

The Potters Wheel

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First Edition

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Note: Some spelling reflects colloquial speech.

It was a bright morning, not a cloud in the sky, the old man always early to rise, fetched an even older barrow from behind a shed. Part of the wooden frame was rotting, the old wheel wobbled as he trundled it from his small yard. Emerging from a small doorway in a stone wall he clattered down the narrow cobbled alleyway.

“Bloody man's up early again, oh how I pray for rain,” said a mother, who's newborn started screaming at full pitch.

“You'd best go see to her May,” said her husband.

“Oh, that bloody man, I could kill him,” she said, angry. From the child's cot near the window she could see the church clock. “Half past four,” she thought to herself, trying to comfort the child.

The old fellow continued clattering down the cobbles to the small harbour. He was no quieter whence he reached the shingle beach, adding curses, as he pulled the barrow over the shingle, it was tough going, and the wheel would often sink in. His visits were becoming more frequent as the loads he could manage diminished. It was some while before he came to his favourite spot in the chalk cliff. A seam of beautiful fine white clay. He pulled his shovel from the barrow and dug out a few lumps. His eyes glanced toward the sea, the waves receding. At low tide there was a stretch of mostly sand, dry it was worse than the shingle, but when damp it was easier going. The old barrow had been constructed long ago by a farrier for his father, the wheel was very wide, almost like a small barrel. He mused, “It was a wonder the excise men had not stopped him. You could have hidden plenty of rum inside the rim.”

“I've enough”, he said to himself, “With any luck I'll get back at low tide.”

He struggled back, taking frequent rests. Sitting on the shingle he watched a gull riding the up draft from the cliff. He heard the church bell chime, “My word,” he said counting the bells, “Six o'clock, I best be getting along.”

The beach was the easy bit, when he reached the harbour it was all uphill. As he stopped

to catch his breath a woman flung some waste into the street.

“Missed the old bugger,” she said, at which the child started crying again.

“E's got ta make a living love, we all ave.”

“I know I know,” she said, “But can't e leave it till later to go to the beach?”

The husband knew better than to defend the old man.

With some more clattering the old man finally reached his small yard at the back of his workshop. He left the clay in the barrow and went for a sit down and a bite to eat. Suitably recovered and refreshed he unloaded his haul. A great pile of clay sat near the old potters wheel, he dug his hands in to grab a large lump. There seemed to be a good demand for jugs so that is what he would make.

He cursed, the clay had something in it, “Damn.”

His hands threw a large lump onto the wheel, he spun it around slowly trying to find whatever it was. “Curious,” he thought, as he pulled at a piece of leather string, it did not come easy. His hands clawed at the clay, parting it as he followed the string into the lump. It was the top of a purse, extracting it, he had in his hands a leather purse. He opened it up, tipping the contents onto the wheel. The coins that strew over the slip encrusted surface were gold and high value. He was a kindly old gent and this was more money than he had seen in a lifetime of hard work. “At last my luck has changed,” he thought, “No more struggling, no more scrapping by.”

He thought of all those dresses his dear wife had dreamt of buying, God rest her soul. How they could have done with such money when their son was ill and they could no longer afford the doctor. The old man wondered what it would have been like to have his son around. Poor lad.

The potter would ordinarily have tried to find the owner, but he had an idea where the money had come from, and why should he not enjoy the remaining years of his life. “Yes, William, you do that,” he said quietly to himself, “Though take care, we must hide it, use a little now and again, and we can't spend it around here.” He knew folks would wonder at him having such coins as these.

He had an old shelf, on which he stacked his wares ready for firing, below it the walls were always damp. He stacked up a lump of clay, hidden in it, the money bag. Upon returning to his wheel with yet another lump of clay, he could not believe his eyes, “Am I dreaming.” There was a second leather pouch, with a similar number of gold coins in it. Quickly as he could he hid that too.

With no idea of the coins worth, he secreted just a few about his person. This was an isolated cove, the village was the only habitation for miles along the coast. That evening William Watts, son of Edward and Mary Watts, determined that he should see a town, and perhaps change his coins for some more acceptable smaller denominations.

William was wise, he carried on making the pottery as usual, biding his time for the right moment. A large order from the local Squire, gave him the excuse he needed, and the

money to pay for a journey by coach. Taking a few of his finer wares with him, he left from the coaching inn at Barkers Cross. It proved to be a successful venture, he returned a few days later having gotten a good price for his wares, yet he met no one he felt he could exchange the gold coins with. He could hear his father's voice, egging him on, and then his mother telling him to always be cautious in dealings with others. His dear old mother, where would father have been without her prudence. His wife was just the same, both good women, careful, kind and loving.

A man came into his shop. "You seem to be doing alright these days."

"Aye, well been getting a good price from my wares up in London see, and a good order from the Squire."

The old potter had been away but not to London, though he did leave by the London stage.

The man smiled, "And a good order from the Squire?"

"Aye, he's a good man," said the potter.

The man nodded and left without purchasing a thing. For a moment the potter wondered about the stocky well built fellow, a man by the name of Bert Bradstock. William knew his wife would have known much more, she would probably have been able to tell him what the fellow ate for breakfast. Still all the wondering in the world will not get work done, and he had to make plenty of pots before his second trip on the stage.

It was a few days later, he was getting off the stagecoach in the fine market town which he had visited some weeks back. He felt awkward, it did not have the same cosy feel as the village. The coach left as he sauntered over to the Inn.

"Sorry old fellow," said the landlord.

William thanked him and made for the door, before he reached it a woman, called to him.

"You need a room love?" she said smiling.

"Oh, yes," he said, quite startled, his hearing was not so good.

"I've a spare room," she said, "If you want it?"

He was pleased to accept her offer, she seemed most friendly.

The following day he ate a hearty breakfast. He thought how pleasant the woman was, very kind indeed. He decided to ask her.

"Mrs Melplash."

"Yes dear."

"I found this on the road, heaven knows whose it was but it's a bit large to buy groceries."

"Oh," she said, eyeing up the gold coin, "I'd say."

"You'd say?"

"You're right Mr Watts."

"Oh, well I was wondering, I mean there are plenty of rogues around."

"You want to change it for something a bit more usable, a dear?" she said.

"Yes, well, I don't know who to ask." William hoped that she did. Leaving the coin with her, he went about his business, visiting a man by the name of Dudley Salterton.

"Hello my friend, those fine pots of yours are selling very well." The merchant smiled, "Pity you can't bring me more."

"I come by the stagecoach, and I'm not so young as I used to be," he said with a chuckle. Good as the pots were, the merchant knew there would be no profit in bringing a cart load,

no money in that which is commonplace.

In another part of town others were meeting.

"Hello Mrs Melplash." said a man, smart and well presented, though not quite, as refined as he liked to appear.

"Hello Fred."

"What can I do for you?" The man had a sly look about him.

"Old fellow found this, bit big to spend," she said, holding up the gold piece.

The man raised his eyebrows, his stare intense.

She offered it to him, "What's it worth?"

"Quite a bit," he said, giving her a fleeting glance.

"You'd not want to spend it," he continued, "Rich folks money this."

"Can you?" She winked at him.

"Spose I might."

"Good, how much?"

Back at home she awaited her lodger. When he returned, William got a little over excited, she could see it. "Silly old fool," she said to herself. "I could not get its full value Mr Watts."

"Oh, well that's to be expected Mrs Melplash, thank you for your help."

She gave him a small cloth bag, "E gave me this for it."

When William looked he realised it was far more than he could have earned in many months.

"Thank you Mrs Melplash, thank you." He took some of the coins and gave them to her.

"You've been very kind."

She smiled, "Thank you Mr Watts." She was pleased. She wondered if he might find some more, "On the Road," she'd not go hungry for a while, that was for sure.

William was a creature of routine, always up early, following a daily pattern, and now he had gotten into visiting town every third week of the month. Upon arrival at Mrs Melplash's he was eager to tell her his news.

"I found another few he said, "Near the same spot."

"Must have been highway men, held up some nobs. Lot of money in wool around these parts, plenty of gentlemen with fat wallets," she reflected.

He was relieved that she said this, he could not have come up with any better explanation.

"So whereabouts?" she paused, "On the road did you say?"

He shook his head, "Oh lord what shall I say," he thought, racking his brain, "I travel so little, I could not put a name to the place."

She did not press him, smiling she anticipated the next day's visit to her friend.

There was an old timber framed building down a back alley. Its sides kept in place by the adjacent buildings, the front appeared to bow outward a little. Like a man with a belly that was little constrained by a belt. Inside a man, they say dogs and their owners look the same, the house and the man did.

"The old fool?"

"Aye," she said.

"Found these on the road!"

"So he says."

The man gave the woman a sizeable bag of small coins.

There you are Mr Watts, she said handing him three small cloth bags all filled with coins.
“Well you better have one for your trouble Mrs Melplash.”

That day Mrs Melplash's friend had another visitor.

“Where's it from man?”

“I can't say for certain sir, some old fellow found it on the road.”

“Oh, I see, well, yes I'll, I'll pay you for it.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Not a word you hear.”

“Not a word sir, you're a gentleman.”

The man in all his finery was swiftly off, leaving Fred to count the coins. His sly look was augmented with a wry smile.

That evening in a fine house a social gathering of a kind, saw the return of a young gentleman.

“Lord Mosterton, back at the table?”

“Yes, yes.”

The other man raised his eyebrows as Lord Mosterton placed three gold coins on the table. “That should clear my debts and put me in credit.”

“Who did you rob?”

“Ha, very droll, my aunt actually,” he said with a slight stammer.

“Oh, I suppose she dotes on you a?”

While the Lord enjoyed his pleasures, the excise men were riding up over Blackdown. It was a full moon, the sky hung morbid with dark clouds. Below the cliff, the waves broke with a crash on the shingle bank. They would stop their horses and listen. No need to see the rascals, they could hear footfalls on the pebble beach. They had stopped a few but there was never any evidence. Their night patrol was uneventful, Lord Mosterton had had no luck either.

The following morning he sat at his writing desk, scribbling furiously. His servant came into the room, “Did you call me sir?”

“Will you be a good fellow and see this is sent to my aunt?”

“Certainly sir,” replied the servant.

The day for William was going so well, after breakfast at Mrs Melplash's he bought himself a new pair of boots, had a fine lunch, saw the tailor and was measured up for a suit.

“Had a good day Mr Watts?” said Mrs Melplash greeting him upon his return. She had never seen him look so cheerful.

“I have,” he smiled.

“Ready for your dinner?”

“Yes please Mrs Melplash, that smells rather nice.”

“Which day are you going back then?” she said, serving a generous plateful.

William was pleased with himself and quite warming to life in town, especially his new friend Mrs Melplash. He was indeed starting to warm to her charm. However he did have to get back to work with the clay.

