

Chapter 1

Extraordinary as it might seem, Francis Burstboil fathered a child. He didn't know it, and, even if he did, it would have made no difference to either him or his offspring. Indeed, he didn't know the name of the mother. Their sweaty coupling took place in one of the sewage settling chambers close to the Dredger Hall, where Maisie Fairgame, on occasions, helped, but not by choice, her father Shoveller Fairgame, a canal cleaner. There was no love involved in Maisie's encounter with Burstboil. She lifted her ragged skirts and opened her legs for the scrawny Assistant Candle Lighter in return for a haunch of beef, that he had stolen from the kitchens, his former place of employment. Maisie was contemplating how she would cook the beef for herself and Shoveller while Burstboil was moaning between her thighs.

'Are you finished yet'

'What?' gasped Burstboil lifting his narrow head from between her bosoms.

'Are you finished?'

'Arghhh I'll show you.' Burstboil lowered his head and resumed his efforts. Maisie stared at the top of his thinning pate and yawned.

'Carrots and parsnips? Maybe. No. Shoveller hates parsnips,' she murmured to herself.

'Oh hurry up Burstpole or whatever your name is,' she said. The flagging Assistant Candle Lighter gave one final shuddering thrust and fell off Maisie Fairgame.

'At long last,' Maisie said, wiping between her legs with the hem of her skirt. She rolled over onto all fours and hoisted her squat frame onto two dainty feet.

'I'm off,' she said, and the frumpled beauty grabbed the haunch of beef and left Burstboil in that malodorous settling chamber where the foetid grey excretions of Castle Dredgemarsh burbled and belched. He lay prostrate, too exhausted to even speak.

Bitch, he thought to himself.

Francis Burstboil's interest in sex declined after that encounter, nor had he any wish to meet Maisie Fairgame ever again.

Maisie would, under normal circumstances, have forgotten the grubby Burstboil but, within a couple of months, she was certain that he had left behind more than an unpleasant memory and the smell of candle grease.

She decided that the most opportune time to reveal her condition to Shoveller was when he was drunk, not an infrequent condition for him.

'You've been what?'

'I've been tuppied.'

'Tuppied? ... tuppied? ... oh ... nice ... lovely ... she's tuppied,' Shoveller addressed a non-existent third party, residing amongst the cobwebs on the ceiling.

'And pray Miss Wagtail, Miss Puttock, who and where is this ram. Who is he, and has he the brass to feed his bastard.'

'Dustpile or Rustpole or something like that ... and anyway that don't matter; I never wants to see the little weasel again.'

'Oh I see, you don't want to see this weasel Dirtpile again. Of course you don't. It doesn't matter that the little weasel has left a little bastard weasel behind. Oh no, no problem. Shoveller will provide. Shoveller will work his arse off for all the bastards in the world ... Shoveller Fairgame.' Then in an reverential whisper, he said, 'Shoveller Fairgame, provider for all that wants providin' for.' With a dramatic sweep he spun round to Maisie

'Shame! you have brought shame on the house of Fairgame.'

'House! you calls this hovel a house?'

'Hah, that's it. There we have it: ingratitude. Kick a man when he's down. Put the boot

in. Criminal? Criminal? I'm proud to be a criminal in this piss pot kingdom. They can confine a Fairgame to wherever they like but they cannot ... cannot ... they cannot ... and that's that.' Shoveller had tears in his eyes. 'I could have been – ' he began again.

'Yes, yes you could have been a captain, I've heard it all before, I'm sick of hearing it.'

'It's true, nevertheless. Me and Shim Sledge and Black Pete, we answered the call. Tancredi could have been king by now, and we could have been –

'You could have been executed along with the traitor Tancredi; at least you're alive.'

'Alive, you call this alive; forced to clean the canals and cesspools of this cursed castle for the last ten years.'

'But that's what you were doing before – ' Shoveller interrupted Maisie with an imperial wave of his grimy hand.

'Silence, and have some respect for your father.' He slumped forward, elbows on table, head in hands and wailed: 'When I think of what might have been ... ah... it's too much for a man. Get me another flagon. Your poor old father's almost finished.'

Maisie pulled a half-full demijohn of cloudy beer from under Shoveller's trestle bed, which lay dishevelled along one wall of the tiny room.

'Here.' She banged it down on the rickety table and disappeared into an adjacent kitchen even smaller than the room containing Shoveller's bed.'

'Maisie,' Shoveller called after her in a subdued voice. 'A cup, Maisie, could you bring a cup.' Before he had finished the sentence, Maisie reappeared with a battered tankard in her hand and a smirk on her lips. 'And Maisie, don't worry about the squealer; Shoveller will provide. Rely on Shoveller.'

'Good night.' Maisie's tone signalled an end to hostilities. She returned to the tiny kitchen, which was also her bedroom, with a smirk of triumph on her face.

'Men,' she said.