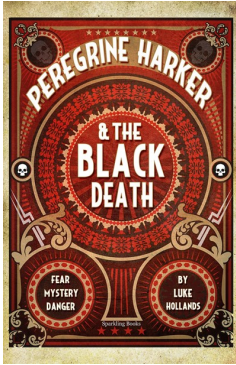


Peregrine Harker & the Black Death



MURDER. SPIES. EXPLOSIONS. REVENGE. This book for teens has it all. Peregrine Harker is about to learn that you're never too young to die....

By Luke Hollands

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LUKE HOLLANDS is a former lion tamer, motorcycle stunt-rider and ruler of a small South American country. He is also a compulsive liar. He learnt how to tell tall tales while interviewing famous politicians, celebrities and criminals as a newspaper journalist.

Thinking he should get a proper job he joined the BBC. Since then he has produced and presented quirky radio documentaries, appeared in the odd drama and danced on television dressed as a giant bear.

He now makes wildlife films, some of which he briefly appears in, and has travelled the world, swimming in shark-infested waters, tramping through crocodile-stuffed lagoons and being eaten alive by various species of nibbling insect.

Surprisingly for Luke, everything apart from the first two sentences of this biography is actually true.

About the book

London 1908: A secret society stalks the murky streets, a deadly assassin lurks in the shadows and a series of unexplained deaths are linked by a mystery symbol.

When boy-detective Peregrine Harker stumbles across a gruesome murder he sparks a chain of events that drag him on a rip-roaring journey through a world of spluttering gas lamps, thick fog, deadly secrets and dastardly villains.

Every step of Peregrine's white-knuckle adventure brings him closer to the vile heart of a terrifying mystery - the true story behind the Brotherhood of the Black Death.

Reviews

“Such a great fast paced book... FUN FUN read!!!” – *Michelle Parsons, Librarian, USA*

“One hell of a lot of fun! Readers of all ages will gobble up this non-stop rip roaring adventure – don't miss this one!” – *Bill Baker, Educator, USA*

“I am so excited to discover an adventure book with a boy for the protagonist/narrator. Peregrine is such a great character and one I think middle grade students (especially boys) will fall in love with. The story is highly imaginative and original, and I love how the plot was fast paced.” – *The*

Hopeful Heroine Blog

“Part Sherlock Holmes. Part Indiana Jones. Peregrine Harker and the Black Death was a quick, enjoyable read. I could easily see my former students or future patrons flying through this book ... A great middle-grade mystery novel that will keep readers hooked from the first page. Well done!” – *Jenni French, Librarian, USA*

“Thank you Luke Hollands for a great book. The pace of this book was quick and for mystery lovers, fairly easy to see who was behind all that happened to Peregrine. Luke threw in two great twists in the end that were great. I believe for my young boys who are reluctant readers, they will enjoy the story and pace of it. I will be purchasing this for my middle school library” – *Jennifer Cabbage, Educator, USA*

“... The most engaging thing about this novel is the style and narrative voice. Harker tells his own story as a first-person narrator. His tone throughout is self-assured, even somewhat cavalier, even when faced with dangerous circumstances. This cavalier tone marks Harker as the shining, confident hero, bound to triumph. For example, when involved in a shoot-out, during a car chase, Harker remarks that, “Despite the fact that someone was trying to kill me, I was rather enjoying myself.” This sense that danger is terribly exciting pervades the novel and makes it pleasant to read. This tone also serves to reassure young readers that Harker is bound to come through such difficulty relatively unscathed.

“Combined with Harker’s self-assured tone, is a marked lack of realism, which also reminds us that Harker will ultimately succeed in getting to the bottom of his mystery. We can actually enjoy the danger that he finds himself in partly because the very nature of the danger and the way that the various villains are presented as caricatures reminds us that Harker is actually not a real child in our mundane world. This lack of realism is almost like a safety net, allowing us to not have to fear for Harker’s safety.

“Harker’s adventures are a romp through the seedy criminal side of early 20th Century London. Hollands seems to draw on such diverse literary traditions and figures as Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, E. Nesbit’s adventuring children characters, and Barrie’s Peter Pan, all while maintaining a tone that is unique to Hollands. This tone is sure to appeal to contemporary child readers.

