



Desert Lighthouse

Merlin Smallbone

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How do boys become men? Why is wisdom cool? Read this gentle adventure in 1860's South Central Asia to find out.

As boys there's a lot of knowledge 'just over the horizon'. As men we remember how our eyesight grew from pinpricks to slits then opened like a bud of understanding to bask in the nourishing rays of knowledge. From there into giant collectors of wisdom, and so to seed the next generation.

If you found a lighthouse while walking through the desert would you stop and find out more? If you knew the Russians were going to take over the town would you hurry away or use that knowledge to your advantage, and if so how?

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems, short stories. Visit vulpeculox.net/books for details.



Preview

The full version of [Desert Lighthouse](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 182 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

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This is very much an adventure book for boys.

Desert Lighthouse

by

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This edition (First edit)

This book was a runaway express, where I only discovered what it was really about half-way through. I'm very proud of it, being an adventure for boys with a clear wise-up moral.

I've called the two towns here Quand and Taz't which are sort of Samarkand and Tashkent if you're interested in the history. The telegraph came later to these parts, and the railway a lot later.

There's a bonus for discovering what many of the names have in common.

As usual, please say what you think or scribble in the margins. I'll be revisiting it with a red pen in due course.

Part I

I've got many tales to tell of my travels selling books around the old cities of Persia, along the Silk Road, over rivers like the Amu Darya and across deserts by ancient tracks. This is about the time I was crossing the White Desert and came across a lighthouse.

From a distance it looked like a bleached bone shivering in the heat. After a few seconds of checking my health, and adjusting the brim of my hat, there was no doubt it was a lighthouse. The sort on Plymouth Hoe. As I approached, as a moth to a candle in the heat of the afternoon I saw the graceful curves of its shell. I was thrilled by the subtle art of its creators. Many people must have quarried, shaped and smoothed the stone for years until they were satisfied with their concave, convex, complex, useless folly.

From a ship's length away, I looked up to admire the delicate ironwork around the diamond-glazed lantern-house. There were no seagulls perched and squealing. No birds of any sort. Waves of sand washed over the base. Instead of breaking into foam these waves had fringes of larger stones.

The sun beat me onwards with its heat against the back of my cloak. I reached the huge foot of the tower. I touched it with my shoes and it was solid. Foot to root. Bare granite sanded into streaks by many years of wind, and my flayed feet tanned to leather over many years. Perhaps there would be an entrance on the shaded side, and by its shadow I would measure its height.

"Hello" I said to the young man, a shepherd perhaps, but why a shepherd should be here I couldn't think. "Is this your lighthouse?"

"Lighthouse? Is that what you call it?"

"Yes. What do you call it?"

"Shadow Tower of the wise ones."

"Who are the wise ones?"

"They built this tower."

"Who are they?"

"Nobody knows."

"Do you live here?"

"No I have been sent here to gain wisdom."

"You are young. Who sent you?"

"You are old. Do you bring wisdom?"

"Of course – but only a page at a time. Let us measure the height of this tower together."

"As you wish wise one."

The man was perhaps not yet twenty with a thin beard and blue eyes staring at me. I'm an expert at status and could see he wasn't a hard-working shepherd by his neat hair and the quality of his robe, it was hardly bleached by the sun and not dust-logged. Also he had no dog and no sheep.

"Stand up and let us pace the shadow counting in our heads. Ready?" He was eager and nearly a head taller than me when he stood up. We went to the base of the tower and I began. "1...2...3..."

At the tip of the shadow he said "Three score and seven"

"Let us walk back and see if it's changed." We paced our way back, this time counting in our heads. ...63...64...65.

"Three score and seven."

"I saw you shortening your step at the end to reach the same number. How wise are you?"

"Not wise."

"So how tall is the tower young man?"

"I don't know. About say fifty men?"

I showed him how to measure his own shadow and as that was 'one man' we could do sums to work out the height of his tower. He was lightning quick at fractions and multiplication! He said "Why did you make me count my paces again?"

"Knowledge isn't always what you see first time."

"That's too complicated for me. I'm a simple man."

"You see how the shadow moves around? Is that too complicated for you?"

"Yes."

"No! You follow it. You are less than a grain of sand in the universe but you can still understand, like the ant can climb onto the top of your head."

"But it can't see into my brain."

"Neither can you."

With the height settled at 25 men or at 135 feet, (who knew how deep the foundations went) it was a good time to camp. My other earthly business could wait. Today my place was here. Even at night I would be in the shadow of the lighthouse. We shared food and stories like brothers. I'd never been to this region before. I introduced myself as Stephen Crane, he as Imra-al-quais. Neither fought for superiority.

"Who sent you here?" we both asked.

I said "Nobody but myself."

He said "I was told by the elders. They said nice things I didn't believe."

"Parents do that when they get crafty."

"They said I was the ideal person to guard the Tower of the Wise for a month."

The sun plunged into the horizon. We both knew tonight's moon would be an hour before rising. Me the traveller by day and night and Imra the innocent sacrifice learning about the heavens but not understanding intrigue. "If it was valuable gift then why didn't they keep it for themselves Imra?"

"Because they wanted me to have it."

"Their sacrifice specially for you?"

"Yes. Even my father, who is usually angry with me for asking questions, was encouraging. Until you arrived I was cursing him. Can you tell me the wisdom?"

"Yes mate. Some. I'm here by chance and I have my own learning to do."

"Is there such a thing as chance Stephen?"

"Just because you weren't picked by chance doesn't mean there's no such thing. I tossed a coin six weeks ago in an inn in Oxian and here I am."

"I want God to tip the coin in my favour. Chance is a madman's guiding lamp."

Earlier I'd noted a doorway about twenty foot up the tower

"It's getting chilly. Let's go inside the tower Imra."

"NO! You can't."

"Why?"

"It's not allowed."

"Alright. I'm tired. I can sleep anywhere so long as there are no ghosts."

"Ghosts!"

"What a nuisance they are! I have my dog and gun ready for wild animals looking for a meal. I have my hammock to stop scorpions exploring me. I have my net to deny flies my blood. But a ghost could turn me into a pool of scummy jelly overnight."

"There are no ghosts here."

"Yes there are. More than a million. They're watching like at a theatre."

"What's a theatre Stephen?"

"A place where ordinary people start by telling you how to behave then, with the confidence of ignorance, they shower you with scorn. Imagine your father and his friends saying 'look at stupid Imra sent to the desert to guard the empty tower. But then they discover Imra, or the other character in the theatre, is not what they think. They get a lesson too. They learn not to make such feeble guesses."

"So there are people watching me now?"

"No. I promise I came alone."

"So what's this theatre?"

"It's like stories with real people."

"How can it be?"

"I'll explain another day. A theatre is like me arriving today to cut open your skull."

"What!"

"Not really. It's putting a window in your skull."

"I don't care how wise a surgeon you are! I don't want an operation."

"Calm down. It's a metaphor. What do you say when you fall in love with a beautiful woman?"

