

THE MAN  
WITH THE  
BLACK  
BOX

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*The Man with the Black Box*

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE RED PACKET

"THIS WON'T DO. This won't do at all."

Jim didn't respond but kept a nervous eye on his fare. The gentleman he'd picked up earlier was standing on the landing of Jim's hansom cab. Having abandoned the cover of his seat, the fool seemed oblivious to the rain sliding off the rim of his top hat onto his black overcoat, and the panic he was inciting in Jim's horse. His arms were wrapped around a leather satchel held tightly against his chest.

"This will not do!" the gentleman bellowed again at the engulfing cacophony of clattering, banging, clinking, and shouting that rose from the crowded London street before him.

"Please, sir, your standing is making her skittish," Jim implored. "She's a little young and not used to such commotion. I beg of you, sir, do please take your seat."

The gentleman looked about at the surrounding congestion, swaying with the erratic motion of the cab induced by the agitated jerking of the horse. "Damn it all, this will not do. What is your name, young man?" he yelled above the din while glaring at the mass of conveyances all in the same gridlocked predicament.

"Jim Talbot, sir. I believe it's to do with some protest march two streets on, sir," he shouted to the back of the gentleman's head. "Please, sir, I need your weight over the wheels and not on her back."

"A protest, yes, quite apparent, I simply asked your name. Master Talbot, I shall remember that," the last part said slightly over his shoulder. "I hired you to take me to my destination in the quickest manner possible. Despite your youth, I trusted your assurances that your horse was of the first rate and up to the task. 'Quickest in all of London,' you said. Now I find myself in the doldrums of a sea of carriages, carts, cabs, and motorcars."

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The horse interrupted with a loud whinny and snort, shaking her head side to side and bouncing her front quarters a few inches off the ground.

Jim wasn't sure he made out all the gentleman had said, but he got the import. "Please, sir, she's a fine horse, just a bit inexperienced and nervous at the moment. If I could please ask your forgiveness and beg you to take your seat, sir."

"No, this will not do! I'll have to get there on my own." At that, the gentleman, still clutching his satchel with both arms, took a step down toward the wet street.

Before Jim could get out another word, a single pop pierced the din. The horse reacted instantly with a leap forward, followed by a jump back, and then a more determined, frantic leap forward, the last move causing her to ram headlong into the back of a large delivery cart. Next came a guttural scream.

Jim felt the accident, if he didn't quite see it all. The first lurch had knocked the gentleman off his feet and onto the street. He had tried to right himself by grabbing the side of the cab during the backward lurch, but evidently, with the slick street being of little assistance, had only managed to slide his right leg under the cab's carriage while he started to get his weight on his bent left leg. It was during the final forward lurch that the accident occurred. One side of the cab rose up and then back down with a sickening crack. After the crack came the scream, the scream from the gentleman whose right leg was now under the wheel of the cab.

Jim pulled back on the reins and backed the cab, resulting in a final thud as the wheel rolled off the gentleman's leg. Jim jumped from his seat and landed near the injured gentleman, who lay on his left side grasping at his right leg with one arm while clinging to the satchel with the other.

"Sir, I'm so sorry. I think it was a motor car discharging, or perhaps a pistol, I'm not sure, but it scared the horse. I'm so sorry. It's my fault, sir. I should have reined her in a bit tighter."

"What's this, lad? I saw the whole thing."

Jim looked up to see an older man crouching over the gentleman.

"You shouldn't stand in a hansom cab like that, sir, not with such a jumpy horse in the reins and all this hullabaloo. Good Lord, sir, you've broken your leg." The older man pulled the gentleman's pants leg up above his shin. "Lad, look at that. Mother Mary help him, the bone's coming clear through the skin."

As if wired together, Jim felt his eyes and jaw widen in unison. He looked away, holding back the urge to vomit his meager lunch on the pavestone street. "I'm so sorry, sir."

"Why, what 'av we 'ere?" A second man appeared from the traffic, wearing a dingy jacket that was too long for his arms, a battered and greasy cap, and trousers with rips over repaired rips on the knees. "Why, it be a gentleman in distress, he is. Now 'av no fear, Charlie's 'ere now to help you, sir."