“... This book serves to fill part of the gap that seems to exist in the world of non-fantasy middle school readers aimed specifically at boys. As such, it should be a welcome addition to schools and libraries.” – *Drennan Spitzer, Educator, USA*

“For those who have been crying out for more ‘boy’ books in Middle Grade, here’s one for you. Peregrine Harker is very much a boy’s adventure novel. It’s a fast paced read, focusing on the adventures of the title character as he uses his intrepid journalistic skills to uncover a plot bound up in tea and smuggling. There are chases, rescues, twists, and a pretty satisfying resolution that gives readers the idea that more may be coming from Harker and company.

“The novel is written in the Victorian/Edwardian style of adventure books. If you’re a fan of steampunk, this should appeal to you as well—there’s some gadgetry going on, not to mention an amazing car (with a sort of driver/butler/bodyguard), and a few steampunkish tropes that pop up to give the book an “out of time” feel. There’s a bit of the penny dreadful in the novel as well, what with a damsel (not usually in distress as she rescues the hero quite often) who is to be married off against her will to some ne’er-do-well who is the sworn enemy of the hero.

“Reading it I was reminded of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and of Alan Moore’s *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. A strange mashup, I know, but that’s what hit me when I would put the book down. It makes it hard to categorize. I was also reminded of Kim Newman’s

Anno Dracula, but I think that had to do with the Victorian references...

“The story is well told and blasts along at a good clip, with some truly fun action scenes. At base, it is a detective story and the mystery is engaging and fun with the right amount of menace. I enjoyed the secondary characters more than Peregrine himself, as sometimes he seemed more like a piece that got us into the action with the really interesting people. Oh the whole, I’d recommend this to anyone who enjoys steampunk and historical fiction with a detective bent.” – *Jeannette Battista, USA*

“Luke Hollands’ debut *Peregrine Harker and the Black Death* is a fun adventure set in a time long-past where mysteries were daydreams, and danger a way of life for over-curious detectives. Hollands’ world is explored by his young protagonist, Peregrine, as he strives to uncover the surprisingly intriguing mystery surrounding the sudden shortage of tea.

“Peregrine isn’t one of those protagonists who immediately comes off as haughty, attractive, and confident--instead, he is rather flawed and easily distracted...No, what I liked was the slow build-up into the main revelation of the story--and it is huge and very satisfyingly unexpected. Though the novel is quite short, Hollands does have a skill for pacing and keeping the reader intrigued as the mysteries mount.

“The characters we meet along the way are all quirky and fit the stereotypical image we may sometimes have of mysterious people detectives often face...” – *Dayla Fuentes-Morales, Canada*

“...It is definitely a book for young boys, preferably reluctant readers who like a lot of adventure with chases and a minimal amount of girls/mushy stuff.

“Peregrine Harker is a rich kid orphan turned journalist in Edwardian England, circa 1908. His newspaper boss has sent him to investigate tea as the price has jumped significantly of late and soon it will be so high that your average British citizen will not be able to have a cuppa every day like normal. Instead of finding out about tea, Peregrine gets sucked into a secret smuggling ring, strange deaths, harrowing car chases and double-crossing lords. There’s even a damsel in distress or so he thinks. Will Peregrine ever get his story? Will he figure out who is in charge of the smuggling ring? And just who is the Black Death and what is their connection to all of this? To find out, read this exciting book! Recommended for ages 10-15.” – *Rachel Huddlestone, Librarian, USA*

“Peregrine is fifteen so he’s really more teen than boy detective, and orphan is a bit misleading. His explorer parents went missing years ago in Peru and for me: no body = no death. It also seems that a taste for action, adventure and danger runs in the family.

“A lover of Penny Dreadfuls, Peregrine has a hard time reporting on boring subjects, which means he generally turns in fantastical stories his editor cannot publish. He’s given one more chance to redeem himself and is sent to speak to a tea merchant about the sudden rising price of tea due to missing cargo. How will the Empire cope? Not something Peregrine finds exciting enough at all, so when he spies two sketchy characters on the docks, apparently up to no good, he decides to investigate. Unfortunately he’s caught and finds himself locked up in a coffin.