"Um. 'Fall in love.' "

"Do you say anything like 'Head over heels in love' or 'knocked over by love' or 'blinded by love'?"

"No."

"What do you say then?"

"In love."

"Tell me about the hottest, sexiest woman you ever saw?"

"My sister Sabrina is quicksand. She used to tease me with her cosmetics. Then I'd have to crawl on my hands and knees to her as she jangled her bracelets. Then she was given false eyelashes for her tenth birthday. The way everyone looked at

my sister made me want false eyelashes more than anything else. I wasn't old enough to know then but I do now. I often dream of oil, coloured powder and false eyelashes."

"And how do you phrase that where you come from?"

"Nanciboi."

"I meant... No... Let's forget it. You watch for ghosts while I take a few hours of sleep under my cloak. Tomorrow will be a great day of learning for both of us."

"You can't go in the tower."

"I have no intention of doing so Imra." (He would have to learn lying one day. I was here for me, not for a chance idiot.)

I took care of my mule. With my arm round Imra's shoulders I told my dog to guard the whole camp. I promised him meat if I woke up alive. I promised Imra that tomorrow would be full of wisdom. As I composed myself to sleep I wondered how to climb twenty feet of polished rock to the doorway.

At Midnight by the Moon I awoke. A single lamp showed my dog and Imra together. The yellow flame reflected as an uncertain spark in four black eyes. Imra was poised with an uncertain brush hovering over a paper. I was pleased. His other hand was under my dog's chin. They seemed to be sharing that filling of the night we do when we're alone. I was pleased. There were six hours of good moonlight travelling waiting for me. There was five days supplies in my packs. Only one would be needed to travel to Imra's town. One for contingency. Three for wisdom. Imra might have more. I would talk with Imra for a day. My business in the world was eating and teaching. No hurry. The books in my pack wouldn't fetch anything less for a day or two. It's good to make friends. It's good to keep friends. It's better when friends treat you as brothers. It's best when you can be an anonymous friend. Do a favour without any expectation of reward. There's a higher satisfaction when you break a private or family taboo that had been poison. 'Hey why are you squabbling?' or 'That was in the past! Who said you have to repeat your parent's mistakes?' or 'I'm going to tell her while you buy her a token of penance' or it might be a token of promise or token of submission.

I'm a wise man. Forty one years old. I've slept in many beds. I've stolen hearts. My rule is try not to steal what will be missed. So stealing knowledge, hearts, abandoned wives, neglected children is my trade. (To be clear, I don't sell children for profit. I sell them for their future.) Find a lonely wife and pay an intermediary to flatter her. Then see if she is confident in cuckolding her rich husband, and if so for what reason. There's money to be made from misery. I make mine after choosing

who deserves more and less misery. My books are mostly about the arts of love. Also how a child may become more powerful than both parents. All stolen from others of course, but phrased for a modern audience.

I could have stayed in one place with riches and an ever growing belly until I was poisoned, but instead why not steal from the lazy men to finance the education of their sons and move on.

After leaving others to watch the rest of the night, I slept soundly dreaming of the view I would have from the tower doorway. At dawn I fed and watered my dog and mule. I took the mule round to what would be the shade of the tower as the sun started scorching. I placed dried fruit in water to swell and renewed the embers to brew tea. Imra awoke and smiled at me sleepily. I thanked him for a quiet night free of care and wished him a peaceful day.

"How will we climb that rock Imra?"

"You mustn't be tempted Stephen. There are ghosts in there. You are afraid of ghosts."

"I may be afraid of ghosts but I'm brave."

"What if it's a magic tower? You said it belonged at the ocean's edge. It must be magic."

"I have seen the ocean Imra. I have seen ships as big as a palace. Ships that use fire for the wind."

"You are a sorcerer!"

"No I'm not. Do I look like a sorcerer?"

"I don't know."

"Is my dog a hound from hell with embers for eyes?"

"No. Um. I don't think so."

"What does a sorcerer look like Imra?"

"I don't properly know."

"So if you can't go by looks how will you find out?"

"I could curse you with the sacred words and you'd shrivel into a scorpion."

"Here's your tea. I have white sugar – will you have a pinch of it?"

"Sugar like honey?"

"Yes. Let me show you."

"No! It could be poison."

"Yes so it could be. By the way do you know any sacred words?" He looked at the ground. "It's alright Imra. I'm not a sorcerer. If I was I'd have flown up that tower by magic wouldn't I?"

"I suppose so."

"And I'd have turned you into a crow or something?"

"I suppose so."

"Will you help me reach that twenty feet up the stone face?"

"No. If it is magic then it could vanish or crumble when you open the door."

"Or it could be full of gold and jewels?"

"I'm sorry I doubted you Stephen."

"It's certainly strange. We're both brave men. What's the worst that can happen?"

"It could fall down?"

I guessed worse might happen when he arrived back at his town with his poetry. "So let's move the camp two hundred paces away from it." He perked-up. Somebody to obey was what he needed.

After breaking our fast we surveyed the base of the tower. It was polished by millions of grains of sand on the wind. There must have been steps. It looked like they had been chiselled away without leaving any sort of foothold. There was an inscription which I couldn't understand but a curved sword and skull probably meant 'keep out'. Of course! They would have hauled up supplied by a derrick., I could see the bent bolts for hinges still embedded into the stone. So all I needed to do was lasso the bottom pintle. Now I had the answer I could afford to use my new wisdom.

"Can we make a ladder Imra?"

"I have three tent poles but even end to end without allowing for tying together they won't be enough."

"Can we grip the stone with our hands and feet Imra? Have we anything sticky?"

"I can't think of anything."

"Can we cut footholds in the stone? Or wedge in pegs anywhere?"

"I have no tools Stephen."

"So we'll have to climb up a rope then."

"WOAH! You are a sorcerer." He backed away.

"No I'm not. If I tell you I have seen how to get up there by rope now can you see how."

"No."

"I'll tell you. I'm not an ogre. Part of being wise is looking and thinking and failing then having a revelation. We can throw a rope over that metal pin two feet to the right of the door."

"Oh yes! Now I see. Is it safe?"

"We'll soon find out."

"Rather you than me."

We made a long enough rope from the lashings used for the animal packs and tent ropes. We had a two man tug of war to see if it was strong enough. With a loop in the end it was time to start throwing it up trying for a catch on the pin. We took a few turns each. In the end after many near misses and a lot of sweat Imra made a perfect throw.

I said "Who should go first. Youth or bravery."

"Bravery." He tried to walk away.

I caught him by the arm. "See. You are wise. There's no shame in not being as brave as everyone else. You'll live to fight another day while I break my neck. I haven't climbed a rope for twenty five years. While I give it a try can you bring some bedding in case I fall, then move back a safe distance to the camp."

I am a resourceful man. My grip wasn't strong enough and my legs had no purchase on the rope either. I asked Imra if he could try. He wasn't much better than me. So with regret we flipped the rope off the hinge in order to knot bits of firewood every three feet as purchases. Imra was now the throwing expert and after only ten minutes we were ready for the climb.

