

TABISH KHAIR

from The Thing about Thugs

THE CONVERSATION in the drawing room was animated. It flowed almost tangibly, like the smoke in the narrow passages of air permitted by the objects that inhabited the room: a profusion of candlesticks (despite the glowing Argand lamp) and mirrors, clocks, Staffordshire figures, paintings, prints, engravings, drapery, ceramics and wax fruit, an aquarium, books, ferncases—a strange combination of the bachelor's touch and that of an older woman which, the Major knew, had to be attributed to the cook. Mary, with her delicate sense of balance and harmony, would probably have a few things to say to both. He laughed inwardly.

Conversations did get animated, thought Major Grayper, drawing on his foul-smelling cigar, whenever Meadows brought out that joker in his pack, the thug from India. There he stood, a criminal by the look of him; he had a low, cunning appearance, though he was not as dark as the Major had expected him to be, more like a gypsy than a nigger. He was dressed in resplendent Oriental robes, something the Major would never have permitted, and he even spoke English. His head, which had just been callipered and commented on for perhaps the hundredth time by Captain Meadows, was almost a perfect oval, smooth, with dark, half-curling hair, and he had a small, carefully clipped and waxed moustache with pointy ends.

The Captain had been narrating the thug's history to the company and had illustrated some phrenological points by measuring his skull with thread, scale and calliper. He had been helped in his endeavour by Daniel Oates, the journalist, who—with the exception of Mary, who was ensconced in a Wolsey easy chair at a ladylike distance from the thug—was the only other person in the gathering who had studied phrenology. The Major had read half a book or two, one by that chap Dr. Andrew Combe who was perennially being quoted in Meadows' circle, but he had desisted from following that branch of knowledge any further. It was not that Major Grayper disagreed with phrenology; he simply found it superfluous. If you knew anything about a man's background and if you could observe him for a few moments, you could instantly place him within the criminal class or outside it. This man was marked

not only by his murderous history but also by his wild cascade of hair and the way his eyes darted about every so often, as if he were hiding something. The eye, they say, is the lamp of the body. Major Grayper could never trust this Amir Ali. He said as much, after the thug had been asked to leave the company.

“And all should cry, Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair,” quoted Mary, mischief in her bright blue eyes.

“Mary,” remonstrated her mother half-seriously, but Captain Meadows simply laughed. So did the other young men and women in the room, all but Daniel Oates, who frowned in confusion, or was it irritation?

People like Meadows were well-meaning but naïve, thought Major Grayper. If they had not been so naïve, he himself, and people like him, would have less unpleasantness to deal with. Why, just this morning, the matter at the opium den . . .



THE MAJOR WAS an admirable person but he had no sense of timing, thought Nelly. Did he have to bring up the subject just as the saddles of mutton were being served? She had laboured so hard to get them right. And now she could see the ladies toying with the meat on their plates and even most of the men had lost their appetite. Only Daniel Oates was tucking away, but that man was always hungry, and the Captain, God bless him, was doing dutiful justice to her cooking.

The Major, of course, had not slowed down, even after providing a macabre account of the latest murder he had been called upon to solve this morning. A decrepit crone in some opium den in the rookery who had been discovered with her head, no, not just chopped off, but missing. Yes, the Major repeated, missing, and it was yet to be recovered. Then he provided a rather graphic account of the scene and suggested, with a gleam in his eyes, that the woman might be the victim of some madman, perhaps imported into the land from the colonies. Oh, how he was going on and on, encouraged by questions from Mr Oates, that greedy, gory pen-pusher!

Nelly prayed they would stop this tasteless talk before she signalled the girls to clear the table and bring in the cabinet pudding and the Jaune Mange. She had spent hours and hours on them, days, in fact, on the Jaune Mange, measuring out the boiling water and isinglass one day, mixing in the right quantities of sweet wine, lemon (with peel), loaf sugar and yolks of eggs the next, and finally boiling and stirring and straining it all into

moulds today. It would be so unfair, so . . . so heathenish to let an unknown headless woman, and that too from the rookery, spoil her precious efforts.



