Burning Bright

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Extract

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ONE

There was something humiliating about waiting in a cart on a busy London street with all your possessions stacked around you, on show to the curious public. Jem Kellaway sat by a tower of Windsor chairs his father had made for the family years ago, and watched aghast as passers-by openly inspected the cart's contents. He was not used to seeing so many strangers at once – the appearance of one in their Dorsetshire village would be an event discussed for days after – and to being so exposed to their attention and scrutiny. He hunkered back among the family belongings, trying to make himself less conspicuous. A wiry boy with a narrow face, deep-set blue eyes and sandy fair hair that curled below his ears, Jem was not one to draw attention to himself, and people peered more often at his family's belongings than at him. A couple even stopped and handled items as if they were at a barrow squeezing pears to see which was ripest – the woman fingering the hem of a nightdress that poked out of a split bag, the man picking up one of Thomas Kellaway's saws and testing its teeth for sharpness. Even when Jem shouted 'Hey!', he took his time setting it down again.

Apart from the chairs, much of the cart was filled with the tools of Jem's father's trade: wooden hoops used to bend wood for the arms and backs of the Windsor chairs

he specialised in, a dismantled lathe for turning chair legs, and a selection of saws, axes, chisels and augers. Indeed, Thomas Kellaway's tools took up so much room that the Kellaways had had to take turns walking alongside the cart for the week it took to get from Piddletrenthide to London.

The cart they had travelled in, driven by Mr Smart, a local Piddle Valley man with an unexpected sense of adventure, was halted in front of Astley's Amphitheatre. Thomas Kellaway had had only a vague notion of where to find Philip Astley, and no idea of how big London really was, thinking he could stand in the middle of it and see the amphitheatre where Astley's circus performed, the way he might back in Dorchester. Luckily for them, Astley's Circus was well known in London, and they were quickly directed to the large building at the end of Westminster Bridge, with its round, peaked wooden roof and front entrance adorned with four columns. An enormous, white flag flying from the top of the roof read ASTLEY'S in red on one side and AMPHITHEATRE in black on the other.

Ignoring the curious people on the street as best he could, Jem fixed his eyes instead on the nearby river, which Mr Smart had decided to wander along, 'to see a bit o' London,' and on Westminster Bridge, which arched over the water and pitched into the distant mass of square towers and spires of Westminster Abbey. None of the rivers Jem knew in Dorset – the Frome the size of a country lane, the Piddle a mere rivulet he could easily jump across – bore any resemblance to the Thames, a broad channel of rocking, choppy green-brown water pulled back and forth by the distant tide of the sea. Both river and bridge were clogged with traffic – boats on the Thames, carriages, carts and pedestrians on the bridge. Jem had never seen so many people at once, even

on market day in Dorchester, and was so distracted by the sight of so much movement that he could take in little detail.

Though tempted to get down from the cart and join Mr Smart at the water's edge, he didn't dare leave Maisie and his mother. Maisie Kellaway was gazing about in bewilderment and flapping a handkerchief at her face. 'Lord, it's hot for March,' she said. 'It weren't this hot back home, were it, Jem?'

'It'll be cooler tomorrow,' Jem promised. Although Maisie was two years older than he, it often seemed to Jem that she was his younger sister, needing protection from the unpredictability of the world – though there was little of that in the Piddle Valley. His job would be harder here.

Anne Kellaway was watching the river as Jem had, her eyes fixed on a boy pulling hard on the oars of a rowboat. A dog sat opposite him, panting in the heat; he was the boy's only cargo. Jem knew what his mother was thinking of as she followed the boy's progress: his brother Tommy, who had loved dogs and always had at least one from the village following him about.

Tommy Kellaway had been a handsome boy, with a tendency to daydream that baffled his parents. It was clear early on that he would never be a chairmaker, for he had no affinity for wood and what it could do, or any interest in the tools his father tried to teach him to use. He would let an auger come to a halt mid-turn, or a lathe spin slower and slower and stop as he gazed at the fire or into the middle distance – a trait he inherited from his father, but without the accompanying ability to get back to his work.

Despite this essential uselessness – a trait Anne Kellaway would normally despise – his mother loved him more than

her other children, though she could not have said why. Perhaps she felt he was more helpless and so needed her more. Certainly he was good company, and made her laugh as no one else could. But her laughter had died the morning six weeks before when she found him under the pear tree at the back of the Kellaways' garden. He must have climbed it in order to pick the one pear left, which had managed to cling onto its branch and hung just out of reach all winter, teasing them, even though they knew the cold would have ruined its taste. A branch had snapped, and he fell and broke his neck. A sharp pain pierced her chest whenever Anne Kellaway thought of him; she felt it now, watching the boy and the dog in the boat. Her first taste of London could not erase it.

