

ALISTAIR GRIM'S
ODDITORIUM

GREGORY FUNARO

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ALISTAIR GRIM'S
ODDITORIUM

*For Jack Schneider, Grubb's first fan.
And for my daughter, who gave me the most
powerful Odditoria of them all.*

From an article in *The Times*, London, 23rd May 18—

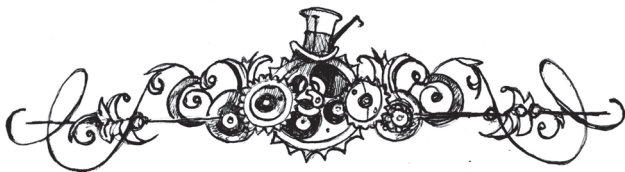
WILLIAM STOUT SENTENCED TO HANG!

In light of a guilty plea and overwhelming evidence against the accused, the trial of the ruffian William Stout for the murder of Mr Abel Wortley and his housekeeper, Mrs Mildred Morse, of Bloomsbury, ended yesterday in the only possible way. The unhappy man was rightly convicted and sentenced to death for as cruel and cold-blooded a deed as was ever committed.

Readers of The Times will recall that Wortley, an elderly philanthropist and purveyor of antiques, and Mrs Morse were brutally struck down last month in a type of burglary that has become all too common amongst London high society. Thanks, however, to the steadfast police work of Scotland Yard, William Stout, an acquaintance and sometimes coachman of Wortley's, was quickly apprehended and charged with the crime. His plea of guilt, conviction and subsequent execution shall prove, in the opinion of The Times, a shining example of Her Majesty's judicial system.

It is also the opinion of The Times that, with more and more villains roaming the streets of London, a little effort and care on the part of the elderly might in some cases preserve them from such dangers.

Chapter One



GRUBB
with a double
B



THE ODD WAS THE ORDINARY at Alistair Grim's. The people who lived there were odd. The things they did there were odd. Even the there itself there was odd.

There, of course, was the Odditorium, which was located back then in London.

You needn't bother trying to find the Odditorium on any maps. It was only there a short time and has been gone many years now. But back then, even a stranger like you would have no trouble finding it. Just ask a fellow in the street and no doubt he'd point you in the right direction. For back then, there wasn't a soul in London who hadn't heard of Alistair Grim's Odditorium.

On the other hand, if you were too timid to ask for directions, you could just walk around until you came upon a black, roundish building that resembled a fat spider with its legs tucked up against its sides. Or if that didn't work, you could try looking for the Odditorium's four tall chimneys poking up above the rooftops – just keep an eye on them, mind your step, and you'd get there sooner or later.

Upon your arrival at the Odditorium, the first thing you'd notice was its balcony, on top of which stood an enormous organ – its pipes twisting and stretching all the way up the front of the building like dozens of hollow-steel tree roots. "That's an odd place for a pipe

organ,” you might remark. But then again, such oddities were ordinary at Alistair Grim’s. And what the Odditorium looked like on the outside was nothing compared to what it looked like on the *inside*.

You’ll have to take my word on that for now.

And who am I that you should do so? Why, I’m Grubb, of course. That’s right, no first or last name, just Grubb. Spelt like the worm but with a double b, in case you plan on writing it down someday. I was Mr Grim’s apprentice – the boy who caused all the trouble.

You see, I was only twelve or thereabouts when I arrived at the Odditorium. I say “thereabouts” because I didn’t know exactly how old I was back then. Mrs Pinch said I looked “twelve or thereabouts”, and, her being Mrs Pinch, I wasn’t about to quarrel with her.

Mrs Pinch was Mr Grim’s housekeeper, and I’m afraid she didn’t like me very much at first. Oftentimes I’d meet her in the halls and say, “Good day, Mrs Pinch,” but the old woman would only stare down at me over her spectacles and say, “*Humph*,” as she passed.