Now Imra asked "Shall I climb first?"

I clasped him like a brother. "Your bravery is slow but sure. Wise bravery. Women's bravery. Determination and love. Not excitement and comradeship of the madmen."

"I was a coward."

"You are learning to be brave when you want to be not when others shout at you. Is that wisdom?"

"I don't know?"

"What will you do when you reach the doorway Imra?"

"I don't know? Pray."

"Good idea but let's pray now. You walk round that way praying to your god and I'll go round the other way praying to mine." We went our opposite ways. We met in the shade on the far side and hugged. We met again underneath the door. Hands on hips we looked up to survey the doorway. It was wood bound with iron, recessed with a flat area enough for two men to sit on.

I said "Just go and have a look. See if it is locked. Don't pull hard on the door in case it suddenly springs open and pushes you off the ledge."

"How do you know the door opens outwards Simon."

"I'll tell you round the supper fire tonight. I may be wrong."

"I bet you're not."

"Stop putting off the moment. At breakfast you were scared of sorcerers and now it's noon you're having all the fun being the first person in a hundred years to stand up there. Go on."

He grabbed the first purchase, tugged on it and shouted "Bravery AND youth first." I moved the heap of bedding to the bottom of the rock. In a couple of minutes he was stood upright with his back against the door. I could see he was nervous but who wouldn't be!

"Take your time Imra. Get your breath back."

After a minute he turned to examine the door. "It looks like you were right Stephen. I think it opens outwards. It's absolutely solid."

"Is there a keyhole or latch?"

"I can't see a keyhole."

"Can you do something for me Imra?"

"What?"

"Face me and sit down with your legs dangling over the edge of the ledge."

"OK. Why?"

"Because neither of us is a sorcerer and we need to solve the riddles in that tower and inside ourselves."

"OK."

I could see he was having difficulty being brave as he inched his way to the edge of the ledge.

"There's nobody behind you Imra." He immediately looked round! When he was alone on the edge of the ledge I said "You're not going to slide off any more than you'd slide off the steps of a verandah. You're being afraid because you think you should be afraid. In a day or two you'll be right up the top walking around without a worry."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will Imra. I might even dangle you from a rope just to be a bad man!"

"No! You wouldn't."

"Correct. Of course I wouldn't. I wouldn't scare you for my own fun would I. I'm not that sort of man am I?"

"No. I don't think so."

"I know how brave you are being at this moment Imra. In a day or two you will smile at this moment and we'll share wisdom. That's a promise. How about that?"

"I'm still scared."

"And I'm still the nasty man making you scared even though a moment ago you said I wasn't that sort of man."

"I'm getting dizzy."

"OK Imra. Get back to the door and see where the blockage is. Top? Side? Bottom? Don't pull too hard remember."

Even though I couldn't see the bottom of the door from my position on the ground it must be wedged by blown sand and perhaps rusty hinges.

By working at the bottom with a knife then improvising a lever hooked onto the solid iron door handle we began to spring the rusty hinges then eventually open the door completely. That took us the rest of the day. Imra worked on the ledge. I only had one visit for a quick reconnaissance. I was comforting to think of the bedding at the bottom in case the rope broke.

That evening after the sun hid behind the horizon, the flickering fire warmed our evening meal and lit our faces, we shared achievement, anticipation and conquering of doubts.

"We've travelled a long way since dawn Imra."

"Yes wise one."

"Please don't call me wise unless I give you the wink."

"Why Stephen?"

"Because most people can't distinguish between wisdom and Sorcery."

"Oh. Like me."

"Yes. You still don't know the difference. One day you will."

"Tell me now."

"I wish I could. If only I could show you your future life. But I can't."

"Why?"

"Good question Imra. Keep asking the good questions of the wise and keep your mouth shut with everyone else."

"It's getting confusing again. Do you do it on purpose?"

"No. Just a little bit perhaps. You must learn your own lessons. Would you ask a money lender the way to Quand? No you'd seek out a traveller. Would you ask me about books. Yes. About lighthouses yes but how to quiet a squalling baby no. I know one way."

"What's that?"

"Smother the blasted thing. I've never done it but wanted to many times."

"I had a teacher. He said not to be ruled by our emotions."

"What did you learn at school Imra."

"Writing and what writing meant. Accounts. History. I know they wanted me to be ready for the Court."

"What went wrong mate?"

"The accounts and histories were all false. As soon as I realised I went as I thought best to the Head Chamberlain and explained what I'd found. It wasn't bravery. Just duty. I didn't have to think about it. I was very thorough and he was very polite. He made me swear me to secrecy on the grounds that he already knew and was playing a waiting game. Two days later I was selected at random to spend a month guarding the Tower of Wisdom. It was fortunate my sister said I should check my supplies myself. Would you believe it! I'd been cheated by the grand Vizier's servants! I can't believe it myself. I think someone must have told them one week's supplies as a mistake for one month's."

"How long have you been here Imra?"

"Seven days."

"Have you got three weeks stores left?"

"Oh yes. My sister arranged it."

"You know what shit is? Everyone on the planet knows what shit is. What's it like to be deep in it Imra?"

"Fine. I'm out here all on my own to write my poems. AND I get to meet interesting strangers – who are definitely not Sorcerers."

I whistled for my dog. A skinny Lurcher with a greyhound's face. He was beside me in a second or two. I pulled his face up to mine. His eyebrows and eyes twitched,

waiting for his master's wish. When it comes to life changing moments dogs understand emotions better than words. (At other times just shout.) I fussed him, tickled his ears, held him to me then stood up and gave him to Imra. In a few seconds they melted into a caring couple. I'd had my dog for nearly two years but Imra needed every tooth and claw he could find. "He's yours now."

"But he's your dog."

"Now he's yours. You have to nurture him. Be his father and mother. Make him serve you. However far you go you must go together." I clung to a future for Imra knowing that he had powerful enemies who would have him murdered for half a pocket of silver. Imra gave in and fussed the dog.

As we smoked our pipes in the gloom of embers and a single flickering lamp I said "Have you learned a lot today?"

"Yes. I don't know how to express it."

"So you thought me a sorcerer then thought yourself stupid then a coward but later proved yourself as equal. What's more you did all the muscle work. You threw the rope. You climbed the rope. You levered at the door. You've travelled a long way today."

"You pushed me Stephen."

"You pushed yourself to volunteer to climb that rope! Tomorrow we must go inside."

"I'm afraid of ghosts."

"So am I Imra. I notice you weren't afraid of the tower collapsing when you were working at the door. Funny for somebody so nervous before?"

"How did you know the door opened out."

"Because any pressure was from the outside. Imagine a fifty foot high wave of water... can you imagine it Imra... That would fall on the door even if the outer storm door was rigged. It's a lot stronger with a stone sill around the edge stopping it being stove-in."

"But how did you know?"

"I just did. It was obvious."

"Not to me."

"Now it is."

"I suppose so. Waves that high? Really?"

