

World From Rough Stones

Chapter 1

Monday, 26th August 1839

NORA LIVED A NIGHTMARE as she stood among the dripping carcasses of the butcher's mart and waited to see if her tactics had worked; all she could do now was hide, as still and as silent as the hanging sides of beef and pork. If she had been right, nothing would happen; but if she had been wrong ... She was surprised at how exciting it was to know that her life really stood in the balance.

The blue man. The man with the blue bandanna. Pat Connally. He was the one who would kill her. They said he kept a golden guinea sewn into the lining of that blue bandanna and he used the weight of it to swing it around your neck and strangle you.

What a fool she had been to try to blackmail Charley Eade! "Charley, you're keepin' ten quid a week for your own pocket out of this business. From now on I want two and a half for me!"

Fool! she raged at herself, standing silent and hardly breathing among the gently swaying carcasses. *Idiot! Stupid half wit! Numskull!*

Thank God young Tony, Charley's assistant, had told her in time – even though he hadn't really meant to. Tony thought the idea of killing her was just a big joke. "See them two men talking to Charley Eade? He's paying them to kill thee! Yon fella with the blue bandanna. Pat Connally. He's a killer! He does half the paid-up killings in Manchester, that Pat Connally." And then with great glee he told her how – the trick with the guinea weight.

As soon as she was convinced that Tony was not just pulling her leg, she turned, picked up her shawl, and walked away. She had to get away from the market; and then she'd have to get away from Manchester. But first the market.

It cost every mite of her courage not to run. She had to walk briskly enough to attract some slight attention. She forced herself to nod, smile, exchange a fleeting word with the porters, clerks, and salesmen who had befriended her these last three weeks – a pretty young girl of eighteen with a strong body, no family, and a good head for figures can soon make a long tally of friends among market men, even in so short a time. She had to lay an easily identifiable trail to the street. And there she had to vanish from Manchester as completely as if a giant hand had plucked her from the earth.

It all depended on how soon Charley Eade woke up to her absence. The nearer she got to the exit, the harder she fought her impulse to run.

But the hardest part was still to come. She reached the outside without being followed. A blear pink dawn suffused the sky away to the east, far off above Rochdale and Oldham. But here, above the city, still stretched the deep purple of the dying night. Away in the distance the cathedral clock struck five. The dark invited her to escape. Surely she could dash now to her lodging, retrieve the money she'd already blackmailed out of Charley Eade – or at least the six pounds that were left after last Saturday's booze-up – and run! It was so tempting that she almost obeyed the urge.

Dozens of people in her situation would have done so. Six pounds! A year's wages for a scullery maid. She knew dozens who would have gone back to get it before running. But people like that were the already defeated. Their destiny lay at the bottom of this rat fight. And what put them there and kept them there was the tendency to make such choices. An instinct sharpened by years of struggle upward through that throng warned her off.

If Eade had gone so far as to hire these two to attend to her, he'd not rest if he thought she was near. They'd watch her lodging even after it was relet. They'd make their way there at once, as soon as they were sure she'd left the market building. There would certainly be no time for her, hampered by her skirts, to return there, make her way upstairs, take out the panel by the door, and scrabble among the earth filling for the thread that led to the little bag with six sovereigns in it – not to do all that and make her escape.

So what they intended as a bait for her she would turn into a lure for them. But first she had to be sure that they had left.

As silent as her shadow, she slipped along the outside wall of the market building, threading her way carefully among the broken crates and chests, the discarded bales, the rotting vegetables, drunks, dead cats, rats, and ordure that gathers around civilized mankind. Then came the dangerous part. Having laid the trail to the outside, she had to get back in – unseen. Once they were convinced she had left, they'd never go back inside to look for her. But it had to be in a part of the market where she was not known: the butchers' mart. In less than ten seconds she could get from the back exit to a secure place among the carcasses. But if in that time one of them came searching that way, or someone who knew her saw her, it would all be up. That was the risk in her plan.

The nearer she drew to the back exit, the louder the screams grew. They were killing the last of the pigs on the cobbles of the apron around the door. One jerked its death spasms over a great vat of steaming blood. Its predecessor silently endured a dowsing of boiling water. Another, even longer dead, appeared to sigh as its innards tumbled out into a tall barrel. Another, already shaved, hung gleaming and silent, turning this way and that, seeming to shiver in the flaring gaslight, waiting to be carried in. Beside it, deep in the shadows, Nora watched.

The squealing stopped. The last of the pigs was yielding the last of its blood. The raucous voice of the bloodpudding maker's wife carried on into

the silence as she and the pigkiller haggled on – just as they haggled here every morning of the working week. Oblivious to it all, a drunken girl in a faded blue dress wove an erratic course among the vats and the dead and dying pigs. She paid attention to no one; and none – save Nora – attended her. She had passed well out of the circle of light when she fell heavily among some broken tea chests. She did not rise. Nora noted the position; the girl was about her own size and build. Her clothing could be useful.

A porter came and took up the glistening carcass; it hung over his shoulder, looking oddly human. Using him as cover, Nora entered the building from which she had so recently escaped.

She grasped the layout with one quick sweep of her eyes. The newly killed pigs were to the right, nearest the door. The porter would head that way. Beyond hung those killed earlier, together with some sides of beef that had already hung a week. At the farther end of this section selling had just begun; a small knot of butchers and cooks surrounded the auctioneer.

The worst moment came when the porter turned aside with his carcass. The sanctuary she sought was only yards away, but there, turning from the crowd near the auctioneer, was one of the killers. She saw his blue bandanna! Or was it? In the bright light she could not be sure. And now it was too late for her to move.

