On the thirteenth of April, 1852, my father – who was at that time a serving police officer in the City of New York – arrested, at the corner of Norfolk Street, not far from Tompkins Square, a vagrant in a state of bloodied distress. My father – who, I suppose, for the purposes of this narrative, I ought sometimes to call Charles (as that was his given name, though I could never think of him, then or now, as anything other than Pa) – approached the fellow with caution, but in a characteristic spirit of kindness.

For Sergeant Charles Wyatt always took a keen, empathetic interest in the underclass. He kept an eye on the comings and goings of derelicts and petty thieves, vagabonds, cut-throats and all the roving strangers who lived their lives in that great city on the cusp of lawlessness. He understood – and he taught me the same – that while acts born of desperation might not morally be considered as felonies in the same sense as plots of grand larceny, the world through which the poor and dispossessed had no choice but to move contained all that was needed to nourish lifelong criminality. On numerous occasions, he had intervened to help unfortunates and to raise them up out of their predicaments. He knew the one good, safe orphanage in New York and there are many children whom he rescued who owe their lives to his kindness. My father's most influential intervention saw him snatch away a young boy from the worst

kind of life at the hands of guardians not worthy of the name. You would know of that rescued mite were I to name him here, for he is now said to be the most brilliant and promising congressman of his generation. This is what I choose to remember most often of my father's legacy – not the sad and broken figure he became.

All of which I lay before you so that you may understand that my father was no unworldly mark or gullible apprentice but also that he was not lacking in sympathetic understanding. The police force was then still in its infancy – a long way from what it is today – yet he knew the city and it knew him. When I recall him now (for he has been dead these past two years) it is almost as though he were an emanation of New York, a kind of mechanism of defence that had been created as the streets became ever larger and more populous, as the underworld just went on swarming.

Now, my father had seen the vagrant in question before. The man had appeared some months earlier, joining the huddled lines of his fellow tramps with a great and palpable unease, as though this were the very last place that he had ever expected to end up. He was a slim man with a drooping, pale moustache. His accent spoke of a fine American education and easy money which seemed impossible to fit together with the ruined figure he now cut. He had a marked distaste for physical contact of any kind and he positively shrank away from the touch of any other fellow, however kindly meant. My father had marked him out as one for whom the life of the streets would prove hard indeed and he had, among his many other duties, tried his best to keep a close eye on the new tramp's progress.

Yet good intentions do not always resolve themselves

into action. My father at that time was much occupied by a wave of killings which had startled and discomfited even the battle-hardened residents of the city, together with the usual cavalcade of petty criminality, with the result that he had lost sight of the new arrival more easily than he might have done in a quieter spell.

It was, then, with a small tug of guilt that my father approached the wild-eyed man that night, his hands outstretched before him in a gesture meant to soothe and calm.

The destitute was screaming. Crazy talk from the sounds of it, the ravings of a man whose sanity has worn too thin, though later my father claimed to be able to remember certain isolated phrases.

"The Mountain Gate… the Creature with the yellow eyes… the tap-tap-tapping in the outbuilding… like stone onto wood…"

None of this meant the slightest thing to my pa, of course – though, by the end of the night, all of these words would hold a far greater significance. He reacted, according to the dictates of his rudimentary training, by speaking calmly to the man and with something that sounded almost like affection.

"Tell me all about it," he said, moving closer. "Sit down and tell me everything."

At this, the derelict, who had been waving his arms and distressing the public for almost an hour, paused and at last drew a breath. His eyes were bleary and swimming with tears but he seemed to see something in my father – perhaps a kindred spirit? – and so lowered his voice to say words which, for all that they lacked then any discernible context, sent a shudder through my father as would a blast of winter air.

"He's followed me here."

With this, the fellow, now seemingly exhausted, all but fell to the ground. My pa stood over him and saw the extent of the man's injuries. His face and moustache were speckled and matted with blood. Cuts and grazes were in abundance. He looked as though he had been the recent victim of some sustained assault. Months of street-living were often sufficient to all but unseat the reason of the sufferer. An attack this vicious might well be enough to destroy it entirely.

