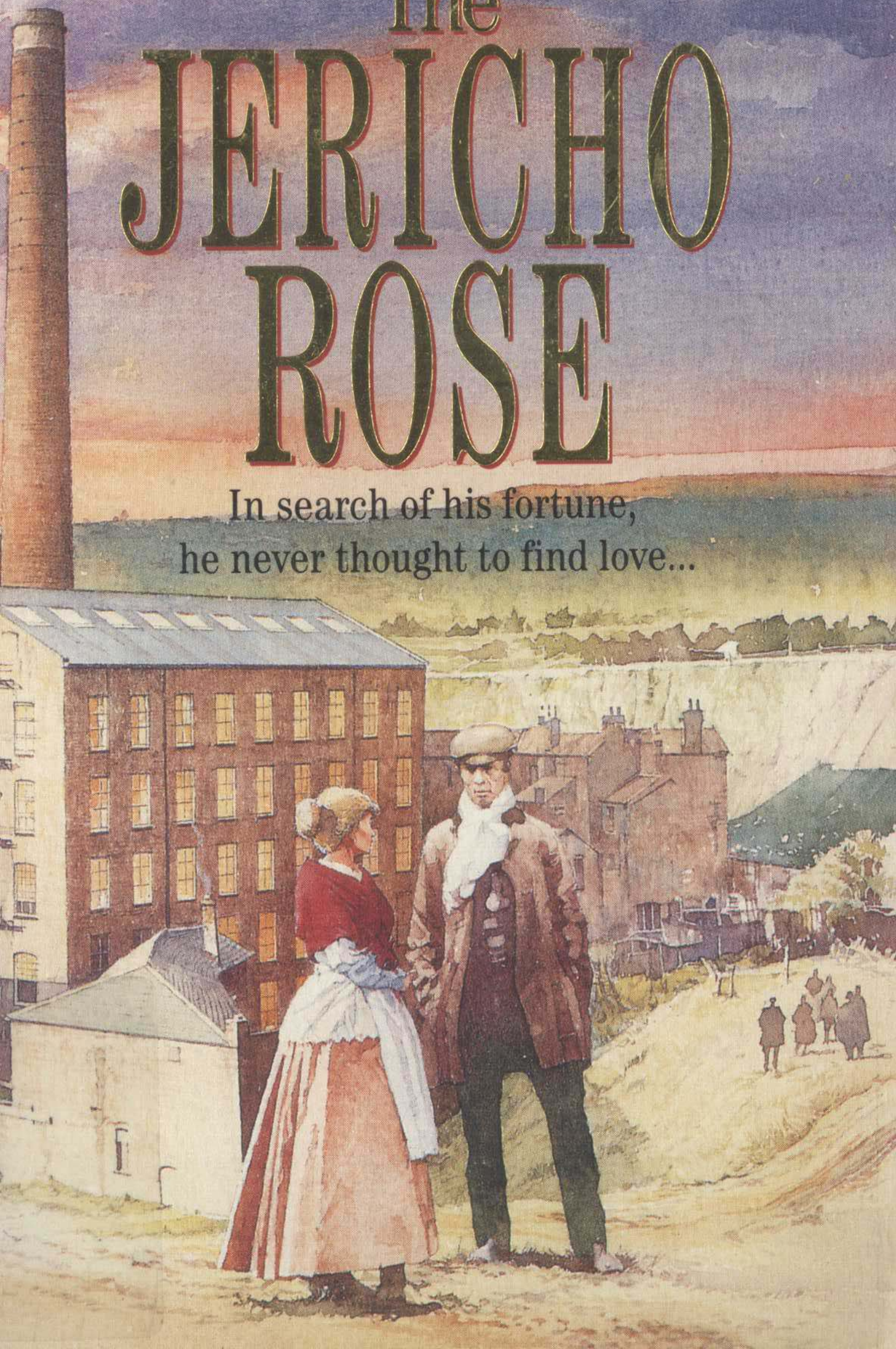


OLIVE ETHELLS

The
**JERICH
ROSE**

In search of his fortune,
he never thought to find love...