"Another obvious thing is that you will need doors like that in the near future."

"Why. We're hundreds of leagues from the sea here."

"Because bad men will come to your house to kill you and when they can't kill you in your house they will stab you in the street or market."

"Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"Shall we talk about that tomorrow Imra? Can I ask you a favour? If you stay up late – like I wish my old bones allowed me – then please – when you're squeezing the moments of the day onto paper – please start with the facts then the important things and only then dabble in the poetry of emotions."

*A clear night in the desert
is like a polished knife.
Cutting cold
with silvery glints.
Dawn is a peach.
A daughter's lure
to a father's brutal demands.*

This morning Imra was the perfect servant. I tried to be the perfect guest. After we'd prepared ourselves and animals for the new day. Imra packed my pipe with his tobacco and waited for my wisdom.

"If I die today Imra then there's a seven line poem about the dawn on the top of my pack for you."

"Die!"

"I might. I want you to have it anyway."

"Can you show me now?"

"Our day's work is less important but we have to do it anyway. We have a long journey to make."

"Where to?"

"Up that tower. Even if the inside looks bare it won't be for me."

"How can that be? Can you see invisible things?"

"Yes. So can you Imra."

"Can I?"

"You have been splashed in the baths so you know what a wave is. Tell me about a splash on the tower. What would that be like?"

"Um. Wet. Unwanted. Angry. Made by a Whale?"

"Think of a sand storm but water. As well as rain smiting you the sea itself is plunging. Imagine dunes running like a herd of animals towards you. The only safe place is a tower like this. Even this might not be safe."

"Ughh! I hate storms."

"One day I'll show you a sea storm you can enjoy."

"I don't think I would."

"Just as the world of the living and the world of spirits is different – so you can safely sit on dry land and watch the sea storm in the distance."

"I want to travel with you Sir."

"Who knows where today will take us. Though we may stand on the same spot we'll sometimes be going to different worlds. Time to make a plan Imra."

We took a day's supply of water and some dried fruit. Imra would write for us. I would lead the expedition.

He asked "Shall I bring the dog?"

"He's happy to let men get about their business while he dozes. Promise him nice things when you come back."

"I meant to protect us in the tower Stephen."

"Against what?"

"Um. OK We'll leave him to guard the camp."

"What did you think he might protect us against Imra?"

"I don't know."

"You can dress in a ragged cloak of fear. I prefer a brave body covered by a well-tailored suit of wisdom and a nonchalant hat. You remember where that seven line poem is?"

"Yes?"

"Why did I remind you about it Imra?"

"I don't know... Because you're aware of your mortality?"

"Come on then apprentice. The sun is already high. You can start a new page today as there will be a lot to write. We're going into another world."

The improvised rope ladder was easier to climb with a bit of experience. Tonight we must make a better one. Imra was in the dark inside before me. As I stood on the open threshold with the light behind and gloom inside, Imra jested as if a house servant welcoming a guest. "Welcome Sir to my humble abode."

"You're supposed to be afraid to the death Imra! What's come over you?" I realised he couldn't see my smile as I'd be silhouetted against the light so I hugged him.

"I won't let you down Master."

"Try not to anyway. If you let me down you're letting yourself down. I've been let down many times. I can cope. Can you?"

After my eyes adapted to the gloom, the inside room was practically empty. An inch or so of sand covered the stone floor. My feet found a manhole cover. So tomorrow we might know where they kept their water. "Hey look Imra. I think below us is their cistern. Why did they need a water cistern if surrounded by the sea?"

"I don't know Master."

"Stop calling me Master. I may be twice your age but I don't tell you what to think."

"Yes you do."

"No I don't. I'll explain when we're right up the top later. Your brains have only one owner and that's you. Can you drink sea water?"

"Why not?"

"Have you ever seen the sea Imra?"

"No. Just rivers and lakes."

"It's full of salt."

"Eugh!"

"More than eugh! Imra. You can't live on salt water. So these people needed pure rain water or well water even though they were surrounded by a sea of water."

"So... So the sea is like a desert?"

"Yes. Well done. Shall we call this level one and the cistern level zero."

"Oh I know about zero."

"Good. I thought you would after your schooling."

"You can see inside me Stephen."

"Yes. That's what wisdom is. At least you know you have an inside. Nobody I know can truly see inside themselves but as you get wiser you'll start to see what other people really are. When we go up those stairs we'll be looking at people even if they haven't been here for a hundred years."

"How Master?"

"Let's find out. From the outside I counted eight windows which tells me there are eight rooms above this one then the lantern itself. You see how easy it is to be wise Imra? Here's a plan. Let's take a single look at each room on our way to the top and then work our way down."

"Yes Master."

"Stop it! Have I not told you to use your brains? Don't pretend you've vomited out all your brains and have to rely on mine."

"Yes Sir."

"So when I suggest something in future you will open eyes and shut mouth before speaking?"

"Yes."

"Try again after understanding the lesson Imra. An impatient teacher is a stupid teacher. I want you to think before answering."

"What if I don't agree?"

"Even better!"

"Why is it better?"

"Good. Well done for arguing. You tell me."

"It's what you just said. Thinking for myself."

"If you were a dog I'd give you a bone fresh from the butcher. How full is your new page Imra? I told you we were going on a long journey. There are nine levels above us and one below."

"I can't see to write in this darkness... Sir"

"This weird stone room will be here long after the crows have picked apart our bones. Let's get climbing. Watch out in case the wood of the stairs is rotten." I needn't have worried, all the stairs were stone or iron. They were all fitted perfectly into the curve of the rooms. Each one had a simple wood door at the top. Tomorrow we must bring lamp-oil to stop every hinge squealing.

Imra said "Why not just leave the doors open."

Perhaps he had a point but I didn't want to disturb this past. On the fifth level which appeared to be a living room there was a calendar for the year 1940. I double and triple checked it wasn't 1840. As far as I knew today's date was the second week of May 1933 on the Christian calendar. I stood in front of it as Imra scanned the room and jotted a note in his book.

The next level was a bedroom with a cradle.

All the levels reminded me of being below decks on a steamship. Careful use of space, wood panelled cupboards making the best use of odd space, strange pipes and trunking. Every room had a central cast-iron pillar with flaking olive green paint. After four levels I wanted to scream for a room without a bloody great pillar in the middle. By the eighth I'd got used to it and now there was a clue. The rotating mechanism must run on clockwork because here we were in a room full of dead birds and clockwork. Two rusty steel ropes connected to a barrel winch disappeared through a hole in the middle of the floor. Brass gears and trunnions showed signs of long since dried grease and insects that landed and became glued

to the sticky ooze of oil. Aha! All was explained. Then I swept a long-dead bird from the iron steps up to what must be the lamp and sat down. That weight going up and down each day. It literally passed straight through the lives of the lighthouse keepers as it fell from the top to the bottom inside the cast-iron central column.

Imra caught up with me. "What's wrong Stephen?"

"Life. And other things. I shouldn't be here."

"Tell me? Is this danger or what?"

