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Kate Griffin, author of *Fyneshade*

'Susan Bell is a captivating narrator who makes a delightful guide through this riveting murder mystery'
Anna Abney, author of *The Master of Measham Hall*

'A delightful caper around the tombs of Westminster Abbey, with a curious king, a royal corpse, a murder victim and an endearing parrot. Wonderfully told, and hugely enjoyable'
Guy Morpuss, author of *Black Lake Manor*

'An ingenious mystery in a historical setting that is incredibly authentic. I was utterly transported'
Victoria Dowd, author of *The Supper Club Murders*

The Bells of Westminster

Also by Leonora Nattrass and available from Viper

Black Drop
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The Bells of Westminster

LEONORA NATTRASS

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Viper
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

Text Design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978 1 80081 7012
eISBN 978 1 80081 7005

The Cloud capt Tow'rs,
The Gorgeous Palaces,
The Solemn Temples,
The Great Globe itself,
Yea all which it Inherit,
Shall Dissolve;
And like the baseless Fabrick of a Vision
Leave not a wreck behind.

From Shakespeare's monument,
Westminster Abbey

Cast of Characters

THE DEAN AND CHAPTER OF WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Mr Bell, Dean of Westminster
Mr Bray, Canon-treasurer
Mr Slater, Canon-steward
Mr Turnbull, Canon-almoner
Mr Suckling, Sacrist
Mr Lamb, Chanter

ABBEY SERVANTS

Henry Ede, Verger
John Catling, Verger
Benjamin Fidoe, Clerk of Works
Thomas Corbett, Searcher of the Sanctuary
George Slemaker, Porter
James Michelson, Gardener
Also sundry sweepers, scullions, bell ringers, butlers,
laundresses, workmen, *&c.*

THE ABBEY LADIES

Susan Bell, daughter to the Dean
Mrs Bray, wife to the Canon-treasurer
Mrs Slater the elder, mother to the Canon-steward
Mrs Slater the younger, wife to the Canon-steward
The young Miss Brays, daughters of the Canon-treasurer
The grown-up Miss Turnbulls, daughters of the
Canon-almoner

THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

Robert Delingpole, Lawyer
Thomas Alnutt Esq., Antiquarian
Henry Quintrel, Librarian at Lambeth Palace
Louis Durand, visiting antiquary from France