The sight of Charlie smiling to reveal a mouth full of brown, broken, and jagged teeth framed by his flabby unshaven face with droopy left eye was alone enough to add to Jim's queasiness. But when the ruffian exhaled a mouthful of putrid rotten-egg smelling breath, it triggered another convulsion in Jim's stomach that he fought back hard with narrow success.

"Let's take a look now, shall we," Charlie added cheerfully as he started feeling around the gentleman's overcoat.

"Leave him be, you rascal," said the older man as he shoved Charlie aside. "You don't mind him, sir. He's just looking for loose change and pocket watches. Lad, we need to get this gentleman assistance. I'm rather lame myself, or I'd be the first to go. So I'm afraid it's up to you."

The rain continued to patter down, rinsing blood from the gentleman's leg and sending it flowing down the street. Jim couldn't tell if he was in too much pain to speak, or maybe just dazed, but the gentleman continued to hold his leg with his body now curled up tighter than before. Jim retrieved the gentleman's top hat and placed it on the man's head as best he could.

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"I don't know what to do. It's my father's cab. I can't leave it and the horse. It's all we have."

"Quiet, all of you, don't move," the gentleman barked. He looked up at the group huddled around him, Jim Talbot, Charlie, and the old man. The gentleman's face looked pale but his eyes were alive as he glared at each in turn, scanning them from top to bottom, concluding with a look straight into the eyes of each of them. Then he glanced down at his leg and let out an audible huff. He looked back up at Jim. "I've no choice. Come here, boy. I must tell you something."

Jim leaned in to the gentleman. With fearsome quickness the gentleman grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling them face-to-face.

"Now listen to me, lad. We haven't a moment to lose. You must listen to exactly what I'm telling you."

Jim tried to pull away, but the gentleman held him fast with an iron grip.

"Take my satchel. Now open it. What do you see?"

"A red packet, sir, I mean, a packet wrapped in red cloth."

"Precisely, now close it. A red packet, that's what it's called, and it's important for you to remember. That color has importance, do you understand?"

"Well, no sir, but if perhaps you let loose of my shirt—"

"Master Talbot, this is a couriered packet. They are all given colors. Red means utmost urgency, a matter of great national urgency. Do you understand?"

"I, yes, I think so."

"I don't normally deliver packets, but when I saw the red, I took personal charge of it. Now" —the gentleman paused as he sucked in a lung full of air through clenched teeth—"now, do you remember where we were going?"

"Yes sir, the Foreign Office."

“Exactly, this packet is to be delivered directly to Lord Lansdowne at the Foreign Office. If anyone questions you, just show them the red packet. But it is to be delivered to only Lord Lansdowne. You must not relinquish custody of the packet until you’ve placed it in Lord Lansdowne’s hands.” The gentleman paused again, bowing his head and taking three long breaths. “Tell me what I just told you.”

“I’m to take this packet to Lord Lansdowne in the Foreign Office, and if anyone questions me, I’m to show them the red packet, and deliver it to Lord Lansdowne only. But, sir, I can’t. I can’t leave my father’s cab and horse. It’s all we have, sir.”

“Listen to me, Master Talbot.” The gentleman pulled Jim’s face closer into his until their noses were touching and, lowering his voice to a hissing whisper, continued. “You have no choice. For King and country, you must deliver this packet. I’ll make sure your cab and horse are tended to.” The gentleman turned his attention to the other two men, who were leaning in to the conversation. “Charlie! Or whatever your name is, get away now before I have the constable take you in for theft and vagrancy. Go, now!”

“‘Theft and vagrancy,’ he says. Humph. Thinks I’m a ruffian, am I? Humph. No good deed goes unpunished.” Charlie straightened up his back, placed his hands on his hips, and, with a last smelly “humph” hurled at the gentleman, turned and disappeared into the morass.

“Master Talbot”—the gentleman turned his attention back to the nearby face, lowering his voice again—“reach inside my jacket to my left vest pocket. That’s it. Now pull out the contents.”

Jim felt a substantial weight of coin in his hand, more weight than he had ever felt in his short life.

