindness. A limpid blankness stares back at my mind's eye before somnolence fills my conscience.

A rattling sound from the street disturbs my slumber. Merdec-mec? His call affirms.

'Bring out yer merde, an' scraps. Egg for a pail.'

Least I can do for the owners of this place. Hopping out from the covers I cram on shoes and coat and go into the tiny kitchen. The bucket of peelings is full, the *other* vessel, about half, judging by its weight—no desire to lift the lid . . . I take them and join the other residents walking down the stairs with their own various wastes. The conversation is of never-ending cold, a possible arrival of some charitable and benevolent outfit and *scoop-trucks*. As we reach the downstairs hall, I ask a man in front of me what these are. He looks at me beneath impressive eyebrows as if I am from a different planet—which I could be.

'Just don't be out on the street if you hear a sound like this.' He emits a wailing cry to which another resident prods him—'Nah—more like this.' The hallway is filled with eerie moans until an old woman clangs her pail with a walking stick.

'Foitlin' shut it! Don't we fear it enough wivout you lot doin' a re-run.'

The crowd mutter apologies and the door opens to let a wave of freezing air into this slightly warmer interior. Outside, each person gives over their buckets and pots, the shit dropped into one of the larger pails, their vessels swooshed out with a watering can of water, scraps into another pail and eggs duly handed over.

The man hauling the buckets steps back at the sight of me, a half-grin on his beardy face.

'Yer not on my rounds—not be takin' advantage of the system now would yer?'

I gesture towards the house. 'I'm staying here—waiting for the owners to return.'

'So, whose crud's in de bucket, then? Yers?'

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‘. . . Mine and someone called Tom, who was using the place
. . .’

His stare softens at my obvious confusion over the *system*.

‘Don’t be worry’n now. Tek de yeggs and just make sure dey com t’ the marsh-permafarm to do der quota.’ I nod, smile with relief and take the two eggs he’s handing me. His fingers trail on my skin for an instant, his smile broadening. ‘If yer ever lonely fer company . . . McMurphy’s de name—two, Curtain road.’

I nod, a smile surfacing at his cheek then walk back upstairs, the buckets clanging, two smooth oval shapes in my coat pocket.

Heaving the bedding off, I drape it over the windowsill for an airing, clear the ashes from the fireplace and prepare to leave this small sanctuary. Part of a loaf and hunk of cheese still sit in an earthenware pot. I make a sandwich, place the eggs on a saucer and wait, eyes scanning a book Tom had found. The words are poetic but my mind drifts away from the pages to thoughts of today and beyond today. The creak of the front door announces the arrival of someone; perhaps, the flat’s owners. Argumentative voices and clumping footsteps become louder, then a rapping at the door.

‘Tom? C’est nous.’

I jump up from the armchair, open the door and discover I can speak French, albeit rusty.

‘Il est . . . parti.’

I explain briefly that I had stayed with him and had agreed to wait so no one would take the flat, to which the man says they have been robbed and are exhausted. The woman is hauling the bedding back in, obviously preparing to become comatose as quickly as possible. No kindly offer of chat and tea then. . . . I add a jumper Tom had given me to my clothing, haul on the coat and walk to the door.

The man turns from unpacking a knapsack.

‘Sorry to ’ave been brusque, et merci . . .’ He passes me a small paper bag of apples. I pocket them and briefly shake his hand.

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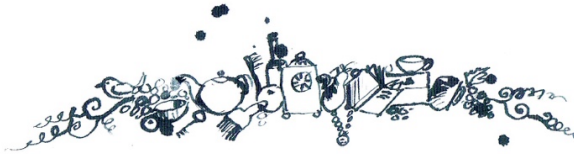
‘Pas problem.’

As I reach the door, he calls out. ‘Where a’ you from, mademoiselle?’

I stop, a hand on the latch. ‘. . . I don’t know.’

He smiles uncertainly. ‘Fait attention—ze streets hold bad people, vous savez?’

My shoes click on the stairs, down the tiled hallway and then I’m outside thinking of his words. But the streets will also hold good people. Turning to my left, I stride out as if the very action will conjure up positive change, useful encounters and a purpose.