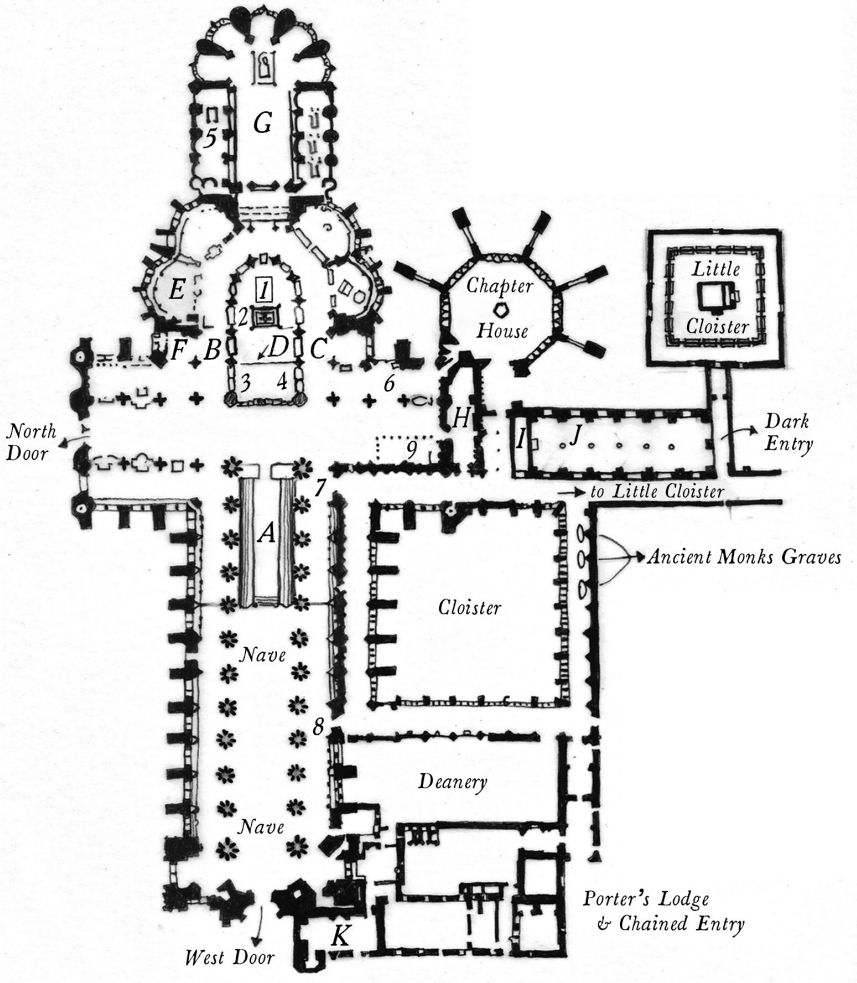
OTHER PARTIES

His Majesty George III, Sovereign Visitor to the Abbey
Major-General Thomas Desaguliers, Equerry to George III
Major-General Edward Mathew, Equerry to George III
Princess Elizabeth, the king's daughter
Lindley Bell, nephew to the dean and cousin to Susan Bell, just returned from his Grand Tour
Thomas Ffoulkes, a friend Lindley made while on his Tour
William Blake, an apprentice engraver, employed to draw the tombs in the abbey
Sir Horatio Mann, nephew of the Envoy Extraordinary to the Tuscan Court in Italy
Dame Elizabeth Yates, widow of Sir Joseph Yates, lawyer
Admiral, Dame Yates's dog
Cuthbert, Susan Bell's parrot

A. Quire B. North Ambulatory C. South Ambulatory D. High Altar

E. Chapel of John the Baptist F. Chapel of Abbot Islip G. Henry VII Lady Chapel

H. Chapel of St. Faith I. Abbey Library J. Chapel of the Pyx K. Jerusalem Chamber



1. Shrine of Edward the Confessor 2. Tomb of 'Longshanks' Edward I 3. Tomb of Aveline de Forz

4. Tomb of Edmund Crouchback 5. Tomb of Queen Elizabeth 6. Poets' Corner

7. Entrance to East Cloister 8. Entrance to West Cloister 9. Muniments Gallery (upstairs)

Introductory

THE DEANERY
WESTMINSTER ABBEY
THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1774

THERE ARE TWO solemn maxims with which my father has endeavoured to impress me over the years of my girlhood.

The first is that although he has neglected the worldly matter of amassing money (so that he must remain Dean Bell of Westminster until his death, merely to keep a roof over our heads) I shall not starve on that unhappy but inevitable occasion.

This is the case because, along with a large grey parrot named Cuthbert, my late mother has also left me a fortune of two thousand pounds, settled upon me so securely that not even God himself can part me from it. After Father's death the money will be invested in the funds and Cuthbert and I shall always have an income to live upon.

Not a great income, however, Father says. We might need

to live something in the manner of a greengrocer, with about the same amount of ready cash at our disposal. I do not know if Cuthbert would like it, but I must say this prospect does not entirely dismay me. At church fairs, when I inveigle myself on to some stall or other, I always much enjoy the feeling of *filthy lucre* in my palm. Coins are a delight to me, for I am so seldom in their presence or they in mine. The world of bills and payments happens elsewhere, out of sight – in Father's study, I suppose, or at the kitchen door of the Deanery.

Father's second maxim (*query*: do I really mean *maxim*? Or is it more properly called a *dictum*?) is that if I do not wish to live like a greengrocer, I had better marry, give my two thousand pounds to some deserving gentleman, and continue for ever in my current, happy ignorance of money matters and tradesmen's bills.