"It's being smaller than tiny in the Universe. It has its plan which we will never know. We do our best each day but you think I'm wise even though I don't know a hundred thousandth of what is there to be known. I came here to learn and I'm learning."

"You came to teach me."

"That's true Imra. On the way down I may be silent. Shut mouth before speaking if you remember. How long ago was that Imra?"

"An hour?"

"I told you this would be a long journey. I'm now journeying like a bluebottle. Look after me tonight Imra."

"Yes sir. Are you fit to go on or shall we come again another day?"

"One more level. We can do it. I will explain."

At the lantern house level the heat and light were intense. We were in a greenhouse glazed with diamond leads. Between us we managed to force the iron door to the balcony open. I felt a hundred years of held-breath being exhaled. The moment Imra turned his attention from the door and me to focus on the void below he recoiled back into me. I patted him on the back. From here we could see desert and desert.

"Take your time Imra. Are you going to be brave and walk all the way round?"

"Yes Sir."

"Be careful. When you can do it three times I'll tell you about these ribs and eyes of glass inside. Take your time Imra. Nobody is going to throw you off. What have you got to be afraid of?"

"I don't know Sir. I'm just more scared than facing a serpent's fangs."

"Good! You must remember this moment. When you're a wise teacher others will need to know about it. Do you remember yesterday I made you dangle your legs over the edge of the doorway ledge?"

"Yes. And you told me I'd think that nothing to today's fears. I can't remember that now as I have too much to petrify me here."

From behind him I reached-up and put my arms around his shoulders as a loving wife. "Gather your bravery Imra. It lurks in strange places inside us. Even after we've used it, it hides where we can't find it. Take a bit of mine. You have enough bravery to put one foot in front of the other. Then have some of my bravery to hold the rail and take three steps round the balcony. After that you can come back or go on." After the first three commanded steps he breathed cooler air. Held up his hands in greeting to me then carried on walking right round the balcony. Now it was my turn. I must stand tall even if the drop worried me. I recovered by thinking of the lighthouse keepers who came out here every day to clean the windows and... And this was the only fresh air they had.

I'm a restless man.

Wide skies are my roof

Travellers of indefinite distance are my family

Knowledge of mysteries is my purpose

I have climbed many mountain passes in all weathers.

I have crossed many torrents and wide rivers knowing hardship was ahead and a lover's arms a day or two behind.

I'd kept my life amongst brigands.

Perhaps one day I will have collected enough wisdom to settle down

But I doubt it.

I stood on the solid iron balcony. I tested the solid brass rail. I pretended to be the Lighthouse Keeper. What would he (or was it she?) have thought? Tatters! How would I know what these ghosts thought? They were the opposite of travellers. Weeks on end in a prison while all the while wishing ocean travellers God's speed to the far side of the world. I managed to explain this contradiction to Imra. He wrote it down then asked about the birdcage of lenses and curved prisms inside.

"You know how if you poke a stick in a clear pool it seems to bend up?"

"Yes."

"That's a trick of the light. It's a trick men can use. Wise men found how to fold light. It needs special glass and mathematics and machinery as precise as a clock but weighs as much as a thousand clocks. A single lamp will shine a beam in an exact direction to make its rays go many leagues. A bit like a star."

"Why Master?"

"On the land you can use the stars and a compass and count your paces to measure your journey. Even in the most featureless desert you can use a sun-

compass with your clock to keep to a bearing. But the sea moves and even if your boat points say due North you might actually be travelling in a different direction without any way of knowing."

"How?"

"I'll explain another time. It's like now the two of us are being taken to places that aren't on any map. We're in this one place but in our minds we're in many worlds in many places. You're in the world where Imra is a new man. I'm in a world where the ghosts I'm meeting are just torn tatters."

"Are you alright Master?"

"Yes. I'm a bit overcome by how there are such strange things after all my years of wandering and study."

We had to go down four levels before finding a livingroom unpolluted by dead animals where we could have a midday meal. It was a snack but we had a choice of chairs and a clean wooden table. If Imra saw the date on the calendar he didn't say anything. So I presume he didn't notice the days were crossed off until 24th April 1940. Seven years in the future.

I decided Imra was more useful to both of us as a confidant than a student to be fed lessons. "I've seen things in here that I want to tell you about Imra. We've touched the stone – seen where the weight for the clockwork goes – made a start on folding light – made a start on why a lighthouse is important to travellers. I've seen other things that I can't explain. I want you to tell me when you want me to tell you what I can't explain. It's not scary like going around the balcony but it's more dangerous."

"How can it not be scary yet be dangerous at the same time."

"Aha! Another lesson. Are you afraid of flies?"

"No. Not afraid. They're irritating."

"Some carry disease. That's dangerous. Do you see? Not scary but dangerous?"

"Oh yes Master."

"Before we go down I'm going to cure you of calling me master."

"Yes sir."

"Take a good look around this room. Would you call it a living room?"

"Yes."

"Suppose your wife had shouted at you and called you all sorts of nasty things... What would you do?"

"Call her worse."

"And how would that help Imra?"

"Put her in her place."

"The people who lived here didn't think like that. You can't live two in a tower like that. Perhaps you'd rush up to the balcony and shout insults into the wind until you'd calmed down. Will you try it now. Just think I think you've stolen my dog. Bastard! Go on run up those stairs and slam the doors behind you then come down when you've calmed down."

"Why."

"We're trying to find out about the tattered ghosts that lived here."

"Why?"

"Because we always try to find out about strangers we meet. Go on. I'm not really angry. Just pretend. Go up. Walk around the balcony planning your revenge then come back."

The strange thing was that I knew this was a magic tower while I was pretending to Imra that this was wisdom. The Fresnel lenses in their rotating frames were scientific marvels. The mercury bearing... (They often floated on mercury to make a virtually frictionless bearing) I hadn't seen one. Perhaps... I had seen a needle point bearing and... I couldn't remember. I forced myself to walk up the steps through each level until I was in the machinery room with the lamp above me. How was the weight of the lenses supported? There was no signs of a mercury bath. But neither any signs of wheels to carry the weight around a ring. Imra was beside me waiting for wisdom. Perhaps explaining it to him would make it clearer to me.

"Everyone knows how a Lighthouse works. There's a light in the centre. That looked like an electric light, it certainly wasn't an oil light or gas light. The glass birdcage rotates to sweep beams of light across the horizon. So for example if you see a red flash every twenty five seconds you know it is a certain lighthouse and if it is a white flash then ten seconds later a green flash and so on it is another one."

"It's like if I turn on the spot once a minute people will say that's Imra because he's the only one to turn once a minute."

"Exactly. We've seen the clockwork so that's what makes it go round but the clocks are little things. This is huge so it must float on friction-free bearings." As I was explaining friction and bearings I saw for the second time today but the first time in my mind what had been drawing me to investigate further. "Look Imra! Show me what keeps this glass birdcage afloat in thin air. What supports it?"