Daylight is rapidly vanishing as I find myself foot-sore standing in an overgrown park reflecting on an empty day and no idea where to go next. My stomach growls at too many apples, the sandwich long gone; the last drink hours ago—a mug of tea some kind soul was handing out of her window to bedraggled folks.

A pond glints here: a rough oval of pale green-blue illuminated by the last rays of a stubborn sun, only now making an appearance. A small brook trickles into the body of water. I crouch and scoop, testing the taste. It seems clean and as several rabbits are now drinking, I assume it can’t be too foetid. I watch their twitchy movements and wonder about the killing of one—how to spear the body, peel off the skin, make a fire from damp sticks . . . have I done this before? No memories surface.

Next to the pond is a seat sculpted from a fallen tree. Gathering the coat about me I sit and contemplate the dusky scene. Despite the cold, I feel oddly content watching the early evening activity of various animals that have come to the pond to drink. A bird warbles a plaintive and beautiful song; another responds

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from a clump of trees on the other side of the water. I drift. Fitful dreams commence, interrupted as reality surfaces.

The night's bitter chill finally wakes me, the last dream still clinging: a man's face hovering above mine, his eyes as green as this pond's water.

I stand stiffly and stretch, stamp my iced feet and walk slowly from the pond. The sky is almost clear, stars shimmering in their millions, an almost full moon lighting the path before me. A squarish shape looms in the shadows to my right. Moving closer, I see it to be a hut sitting within a winter-withered garden, last summer's dead tomato vines still clinging to canes. Perhaps someone only lives here in the warmer months; maybe they wouldn't mind me borrowing their abode. The hand-written notice on the door suggests otherwise.

Property of Jake the Prophet.

Keep-the-fuk-out.

Snakes inside.

Turning reluctantly, I walk from the parkland, through a twisted metal gateway and out into a different street. A distant wailing sound echoes around the silhouetted buildings. What had they said? Scoop trucks?

Within a row of black-stemmed street lamps, one is alight. I quicken my step and stand beneath the flickering flame, wondering which direction to walk. A dart of wind blows out the solitary light. A cloud passes the moon and darkness swallows the road. Two words occur to me. *Sod it.*

From the corner of another road a person appears, walking fast, so layered in clothing I can barely tell more than it is human. Dangerous? Perhaps, but too late to run. She or he stops at the sight of me.

'Oi, dame. Wot you doin' out 'ere?' The voice is gruff but not hostile.

Good question. 'I have . . . no idea.'

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‘Eh? Well, don’t ’ang about! Get away, sharpish—scoop trucks been doin’ the round.’

‘Scoop truck?’

He’s already speeding away, glancing furtively about—flings me a question.

‘You seen an ’orse ’ereabouts?’

‘Sorry . . . no.’

His voice echoes in the silent street as he disappears into the shadows.

‘ ’Orse, you bastard—come ’ere.’

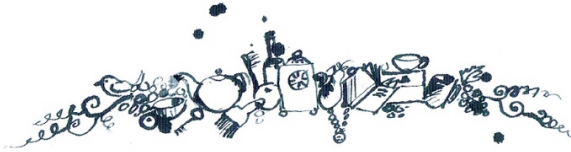
Whatever a scoop truck is, I’d like to not encounter it. Picking the coat-ends out of the puddles, I opt for a road opposite and walk as fast as my numb feet will allow, just anywhere, to any form of open-doored building. The cloud has left the moon’s face; a watery light illuminates this thin street. A small pack of dogs fight over something. They scatter as a horse appears, breathing hard, pausing perhaps before re-flight. I look at his empty saddle, and dangling reins. Have I ridden a horse? The idea seems not entirely alien. I walk slowly, eyes down. He snorts as I pass, breath silver in the dim light. Searching the deep pockets of this coat I find a fragment of something soft—bread, old but perhaps tempting enough. I turn, pace back silently and hold the morsel out, hand flat as someone must have told me. He snaffles it and I carefully take the reins in a trembling hand.

‘Right . . . ’orse. Let’s see if you can find us somewhere to shelter.’

He’s big, and this coat’s a tangle around my legs. My few attempts, foot in stirrup and heave up, fail dismally. I slip the garment off, body protesting at the cold, and try once more. Success. I haul the coat back on and jab my heels into his belly—gently. He walks, swayingly, unhurried now. The heat rises from his girth up the back of my thighs. Horse-heating. Whatever and wherever, this is an improvement. Perhaps I am asleep, dreaming—this beast part of a larger reverie from which I will awake, my surroundings familiar.