He advises against a clergyman, however. (I believe fathers often warn their children away from their own professions.) A churchman's stipend is shocking, he says, and a clergyman quite as subject to the whims of his superiors as any politician. It would therefore be unfortunate that I scarcely meet any other kind of gentleman, if it were not the case that Father's dearest wish (though he does not absolutely say so) is that I should marry my cousin, Lindley Bell. Lindley is presently staying with us at the Deanery, between returning from his Grand Tour on the Continent and going home to the family seat in Leicestershire, where he is to settle down and be a country gentleman at the ripe old age of twenty-one.

Meanwhile, I have two maxims (or dictums?) of my own, which are more pithy, if no less sincere.

First: a deep and solemn love of bonnets and gowns is not incompatible with common sense or even genius. I often have my profoundest thoughts when concentrating upon the sewing of a very fine seam. The truth of this is self-evident, since the clergy of Westminster Abbey, in their golden gowns, are more gorgeously arrayed than I could ever be, and never seem to think themselves the slightest bit frivolous.

Second, my strictest and most absolute *dictum*: never remain in any space, large or small, alone with Mr Suckling, the sacrist; curator and keeper of the said gorgeous clerical robes, along with the abbey's collection of chalices, candlesticks, altar cloths, *et al.* He will infallibly propose, if given any opportunity to do so, and I cannot in any possible circumstances be known as Susan Suckling.

Or, at least, it is to be hoped that Mr Suckling will propose. I sometimes think he might dispense entirely with such preliminaries and instead proceed directly to carnal pleasures. He has a special leer I believe he reserves only for me, which always puts me in mind of Roman emperors in general, and Caligula in particular. (And everyone knows how *he* carried on.)

To be fair to him, Mr Suckling is always smiling in some way or other. A pious dreamy curve to his full lips when he conducts Evening Prayer and what I would call an oily simper when the archbishop comes visiting. It is common knowledge that Mr Suckling supported the archbishop's preferred candidate for Dean against the king's choice to appoint Father (or desired the archbishop's favour, which is much the same thing) and as a consequence takes pleasure in all of Father's little trials and tribulations.

And of these there are unfortunately many, for the dean oversees all the various doings of the abbey. What with the vergers and the clergymen, the sweepers and the gardeners – along with the abbey watchman, the searcher of the sanctuary and the army of workmen who keep the ancient fabric from falling on our heads – Father has the care of what amounts to a large and thriving village.

But beneath these various obstacles to tranquillity there is, nonetheless, a soothing rhythm to abbey life. The daily round of services and prayers; the weekly round of maintenance and sweeping and arranging flowers at the altar; the seasonal feasts of the Church year, which come one upon the other at intervals of a few weeks. The practising of the choir: the singing men making the roof ring with their deeper voices beneath the boys' soaring sopranos; the boys from across the yard at Westminster School looking as pious as cherubim in the new-built choir stalls, while at other times making a great hullabaloo about the gardens with their footballs.

And then there is me. I try not to be another burden on Father's shoulders, but the abbey is my home after all, and the cloisters my garden where I take my daily walks. No one cautions me against haunting the abbey for my recreation either (there is, as I have said, always a great deal going on and even the vergers may not positively eject a young woman from church, especially if she makes sure to pray at regular intervals) and I have made it my place of business, too. Viz. I arrange the flowers on a Sunday and record any matters of particular interest pertaining to the abbey in this journal.

The second bible in this place is a volume entitled *An Historical Description of Westminster Abbey, its Monuments*

and Curiosities, much beloved of the vergers, who make a considerable amount of *filthy lucre* of their own, showing visitors around the abbey. I once thought my journal might supplement this worthy work, in a new edition to be published under the suitably sexless name NASUS BELL (which, if you study it, you will find a very cunning stratagem). But lately the *curiosities* have grown rather more curious than is comfortable, and a truer title might now end with the words: *its Monuments and Murders*. Whether we shall ever get to the bottom of the business remains to be seen, and there is a lofty personage very anxious, along with Father, that the report will not reach the press (Father being above all things afraid of the archbishop's spiteful tongue).

This being so, alas, Nasus Bell will likely remain forever unborn, along with my literary fame. But for my own satisfaction, I shall preserve the account of the affair as it unfolded in my journal, beginning on a morning in early May when the events surrounding *its Monuments and Murders* had their first commencement.