"The old buggers back,"

"How'd you know?"

"I saw him sat on the back of the millers cart."

"Oh,"

"I shall have to have words with that miller. He should have left him up at Barkers Cross."

"Best not upset him love." said May's husband.

"Don't worry I was joking, oh god there she goes again." The baby had started crying.

"We should have had a son."

"You tell god that."

"I will." May's husband replied, pondering a few questions for the vicar.

"Bloody man." said his wife.

"You cursing your husband?" He said with a wink.

"No." she said rocking the child, "That man we have to pray to, fat lot of good it does."

"May, people might hear." His tone became cautious.

She knew he was right, they had enough worries without adding to them.

"Oh god she's off again." The baby holared, her mother shouted, "What is that noise can nobody keep quiet."

"Bugger." said her husband.

"Sounds like a load of women screaming."

"It is, the bloody press gang coming down the street." he replied.

"Oh that's all we need, you best hide."

May rushed around, bolting the doors and putting the shutters up at the windows.

Grabbing the baby she went upstairs, bolting the door to the small bedroom. Sitting by the window she watched. She had never seen so much crap thrown into the street.

It did not deter the press gang. These were hard men, they'd had worse to deal with and this only made them more determined.

The old potter heard the commotion, but he realised too late. Men burst through his door. Crashing through the shop, breaking pots as they came towards him. The leader looked at the man, hunched and grey. Leave him lads, and they did, moving on. He stood and stared at the potter, "You owe me." William threw a coin at him, he turned and left.

May watched, most of the men had had the sense to run. She watched as the gang hauled a couple of youths to a waiting cart. At that moment she was glad she had a screaming girl. "Thank you lord," she wept, she knew the mothers of the youths.

The following morning there was even more commotion, May had commented to her husband that the old potter had not gone to get clay. Her husband being a good man had called on some of the village elders. The small group had found old William. They found the remnants of a money bag in the clay, and a fine gold coin that had escaped the pillaging.

"That'll pay for a good send off, poor old bugger," the old villager looked across at the beaten and battered body, "Bastards, e were a good man."

"E were alive after the press gang left, Tom saw e down on the beech, said the poor old bugger was in a right strop. Them press gang lot, tore through his place smashed the lot." said one of the other villagers.

In an Inn to the east of Barkers Cross some men were meeting in one of the rooms.

"They're sayin t'was you lot did it. Say they found smugglers gold in the old fellows clay."

The man speaking was an old fellow, his beard long and grey, a waistcoat and some fine breeches giving him a distinguished look. He was well liked and respected, the fine brandy he served made the Crow and Raven a popular Inn.

"Noo," came the rather stretched reply, "We never knew e ad em." The older man looked worried, while he took in the situation, his younger friend asked, "So, there's not just us doin it."

"Aye lad, but you're local, and though folks can't say for sure, they know you two always have plenty of money."

The older man realised what the Landlord was implying.

"But we did not do it, we never killed him," said the younger man, "You won't tell on us, will you Alf?"

The landlord shook his head, "I won't but remember it ain't just me."

"Aye he's right," said the older man, "There's the bloke who sets things up, then there's the others what we takes the stuff to."

"But we're honest men that's why they trust us with the money."

"Yes John," said the older man, "But what we do ain't honest work. Besides, who'd stand up and defend us?"

The excise men were riding up over Blackdown again. This evening two men approached them on horseback.

"Here he comes."

The the other excise man looked at his colleague.

"Well?" shouted the man on the lead horse.

"No sign of them sir,"

"You know who you're looking for?"

"Yes, sir, them same two as we questioned on the beach several months back."

The man turned his horse and road off, closely followed by his accompanying rider.

"Who was that fellow with him?" said one of the excise men.

Sergeant, Willy Moore, or "Willy stop asking so many bloody questions to some of his colleagues." The other man was a quieter sort, happy to let Willy do the thinking, he was only doing the job to keep a roof over his family's head. The man was more worried about staying alive, preferring to avoid trouble. Plenty of excise men had had unfortunate "accidents" riding the cliffs.

Upon arrival at the manor house the Squire was greeted by a visitor. A man higher up the social ladder than he. They retired to a fine oak panelled room. It had a pleasant aspect overlooking the course of a river.

"Smugglers gold!" The man stammered.

"Yes that's what we think your Lordship." said the Squire.

"How, how did he come by that?"

"Well some think the smugglers may have buried the money bags in the clay sir."

"Why n not in the cliff, or under the sh, shingle?"

The Squire thought for a moment, "With all those pebbles?"

"Ah," said the man nodding.

The Squire continued, "And there aren't many crevices in the chalk cliff along that stretch."

"No, I see, so who might it be?"

The Squire was a well respected man. His family had prospered from the wool trade, which was currently very brisk. He was well connected and there was not much that he or his man did not know.

"My gamekeeper has an idea. Two local men, frequent the Crow and Raven, never short of change."

"Good well, good," his Lordship paused.

The Squire looked at him, his dress, that hair, he waited for the man to continue.

"You must have evidence, do you have evidence?"

"No, not yet, but we will sir."

"Good, good, well I'd best be off, on route to see some relatives. Is my coach ready?"

"I'll see," said the Squire relieved that the fop was leaving.

The Squire felt more comfortable upon seeing his guest sitting in the fine coach. As the coachman closed the door the Lord spoke, "Squire, I was thinking."

"Yes," said the Squire.

"If it were not for your house having a view over that river, someone might use it to sneak a boat full of brandy upstream, the Crow and Raven is not far from here is it?"

The Squire did not answer, he raised a hand to wave goodbye.

The following day the Squire and some armed locals galloped down the lane to fisherman's cottage. The small dwelling was tucked away from the main village down a narrow gully barely wide enough for a horse. The Squire was a very determined man, efficient, he did not want any bad news emanating from his part of the world.

A woman peered from a window, she could hear the horses hooves as they struck the rocky trail, "Bert, John," she called, "Riders, men are coming."

She quickly gathered bread and some cooked ham, threw it in a couple of pieces of cloth and handed one to each. Bert gave her a hug and a kiss, then turned "Come on lad."

"But it weren't us?" said the younger man.

"Come on, remember what Alf said."

Slipping out of the back door they made their way up the steep bank behind the house.

Covered in scrub, it gave them cover.

The Squire did not bother to knock, he burst in, with his men following behind, one pushed the woman out of the way. She fell to the cold earth floor, as the men charged through to the back door.

"Gone sir," said the Squire's gamekeeper, looking back at his employer.

The Squire pulled the woman to her feet, his iron grip hurting her arms, she was crying.

"Where are they woman?"

"Fishing, down in the cove sir," she said sobbing.

He slapped her, "Lying," he slapped her other cheek, "Lying little harlot," he shook her, her whole body trembled.

"That's what they said sir," she cried.

A man came back into the house, it was one of the Squire's men, "I found a fresh trail sir."

"Where?"

"Goes up the bank sir," said the man, who was suitably rewarded. "Thank you sir."

The Squire organised some men to stay at the house, the rest he took with him, sending a few with messages to other members of the gentry.

With the thought of a hunt, it did not take long before there were a considerable number of riders, hounds and retainers all trying to lead the chase. The two men were used to hiding and at times running from the excise men. Bert wished for some now, as they struggled across a field, he wished for some. Those that were after them were no disciplined officials who would follow procedures.

Clear of the field they entered thin slither of trees, which widened as they went deeper. The air was full of sounds, in the distance shouts, and calls could be heard.

As the two men ran through the forest, one cried out in pain. The ferocious jaws of a man trap had closed around his right leg. The other man looked back, turning he rushed to his friend. Quickly he pull the jaws open, he was a strong man, but even he struggled with the effort. After pulling his friend's leg free he grasped a fallen branch. Pushing it down on the trap. The jaws closed in a flash, rotten wood exploded with the force, showering both men.

"John get going lad."

"But they'll hang you."

"They'll hang us both, they're sure to have heard my cry." The man was fighting pain, grimacing as he spoke. He was loosing a lot of blood. "Promise me one thing."

"Aye."

"Find out who killed the old potter."

"Aye, and I'll see Meg is ok."

"You can't help Meg lad, you can't go near the village. Go, go," he said urging his friend on.

The man was pursued relentlessly. Only a piece of luck had thrown them off his track, drained but determined, he mustered his strength, sometimes only covering short

distances before having to rest.

"God ye look terrible."

The woman stared at the strong looking fellow, his hair dishevelled, clothes ripped and torn. Arms and legs covered in scratches and bruises. He was tired, very tired, he had been on the move for many days now. Drinking water from streams, taking fruit from bushes. He had arrived at this woman's house by keeping to the back lanes and trails. Her place at the end of an old track was well hidden.

She watched him, he was swaying. "Ye best come in."

He followed her and collapsed in a chair. It creaked and groaned as his weight bore down on it.

"Are ye in some kinda trouble?"

"We never did it," he replied, not thinking, his mind deprived of sleep was fuzzy.

"What?"

"Where I came from, an old man has been found dead, murdered. They said it was us, never was though."

"Ye wouldn't be lying?"

"No." He shook his head, his hand stretched out to grasp the drink she offered him.

"Ye one of them smugglers?"

He nodded, as he gulped the liquid.

"There's a big reward out for ye. They hung the other one."

"You know that, out here?" The man was worried. Maybe he had not gone so far as he thought, "But my village it must be, what, ninety miles from here." He was trying to count the number of days, and estimate the distance he had gone on each of them.

"More than that," said the woman.

"So how?"

"Do I know?" She grinned, "I do some work for the publican down at the Inn. Lots of travellers, plenty of gossip. That reward for your capture has made it worse."

The man's face went white with fear, he was exhausted, he could run no more. "If this woman's.." His thoughts were interrupted.

"Don't worry, I won't tell on ye, and nobody knows what ye look like. I should stay away from the Inn though."

He nodded.

"You need money so why?"

"Why won't I tell?" She smiled at him. "I have my reasons. What will you do?"

His eyes closed, he could keep awake no longer.

It was along time before he woke. The woman turned from preparing an evening meal, the smell of which had brought him to. His empty stomach, was letting all know of its current displeasure.

"While ye've been asleep I've been thinking."

He nodded, still unsure about the woman, though she could have turned him in, he must have slept most of the day, for she now spoke to him by the light of a candle.

"They must think you know more than ye do."

He shook his head.

"The old fellow that was killed, potter weren't e?"

The man nodded

"So why such a big reward?"

Her name was Laura, or Lovely Laura as the clientèle of the Duck and Rabbit knew her. She was smarter than she looked, she had to be. Her husband had gone down with fever, he did not survive. She had struggled to manage, her only luck, the landlord had been a close friend of Harry's.