“Put it in your pocket. I’m putting my trust in you, Master Talbot. The King is putting his trust in you. The Foreign Office, Lord Lansdowne, for King and country, as quickly as you can. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir, for King and country.”

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The gentleman released Jim's shirt and dropped his head back onto the street.

Without hesitation, Jim grabbed the satchel, sprung to his feet, and ran at the maze of traffic, leaving the slumped gentleman and his precious horse and cab behind.

"Godspeed, Jim Talbot," the gentleman muttered into a wet paving stone.

\* \* \*

"Lord Lansdowne, there is a young man here to see you, a Jim Talbot."

Lansdowne looked up from his paper, puffing out the mouthful of cigar smoke he had been savoring. "Never heard of him."

"He has a red packet."

Lansdowne set down the paper and placed the cigar in a nearby ashtray. "Well, then, by all means, send him in."

"Yes, Lord Lansdowne."

Lansdowne turned to the other man in the room who had also set down his paper but still held a shot glass at the ready. "Children delivering red packets, perhaps the budget cuts have come closer to the bone than I realized? Well, Charles, we'll just have to see what this is about."

"Indeed."

"Lord Lansdowne, may I present Jim Talbot."

The announcement having been directed to no one in particular, the young man looked back and forth between them, puzzled. "Lord Lansdowne?"

"He's Lord Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary," one of them volunteered while pointing with his glass. "I'm Sir Charles Hardinge, the Permanent Assistant Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Perhaps you can tell us who you are and how it is you came upon a red packet."



The boy gasped for air and then stood frozen, appearing to Lord Lansdowne like a rabbit confronted by two wolves. Lansdowne smiled and looked the lad over. He was dressed in the uniform of a cab driver, but the fit was much too big, and the clothes rather worn. He was a ruddy lad of perhaps fourteen, of average height but rather skinny. He stood panting with his mouth agape, his lower body in the stiff pose of an actor who'd forgotten his lines waiting for stage direction. There was a noticeable fresh bloodstain on his left knee. He clung tightly to a leather satchel, pressed against his chest.

"Sir, my lord, sir, I was instructed to deliver this to you." He pulled from the satchel a packet enclosed in bright red velvet cloth.

"Well then, deliver it to me." Lansdowne smiled and reached for his cigar.

The boy walked purposefully toward Lansdowne. "The courier was injured, my lord. He told me to bring this to you for King and country. I came as fast as I was able."

Lansdowne placed the cigar in his mouth, looked up at the boy, and relieved him of the packet. "Thank you, lad."

The boy paused for a moment, looking befuddled, and then turned to leave. He stopped halfway to the door and turned back around, again facing Lansdowne just as he opened his lips to allow another mouthful of the delicious smoke to slowly waft away.

"I beg your pardon, sir, my lord."

"What is it, lad?"

"The gentleman, what is the courier he was, he says to me that I must deliver the packet for King and country."

"Yes, he was right. You did well."

"Yes, my lord, thank you, sir. But you see, he also gave me these." The boy produced a handful of coins from his pants pocket. "This is far too much for my fare, my lord, sir. I did it for King and country. It had nothing to do with these coins."

"I'm sure you did, lad. What is your name again?"

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"Jim, I mean James Talbot, my lord, son of John Talbot."

"James Talbot, you've done well by King and country. Keep the coins. When next I see the King, I shall mention to him your service."

Appearing not to know what else to do, Jim bowed deeply. "Thank you, sir, my lord. I shall take my leave now. I must attend to the injured gentleman and my cab. Thank you, my lord."

Lansdowne allowed a wry smile as he watched the boy march from the room, after which the door was closed behind him, leaving Lansdowne and Sir Charles Hardinge alone with the red packet.

"Well, now, let's see what this is about, shall we?" Lansdowne set his cigar back in the ashtray and examined the packet. "It looks real enough. I haven't received one of these in several months now. I always dread opening them, to be frank." Nonetheless, he unsealed the packet, peered inside it, and pulled out a short stack of papers. As he started to read the first page he felt a knot growing in his stomach. "Good God!"

"What is it, Henry?"

"Good God." Lansdowne paused to compose himself and then read from the papers in his hand. "'Thirty-one March 1905, Kaiser William has landed today in Tangier, Morocco, and is meeting, amidst pomp and ceremony, with Sultan Abdelaziz. The Kaiser has issued a public statement declaring his support for the Sultan's sovereignty over Morocco.'"