1

SATURDAY 7 MAY

My cousin Lindley was already at the table when I came into the parlour this morning, with a book propped against the teapot. He did not raise his eyes when I came in, nor greet me, so I busied myself cutting a slice of cold meat for my own breakfast, and giving Cuthbert a very wrinkled apple from last autumn's store for his. Within a month there will be strawberries and, in another month, grapes from the hothouse, but Cuthbert liked his apple and commenced peaceably dismembering it on his perch.

The sun was shining through the windows, showing in scrupulous detail the egg yolk trickling down my cousin's chin, and the butter glistening amid the boyish wisps of hair on his upper lip as he bent, transfixed, over his book. The manner in which a man eats his quail eggs may not be an infallible window into his soul, but I did wonder how I should tolerate the yolk, *&c.*, if confronted with it every morning of my married life as Father wishes.

In one way, Lindley is a perfect example of a secular young gentleman destined to inherit his family's affluent country estate. He is well-dressed, well-combed and slightly scrubbed looking, as though he has only just escaped from his nanny's managing hand. I know nothing bad of him (though, quite besides the yolk, *&c.*, he has a propensity to stare at one with a strange unblinking gaze and his ears protrude and turn pink when he is excited). Father likes to joke that our name has a ring to it, and there is certainly much to be said for remaining always Susan Bell, one way or another, at least for the length of this earthly existence. (*Query*: are there surnames in heaven? Are there names at all? And if not, how is conversation to be carried on without confusion?)

But in his own way Lindley is quite the curiosity himself. He is lately returned from Europe where, instead of spending his time examining the marvels of antiquity in Greece and Rome as most men do (and as a man with so milk-and-water a name as Lindley really *ought* to do) he betook himself to Holland (of all places) to talk to men of science. He has carried home a trunk full of souvenirs, but rather than pleasant things like silks and statues, he has instead brought back odd bits of metal and glass, and a number of strange machines.

His father does not know he is staying with us. There was some terrible quarrel between Father and my uncle when I was small, and Father quitted the family living in dudgeon. He subsequently made his way in the world quite alone (and, I might add, with great success, having risen so high as Dean of W. without the usual money or connections). But

I suppose Lindley is curious about us, being a curious kind of youth, and Father is extremely eager for a reconciliation with his brother. (*Query:* does Lindley know the reason for their falling-out? His father is a worldly man and must have done something very bad to make Father break with him. But it is typical of Father's gentle nature that he should also be the one to wish to heal the breach.)

I am afraid my own character is more resentful, a trait exemplified over breakfast, as I tried to repay Lindley for ignoring me with a show of equal indifference. In this I had rather less success than he did, for I had forgotten to bring my own book to the table and Cuthbert, so talkative at other times, was wholly preoccupied with his apple. Father had been called out early, but by his plate a small parcel lay waiting. It was his birthday and the package was my gift to him. I was morally certain he did not know it was his birthday for he is always far too busy with his various enthusiasms to remember such trifles. I therefore also knew he would greet the discovery with delight at my thoughtfulness, and self-deprecating amusement at his own absence of mind.

'What are you reading?' I asked Lindley eventually, after a protracted inward tussle between maintaining a dignified silence and finding out what subject could be so riveting as to make him utterly dead to all other considerations. Lindley looked up at me as if clambering out of a very deep, dark hole – which, as it turned out, was rather apt.

'A very interesting disquisition on coal.'

'I beg your pardon. Did you say *coal*?'

'That black stuff your Father keeps in his fire grate, for making the flickering orange lights which we commonly call flames.'

And this is why it is generally better to mind my own business and leave Lindley to his. Though our fathers were estranged long ago, I do have fragments of memories of the Parsonage on the family estate in Leicestershire. The pattern of a cushion. The way light fell in through the glass door to the garden. Breaking Lindley's toys and him biting me.

'I expect you find yourself very droll,' I said. 'It is lucky for you, since no one else does.'