That said, I suppose I can’t blame her for not liking me back then. After all, it was Mrs Pinch who found me in the trunk.

Good Heavens! There I go getting ahead of myself. I suppose if I’m going to tell you about all that trunk business, I should go back even further and begin my story with Mr Smears. Come to think of it, had it not been for Mr Smears taking me in all those years ago, I wouldn’t have a story to tell you.

All right then: Mr Smears.

I don’t remember my parents, or how I came to live with Mr Smears, only that at some point the hulking, grumbling man with the scar on his cheek entered my memories as if he’d always been there.

Mr Smears was a chimney sweep by trade, and oftentimes when he'd return to our small, North Country cottage, his face was so black with soot that only his eyeballs could be seen below his hat. The scar on his cheek ran from the corner of his mouth to the lobe of his left ear, but the soot never stuck to it. And when I was little I used to think his face looked like a big black egg with a crack in it.

His wife, on the other hand, was quite pleasant, and my memories of her consist mainly of smiles and kisses and stories told especially for me. All of Mrs Smears's stories were about Gwendolyn the Yellow Fairy, whom she said lived in the Black Forest on the outskirts of the town. The Yellow Fairy loved and protected children, but hated grown-ups, and her stories always involved some fellow or another who was trying to steal her magic flying dust. But the Yellow Fairy always tricked those fellows, and in the end would gobble them up – "*Chomp, chomp!*" as Mrs Smears would say.

Mrs Smears was a frail woman with skin the colour of goat's milk, but her cheeks would flush and her eyes would twinkle when she spoke of the Yellow Fairy. Then she would kiss me goodnight and whisper, "Thank you, Miss Gwendolyn."

You see, it was Mrs Smears who found me on the doorstep; and after she made such a fuss about the Yellow Fairy, her husband reluctantly agreed to take me in.

"He looks like a grub," said Mr Smears – or so his wife told me. "All swaddled up tight in his blanket like that. A little grub-worm is what he is."

"Well then, that's what we'll call him," Mrs Smears replied. "Grub, but with a double b."

"A double b?" asked Mr Smears. "Why a double b?"

“The extra b stands for blessing, for surely this boy is a blessing bestowed upon us by the Yellow Fairy.”

“Watch your tongue, woman,” Mr Smears whispered, frightened. “It’s bad luck to speak of her, especially when the moon is full.”

“It’s even worse luck to refuse a gift from her,” replied Mrs Smears. “So shut your trap and make room for him by the fire.”

“Bah,” said Mr Smears, but he did as his wife told him.

Mr and Mrs Smears had no children of their own – an unfortunate circumstance that Mr Smears often complained about at supper when I was old enough to understand such things.

“That grub ain’t free, Grubb,” Mr Smears would say, scratching his scar. “You best remember the only reason I agreed to take you in is because the wife said you’d make a good apprentice someday. And since we got no other grubs squirming about, I suggest you be quick about getting older or you’ll find yourself picking oakum in the workhouse.”

“Shut your trap,” Mrs Smears would say. “He’ll find himself doing no such thing.” Upon which her husband would just shake his head and say:

“Bah!”

Mrs Smears was the only person I ever saw get away with talking to Mr Smears like that, but she died when I was six or thereabouts. I never had the courage to ask Mr Smears what from, but I remember how old I was because Mr Smears was very upset. After the funeral, he knocked me down on the cottage floor and growled:

“Six years of feeding and clothing you, and what have I got to show for it? A dead wife in the ground and a useless worm what ain’t fit for nothing but the workhouse!”

The workhouse was a black, brooding building located near the coalmines on the south edge of the town. It had tall iron gates that were always locked and too many windows for me to count. Worst of all were the stories Mr Smears used to tell about the children who worked there – how they were often beaten, how they had no play time and very little to eat. Needless to say, I didn't have to be told much else to know that the workhouse was a place from which I wanted to stay as far away as possible.