I directed him to the centre pivot which was a shiny bevelled cone floating a little finger's width from a bottom bearing. Where, through my knowledge of engineering I'd expect the equatorial guide rails and wheels there was a much larger second

shallow bevelled ring with a definite gap but perhaps only a fingernail's thickness. Both rings had jagged whiskers of dirt which were iron dust. I found a rusty key and it snapped angrily onto the ring. Imra was able to push paper through the gap. We cleared the bird debris from the tracks then, with a steady push, managed to spin the chandelier. It was obviously very heavy but once moving it just kept on turning. We had to be careful not to get in the way of odd brackets that could crush us.

"This is wisdom beyond me Imra. I've never seen this before. If I had to make a guess I'd say magnets – but as far as I know there are no magnets strong enough to lift a ton."

"Master! I am ever more humble. I don't even know what 'magnets' is. Wow! It keeps turning even after five minutes hardly slowing down. Is this magic?"

"No. It is science. But this is a magic tower. One day perhaps magic and science will be the same thing. Let's go back down to the living room we used for our lunch. I must confess something to a sapling who will become a wise and broad-branched tree."

I asked Imra if he could see any change to the 'living room'.

"No master."

"What about the calendar behind me. I've turned it to the wall. Why would I do that Imra?"

"To teach me a lesson?"

"Yes. It's the most fierce lesson yet. You've had some fierce lessons from me already haven't you?"

"Yes Master."

"This is going to be the easiest to understand but the most difficult to master. I can't master it. Can you remember anything about it Imra?"

"No. Just a calendar."

"When you see me miserable then you will understand there are so many things I don't know. Fetch it and watch my misery."

"Why would I make you miserable Master?"

"GET ON WITH IT. Look at the year."

Bless him, he looked for alternative explanations. I should have known this was a magic lighthouse and now I knew it was. But if the way they floated the lenses was anything to go by, it was magic materials not spells or eye-of-newt.

"I'm not sure about the Christian calendar Stephen. You haven't just trapped me with a false calendar? They must be using a job-lot. Maybe the people that lived here used a different calendar. After all if you were so isolated the days of the week wouldn't matter very much."

"You're a star Imra. If I'd asked you this a day ago then you'd have looked at your feet and mumbled. Like your bravery yesterday that came from where you'd hidden it – so now you're finding wisdom you were afraid to acknowledge. I told you I had a confession. Here it is. I should have kept you from this strong magic. If this calendar is to be believed then this lighthouse was abandoned seven years in the future."

"It's a trap."

"It's trapped me Imra."

"Let's get out then. That's easy. I'll carry the packs. You mind how you go. I'll do my best to shut the door at the top of each stair."

"It's impossible."

"Get going Stephen! Down! Down! Go. I'm right behind you."

We both sat on the ledge outside the doorway with our feet dangling over the edge. Imra said "I will write a poem tonight about the wise man who is eaten by a snake. A snake of being mystified. It will be a poem of praise not scorn."

"Write about two wise men and how each animal that eats them makes them stronger."

"That's a strange poem."

"It gets stranger Imra. Each man alone would die but together they survive. Together they get reborn younger and older."

"I must think what you mean Master."

I put my arms around him. "We must think like we breathe Imra. We must understand like we run from the arrows of our enemies. We must shout revelation like we win at dice. We must whisper wisdom like words of love."

He smiled back at me as we hugged. "I was happy with one wise man and one snake. Then you showered me with complications. Rose petals in drifts. Dunes and drifts in a storm of scented flowers."

"We have nothing to be afraid of here but our fear."

"What about our stupidity Stephen?"

"Yes. That as well. That's a wise point."

"If we know we're stupid we can make amends. Like a wound can be bandaged and healed."

"Oh. I see what you mean. Yes. Another wise point Imra. Um. I had another thought entirely. We must not be stupid when it may hurt us. We mustn't fall and injure ourselves. We should set off for more supplies in good time before we run out. The wisdom of snakes eating a man – no matter how perfect the thoughts are woven – is in our heads. It is what our bodies do that keeps those heads alive and curious. Like this whole tower keeps the light that nobody uses up the top – so our whole selves keep our minds sweeping the horizon."

"But we can write our ideas down Stephen."

"Today yes – but if we're not breathing tomorrow then who will cherish our ideas?"

After agreeing we were not afraid of what we might find in the tower when we looked properly, we set up a tent in the ever moving shade for a peaceful afternoon. As I leaned back against the stone with my eyes closed I could feel the rock being formed inside some mountain. Could it really be made of hundreds of interlinking blocks. There never was such a tree trunk. This wasn't tree busy growing up and down. This wasn't living for one or two hundred years beside other millions of trees. There were no birds in the boughs. No canny woodman waited to saw it into planks for a house or carve it into furniture. This was once made to last millions of years then made again into a single piece to last in a world of tempest. Even without the beating broom of the sea it commanded obedience to the laws of physics and the power of wise men. There were the worrying matters of why it was here, why it was abandoned and why it was abandoned seven years in the future. Perhaps it's no place to bring up a baby, and what's the point of winding the weight every day to flash to ships that will never see the beam. My shoulder blades rested on the stone that told a story in the whispers of ghosts.

The late afternoon sun or Imra woke me. Time to move the tent further round. He brought me dates and we shared a pomegranate. He leaned back next to me and closed his eyes. His features were as smooth as the stone of the tower. I was drenched with a shock-thought. Perhaps he was as artificial as the Lighthouse. Who made him, brought him here, left him to be found by me. I believe in coincidence. Every single thing is coincidence. Jumping a mountain stream safely is no coincidence as you know how far you can jump, but being there at the time to watch the eagle and salmon spear, stab, punch and wrestle in the air is a coincidence made in heaven. Just because something is predictable doesn't mean it isn't coincidence. It's predictable I'll wake up tomorrow in the same bed as I went to sleep in... But whose bed... and will I be over the horizon before her husband finds

out? A wise man can use coincidence. It was just coincidence I was being shaved by the barber three doors away when he found out. It was just coincidence that I looked a bit like the man who the servants said had slept with his wife. It was lucky coincidence that I had a rare book that he might want to buy and should we have coffee and tobacco together? How coincidental that I had some of his favourite tobacco? But perhaps he should be pursuing the cad and bounder reported by his servants. Or maybe he should whip them for spreading foul rumours about his wife's fidelity? I can tell you there are few things better than being in a cloud of perfume after a fresh shave, taking coffee, putting a greedy man in your debt by gifting him the last contents of your tobacco pouch. Having slept with his wife makes it better, but the exchange of gold coins for a book makes it better still. I am a wise man. I keep a list of places not to go back to.

"Have you had a productive afternoon Imra?"

"Yes Master. I have written and written. There is still much more."

"Keep it but don't cherish it. Like returning to your parents and grandparents, you will get more by revisiting it after a while. No ordinary soldier in battle who survives can know how the battle went beyond their own attacks, wounds, trophies and lost comrades."

"Have you ever been in a battle Master?"