'It is hard to amuse a spinster aunt,' he answered, squirting golden yolk on to a slice of rather charred cold toast as he cut into another tiny egg. 'Her interests must naturally be jaded by so many long and disappointed years.'

'Lindley,' I said, 'I am twenty-three.'

'And I pity you, dear Miss Bell, from the depths of my heart, I really do.'

Here's the dean, Cuthbert announced, stretching a leg and a grey wing, and it was certainly lucky that Father came in then, or to relieve my feelings I might have wiped the butter from Lindley's chin with his own eggy toast.

But Father looked unusually fretful. He didn't even sit down, nor notice my parcel at all. 'I am deuced annoyed,' he said, picking up a bath bun and pecking at it irritably. He is very small and very round, like a robin in his scarlet cassock. Perhaps it is Cuthbert's doing, but I always think we Bells are birdlike. I suppose I am a thrush, being brown-haired and freckled and somewhat larger than Father is. And Lindley, being all eyes and ears, is an owl.

'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Not old Dame Yates again?' (Surely only something so dreadful could elicit the expletive 'deuced' from Father's lips.)

'No, no. I almost wish it were,' he said. 'This is something much worse.'

'Worse?' I echoed. 'What could possibly be worse than Dame Yates?'

'Susan, my dear, that is not very kind.' Father now sat down and buttered his bun, still oblivious to my waiting parcel. 'But any interruption is certainly a nuisance this week.'

Holy Thursday was almost upon us, when the great and the good present themselves at the abbey for the Ascension Day service, including the king our patron, and the numerous members of his family. The king stood out against the archbishop and appointed Father as his dean, which he was perfectly entitled to do, the abbey being what is known as a *Royal Peculiar* – more or less the king's private church and no one's business save his own.

'But now the antiquities are in the north transept, causing a terrible fuss,' Father was going on. 'We shall have to close the abbey and rearrange all our rehearsals, merely for their convenience – I might even say, for their trivial amusement.'

'Antiquities? Making a fuss?'

The abbey is certainly brim full of antiquities; there being so very many tombs and monuments it is like living in a city of the dead. Battalions of pale, carved men and women loiter about (some striking highly unlikely poses) or doze on top of their monuments as brazenly as if they were at home in their own beds. Their faces are various, but most wear a look of bland, soulful despondency, though among dead people they are pretty well off, being spared the horrors of the grave and dusted weekly. On the whole, a rebellion seemed unlikely, and in this it turned out I was right.

'The *Society* of Antiquities, I mean, my dear, or at least some of them,' Father explained.

Lindley was still reading his book, but, as always, Cuthbert was listening to the conversation with his head cocked on one side. Catching Father's fretful tone, he loudly opined that the Antiquities in question were *bad old birds* and then tolled the chime of the sonorous abbey clock, three times, with some ominous meaning.

'But what exactly do they want?' I asked, sipping my tea, and trying to exude calm as I always do when Father begins to fuss.

'To open a tomb, if you will believe it. Now, at this very hour, without any forewarning at all!'

'Then tell them to go away,' I said. 'Strange gentlemen cannot come in and rummage through our tombs just as they please.'

He looked unhappy. 'I told them that if their authority came from the archbishop they were mistaken, for he has no sway here. But they had already found that out and are come properly armed with a letter from the king.'

Bad birds, bad birds, dong, dong, dong, Cuthbert reiterated with some energy, while Lindley finally raised his head from his book and stared at Father, a slight look of interest dawning in his owlish face. 'What tomb do they want to open?'

'King Edward the First. Edward Longshanks, as they called him. A very tall and, some say, disagreeable man who was making endless wars against the Scots and Welsh in the late twelve hundreds. You will have seen his very plain marble coffin behind an iron grating in the north ambulatory, I am sure. It has "Hammer of the Scots" embossed upon it in rather faded gold lettering.'

I wasn't sure I had seen it myself and was therefore pretty certain Lindley hadn't. 'What does his effigy look like?'

'He has no effigy at all, my dear. As I say, it is just a plain coffin – very odd, in its way, lying among the other medieval kings who are so very ornate. I gather that is partly why they wish to open it.'