THE HEAD STARES at John May. He has locked himself into the room in which he works. He has roared at his children. He has slapped his wife. He has banished them from this part of the house. He has entered and left the room half a dozen times today. But the head just sits there, its locks stiff and snaky with blood, its eyes still staring, the coarse lips, the knotty skull, all of it a growing presence, minute by minute, a presence that takes over the room, his house, his very soul, sucking them all in. He wishes he were Shields, who must be drowning his horror and fear in some tavern. He wishes he were One-eyed Jack, incapable of any feeling that does not pertain to his own animal appetites. But he is not; he is John May, provider, self-made man, rational worker, ex-taxidermist, ex-resurrectionist, now murderer.

He does not believe in ghosts, but he is haunted by the eyes of this woman. He has to tear them out. He has to strip her skin, dissolve her brains, clear the skull until it becomes the extraordinary museum specimen demanded by M'lord. With every cut of the knife, every drop of chemical, he will sear his own soul. And it will have to be done in secret. Even M'lord, the prime mover of his actions, will pretend not to know how he procured this splendid skull. Skull number 50. Or skull number 550. How many does M'lord already have; how many people has he employed to procure such samples, people like John May?

And has any of them gone as far as John May has? It is a good thing he does not believe in ghosts. It is a good thing that he has stuffed animals. It is good that he knows how much more beastly than animals a human being can be. Like that Thing there, staring at him. That head, that skull, that Thing that belongs to a white woman who was as depraved, as obscene, as any nigger or lascar. More perhaps. Surely, more. Why should he, John May, self-made man, be afraid of that ugly bolus of skin, flesh, blood, hair and bone? Why should he let it turn him to stone?



AMIR ALI RETIRES to his "room," the scullery, as soon as he is dismissed from the polite company in the drawing room. It is a bare room with a tiled floor, a counter, a sink and a copper for the laundry. Unlike many other sculleries, it has a small fireplace too. It is also used less often than

the other sculleries that Amir has seen, as Captain Meadows's house is rather large and has a pantry in which the pans and dishes are washed.

Because it is hardly in use, and has its own supply of water and a fireplace, the scullery was imposed on Amir Ali by Nelly, though only after some resistance from the Captain, who first offered him one of the servant rooms in the attic. But Nelly was adamant. It is bad enough to have him hulking in the scullery next to the kitchen all day, Amir Ali overheard her telling the Captain; she does not want her nights disturbed by the knowledge that he is sleeping on the same floor as her and the young girls who are, after all, her wards in a manner of speaking.

The fire in the little fireplace has burnt low and the room is chilly, despite the warm smell of cooking from the kitchen. By now Amir has become used to the overbearing smells of London houses, especially around the kitchen: the odours, he feels, are stronger and more basic—burnt meat, boiled vegetables—than in respectable houses in his village, which are open to the cleansing air, purified by agarbattis.

In the little light afforded by the fire, which is augmented by a candle stub, Amir sits writing in his journal. He is penning one of the letters that he has been writing to Jenny in the elaborate and silenced strokes of cursive Farsi. The letters she will not, cannot read. The letters which, more than a century later, across continents and seas, will be read, with some difficulty and assistance, by a teenager in his grandfather's library in a whitewashed house. Jaanam, he begins.



Jaanam,

There are days when I wait for you, sometimes outside, sometimes in the scullery. The kitchen I avoid, for I have no desire to increase the ill-will that Nelly bears towards me. It is not that I am afraid for myself, I am more afraid for you: Nelly is no fool, I think she has noticed that we like each other, though she may not have imagined more, so alien am I to her and her world. Still, I do not want her to inflict on you the cruelties and indignities which, if it were not for the Captain, she would inflict on me.