“That’s not the only scrape our hero gets into: underground boxing matches, daring escapes through tunnels in Paris, motorcar chases, informants turning up dead, a childhood rival, a girl with a penchant for showing up in dangerous situations, and an order known as The Black Death out to stop Peregrine and anyone who gets in their way. It seems there’s a lot more to this missing tea business than previously thought. This is confirmed when Peregrine runs into his slightly older cousin Archie Dearlove who tells him there’s a smuggling ring tied into all this and that he’d like Peregrine’s help solving the mystery! Finally, a story Peregrine can really sink his journalistic teeth into. If he doesn’t die in the meantime...

“The cast of characters is colorful and the author does a great job of introducing the time period without getting too descriptive, which I think is very important in a book geared to younger audiences.

“Overall the story is a lot of fun, but despite Peregrine’s age it reads more for a younger crowd, and given everything kids are exposed to in media today, I think the murders aren’t really all that shocking. Definitely 10yrs+.” – *Alicia Wheeler, USA*

“This is an ideal book for readers aged ‘tweens’ and up; it is filled with mystery, action, adventure, thrills, spills and dire peril - and not too long either.

“Written in the style of a ‘penny dreadful’ and incorporating a satisfying amount of historical detail about the early twentieth century Europe in the process, we meet the brave young detective Peregrine Harker who investigates some mysterious deaths and quickly finds that learning too much about The Brotherhood of the Black Death carries risks and his own life is now in mortal peril.

“his book races along at breakneck speed, carrying the reader gasping and breathless to the highly satisfying conclusion. A fun children’s book, sure to be popular with the majority of youngsters.” – *Sian Williams, UK*

“I loved it! I felt that this book was equal parts Rin Tin Tin (minus the dog), Indiana Jones, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and Sherlock Holmes all wrapped up in the 15 year old protagonist. This is a book primarily for the male reader, probably ages ten to fifteen. But, that is what gives this book its appeal. It’s a great mix of history and the fantastical, of the dreams of a young boy with a head full of stories and the amazing stories that can actually take place.

“Our young hero, a young and very green journalist, is dispatched by his editor to examine a story regarding something distinctly British – tea. And yet, when young Harker reaches the crux of his search, we find out that tea is not the root of the problem, but something much more sinister and engrossing.

“This book had me in its clutches from the first page. I felt like I was reading one of those old dime-store novels that I used to find tucked away in the far, unreached corners of my library as a child. It was exciting, kept my interest from the start and I genuinely cared about Mr. Harker...

“I could definitely see how this text could be incorporated into the classroom. It fits perfectly with a lesson that would, in tandem, teach history and literature as well as British culture. If nothing else, it is a text that any teacher should be proud to have on their shelves, available to lend to voracious readers and hard-to-please readers alike.” – *Hope Thomas, USA*

“A Ripping Yarn and an Engaging Hero:

“I know this is a cliché, but bear with me. Start with the Hardy Boys. Or at least with the can do, gee whiz, boy detective vibe. Now put that in 1908 England. Amp up the violence a little by introducing a few bodies, poison and gun-play. Make the plot more twists and turns than just smugglers hiding in a cave.

“Then, add an earnest young reporter/detective with a sincere narrative style, a bit of a romantic streak, a droll sense of humor and an inclination toward deadpan descriptions.

“This is a stock sort of character, but there is a good reason why this character keeps popping up. He is the enduring embodiment of adventure, excitement, danger!, action and derring-do. And, everything is improved when you add a romantic interest in the form of a girl with spirit and twinkling eyes, and a pal with a revolver. Once you sprinkle in a range of secondary characters who you may trust, or perhaps not, and a shady society of villains, you’re set.

“The last piece of the puzzle is the author. Does he have the skill to keep this mix moving forward, to keep all the balls in the air, and to keep you interested in and rooting for the hero. The answer here is “yes“. Mr. Hollands doesn’t get cute and he doesn’t reach too far. This is action/adventure and he keeps the wheels turning with writing that doesn’t fail, and that is complemented by some some nice touches and sharp observations that elevate the work beyond mere pulp, (not that I’m faulting mere pulp).