The Jericho Rose



WARNER BOOKS

A Warner Book

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*The
Jericho Rose*

***For my parents, remembered with love –
Elsie and Cecil Murray
of Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire.***

They are a people kind and open-hearted . . . orderly and loyal. They are one of the most independent peoples on earth; they will bear no dictation, and will listen to no advice unless fully assured that it comes from a sincere heart. There is nothing finer on earth than a Lancashire man or a Lancashire woman.

Lord Shaftesbury
1862

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CHAPTER ONE

The First Wagons

MATTHEW RAIKE WAS STEAMING. Wet clothes over a hot body gave off a visible haze that merged with the dampness around him. His night's sleep under the steps of a dockside warehouse had been broken by heavy rain, and he'd been soaked before he was fully awake.

He wasn't aware that he was steaming, and if he'd known he wouldn't have cared. He'd been wet before, and no doubt would be again; the same could be said for the men who worked beside him. It rained: if you were lucky you stayed dry but more often you got wet. If you had access to a fire or there was hot sunshine you could dry your clothes, and if not they dried on your back.

There was sun now, somewhere in that milky sky, but it hadn't yet risen above the buildings that shadowed the quay. It was a sombre scene, dull and muted like an old painting on the wall of a smoky parlour; the canal dark, almost black, with mist lying over the water in drifting grey bands. Narrow brown boats awaited their cargoes of raw cotton; the long-distance vessels that had brought it were already heading back to Liverpool, disappearing into the haze with a farewell blast on their whistles and a swirl of black water in their wake. The clothes of the dockers were sombre, too; dark moleskin trousers with grey flannel shirts and black waistcoats, and on their heads battered hats or small round caps that were faded with wear and weather. In all that busy scene the only splashes of colour were the fancy green waistcoat of the wharf manager, a rusty-pink shirt here and there,

and the bright red kerchief round Matthew Raike's sweat-damp neck.

Conscious of the hostility around him he worked hard, his long lean body adapting easily to the shared task of moving the immense bales of cotton wool. The dockers hadn't taken kindly to a new man in their midst, but the wharfinger had hired him at once when he requested a free passage on the first boat to Saltley rather than payment in cash. The ganger bellowed, the men heaved on the pulleys, and the boat creaked acceptance of a capacity load. Matthew smiled with a touch of triumph at anyone who forgot to avoid his eye. Had they really believed they could frighten him off with sour looks and hard words? He'd been reared on hard words, and sour looks had come his way more often than smiles.

In any case he saw no need for hostility. He'd heard enough to know there would be work enough for everyone now that the American Civil War was slowing down and shipments were coming through again. And if the mill-owners wanted their cotton at once, why shouldn't he help to speed it on its way? He shrugged and turned to the next bale.

Above him, his seamed face unsmiling, the boatman stood watching. In his opinion these Manchester men were rabble – wharf-rats was the term he used in his mind – casual hands all of them, unskilled men hired by the hour. He'd been given one of them as a helping hand for the trip back to Saltley – that young 'un in the red neckband who looked so pleased with himself.

The last bale on board, Matthew watched the grim-faced old man check the ropes, hoping they were to set off at once rather than wait for the other boats to be loaded. He was lucky. The wharfinger signalled them to slip the mooring. 'Right! Get under way! They're waiting for this load up yonder.' He turned to Matthew. 'Now lad, you stay with these bales right to the end – to the mill. You'll help hoist them in, and when the last one's on the mill floor you're done, and not before. Is that

clear? You're a fair worker, that I will say, and if ever you come here again I'll find you a few hours' work if I've got it.'

Matthew touched his hat. 'Thank 'ee kindly. I'm obliged.'