"He's insane! The French will never stand for it."

"They can't stand for it." Lansdowne dropped the papers in his lap and stared straight ahead, gathering his thoughts. "He's put them in a box. They either declare war or geld themselves in front of the entire world."

"It's preposterous. Crazy man, he runs around with a Lucifer match and keeps scratching it against powder kegs. He may have scratched too hard this time. How did we not have wind of this in advance?"

"That's precisely what I was going to ask of you. Charles, we can't operate in the blind like this. Why, it's more absurd than children delivering red packets!"

"Quite right. I understand your frustration. There does seem to be a great deal of strangeness of late. I'll look into it straightaway. I'll also instruct Berlin and Paris to watch carefully for any sign of mobilization."

"Preposterous, he thinks he can destroy the *Entente Cordiale*. We must do what we can to stiffen the French spine."

"Shall we send a note of support to Foreign Minister Delcassé?"

"Yes, and please contact the Prime Minister. Inform him that we urgently request a meeting of the cabinet."

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Jim Talbot was relieved as he turned the corner and saw his hansom cab and horse. They were moved off to the side of the road, but not far from where he left them less than two hours before. The street was no longer jammed to a halt, but had returned to something closer to its normal, overcrowded condition. As he got nearer he noted several men loitering about his cab, including a bobby in his blue uniform and tall domed hat.

"Excuse me, Constable. My name is Jim Talbot, and this is my cab and horse."

"See him about it. He wants to talk to you."

"The man with the derby over there?"

"Yes, the inspector. He'd like a word with you."

Jim trotted over to the man with the derby, who was staring intently at a nearby building.

"Excuse me, sir, Inspector. The bobby, he says I'm to see you. I'm Jim Talbot, and that's my horse and cab."

The face under the derby reminded Jim of a bulldog, and one that had seen a few scrapes in his time at that. He was chomping on a short, unlit cigar.

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"Come with me, Master Talbot, we need someplace less public to talk."

"But I need—"

The inspector started down the street before Jim could finish. He was moving so quickly that Jim had to run just to catch up and skip to keep abreast of him.

"But, sir, I need to get home. I'm past my time. My father will be worried and no doubt angry."

"I've interviewed the witnesses. I trust you delivered your packet to the Foreign Office."

"Yes sir, but—"

"You've made good time, there and back. Why did your horse start?"

"It was a popping noise of some kind, sir. May I ask where we're going?"

"Did you see where it came from, the popping noise?"

"No, sir, I just heard it. The horse jumped, and the gentleman fell."

"Did you see a man running through the crowd?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry, but where are we going?"

"Just around the corner here, there's a quiet room in a pub where we can chat. It won't take but a moment, and then you'll be on your way."

"I'm sorry, sir, Inspector, but I think I missed your name."

The inspector seemed momentarily distracted by the approach of a fashionable young lady who was having a heated discussion with a young gentleman companion.

"Pardon me for a moment, lad. This may be unpleasant."

As the arguing couple grew near the lady suddenly sprinted away from the young gentleman. Without looking ahead, she crashed directly into the inspector. He seemed prepared for the blow even though he was looking at Jim when it happened. He

brushed her aside and spit his half-chewed cigar directly in her face at about the same time as her bottom smacked the sidewalk.

The young gentleman rushed in to assist the inspector from falling, a gallant act that seemed unnecessary given the small effect of the collision on the inspector. Coming at the inspector from the side on which Jim stood, however, the young gentleman managed to jab Jim in the ribs at the same time. The sharp blow was such that Jim fell back, only to find himself nearly on the ground and on top of a young boy who must have been right behind him.

“So sorry, let me help you up,” the young boy blurted out to Jim.

Before Jim could get to his feet he saw the inspector flash by, bull-rushing the young gentleman and pinning him to a nearby building. With his left hand the inspector held the young gentleman’s right wrist and his forearm was pressed hard against the young gentleman’s chest.

“Don’t you presume to do such a thing to me! Give me the watch,” barked the inspector.