She stood looking at the nearest carcasses as a butcher's daughter might look, she hoped, and waited for the man to pass. As he drew level she turned casually to face him. A vast relief welled up within her: he was not the man! He had a blue bandanna but he was not the man. More important though, she noticed how he screwed up his eyes and peered toward the doors as if he could only just make them out. Of course! There were three big flares around the auctioneer.

Anyone coming from that end would think it pretty dark down here. She, coming in from the outside, had been led into the contrary error. Whoever he might be, the man with the bandanna had not even noticed her.

Fearless now, she slipped among the carcasses and waited for the real pursuer to come by. She was certain he would. They were of the mob and they knew their trade. They'd make a rapid search of the market. Go straight to her lodging. Then, finding her not yet returned, one would stay there while the other came back here for a further search and new instructions. The twenty or so minutes they were away would be the safe time, the only time, for her to make good her escape.

Curiously enough, it was only when she stood securely hidden that she felt the usual signs of fear – the racing heart and sinking stomach. Until then she had acted and thought in the coolest of spirits; if she had felt any emotion, it had been a kind of mad joy. To be hunted and to outwit your pursuers was to turn the tables and to become, in a way, a kind of hunter yourself. A hunter-from-in-front. You had the power. You dictated the play. You escaped. They lost you. The true hunter was always the one that did not lose.

Escape! But where? Sam, her younger brother, had gone back to Leeds last year and was now in service there somewhere. He'd always see her settled. But could she find him? In any case, there must be some of her father's family left in Leeds. That's where she'd have to go. Certainly there was no point in trying to go back to the mills in Stockport. Eade and his two would trace her back there with no difficulty. In fact, she hoped they would: it would let her get away to Leeds that much more easily.

She came back to her present surroundings with a jolt – and froze. The man with the blue bandanna – the real one this time – was standing not three yards from her. Standing. Not moving. Freakishly his eyes stared straight into hers. *He cannot see me*, she thought as she fought down the panic that had thrust her heart and lights up into her gullet. *It's much too dark. It's not possible.*

The man bit his lip and turned away to the exit. Nora counted thirty, forcing herself to count slowly, imagining herself walking through treacle and counting one for each footfall. She was so relieved to reach thirty that she almost relaxed her guard and walked out; but that same survivor's instinct held her back. She edged her face slowly out for a quick peep. It was the saving of her, for the man still stood in the doorway, letting his eyes grow dark-accustomed, looking right and left, giving no sign of leaving.

Soon it became clear that he was waiting; probably the other man was working his way around the outside – the way Nora had crept. And indeed, before long, the other came breathlessly up from the shadows, heading for his companion in the doorway. He shook his head as he walked. At this the bandanna man set off for the main roadway, leaving his companion to follow close on his heels. Neither gave so much as a backward glance at the market building.

A crowd of drovers came out of one of the offices, up beyond the auctioneer; warm with hospitality they made for the door. As soon as they were past, Nora slipped out from among the carcasses and walked as if she were a straggler from their band, just in case one of the pursuers looked back. A drover turned and, seeing her, fell behind a pace or two and grabbed her around the waist. She smiled encouragement and joined the group, to shouts of bawdy approval.

But when they were well out of the light she slipped away and ran off into the darkness. The drover took three or four loud, laughing steps after her but made no genuine effort to follow. When their laughter had faded around the corner, she doubled back and sought for the crates where the girl in the blue dress had fallen. Blue was going to be her lucky colour this morning, after all!

She imagined it would be a matter of moments to get the unconscious girl's dress off and change it for her own. In fact it took ten gruelling minutes, for nothing is less cooperative than a full-grown adult dead to the

world. And all the while the sky was getting paler and the risk of discovery grew.

But she managed in the end. It was a wrench to part with her lovely red worsted dress and the dark brown shawl. And she despised the faded blue cotton thing and single petticoat she was to take in exchange. It hung so slack and straight that her boots peeped out beneath the hem. What was worse, her toes, in their turn, peeped out of the boots. On the brighter side, the borrowed clothes were much freer of vermin than Nora had feared. As a final touch she let down and disarranged the black coils of her well-kept hair.

At last, rising drunkenly from the spot where she had changed, she staggered off into the sooty dawn. When she risked a backward glance, she saw a dog sniff at the bare toes of the unconscious girl. Then it lifted its leg and staled them. The girl's utter stillness made Nora think of death.

Thoughts of death had not been far away all spring and summer – what with the death of her father and then the terrible, terrible deaths of the two young children. She must shut that out. She could talk about it in company, and even sound quite matter-of-fact, but she must not think about it. Thinking could never bring; them back. Of course, she could not help it.

“Dad!” she whispered at the eastern sky.

And the eastern sky shivered asunder in a sea of hot salt. And she remembered his strong body and his gentle voice. And she remembered how home was always where he was, even when it held no food and he was desperate with the worry. And she remembered the ruin that followed his death and how there was never any more home. And she thought of the mess she had made of everything because he was not there to stop her. And more than anything she wanted someone to whom she could turn and just whisper. “Sorry.” Someone big like him. She wanted to start again.

But when she was out on the Oldham road, bound off for Leeds, and the sun was up, and the birds sang, and the day promised to be hot, she said to herself that this was a way of starting again. She remembered that her father was in a pauper's grave in the abandoned cemetery beyond Littleborough.

“I'll give it a last tending afore I tramp back to Leeds,” she said. And the thought came like a great comfort.