“This is pure unadulterated entertainment and it works. There’s no magic or fantasy; this is old fashioned action. But sometimes that’s what you want, and for a tween or young YA reader this could be just right.” – *Joel Smith, USA*

Excerpt

1. One-way ticket to hell

Dr Quintus Crick was a traitor. A traitor and a thief to be precise. Which is why he was about to die. The good doctor had no way of knowing he was soon to meet his match, the brave boy detective Peregrine Harker. This was fortunate as young Peregrine was sitting but a foot from his delicately polished brogues, in the dining car of the express train to Dover.

As the locomotive thundered towards the Kent coast, Peregrine studied the face of the man sitting opposite him. It was cold and clammy, like that of a dead fish; his lips were little more than a red scar, clamped tightly together, while his eyes were hidden behind a pair of round smoked glasses. Peregrine watched as the doctor raised a long thin bony hand and smoothed back a lock of his oily black hair.

Catching Dr Crick had been the toughest case in Peregrine’s career. It had been a gruelling six months since the Prime Minister himself had asked Peregrine to look into the matter personally, and had promised him a knighthood for his troubles. The case had taken him on a merry dance through the cobbled streets of foggy London, to the bustling Souks of Constantinople and around the opera houses of Vienna. All the way he had been ably assisted by his beautiful companion, the ever-brave Miss Petunia Goodheart, the Prime Minister’s niece. Now, sitting here on the 9.15 from Victoria, he was finally face-to-face with the evil genius who had stolen none other than the Crown Jewels.

Dr Crick took a sip of coffee from the bone china cup in front of him. His clammy features briefly contorted into a grimace.

“Excuse me, young man,” he hissed at Peregrine, lispng through a set of crooked teeth. “Would you please pass the sugar bowl?”

“Of course,” replied Peregrine smugly, sliding the bowl of sugar lumps across the table that separated them. “But only if you give me the Crown Jewels in return, you despicable bounder.” Dr Crick’s pale face briefly flushed red and he let out a world-weary sigh, less in desperation or fear, and more in mild annoyance, as if someone had just asked him to lend them a ten-bob note. He gave a brief manic chuckle.

“I suspected they would send someone after me,” he spat viciously. “But I did not expect them to send a child. What makes you think I’m going to give you my spoils, boy?”

“Because if you don’t,” said Peregrine, smiling in return, “you’ll be dead.”

As soon as the words had left his mouth, Peregrine pulled back the hammer of the trusty service revolver he had concealed under the table. It was now pointing right at Crick’s stomach.

“Ah, you mean to shoot me,” chuckled Crick, hearing the click of the revolver, “on a train,

surrounded by witnesses. Well, I would like to see you try, young man; but unfortunately I shall not have that pleasure because long before you pull that trigger you shall be dead, killed by the poison I placed in your coffee. Yes, that's right. I suspected you had been sent from Scotland Yard the very moment you chose to sit opposite me and while I shall be boarding a ferry to France this afternoon, the undertaker will be measuring you for a coffin," he finished with a wild laugh.

Peregrine sat quietly for a second and without a hint of fear on his stony face picked up his coffee cup and drank down every last drop in one satisfied gulp.

"Ah, you are quite right, Dr Crick; there is something wrong with my coffee," he said coolly. "It is a little too sweet for my liking. I never take sugar with a hot beverage, whereas you always do," he said, reaching across the table and switching his cup for the doctor's, "do you not?"

Dr Crick's face took on a puzzled look. Whatever was the boy blithering about, and then it hit him. He had poisoned his own coffee!

"That's right, Dr Crick; I switched our cups not ten minutes ago, as we passed through that tunnel. So while this afternoon the undertaker will be measuring you for a coffin, I shall be having tea and crumpets with the King himself."

Crick's face turned even paler than before. He looked down at his cup, he had sipped at least half of it, more than enough for a fatal dose. He reached for his chest and let out a quiet agonising gasp. The boy was right, he could feel the poison working its deadly effects already.

"You may kill me, boy," he hissed. "But you will not be able to save your delightful companion Miss Goodheart. For in ten minutes she will be dead, crushed by the wheels of this train. She is tied to the tracks ahead of us, and there is nothing you can do to prevent her demise. I paid the driver and his crew to jump from their engine at Bekesbourne, I was to follow them shortly afterwards, but now it looks as if I shall be travelling to another place."