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We reach the junction to a wider road. *Which way to go?* 'Orse decides and I drift, with the animal's steady pace; slip, and right myself time and time again as my head nods. I mustn't sleep. A word hovers just out of reach—hypo-hyperther . . . A sharp barking sound cuts through my somnambulant thoughts. The horse high-steps, hooves clopping on a different surface. I slip, finally this time, foot wrenched in the stirrup, onto something soft.



'Oi. You in the coat. Wakey-wakey.'

I sit up abruptly and peer through a thunderous headache at the voice's owner.

Dark eyes observe me beneath a dusty black homburg. As his scarred face cracks into a wide grin my muscles tense, ready for escape. I try to stand but fall back as my damaged foot decides against it. He puts out a hand in gesture of peace.

'Ça va. Wos just tickled by you an' the hounds. Anylane, I'm not *that way* inclined.'

'Hounds?' Glancing from side to side, I realise why I slept so deeply and warmly. Two enormous dogs flank me, their heads now lifted in question. 'Oh!' I start, try to move again, but the pain prevents it.

The man crouches. 'Take a squint?' I nod and he gently prises off the shoe, whistling at the sight of blue flesh. 'Merda! Wonder if The Lord 'as enyfinng for that.'

'The Lord?'

He grins again and points upwards. 'Not 'im. *The Lord* wot lives 'ere—Finder par excellence. Rest. Don't mind the dogs—soft'ens they is, and I'll have a scan, see wot he's got.'

I flop back as he disappears off, shoes clacking to some other part of this . . . church. The headache has receded just enough

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for me to assimilate everything about *now*. I, whoever *I* really am, lie on a mass of straw, sandwiched between two huge greyhound-like dogs and a horse, in the echoing, grey-stoned interior of a church while a gangster has gone in search of drugs or a bandage, or both.

He's singing, a strong baritone: '*Champagne Charlie is me name . . .*' The song stops as he finds something. 'Gotcha.' The footsteps clatter and he's crouched again before me. ' 'E must'a been lucky with a trade—look, bandage and pills.'

He cradles my foot with great care for someone who looks as if he could wrap those meaty hands about a neck and squeeze until life ceased. The bandage applied after a slick of ointment he sits back. 'Wot about a swig 'a tea to get them tabs down then?'

'Tea?'

'Yu know—dried leaves, hot water . . .'

'That would be possible?'

'Yeah—'E's left the stove in, an' the kettle's warm.'

Questions are queueing. 'This person—*The Lord*, would he mind me being here?'

My new friend drags over a chair, sits, crosses his pin-striped legs and grins again.

'Let's see . . . nope. Mainly as I reckon 'e's dead.'

' . . . Sorry?'

'Saw a death-cart on the way here, and recognised certain *aspects* to one of the bodies on it.'

'Like?'

' 'E only had three fingers on one hand, see, and 'e always wore tweed—geezer on the cart . . . wewll, it was 'im.'

'You don't seem overly upset about his demise.'

'I'm not.'

'Oh?'

'Got a bit above 'imself, he did. Useful bastard as 'e'd got into the Cincture and could get stuff but didn't 'xactly go out 'is way to help anyone.'

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'So, whose is this place now?'

He shrugs. 'Yours? Mine?'

'But, doesn't anyone own it?'

'The *real* Lord? But finders-keepers, for now, eh?'

'I can't just take over a church.'

'Got anything better to do? Dogs like ya' too. An' 'e was always cunty wiv 'em.'

'But . . . I'd have to go to, I don't know, some sort of magistrate or council, buy the place.'

He smiles. 'Which cartier you from? Bumped yer 'ead, did yer?'

I wonder where to start, but then as I can't recall anything about me, there's not much to say.

'I don't know . . . I've been staying with someone, but he had to leave.'

'D'ac. Well, first up. There's a sort 'a rule 'ere. Someone dies, or's taken away and you 'appen to stumble into their place—you can take it on. You might get challenged by some fukkaorother but if you can fend 'em off—s'yours.'

'What about you? Where do you live?'