The man before her was no murderer, of that she was sure. Rascal maybe, she noticed a glint in his eye.

"Hungry?"

He nodded.

"Quiet sort ain't ye?"

He nodded with a smile.

Her husband had been a farrier gaining a lot of trade from the Inn. She mused at the irony, the people who could afford the brandy and encouraged the trade were the same ones who governed the land, and opposed smuggling.

"I've got to find out who did it?" He blurted. "I have to, and there's Meg."

"Meg," she said serving up a meal.

"Aye, my mate's wife, she'll be all on her own. No tellin what might happen to her."

Laura, looked at him, he seemed determined, "I know what that's like, believe me."

"Aye but where they lived, was even more isolated than here, and she don't have a friendly landlord a few yards down the lane." He was so sad he was almost crying.

"Ye and ye's friend, ye was close?"

The man nodded, "He helped me when none others would."

"Ye will help me a bit, if I let ye stay here?"

"Aye, you've been kind to me, very kind, but..."

She cut him short, "Ye wants to find out who did it, use ye's brain and let me help ye, ye go traipsing around asking questions they'll hang ye too."

"Why," he paused, "Why will you help me?"

"Did ye ask ye's friend that when he helped thee?"

"No," he said with a grin. He liked Laura, and he knew she was right.

As the night came to an end, the excise men rode back home, relieved to be off duty, the younger man began to speak. "That's two less to worry about a sarge?"

"What lad?" said the Sergeant his mind adrift on other thoughts.

"Smugglers, I knew they was smugglers."

"Aye lad," said the older man, with a smile.

"We'll be safer with them out of the way."

"Oh?" This got Willy's attention.

"Them being murderers, mind they only hung the one. I doubt the other will be back though, a sarge?"

"They'll get some more to do it, and they might be worse'uns." said Willy.

"They?"

"Lad, you don't think it was just a couple of country yokels, do you? Besides, I don't reckon they murdered the potter, why would they?" Willy's mind was also trying to fathom what was really going on.

"To get their money back, they found gold on that one they caught, just the same as what was in the leather purse what was at the potters."

"So they did," said the rather cynical sergeant. You are so right young lad, and there won't be any more smugglers. We can go home and put our feet up, can't we?"

At this thought the younger man went quiet, he worried about his job, "If there's no more smugglers?"

"You worry to much, you'll get paid. Like I say there's plenty more where they came from. Folks likes their brandy, and the government likes their taxes so we'll still have work to do."

"Yes sarge, we're the only ones along this stretch of coast, so.." he, was trying to figure out something, and the sergeant had a shrewd idea but he kept quiet.

In the little cottage, near the Duck and Rabbit. Laura was pleased with John, he was

looking better and working hard, keeping out of sight. She watched as he repaired part of the wall that surrounded the farriers yard. Coming close to him, she whispered, "Can I ask ye a question?"

He nodded.

"Ye said the cottage was on the coast, when they came, why did ye not leave by boat?"

"Bert thought they'd have men on the beach, said that's what they'd expect us to do."

"Did they?" she paused, "Have men on the beach."

"Don't know."

"You're making a good job of that wall."

A rather puzzled looking Sargent was glad to be home.

"You alright Willy?"

"Aye Martha, aye." he replied smiling at his dear wife.

"Thinking?" She knew him so well.

"Aye, something the lad said," he grinned.

"Oh?"

"You won't tell no one?" he said, looking at her rather more seriously than she'd seen him in a long while.

"Willy, you know me better than that, I'm no gossip and you know it."

"Not many of us for such a length of coast, and when there are we're so badly led a snail could escape." Willy was in a rather cynical mood and rightly so.

She burst out laughing, "Well I know one thing, them smugglers wives get better pay than I do."

This gave him cause to join her frivolity. The two of them laughed themselves silly.

When she quietened down, she looked at her husband, "You don't reckon they did it do you?"

"No Martha, no I do not," he said shaking his head, "Unfortunately my powers are limited. Investigating murders is not one of them."

"You can investigate smuggling and those involved, can't you? If you happen to discover other things, well!"

"Yes Martha I can, but with great caution, there are some very big toes I must be careful not to step on."

She looked at him, her expression serious, "I don't want to loose you Willy Moore, you be careful."

There are a good many lanes, and two men in fine uniforms were coming to a junction, a man dressed in much finer attire, caught their attention. Some unmentionable thoughts went through the lead horseman's head.

"Sergeant." It was a rather abrupt and distinctive voice that called him.

"Sir," said the sergeant.

"What are you doing inland, aren't you supposed to be patrolling the coast?" The Squire was curious, it was unusual to see these men anywhere else.

"With those two rascals out of the way it's quiet there at the moment sir."

"Just what do hope to find inland then?"

"Don't no till we look sir."

The Squire shrugged his shoulders, raising an eyebrow.

"Sir," said the sergeant, bidding good day to the Squire, the two men road on.

"Just why are we inland in broad daylight?" asked the lad.

"Would you rather risk riding near the cliff edge at night lad?"

He shook his head, his horse did the same.

"Old Molly agrees with you lad, see."

The two men grinned, the lad's horse was quiet a character, sometimes you'd swear she understood every word.

The sergeant's horse was a funny sort, very mild tempered, almost to laid back, was Jasper, although he did have a bit of a thing going for Molly. This could manifest itself at the most inopportune moments.

Willy was puzzled, he knew the obvious suspects, the smugglers had a motif, of sorts. but he could not think who or why another should have cause to murder the potter.

Some considerable distance away John and Laura were pondering the very same thing.

"So who else would have cause to kill him?" said Laura.

"There was a woman in the village, Meg said she hated the old fellow."

"Why?"

"He used to go by in the early hours with a cart to collect clay off the beach."

"Oh, woke her up," Laura smiled.

"And the baby," said John, remembering how Meg had told the story.

"I doubt it were her," she said, sceptical. "From the size of the reward, I'd say someone higher up had some cause for concern."

"What threat would the potter pose?"

"I'm not thinking of the potter."

She had lost him, "Then why kill him?"

"Got rid of ye's friend, and ye if they catch ye."

John was starting to cotton on to her reasoning, he started to think about all the people Bert knew. "There is the fellow that organises the shipments, tells us when it's coming and where to take it when it arrives."

Riding along the lanes, the two excise men caught a glimpse of a fine manor house.

"Nice sarge," said the lad, looking across the valley.

"Aye, that's the Squire's."

"Alright for some," said the lad.

Willy had gone quiet, he pulled Jasper to a halt, staring out across the fields and meadows, across the river, past the manor house, up the valley towards the crossroads at Barkers Cross.

"Nice view," said the lad, stopping Molly alongside Jasper.

An excise man was not the favourite visitor to an Inn, so later in the journey they met with a frosty reception at the Crow and Raven. Alf was polite, even respectful, but he did not enter into his usual cheerful banter.

"Pity about the old potter said Willy," his eyes fixed on Alf.

The landlord said nothing.

"Wonder if they'll catch the one who did it?" said Willy continuing, watching the landlord

tend to the bar. "Nice clean establishment you've got here."

"Aye," said the landlord.

"Who would want to kill a harmless old potter?"

"Thought you lot already knew that," said Alf, wondering what this fellow was driving at.

"Some people are very good at exploiting what we fear," said Willy.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Alf was old, but he was still bright as button.

"You're not going to catch a fish if you ain't got no bait on the line," said Willy.

"I bet the fish would like to know who put the bait on the line?" said Alf.

"The person who puts the poor worm on the end of that nasty hook, you'd have to be careful, of people with nasty hooks, if you were a worm," said Willy.

"Or a fish," said Alf.

The lad was now lost, looking at both of them and concluding they were two old fools. The landlord called his wife, she came to the bar. "These two gentlemen would like a word with me, it would not be good for business here."

"Alright love, I'll see to the customers." She gave him a nod and a wink.

In a back room the three men assembled. Alf looked at the lad, "Can we trust him?"

"He want's to stay alive, don't you lad?"

"Aye," he said nodding.

"He has a family to feed, and a job to keep, so you won't go talking to that wife of yours will you?"

He shook his head, "No Sarge."

Alf spoke next, looking Willy straight in the eye. "This about smuggling or a dead potter?"

"Officially, smuggling," said Willy.

"So you think those lads did it and are trying to track down the other one, that it?" said Alf.

"Those lads, you referring to would they be the smugglers one of which hung?" said Willy.

"Aye," said Alf.

"They was flies, weren't they? I've never seen a fly kill, have you?"

"You're after the spider?" said Alf.

"I don't know who to trust, I could be speaking to the spider, I could be in it's lair right now, couldn't I?" said Willy.

"Spiders need twigs and branches to support their web," said Alf.

"Nice branch you have here," said Willy.

"Big twig," said Alf, wondering if he was giving away too much. "So why do you want the spider and why should I help you, you're not exactly an enhancement to my trade?"

"Long time ago, I used to work in a more, shall we say active area of the coast, more spiders and flies. Smugglers, excise men, we were all getting killed, lost a good mate of mine, smugglers killed him. But you have to ask yourself, why there are smugglers, and who it is that gets both killed?" said Willy.

Alf stood for a moment, looking at this man with the rugged face, wearing a uniform that had seen better days, and Martha's needle and thread work. "Suppose I agree with you, suppose I say's that them two men never did it, how does that help?"

"This is a busy Inn, suppose someone says something that gets you thinking, but you can't do anything to get that spider."

"You can." Alf grinned, although you could hardly tell through the mass of beard. "I'd be taking a risk?"

"Those men took great risks, you might have benefited from them, I don't want to know, but

now one is dead. I'm taking a risk, you might tell the spider, some of them are very powerful, I'm just a sergeant." said Willy.

Alf was warming to this fellow, "Alright, but don't you come here, one visit I can explain, if you keep coming." said Alf.

Willy nodded, "Perhaps if you had some sign, outside, then some place we could meet, I'd come without the uniform."

The two men came to an agreement, Willy and the lad parted company with the landlord. The lad was still confused.

"Sarge, what I don't get is you two talked a load of, yet you didn't have a drop. Spiders, flies, fish?"

Willy looked at the lad, "One day I'll explain."

While they road away, the Landlord's wife had a question or two. "You were a long time, what did they want?"

"Oh, they've got nothing better to do than ask a load of stupid questions." said Alf.

"What about?"

"If I knew any smugglers?" said Alf.

"Daft buggers, you'd hardly tell them if you did."

"No dear," he said, glad to be saved from further questions by the arrival of a group of men eager to be served.

It was late evening at the Duck and Rabbit, the Inn was busy, into this bustle came a small group of well dressed folk.

"Ah Landlord," said a dandy looking fellow who had just wandered in. "Would you have some rooms for this evening, for me and my party?"