As for me, I have only a few nights left in the Captain's house. I have completed the narrative that I have been providing him with and I could leave tomorrow, if I wished to. I have already arranged to rent a small place not far from Qui Hy's at the Mint. It is dilapidated and vermin-infested, but it is cheap and will provide me with

enough space to allow Gunga and his jahaajbhais to join me. Now that Gunga has lost his job—he ran into trouble with some guild or union—I can hardly do anything else. I cannot let them stay on in that damp little room in the East End with so many others, at least three of them seriously ill. Even more seriously ill than Karim who, I fear, is slowly dying of consumption.

As you know, Jaanam, I can afford to rent the house. The Captain is a man of his word. Not only has he paid me regularly for the months I have been with him, today he also paid me—as he had promised—for the voyage back. I have most of the money sewn into my English coat, the one you helped me buy from that pedlar on Chick Lane. The Captain has gone even further: he has given me a statement of character, vouching that I am an honest and reformed person and may be employed on his recommendation. How many people would do that? Not one of the men who probed my skull in the drawing room tonight; not one of the women who chirruped and exclaimed over me.

Over the months that I have spent with the Captain, I have grown fond of him. I concede that. And I dare say he has grown fond of me too. In some ways, we are so similar, we are people who have grown up with others and yet alone. There are moments when I feel guilty about the stories I have embroidered for him. No, I would not say I have lied to him, for I have told him what he wanted to hear, stitching together a colourful garment from the threads and patches of stories heard here and there, in my village and in Patna. I believe that we are lied to only to the extent that we want to believe in the lies.

In one sense, the barter was fair enough: He got his thug; I got my revenge. For, when I approached Captain Meadows in the Patna hospital, he did not just interrogate me and examine my skull, he also instructed the authorities to confirm my story. But my story was simple enough. The mound with the dead bodies was exactly where I had described it; Mirza Habibullah and his men just where I had said they would be.

Oh, the Company is efficient, jaanam; we all know that in India. It swooped on Habibullah and his men and rounded them up before they knew what had hit them. On being arrested and interrogated—and not just with words, jaanam—the men broke down and confessed to the murders. Of course, they attributed it to enmity and a feud over land. But I had already anticipated that. I had told

the Captain that thugs, on being arrested, try to attribute the murders they have committed to mundane causes, as they expect to be let off more easily then. And neither the Captain, with his story to tell, nor the authorities, with their new crusade against thugs, were in the mood to believe the blustering Habibullah.

I am told that two of Habibullah's relatives and three of his henchmen were awarded the dreaded sentence of Kalapani, but Habibullah managed to get his sentence commuted to ten years in jail by paying his henchmen to lie about his involvement. I was never confronted with them. I pleaded terror of the gang, and the Company authorities only asked me for a signed statement. After that I was free to go—except that there was nowhere I could go. To return to the village might have embroiled Hamid Bhai and his family in the matter: it was best that no one fully discovered the role I had played in the arrest and prosecution of Habibullah. The Company worked in mysterious, incomprehensible ways, and it was safest to let the mystery remain undisturbed. So, when Captain Meadows offered me service and a free passage to England in lieu of my "history," I accepted his offer.

But when I had spun him a story about Habibullah being a thug, I had not realized I was spinning myself into a web of my own making. Stories, true or false, are difficult to escape from, jaanam. Especially the stories we tell about ourselves. In some ways, all of us become what we pretend to be.



**[WILLIAM T. MEADOWS, NOTES ON A THUG:
CHARACTER AND CIRCUMSTANCES, 1840]**

'I fear, O sahib, that I have wearied you with the minute relation of my history. But I have told all, and I have not concealed from you one thought, one feeling, much less any act which at this distance of time and place I can recall and that I feel may have a bearing on the moral of my history.'

With these words, Amir Ali, the Thug, ended his narration, the long account of which I have here presented to you, revered reader, in the hope that it would weary you as little as it wearied me. For man is such a beast of wonder that even in his mistakes, errors and lies, even in his darkest manifestations, even when he follows devilish rites and false gods, there is much to learn and even more to hope for. May this account, then, offer to you, indulgent reader, the story of the reclamation

of not just one benighted heathen, but through him, evidence of the civilizing of entire cultures and nations. Nay, I would say more: the promise, so dear to any Christian heart, of salvation of the human soul, of mercy and redemption.