The man patted the pocket of his fancy waistcoat and drew out a timepiece. 'It's half-past-six!' he announced accusingly, and flicked a dismissive wrist at the boatman. 'Get off with you, and no shaffling!' He turned away, but swung back and laid a heavy hand on Matthew's arm. Shrewd little eyes glinted from under heavy brows, and what could have been concern softened the hard gaze for an instant. 'Have your wits about you while you're in Saltley, young fella,' he said abruptly, and then strutted away across the cobblestones.

There was no time to reply, or even to think about the mildly worded warning. The horses were waiting, held by a young lad, and the boatman was slinging their towing-chains to the quay. A moment later he took up two barge-poles and handed one to Matthew. 'Do what I tell thee, *when* I tell thee, and we'll be on the Saltley Cut in no time.'

Pushed off by the poles and then pulled by the horses, the narrow craft moved sluggishly towards the link canal. Matthew stood on the bales with his bundle beside him, and at that moment the sun cleared the rooftops and pale gold light spilled across the canal basin. His spirits rose. It was a good omen to be touched by the sun as he began the last stage of his journey.

He turned and surveyed the scene behind him, wondering how he could have thought it dull. The remnants of mist had cleared, and now colour leaped forward where there had been gloom. The sky was a pale, clear blue, and the sullen water glimmered with gold; the warehouses were revealed as a deep rose-red, and the bales beneath his feet had become golden-brown. It seemed to him that even the scent of the cotton had changed: on the quay it had seemed oily and faintly

rotten, like wilting vegetables at the close of a busy market. But in the shifting air of the boat's passage it gave off a sweet, grassy scent, reminding him of new-cut hay in the fields around his home.

He pushed back his hat and wiped his forehead on his sleeve, then, pole in hand, awaited his orders from the grim old man at the tiller.

The boat moved along the sunlit canal, horses pulling patiently on their chains as they trod the familiar tow-path, and the boy who led them swishing idly at the grasses with his stick. On top of the cargo Matthew rearranged his limbs as his clothes dried out, his wide-brimmed hat tipped forward against the sun and his bundle between his feet. After the rough and tumble of the last ten days he found pleasure in their tranquil progress, and once through the series of locks there were no more orders to be obeyed.

They were passing through a village dominated by one of the big cotton mills that had so impressed him on his arrival in Manchester. It was a fine affair of red brick with white-tiled inserts and a tall, fancy chimney. Close by its walls were crammed terraced houses, like rows of stunted infants fathered by a well-fed giant. There was money up here in Lancashire, just as he'd been told. No matter what was said about hardship in the cotton towns the stamp of wealth lay all along this waterway. And the countryside was pretty, too, 'bonny' was what Peggy-oh Luke had called it in those endless tales of his home town. It was bonny, but oh it was flat to a man of Devon.

'Where be the hills, then?' he asked the boatman, hardly expecting an answer as he'd found him to be sparing with words. 'I say, where be the Pennines?'

Surprisingly, the man answered. 'Sithee!' he said, pointing ahead into the haze, 'them's the hills up yonder, beyond Saltley. Have you never been here afore?'

'No, never,' admitted Matthew. 'I'm from Plymouth, in Devon.'

'Oh aye?' A flicker of interest showed as the other's gaze swivelled in his direction. 'That'll be why tha talks so funny. Plymouth . . . I reckon they play a lot o' games down there?'

Matthew pushed back his hat. If anybody talked funny it was this old bag of bones at the tiller. And what did he mean? 'Games?' he repeated, mystified.

'Aye. Yond' chap playing bowls while he were waiting fort' Spaniards. Tha knows.'

'Oh. Yes.' Matthew allowed himself a small, superior smile. They were so confident, these Northerners, so know-it-all; but they didn't know everything, it seemed. 'Twas a long time ago, that game of bowls,' he pointed out mildly. 'Ordinary folk in Devon don't have time for games – they work hard, same as here.'