'Ah now. Got me a barge down at Tower Bridge—wiv Parrot.'

'Parrot?'

The dark eyes soften a little. 'Been after 'im to settle down, and enfin, he's good fr'it.'

'Why a barge, not a house?'

'Parrot works the fish boats. 'E's a eel catcher most, and I likes t'be near anytruc comin' in. Load 'a citrus arrived recent. Goodly trading in the Cincture.'

'What's the Cincture.'

He gawks at this. 'You a time-traveller or sumink?'

'No . . . I've lost my memory—somehow, and Tom didn't talk about a *cincture*.'

'*The* Cincture. You did bump yer nut then?'

'I don't know why I don't know about what happened.'

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At the sound of a reedy whistle emanating from where the bandage was found he gets up. ‘Don’t go nowhere—ha.’

Even if I wanted to, I can’t move and it’s warm here surrounded by these huge animals. I try to reach into my mind, stir the blackness in there, find something to tell me of before those few days when I had woken as if for the first time, wandered and encountered Tom. Nothing. But, I know how to ride a horse and speak French. I know the name of a hat that sits above this man’s eyes . . .

‘Ow!’ Something is biting me. Delving a hand down my front, I find two things: a flea, and the neck chain with its thin metal rectangle embossed with one word: Hoxton.

The hatted man has returned bearing two small bowls, one of which he hands to me as I shuffle up against the larger hound. The tea is peculiar but hot.

He nods as I sniff the brew. ‘Goat milk, or p’raps donkey. Think he had one. Might be out the back . . . anystreet, you got a name?’

A recent memory flits: lying in bed with Tom, him peering at the word on the chain’s tag. ‘*That your name, is it?*’ I return to the present and answer assuredly. ‘Hoxton.’

‘. . . D’accord,’ he says. ‘Tadly atypique . . . mind, I’ve a cohort called Wandsworth, so not that *out the box*, s’pose.’

‘And your name?’

‘Jarvis. Pleased to make yor quaintince.’

‘Two questions, Jarvis.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Why are you helping me, and what *is* the Cincture?’

His eyes widen at the second question. ‘You really don’t know . . . d’ac’, workin’ backwards—you’s in Londonia wot circles the Cincture—Cincture bein’ the hyper-central state of what was all once London town. An’ I likes the look of yer.’

I realise with a start that, although Tom had obviously approved, I still haven’t seen my reflection apart from in grubby windows.

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‘What do I look like?’

‘Reckon persons might say a tasty dame . . . very—very lot, in verity. As I said, I’m gay-way so makes no diffrence to me. You got apex teef an all, skin’s right smooth—darkish, my dad would say olive . . . wewl, ’e wouldn’t now as ’is mind’s buggered off recent-time.’

I pass a hand over my cheek, touching the skin, trying to imagine the shape of my face.

‘How old do you think I might be?’

He cocks his head, *mms* a little. ‘Got a bit less cycles on yer than meself—’bout four ’n thirty? Bit less p’raps . . . wos that wound there—on yer face?’

I touch the place again; a scab crackles beneath my fingertips.

‘I think a rat bit me—when I woke . . . on a bench.’

Jarvis shrinks back, just a little, his seemingly perpetual smile vanishing.

‘You got mal? Aches ’n that?’

‘Just the foot from falling off the horse. Why?’

‘Some of ’em carry pox, crud-stream, rougefluenza, and other stuff.’

I sigh, wondering if this strange new life might be a short one.

‘That’s something to look forward to then.’

His grin re-appears. ‘Don’t just like the *look* of yer—few’s got the ’umour on ’em after this rimy quarter. Too busy sneezin’ and repairing their mufflements.’

‘Is *rimy*, cold?’

‘Yeah. Fukkin’ freezin’, biting, raw . . .’

‘Siberian, benumbed, hyperborean?’

He raises a tangled eyebrow at my last utterance.

‘Wordsmith, whatever else you is.’

‘So, quarter is a season, and mufflements?’

‘Foitling big wrappings—clothes, feltys ’n that.’

I stop the interrogation realising he probably has things . . . whatever he does, to do.

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‘Sorry. You no doubt have work to be doing.’

‘T-dui? Nah. Time off, ’cept I was comin’ t’ see ’im—The Lord, about oranges.’

‘He had some for trading?’