The young gentleman frantically felt for something around his waistband with his free hand.

“Looking for this?” A knife appeared from the inspector’s right hand. He kept his forearm hard against the young gentleman’s chest, but rotated his wrist to point the blade of the knife at his quarry’s nose. “Don’t presume, sir. Let loose of the watch.”

Jim was on his feet. When he looked about, the young lady and the young boy were gone. The young gentleman was shaking as he opened his right hand to reveal a gold pocket watch. The inspector loosened his grip and took the watch from him.

“What shall I do with these, Inspector?”

Jim turned around to see where the question had come from. Standing in the road was a barrel-chested brute with arms the size of a man’s legs. His thick neck was as wide as his head, which was topped with a workman’s cap fringed with his curly auburn hair. His arms were extended from his side and parallel to the street. In

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one hand he held a small boy; in the other, the fashionably dressed young woman. He held each by their forearms, dangling them above the ground like a poulter displaying two larger turkeys.

“Thank you, Mick. Let the woman go. She’s just the distraction. The boy can go too, once you’ve relieved him of the coins he took off Master Talbot. We have more important matters to tend to.”

Jim felt his now empty pocket and was amazed to see a handful of coins, his coins, produced from the pants of the boy who had cushioned his fall. The boy and the young lady scampered off as soon as the brute released them, as did the young gentleman once the inspector let him go. All three scattered in different directions, like cockroaches when the lantern lights. Jim looked at the inspector with stunned amazement, trying to piece together what had just happened.

“He wasn’t after my watch, lad. That was just a target of opportunity. The street is buzzing with talk of your little affair today. Rumors about a large sum of money paid to a young cab driver are bound to bring out the opportunists. There may be more about. My man Mick will hold your money for now. He can escort you home safely when we’re done. Now, one more door on, follow me.”

Jim followed into a lively pub and up a flight of stairs to a quieter second floor. The inspector sat at a table in one corner. Jim dutifully sat across from him, still shaken and more than a little confused.

A woman appeared from another room and made her way to their table. “Scotch, Inspector?”

“Yes, and a beer for the lad.”

“Thank you, sir, but if Father were to smell alcohol—”

“Lad, you appear to me to need it.” The inspector looked up at the woman and thumped the table with his stubby pointer finger twice in a spot in front of Jim.

“One scotch and one beer,” acknowledged the woman.

"Are you certain you saw no one running through the street after your horse started?"

"Yes, sir. I was very concerned with the gentleman and his leg. I don't recall seeing much beyond him at the time."

"I see."

The inspector sat quietly staring at Jim. Why was he looking so coldly? Jim was relieved when the woman reappeared with a glass and a mug. The inspector placed a coin on the table, which she swept into her apron. He then raised his glass and pointed it at Jim.

"To your health."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but can you tell me what this is about? I really must be on my way home. I'm past my time, and my father will worry."

"Speaking of time, would you like a watch?" The inspector held out two gold pocket watches for Jim's inspection. "He may have taken one of mine, but I relieved him of two of his. They weren't his, anyway. Pick one. It's yours."

"Sir, these would be stolen watches, then?"

"I'm quite certain of that. He probably stole them from some gentlemen today and hadn't time to sell them off before I took them back. Which one would you like?"

"I can't, sir. They belong to someone else. That would be stealing."

"It's not like you stole them. He stole them, then I recovered them, and now I offer one to you. They appear quite valuable. Look, this one is gold and has a fine gold chain."

"It's not right, sir. It's not Christian. Perhaps you could find the owners and give them back. Thank you kindly for the offer. May I go now?"

"Very good, lad." The inspector took a drink. "I have a few more questions first."

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The inspector seemed pleased for the first time. Odd, why wasn't he upset that his gift had been refused? Jim squirmed in his seat, wishing he'd never picked up the gentleman with the red packet.

"How long have you lived in London?"

"All my life."

"Do you know it well?"

"Like the back of my hand. I've been riding with my father since he bought his first horse cart. I could barely walk, he tells me. He's taught me every street and lane in the city."

"How did you get to the Foreign Office and back so quickly?"

"I ran."