TWO

Thomas Kellaway felt very small and timid as he passed between the tall columns outside the amphitheatre. He was a small, lean man, with tightly curled hair, like the pelt of a terrier, cut close to his scalp. His presence made little impression on such a grand entrance. Stepping inside and leaving his family out in the street, he found the foyer dark and empty, though he could hear the pounding of hooves and the cracking of a whip through a doorway. Following the sounds, he entered the theatre itself, standing among rows of benches to gape at the performing ring, where several horses were trotting, their riders standing rather than sitting on the saddles. In the centre a young man stood cracking a whip as he called out directions. Though he had seen them do the same at a show in Dorchester a month earlier, Thomas Kellaway still stared. If anything it seemed even more astonishing that the riders could perform such a trick again. One time might be a lucky accident; twice indicated real skill.

Surrounding the stage, a wooden structure of boxes and a gallery had been built, with seats and places to stand. A huge three-tiered wagon-wheel chandelier hung above it all, and the round roof with open shutters high up also let in light.

Thomas Kellaway didn't watch the riders for long, for as

he stood among the benches a man approached and asked what he wanted.

'I be wantin' to see Mr Astley, sir, if he'll have me,' Thomas Kellaway replied.

The man he was speaking to was Philip Astley's assistant manager. John Fox had a long moustache and heavy-lidded eyes, which he usually kept half-closed, only ever opening them wide at disasters – of which there had been and would be several in the course of Philip Astley's long run as a circus impresario. Thomas Kellaway's sudden appearance at the amphitheatre was not what John Fox would consider a disaster, and so he regarded the Dorset man without surprise and through drooping eyelids. He was used to people asking to see his boss. He also had a prodigious memory, which is always useful in an assistant, and remembered Thomas Kellaway from Dorchester the previous month. 'Go outside,' he said, 'an' I expect in the end he'll be along to see you.'

Puzzled by John Fox's sleepy looking eyes and lackadaisical answer, Thomas Kellaway retreated back to his family in the cart. It was enough that he'd got his family to London; he had run out of the wherewithal to achieve more.

No one would have guessed – least of all himself – that Thomas Kellaway, Dorset chairmaker, from a family settled in the Piddle Valley for centuries, would end up in London. Everything about his life up until he met Philip Astley had been ordinary. He had learned chair-making from his father, and inherited the workshop on his father's death. He married the daughter of his father's closest friend, a woodcutter, and except for the fumbling they did in bed together, it was like being with a sister. They lived in Piddletrenthide, the village they had both grown up in, and had three sons – Sam, Tommy and Jem – and a daughter, Maisie.

Thomas went to the Five Bells to drink two evenings a week, to church every Sunday, to Dorchester every month. He had never been to the seaside twelve miles away, or expressed any interest, as others in the pub sometimes did, in seeing any of the cathedrals within a few days' reach – Wells or Salisbury or Winchester – or of going to Poole or Bristol or London. When he was in Dorchester, he did his business – took commissions for chairs, bought wood – and went home again. He preferred to get back late rather than to stay over at one of the tradesmen's inns in Dorchester and drink his money away. That seemed to him far more dangerous than dark roads. He was a genial man, never the loudest in the pub, happiest when he was turning chair legs on his lathe, concentrating on one small groove or curve, or even forgetting that he was making a chair, and simply admiring the grain or colour or texture of the wood.

This was how he lived, and how he was expected to live, until in February 1792 Philip Astley's Travelling Equestrian Spectacular came to spend a few days in Dorchester just two weeks after Tommy Kellaway fell from the pear tree. Part of Astley's Circus was touring the West Country, diverting there on its way back to London from a winter spent in Dublin and Liverpool. Though it was advertised widely with posters and handbills and puffs about the show in the *Western Flying Post*, Thomas Kellaway had not known the show was in town when he went on one of his trips there. He had come to deliver a set of eight high-back Windsor chairs, bringing them in his cart along with his son Jem, who was learning the trade, as Thomas Kellaway had done from his father.

Jem helped unload the chairs and watched his father handle the customer with that tricky combination of

deference and confidence needed for business. 'Pa,' he began, when the transaction was complete and Thomas Kellaway had pocketed an extra crown from the pleased customer, 'can we go and look at the sea?' On a hill south of Dorchester, it was possible to see the sea five miles away. Jem had been to the view a few times, and hoped one day to get to the sea itself. In the fields above the Piddle Valley, he often peered south, hoping that somehow the landscape of layered hills would have shifted to allow him a glimpse of the blue line of water that led to the rest of the world.

'No, son, we'd best get home,' Thomas Kellaway replied automatically, then regretted it as he saw Jem's face shut down like curtains drawn over a window. It reminded him of a brief period in his life when he too wanted to see and do new things, to break away from established routines, until age and responsibility yanked him back into the acceptance he needed to live a quiet Piddle life. Jem no doubt would also come to this acceptance naturally. That was what growing up was. Yet he felt for him.

He said nothing more. But when they passed the meadows by the River Frome on the outskirts of town where a round wooden structure with a canvas roof had been erected, he and Jem watched the men juggling torches by the roadside to lure customers in; Thomas Kellaway then felt for the extra crown in his pocket and turned the cart off into the field. It was the first unpredictable thing he had ever done, and it seemed, briefly, to loosen something in him, like the ice on a pond cracking in early spring.