“Oh please don't send me to the workhouse!” I cried. “I'll make you a good apprentice. I swear it, Mr Smears!”

“Bah!” was all he said, and knocked me down again. Then he threw himself on his bed and began sobbing into his shirtsleeves.

I picked myself up and, remembering how gentle he was around his wife, poured him a beer from the cupboard as I'd seen Mrs Smears do a thousand times.

“Don't cry, Mr Smears,” I said, offering him the mug.

Mr Smears looked up at me sideways, his eyes red and narrow. And after a moment he sniffled, took the mug and gulped it down. He motioned for me to pour him another and then gulped that one down, too. And after he'd gulped down yet a third, he dragged his shirtsleeve across his mouth and said:

“All right then, Grubb. I suppose you're old enough now. But mind you carry your weight, or so help me it's off to the workhouse with you!”

And so I carried my weight for Mr Smears – up and down the chimneys, that is. Mr Smears called me his “chummy” and told everyone I was his apprentice, but all he was good for was sitting down below and barking up orders at me. Sometimes he'd sweep

the soot into bags, but most often he left that part of the job for me to do, too.

I have to admit that all that climbing in the dark was scary work at first. The flues were so narrow and everything was pitch-black – save for the little squares of light at the top and bottom. And sometimes the chimneys were so high and crooked that I lost sight of those lights altogether. It was difficult to breathe, and the climbing was very painful until my knees and elbows toughened up.

Eventually, however, I became quite the expert chummy. But sometimes when we arrived back at the cottage, Mr Smears would knock me down and say:

“Job well done, Grubb.”

“Well done, you say? Then why’d you knock me down, Mr Smears?”

“So you’ll remember what’s what when a job *ain’t* well done!”

There were lots of chimneys in our town for me to sweep back then, and I always did my best, but life with Mr Smears was hard, and many times I went to bed hungry because, according to Mr Smears, it wasn’t sensible to feed me.

“After all,” he’d say, “what good’s a grub what’s too fat to fit in his hole?”

Oftentimes I’d lie awake at night, praying for the Yellow Fairy to take me away. “Please, Miss Gwendolyn,” I’d whisper in the dark. “If only you’d leave me a little dust, just enough to sprinkle on my head so I can fly away, I’d be forever grateful.”

Mr Smears made me sleep in the back of the cart in the stable. I was too dirty to be let inside the cottage, he said, and what use was there washing me when I would only get dirty again tomorrow?

There was a small stove in the stable for Old Joe, Mr Smears's donkey, but on some of the chillier nights, when Mr Smears neglected to give us enough coal, Old Joe and I would sleep huddled together in his stall.

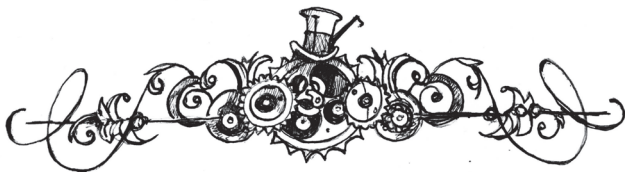
Of course, many times over the years I thought about running off, but if I did run, where would I run to? I'd only ever been as far as the country manors on jobs with Mr Smears, and since I knew no trade other than chimney-sweeping, what was left for me besides the workhouse?

I suppose things weren't all bad. Every third Saturday Mr Smears would allow me to wash at the public pump and sleep on the floor in the cottage. The following Sunday we'd dress in our proper clothes and attend service like proper folk. After that, we'd stop in the churchyard to pay our respects to Mrs Smears. Sometimes Mr Smears would snuffle a bit, but I would pretend not to notice so as not to catch a beating. Then we'd arrive back at the cottage, whereupon I'd pour him some beer and keep his mug full until he was pleasant enough to allow me outside to play.

For six years or so things went on that way, until one day I blundered into a stranger who changed my life for ever. Indeed, we chimney sweeps have a saying that goes, "A blunder in the gloom leads a lad to daylight or to doom."