THE GILDED WOODEN CHERUB of the Prize of War is difficult to face alone. John May has dragged Shields along for moral support, and also because he does not want to carry the canvas bag containing the polished, gleaming, knotty skull of the old woman. It has taken him almost a week to prepare the skull, a week of sleeplessness.

Handing the Thing to M'lord is not any easier. He meets M'lord in the parlour of the house, as usual: a carpeted room with potted plants, cheap coloured prints of various queens and royal consorts, and a number of stuffed animals. The two foxes and the otter look particularly ravenous to John May. He feels alone and naked, raked by M'lord's eyes through the slits of a new mask, his guilt transparent to anyone who cares to look him in the eye. He wishes for a mask. He wishes he could bring Shields into the room, but that, of course, is not possible. He would lose M'lord's patronage in a second. M'lord likes to believe that the skulls materialize, cleaned and polished, in John May's hands out of nowhere, without the aid of any stratagem, accomplice, or even undue labour.

And M'lord does not see through John May this time either. In fact, he hardly sees John May. All he has eyes for is the skull. A superb specimen, he utters, as if in a trance. A superb example of the structural traces of depravity, my man; structural traces, not a minor matter of wrinkles and upturned lips that Combiants like Captain Meadows fool around with. Look at the superciliary ridge, the narrow eyes, the indentures, ridges . . . You have done a good job, Mr May.

Carried away by M'lord's enraptured praise, John May volunteers another skull as distinctive, as precious to his Lordship's precise physical science as this one, and that too within a month—at a slightly higher price, if I may, sir. And M'lord accepts the price with a generous wave of his hand.

Now, sharing a beer with Shields, John May is both thrilled and worried by his offer. Unusual skulls are not altogether impossible to find in London. Difficult, true, but not impossible. He often comes across a gypsy here, a cockney there, whose skull would be welcome in M'lord's collection. The problem is that all these people are vigorously alive. They are not even old, like the woman in the opium den. And, give or take a few whores, it is difficult to justify their death on moral grounds: they

might be niggers, they are poor, but these attributes are not really sins.

The pinched publican stands with his elbow on the counter and looks at the two.

“His Lordship didn’t pay,” he observes to John May.

“Oh no, he did. He paid splendidly,” replies Shields, the half-drunk fool, before John May can kick him.

“Why so glum, then, my friend?” the barman asks John May.

There is something about barmen that makes you want to open up to them, thinks John May. Perhaps it is because they are good at echoing your words, sometimes even your thoughts. It is a little like going through a tunnel: one feels tempted to shout into it and hear one’s voice echoing, changing shape and sound, and still remaining identifiable. John May resists the temptation.

He knows his soul is oppressed by the need to shout into some tunnel. But he also knows that there always are people listening at the other end of a tunnel. He wishes he could at least take his confusion out on Shields as he used to in the past, by swearing at the smaller man, running him down, even cuffing him on occasion. But the night in the den has changed all that: now he cannot afford to make an enemy of Shields; he has to be reasonably polite to the uncouth man, he has to ply him with drinks.

Luckily, the temptation of the tunnel-barman is removed due to a brawl that erupts in a far corner of the pub. By the time the barman and his helpers have coped with it, by tossing one side out and providing a round of free drinks to the other side, John May and Shields have moved to a corner table, out of reach of the barman.

They are soon joined by One-eyed Jack. This is the other consequence of that night of enterprise at the opium den: Jack has penetrated the more intimate corners of John May’s existence; he seldom uses “guv’nor” or “sir” to address them now.

John May actually welcomes the gaunt man’s company this evening; unlike Shields, who is not drunk enough to blur the horror of their acts that recent night, Jack is unperturbed, calm. Smelling of alcohol and opium, and dressed in worn hand-me-downs and a battered hat, his gingery hair falling on his shoulders in lanky lumps, Jack is probably the blind tunnel John May craves. After another drink, he broaches the topic indirectly.

