

## Part I: The Morlocks

*Hell is a city much like London, a populous and  
a smoky city.*

--Percy Shelley

The guts of London are laid out as if on a surgeon's table. The narrow streets surge with pedestrians, tramps, carters and children flitting on mud-flecked legs—denizens of the great coal-gray smudgery piss-pot. Slip down through the smog, over hovels with garbage strewn across tar-papered roofs, down to the locals at their windows. Marionette arms test stiff laundry wings. The sound wafts up, the snap of umber linen on the wet, but no one rises above the cornices.

In an alley ahead, moist with dirty runoff from a public bath, lies a woman on her back, legs splayed, dressed shabbily in checked woolen skirt, ripped stockings, pea coat never returned to a sailor-client. Her blood seeps, mingling with soapy effluent. Descending, see her coarse face, a common one pricked with smallpox scars. Her eyes are open, pall of disbelief fossilized. In closer, toward those dry globes, those bleary taxidermy marbles blotched by broken capillaries. Little vessels broken by the effort of her screaming.

Within the threshold of the pupils some trace is deposited. Captured in negative, it is the outline of a man in a peaked cap, dark suit, white shirt. His face is without features, indistinct, like a gray fish turning fast in a twilight ocean. The last image this woman ever saw is frozen on her retina: her killer standing over her, the second before he cut the life from her body.

**Waterloo Station. August 30, 1888. 12:50 pm.**

A young man waits on a railway platform. George Hutchinson, casual laborer from the Whitechapel district of east London. Clad

in a checkered shirt, tar-flecked grey pants with suspenders, kerchief around his neck. His cheeks hollow as he drags at the remnant of a cigarette.

The well-heeled gentleman waits nearby, newspaper in hand. Black suit and coat, crisp and tailored. He stares at Hutchinson, eyes demanding to know "what right have YOU to be here?" Hutchinson averts his gaze, not out of deference but instinct, bred into his tired bones. What right does he have, indeed?

An incoming train shudders to a stop. The doors open, the compartments empty. Hutchinson is looking for someone. The gentleman immediately meets his party-- a woman as well-dressed as he, whom he greets pleasantly (no kiss, mate?). He leads her off, giving Hutchinson a dark glance as he goes.

All of the passengers seem to have gone. Hutchinson wants to give up, walk away, until he sees the figure of a woman part a curtain of steam.

Dark-eyed Mary Kelly. Pretty, petite Mary Kelly with her air of sad gravity. Head turning with the majesty of a revolving planet. Her dress is plum purple, with black gloves and a glad feathered hat on her head. She struggles with a hefty portmanteau.

Hutchinson darts forward to take the handle. She looks up, smiles. "*Alors mon amour. tu es venu a ma rencontre*, eh? Such a sweet young man you are. Let me kiss you--"

Surrendering her burden, she plants two Continental-style kisses on both corners of his lips. Hutchinson blushes.

"I didn't know which bleedin train ye werein. Been ere since eight."

"Sorry I forgot to put that in my letter, love. I've been so busy lately! Paris is the only truly civilized city, Georgie. I was in the shops almost every day. I bought this dress just last week. Do you like it?"

He opens his mouth to answer her question, but she, still chirping, interrupts—

“And you must see the Japanese kerchiefs I bought. They're the height of fashion now, you know! You really must see Paris some day!”

“If ye liked it so bloody much, why'd ye come back?”

“It's such a lovely place, Georgie. So unlike grubby London. It's a place for dreams—“

Petticoat Lane, a short walk from the station. His arms ache from hauling her luggage. There is a persistent smile frozen on Mary's face, as if she's determined to be happy.

“I wrote ahead to Sue and she promised her roommate would be out by Saturday next, which is yesterday...it was Thrawl Street, number thirteen, I think...”

“Fair nough. Long as ye don't end up in some cunny dosshouse.”

He doesn't see her smile waver.

It is a clear day in early summer. The sun filters down intermittently between low buildings huddled around the street. The shadows retreat for the moment, sinking into the skin of things, into the carbonaceous crust that adheres to every public surface.

Today, Petticoat Lane is a fruit and nut emporium. Carts and stalls stand athwart traffic, forcing the well-kitted and the dire into uneasy contact. Someone yells "Thief! Thief!" Hutchinson is shoved by a teenage purse-cutter fleeing through the crowd—and again by the cop chasing him. Hutchinson only resents the cop.

“Blind the bugger! Let'm buckle me again and I'll send m aff wi a flea in is ear!”