I just never expected to find either inside a lamb.

Chapter Two



The Lamb



ON A COOL AUTUMN SUNDAY when I was twelve or thereabouts, Mr Smears and I returned from the churchyard to find a note pinned to the cottage door.

“What’s this?” Mr Smears grumbled. He tore off the note and opened it. “Well, well, well,” he said, scratching his scar. “A bit of pretty luck this is, Grubb.”

Mr Smears couldn’t read, so I was surprised he understood the note until he handed it to me. “You know what this means?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said, my heart sinking.

On the piece of paper was a drawing of a lamb inside a square. This, I knew, stood for the sign at the Lamb’s Inn. Next to the lamb was a crude drawing of a sun and an arrow pointing upwards. This meant that Mr Smears and I were to report to the Lamb’s Inn at sunrise the following morning.

“Ha!” said Mr Smears, smacking me on the back. “Looks like we’ve got our work cut out for us, Grubb. But also a handsome profit if we play it right.”

What Mr Smears really meant was that *I* had my work cut out for me. I’d worked the Lamb’s Inn before, and not only did I know there were lots of chimneys to be swept, I also knew that Mr Smears

would spend most of the day drinking up his wages in the tavern with the inn's proprietor, Mr Crumbsby.

Mr Crumbsby was a round man with a bald head and thick red whiskers below his ears. He had a jolly, friendly air about him, but I knew him to be a liar and cheat, and at the end of the day he would waffle on about how much of Mr Smears's drink was to be deducted from his wages. Then he would trick Mr Smears into thinking that he was actually getting the better of him.

That's not what bothered me, however; for no matter how many chimneys I swept, my wages were always the same – a half-plate of food and a swig of beer, if I was lucky. No, what sent my heart sinking was the thought of Mr Crumbsby's twins, Tom and Terrance.

The Crumbsby twins were the same age as me, but they were fat, redheaded devils like their father, and together their weight added up to one sizeable brawler. I'd had my share of run-ins with them over the years, and the bruises to show for it, but most of the time Tom and Terrance were much too slow to ever catch me.

And so the next morning, Mr Smears and I set out for the Lamb's Inn just before daybreak – I in the back of the cart with the empty soot bags and brushes, Mr Smears up front in the driver's seat handling Old Joe. It was only a short distance through the centre of the town, over the bridge, and up the High Road. And when next I poked my head out from the cart, I spied the outline of the Lamb up ahead of us in the gloom.

Whitewashed with a stone wall that ran around the entire property, the Lamb's Inn cut an imposing presence against the thick North Country forests that spread out behind it. The inn stood three storeys high and rambled out in every direction just as wide.

A hanging sign out front bore a lamb, while coach-and-horse signs at each end advertised its stables.

The inn itself was said to be over two hundred years old, but had burnt down and been rebuilt a few times with more and more rooms. I only mention this because that meant the flues had been rebuilt, too, resulting in a confusing maze of narrow passages that twisted and turned into one another so randomly that even an expert chummy like myself could get lost up there in the dark.

Indeed, I had just begun to imagine the gruelling day ahead of me, when all of a sudden, farther up the road, a shadowy figure stepped out from the trees. It appeared to be a man in a long black cloak, but before I could get a good look at him, he dashed across the road and disappeared behind the Lamb's stone wall.

Nevertheless, with my heart pounding, I waited for Mr Smears to say something. Surely, I thought, he must have seen the man, too. But Mr Smears mentioned nothing about it, and as he steered Old Joe for the Lamb's stables, I dismissed the black-cloaked figure as a trick of the early morning shadows.

"Well, what do we have here?" said Mr Smears, and he pulled to a stop alongside an elegant black coach. Its driver's seat was flanked by a pair of large lanterns, and on its door was emblazoned an ornate letter G. The horses had already been unharnessed and bedded in the stable, which meant that the owner of the coach (a Mr G, I assumed) had spent the night at the Lamb.