It made it easier when he and Jem returned home later that night with tales of the spectacles they'd seen, as well as an encounter they'd had with Philip Astley himself, for Thomas Kellaway to face his wife's bitter eyes that judged

him for having dared to have fun when his son's grave was still fresh. 'He offered me work, Anne,' he told her. 'In London. A new life, away from—' He didn't finish. He didn't need to – they were both thinking of the mound of earth in the Piddletrenthide graveyard.

To his astonishment – for he himself had not thought to take the offer seriously – Anne Kellaway looked straight at him and nodded. 'All right. London it be.'

THREE

The Kellaways waited at the cart for half an hour before they were visited by Philip Astley himself – circus owner, creator of spectacles, origin of outlandish gossip, magnet to the skilled and the eccentric, landlord, patron of local businesses and oversized colourful character. He sported a red coat he had worn years before during his service as a cavalry officer; it had gold buttons and trim, and was fastened only at the collar, revealing a substantial belly held in by a buttoned white waistcoat. His trousers were white, his boots had chaps that came to the knee, and, in his one concession to civilian life, he wore a black top hat, which he was constantly raising to ladies he recognised or would like to recognise. Accompanied by the ever-present John Fox, he trotted down the steps of the amphitheatre, strode up to the cart, raised his hat to Anne Kellaway, shook Thomas Kellaway's hand, and nodded at Jem and Maisie. 'Welcome, welcome!' he cried, brusque and cheerful at the same time. 'It is very good to see you again, sir! I trust you are enjoying the sights of London after your journey from Devon?'

'Dorsetshire, sir,' Thomas Kellaway corrected. 'We lived near Dorchester.'

'Ah, yes, Dorchester – a fine town. You make barrels there, do you?'

'Chairs,' John Fox corrected in a low voice. This was why

he went everywhere with his employer – to provide the necessary nudges and adjustments when needed.

'Chairs, yes, of course. And what can I do for you, sir, ma'am?' He nodded at Anne Kellaway a touch uneasily, for she was sitting ramrod straight, her eyes fixed on Mr Smart, now up on Westminster Bridge, her mouth pulled tight like a drawstring bag. Every inch of her gave out the message that she did not want to be here or have anything to do with him; and that was a message Philip Astley was unused to. His fame made him much in demand, with too many people seeking his attention. For someone to display the opposite threw him, and immediately made him go out of his way to regain that attention. 'Tell me what you need and I will give it you!' he added, with a sweep of his arm, a gesture lost on Anne Kellaway, who kept her eyes on Mr Smart.

Anne Kellaway had begun to regret their decision to move from Dorsetshire almost the moment the cart pulled away from their cottage, the feeling deepening over the week they spent on the road picking their way through the early spring mud to get to London. By the time she sat in front of the amphitheatre, not looking at Philip Astley, she knew that being in London was not going to take her mind from her dead son as she'd hoped it might; if anything, it made her think of him even more, for being here reminded her of what she was fleeing. But she would rather blame her husband, and Philip Astley too, for her misfortune, than Tommy himself for being such a fool.

'Well, sir,' Thomas Kellaway began, 'you did invite me to London, and I'm very kindly accepting your offer.'

'Did I?' Philip Astley turned to John Fox. 'Did I invite him, Fox?'

John Fox nodded. 'You did, sir.'

'Oh, don't you remember, Mr Astley?' Maisie cried, leaning forward. 'Pa told us all about it. He and Jem were at your show, an' during it someone were doing a trick atop a chair on a horse, an' the chair broke and Pa fixed it for you right there. An' you got to talking about wood and furniture, because you trained as a cabinet maker, didn't you, sir?'

'Hush, Maisie,' Anne Kellaway interjected, turning her head for a moment from the bridge. 'I'm sure he doesn't want to hear about all that.'

Philip Astley gazed at the slim country girl talking with such animation from her perch and chuckled. 'Well, now, miss, I do begin to recall such an encounter. But how does that bring you here?'

'You told Pa if he ever wanted to, he should come to London and you would help him set himself up. So that's what we done, an' here we be.'

'Here you be indeed, Maisie, all of you.' He turned to Jem, judging him to be about twelve and of the useful age to a circus for running errands and helping out. 'And what's your name, lad?'

'Jem, sir.'

'What sort of chairs are those you're sitting next to, young Jem?'

'Windsors, sir. Pa made 'em.'

'A handsome chair, Jem, very handsome. Could you make me some?'

'Of course, sir,' Thomas Kellaway said.

Philip Astley's eyes slid to Anne Kellaway. 'I'll take a dozen of 'em.'

Anne Kellaway stiffened, but still did not look at the circus man, despite his generous commission.

'Now, Fox, what rooms have we got free at the moment?' he demanded. Philip Astley owned a fair number of houses in Lambeth, the area around the amphitheatre and just across Westminster Bridge from London proper.

John Fox moved his lips so that his moustache twitched. 'Only some with Miss Pelham at Hercules Buildings – but she chooses her own lodgers.'

'Well, she'll choose the Kellaways – they'll do nicely. Take 'em over there now, Fox, with some boys to help unload.' Philip Astley lifted his hat once more at Anne Kellaway, shook Thomas Kellaway's hand again, and said, 'If you need anything, Fox'll see you right. Welcome to Lambeth!'