"How many rooms would sir need?"

"Ah, auntie," the man called to a finely dressed woman.

"Yes, darling?"

"H, how m many rooms?" he stammered.

"One for you, one for me, one for my maid, and one for your man servant, four dearest nephew."

"Laura, would you take this fine gentleman and lady to their rooms and find room for the servants."

"Course sir," she said, leading the entourage up the stairs.

"He's off again," remarked the aunt to her maid.

"Yes, well you see I think they must take those barrels up that river by boat. D d did you notice how the Squire never answered my qu question?"

"I did sir," said his servant, Mr Thomas Carter.

"You see Tom, that river does not go near the village. Only a stream going through the village. So you imagine, at night those smugglers, well, how would you get heavy barrels of liqueur inland surreptitiously?"

"Anthony, please I think this lady is waiting?" said his aunt.

"Oh, ss ss sorry," said the Lord.

"Is this room alright for you sir," she said pointing through the open doorway into the best room they had.

"Oh, y yes, thank you," he handed her some small change.

"Thank you sir," she continued to see to the other members of the party while Anthony continued his chatter. "Takes brains to set up smuggling, Tom, takes money too, you'd have to pay them French for the Brandy." His voice faded from Laura's ears, though she strained to pick up a word or two in between the aunt's many and varied requests.

John was relieved, when Laura arrived back home safely, he had grown very fond of her, and worried about her.

"I don't know if it is of any use, he might have been talking about somewhere else."

"Go on Laura," said John keen for news.

"Well, there was this fop in, nice chap, gave me a good tip, well he was chattering way to his servant, said," she paused, "Only a stream runs through the village, so the smugglers could use the river to get stuff inland, surreptitiously."

"Surup.."

"I think it means without people seeing, anyway, were was I? Oh, anyway he reckoned the Squire was suspect, something about needing brains and money."

"The Squire would not have killed the potter, he gave the potter a lot of work. Bert went in there one day, the old fellow was enamoured by him." He paused, "I don't know why I'm defending the...."

"Aye e was the one who came after ye. How many purses of gold did you hide?"

"Two, why?" said John.

"Well they only found one, so I hear." said Laura.

"Maybe he spent one, ye sure, thought them was very valuable, what's an old potter going to buy?" John's mind began racing with thoughts.

In the morning the landlord was pleased on two counts, glad to be rid of the fop, and delighted with the revenue from the rooms.

In the carriage Anthony began chattering.

"Anthony," said his aunt in a stern voice. He stopped talking. "You must promise me you'll stop going to that awful place, you know it's full of rogues. You never win."

"I did aunt, I d did when I first went there."

"That's because they are all rogues, they let you win, oh you silly boy."

The aunt's maid smirked, pursing her lips to avoid laughing.

"But what shall I do all day?"

"You must find an interest, a hobby," said his aunt.

"But I, I c cant abide hunting, and I'm no no not musical in the slightest."

"Pardon me for interrupting," said the man servant.

"Yes Tom," said Lord Mosterton.

"Well sir, you do like to puzzle on things."

"I do?" he said puzzled, by this remark.

"Well Mr Carter," said the Aunt, sensing he was onto something, "He does have a point, you were trying to fathom how those smugglers got the brandy inland, and who might be behind it all. You know how I disapprove of drink."

"Yes aunt," he paused, "S so I could find out who's behind the smuggling, wasn't just those

two men, was it.”

“Beggins your pardon, madam, sir, but won't that be dangerous, you'd upset a good few people.” The aunt looked at the maid, then back at her nephew. She wondered if it would be any more dangerous than some of the places he went at the moment. “You'd look after him, wouldn't you Mr Carter?”

“Do my best your Ladyship.”

“I don't like that Squire fellow, never have, you be careful, take some men with you good men, let Mr Carter help you select them. You see what you can find out.”

She was becoming most enthusiastic, as the carriage drove on so did the conversation. By the time they arrived at Lord Mosterton's residence, the Aunt was pleased with her Nephew's plans.

Sitting at his writing desk Anthony suddenly turned to his servant.

“That's it Tom, I have it. I shall pretend to be writing a book, a novel perhaps. I can pay people to tell me tales. Ask a few questions, maybe. What do you think?” He was very enthusiastic.

“Very clever your Lordship. Though I would not pay too much, we might have coachmen with us, but it would be wise not to tempt fate.”

“Yes, yes yes you, you are quite right,” he said, rather excited at the idea. He was no sooner home and he was after some careful preparation, off once more. Aided by Mr Carter, who had chosen men he knew to be of good character. Very dependable, and also passable as coachmen.

In the Squire's manor house, a man, lean and strong wandered into where the Squire was sitting. The Squire looked up.

“Any luck?”

“No sir.” the gamekeeper shook his head.

“We must get him, you understand why?”

“Aye sir, best we get him before anyone else does.”

“You best get off.”

“Aye sir.”

As the gamekeeper left the Squire returned to his books. He was deep into the figures when his footman interrupted.

“Someone to see you sir.”

“Who?”

“Lord Eldon sir.”

“Tell him I'm coming,” he said, closing the books and locking them away. He was not going to get much done, he knew that, why when you need to concentrate does everyone call by? He walked into the hall, to greet his guest.

“Lord Eldon, nice to see you.” said the Squire.

“You caught the rogue yet?”

“Not yet sir.” The Squire was feeling the strain.

“Rewards big enough.”

“Indeed it is sir, very generous, shall we go in there and sit down?” he said pointing to a small but well furnished lounge.

“Brandy?” he said getting some glasses.

The lord nodded.

"I want him hung, do you hear?"

"Yes sir, but..." said the Squire.

"But, what's the matter with you man, gone soft?"

"We would need evidence that he..." The Squire could not finish his sentence.

"The man's a bloody smuggler, hang him."

After a stressful conversation with the eminent Lord Eldon, the Squire decided to take to the road. "Saddle up my horse Jenkins," he said to the footman.

"Very well sir."

It was not long before the Squire was mounted on his fine grey mare, she was a good sturdy horse, calm temperament. She cantered along the track from his manor house toward the road. He noticed a man in the fields. A rugged fellow walked across a field arriving at the gate just before the approaching rider.

"Sorry to disturb you Squire," he said addressing the gent on the horse.

"That's alright, what is it?"

"There's a fop, his servant and two coachmen wandering around. The fop's asking lots of questions."

"Oh." Though he did not show it, the Squire was beginning to sweat.

"Aye sir, generous by all accounts. Seen him at your place once sir."

"Thank you," said the Squire, leaving the shepherd to go back to tending the sheep.

"Mosterton," shouted a man in a carriage, to a man speaking with a local, his men in attendance. The man looked towards the coach, then back at the woman. "Do please excuse me one moment, he said, to the lady with whom he'd been conversing.

"Lord Eldon," he said walking to the coach door.

"What the devil are you upto man?"

"Writing a book sir," replied Lord Mosterton.

"A book, a book." The other Lord looked contemptuously at the youthful dandy.

"The country is full of rogues and villains, and you're writing a book." He almost spat the last word.

"Yes aunt thinks it will do me good, broaden m horizons."

"Oh, oh your aunt, you spend too much time with her, you need to get out with some men." said Lord Eldon.

"I am sir, he pointed to the servant and coachmen."

"No, no, real men, come on a hunt, see a bit of blood." barked Lord Eldon with passion.

"I I I don't care for it sir."

"You," Eldon was lost for words, exasperated, "You toughening up, see some action, buy yourself a commission."

"Commission?"

"Your aunt has cosseted you," he gasped, "In the army," he said very slowly, "Officer."

"Oh, well I don't care for killing sir."

Lord Eldon tapped his stick on the carriage roof. As the driver pulled away, he shouted, "I shall have words with that aunt of yours."

Lord Mosterton walked back to the woman. "Terribly sorry now where were we?"

"Oh I was telling ye about May, she hated the potter..." The woman chattered for some considerable time. Later that day they went in search of another woman.

"Carriage won't go any further sir, but I'm sure this is where the old woman said she lived."

"Well, hm," he thought for a moment, "You best stay with the coach, Tom and I will see

her.”

The two of them wandered down the gully. It was so overgrown Tom wondered if they would find anyone, but Anthony was keen to see the place even if it were deserted.

Meg trembled behind the door. She had seen them coming and run into the house. The door was broken, unrepaired since the Squire's visit.

“Look if you are in w w we mean you no no no harm,” said a posh voice. Lord Mosterton tried to think of something to say to reassure her. They had seen a glimpse of her darting into the house, so he knew she was there. “I upset Lord Eldon, I can't abide the hunt. He paused almost laughing, Then I rejected his idea of buying a commission, officer in the army. Not me, not my thing, I'm writing a book. We saw you run into the house. This door needs repairing.”

“What kind of book?” she whispered, her voice nervous and faint.

“Not sure yet, just getting ideas for a story. I could help you get this d d door repaired.”

“Why would you want to help me?”

“You won't tell anyone if I say?” said Anthony.

“Nobody speaks to me, they all hate me.”

“Yes but Mr Bradstock did not do it did he, or the other fellow for that matter?”

“They'll hate you too.” said Meg.

“Not bothered if they do.” He could tell she was crying.

Meg eased the door open, she stared at the fine gentleman and his well dressed servant,

“Come in.”

As Lord Mosterton entered he noticed the wide walls tapering toward the roof. “Sorry to be awfully nosey, but what kind of stone is this house made of?”

“It's not stone, that's why it's so damp, made from clay and straw.” said Meg.

“Oh.” he said, none the wiser. However he had noticed the poor woman looked wretched. She was quite emaciated.

“Tom be a good fellow and fetch some f f food from the carriage.”

“But sir your aunt said.”

“Yes, yes but Meg's not going to hurt me is she?”

“No sir I suppose not,” Mr Carter felt in an awkward position, having promised the aunt he would do his best to take care of Anthony.

Upon Tom's arrival back with the food, Lord Mosterton was deep in conversation with Meg.

While Meg ate, Anthony thought, then he had a sudden idea, as was his way.

“My dear, I don't like the thought of you being s s stuck out here all alone. He turned toward his servant. Tom do you suppose we could find a home for this lady back at the house?”

“Yes sir, I suppose we could, you'd upset Eldon, sorry Lord Eldon.”

“Good, more reason to do it.” said Anthony with wry grin.

Tom smiled, he knew which Lord he wanted to work for.

“Eldon that; he was the one that had Bert hung.” said Meg.

“Well dear, w what do you say, will you be our guest?”

“Guest?” she hesitated, “I thought you was taking me in as a maid, sir?”

He shook his head and smiled, “I'll need to chatter to you, how shall I so that if you are running around doing work?”

Meg took a look around the empty house, then at the two men. Bert wasn't coming back and she doubted she'd see John again. "Thank you, yes please."