"Looks like old Crumbsby's got himself a toff," said Mr Smears, jerking his chin at the coach. "I'll have to remember that at the end of the day when the devil tries to chisel me for my drink. Ask him

for how much he took the toff, I will. That'll soften him up when he starts waffling on about being strapped for cash."

Mr Smears chuckled to himself and scratched his scar.

"Shall I unhitch Old Joe, sir?" I asked. I wanted to have a look inside the stables, for certainly Mr G's horses must be a breed apart to pull so fine a coach.

"Bah," replied Mr Smears, climbing down after me. "Let Crumbsby's man do that. It's only right, us coming here on such short notice."

Mr Smears and I crossed the yard to the Lamb's back entrance. But before Mr Smears could knock, Mr Crumbsby opened the door and gave my master's arm a hearty shake.

"I thought I heard you, Smears," said Mr Crumbsby, smiling wide. His eyes were puffy with sleep, and his waistcoat was still unbuttoned. "Good of you to come. Business has been slow of late, so I thought it an opportune time to secure your services."

"Business been slow, eh?" Mr Smears said suspiciously, and he jerked his thumb towards the fancy black coach. "Looks like you've taken up collecting coaches then, eh Crumbsby?"

"A late arrival yesterday afternoon," Mr Crumbsby said, then he lowered his voice. "An odd fellow that one is, too," he added secretively. "Him and his coachman. Like something out of the Black Forest, I tell you, what with their pale faces and gloomy dispositions."

"As long as their money ain't gloomy," said Mr Smears, then he smiled knowingly and lowered his voice, too. "And nothing gloomy about the price of lodging going up, I wager. A fine gentleman he is for inconveniencing you during your cleaning season – or some excuse like that you must've given him, eh Crumbsby?"

Mr Crumbsby smiled guiltily and ushered us inside. The fires were already roaring as we entered the kitchen, and Mr Crumbsby's wife gave us each a slice of bread and cheese before she and her two daughters set about readying the rooms. Of course, Mr Smears protested my share, until Mrs Crumbsby made her husband promise not to count it against our wages.

"Besides," said Mr Crumbsby, "we'll settle our account in the tavern at the end of the day. But I warn you, Smears: you're too shrewd a businessman for the likes of me. I have your word you'll deal me plain?"

"That you do," said Mr Smears, munching slyly. "That you do."

"As for you, Grubb, you'll remember that you needn't bother with the kitchen. And you'll leave the keeper's cottage until Mrs Crumbsby tells you it's ready. I expect the twins should be up and about by mid-morning. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," I said, my stomach turning. Mr Crumbsby treated his lovely daughters, Anne and Emily, as little better than servants. Tom and Terrance, on the other hand, got a sizeable allowance every week for doing nothing. But unlike their father, they made no pretence of being strapped, and carried themselves about the town like a pair of haughty princes.

"As for our lone guest," Mr Crumbsby continued, "he's lodged on the second floor. North side, corner room, east wing. He's paid up for two nights but plans on departing late this afternoon. Wishes not to be disturbed until then, is what he said. I warned him about the goings-on today, but he told me not to fret. Sleeps the sleep of the dead is what he said – his words, not mine. You best mind your

step up there today, Grubb, and leave the north-east flues for last. You hear me, lad?"

"Yes, sir."

"Grubb knows what's what," said Mr Smears, "and knows even better the back of my hand if he steps out of line. Ain't that right, Grubb?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come along, then," said Mr Crumbsby, and he led Mr Smears and me into the tavern. The Crumbsby girls had moved all the tables and chairs away from the hearth, and laid out sheets of brown paper on the floor. These extended across the tavern to the front door so that I could come and go without tracking soot about the inn.

"All right, get on with it," said Mr Smears with his boot on my bottom. And into the fireplace I went and up the chimney I climbed. "Be mindful of the rooms," Mr Smears barked after me. "You know what's waiting for you if I find so much as a speck of soot on Mrs Crumbsby's furniture."