‘Nope. I’d traded him some and ’e wos s’posed to ’ave got me something from the Cincture.’

‘What was it?’

‘A bit for a ’lectric thing what Bert’s making.’

‘You have electricity in Londonia?’

‘Most don’t, but there’s some wot does—bods who’s good with tinkering. They’ve got these little glassy rectangles wot goes on a roof and traps the sun—if there’s any.’

‘Solar panels.’

‘Yeah—that. See, they got the knowledge in the Cincture but it stays there. Like most mod stuff.’

‘Why?’

He shrugs and picks up his tea-bowl. ‘Dunno, really. I was only a nipper when the Final Curtain happened. S’always been like this . . . ’ang on, how d’you know about them panels then?’

I wonder again about the void in my mind—a partially opened store cupboard of words and phrases.

‘I really have no idea.’

Jarvis looks at me as if he’s weighing up a next phrase.

‘. . . Reckon you’d a make a good Finder. And not just a local one—Cincture-bound. A Grand Finder.’

I glance around me at the church walls. ‘You mean like the previous owner? Why? I don’t know anything about *Finding*.’

‘Call it a hunch—an’ mine are usually right. Or fate. But it’s foitling weird why you ’appened upon the ’orse of The Lord, eh? And you speak educated—seems like you got confidence. Finders need that, and dame ones is rare. Sought after.’

‘But hasn’t The Lord—or didn’t he—have any family who will want to take over this place?’

‘Had a wife once but she died in gosse-birth, *and* it too. Probably why ’e was such a miserable fukka.’

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‘So . . . no one else? Brothers? Cousins?’

‘Not that I ever known about.’

‘You really mean I could just . . . take over from him, if I can do it—Finding.’

‘I could put the word about—you’s a relative or somink. End of.’

‘And what would you get out of helping me?’

‘A lovely warm feeling of being a vrai ’n good Londonian citizen—and I continue being this place’s sub-finder.’

I sit up, put out a hand and he clasps it in his. I stare into those deep-set grey eyes and somehow know we will be good friends.

He squeezes my hand then gestures to where he had come from with the tea.

‘Better come and see the lodgings then. ’E’d made a right chaudy place of the vestry.’

Standing stiffly, and with his help, I hop-walk over to a faded blue door to the right of the transept and enter a room which fills my confused mind with joy. The Lord had amassed a serious collection of books along with old china, clocks and some interesting pieces of furniture including a velour chaise-longue, currently occupied by a black cat. I go over and introduce myself.

Jarvis draws in a breath.

‘Watchit. Zorro don’t like new persons.’

The animal stretches and opens its one golden eye. I risk stroking his coat and a rusty vibration starts up.

‘You got a animal gift,’ observes Jarvis, poking about in various boxes on the shelves.

No images of a familiar cat or dog appear in my mind but I feel drawn to the beasts of this building.

‘How would I feed them?—if I do stay here?’

Jarvis points to a rifle hung on a hook near the door. ‘Tool for the job, in fact the dogs’ll help yer with hare ’n rabbit.’

‘I wouldn’t know how to . . . kill anything.’

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Jarvis opens the glowering black stove, throws a chunk of wood onto the fire and looks back at me.

‘ ’Bout time you learned then. When yor foot’s better—morrow darking p’raps.’

I reach down and feel the bruise. ‘I don’t think it’s so bad.’

‘We could get Jake t’aver look—’e’s good with wounds, got herby potions and stuff. I was goin’ up there anylane. You could go on the ’orse.’

The dogs have now entered the vestry, long tails snaking. I feel responsibility lurking.

‘What about them? They must be expecting food by now.’

Jarvis stands up and waves them out. ‘I’ll go an’ see what he might have ’anging in the crypt.’

As the small pack of excited dogs and whistling man move off, I peruse The Lord’s eclectic book selection: Dickens, composting, tulip-growing, great French artists, a history of something called Facebook, punk rock, Mozart . . .

‘Sorted.’ Jarvis has returned. ‘Boar’s leg—nuff for a couple ’a days. So, Parkplace. First I’ll show yer the graveplot and the boggost.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Crapper—jon, water-closet, ’cept, ain’t no water, if you was used to that.’

‘Where I was staying, someone collected it.’