Lindley wiped his chin and stood up. 'They are going to open it now?' he said. 'Well then, what are we waiting for?'

2

When father and I hurried out of the Deanery Court, Lindley's figure was already well ahead, flickering in and out of the arches as he flew along the other side of the cloisters towards the door to the south transept of the abbey.

Father turned the other way, past Michelson the gardener peacefully weeding the borders, towards the door to the nave (the distance to the north transept being pretty much of a muchness, as I have established from long experience. In general I prefer the route Lindley had taken, as it gives me the opportunity to bid good morning to the three ancient monks who, after more than six hundred years, lie almost worn away to nothing among the paving slabs against the left-hand wall.)

Inside the abbey, we found a small clutch of gentlemen waiting in the gloom by the quire, hats in hand, while a trumpeter practised his cheerful fanfares for Ascension Day from a platform somewhere above our heads. As we drew nearer, the group proved to be composed of four gentlemen of varying ages. Their leader was a sensible-looking man of

about forty, neatly dressed in a bottle-green waistcoat, who introduced himself as Mr Robert Delingpole before naming the others to Father with tremendous politeness, despite being obliged to speak very loudly above the warbling trumpet. He first presented a very old, very thin man called Mr Alnutt; next, a scholar with long hair and a dirty neckcloth by the name of Quintrel; and finally an acquaintance of Mr Quintrel's, a visiting antiquary from France by the name of Louis Durand. Antiquary seemed too grand a title for the lad in question, who was dark-haired and good-looking and appeared scarcely older than Lindley. (But then Lindley likes to call himself a *natural philosopher*, which is just as ludicrous.)

Mr Delingpole was holding their letter of authority from the king and, having made these introductions, wasted no further time in pressing it upon Father.

'You will see His Majesty requires all accommodations to be extended to us, Dean, but there should be very little difficulty for you, I hope. Being so plain and simple, the tomb will be easy to open with the assistance of your workmen, and we think the abbey need only close for about an hour. We have arranged with Mr Basire, the engraver, for his apprentice to make some sketches to record the occasion, for the boy is here already, working on some drawings of the monuments for Basire's new book.'

I knew who he meant. I had seen the lad about the abbey these several weeks, always working on some tomb or other; a youth of about seventeen, stocky with practical hands but large, dreamy eyes which I sometimes thought followed me as I passed him.

'But I don't understand why it must be today.' Father thrust

the letter back at Mr Delingpole. 'Indeed, I don't know why it must be at all. What business has the Society of Antiquities to rummage through our tombs just as it pleases?'

It was gratifying to hear Father echo my own words in this way, since as far as all the gathered gentlemen were concerned, I might just as well have been a pigeon perching in the rafters.

'We were emboldened to request the permission of His Majesty by your own very interesting researches, Dean,' Mr Delingpole answered. The trumpeter was catching his breath and a moment of blessed peace descended upon us. I thought Mr Delingpole seemed a nice sort of creature, for his voice, now reduced to a normal pitch, was steady and deep, and his manner towards Father was tactfully soothing. 'We have long heard of your interest in the antiquities of the abbey and your own investigations into the tombs. You really should join our society – which is, in fact, *Antiquaries*, not Antiquities, which makes us sound rather antique ourselves,' he smiled good humouredly, 'for we would be delighted to hear all about your findings.'

But Father is not the sort of man to sit writing scholarly articles; indeed the only accounts of his researches are the ones recorded in my own hand in this journal, so if they ever do reach print they will be the work of Nasus Bell. Nevertheless, Mr Delingpole was quite right to take Father as a good precedent for opening tombs. Seized by the latest of his enthusiasms, he has recently had half the floor up, with the help of the abbey's clerk of works, Benjamin Fidoe, in a quest for James I, who seems to have gone unaccountably missing sometime in the last one hundred and fifty years.

When he watches Fidoe's pickaxe prise up the floor slabs, Father looks exactly like a robin waiting for the gardener to turn up worms.

'My *researches*, as you call them, are underpinned by prayer,' Father said primly, as the trumpeter started up again with a series of fine, pealing flourishes. 'We cannot open the last resting place of any man – still less a king – without all due reverence.'