Mary frowns. “No, this place hasn't changed!”

Thrawl Street is enjoying a brawl between two 40-year old women. Hutchinson pauses to watch them attack each other's hair, clothes, scratching and cursing and clawing with a ferocity more exhausting than effective. Some of the onlookers cheering them on are children.

A kind soul, a man in bricklayer's smock, intervenes. “Now let's step back, doves...let's shew em some Christian forbearance...”

The Good Samaritan steps between the blowsy furies—and is promptly driven to his knees under an assault of balled fists, elbows, and steel-toed high-button shoes. The crowd roars with delight, and Hutchinson laughs.

“Neva get between two blowins avin a set-to!”

“Let's go, Georgie.”

Mary pulls him away, but not before a woman in the crowd seems to recognize her. Anne Liffey, with boiled red face, shelf tits, and fingernails smeared with dried nose-grease.

“Well looky ere, mates!” she calls out. “It's little Miss Kensington High Street erself!”

Anne's cronies turn on Mary, their eyes burning holes in her new dress and hat.

“Back from suppin with the Queen, are ye?”

Mary turns her back on them, sweeping her skirts around in a genteel arc over the piss-soaked cobbles.

“Come round again sometime, preychus!”

Hutchinson struggles to catch up as they round crescent-shaped Thrawl Street. “Ahem,” he says, and when she doesn't respond, calls out, “You're not plannin to go back to the night trade, are ye?”

“Of course not. I've decided now that I've been to Paris I can get work at a nice shop. Maybe a hatter's. In the West End, too.”

They approach number thirteen. A private apartment house, with stoop neatly swept, sides recently rammed with dun-colored plaster. There's a sweets shop below. Mary turns to George.

“Well, here I am, *mon cher*.”

“That's the barber, then.”

They look at each other. He points at the suitcase.

“You wantin me to take this up?”

“No. Not necess'ry. Thank you.”

“Hallright then...”

After a pause, they start talking in unison—

“—just wanted to ask ye—“

They laugh. Her hand is on his shoulder now, bidding him go first. The contact throws him for a moment, until he marshals his words:

“No, I just wanted to ask ye, since ye just been to the contnent n all, and since I had to take most o a whole workday waitin, if you could spare’ny cutter. Goin to the spike tonight, so I'd pay you back on the marrow.”

Her face darkens as she hears his plea.

“I'm not really flush myself. But I'll see what I can do.”

She removes a small purse from her bag. George cranes his head to look inside, but Mary turns away from him. She pulls out a few coins and snaps the purse shut.

“Here. This should keep you til morning.”

“Bless ye. I'll be back day after tamarrow with it, I swear it before God.”

“Thank you for meeting me, Georgie.”

She kisses him on the corner of the mouth again. Stuck somewhere between friendly and romantic, there's nothing continental about the gesture this time.

“G'bye.”

“*Au revoir!*”

He rounds the corner. Mary waits until he's gone, then drags her case a few doors down and around the corner to #56 Flower and Dean St.--"White's Royal Arms". She enters the doorless aperture and descends the dark staircase within.

The lobby of the lodging house, such as it is, is lit with a single oil-lamp on a short wick. Mary passes several women sleeping on the floor. Though blasted by alcohol, their sleepy grimaces make them seem faintly infantile. At the front desk, the clerk sits, trying to make out a trashy newspaper in the gloom. He only looks up when—BANG—she drops her suitcase on the floor.

“Any rooms to let?”

“Top floor only. 4d in advance.”

“With a door?”

“Room widadoor, 5d in advance.”

“As you can see, *mon ami*, I am a woman of some substance. Perhaps I could pay you tomorrow.”

“Room widadoor, 5d in advance.”

Mary looks into his eyes: it is impossible to move him. She takes out her purse and removes her last five pence.

“No ov’night guests.”

“Of course! How dare you suggest such a thing!”

The women behind her, awake after all, snigger at her.

The room is a cube seven feet on a side. There’s a narrow window opening on the brick face of a neighboring building. The walls are bare white, with a set of draconian HOUSE RULES posted on the door: no guests, no eating, no talking above a normal tone, no mucus from the nose or mouth. She drops her suitcase and falls into the narrow bed.

What’s that smell? Bending, she follows its source, sniffing the sheets of her bunk and then rifling them: a trail of dried bodily fluid, yellowish and unidentifiable. Her upper lip curls with disgust, but she is not surprised. She cracks her suitcase, feels between the daintily folded garments until she finds a small liquor flask.

There are tears in her eyes as she takes her first of many swallows.