“Some people say it is wrong to take a life,” John May says to the two.

Shields grows pale; he is still not drunk enough to be recklessly brave and blasphemous.

Jack does not even look up. "Bloody Budderists," he growls into his mug.

"Who?"

"Budderists. Hindoos. Them that don't eat meat, they say."

"But what do you think, Jack?" John May asks him.

"Me?"

"You."

"What do I think?"

"Yes."

"I think . . . well, I think if God didn't want 'em slaughtered, he wouldn't've made 'em sheep."

"That's a thought, isn't it, Shields," replies John May.

"Sure is, sure is," says Shields, drinking desperately and hoping that something will happen to break off the trail of this discussion. It does, for it is a Saturday evening. The publican hops on to the bar counter and bangs a pan for silence. It does not manage to curtail all the conversations in the room. Shut up, gentlemen, shut up, sirs, will you, the publican roars into the hubbub, banging harder with a ladle on the metal pan. Conversation subsides. It's time; it's time, announces the publican, and further conversation is made impossible by the loud singing of men as the "free-and-easy" starts in the pub.



MAJOR GRAYPER SAT in the cooling room of a Turkish bath, assiduously jotting down and checking the points of the "opium den beheading" case in a covered pocketbook. He looked up when Daniel Oates, in the Major's view a godforsaken hack who shared not only his acquaintance with Captain Meadows but, more sadly, also his club, lounged in and swung himself into an adjacent chair. He was cupping a drink in his hands and crumbs of bread adhered to his robe.

"Major," he said by way of greeting.

"Mr. Oates," replied the Major, pausing in his careful collocation and correction of written clues. He always carried a pencil stub for this purpose: in his receptivity to facts and clues, the Major was as sensitive to the moment of inspiration as any airy poet.

"Am I not right, sir, in recollecting from our dinner some days ago at Captain Meadows' residence that you have been entrusted with the task of clearing up the opium den mystery?" Oates observed, after taking a sip of his drink.

"You recollect correctly, sir. Holborn falls within my jurisdiction."

“It could not have been entrusted to more capable hands, if I may say so, Major.”

Major Grayper made a gesture of thanks and self-deprecation.

“You would not have a lead or two to offer the reading public, would you, Major?”

Major Grayper was prepared for this question. Oates had a reputation for writing perceptively and with much colour about the street life of London, but Major Grayper suspected that his stories were gathered at the club and garnished with a stroll down some East London street or, at the most, a nervous night in some place of licence. He had the answer ready: “It is too early, sir.”

Oates smiled cloyingly, squiggling like an amoeba to fit his ungainly frame into the chair. “That it is, Major. That it is. And yet, this afternoon in the club, there was a lively discussion of the matter.”

“I am sure there was, sir.”

“Yes, Major, I was there. It was actually something young William Byron let drop; he has just returned from Africa, you know. He suggested that the manner of the beheading indicates a heathenish rite, and of course there were men in the room who took to the idea: so many of them have been to different parts of the empire and have witnessed such sights. I must say, for someone like me, who has not travelled much farther than Paris, the tales were almost beyond belief . . . To think that one such savage might be here in our midst, perhaps walking next to us on the streets, dressed in the civilized garments of an Englishman.”

“I would not worry too much, if I were you, sir. The heathens we have here are no worse than our own criminal classes. It is unlikely that they would go about beheading people on a whim.”

“Perhaps, Major, perhaps, though I distinctly recall that you suggested otherwise at Captain Meadows’s place. You know, I suppose you do, though to be honest I did not until it was brought to my notice, that there are natives in places like Burma (or is it Borneo or Brazil?), who chop off heads and shrink them to keep as talismans. Surely, sir, it could be a cult, as young William suggested. Someone like that thug our good friend Captain Meadows has imported into the land. I must confess that with his pointy moustache, flowing tresses and dark, shifty eyes, he looks the very part of a vindictive murderer, a practitioner of barbarous, unspeakable rites. It surprises me that the learned Captain harbours him in his house.”