"That doesn't completely answer my question. You surely spent some time waiting for an audience with Lord Lansdowne. That, added to the distance you had to cover and the crowds you had to navigate...you made excellent time."

"You have to know the mews, sir. They can save you considerable distance when you're on foot."

"I assume you saw Lord Lansdowne."

"Yes sir, as I was told."

"Describe him to me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"What does he look like?"

"He has a high forehead and long narrow face, brown hair but balding in front, sideburns, and a moustache that he waxes and twists at the end."

"What color are his eyes?"

"Blue."

"How old would you make him?"

"About sixty, I would think."



"The woman who ran into me on the street outside, what color were her gloves?"

"Light blue with white trim at the wrists."

"And her shoes?"

"Black."

"The policeman who directed you to me, did he have a mustache or no?"

"Yes, a bushy black one."

"And how tall would you make him to be?"

"Taller than you, perhaps six feet or more."

"Close your eyes."

"I'm sorry?"

"Close your eyes." The inspector paused from the rapid-fire questioning.

Jim felt increasingly anxious and further confused. He could hear the inspector take a sip of something. What were his options? He could get up and run, but that hulking Mick was still about, assuming he could outdo the lightning reflexes he'd seen the inspector employ. Besides, the brute still had his money.

"Now, lad, without peeking, what color are my eyes?"

"I'm not certain, sir."

"You're not certain?"

"I mean, they seem to change depending on the lighting or something. I think they're mostly gray, maybe green, but then they look light blue. I'm not sure. Your left eye, the one with the scar below it, has more brown, though."

"What was the first thing I said to you?"

"Come with me. We need someplace private to talk."

"Are you sure? Think on it again. *Exactly* what did I say?"

"You said, 'Come with me, Master Talbot, we need someplace less public to talk.'"

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"The man who took my watch, what was he wearing on his head?"

"A derby, like yours, only cleaner."

"Yes, very good indeed, lad. You may open your eyes now." The inspector grinned and sat back in his chair. "I think you'll do."

"Sir, please, what is this all about? I'd very much like to go home."

"Master Talbot, I'm with Scotland Yard. I'd like to employ you. You've demonstrated the characteristics I need for the task at hand. No, please, don't interrupt. I know you've been through much today, so just listen.

"I'm on the trail of an assassin. I can use honest and reliable eyes in the street. I'd like to hire your cab for the next several weeks. I'll pay you full fare for each day while you are under my employment, with each week's payment made in advance. All you need do is ride through the city, as if on your way to pick up a fare, and keep your eyes and ears open."

"What am I to look for?"

"A man with a black box."

"I'm sorry. A black box?"

"Yes, a man carrying a black box, the box being about a third the size of a hat box, longer than it is wide. If you see a man with a box of that description, particularly in the vicinity of children, you must alert me immediately."

"And how will I do that, sir?"

"There's a checkered knit scarf under the seat of your cab. Is it yours?"

"Yes, it's useful on a cold day."

"No doubt. On such a cold day you must wear it with both ends in front. If you see the man or know where he might be, place one of the ends over your shoulder such that it dangles behind you. Upon doing so you should move your cab thusly: make a turn on

every fifth street you come upon, always in the same direction left or right, in accordance with the position of your scarf. If you intend to make left turns, place the scarf over your left shoulder. If you intend to make right turns, place the scarf over your right shoulder. Keep making turns at every fifth street in a consistent direction, left or right per the signal you've made, until someone flags you down and asks for a ride to Saint George's Dragon on Brick Lane."

"But there isn't a Saint George's Dragon on Brick Lane."

"Exactly, but whoever asks for such you should trust implicitly. Tell him what you know immediately, and follow his instructions to the letter."

"And what if the day isn't cold?"

"Then signal with your scarf by draping it over the back of your seat. Drape it on the left side for left turns and on the right for right turns."

Jim reached for his beer and took a long drink.

"This part is particularly important. You must be absolutely discreet. No one must know you're working for me or why, not even your father. That is a critical term of your employment and a condition that will keep you out of harm's way."

Jim took another long drink, downing nearly half the mug at once. He suddenly felt a little light-headed.

"Sir, I still don't know your name."

"Inspector Edmund Jenkins. Now, drink up, lad. We need to get you and your reward home."