You will indeed, thought Peregrine, his mind racing, straight to hell you devil! And before the evil doctor had drawn his last breath Peregrine was up and running towards the front of the train. Clashed in his hand was Crick's carpet bag, which he knew was packed full of the royal booty. In his haste, Peregrine sent a waiter with a tray of brown Windsor soup flying. The viscous substance landing in the lap of a rather bemused vicar. But he did not dare stop, he had to save Petunia. Peregrine made it as far towards the front of the train as he possibly could, but there was no connecting door to the locomotive. He would have to climb outside. Taking the butt of his revolver he slammed it into the window next to him, sending shards of glass flying. A harsh wind came blowing into the carriage. He knocked the remaining shards clear from the window, before slinging the carpet bag across his shoulder and leaning out dangerously. He was thrown backwards by a blast of cold air. Bringing his free hand up to shield his face he could see something up ahead on the tracks. It was white and billowing in the breeze. It took him a while to work out what it was, but then the sickening realisation flooded over him. It was Petunia, in her long white flowing dress. Damn and blast it. She was a lot closer than he had expected. Even if he could reach the locomotive and find a brake, or extinguish the fire in the boiler, there was no way the thundering train would be able to stop in time. All was lost.

And then he saw it. Salvation. Up ahead lay not only the prone body of his faithful companion, but also a set of points and a lever to throw them. One nudge of the controlling lever and the train would shift on to a parallel track saving Petunia's life.

There was only one thing he could do. He raised his revolver and checked the chamber, three rounds remaining. He would have to keep a steady hand, but if only one round hit the lever it might just work. Holding the revolver with both hands he rested his finger on the trigger, shut one eye, and took aim. When the lever was in his sights he held his breath, and then squeezed the

trigger: BANG, BANG...

2. Trouble brewing...

...BANG. A fist slammed on to my desk for a third time.

“Harker! Harker, my boy! Rise and shine.”

I opened my eyes, and then immediately shut them again, realising I had been asleep. I gradually opened first my left eye and then my right, taking in my surroundings. I was in the newsroom of the Evening Inquirer, my head resting on my notepad. Around me was the din of two-dozen clacking typewriters as busy journalists frantically recorded the day’s news.

Through a rain-splattered window I could see a brown smudge of smoggy sky. Below, men in top hats and frock coats made their way along Fleet Street, with the occasional cloth-capped copy boy running alongside them.

I was at my workplace in London. There was no train, no secret mission, and no Petunia. I had been dreaming again.

I looked up and saw Reginald Morton, news editor of the Evening Inquirer, leaning over me. He picked up a tattered magazine from my desk and momentarily thumbed the pages.

“I see you’ve been reading the Penny Dreadful again, Harker. Nothing but a load of fanciful tosh. Next you’ll be dreaming you’re a bally hero, instead of a simple hack. Well, there’s no time for that, I can tell you. The editor wants to see you in his office right away. Come on lad, jump to it!”

I reluctantly stood up and made my way to the large mahogany door at the end of the office that bore the name:

Jabez Challock – Editor

I raised my hand to knock, but before my knuckles reached the woodwork a voice boomed from inside.

“Harker, get in here now!”

I slowly opened the door to find the familiar form of Jabez Challock sitting behind a large wooden desk. He was dressed in a garish checked suit, and a large pipe hung from his lips, blue smoke curling upwards, around his piggy face.

Challock was a larger-than-life Yorkshireman with a fearsome reputation. He was well known in Fleet Street for his outrageous manners, impressive moustache and terrible wind. He was an editor who could terrify even the bravest of chaps.

“Sit down, boy,” he grunted, pointing to a chair in front of a large mahogany desk.

“How old are you, lad?”

“Fifteen, sir,” I answered.

“Fifteen, eh. And you’ve been a reporter with us for three months?”

I nodded in reply, wondering what he was getting at. I was about to find out.