To this the Major did not volunteer a response, for it was a feeling he shared. He had never liked the idea of his daughter Mary visiting a place

that housed such a villainous-looking Moor, and one who openly confessed to being a “reformed thug.” Reformed, my foot! The Major was not a missionary: he did not believe in reforming the criminal soul. He hoped that the Captain would keep his word and turn the thug out once his narrative had been completed.



Jaanam,

Three days ago, I moved out of the Captain’s house. Now we will be able to meet without worrying about Nelly. I only wish the circumstances were not so sad for you. When I discovered at Qui Hy’s—just a day before I moved out—that the headless woman that Captain Meadows’ friends and guests had been talking about was your aunt, I ran all the way back to the Captain’s house, hoping to find you there. But, of course, you had still not reported back to work. Nelly was complaining about it, about the unreliability of the working class, as though she belonged to some other strata of society. There was nothing I could tell her. I knew why you had disappeared but I had to be alone in my knowledge. Any association with the opium den murder would have been too much for Nelly: not even the Captain would have been able to talk her out of firing you. I remained quiet. But I was restless and Nelly noticed this; she looked at me strangely for the rest of the day.

The next day I waited again for you to return. When you had not come by noon, I could not bear it any longer. I left the house without telling Nelly, something she dislikes, and searched for you in every passing face.

The streets were crowded; it was late in the afternoon. I felt a desperate need to see you, and I ran in the direction of your aunt’s home but I could not find it: there are places in this city where I still lose my bearings. By the time I had calmed down, it was almost evening and the air had grown chilly. The weather had taken a turn for the worse a few days ago, and winter—so dreaded by Gunga, Karim and all the other lascars I know—was creeping up.

I lingered on a path of cobbled stones near the Thames and then made my way back to the Captain’s house. When I got there, Gunga and Karim were standing outside, and it was then I remembered that I had arranged to meet them there early in the evening. They were to help me cart my wooden trunk and an old cot, both of which

the Captain had given me in one of his gruff gestures of generosity and affection, to my new lodgings in the Mint. All my possessions fit into that trunk.

I went up to see the Captain and take my leave. I was in a bit of a hurry, as we wanted to get the trunk and cot to my lodgings before it became dark: we had been told that the law forbade furniture being moved out of a house after dark. The Captain was in the library, reading as usual, and he did me the honour of asking me to sit down. Then, addressing me as Mr. Ali, he expressed the hope that I would continue to sustain the good reputation and character that he had observed in me during our year or so together. I was touched by his address, but perhaps I appeared even more moved than I was, as I was still distraught over the news of your aunt's murder. When I took my leave, he shook my hand and wished me luck and a good voyage back. The Captain assumes that I will be returning to India. He loves to believe that everyone belongs somewhere and that people can always return to where they belong. It is a belief which, I suspect, has to do with wealth.

After that, conveying the trunk, balanced on the cot, to my new lodgings took us deep into the night. The place that I have, and which I hope you will visit as soon as you can, contains two rooms. I will be sharing them with Gunga and his boys, all of them, at least until you decide to join me. It was the least I could do with my money: Gunga and the four men left from his gang had been sleeping in a damp basement with a family of tinkers.

When we fell asleep, Gunga winked at me and said, Amir Bhai, I promise we will disappear as quietly as ghosts whenever your jaanam visits you.

I lay in bed, the Captain's cot, worrying about you and getting used to the noise from the streets—the Captain's house, as you know, is in a much quieter neighbourhood—until finally, I fell into a fitful sleep disturbed by nightmares. I do not remember my dreams like you do, jaanam, nor do I seek significance in them. Perhaps our dreams do indeed tell us something about our hours of wakefulness. That is probable. It may even be inevitable, for how can half of one's life be completely disconnected from the other half? And yet, how can we be certain of remembering what we dream, remembering it exactly and entirely? And if what we remember on waking up are only shards of images and sounds, as in my case, isn't the sense, the

story we make of them, just an arbitrary shape that we impose on our nights after waking into the difference of the daylight?