'Oh aye?' Something in the other's tone caused Matthew to look at him sharply. Was the old fellow having him on? The leathery face was suspiciously blank. Discomfited and somewhat put out, Matthew fell silent. If this was humour it was a variety not known to him. It was rare for him to be disgruntled, and his irritation soon passed. It was a beautiful morning; he was on his way to a new life, and for the moment he was quite content to sit and listen to the thud of the horses' hooves, and the creak of the boat as it cleaved the black water.

A convoy of coal barges passed them, heading for Manchester. So there was mining around Saltley – another snippet of information to add to the little he knew of the place. He was heading there because the long-ago ramblings of an old, one-legged sailor had found a response in a teen-aged boy's unsettled heart. Oh, he'd picked up hints about Saltley on the way here, of course, but not all of them had been encouraging, and so he'd dismissed them.

A group of road-layers at the other side of Manchester had nudged each other and sniggered when he told them

where he was heading. 'Hey – you're all set to take on the army?' they asked him, grinning. 'You'll try your hand at leading the riots, lad?' Matthew had never liked admitting ignorance, so he'd laughed and pretended to know what they meant.

Before that he'd met a pieman at a country market in Cheshire; a kindly, tubby man with beautifully clean hands and wise, sad eyes that looked as if nothing could shock them ever again. 'Oh, I know Saltley,' he'd said. 'I had a stall on the market there. It's crowded, is Saltley. Have you got somewhere to stay?'

Matthew admitted that he knew nobody in the town, and the pieman shook his head admiringly. 'You're young,' he declared, 'that's what it is – the confidence of youth. Look, lad, if I were you I'd watch my money and my bundle in Saltley. If you've nowt of your own it's a big temptation to help yourself to somebody else's stuff, especially if you've a family to feed . . .'

Pondering these remarks Matthew knew he'd be a fool not to admit he was heading for a trouble-spot. Well, he wasn't a fool, but neither was he a stranger to trouble: he'd learned how to handle it in a hard and painful school. The Mizzen Mast was the worst trouble-spot in Plymouth, but he'd survived there for ten years. Oh yes, ten years with Fat Annie and the tribe in the room behind the stables had taught him a great deal about trouble. In that time he had grown from a timid eight-year-old who cried for his mother and was always hungry, to a thin, still-hungry lad of eighteen who could overcharge a tipsy customer with an innocent smile and use the money to feed his sisters and half-brothers; a lad who for years drank his step-mother's ale and then topped up the jug with water from the pump in the yard; who could sleep only on his stomach because in earlier years his back had so often been sore from a leathering. Then he grew too big to be leathered and Fat Annie too sodden with drink to raise the strap. And then . . .

Enough of that! He dragged his thoughts into the

present. He was twenty-two now, and Fat Annie a diseased, half-mad creature existing in a lonely shack because not even the workhouse would have her. It was four years since he had taken the younger ones away from the inn and left Fat Annie to rot; four years since he saw Maggie safely married, Liza settled as a dairy-maid and the two boys taken on as hands at the Ryders' home farm. He himself had been sacked by the head gardener at Ryder Hall, but he would have left in any case. He'd had no intention of spending his life as labourer to the under-gardener with the sole prospect of one day being made up to second gardener.

Four years. A lot had happened in those four years. He'd learned a lot, and in particular he'd learned that to recall his time at the Mizzen Mast did him no good. It sent his mind into chaos and brought back the sick, helpless feeling that even had its own smell: fear and dirt and stale drink, and the spittle-wet sand that he'd swept from the floor more times than he could count. So, no more thoughts of Fat Annie. He closed the flimsy little door in his mind and for the thousandth time shrugged away his memories. There was another door there as well – a smaller, heavier door that was locked, bolted and barred against something that stayed imprisoned except in a totally unguarded moment or in his most sickening nightmares. That door remained tight-shut, and sometimes he almost forgot it was there.