“In the past twelve weeks you’ve been late for work five times, had a scrap in the newsroom twice and even been in trouble with the police.” His chubby cheeks wobbled as he spoke. “That’s not to mention how scruffy you look, you’re like a tall bag of bones with a straw mop on top.” He

paused, narrowing his angry gaze. "But the worst thing Harker, the worst thing," he continued, "are these tall tales you keep blithering on about. I've not had one decent bit of copy from you, lad, since you started. You're too busy chasing make-believe tales of spies, thieves and saboteurs. None of which have been true. You're living in a dream world, lad. And it won't do, it won't do at all."

I sat there silently, half expecting him to jump across the desk and hit me, but instead he opened a drawer and pulled out a wedge of papers. He looked at them with disgust.

"Just look at this nonsense. Last week alone you tried to convince me a Dowager Duchess was selling stolen diamonds from the Cape, a group of anarchist lamplighters wanted to plunge London into darkness and there was a foreign plot to lace the King's crumpets with arsenic. This is a newspaper, Harker, not a Penny Dreadful.

"By all accounts I should throw your useless backside out of this office and kick you all the way to the workhouse. But I'm not a monster, lad. I know you've had some dark days recently with the death of your parents. Sir Michelmas Harker was one of the best explorers this country has ever seen and the reports he sent back to this newspaper were second to none. You may not know this, lad, but I promised your father if anything happened to him I would look after you. So when he and your mother, Lady Octavia, went missing in Peru, the least I could do was take you on. Which is why I'm going to give you another chance, only one mind, but a chance nonetheless to show me you can actually do what I pay you for." He paused for a second and mysteriously pushed forward a dainty cup and saucer, full to the brim with steaming hot char. "Now then, my boy," he said, losing something of his angry tone, "what do you know about tea?"

"Tea, sir?" I said, perplexed.

"Yes, lad, tea," he replied, his angry tone returning. "Tell me what you know about the humble British brew."

"Well, apart from the fact I like to take mine with a dash of milk, not very much, sir," I said, stalling for time. "From what I recall it is derived from the leaf tips of a rather particular plant grown in large plantations in India, famously in Assam and Ceylon. It is hand-picked and shipped to Britain on board tea clippers in large wooden chests. Great quantities of it pass through the wharves and docks in South London every day. Traders haggle over the price with the importers, buy what they can afford and distribute it across the nation, where it is sold in tea houses and penny bazaars to all and sundry. I would not be surprised if everyone from the lowest vagrant to His Majesty himself has at least one cup a day. In fact I would go as far as to say, after water, it is very likely the most popular beverage in the world," I finished, rather pleased with myself.

"Indeed it is, lad. Indeed it is," replied Challock looking worried. "Which is why the assignment I am about to send you on is of the gravest importance. This humble little cup of stewed leaves and warm water is the oil that keeps the cogs of Empire moving smoothly. If you were to deny the humble British labourer his morning cup there would be riots on the streets of every major city from here to Rangoon; and, in a few months, I believe that very tragedy is about to happen. There's trouble brewing and no mistake."

I chuckled at what I thought was a joke, but Challock's face remained serious.

"This is no laughing matter, Harker. You see, during the past few weeks, the keen-eyed of us, have been noticing tea prices shooting sky-high. If they continue to rise at this rate it won't be long before the tea pots of the British Empire are dry. Even my wife tells me we might have to stop having it delivered to our house. This will not do, Harker. It will not do at all. Which is why I am commissioning you to get to the bottom of it all. I am giving you two weeks to find out why

tea prices are on the rise.”

I felt like groaning. This was not the kind of thing a young lad should be doing, worrying about the price of consumables, he should be cutting a dashing figure around town on the hunt for stories that thrilled and excited his readers. Before my disappointment could grow any deeper, Challock brought me out of my funk.

“I’ve already made a start for you, lad. You have an appointment with a tea trader called Clayton in Cutler Street in an hour, so you had better hurry.”

With that he returned to looking at some copy, studying it intently as if I was not even there. I sat for a second wondering what I should do before rising and heading to the door. But before I could leave, Challock stopped me.

“Oh, Harker. The deal is, lad, if you come back with the goods you can keep your job but if you fail, if you don’t do as you are told, and instead go off on the trail of armed villains and vagabonds, then don’t think of returning to this newspaper again. Good day to you, Harker. Good day.”