‘Oh—ver merde man. Yeah, that’s usual, but you got class facilities ’ere. Bucket over there in the confessional, outside and into the boggost—crud composter.’

I follow Jarvis to the back of the church and a side door. It creaks open and we step into a large area of savage undergrowth punctuated by broken gravestones, a semi-collapsed wall encompassing it all.

Jarvis nods at the sight. ‘Garden for the making. The Lord weren’t that lured by growin’ stuff but it’d be goodly soil—all them bodies an’ that.’

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An excitement spreads through me. I look at my hands, turn them, feeling the smooth skin. Are these hands that could grow food, flowers, fruit?’

The dogs have appeared, stretching, licking their mouths, still bloody from their breakfast.

‘Great-hounds,’ assists Jarvis as I eye their stature. ‘Mix-up of greyhounds, wolfhounds, maybe a bit ’a wolf, even. Lot’s a stuff got chucked out from the zoo when the Final Curtain ’appened. D’ac—there’s the boggost, and that there’s ’orse’s manure pile. Folk’s ’ll trade for it if it’s well manked.’

I gaze at my new friend, wondering if I am going to wake from this peculiar dream any moment, a plate of something awaiting me in whatever life I had been in. My stomach grinds hopefully.

‘D’you think . . . Jake might have anything to eat? I’d pay in some way.’

Jarvis grins. ‘He’s always got scran. Maybe if you takes The Lord’s place you could find him a new hat or sumink. D’ac. Parkplace.’ He pauses as if recalling something. ‘. . . Oh, yeah, he—The Lord, ’ad this two person saddle. Might still be about, if ’e didn’t trade it. Back in a jif.’

I survey the potential garden, imagine swathes of larkspur, delphiniums and roses; lines of verdant vegetables and a chicken enclosure. The gravestones stare stolidly back at me as if refusing an idea of change—but it will happen.

‘Oi, H. Found it.’ Jarvis beckons me to the door where he grasps a large dust-covered mangle of leather. ‘Bit mangy but it’ll do for a smallish jaunt. Alors, let’s saddle up.’

I wonder what the horse will think but he stands patiently enough as Jarvis wrestles with the thing, promising good grazing in the Parkplace.

Out in the front courtyard, Jarvis grinds the weighty door shut, locks it and then the gate behind us. We scramble up onto ’Orse and I look down on a very different street to the silent one of yesterday. Carts rattle, horses clop and people stride, stagger,

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and dazedly meander. A motorbike passes, filth belching, its rider steering edgily around holes and bushes that have pierced the road's surface.

Jarvis wraps his striped scarf about his neck, pulls the homburg down and lightly thumps the horse.

'Allez—Parkplace.'

A few streets on we approach a slightly familiar-looking stretch of wild land, its perimeters marked by rusting railings and an arched metal gateway crowned with a notice reading:

Parkplace—go about your stuff quietly and respect all

Jarvis jumps down from his seat.

'Just gotta 'ave a word with the goat-dame. You take over.'

He walks over to a woman leading a small herd of goats, and I shift into the front seat. 'Orse seems to know where he is going so I slacken the reins and observe the trees raising their winter-bare branches to this sullen sky. Names occur to me: oaks, ash, willow and the brindle-barked silver birch. Between their trunks glitters the pond I sat next to only last evening, the seat now occupied by a group of pipe-smoking women. The horse turns, walks on and within a few moments we arrive at the hut with its warning sign. Jarvis has returned, a jar of something in hand.

' 'Ere we are—chez Jake's.'

Slipping down from 'Orse, I tie him to a tree and notice the sign has gone.

'I was here, last night—before I found the horse, and was hoping to find a place to sleep.'

' 'Ad the snake-alert out, did 'e?'

'Yes.'

Jarvis smirks and raps on the peeling door. It creaks open and a weathered face topped by a darned woollen hat peers out. The bloodhound jowls crank up into a grin.

'J! Enter . . . bit worn this morn but I'll livey up soontime. Who's this dame, alors?'

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I step through into his wood-smoky room and hold out a hand. ‘Hoxton.’

He takes it, enfolds it within his own and says nothing for a while. Jarvis looks on with a knowing smile, nods, sits in a decaying armchair and waits. At last my hand is released and Jake gestures towards another chair.