"My friend?" said my father. "Who did this to you?"

The vagrant looked up, for all the world as though it were the policeman who was the real madman present. "I did. I thought it the best way… The only way… To get what I need…"

"And what do you mean by that? The only way?"

The man on the ground looked up and grinned. Three of his teeth were missing. "The only way to escape him," he said. "The only way to be free."

It was then that my pa noticed something on the sidewalk down by the lunatic's feet. It was a stout kind of scrapbook, bulging with papers.

The man noticed the object of my father's gaze and he grabbed greedily at the thing and hugged it close.

"What's that?" asked my pa. "Got to be important for you to have kept it with you all this time."

"Oh this?" There came another toothless grin. "This is everything. This is the story. And this is the truth. I put it all together. I stitched and I darned and I pulled tight the threads."

"Now that is interesting," said my father, still in that same easy tone. "Maybe you'll let me take a look?"

At this, the man eyed him with suspicion but also with a

measure of hope. "Perhaps," he said. Then, looking my father up and down: "Perhaps I will."

So my father arrested him and took him to the station-house, more as a kindness than anything else, for the night was chill and the streets were unfriendly. Even a few hours of respite would be enough to allow the fellow to calm himself more fully. My father could arrange food and drink, maybe even spare him a few cents.

The fellow came dutifully enough in the end. My pa always had a way with persuading the desperate.

At the entrance to the station, he asked the man his name, for the accuracy of their records.

The fellow gave him a queer, cunning look. "My real name?"

"If you'd be so kind."

"That's odd." He patted at his blood-flecked moustache. "For I haven't used it in a while. It's Jesse. Jesse Malone."

He did not wait for any reaction from my father but stepped forth into the station, from whence he was delivered into a cell which, if not exactly well-appointed, was at least dry, solitary and not uncomfortable.

Now the name of Mr Jesse Malone rang a distant bell in the memory of my father. He could not place it immediately, but it seemed to him to possess ominous associations all the same. Some scandal? Some hushing up? He could not readily recall. It was not, in fact, till he returned home again that night that the truth was served up to him, from no less distinguished a source than my mother.

He came in late, but Ma could never get fully asleep without him present in our apartment. Like most folk nowadays

who marry officers of the law, she worried ceaselessly about him, and with good reason. I, who was only five years old at the time of these events, had no such qualms and slumbered peacefully in the room next door.

The arrival of my father brought my mother full awake and, as was their custom, she asked him about the progress of his day. He mentioned a few small incidents, keeping from her, as ever, the worst excesses of the job. At the end, he chanced to mention Malone who, so far as he knew, still lay resting in his cell some miles hence.

My mother who had, at my father's carefully filleted recitation of the day, began to slip into a contented drowse, now looked at her husband with a startled expression.

"So that's what became of him," she said.

"You know the name?" asked my father, who was not unaccustomed to discovering that his wife's New York knowledge outstripped his own in certain directions.

She raised an eyebrow. "I would've thought everyone did…"

"Didn't I tell you it rang a bell for me?"

My mother wrinkled her nose, a sure sign that she was teasing. "It should've done more than that."

"Come on, Molly, it's late!"

She shrugged. "He was a famous rich boy once, from a famous family who went half-mad with it. Several of his relatives were in asylums. Plenty of his ancestors in the ground who should've spent their lives in institutions too. But Jesse was different. He ran away from the whole thing and went to England. Made some strange friends there, by all accounts."

"I do remember, now that you mention it," my father said.

"But what's he doing sleeping like that in the city and making a nuisance of himself?"

"You'll have to ask him that," said my mother. "Though it can't be good. Anything that's brought him down so low as that… I expect he'll have quite a yarn to spin you."

"I expect he will," said my father, thinking of that weird scrapbook which the man had carried with him.

"Maybe you'll find out tomorrow," said my mother as she stretched and wriggled down into bed. And that was the end of their conversation.