Lord Mosterton arrived back at his house where aunt was still in residence.

"I hear you've had words with Lord Eldon, you've been a very naughty boy and upset him?"

The maid was listening, she rushed away with a fit of the giggles.

"Aunt, this is much better than silly old cards, and do you know I've learnt so much about how these poor people live. W w we we are lucky aren't we aunt?"

She smiled and nodded.

"I have someone, a guest I'd like you to meet."

"Oh?" His Aunt became curious.

"A lady."

"A lady." the Aunt reacted with surprise.

"Do please come in dear Meg." said Lord Mosterton.

As Meg entered, he announced, "May I introduce Mrs Bradstock.

"Mrs Braststock, may I introduce my aunt, Lady Mosterton-Riley."

"Pleased to meet you madam."

"You are very welcome my dear. Dreadful what happened, has my nephew ..." she paused looking at Anthony.

Meg understood, "Yes madam, he does not believe my husband killed the potter." Meg burst into tears. The aunt took her in her arms and comforted her, indicating that Anthony leave. He understood. His aunt was very kind and very wise, a real lady.

When the tears subsided, the aunt spoke, "I'm Louise dear and you are?"

"Meg madam."

"Call me Louise, in private," she winked. "There are some very bad things going on."

"Smugglers aren't all bad." said Meg.

"I'm thinking about impressment, transportation, people being thrown off their land. It's not right. I hear they even use slaves to work the sugar plantations."

"No Louise it is not," Meg again burst into tears.

"I'm none to keen on drink and gambling either."

Meg nodded, in a funny sort of way neither was she. Drink was she felt, responsible for her husband's demise. "Silly ain't it what folks will do to get brandy."

The aunt had a long chat with Meg, calling her maid to attend to the provision of clothing for Mrs Bradstock.

At Laura's home John was becoming restless, he was not used to being cooped up like a chicken.

"Laura, the weeks are going by and I promised Bert I'd find who murdered the potter."

"I know."

"All we know is what you heard some fop say, there's been nothing."

"Aye and if ye goes wandering around they'll ave ye for certain then yell never keep that promise will ye?"

Laura was quick, very quick and her logic impeccable.

He nodded, why was this woman always right?

In Lord Mosterton's country house, the Aunt was having one of her friendly conversations

with one of the servants.

"You know you are always giggling dear."

"I know, sorry madam."

"Don't worry, I like jolly, most people are so morose. It's no wonder they turn to drink. Any news on you and Mr Carter?"

The maid blushed.

On more serious matters Willy the excise man, was discussing matters with Martha.

"Did who killed him know about the money?" said Willy.

"Why do you say that dear?" she asked.

"Well if they did, how come they found the bag of money at his workshop?" said Willy.

"It was hidden in the clay, so folks say." she replied.

"Exactly Martha, if it were smugglers that's where they'd have looked, that's where they hid it on the beach, obvious place to look, if you was a smuggler."

"Oh yea," Martha thought for a moment, "Surely them smugglers must have known the potter gets his clay off the beach."

"So do we Martha." said Willy.

"So why hide it there, seems a daft place to put it if you ask me."

"It ain't so daft, we'd expect to see the clay disturbed, and they'd know we'd think it were the potter. If you ask me it's the last place we'd have thought to go looking."

"Yea, so, but they'd know he might find it," she replied.

Willy thought for a moment, "If someone was supposed to collect it before e got there."

"Right, I'm with you, and suppose they never picked it up."

"Exactly, now they'd also realise the potter might have it." said Willy.

"So they could be suspect as well as them smugglers."

"Well maybe, exceptin they left the money hidden in the clay." said Willy.

"Maybe they missed it?"

"No, he only takes small amounts off the beach on account of him getin old see. It would not take long to find it in what e has." said Willy.

"Maybe he disturbed them, they panicked see, killed him and run off."

"Oh," Willy thought for a moment, "Aye. Well they must have known him else why would they kill him? That river mouth is not far from the clay."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"How would you get down to the beach other than via the village harbour?" said Willy.

"How should I know, I've never been there. Mind out I need to dish this stew onto your plate."

"Smells good."

"Only the best for my Willy."

Later that afternoon Willy road past the Crow and Raven, noticing the sign, he headed for the clandestine location. Hidden beneath a rock in a dry stone wall was a note.

"He used to go by coach into town, not sure where LS"

That was all it said. Willy looked puzzled. "LS, the landlord was Alf," he thought to himself.

He rode back home.

"What you got?" asked Martha.

"That potter went to town by coach from the Inn near Barkers Cross."

"Oh, so someone might have seen him living it up." said Martha.

"Hmm, says LS at the end?"

"Well by town some folks mean London."

"Oh Martha what would I do without you?"

"Starve?"

"London Stage, my word I don't fancy going to London, I don't reckon Jasper would either."

Martha laughed, "You and that horse of yours, I don't know why you don't have I'm sittin at the table."

Willy grinned.

"Maybe you could check where the stage stops. I doubt an old fellow would want to travel any distance."

"Tomorrow I shall take the lad and make enquiries."

"You do that. Now eat your dinner."

"Yes dear."

The following day the excise men were patrolling.

"Sarge"

"Aye lad."

"What you was saying earlier."

"Aye?"

"Well suppose they put the money there because we was nearby. Suppose there weren't nobody else, suppose it was them come back later and found it gone?"

"Lad that's a close knit community, those smugglers are or were part of it. They'd have found a way to get the money without killin the old fellow. They could have paid him off. That potter would not have given them no trouble, he was a quiet old fellow."

"Where we going?"

"To meet the stage." said Willy.

"Oh, you expecting visitors?"

"No lad I just wants to find out where it stops."

"Oh," the lad said going quiet again. Then he blurted, "London."

"In between?" Replied Willy, as though he did not know the final destination, he scoffed in his thoughts.

As Jasper and Molly took the two men along towards the crossroads, Willy always alert, pulled his horse off the road down a track. The lad with delayed reaction, wheeled Molly around to follow.

"Sarge," he called.

"We don't want to ride near that carriage lad." said Willy his voice a near whisper.

"Why not it's only a carriage." the lad said lowering his voice and his head below the level of the hedge.

"Only! That's Lord Eldon's and believe me you don't want to meet him." said Willy.

"Why not?"

"Trust me lad."

"Alright."

John was pacing up and down, feeling very frustrated.

"It's not much John, but I heard a bit of gossip. Apparently the fop has been riding around your village asking a load a questions. Writing a book so they say."

"Oh?" said John.

"Ah but here's the interesting bit. Lord Eldon was seen riding around in his carriage."

"That bastard." If there was one man John would have liked to get his hands on more than the Squire it was Lord Eldon.

"Aye, well that's all I heard."

"What did he want?"

"I don't know," she paused for though, "You I expect."

Willy was back home and poor Martha, was keen to go to bed.

"So where'd that stage go then?" asked Martha.

"Goes to Market Bratton," Willy scratched his head.

"You got splinters again?"

"Oh, no," he put his hand down, "Why did they accuse them smugglers?"

"Isn't it obvious, cause they found smugglers gold in his workshop."

"Yea, oh, right," he started scratching his head again

"Did you pick up some nits today?"

"Oh sorry," he stopped scratching his bald patch. "How'd they know to look in that clay?"

"Maybe it weren't hidden proper, like I said yesterday, he might have disturbed them."

"Yes but if you'd a bag of gold on show and just killed a bloke. Well if it were me, I'd take that gold and hop-it on the next stage or get me a boat to France."

"Maybe they weren't so clever as you Willy Moore. Move out the way a moment I needs to get to that drawer," said Martha edging over to a rough looking chest of drawers. "Bloody drawer," she cussed, "You've got to fix this."

"Aye alright."

"When Willy? I don't know how many times I've asked."

"I know," said Willy almost automatically. "There's a lot of money in smuggling."

"Well I hear there's a couple of jobs going. Why don't you do that, then we can have some proper furniture, instead of riding around half the night or following wild goose-chases."

"Now Martha would you really want me doin that kind a thing?"

"No, no course not, but I don't know why your wastin your time on that old potter. She sighed, Everybody says it was them two smugglers."

"Why?"

"Oh come on."

"Look Martha we can keep fighting them poor folks what does the smuggling, but that won't stop the smuggling, will it?"

"What you gettin at?"

"It's organised and well funded."

"So?"

"So t'ain't them poor folks alone."

"No, no, oh Willy, don't you go pokin your nose in. She was genuinely frightened. You can see what them poor folks is upto, there's others a lot more dangerous."

"Yes Martha, yes, don't worry I'm very discrete."

"Well be discrete now, shut up and go to sleep."

"Yes dear."

The following morning Lord Mosterton was mustering the men. Aunt was still in attendance.

"How is poor Mrs Bradstock?" He enquired.

"She's as well as can be expected, cook has been feeding her well."

"Good I'm, I I'm go going to go back I I have a few ideas."

"You be careful."

"I I I will aunt, do not worry."

As Lord Mostertons carriage rattled along back towards the Crow and Raven, he chattered to Mr Carter his trusty servant.

"L look Tom if the smugglers did not do it."

"Yes sir."

"Who, who would want to kill the old fellow?" Anthony had in his mind a strand of reasoning.

"Someone who knew about the money sir?" said Mr Carter.

"No, no they found the money," he paused, "Do you see Tom it wasn't the money was it?"

"Sir," now Tom had a think, "They do say that smuggler had the same coins about his person."

"If he took it and the other fellow why leave evidence of it at the potters?"

"Very astute sir."

"Most fortuitous for the justice system, d d do you not," he stammered, "Do you not agree Tom?"

"Yes sir."

While Lord Mosterton headed in one direction two men were travelling in the opposite.

"So where are we off to then sarge?"

"Market Bratton," you don't have to come.

"I'd rather stick with you sarge."

"Good lad."

The two men had set off early and arrived at the market town by lunchtime

"We might need to stop over, that alright?"

"Yes Sarge, my missus is used to funny hours. Mind I'd best get back tomorrow, I don't like leaving her too long."

The sergeant nodded, "I worry about my Martha just the same lad."

"Where will we stay? They don't exactly welcome us at the Inns."

"I've a friend in Market Bratton, we'll see him."

The two men road around the main square, then a short distance down a side street and through a large gate in a wall. There was a small courtyard, a cart was drawn up, behind it a doorway. The man unloading gave the two excise men a dirty look. The other man in smart attire assisted without showing any sign of recognition.

Willy and the lad remained mounted. Watching as the carter hastily exited the premises.

The other man walked right past them shutting the gates behind the exiting tradesman. He wandered back across the courtyard, turning towards the two excise men, "Willy Moore, long time no see."

"Dudley you old rascal, how's trade?"