‘Have a seat. Coffee?’

Jarvis produces the milk jar. ‘Apex—got this too, if yer out.’

‘Impec timing, my friend.’

‘So, wot’ d’you sense about Hoxton. Let’s see if the Jake-ometer is in a goodly state, orjordu.’

Jake pours three cups of dark coffee from a pot set by the fire and hands me one emblazoned with, *I Love Southend*. He sits and stares at me again with surprisingly bright blue eyes under their heavy lids.

‘A fertile grounding hidden here. Schooling, wealth . . . but you don’t recall where, methinks?’

I shake my head and sip at the coffee, fingers de-icing as they absorb the china’s heat.

Jarvis offers the goat’s milk then adds a spoon of honey to his brew, stirring manically. ‘Tell ’im wot you *do* know, Hoxton and show him yer foot.’

I do tell him the small amount I’ve gathered about my new life; Jarvis’s *finder’s-keeper’s* information is verified, after which Jake duly examines my bruise and pronounces it to be well rectified. He notices me eyeing his shelves near the old china sink.

‘When did you last partake of grub, Ms Hoxton?’

‘Yesterday—yesty?’

‘You like language and its changes, hm?’

‘Oddly, I do seem to be able to speak French, and yes, language does interest me.’

‘Useful for a Londonia life as our citizenry is disparate as the contents of a mixtibeast pie.’

He gets up and looks in an enamel pail.

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‘Raisin bread, and a tadly bit of dried ham . . . will that keep bodnsoul intact for a while?’

I nod enthusiastically and he puts the small plateful together, handing it to me.

‘Should have seen the feed at Fred’s last darking, Jarvis.’

Jarvis looks over at me wolfing the ham.

‘I had the notion to take the jaunt but found this dame at The Lord’s instead.’

‘So, you had business with him—before his out-snuffing?’

‘How d’you nouse he’d flaked?’

‘Learned of it there! Some mec had already stripped his tweed and was proposing of it to Fred.’

‘Who is Fred?’ I interrupt, stifling a burp.

‘Someone you’ll encounter muchly if you takes up the Finder profession,’ grins Jarvis—‘thought you was a posh dame.’

I think about this. How strange to have no memory of background or notion of character—pessimist or optimist, humorist . . .

‘Lady by birth, but perhaps not following that river’s course too closely, eh, Ms Hoxton?’ divines Jake. ‘A Finder’s life for you now. Observations, learning the trade.’

I feel somehow that he may be completely correct.

‘I’ll keep you informed, Jake. Or perhaps you’ll know anyway. Are you a fortune-teller?’

He smiles warmly. ‘Prophet-Jake’s the name, guérisseuring’s my game.’

‘Guéri-whating?’

‘From the French—guérisseur, meaning one who can heal, and sometimes intuitively know things about a person. Father was the same—always had queues of bods wanting this ’n that checking. Witch doctor, maybe.’

‘But you can’t *see* where I’m from?’

‘No. It’s not like reading palms, or cards. I just sometimes know stuff—sort of flows through me. Maybe next time we meet I might pick up on sometruc. Or we might just have a chat about gardening—reckon you to be a green-fingered dame.’

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Tom slips into my thoughts and sits down looking on at this conversation. I wonder where he is in the forrist he talked of.

‘Lead you to thoughts of someone, did I?’ says Jake, ‘—a gardener too?’

I jump slightly at his words. ‘Oh. Yes . . . well, he is, but mainly logging at the moment.’ Jake declined the label of fortune-teller, but it is tempting to ask. So I do.

‘Do you think . . .’

‘He’ll be back?’

‘Yes.’

Jake’s eyes glint within this shadowy interior. ‘Wouldn’t doubt it for a lizard-flicker.’

Jarvis, who’s been stuffing a clay pipe with tobacco, stops and shoves it away in a pocket.

‘Merde! Said I’d meet Parrot back at the barge at scantime. You stayin’ here, Hoxton? Or come and meet ’im.’

Jake decides for me.

‘Better to go. A dame will be arriving sometime soon with a casserole of pheasant in exchange for a foot massage. She says I have the gift of reflexology, whatever *that* is.’

‘D’ac,’ says Jarvis standing up and heading to the door, ‘See yer soon.’

I thank Jake for his hospitality and insight.