"Yes, sir," I shouted back. Then I heard Mr Smears chuckle and Mr Crumbsby offer him a drink.

All morning I climbed and crawled, scraping my way up through the chimneys on the western wing. A hard go of it I had, and I was thankful when it was time to sweep the hearths and haul the soot bags out to the cart. By noon I'd lost track of how many chimneys I'd swept, but Mrs Crumbsby and her daughters took pity on me and gave me a slice of beef and a biscuit before I tackled the keeper's cottage.

When that was finished, it was back to the inn for the east wing. The flues on this side of the building were much more difficult to

navigate, and once or twice I lost my way and popped down the wrong chimney.

However, as the afternoon wore on, I grew more and more tired, and soon I found myself lost in a pitch-black maze of narrow flues. I can't tell you how many times I seemed to criss-cross back on myself, crawling and squeezing my way around like a worm in the dirt, when finally I saw a light coming from below.

Mindful of Mr Crumbsby's guest in the north-east corner, I popped down the chimney ready to shoot back up. Lucky for me it was one of the chimneys I'd swept earlier. I recognized the rolled up carpet and the covered mass of furniture in the centre of the room.

Not so lucky for me, however, was that the Crumbsby twins were now in the centre of the room, too.

"Well looky-look," Tom said sneeringly. "An invader come to storm our castle."

The twins' freckled faces were smeared with jam. And even though they were dressed alike, I could always tell which one was Tom by the chip in his left front tooth.

"I thought I smelt something foul coming from the chimneys," he added, rising with a stick in his hand. He'd obviously been playing at swords with his brother.

"I thought I smelt something, too," said Terrance, smiling wide. "A rat gone up and died in there is what I thought."

"You don't look dead," said Tom, stepping forward. "But you look like a rat. A big black rat what's left his poo in our castle."

"A *little* black rat is more like it," said Terrance, stepping forward also. "His bottom still smelly from pooing, I wager."

"But there's nowhere to poo now, is there, rat?"

“Nowhere to run now, either.”

The boys were right. Even though the Crumbsby twins were slower than honey in winter, they were too close for me to dart back up the chimney. And before I could think of what to do next, fat Tom Crumbsby came for me with his stick.

He swiped for my head, but I ducked the blow easily and sent him flying past me into the hearth. His face hit the stone straight on.

“Ow!” he cried, his hands flying up to his mouth. “My *toof!*”

But Terrance was close behind, and the two of us collided in a cloud of soot. Terrance held me in a bear hug for a moment, but on his next breath he loosened his grip and started choking.

“Agh!” he coughed. “Soot!”

I twisted free and rushed from the room, leaving great patches of black everywhere I stepped and on everything I touched. My stomach squeezed with horror at the sight of it – *Mr Crumbsby'll have my head*, I thought – and then Tom began blubbering behind me. “My *toof!*” he shrieked. “Grubb broke my uhffer *toof!*”

“Stop him!” his brother called, but I was already down the hallway and heading for the stairs. I took them two at a time and ran into Mrs Crumbsby on the landing. I nearly knocked her over; and whether from the sight of me or the trail of soot in my wake, the kind-hearted woman let out a shriek that I thought would collapse the stairs from under us.

“My apologies, ma'am,” I said as I flew past, but I didn't dare look back to see if she was all right, for when I reached the bottom of the stairs Mr Crumbsby was already waiting for me.

“What's this, what's this?” he gasped.

“My *toof!*” Tom Crumbsby cried from above. “He broke my uhffer *toof!*”

“Why you little rat,” Mr Crumbsby growled, grabbing for my collar, but I quickly dodged him and dashed down the hallway. Emily, the elder of the Crumbsby girls, stepped out from the parlour, her eyes wide with shock.

“Pardon me, miss,” I said as I passed.