3. Buried alive

As my cab drew up at Cutler Street, I began to feel this assignment might not be quite as dull as I was expecting. The place was teeming with life and movement and colour. Above me brown-bricked warehouses towered six storeys into the murky winter sky. From every window and opening, labourers were busy at work, shouting and bellowing to their mates, their breath hanging in the wintry sky. Bales of fine coloured silks, crates of ostrich feathers, and barrels of wine were being hauled up from the ground, by clanking iron chains, and into the belly of the brick beast, where no doubt they were being carried off to sorting halls and showrooms. On the ground, packing-cases of bananas and chests of tea were being delivered by vans and carts at an almost constant rate. Boys younger than myself were running round each crate as it arrived, checking the numbers daubed on the sides against grubby lists clasped in their hands. The whole picture reminded me of an anthill.

Stepping from the cab a bitter wind caught my overcoat. There was a touch of snow in the air, and I watched as it fell into the dimpled leather of my brogues. Pulling my collar up I stepped into the throng of people. Wherever there was space, men had lit glowing briars, and those taking a break were gathered around them drinking tea from chipped enamel mugs and smoking dog-eared cigarettes.

I examined the name and address I had been given for my appointment. By the look of things I was to meet someone by the name of Sir Magnus Clayton in an office on the fifth floor of a crumbling building known as the Old Bengal Warehouse. With a little help from an errand boy I made my way to the entrance. It lay in a dark cobbled road behind the main row of warehouses. A couple of flickering gas lamps were already alight. Thank goodness they were. Despite being the middle of the day, the sun was hidden behind a thick screen of smog and cloud, and without their guiding lights I would have been stumbling over my own feet. For some reason I suddenly felt quite afraid. The situation was not made any more appealing by the appearance of a funeral hearse parked up ahead. Two black horses, with black feathered plumes attached to their foreheads, stood in front of a black windowless carriage. On the kerb next to the hearse was the unmistakable shape of a coffin. A shudder ran down my spine.

I went to move off, but my curiosity stopped me. Why would someone be collecting a coffin from a dock warehouse? Why had they simply discarded it by the roadside? More importantly, why was I not already investigating? Well, there was nobody about, so now was my chance. As I walked towards the ominous box, Challock’s words rang in my ears: ‘If you don’t do as you are told, don’t think about returning to this newspaper ever again!’ That may well be the case, I

pondered, but just one look surely wouldn't hurt, and anyway who gives a fig about tea: coffins are much more interesting.

I quickly glanced round the street, checking the coast was clear, then made my way to the long box. Keeping in the shadows to remain unseen I knelt down to take a look. It was a most peculiar affair, shoddily made out of rough wooden planks. There were gaps between the slats and I could just see through. The faint light from a nearby gas lamp caught on something inside. Whatever was in there, it was certainly not a body. It looked almost metallic, glinting in the gloomy light. I would need a closer look. If only I could get it under the light of the gas lamp, I would have a better idea of its contents. There was only one thing for it, I would have to move the coffin. Putting both hands on the end of the casket I tried to give it a shove, but it stayed fast on the frosty kerb. I tried again, putting all my weight behind it, my legs and arms straining for all they were worth, but it refused to budge even an inch. Whatever was inside, it was extremely heavy.

I had just about made up my mind to open the thing and take a peek when I suddenly heard a noise from behind me. It was the approaching sound of shuffling feet. I had to hide, and fast. I stopped what I was doing, dropped to the floor and rolled under the carriage. It was dark beneath the hearse, dark and cold. I could feel the damp, frozen, cobbles beneath me and my nostrils were full of the pungent hay-like smell of the horses in front. I could hear the steps coming closer, and then, out of the fog and gloom appeared two sets of booted feet. There was a puffing and groaning noise, as if the mystery pair were carrying something heavy. Then their arms came into view as they lowered an object to the ground next to me. It was another coffin.

“Cor blimey, what the blast's in these caskets. I almost bust a lung carting 'em down them stairs,” said a voice. It was high-pitched and nasal, but there was something chilling and vicious about it. “Never you mind, boy,” replied a completely different voice. This one deep and throaty, like the growl of an untamed beast. “You know the rules. No looking in the boxes, and no asking questions, unless you want to end up floating face down in the Thames that is.” At this the pair chuckled. I heard the rasp of matches and then caught a whiff of tobacco smoke as they lit cigarettes.