Matthew stood up restlessly. What about now? What about Saltley? The green-waistcoated wharf-boss had said, 'Have your wits about you, young fella. . . .' He tipped his hat further over his eyes. If there was one thing he could lay claim to it was having his wits about him. Hadn't he travelled from Devon without it costing him a penny? By coach, by wagon, by the railroad and now by boat? Hadn't he worked his way here, just as he'd promised himself? He'd weeded gardens for a free ride and loaded baggage by the hundredweight; he'd looked after two little boys for an afternoon, and panicked when

he thought their father had left them with him for good. He'd served at table wearing a borrowed shirt and apron, and the innkeeper had offered him his keep and a bed and three shillings a week to stay on permanently. He'd rescued two horses being driven to death by an unskilled carter and been given the fare for a fifty-mile stretch of railway by their grateful owner. He'd covered hundreds of miles in twelve days and arrived with more money in his belt than when he left Plymouth. He didn't need telling to keep his wits about him. Let the folk of Saltley keep their wits about *them* when Matthew Raike arrived!

The time for that was drawing nearer. The level fields had begun to dip and curve and the flow of the nearby river was more rapid. A forest of tall chimneys lay straight ahead and the sun-warmed breeze carried the first foul smell of a town. He was accustomed to the stink of the Plymouth slums and the cess-pits of Ryder Hall, but even so his nose twitched in protest. Then he shrugged. He'd been told that Saltley was crowded, hadn't he? Well then, where there were crowds there was filth – it was a law of nature.

The mills were along the edge of the canal now, boiler-houses open to the water, but no boiler-men could be seen, no workers in the mill-yards. Then the boat was sliding into a wharf that was like a village in itself, with market-stalls, open shops and a blacksmith's forge. Horse-drawn wagons were being loaded with goods from long narrow monkey-boats, and Matthew surveyed the scene keenly. He knew that the canal companies had long been in the hands of the railways, and the busy wharf reflected the thrusting self-confidence of its owners.

There was such noise and activity that the tranquil journey by boat seemed unreal even before the vessel came to a halt. Everyone seemed to be bellowing in the hard flat accents that seemed to him no better than the squawk of farmyard fowl. A shiny black railway train was picking up passengers only a dozen yards away, and with a blast on its whistle chuffed away across a

newly-built viaduct. Horses neighed, gangers shouted, hammer clanged on anvil and Matthew saw that Saltley was busy, just as he'd been told.

There was little time to observe either the scene or the people because the cotton had to be transferred to two wagons that stood waiting with their horses in fancy harness decked with bells. Men and scrawny young boys swarmed over the great bales with a speed and agility that would have challenged the dockers of Manchester. When the last bale was loaded Matthew touched his hat in farewell to the old boatman and swung himself up beside the driver of the second wagon. With an amiable nod the man flicked his beribboned horses, and the carts rumbled across the cobblestones and out through the gates of the goods yard.

Matthew straightened his hat and couldn't help smiling. He'd done it. He was here in Saltley as he'd promised himself all those years ago. Here – and with a perfect excuse to get inside a cotton mill. The sun was shining and the great red mills seemed to lie back and bask in its warmth. It was quieter away from the wharf, and for the first time he noticed that smoke issued from few of the tall chimneys, even though it was not yet noon. He opened his mouth to question the man at his side, then closed it again. He had keen sight and good hearing – he would form his own conclusions.

The carts creaked up a dirt road past a church whose pale stone walls were streaked with black. From his perch Matthew could see beyond a tall hedge into the graveyard, where two sextons were hauling something from an open grave. He twisted round so as not to miss what it was, and saw them lift out a coffin, clotted with earth and falling apart at one end. The men were chatting as they stacked it to one side with several more, and one of them carefully tucked away a fleshless thigh-bone, as if to make his pile more tidy.

Matthew was sensitive to signs and portents and he turned hastily to face the road ahead. He saw from