The only way out for me now was through the tavern. And as I ran for it, above the din I heard a voice in my head telling me the Crumbsbys were the least of my worries. No, nothing could compare to what Mr Smears had in store for me when we got back to the cottage. And at the exact moment I saw him swinging for me in my mind, the hulking man with the scar appeared in the tavern doorway.

“What’s the row?” he growled.

“Stop him!” Mr Crumbsby shouted behind me. But the drink had long ago done its work, and in his confusion Mr Smears lost his balance and braced himself against the doorjamb.

“Grubb!” was all he could manage, and I dived straight between his legs.

I slid for a stretch on my stomach then sprang to my feet, nearly slipped on all the sooty brown paper, then found my footing again and headed for the door. Mr Smears must have fallen as he turned round, for behind me I heard a thud and a “Bah!” and then Mr Crumbsby shouting, “Out of my way, you oaf!”

The afternoon light was quickly fading, but I could see the outside world through the open door ahead of me. Freedom was within my reach – but then I saw young Anne Crumbsby, eyes wide, mouth gaping, with her hand on the door latch.

"The door!" Mr Crumbsby shouted. "Close the blasted door!"

But I kept running and – oh, Anne! Sweet Anne!

The young girl giggled and let me pass!

"Thank you, miss," I whispered as I burst outside, but I never knew whether or not she heard me.

"After him!" Mr Crumbsby cried from within.

"After him!" Mr Smears cried, too.

A pair of men who were approaching from the road blocked my way at the gate, so I darted left and ran around the inn along the high stone wall. I remembered there was a break in the wall by the keeper's cottage, but when I got there I spied Mr Crumbsby's groom and stable boy heading straight for me. They'd been poaching rabbits at the edge of the forest, and each carried with him a long-barrelled musket.

I hesitated, when suddenly I heard Mr Crumbsby and Mr Smears out front shouting, "*Which way? Which way?*" and "*You go left, I go right!*" And so I stepped back inside the yard and ran past the keeper's cottage towards the stables.

The fancy black coach with the G on its door had been readied for departure. Its curtains were drawn, and a pair of fine black steeds had been harnessed at the fore. Drawing closer, I noticed the door to the luggage hatch was down, and on the ground at the rear of the coach I spied a large black trunk. The coachman, distracted by all the racket, had abandoned it to investigate, and as I glanced towards the inn, I caught a glimpse of his coat-tails as he disappeared around the corner.

"What's all the commotion, Nigel?" a man asked. His voice, deep and genteel, had come from inside the coach.

Mr G, I thought – and then I realized I'd stopped running.

"Nigel?" Mr G called again.

All at once, it seemed, I could hear footsteps and voices approaching from every direction. I thought about making a dash for the stables, but when the coach's silver door handle began to turn, I decided to try for the trunk.

It was unlocked, and along with some neatly folded clothes there appeared to be just enough space for me. I climbed inside, pulled my knees up to my chest, and closed the lid. My heart pounded at my ribs, and I hardly dared to breathe, but what little air I allowed my lungs in the cramped, dark trunk smelt musky and strange.

In the next moment I heard the coach door swing open and the sound of heavy footsteps approaching in the dirt.

"Pardon me, sir," came a voice, panting. It was Mr Crumbsby. "But did you happen to see a young boy come this way?"

"A beggar, he looks like," growled another voice – Mr Smears. "Black with soot and fit for the gallows, is what he is."

"I've seen no one of the sort," said Mr G. "But whatever he's done to you, I'm sure you gentlemen deserved it."

"Bah!" said Mr Smears.

"Come on, then," said Mr Crumbsby. And as the men hurried off, I heard Mr Crumbsby's groom yell, "*I'll ready the hounds, sir! He can't have gone far!*"

Then the sound of more footsteps approaching.

"What was that all about?" asked Mr G.