“Speaking of which,” said the high-pitched man. “What did happen with old Bert?”

“Well, according to the Peelers, he was just another floater. Accident at the docks they said. But between you and me, lad; it was my hands what done him in. Right round his scrawny neck.” The pair laughed again. “He was off to see the boss, weren't he? Going to tell him he'd found something going on down here. Silly old duffer. What did he expect?”

The high-pitched man let out a frightened laugh.

“You wouldn't do me in, would yer?” he said nervously.

“Of course not, boy,” came the reply. “As long as you don't go looking in them boxes.”

There was another nervous laugh. “Now come on, we better get these shifted before anyone sees.” With that the pair threw their cigarette ends on the floor and stubbed them out under their grubby shoes. Right then, I should have been thinking of my safety, but all I could think about was the amazing scoop I was about to write. I had a confession of a murder, not to mention the mystery contents of the coffins. If only I had been paying attention. As the pair bent down to pick up the casket resting by the kerb, I suddenly caught a glimpse of a grimy face turned towards me.

“Here, who the 'ell are you?” It was the squeaky-voiced man, who was quickly joined by his companion, a grubby, chubby-faced brute missing most of his teeth.

“Well, well, well. Looks like we've got ourselves an eavesdropper,” the other man chuckled. “And we know what happens to them.”

Before I had time to think, a strong pair of hands gripped my ankles and yanked me towards them. Within a second I was hauled up against the carriage, my face pressed against the glossy black woodwork, my arms held firmly behind my back.

“Shall I tell you what happens to eavesdroppers, lad?” the deep-voiced man continued.

“You won’t if you know what’s good for you,” I spat, trying to keep up a sense of bravado. My captor let out a horrid laugh.

“You’ve got spirit, boy, but that won’t help yer,” he chuckled. “Not when you’re buried alive.” I heard him turn to the other man. “Fetch me a coffin and be quick about it.”

No matter how hard I struggled I couldn’t escape. I struggled and squirmed, but the scoundrels had me gripped tightly. Behind me I heard a scraping and clattering noise. Then all of a sudden I was thrown backwards and shoved to the floor. At first I didn’t realise what had happened, but then it dawned on me, I had been shoved into one of the wooden boxes. I just caught a glimpse of two evil faces grinning above me, before a rough wooden lid was thrown on top of me. I tried to kick out, and force my way from the coffin, but it was no good, they were nailing it shut.

“Right, lad, we’re off, we got business to mind, but we’ll be back for you later,” said the deep-voiced man. “Don’t you go running off now,” he laughed. “We wants to have words with you, before we send you six feet under.”

With that I heard the trundle of the undertaker’s carriage pulling away from the kerb. Then I was alone. This was not good. This was not good at all. I was trapped fast in the coffin. It was so small I could hardly move, my arms were held close to my sides, and the lid was a hair’s breadth from my nose. There was no escape. My only way out would be to get help. I shouted out in panic, bellowing and bleating until my throat was raw but my calls were in vain. Why had I not paid attention to Challock? Why had I not simply followed his instructions to do as I was told? They say curiosity killed the cat. Well it looked like it was about to finish me off too.

After half-an-hour of sweating and panicking I heard the trundle of the undertaker’s carriage returning. This would be my only chance to get free. If they so much as lifted the lid for a second, I would kick out with all my strength and try to wrestle free from the coffin.

I heard the carriage stop and then a pair of footsteps. I readied myself for action. The footsteps came closer and closer, until they were right beside me. Then, thank God, I heard a scraping and a knocking and the lid was torn from the coffin. I kicked out with all my might, and looking up saw the body of a man go flying. I was free. I jumped to my feet and flew at my attacker, grabbing him round the throat. It was only then I realised the man who had opened the coffin was not one of my attackers. Looking back at me was a vision from my past. At first I didn’t quite recognise him. His face had aged since we had last met, but how could I not remember that beaming smile and those piercing eyes? It was unmistakably Archie Dearlove.