"Come inside, I've closed for lunch so we won't be disturbed."

"Lad this is an old friend of mine, Mr Salterton."

"Pleased to meet you sir."

"You helping Willy then son?"

"Aye sir."

"He's a good man." Dudley turned to look at Willy, "This must be a bit out of your area, ain't it?"

Willy nodded, "Little bit."

"So why?"

Willy explained his theory about the potter and the smugglers. Dudley listened with interest.

"You know he used to sell me a few pieces each time he visited."

"Did e?" said Willy excited by this news. "So you'd know when he came here?"

"I have the exact day in the books."

Willy was noticeably animated.

"Will that help?" said Dudley

"Oh yes." said Willy making notes of the dates as his friend leafed through his purchase ledger.

"Very regular." remarked Willy

"Like clockwork." said the lad, also looking at the dates

Dudley nodded, "Sort of fellow you could tell the time of day by."

"So someone watching him would be able to predict what he might be about."

"Yes my friend."

"Do you know who else he visited?" said Willy.

"No idea, quiet fellow never said much. Would you like some lunch, I've plenty?" Looking at the two men in turn. Both politely accepted his kind offer. The three men sat, ate and chatted for some time, Willy and Dudley exchanging tales.

"Is there somewhere we can stay?"

"There's the Inn."

Willy shook his head, "I'd rather somewhere quieter."

"There's a woman by the name of Mrs Melplash. I hear she takes in guests. One of my suppliers mentioned her, stayed there, funny woman by all accounts. Your horses will be alright here. Sorry I don't have a lot of room the wife's expecting and we have mother-in-law staying."

"Ah." said Willy understanding the situation very well. "We'd best leave you to your business. Come on lad, let's go see this Mrs Melplash."

The three men shook hands, Willy and the lad slipped quietly out of the back on foot. Willy turned to the lad, "I don't mind Dudley knowing our reasons for being her, but don't let on to none else, alright."

"Aye Sarge."

After asking a few people the sergeant strode purposefully to a small house tucked away down a narrow side street.

"Mrs Melplash?" The Sargent asked politely.

"Yes." said the woman looking slightly concerned, the uniforms clearly worried her.

"We understand you let rooms?"

"Yes." she said.

"Do you have rooms free at the moment?" said Willy probing.

"Yes why?" she said, suspicious of their motives.

"We need to stay the night."

"Oh, I see, oh well your money is as good as any." she said bidding them enter.

Mrs Melplash was clearly uneasy, though she tried not to let it show.

"So why are you here?" she said being noseey.

"There's still one of them smugglers on the loose, we are after him see, he's from our patch, so to speak." Willy smiled at her, trying to put her at ease.

"Right I see." She said, still somewhat sullen.

Mrs Melplash did not take long to find an excuse to leave the two gentlemen, to themselves. She was gone for some considerable time, something, Willy, always thinking on things, noted. The two excise men were tired from the journey, and though they may have liked a pint down the local tavern, in uniform it would not be a very good idea.

Back at the Squire's residence, his footman approached him, "Sir sorry to disturb you."

"Yes go on."

"News from the Crow and Raven, Lord Mosterton has taken up residence."

The Squire sighed and shook his head, "If he calls I'm not in."

"Understood sir."

The Squire settling back into staring at a map, and some scraps of paper. He was clearly a very worried man. John the smuggler had now been at large for some considerable time, and he knew too much.

"Sir." said a maid.

"What." The poor thing was rather taken aback, by his bark. She trembled. "Get on with it, what do you want?" She was still shaking, and had gone almost mute. Recently hired to replace the rather elderly Mrs Bumkin. The Squire was now wondering if he might not prefer to have the silly old woman back.

"Hmm," she tried to speak, "Lord Emon, I think e says."

"Lord Eldon?"

"Yes sir." She replied, looking a bit blank.

"Well, what about Lord Eldon?" The Squire's temper was now very frayed.

"He's hmm."

"HE'S WHAT?" shouted the Squire who was now about to throw her out, as he got to his feet.

"Here sir.." she almost whispered.

"Well show him in." He pause, "Oh, go back to the kitchen, I'll see to it myself."

She nodded and quickly left. As he was about to follow, the bulk of Lord Eldon entered the room, she had almost collided with him.

"Who was that stupid woman?" He looked sternly at the Squire, "Perhaps we should hang her as well."

"Sorry," said the Squire.

"Sorry! The damn stupid woman assaulted a Lord." Lord Eldon's temper was a match for that of the Squire. "Well, what are you doing, sat on your arse man, have you caught the blighter yet?"

"No, well, I was planning, your Lordship."

"Planning, by God, Squire what do you need to plan for. We have scoundrel on the loose.

You have men, what are you doing man, lets have some action.”

“He may have gone to France sir.”

“No chance.”

“But.” The Squire was cut short.

“But, get off your butt man. He's not in France and you know it, and you know why. There is a lot of stake here. I shall not stop, some of us are taking action, if you can't catch him I will. There are some who say you have reason not to catch this evil villain, so you better get him before I do.” With that a rather red faced Lord moved his great bulk and sauntered off, through the house and out to his waiting carriage. The Squire had stood frozen, the sound of the whip as the carriage moved off, startled him.

He sat thinking, he wanted to use every man he could, including those two incompetent excise men. Then he thought about what the smuggler knew, and thought better of it.

That evening when almost all of the servants were away the Squire called in a few men. Looking around the room, with the Squire at the head of small table. The room was tiny and the four men huddled in. Jenkins the Squire's footman sat to his right, the shepherd to his left and the wiry gamekeeper at the opposite end of the table to the Squire.

“Bloody Eldon, won't let it go.” The Squire said looking at the others.

“That bastard, drinks the Brandy though don't e?” said the gamekeeper.

“Ey Bloody Elden is a good name for e.” said the shepherd, shaking his head.

Jenkins remained quiet, listening.

“I know, he has intimated that if I don't get John and he does, questions will be asked.”

“Squire can e tell us that so we can understand ye?” said the shepherd.

“Either we get John, or if Eldon does, I will be under suspicion, and that will affect all of us.”

“Bloody right, Bert would not have talked, but John, e were always a bit jittery. Good man, strong like but not in the head, acts first see.” said the gamekeeper.

“Yes well I've been thinking, rather than go chasing around with too few men, who would have killed Mr Watts?”

“Well it weren't us, and who knew the silly old fool found the money?” said the gamekeeper.

“Some may think it though.” said the shepherd.

Jenkins piped up, “Not just your sheep, you mean those idiots who listen to gossip about the Squire.”

“Gossip.” said the Squire.

“You must have heard sir, folks wonder about how you keep such a fine house?” said Jenkins

“Yes but, I don't murder locals.” The Squire paused, “Ah, but I did buy from the old potter, so they might think?”

“Yes, they might, and with your connections.” said the footman.

“So just as they bastards put they blame on Bert and John, them folks might just as well believe our Squire ad a and in it.” the gamekeeper, paused for thought, “That bloody fop, e don't elp.”

“Writin a book in im?” said the shepherd.

“So they say.” said Jenkins. “He might have a good deal of information, gossip, would it be worth taking an interest in that book of his Squire?”

“Hmm, yes, yes it might, that is a very good idea.” said the Squire. Realising that he could

possibly exploit others without needing to expand his search party.

The following afternoon after a fruitless journey to Market Bratton, while Molly and Jasper were making loving gestures to each other, their riders were deep in discussion.

"Waste of time a sarge?" said the lad.

"Was it?" said Willy.

"That bloke who Dudley mentioned, he didn't say nothing."

"Yes but did you watch him, real careful like I told ye?"

"Yes sarge."

"Did you see, how he reacted when I mentioned we were on an investigation and had come from Mrs Melplash?" Willy turned and looked at the lad, who thought for a moment.

"He just..." the lad, was desperately trying to recollect.

"And do you remember how Mrs Melplash reacted when we arrived?"

"Not very inviting, but we are excise men."

"Yes, but according to Dudley, Mr Watt the potter also stayed a her place."

"Sarge, if the potter had gold coins, he would not have been able to spend them would he?"

"No lad, so he would have had to have changed them into something less conspicuous."

said Willy. "Which is why I asked Dudley, which is why he suggested that bloke, Fred."

"So do you think they killed him?" said the lad.

"Why would they?" said Willy, "Why would they?"

"Sarge, if Fred did change the coins, what would he do with them, after all he could hardly spend them, not that much, not in Market Bratton."

"They might have diddled him, but I don't think they would have killed him." The Sargent was deep in thought. Just as the lad was about to ask if he had heard. "Yes, lad, so who did Fred give the coins to?"

"But how do we know, Fred did, just because he was the only one in Market Bratton, William could have changed the money elsewhere."

"No, the old fellow was regular as clockwork." The sarge paused. "They only found one bag, and one coin at the scene right?"

"So?" said the lad, "That smuggler had a coin on him."

"Two coins." said Willy.

"Maybe the other smuggler has the rest." The Lad did have a valid point. "Maybe the other smuggler, bought passage to France."

"You think those sea faring folks would not let on to a well known smuggler with some big old gold coins, buying passage?" said Willy. "There is no way ordinary folk could spend coin like that."

"Sarge, catching smugglers in the act is what we are paid for. If you're thinking we can go back and ask Fred again, well." said the lad, growing nervous at the thought. "Our jobs dangerous enough as it is."

"Why do you think, we are not very good at it?" said Willy, it was a rhetorical question. "We get tipped off don't we, where to be."

"Sometimes."

"Most times, lad, near enough to see what is going on, far enough never to be very effective."

"We usually capture fishermen, bringing in a catch late in the evening." said the lad.

"Exactly." Willy was nodding, "Well away from that nice view from the Squire's house."

"Should we ask the Captain?" said the lad.

"No lad, I have sent him a report," he paused, "Keep it simple, we are patrolling, also keeping watch for the missing smuggler."

"Maybe he could ask that Fred fellow?" said the lad.

"Look lad, the Captain ain't the problem, if he gets orders that affect us he will tell us, we are not supposed to think, that could make our job much more dangerous."

The lad kept quiet for the rest of of the journey. It was only when they got closer to home that he asked. "So what if we do find out who killed Mr Watts? Seems we might be safer not saying anyway."

"Yes, but I bet Alf might be interested, and he probably knows folks who could do something about it."

"The landlord of the Crow and Raven." said the lad.

Willy nodded.

At the Squire's residence his guest had arrived.

"Lord Mosterton, how nice of you to come."

"Thank you for the invitation Squire."

"I hear you are writing a book."

"Yes, indeed." replied Lord Mosterton.

"I am curious, what is it all about?"

"Well I have titled it "The Life of English Country Folk.""

"How fascinating, what have you written so far?" asked a very enthusiastic Squire.