‘Pas problem, Hoxton. Best of luck, but . . .’ he pauses, a hand on my arm, ‘I don’t think you’ll be needing luck.’

I smile at his words and leave the hut, blinking at the daylight after the musty interior.

We leave the Parkplace and head Southwards, Jarvis shouting out details of roads, buildings and Londonia landmarks.

‘There—spont-market.’

I glance over at a cluster of people surrounding a couple of tables. ‘What is it?’

‘One bod starts up sellin’ somethin’ then ’fore y’ know it, others join, drag tables out, sell whatever they’ve got spare—voila, spont. Only don’t do t’ get too big.’

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‘Why?’

‘Can get a bit riot-ish. Brings out the Sharks.’

‘Sharks?’

‘Cincturian narks—police, and then if the luck’s down, scoop truck.’

A gaping hole in the road surface takes his attention and I cease questioning as he steers the horse around it. At the end of the road, beyond a cluster of semi-derelict buildings I glimpse water.

‘Is that the main river of Londonia?’

‘Nah, Lady Thames is beyond. That’s Limehouse pool, where a lot of the barges is.’

‘Including yours.’

‘The black-planked one, yeah.’

The pool is frantic with movement: boats being unloaded, boats on wooden platforms being scraped free of clinging shells, nets being hauled, people yelling about fruit, wine, tobacco and lodgings; women selling fish and small birds on steaming skewers, children playing on skeletons of vessels, and everywhere small fires surrounded by locals smoking and discussing the day’s events.

Jarvis turns in the saddle. ‘Approve of my manor?’

As I wonder where to start, a voice cuts through the noise.

‘Jaz!’

‘Parrot! Said, I’d be back.’ Jarvis stands in the stirrups, swings a leg over, bounces down to the cobbles and hugs his barge-mate. ‘Like yer to meet a new Hackrovia resi. Hoxton.’

Parrot wipes a hand on his overalls and holds it out, tawny eyes bright in a round dark brown face. ‘Pleased to meet yo, girl. Sorry, I’s been guttin’ dem pikes ’n perch all dis morn.’

I clasp his hand, shake enthusiastically and get down from the horse. ‘Pleased to meet *you*.’

‘Got me one pike in a pot if you want to try a bita Creole cookery?’

‘I’d love to. Where shall I tie the horse?’

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Jarvis takes the reins and leads him to the barge. ‘Just hold ’im a mo. Where’s the sign?’

Parrot hands him a small rectangle of wood marked: *DON’T* Touch. We can see *you*, and Jarvis passes the two attached lengths of wire about the animal’s neck, looped and clasped.

‘D’ac. Scran-time.’

I step gingerly onto the gently swaying boat and Jarvis helps me down a small flight of steps into a woody, smoky interior full of a billion *things*.

‘ ’Scuse the derangement, and the foitling stove’s a bit blocked—reckon there’s a bit of a nest-remnant in the pipe after I hedgehogged it recent.’

Parrot throws a heap of clothes off a chair and invites me to sit.

‘Jarvis? We got that bottle a’ Elderberry still?’

Jarvis nods and opens one of the many wooden doors making up one wall. ‘I’ll do it. Stew ready?’

‘In a tadly, man.’

Within a few moments, the table is uncovered, more chairs liberated and we sit looking hungrily at a scarred enamel pot, a chunk of bread and the uncorked dark green bottle. Jarvis unstacks three bowls and ladles out the stew.

I take the bowl handed to me. ‘Sorry I had nothing to bring.’

Parrot puts a glass in front of me and pours out a generous measure.

‘Hey, not a worry. You can make something ’nother time. Where you livin’, girl?’

‘Meet the new Lord, Parrot,’ grins Jarvis.

‘You taken over St Leonard’s?’

‘Apparently. I still don’t really understand . . .’

‘He dead?’

‘As a coffin nail,’ confirms Jarvis, ‘an’ she—Hoxton claimed the place.’

‘Well . . . it was an accidental claiming.’

‘But you was first bod after ’im.’

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Parrot raises a glass and clinks mine. ‘Then I salut yo, Lord, or Lordess of Hackrovia.’

Londonia by Kate A Hardy
is published by Tartarus Press,
13th March, 2020

www.tartaruspress.com