"Don't know, sir," said another man's voice, this one higher and friendlier than Mr G's. "Something about a chimney sweep. Didn't get all of it, I'm afraid."

“Very well then, Nigel. Let’s be on our way.”

“Right-o, sir.”

I heard the coach door close, some more shuffling in the dirt, and then I felt myself being lifted up off the ground. My head thumped against the inside of the trunk as Nigel loaded it onto the luggage hatch and latched the door.

A moment later we were off. And after I felt us swing onto the road and pick up speed, I dared to raise the lid just enough to peek out.

The light had grown fainter, and above the horses and the rattling of the coach wheels I could hear Mr Crumbsby’s hounds baying in the distance. The Lamb quickly got smaller and smaller as we sped away, but only when I saw it disappear behind a bend of trees did I allow myself a sigh of relief.

We were heading south-east along the high road, which would take us around the town and into the country. A bit of pretty luck, as Mr Smears would say.

Mr Smears!

And just like that my relief turned to horror. What was I to do now? Where could I go? Surely never back to Mr Smears, or to our town, for that matter. Mr Smears would find me and send me to the workhouse for sure!

I sank back down into the trunk and closed the lid. The workhouse and all the rest of it were too scary for me to think about now. Besides, I was safe for the moment where I was. And where was that? Why, inside a trunk on the back of a speeding coach, thank you very much. Come to think of it, I’d much rather spend the night all warm and snug in a trunk than in a cold stable. However,

when I thought about Old Joe having to spend the night alone in his stall, I began to feel sad.

Chin up, I said to myself in the dark. Mr Smears'll find another chummy for Old Joe to huddle up with. First thing is to get as far away from Mr Smears as possible, which you're already doing. Next thing will be to jump from the trunk when the time is right. That's plenty for you to worry about for now.

But how far from Mr Smears was far enough? And how would I know when the time was right to jump? These questions were enough to keep me occupied as we travelled on. And occasionally I'd peek out of the trunk as though I'd hoped to find the answers out there in the passing countryside.

The darkness came quickly, but the moon was full, and when next I peeked from the trunk I spied a great, buttercup-filled meadow rolling past me. It looked like waves of sparkling silver in the moonlight, and for a moment I tried to remember if I had ever seen anything so beautiful.

"That's far enough, Nigel," called Mr G.

I shut myself back inside and listened as we came to a stop. Nothing. No footsteps or jostling from the coach, either. So I dared to crack open the lid again.

"Ready, Nigel?"

"Right-o, sir," the coachman replied.

"It's all yours," Mr G said gently. Then I heard a strange cooing sound – like that of a pigeon, only higher – but before I had time to wonder at it, I was startled by a loud crack and a flash of blinding yellow light.

I thumped my head on the top of the trunk and shrank back inside.

The horses whinnied and I felt a great lurch forward. We were moving again, but unlike before, the coach was now shaking feverishly, up and down and side to side. I tried to open the trunk to see what was happening, but then the shaking abruptly stopped and a great force pulled me down.

Another lurch, this one more powerful than the first, and then everything became... well... *smooth* is the only way I could describe it. We were no longer moving, but it felt as if we were no longer stopped, either.

I cracked open the trunk and a great wind rushed past me, blowing the soot from my hair like the tail of some great black comet. I could see nothing but sky, and popping my head out a bit farther, I realized the sky was not just above me but all around me, too.

I flung open the trunk, rose to my knees, and peered out over the side of the luggage hatch.

It took a moment for everything to sink in.

There was the meadow of silver buttercups rolling beneath me; beyond that, great patches of jagged black trees; and farther still, clusters of tiny lights and the outline of our town against the sky. I recognized the steeple to our church, and for some reason felt sorry that I hadn't had a chance to properly say goodbye to Mrs Smears before I went flying about the countryside.

That's when it hit me.

"I'm flying!" I gasped.

And then I was falling backwards into the trunk again – the sound of the lid slamming down on me the last thing I remember before everything went black.