The next morning there came upon the front door of our modest apartment a ferocious hammering sound, so loud and so insistent that it sounded almost violent. I recall being woken by it, and crying out in shock, and my mother coming into my room to comfort me. I remember hearing my pa's heavy tread to the door, the sound of it being opened and of their subsequent urgent conversation. I feel sure that he must have had a weapon with him, a knife or pistol behind his back. For few things are so unsettling to the American policeman than a wild knock on the door while the city is in uproar and it's barely light outside.

I remember hearing his voice, asking: "What do you mean by all this ruckus?"

Then came another male voice, one I recognised. "I'm sorry, Charles. But I thought you'd want to know."

My mother must have recognised the voice too for, at the sound of it, she released me from her embrace, rose and led me through to our little front room. There stood my father and a man who I knew as his closest friend from work – Louis Brand – a fine policeman and a patriot, who was shot dead

ten years after this conversation, by a woman whose secrets he had discovered and had no choice but to expose.

On our threshold, Louis nodded. "Sorry to call so early, ma'am." He looked at me. He was a big man, I remember, clumsy and ungainly. "Son."

My mother looked at him directly. "It's to do with Jesse Malone, isn't it?"

The other policeman looked at my father, as if to ask just what exactly he had been telling his wife.

"I only mentioned it the once," my father said. "I swear."

Louis spoke to my mother. "You're quite right, ma'am, it is."

She tutted. "Soon as I heard that name again, I knew it would be trouble." She gave the assembled menfolk a look of something close to haughtiness. There were family stories (never proven) that we had once moved in more exalted circles, a few generations back and my mother sometimes had an air about her which spoke of the old country and of great houses. "There's something wrong with the Malones," she said. "Always has been."

My father looked at her oddly.

"You'd better come with me, Charles," said Louis. "It's going to get ugly if you don't."

Pa agreed that this was likely. He kissed my mother on the cheek and bent down to kiss me too, and that is the last thing that I can remember personally from that dreadful morning.

The rest my father told me years later, after the death of my mother, at a time when his own sanity had started to decline. He went with Louis, of course, back to the station, where Malone was still thought to be safely penned. He was greeted there, in the wide vestibule of the place, which was busy even

at that early hour, by a slender, groomed kind of a man in an expensive suit and the sort of smile which seemed counterfeit.

"So you're the man who arrested him?" said this gentleman to my father.

"I am Sergeant Charles Wyatt, yes if that's what you mean."

"My name is Peter Coenraads," said the man. "I am fortunate enough to be the chief custodian of the Malone estate and fortune."

My father, who had taken an immediate dislike to the fellow, said: "Are you now?"

"For many years I have managed the estate on Mr Malone's behalf while he has been resident in Europe and pursuing his many philanthropic interests there. I was quite content to continue in my duties upon his sudden and unexpected return to America. Yet he vanished almost as soon as he came back. And I have been in search of him ever since."

"Is that right?" my father asked. "And just how hard exactly did you look?"

Mr Coenraads favoured him with the iciest of gazes. "Extremely hard. But when a man does not wish to be found…" He gestured around him. "Well, there are times when the most efficient course of action is simply to wait for him to… so to speak… wash up on shore."

Pa glared at him. "He's not well," he said. "His mind is unsettled."

Coenraads did not seem surprised by the news. "Then if you'll just take me to him, I will make sure he gets all the help he needs."

My father did not feel that he had much of a choice, for Louis had already assured him that Coenraads had presented

his bona fides. He led the visitor to the cell, while Louis followed on behind.

There was plenty in my father's career which he could not set aside in his generally unhappy retirement, cases which nagged at him and victims whose memories he could not shake. Yet chief amongst them was what they found in that cell, the one to which he had brought poor Mr Malone the night before, thinking it to be a place of safety.

When he unlocked the door and stepped inside, with Coenraads and Louis Brand at his heels, it was to find the vagrant lying dead upon the floor. There were no obvious signs of violence or of self-murder. Yet there was such a look upon the man's face, one of absolute loathing and despair, that the sight of it lodged in my father's imagination where it never would be shaken free.

I asked my father, when I was an adult and he an old man, what he believed had caused the heart attack which killed Jesse Malone. Some vision, I had wondered, some hallucination from the man's disordered brain?