"Well, you will never believe this but some of their houses are actually made from straw and clay. Can be rather damp, not good." Lord Mosterton paused, "Oh, and I have been doing a chapter on how Inns are run."

It did not take long for the Squire to realise that the information presented to him was of no use whatsoever. His opinion of the fop, was beginning to rival that of Lord Eldon's.

Anthony having on previous occasions been less warmly received, was wary of the Squire's new found enthusiasm. Mr Carter on the return journey home, pointed to fine view from the Squire's house. Anthony concurring upon the navigability of the river and the requirements of certain activities.

It was early evening the excise men were on patrol, riding along the coast road, keeping well away from the treacherous cliffs.

"Why was the money in the clay in the first place?"

"The smugglers hid it there."

"Why?" said the Sargent, "We were no where near that area, our orders were to stay further down the coast, right?"

"Sarge." the lad pointed to the riders coming towards them.

"Good evening Squire."

"Good evening Sargent, how was Market Bratton?"

"Well seeing as how your good self caught one of those rascals, we thought we'd best try and catch the other."

"The one we caught was dead, bled dry from his wound, nasty things those man traps."

"They still hung him, though." said Sargent Willy Moore.

"Lord Eldon, wouldn't have had it any other way." said the Squire, "Market Bratton is not exactly a coastal town is it?"

"That scoundrel was from our patch and we thought it best to at least try and do our best, even if we were inland a bit."

"Inland, hmm." The Squire, shook his head. "Well did you get him?"

"Ah, no sir."

"Did you get anything of use?" said the Squire. He gave the lowly Sargent a rather superior look.

"No sir, no one had seen hide nor hair of him sir."

"Where do you think he might have gone?" The Squire was probing and Willy was well aware of his position.

"We don't rightly know, though we heard tell he had gone to France. Gossip, waste of time, Squire."

"Gossip?" This struck a raw nerve with the Squire.

"Well you know folks think with all that money he's livin it up over in France. Specially as they ave not heard nothin."

"Any other gossip, about anyone else?"

"Taverns are full of gossip Squire, I don't suppose non of us escape the gossip Squire."

The Squire, pulled his horse around and then road off at a gallop, the three men who were with him, gave chase.

Willy and the lad looked on.

"Sarge, why did he ride off like that, without sayin nothin?"

The following day, the two excise men were even more perplexed. They had been given new orders. As they sat miles away from the Squires property Willy pondered the orders.

"We have to stay here all day every day for the next week."

"Why?" said the Lad.

"Beats me lad."

It was only a week later, When Willy found another note from Alf. It was getting dark, so he decided to look at it at home.

Martha was stirring a stew, there was a warm flickering light from the fire, and a rather expensive candle burned by Willy as he read the note.

"Anything important love?"

"Only that the squire and three men have been arrested, all of them hung apparently."

"Hung." Martha looked puzzled. Her shadowy figure backlit by the orange glow of the open fire. "What about the assizes?"

"Don't know love. Our orders kept us well away from the Squires."

"There have been a lot of gossip, they reckon that e might have been doin all the smugglin, some even say e killed William, it were his gold." She turned from stirring the stew, "You alright love?"

"We talked to the Squire a week ago."

"Oh, you worried they might think you're in on it." said Martha, herself starting to worry.

"Well we don't catch much. Though we are mostly where we are ordered to be."

"You think you could argue that with them nobs, they'd say you disobeyed and come up with some other orders." Martha, knew a few women who had served in houses of the upper crust. She had heard a few tales.

In Laura's home, John was becoming restless and agitated to the point where he was beginning to reject her wise counsel.

"John, listen to me. They've already arrested the Squire, a shepherd, the squire's footman and gamekeeper, and hung em. And that ain't all, Lord Mosterton was apparently the key figure in it, him and a man, Mr Carter I think they say, plus a couple of other fellows. They say he was the money man, financing it, the Squire was the brains, and them locals the muscle. Hung the lot of them."

"What?" John was taken aback. "The Squire was and them others, but Lord Mosterton never heard of him."

"Well that's what they're saying."

"Laura, sorry love, I gotta go, I promised Bert."

"Ye'll get ye self killed, use ye brain." Laura, started crying, "I lost one good man to.. to those evil bastards, what... what can you do against that lot?"

"Laura, sorry, I don't know, how can I stay here for ever, if they caught me here they'd hang you for sure, I don't want that." He paused, wishing he could think of something. "I'll come back, I promise, but they can't find me here."

In her heart she knew he was right. They parted on good terms, he slipped away unnoticed. Making for his home territory he wounded what had happened to Meg. Though he did not know it, a very tough Aunt had managed to survive the purge of her kin. With Meg and Lord Mosterton's surviving servants they had retreated to her modest home.

Keeping undercover, John had taken refuge for the night in the hollow of a big old oak tree. It stood in a small wooded area, that descended very steeply into a sunken lane. Sounds funnelled into the old tree.

"Look what we have here two excise men."

"Not very good excise men so they say."

Willy heard more horsemen coming from behind.

The four men blocking the lane in front of them continued their banter.

"How many lad?"

"Another four Sarge."

"They'll make it look like we were ambushed by smugglers."

"Aren't we then?" said a very nervous lad.

"Stay calm lad. These are fops, dandies. The bastards who drink all that Brandy."

John, had now moved out of the tree and quietly edge behind a thick bush, he could just see through gaps what was going on below.

"So what can we do for you gentlemen?" said Willy in a very calm and polite voice.

The horsemen, were beginning to go for their pistols.

"Gentleman, we don't want to wake the neighbours. Let us have some finer sport." said the most finely dressed man.

Willy was trying to think, the excise men's muskets would be of little use, these men would be on them before they could load. The sides were far too steep to climb, and they would be hacked down if they tried. He turned to the lad whispering, "Pray for a miracle lad."

John had by now loaded his two pistols. He aimed the first at the fop in the fancy cloths.

The man fell, the others were now reaching for their pistols. John took aim at the man nearest the fallen fop. As the second man fell, Willy and the lad charged through the gap,

holding their muskets up to deflect any sword play. John had reloaded one pistol and took down another. The five men on horseback were now chasing Willy and the lad through the length of the deep gully, they could do nothing about the man who fired the shots. Jasper and Molly could sense the danger, and were fleeing as fast as they could negotiate the rough old lane, though the fops had finer horses Jasper and Molly were of a sturdier build. In open grassland the fops mounts would catch them, but in the rough stony track, several of those giving chase had to pull up as their horses went lame. John who had been running in cover along the top of the gully, and took both of the lame horse riders with two more shots. His thirst for revenge at the loss of his friend Bert, made him oblivious to who these men were, but given the situation, he knew foul play when he saw it.

Catching sight that there were now only three men following, Willy called a halt, swung around and loaded his musket, the lad did the same. One of the three men fell, the other two slowed. The lad had shot, but he was nervous and missed.

“Reload and let me shot your musket lad.” Willy knew these men could not escape. “He could hear the story, rogue excise men ambush...”

The two riders were going for their pistols. Willy hit one of them, as the shot from two pistols skimmed him, one shot removing his hat the other catching an epelet.

Grabbing the lads musket, Willy caught the second rider, both were wounded but still riding.

“Come on lad, we must get them.”

“They have fast horses, then we will have to drive them into rough ground.”

One of the riders fell, the other turned too shot.

“Ride left,” said Willy as he pulled Jasper off to the right. Halting, he reloaded the musket and shot the man again. He to fell.

Willy and the lad cautiously approached the two fallen men.

“Who are you bastards.” said Willy, his voice snarling.

“Peasant scum.” spat the first one to fall.

“Load my musket lad.” His arm outstretched, the lad took it and reloaded it. “Now do yours lad.”

Willy took aim, “Who?”, Willy was now seething, he thought of Martha as a widow. The spark as the flint hit the steel, ignited the powder, sending the shot into the man. He fell back, motionless.

“Musket.” The lad took Willy's musket and handed him his.

“Who?”

The remaining fop, looked terrified, this had all sounded so easy, such good sport. The final shot rang out. A man came over to the two excise men.

“They'll hang us all if they find this lot.” said John looking up at them.

“I recognise you.” said Willy.

“You won't for long if they catch us here like this.” John pointed back to the lane, I got all the horses tied up, no sense in them running back to alert others. We can put them on the horses, take them away from here, quick.”

Willy did not argue, he and the lad assisted this fellow. With all the dead men slung over each of the horses that were not lame, and tying the two lame horses behind. John riding one of the fops horses they made haste.

“Where?” said Willy.

“Keep quiet, follow me, lad, you keep watch at the rear. You sir take the front, I'll check the

route ahead, follow, if I raise my hand make yourselves scarce, hide.”
As the light faded they dismounted and lead all the horses down a narrow deep gorge. The sound of the sea, and the distinctive ocean smell growing stronger.

John, knew the gruesome task that they had before them.

“All the horses, no not Jasper and Molly.” Willy was repelled by John's gestures towards the mounts.

“No, not your horses.” John smiled at Willy.

“What about one for you?” said the lad.

“Lad, those fops know a horses like I know this coast. They know another fops horse when they see one. Best take your two horses down their, keep them up wind and out of sight. I don't want to do this, they are fine beasts, but if...”

“If the fops or their horses are found...” Willy paused, “Someone was after us. They knew just where we would be.”

It was well into the night before the job was done.

“Well the crabs will grow fat in these parts.” said John as they, sat after cleaning up.

“Don't think I'll be eatin crab for a while.” said Willy his gut almost wrenching.

“Me neither.” said the lad. “I feel sick Sarge.”

That night did not go easy. In the morning the three men, sat on the beach as the sun came up.

“It was them or us lad,” said Willy. He turned to look at the man who had saved them both.

“John, thank you my friend.”

“Friend, smuggler and a two excise men.” John looked a little amused.

“Sir, do you think it was them that murdered, Mr Watts?” said the lad.

“Maybe, it certainly wasn't you two that caused us to hide the money.”

“How do you know that?” asked Willy, intrigued by this statement.

“Your orders,” said John, “We knew where you would be and we knew that you would follow orders. The Squire had all that sorted.”

“So why did you hide the money in the clay?”

“Willy my friend, the Squire sent us down to the beech, we were told our boat was arriving that evening. We usually hand over the two bags of gold they roll off the brandy. We load our boat, take it up river. That night we waited, no sign of any ships, nothing. Strange because there was a fair wind, no reason a ship could not sail, sea was calm. Then we heard them coming. Bert put the money in the clay where we were.”

“Why? They could have found it.”

“We did not want to get caught with a load of money. We slipped our boat back up river. Just missed them, we caught sight of their horses in the moonlight, they were headed straight for our location.”

“They knew where you would be, John?”

