



The men were unshaven and dressed in tattered brown frock coats that looked as if they hadn't been washed since they were first stitched together in some sweatshop beside the River Thames. Their ragged boots were full of holes and they had the eyes of men who had seen a fair few fights down back alleys late at night.

"Do you know to whom you are speaking?" spluttered The Great Marvello, his clumps of white hair jutting out in all directions.

"It doesn't matter who you are, it matters what we want!" snapped the older of the men, a particularly gruesome-looking specimen.

"If it's money you're wanting, don't you realise that picking on two vagrants sleeping in a ditch isn't going to bring you much financial bounty!" I snapped at them, shaking the dirt and dust from my hair.

"Well he's wearing a rather nice velvet jacket," pointed out the younger one, his eyes alight with greed. "We'll take that for a start!"

Stumbling to his feet, his face dark red with rage, The Great Marvello raised himself to his full, rather short height. "I will have you know that I am a close relative of the Sheriff of Olsworth!"

The Great Marvello

he declared in a barefaced lie, “and as soon as I describe you two rogues to him, he’ll have you behind bars for a good many years.”

“Sheriff of Olsworth!” snickered the older man. “Never heard of him and even if I had, he’s not here, is he? So there’s no one to hear your cries of help.”

“True,” I said thoughtfully, bending down slowly and picking up a long length of copper tube we used in the show. “But that means no one will hear your cries of help either.”

In a lightning-quick move, I lifted the tube and swung it violently in the direction of their ankles. It smashed straight into them both and floored them. I was out of that ditch in a jiffy, my hands swooping for both pistols while the two men lay groaning on the ground, clutching their ankles in agony.

“Who holds the upper hand now, boys?” I demanded in my best pirate captain imitation. Just to add to the sense of drama, I fired one of the pistols. The gun shook violently in my hand and a bullet went hurtling off into the trees.

Well, bad ankles or not, that got them moving. They scuttled off as quickly as they could, taking nervy looks round in case I chose to fire at them again.

The Great Marvello stood, brushed himself down and stared at me with what could almost be called admiration. “Well, young Cassie,” he said, when the rascals were fully out of sight, “that was quite some performance.”

“I’d say it was something of a life-saver, Marvello, an act of courage and bravery that deserves an extra day’s pay.”

“Well I wouldn’t go that far but I am willing to chuck in a small bonus tonight.”

“Can I ask you a question, Marvello?”

“If you must,” he sighed.

“Where’s the suitcase? The one with all of the dosh?”

He looked around as if the two ruffians might return at any minute and then took a small trowel from his trouser pocket and began digging in the dirt on which we’d slept. It took him several minutes but eventually the top corners and then the rest of the case were revealed.

“Excellent ruse!” I beamed. “Any chance I could take a look inside, just for a second?”

The Great Marvello

The Great Marvello shook his head. “What you did this morning was a brave and noble deed, young Cassie, for which I am grateful. But as the manager and financial controller of our little project, I’m afraid its contents are for my eyes only.”

I shrugged. I hadn’t been expecting any other answer.

It was a hot day. The sun beat down on the road and we had to stop several times beneath the shade of a tree just to gain a little more strength for the next part of our journey. We bought some milk, cheese and bread from a farmer’s wife, so our nourishment levels were just about acceptable.

“Come on, Marvello,” I said, as the sun began melting away over the horizon, its beams lessening in power and intensity. “Surely we can stop soon.”

My feet felt as if an elephant had spent a merry day’s work stomping on them. I had a blister on the underside of my left little toe. My heart felt like someone had been using it as a beach ball on a promenade by the sea all day.

“Not long to go,” he replied. “Just a little bit further.”

I was grudgingly coming to terms with his announcement, when something stuck to a tree caught my attention.

I dropped the green bundle (or my “second back” as I sometimes called it), panting, and stood there, gazing at a piece of parchment attached to the bark by way of some small pins.

SATURDAY JUNE 16th

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The Annual Funfair that beats them all

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See sights to amaze and astound you

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The Great Marvello

“You have GOT to see this,” I declared, the excitement clear in my voice.

Wearily, Marvello sidled over and looked at the sheet.

“Mmmmm,” he muttered to himself. “I know Harwood’s Open Field. It is a very large space and the surrounding area has a large population.”

“Large population equals large cash sum,” I replied, relying on Marvello’s greed to sway the argument in my favour.

He sighed, twisted his moustache for a few seconds and then fixed me with intense eyes. “Let’s do it,” he said softly.