My father shook his head. He had another theory. "The bars of that cell looked out on the street, three stories up. Something climbed – yes, climbed – up the wall that night. It looked in and it whispered to him in the darkness and it scared Malone to death. God knows what it spoke to him after midnight, what hideous truths and lunatic revelations."

"But surely," I began, taking my time with the unfurling of logic, "such a thing is impossible? How could anyone ever climb so high? I've seen that wall and it's sheer. I guess… a bird might have landed there and looked inside. But never a living person."

At this my father looked at me with affectionate irritation, as though he thought me a fool, which indeed he did. "When exactly did I say 'living'?" he asked. "When did I say anything about that?"

Of course, at the time, there was a great deal of shock and lamentation at the discovery of Malone. Not from the two policemen, for they were well accustomed to sudden and unpredictable death, but from Mr Peter Coenraads who professed a sort of outraged grief at his employer's demise. The expression of relief which had flitted across his face, however, when he realised that his master was dead and gone did not go unnoticed by my father. It was for this reason, then, that he did not take in the least bit seriously the professional man's threats of imminent legal action for their failure to keep alive a prisoner in police care.

As they said their goodbyes and as the body of Malone was taken to the morgue, Mr Coenraads took my father aside and asked whether the rich man had left any effects behind him.

"He had almost nothing on his person," my father said. "So far as I could see, he was living in a state of complete penury. He was wearing rags, as you saw. He had just a few stones in his pockets which were taken from him at the desk."

"Was there anything else?" Coenraads said with an unkind, perceptive look on his face.

My father, who was, of course, thinking of the scrapbook again, decided, on impulse, to lie. "Nothing," he said.

Coenraads looked at him oddly, as though he suspected the truth, and for a moment my pa thought the man was actually going to call him a liar. Then Mr Coenraads nodded, no doubt already thinking of all that untouched money in a family trust

which no longer had a single living, sane member of the family left to claim it. He thanked my father, even going so far as to shake hands with him and Louis and then he left the building.

There was a deal of clearing up to do and much else to occupy my father over the course of that long day. The details of it are lost to me now. At the end, he went to the desk, thinking to see the scrapbook for himself. It was waiting for him there, but so was Louis.

"Why didn't you tell our visitor about that book?" he asked, as my father reached for it and tucked it under his arm.

My pa told him a brief version of what he would later tell me. "Besides," he added. "I'm not sure it isn't evidence in a crime of some sort."

"Yes, but of what sort?"

To this my father did not have a ready answer. "Let me read this," he said. "And maybe I'll find out." His friend was looking at him, concerned.

"Trust me?" my father asked and, of course, Louis Brand agreed.

My father did not come home to us that night but went instead to an establishment he then frequented, a quiet Manhattan bar, which was to burn down in unhappy circumstances the following summer. Here he ordered his usual drink from a barmaid who knew him well (though not as well, my father promised me, as my mother had sometimes feared) and he took it into a corner along with that fat, queer book. He thought he would need liquor to face the thing in its entirety and in this at least he was right.

Sitting alone, he took a drink and looked at the strange object. It was a big, old volume, its stitching now ragged and

coming loose. Inside was a jumble of text, some pasted in, some written directly onto the pages. There were many different hands – much seemed to be by Malone himself but there were clippings too, and letters and transcripts. The writing, which he took to be Malone's own, began as a firm, confident thing. By the end, the dead man's testimony had transformed into a rough diary and his writing had grown into a mad, spidery crawl, full of blotches and stains.

My father told me he often wished that he had taken the book to the stove that night, that he had just thrown it inside and watched it burn. He wished he had never so much as glanced at a single word of it. Yet books cannot be unread, can they? Or testimonies unseen. The learning of this lesson would cost my father dear indeed.

And so he took another swig of strong drink, turned to the very first page and, in the centre of the most advanced city on God's green earth, he began to read a tale of superstition and horror which he would, until then, have believed to have been impossible in this supposed modern and optimistic century.

Dr Frank Wyatt

New York,
October 30th, 1872