“Yes, Willy exactly.”

“Mosterton?”

John looked at Willy, “Who?”

“Lord Mosterton?” John looked puzzled as Willy repeated the name.

Willy continued. “They said he was behind it, the man with the money.”

“The only Lord that used to visit the squire quite a lot was that bastard Eldon.”

“We did not think it was Lord Mosterton, rumour had it that he was writing a book, asking lots of questions. He had also taken your mates wife in, took care of her really well. Not

wise though, Eldon would use that as evidence of his involvement.”

“Do you know what happened to Meg?”

“Seems the women servants and Meg were saved by Lord Mosterton's Aunt, quite a formidable woman by all accounts. Best not visit her though.” said Willy. “What will you do now John?”

“Get the bastard who killed the potter. Made a promise to Bert.”

“Might have been those we got the other day?” said the lad.

“Hmm, they are just the hounds, no I want the master of the hunt.”

“So do I John, so do I, we were set up, we always are, we get orders, courier brings them. That's why we were in that lane, don't usually go through there, but we had orders.”

“Sarge, won't they try again, if we go ridin around?”

“Yes lad, but we must.”

“Why?”

“Because lad, if we don't they will think we are on the run, do I need to explain that?”

“No,” he said, looking rather glum.

“You two best be off,” said John, nodding towards the rising sun.

“How will we contact you, we owe you a big favour, you might need some help?”

“Willy, if I need you you'll know. Thanks.”

The men parted company, the excise men made for home with some caution.

“Blood sir, over here,” said a well dressed servant.

A the bulk of Lord Eldon, descended from his carriage and wandered over to inspect.

“That it?”

“Yes sir,” said the servant.

“Anymore?”

“No sir, we have looked the whole length of the lane, just that bit.”

The great man slowly swung around, his penetrating stare, looking intently at the lane. He got back in the carriage and made for his stately home.

“Well Eldon, what news of our friends, were they successful?” said a rather delicate looking man. He was in the centre of a group of finely dressed men.

“One spot of blood on a rock, and nothing, no sign of anyone sir.”

“And no bloody sign of Brandy Eldon, no bloody Brandy.” One of the other men snapped at Eldon.

“Yes, Eldon, was it really necessary, the Squire, was it?” said a haughty fellow.

“Eldon did you ask those excise men, well did you?” Came another question from a rather nasal sounding gentleman.

“Sir, we do not want to ask them anything right now, if we did we might as well tell them everything.” said Lord Eldon.

“But they are just peasants, what can they do?”

“Yes, why did you not question them, you could have asked if they had seen any riders.”

“Gentlemen,” Eldon was becoming angry, “We don't know where our friends are, so we don't know what happened, and we don't know how two incompetent excise men are still patrolling as though nothing happened to them.”

“How do you know that?” asked the nasal fellow.

“Sometimes it is better to listen, than to act, and I am working on a plan gentlemen.”

"Eight of our friends are missing, you still have not caught that other villain, all you seem to have achieved is to cut off our Brandy supplies." said the haughty fellow.

"Yes, if we can get rid of Mosterton, surely we can get rid of a couple of inept excise men, they fall off cliffs all the time." The group laughed, even Eldon cracked a smile.

One of the gentleman who had yet to speak, waiting until the laughter had subsided, spoke in a rather serious tone, "Perhaps gentlemen rather than criticising Lord Eldon we should try and help him. He has done a good deal of the work over the years and we have enjoyed the Brandy."

"Why are we going after these excise men?" asked the nasal fellow.

"Because dear fellow our man in Market Bratton told us they were there poking around, asking lots of questions."

"Silly, very silly, not so inept, could cause us problems." said the haughty fellow.

"They were also seen meeting with the Squire, then he rode off with his chaps at quite a pace," added Lord Eldon. "The Squire had also been confiding in Lord Mosterton."

"How do you know that sir?"

"I have my sources, sir," said Eldon.

"Could not we just arrest them, and hang them to?"

"Not enough to prove anything," said Eldon.

"Since when has that stopped us?"

"Sir, we must be cautious, if we hang half the people it could draw suspicion on those doing the hanging."

"Well, said sir," said his Lordship, looking towards the serious fellow.

As the weeks passed with still no sign of the eight men, questions were being asked elsewhere, family members of some rather powerful and influential lineage, were showing distinct signs of concern.

Another distinguished gentleman was having a talk with Lord Eldon.

"You can hardly blame two excise men Eldon, given the length of coast they have to patrol."

"But the army sir?" Eldon's great bulk reeled back, his face glazed with an astonished look.

"It is only temporary, you need more manpower to search the place."

"The smuggler is probably long gone," said Eldon appearing dejected.

"Certain families have complained in high places about their sons going missing. Some fear they may have been taken in revenge for all those hangings sir. They are a close knit lot down there, besides you might even find your smuggler, could be right under your nose."

"Alf." Willy beckoned the landlord out of sight.

The two men huddled out of sight.

"Alf if you knew of a fly that a big horrible spider was trying to catch." Willy paused, "No more like a little tiny beetle on one of your tables and on that table was a fine pint of your best ale."

"Go on."

"Well suppose the sweet smell of that ale was attracting lots and lots of ants."

"That little beetle would have to move off that table pretty quick, else them ants might get him."

Willy nodded, and the two men parted.

Some days later Laura got a pleasant surprise, John was back with her. She told him what she heard about the army.

"That explains the message."

He gave her a big hug and more!

In the newly erected military encampment the General was quickly gathering intelligence.

"Corporal."

"Yes sir."

"You've been to the excise men, how did their homes look to you?"

"Well kept sir,"

"Affluent looking?"

"Begin you pardon sir"

"Plenty of money?"

"No sir, quite poor I'd say sir."

With that the General sent the Corporal to do his duties.

"You suspect those excise fellows sir?" The general's aid, was very shrewd when it came to analysing intelligence.

"No, I don't but," he pause looking for the right words, "Lord Eldon expressed his suspicions about them."

"Ah, Lord Eldon!"

"Yes, very rich, very powerful, and so they say, not averse to a drop of brandy!" The General gave his second in command a sly nod and a wink. "Word to the Wise, be polite, brief, say as little as possible, we are men of action after all."

"Thank you sir."

Some hours later within the encampment;

"Lieutenant," said the General.

"Yes sir."

"Your orders, and take those two excise men with you."

Sargent Willy Moore and his fellow excise man, had been called to the encampment, to assist with the search given their knowledge of the local area.

"So where we going then sir?" Enquired Sargent Moore

"The village of Lorton, do you know it?"

"Heard of it sir, can't say as we've been there, to far inland for us."

The small company of men arrived mid-morning outside a small but well tended house and garden. The lieutenant beckoned the two excise men to come with him, while the rest of the men stood at ease in the lane.

"Lady Lydford?"

"Oh." It was the giggly maid. "I'll fetch her sir."

A few moment later a rather gorgeous lady even in her advancing years, appeared.

"Yes sir, how can we help you?"

"Sorry to bother you, your Ladyship, I have orders to search your property."

"What on earth for?"

The lieutenant somewhat uneasily explained, "Smuggling." He then realised he should not have said this after he spoke.

"Eldon, he never gives up does he?"

"Please, may we your Ladyship?"

"What all that lot?" said Lady Lydford, staring at the soldiers in the lane, now in a somewhat dispersed and some might have said disorderly array.

"Just the three of us your Ladyship."

"Oh, very well."

As they delicately toured the rooms, Meg hovered around the excise men. Meg was not shy about letting them know how much she hated them. When the lad looked towards her and started to open his mouth, Willy barked at him as only a Sargent could.

It was not long after the soldiers had left, than someone else arrived at Lady Lydford's residence. A very nondescript man with a message. She and her ladies had passage to France, allegedly to visit a "sick" relative. Her Ladyship understood and the three women lost no time in making hast for the waiting vessel.

As Willy and the lad, approached the excise mens' cottages he turned to his companion.

"That was daft lad."

"But we were alone, just Meg and us."

"Walls have ears lad."

"Yes but John."

"And if she knew and then became friendly toward us?"

"I guess someone might notice."

"Eldon don't need no reason," said Willy, "How do we know we weren't left alone with Meg on purpose?"

The General and Lord Eldon were comfortably seated near the fire in the Squires old living room, when the Lieutenant entered.

"Close the door sir," said the General.

"Interesting report Lieutenant, seems you found nothing?" Eldon was not pleased. "They were with you all the time?"

"They, sir?"

"The excise men?"

"Yes sir."

"Never alone?"

"Well while searching sir." The Lieutenant was not sure what to say.

"Go on man."

"Well they were alone with one of her maids, the older one."

Eldon looked at the General, "The smugglers wife."

Then Lord Eldon gave the Lieutenant a chilling stare, "And they insisted on coming with you didn't they?"

"No, sir, I believe it was orders sir."

"No man, they did insist upon it."

"Sir?" The Lieutenant looked puzzled.

"Damn it man they are in cahoots with the smugglers, why do you think those excise men caught so few? Well?"

The General spoke, "Lieutenant his Lordship has shown me orders that suggest, if obeyed would have lead to the capture of the smugglers."

"Difficult getting enough evidence Lieutenant," said Lord Eldon.

The Lieutenant looked blank, he said nothing but wondered if, perhaps it was because there was no evidence to get.

The following morning the General gave the Lieutenant a new set of orders.

"Take your men and arrest those two excise men."

"Sir," he said none too enthusiastic.

"It is rather hot today and we would not want to tire the men sir!"

Half an hour later a fine carriage arrived at the General's headquarters.

"General, general, barked Lord Eldon."

"Yes sir?"

"That damn woman, bitch has gone sir."

"Oh, I have sent soldiers to arrest her, others to the excise men."

"When man, when?"

"About half an hour ago."

"How many horse?"

"Horse, only the officers have horse sir, this is an infantry unit sir."

"Damn it man then send someone to stop them arresting those excise men."

"But?"

"Damn it just get on with it."

The general called for one of his officers, who with great speed left at the gallop for the Lieutenant and his men.

During the evening in a dimly lit room, a group of men were meeting.

"Good news Eldon?" Asked the haughty man.

"No, sir the damn woman, has gone off to France, and without her and that smugglers wife making a case against the two excise men is slim even for me."

"Bad luck old chap. Still we have some good news, bagged us a nice plump goose for the feast."

"Ah, that is good news." Lord Eldon was truly pleased.

"Well we figured if the land is crawling with a lot of hot blooded soldiers, one woman going missing."

"Yes, yes, excellent well done gentlemen, enough for us all?" His Lordship was getting excited.

"Oh, yes," said the nasal voiced man.

They all laughed.

The Endor is it?

(Please let me know by emailing more at dorsetauthor.co.uk with the story title in the subject line. Thank you.)