

Chapter One

A Truly Awful Beginning

It was 1849 and in Victorian London times were as hard as nails for most people. It was fine and dandy if you were rich, could afford to dress in posh clothes and eat until your belly was full, but it was pretty dreadful if you were poor and even worse if you had the misfortune to be an orphan living in a dangerous city filled with thieves, murderers and scallywags. Certainly Albert and Florence Leadington knew all about that side of things and then some, because at the grand old age

of ten years old, they had had to endure a lot of hardship.

The Leadington twins wearily followed their new guardian towards Madame Divitan's gloomy creepy looking mansion, with its spiky turrets and sneering gargoyles, feeling very cold and not at all happy. The January evening seemed more frostily crisped-up than normal, like old icing sugar, and the gas lamps that lined the cobbled street leading up to the house flickered like demented demons in the wind. It had to be said that the visceral feeling which the twins had as they got closer to the daunting mansion, was not good.

Their minds were clogged up with all sorts of unanswered questions - I mean, after all what did they really know about their reluctant guardian Mr. Arthur Canarthy? Well,

apart from the fact that he was going bald and had recently informed them that their parents weren't dead at all, but had in fact been cursed by a vindictive sorceress, whom he was now insisting they went to meet?

Considering it had been less than two days since the twins had first made his acquaintance, it was rather a lot to take in, especially if you didn't believe in magic, (which I hasten to add that neither Albert nor Florence did). It was as if they had slipped in a puddle of time that had turned their lives upside down, changing everything forever, and now the only thing stitched into their future was uncertainty.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” ventured Albert, through chattering teeth which he tried to grit still as he pulled his threadbare coat tighter around him. He

wanted to stay focussed on the matter in hand, but his mind kept filling up with images of roast beef and custard trifle as a monstrous hunger growled in his tummy.

“Of course I’m sure! I’ve never had a bad idea in my life, besides it is the only way if you ever want to see your parents again,” Mr. Canarthy replied brusquely, as he marched forward, his arms swinging like a soldier on parade, “believe me when I say I am not overly cheerful about the circumstances either, but I don’t see any other alternative.”

“How do we know he’s not on her side?” Florence whispered to her brother, as her long tangled hair whipped up against her grubby cheeks.

“He could be you know, and then we’d really be in trouble, that’s if what he’s told us is true.”

“Doubt it,” her brother replied, shivering uncontrollably, “why go to all the trouble of getting us out of the orphanage then?”

“I don’t know, maybe he’s just crazy! We don’t know if he’s really Uncle Charlie’s brother or not, we’ve only got his word! He could be anybody - he could be a mad axe murderer!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! He’d have killed us by now if that was the case. Besides, he doesn’t look like a mad axe murderer.”

This was actually true in some respects, depending on how many mad axe murderers you have encountered because you would really have to have somebody to compare Mr. Arthur Canarthy to if you were going to make such an assumption.

Personally, I have always thought a mad axe murderer would have wild, wolfy eyes and perhaps foam at the mouth a little as rabid dogs do.

But Mr. Canarthy was a fairly ordinary looking fellow, and you'd be hard pressed to describe him as dangerous looking. He had a pasty face and eyes the colour of dirty dishwater, with no real chin to speak of which gave him an insipid air and enormous ears that stuck out like wind breakers. The few strands of hair that remained on his head were carefully combed over and waxed down from one side to the other, so that even the spiteful gusty night could not ruffle what remained of his balding coiffure.

“Right, here we are then,” announced Mr. Canarthy abruptly, as they reached the imposing front door. He lifted the wrought

iron knocker, which was fashioned in the image of a fearsome lion, and let it slam back with a resounding clunk.

They waited for a moment or so, but the only sound of life was the barking of a stray dog somewhere in the distance.

“Doesn’t look like anybody’s in,” said Florence, with a tangible sigh of relief, “oh well, I suppose we should head home.”

“You don’t have a home child, and you never will do unless you find a way to free your parents from the curse. Now, if necessary, we shall wait here all night. Nobody is going anywhere,” snapped Mr. Canarthy, glaring at her, as he plonked himself down on the pavement.

Suddenly the door creaked opened and they found themselves face to face with the

tallest, meanest looking man that could ever be imagined.

“We have come to see Madame Divitan, these are the Leadington children that I sent word about,” Mr. Arthur Canarthy announced, clearly perturbed by the tall man’s towering glowering presence.

“You’d better come in then,” he smiled unpleasantly, his lip curling like a sleepy cobra uncoiling. “Madame Divitan will be most intrigued to meet them I’m sure.”