"Not a big one but I've sometimes been the only man a soldier would tell about that day or the friends he left on the battlefield or the generals. There are two sorts of generals Imra. The utterly useless and the wizards of humanity. I once met a man who I would follow to certain death."

"What's the point of that Master?"

"We are two men. What about our town. If your town – corrupt as it is – was about to be put to the sword and you alone could save them would you? Say you have to keep the light up there burning for thirty nights to show the relieving army the way. All around are men with arrows and fire-pots. Would you fight-on?"

"I wouldn't have any choice. I'd be trapped."

"EXACTLY! You know how a fruit starts as a ugly bud then grows then ripens? Every hour Imra you are nearer that moment when you will drop from the tree as a perfect plump fruit."

"I have given up trying to record your wisdom Master. There is too much."

"Try. Being wise in our heads is our pleasure, but acting wise is different. Why did I give you my dog Imra?"

"Because... You've done it AGAIN!"

"Whoa! Lean back against the tower. The tower is millions of years old and magic. You've touched it before. It neither loves nor hates you. It has no emotion. But you know what we wise men are like? Like silly women. What have I done again?"

"Asked me a question I thought I knew the answer to."

I smiled at him. "A wise man may be a canny man. He may play on your naivete many times."

"What's naivete?"

"Innocent ignorance wrapped in a belief that the world is full of nice people. You are naive Imra. I'll go into that later but for now you were wise. You said you'd be trapped in this tower. Yet if your enemies started running at us now where else would you go? It's got a strong door you can bolt."

"Why? I don't have enemies."

"You do. We are safe for one more day. But as we can't get the animals into the tower and make it look deserted then we must break camp and hide elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"You were sent here to die. You know bad secrets. You believed the nonsense of being chosen to have a month of time to yourself and your poetry. Your sister warned you to check your supplies and you found them wrong. Salted water? Oil instead of water? Whatever. She paid somebody a lot of money to secretly undo your death sentence. Sent into the desert for a month when after the first week you would die of thirst. Oh what a shame? Such a nice quiet chap."

"What? You mean..." He looked around. "Now it's obvious. How was I so stupid Stephen?"

I hugged him. "Don't worry. Being stupid is what most people are every day of their lives even if sometimes they consider themselves clever. Most people get stupider as they get older. They confuse age and wisdom. The self-delusional think experience and guile is wisdom. You complained just now of all the extra wisdom I give you that keeps smothering you in rose petals. Actually you're finding it yourself."

"My idea for the wise man and the serpent was how the wise man shrank from the shame of embarrassment. How horrible for a wise man to find he is ignorant. Now I see you were right about the two wise men – you're being generous using the word wise in my case – and the serpents. It's me that's ashamed and embarrassed by my ignorance. More – much more than stumbling into a pothole – for me – like you said – it was a way of life. I can see it now. I don't know what to do."

"Why not go for a run with your dog in the last of the daylight then bathe his dusty face with precious water. I'll cook supper and see to the animals."

That evening after supper it was my plan to be a practical general who organised his troops, mostly just me and Imra, so we could fight for a month not run into a dead-end of foolishness some call fate. "Do you remember I said we had a day's grace before worrying about enemies Imra?"

"Yes. I wondered about that."

"I was hasty. For myself I chose my enemies and my arenas, or I have to be prepared to think quickly and run fast in the right direction. You on the other hand are unused to enemies. You know all about those who bully and disfavour you but beyond the schoolroom and the games pitch you don't know confrontation."

"I have confronted my father!"

"We've all done that. Did you apologise later or run away?"

"I ran away... As I ran I was blinded by rage then tears then sighs of frustration. With nothing to hug but cold night air I sneaked home to a stable then apologised at breakfast."

"What did you take with you? Why do I ask? I will be a serpent to make you stronger."

"My pen and book of poems. The collar of my dog. A water bottle and a gold coin my mother passed to me as I ran out of the back door."

"You were wise to return Imra. You see what I said about the serpent that eats you making you wiser?"

"I was an angry teenager. My father shouldn't have mocked me. I was wise to run away and wiser to return."

"Ha! You tell me something that's always been beside me but only ever seen from the corner of my eyes. Wisdom is relative. This is good tobacco."

"What about you Stephen? Did you run away?"

"Did you give your mother the gold coin back Imra?"

"Yes. You were there I swear! We shed tears together."

"I was sent away. My mother was a bit wrong in the head. My father had enough money from his job as a preacher in Dundee – but as he told me later – he couldn't have managed the household without the help of the housekeeper, Mary, but the congregation were always whispering things about him and the housekeeper. I was sent to relatives and given books and schooling. I can tell you all the Latin words for various sorts of woman. Before the war I got to meet girls but everything was so formal. The MATRONS that looked after me loved me but soon knew I was a firebrand. I know they loved to see me be cheeky."

"How do you know that Stephen?"

"Because I listened at keyholes. A woman's laughter is my weakness Imra. I must tell you about magnets. I was their pet and if I performed tricks then I was a better pet."

"What? What did they make you do?"

"Recite poetry. Read the works of Sir Walter Scott aloud. Tell comic stories printed in Punch. As I recall the stories that I had to act – I loved it – all involved sneering. I must have spent a year of my youth watching for sneering and being a really unpleasant boy. Then the Headmaster of my school pulled me up to a halt. In his study he gave me the choice of being what he called a 'flim-flam-floozie' or a young man. He explained that a 'young man' was a vigorous beast who would go a long way if he could just discard the baggage of being pompous before his time. Then he asked if he needed to explain what a 'flim-flam-floozie' was."

"Did you Stephen?"

"Bloody hell no! I was scarred stiff. I could guess enough."

"Was that it?"

"No. I was fifteen. He told me to fetch his cane from the corner. This was a bamboo stick. I'd had a few strokes in my time. It bloody hurt and then for days afterwards sitting down was a reminder. He said a wise thing. 'I keep that for reminding boys how stupid they are. We don't need that now do we Mister Crane?' Wow! that was the first time he'd called me 'Mister'. 'No Sir.' "

"What happened Stephen?"

"He thought that after a while in the Civil Service I might marry and then use all the knowledge I had in my head and cleverness to learn more. He said I was a good scholar but if I was to be a man in the World I would have to see a bit more of it. As it was I'd seen Dundee, Edinburgh and some moors and rivers. He said I'd be one of the men who made Great Britain great but I must visit some slums before I set my sights on the Diamond Mines of South Africa, Gold Mines of Australia, plantations of Malaya and teeming masses of India. I queried visiting slums. He said 'You and McArthur will accompany me tomorrow night. It will be like a caning but for the wise and capable.' "

"What happened?"

"The next night he took me and Lugs McArthur to places in hell we'd been told existed in a story-book or Biblical way but never realised these were ten minutes from our own homes. Perhaps we'd realised before but there's a difference between existing and being in our own world."

"Like toothache Simon?"