'Oh, we'll be as reverential as you like,' Mr Quintrel, the shabby scholar, put in with a rather cynical smoky laugh. The thin old man, Mr Alnutt, cast him a reproachful, trembling glance before turning eagerly to Father, but he was forestalled in whatever he was going to say by a sudden shout from above our heads. When we looked up, Benjamin Fidoe was leaning out of an arch in the triforium gallery fifty feet above us and waving down at a couple of workmen, who saluted in answer and shambled off, presumably on some special errand.

Father turned his eyes reluctantly from the workmen back to Mr Delingpole. 'It is all highly inconvenient and the king ought to have known better. He is to be here himself on Thursday and should remember we are taken up with preparing for the ceremony.' (For myself, I think it far more likely that it never crosses the king's mind that the marvellous occasions from which he flits, one to another, are the result of so much labour; but being only a pigeon I did not venture to say so just then.) 'We are installing some lamps in the gallery for a new effect never before attempted,' Father added.

'We need not interrupt those works,' Mr Delingpole answered pleasantly. 'Your man is so far above us that he will

not be able to see or hear what we are about.' He squinted up at Fidoe, who was now sitting with his legs dangling out of the arch. 'But, dear me, that looks a very precarious perch. What do you call that high gallery now? A *triforium*, I think?'

Father didn't answer, being distracted by Fidoe making more cabbalistic signs, this time to him. He raised a hand and Fidoe scrambled to his feet and withdrew into the triforium's shadowy depths.

'What can have been its purpose, I wonder?' Mr Delingpole's eye was now scanning the length of that lofty arcade which runs round the three sides of the transept. 'Whatever did the original builders intend to do with it?'

'Some say it was to be a range of private chapels,' Father answered. 'But the work was never done, and it has always remained abandoned, a dusty, dirty loft full of antique rubbish.'

Mr Delingpole's eyes positively lit up. 'One man's rubbish is another's treasure, you know, Dean. How does one get up there?'

'There is a very narrow winding stair, but no one dares go up except for my man Fidoe there, for the floorboards are quite rotten.'

The rest of the Antiquities (I find it is far too dull to call them antiquaries) were growing restive under these pleasantries. 'Are we ever to see Longshanks this morning?' the French lad asked, with some boyish energy, and Mr Delingpole smiled at him apologetically.

'Yes, yes, of course, Durand. Dear me, the abbey is quite the siren, is she not? So full of alluring secrets that one gets far too easily distracted. But if you will be so good as to

empty the place, Dean, and summon some of your strong men to help us, perhaps we may begin.'

A group of visitors had just come in at the west door, in hope of a tour with a verger, but they were routed out, along with another unoffending set presently examining our collection of wooden kings and queens summarily stuffed in a cupboard. The trumpeter took his silver trumpet away, to continue practising elsewhere, and Basire's apprentice engraver sloped past us, probably assuming himself also banished. But Mr Delingpole called him back as the great doors of the abbey thudded closed, and Mr Suckling the sacrist, who always seems to know when great things are afoot, appeared among us, smiling as usual.

3

Edward Longshanks' tomb is indeed a very plain one. It lies, dour and glowering, behind its iron grille in the north ambulatory, and is therefore only properly accessible from within the shrine of Edward the Confessor, which is a small room raised above the floor behind the high altar. (Two Edwards in one room! It is lucky they both have their nicknames, else I should never keep them straight in my mind. All I know about the Confessor is that he built this abbey in the first place and was the last – or perhaps next to last? – of the Saxon kings, before the Conqueror came in 1066 and shot someone in the eye. But if I am right, why then is the Confessor not called Edward I instead of this other, later one? Did kings not have numbers before the Conquest, only nicknames? And why does Edward Longshanks have both? Perhaps he was greedy as well as *disagreeable*.)

The Confessor's shrine has two marble doors set into the altar itself, along with a flight of wooden stairs from the ambulatory, which is always locked behind a low gate. The only decoration on Edward I's (Longshanks') tomb is the