

# *Silent Messenger, 1887*

by Hannah Ashton

As Victorian villages go, there was nothing remarkable about the community residing in The Malago, a village bordering south of the City of Bristol. A small population of cottages surrounded by farmland sprinkled with outbuildings and livestock with nearby buildings of worship and a village shop just down from the river. Where, on a late morning in the early autumn, the shop is a hub of activity.

“Well, I did ‘ear, that the young Miss Watts and Master Baird are making a fine companionship and both Mr Wattss and Mr Baird are ‘opin’ to see a weddin’ taking place very soon, I ‘eard it meself, I did” discloses Maude, smugly, in her West Country accent.

Believing she alone is privy to such information and she alone is fully responsible for sharing it for the benefit of her community and not taken for local gossip.

Her companion, Beryl, eager to fulfil her curiosity and forgetting her ladylikeness and the need for any discretion she hurriedly replies “Oh how wonderful! Where did you ‘ear that to Maude?” in an equally Bristolian accent, featuring the regional fashion of adding “to” needlessly to sentences.

The chatter of such exciting gossip entertains Beryl and fulfils Maude's ego. They lean their heads in closer to each other not to miss a single word. Whispering, Maude replies

"Well, I say I 'eard it, but I mean me Bill. Down the Coach House. Shook 'ands on it, they did an all. Mind you, I dare say, it woul'nt surprise me if a baby arrives a little earlier than expect'd, if you know what I mean Beryl".

Maude finishes this retort with an expression suggesting scandal and straightens herself with hands on hips.

As the women continue their conversation, the subject moving on to the personal business of another local resident, their two young sons are standing close to their mothers skirt hems. The boys, both coincidentally named George, are as equally engrossed in their tete-a-tete in the trading and bartering of marbles and sucking on hard-boiled sweets.

"Give I that 'un and I'll give thee this blue 'un," offers the first George, the stockier of the two with prominently large ears which were creased over on account of his flat cap and taking the desired marble from the open hand and putting it in his pocket.

"No! Give I that back! Now!" shouts the other George in protest, causing arms to lash out towards his friend, the smaller and slender of the two with moonlike eyes and his cheeks reddening in his fury. The arguing fills the shop with noise and draws their mothers' attention towards the commotion.

“George! George! Now stop please,” Beryl scolds her son and grabs him firmly, and pulls him away forcefully by the arm, much to the other George’s satisfaction.

In that same moment, the door to the village shop is pushed open knocking the brass bell hanging from the internal wooden frame, sending the sound of tintinnabulation throughout the shop and startling Beryl as she loosens her grip on her son who is staring towards the door along with Maude, who stands closely behind and is uncharacteristically silent.

As the breeze and chill is pulled into the shop from the entrance, dragging inside the dust and debris from the horse worn road outside, There is a gentle landing of a footfall, followed by a clunking sound of wood as it hits stone as the new visitor enters through the door.

Maude, still lost for words, manages to turn to look at Beryl with wide eyes and brows tilted inward provides some unspoken remark, which is returned with a similar look of acknowledgement.

The newcomer, acutely aware of the undesirable welcome but stoic in his posture, looks towards the back of the shop past the baskets of seasonal vegetables, pumpkins and toffee apples to where the trading counter lines the cobweb coated back wall, with its marked and grubby wood at foot level. A tin advertisement hangs for *Fry’s Chocolate Milk* with a collection of Will’s cigarette cards standing upright secured in the gaps around the edges. His eyes fall on the shopkeeper and with a tip of his hat, the rim pinched between his thumb and forefinger, he nods his acknowledgement.

The shopkeeper, a stout and portly man is wearing a black waistcoat too tight for his rounded stomach and black breeches equally stretching beyond their intended capacity and both faded and threading. His white collarless shirt is stained by day's old grease and yellowing due to his tobacco use and matching what is left of his teeth. At forty-eight, his years are not showing kindly on his squared face, with an unkempt beard of varying shades of black, grey and white.

Recognising the stranger and receiving his greeting the shopkeeper flicks his dark eyes back to his occupation, serving the distracted Maude and continues weighing up goods on his scales, Epping them into paper bags and toPng up the orders on the register to complete the transaction.

“Thad’ll be a two n’ six please Ms’ Mills”

states the shopkeeper in his gruff tone, altering Maude back to the counter and exchanging the goods for coins into the shopkeepers palm which he counts as he places them into the cash register and slamming the drawer back closed.

“Thank you Mr Bishop, good day to you” Maude politely answers, guiding her bulbous George to the direction of the door.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Bird. A pleasure to see you and young George” formalities firmly back in place.

She swiftly leaves the shop, with stiff haughtiness, her face forward, and barely a shuffle amongst her skirts. Beryl followed closely behind after gathering up her orders and catching an apple asit made its escape.

The shop now vacant from onlookers and the door closed, the newcomer continues to move forward with his limp becoming more distinct as he rhythmically walks across the shop floor to reach the counter. Supported by his walking stick, he bends his right side into the curve of the worktop with his elbow rested on the counter to support his slim frame, closing the space between them.

The two men are obviously familiar with each other, the approach friendly or hostile is unclear.

“Wha’d ‘e bring ya ‘ere today Silas?”

Edwin “Tracker” Bishop, the shopkeeper, who is now standing with his arms crossed against his chest and although he is restrained in his tone, his manner is not unkind as he addresses the dark-clothed figure.

Silas as slender as he is tall, with a hooked nose and pointed chin but perfectly straight teeth and velvety blue eyes which simmer to black in the change of the light. He wears a draped long black tailed coat fastened neatly with a white collared shirt fashionably dressed with silk black neckerchief, black gloves and holding a black walking cane with a hand-carved raven at the hilt.

Without uttering a single word and looking directly at Tracker, Silas, with the elegance of a magician performing a magic trick, holds out his hand and showing a folded note of rough paper pressed between his thumb and forefinger he offers it towards his companion. The shopkeeper reluctantly takes the note, looks at it with suspicion, his eyes looking from the note back to Silas and returning to the intrusive slip of paper and it, reading the three words written inside.

His growing recognition of the implications of the words he just read displaying across his face but regaining his control he looks at Silas' purposefully and releasing his gripped fingers, allows the note to fall onto the counter.

He takes a sharp inward breath and releases a long shy through pursed lips and reaches under the counter into a familiar place and bringing his hands back up, places a small receptacle and two glasses onto the counter and pours himself and his unexpected guest a drink. He knocks back the dark liquid grimacing as he feels the burn at the back of his throat and swallows hard and holding his empty glass at the base, places it back onto the counter with a crash with the curve of his palm saving it from breaking into pieces.

His hands now free, he places the palms of his hands firmly downward on the counter and leaning forward, Tracker utters in a tone barely above a whisper the three words he silently read and has brought a sudden darkness around them.

*They are coming.*