"Whoa! Don't interrupt a man in the middle of his most important story. Yes. Toothache is what other people have until you get it yourself when you can't get rid

of it even if it is a twinge. Um. Sorry Imra. That was a worthy interruption." My thoughts of then and now and between became mixed for a moment. "You are a proper poet Imra. If the world could deal with toothache... I'm wiser. Thank you Doctor Keeble for taking us to the slums and thank you Doctor Imra for showing me Toothache. Perfection."

"What happened in the slums?"

"As you so wisely observed Imra – we were grinning dentists clutching our penknives amongst those with toothache. It was my introduction to organised suspicion. Now I understand – but at the time I couldn't see that the half-clothed skinny children and disease-wasted adults hated us because we didn't give them food. Now I think that they hated us because hate was their only emotion. They mumbled and held their hand out when I asked them a perfectly civil question. After the second tenement I asked Doctor Keeble if we had to visit any more. He said 'No. Let's go down to the river's edge' so we went. The three of us leaned against the railings in the feeble gaslight. The river Tay was unseeable black but we could hear it licking against the granite stone beneath us. Doctor Keeble said 'Think on this abyss gentlemen. You could end your disease-ridden life in a minute. You could save your baby from coughing to death over days by throwing it in. You could stab somebody for half a sovereign – a month of food – and let their body float away with the tide.' " I pretended I was gazing at my knees. My head drooped as my memory was exhausted and my conscience stirred in its grave.

"What's the matter Stephen?"

"Two things Imra. Two things. The easiest to tell was that I ran away from taking responsibility for other people's troubles. I am not a compassionate person. I saw the impossibility of being a saviour to the starving and desperate. I want them to be healthy and happy and have children who are also healthy and happy but I can't make it happen even if I might be a wise man. I'm a failure Imra."

"If that's the easiest to tell then I don't want to hear the second."

"You will anyway. Then we must escape the dreams of our past and dreams of the future and keep the breath in our bodies. Thoughts need food. Wisdom need water. I guess the tower won't get cold at night but we still need fire to feed our bellies which feeds our brains."

"OK Stephen. When you're ready." In this moment of avoiding a dentist with a sledgehammer I saw my dog with his head on Imra's lap. The two of them were happy even if, unknowing now, they might be being picked at by hooded crows next week.

"The Headmaster gave both of us a white envelope about an inch square and told us to put it in the left pocket of our trousers. Then he said 'Don't tell a soul what happens in the next hour. We live in an upside down world where sex is a sin. It's not a sin. Ask every prim person you meet if sex is a sin if they sniff. NOT your

guardians. Sex is what God wants. Unwanted babies are a sin.¹ He led us up from the waterfront to a house like any other in the tenement block, gave a peculiar rhythmical knock on the door, said hello and exchanged smiles with the fierce lady inside. In a couple of minutes Doctor Keeble, Lugs and me were in a strange room. It had a beds and a sink and a chaise-longue with three naked women on it. Their breasts and keystone were in full view. They made no attempt to cover themselves up or be embarrassed. The older one waved the doctor towards her. I realised what was happening but couldn't struggle against the black haired, dark-eyed Helen that locked eyes with me. Lugs wasn't far behind. You know Imra – I'd sort of imagined being married – I'd always assumed it was marriage first and a passionate night of whatever sex was after – but now I was in a pleasure garden that made all pleasure gardens ashes. What a man I was! What a lover I was (she had to show me where to love her. She even made me tickle her private slit with my toes before bursting into shrieks. It was my first time.)" Poor Imra. Still, he was young and love could easily turn sour. "That was my running-away moment. I was lucky to have a wise man as a teacher when I needed it."

"Where is Dundee?"

"When is it? I will tell you another time. We must plan to live not trust to hope to live. Between us we have stores for two more weeks. Your enemies will send a scout to check you have perished tomorrow and it's a day's journey. Remember they think you were sent out with a week's not a month's supplies. So, even though if I was the scout I'd not bother going the whole distance for a few Piastres, we need to confuse or confound our enemies."

"What's the difference between confuse and confound?"

"Confuse is when we make them uncertain. Confound is when all their ideas are broken."

"So sometimes all we can do is confuse."

"Yes! But what would confuse most people is a lesson for a wise man."

"Yes! It's the puzzle that the wise man can explain."

"Yes Imra! You have it. Also do you see the wise man doesn't have to explain? He can pretend to be confused and use the trick for his own ends."

"Yes Stephen! I'm understanding more about these two serpents. When you said two men and two serpents you meant me and two serpents."

"No I didn't. I meant the two of us both. What is your idea?"

"I am eaten by fear. I am eaten by ignorance. I am eaten by stupidity. I am eaten by how much you teach me."

"If we live for the next month then we will have lived for the next week and to do that we will have lived for the next day. It's all right Imra. I could take you home

as a prisoner where you would be tortured and I'd have special pleasure in telling the Emir how you so much wanted to bed a woman for the first time that cutting your cock-off would be good fun."

"No You bastard!" The lamp light flickered off the blade of his knife! My dog or his dog was ready to fight but didn't know its master.

"Calm down Imra. I will not betray you but one day you may have to fight with knives and guns. Wisdom isn't armour against anything."

"I am eaten by never bedding a woman."

"Is that more or less important than staying alive for the next month?"

"Less important. But it's like toothache."

"We will scheme a way for you to live and be wealthy. We may have to lie and take risks but you have uncovered your sleeping bravery and kicked it out of bed. You are sucking up wisdom like dried fruit takes water. If you are wealthy then I will be too. Is that a good feeling Imra?"

"Yes. Oh bit I see. You will plot on my behalf and demand a reward."

"I will. That reward will be your company as we roam the World. I will show you America and Dundee and Perth and Sydney. Today we are fugitives. Next year we will have a dozen servants and you won't need to worry about where to find willing women."

"Really?"

"No. That's my dream. We may make it happen if we are wise but we must not let the pursuit of wisdom – or the pursuit of women or poetry for that matter – distract us from the business of staying alive long enough to enjoy it."

We decided to sleep for the first part of the night then use the moonlight and dawn to lift our stores into the tower. We would hide the animals to make the camp appear deserted and tend to them each night. Imra and myself would make our home in the tower until the spy had gone. So long as the spy thought the tower deserted he would assume Imra had perished. Imra's new friend and protector had to be coaxed into a sack then hauled up on a rope with me above doing the hauling while Imra soothed him. Once inside we shut and bolted the door. I hugged Imra. "One – Two – Four days who knows? We are in a trap of our own making. Let us make it our home. A home for homeless men. A fixed home for wanderers. A tower with tales it cannot tell to men who dream tales. You can be the mistress of this tower." He glared at me. I saw sinews in his arms stand out. "Woah! Calm down Imra. Every single man must be his own mistress. Why else would he shave and

Then...

The majority of the action takes place in the later 1860s along the Old Silk Road as Russia threatens to annex various towns. This is an opportunity for Stephen to collect helpers and perhaps 'liberate' a large amount of portable wealth from the Palace with. The mysterious lighthouse is a beacon for wisdom and progress.

On the last page, if you haven't already twigged, you'll discover why the cover is a blackboard.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.