OUTSIDE MY GRANDFATHER'S library, a different world pressed against the wrought-iron gates at the end of that driveway of red pebbles. I knew it was different even when I was a teenager as, preceded by the jangle of my grandmother's keys, I slowly unravelled the stories I am threading into a book here, unravelled them in Dickens, Collins and Mayhew as well as in smudged snippets of paper, a mouldy notebook in Farsi, and many other fragments of text and language that were to follow.

But even then, in my teenage, when I was less aware of the world within and the world without, I could sense the difference of those hands at the gate, those eyes on the streets. I could sense that they gazed at another horizon, or none—not like my eyes which, from my early years, had been forced by family tradition to focus on a career in engineering or medicine. It was then that I started realizing the privileged ease of my learning, haphazard as it was (having been picked up in the clutter of a provincial town), and the angle my learning made to their living. For, no matter how haphazardly, I could still afford to access life through books, while for them, books existed, if at all, only to make life possible, or easier. To earn a livelihood: two square meals a day, or a reputation. How many of them refrained from pushing themselves over the precipice of crime, and how many succumbed, who knows?

It was when I saw their world pressing against the wrought-iron gates of my reading that I began to see John May. Not understand him—for how could I claim to understand someone across such a stretch of space and time?—but to see him well enough to be able to write of him. It was then that I noticed how he changed from place to place, his voice when confronted with M'lord, his clothes when they passed through the layered streets of London. I saw his anger and pride, his desperation, his constant, cruel, courageous cunning crawl towards a precipice of his own making. John May. Never just John, never just May. Always John May.

John May was a man much used to figuring things out, thinking dispassionately and objectively, and acting finally in his own best interests. These, he believed, were the characteristics that distinguished the better classes from the worst. The lower classes tended to be hasty, emotional, impractical, imprudent; the higher classes deliberated, planned and acted calmly. Even their morality was restrained and practical. As John May

picked his way up the hundreds of rungs leading from the puddle of the lower classes to the tower of the upper ones, he liked to believe—and not without reason—that his success was attributable to his ability to keep a cool head.

For instance, he never got completely drunk, unlike Shields, who was at that moment sitting head in hands, elbows on table, in a Haymarket café, lonely despite the company of John May. They had started meeting in different places to discuss their business, for John May did not want to risk the same bartender or waiter overhearing them twice. The café was full of elegantly dressed women and men in close proximity to each other, and it appeared very much the hub of society to John May. It was not the sort of café that had one spoon dangling by a dirty thread next to the counter, used by all patrons to stir in the sugar; in this café, each cup was served with its own spoon.

Shields was already quite drunk, though it was only late afternoon, the sunlight not much more than a rumour. John May had been plying him with expensive wine, for he had a proposal to make, and he knew that Shields' entrepreneurship was inversely proportionate to his sobriety. John May felt distinctly ill at ease in the plebeian company of Shields in this place of polished tables and glittering people, though perhaps, if he had known more of real society elsewhere, he would have felt at ease—for the cafés, casinos and supper-rooms of Haymarket were seldom frequented by the better set of men and women. The company around John May was, like John May himself, a shoddy replica of what existed elsewhere, at Mott's for instance, or in the Burlington Arcade.

But unfamiliar with the society he aspired towards, John May steeled himself and bought Shields another drink, hoping the charms of the place would render the man pliable to the proposal he had in mind. For John May had thought much about the rights and wrongs of the matter. He had thought dispassionately and coolly. He had thought as he imagined the better class of people would think. And, as soon as Shields was drunk enough, he would walk the man out and tell him about the Italian boy who could be seen with his performing white mice all over London, or perhaps the ancient lascar who sold tracts and sang psalms on a fiddle. Both had skulls of the most interesting shape.

