

Supernatural Tales

The Waif

by Michael Chislett

Thorne gazed out of the window at the rain-swept, rat-brown Thames below. The ebbing tide had receded to reveal a beach of mud that stretched sullenly to the restless water. On the north bank, too, the river had withdrawn, so that it seemed as if the sundered halves of London were reaching out to one another. To his right, Milford Creek twisted south through the district; its high-banked sides, once industrialised, were now given over to scrap metal yards, or to warehouses being converted into flats like his own.

Squinting his eyes made the Thames flow seem narrower, so that it disappeared altogether for a moment. But the two banks couldn't be joined permanently, and Thorne's eyesight returned to normal as he watched mudlarks on the opposite shore dig into the exposed mud, working as swiftly as they could before the tide turned again. It must be interesting to have such a hobby, he thought. Who knows what might be found abandoned by the river, or dug up out of the mud? Things long buried, somehow working their way back to the surface. Clay pipes - he recalled that they were the most usual finds. Not much point in getting wet and muddy just for that.

Turning his head to look down at the creek mouth - where the stream ran at barely a trickle through the revealed mud - Thorne saw that gulls were flocking in dirty clouds to peck at whatever had been abandoned by the tide; foraging among the wastes of the river, rising in the air with their beaks stridently open in cries that were silent, thanks to his double-glazing. He had once been told, or had read somewhere, that gulls were the souls of dead dock workers, unable to leave the scene of their labours. Seeing the birds glide like wraiths above the mud and water he could well believe it. The river could be a strange place; now that industry and commerce had been banished from its environs, it had occurred to Thorne that whole areas of London by the Thames were nothing more than ghost towns, deserted by all but the most tenacious spirits.

A neighbour had told him that it was possible to walk along the creek bank for some distance, if the correct path was kept to. He resolved to do that on a day when it wasn't raining, and he had the leisure. Indeed, it would be interesting to find out a little more about the district in which he now lived. After all, Milford was an historic part of London, albeit one that had changed beyond all recognition in recent years. The gulls and the line of the river around Milford Hook were the same as ever, though. The Thames and the birds that flocked and feasted upon it would not alter; Thorne wondered what they would see when he and his kind were all long gone.

At the corner of his eye, in the drizzle of rain, Thorne thought to see a figure standing in the mud by the creek mouth. On looking directly he saw it was a post, all slimed with rot-green weed, set down there possibly for tethering boats to. An odd place, though, if that were its purpose. One would either have to wade through the mud at low tide, or swim to the water stairs when it was high.

The north bank of the river appeared to be crowded with figures, dark in the dimness of rain and distance. Thorne wondered idly if there might be some sort of event going on there; it was a bad day for simply digging in the mud. The rain had begun to fall more heavily, obscuring the view. He could not be quite sure, but Thorne thought the diggers were huddled around something that they carefully lifted out of the ooze. Struggling with their burden, they moved it down and onto the river, and he realised it was a boat they were launching.

The rain lashed against the glass, fresh gusts turning the world outside the flat to an underwater realm, as though the Thames had risen to swallow him. As if they feared being engulfed, the gulls rose in a mass to hover and swoop away to the far side of the river, flying inches above the water, then descending to where the boat had been launched. It seemed they encouraged the launch, and perhaps sought to guide the vessel on its way.

"But it was the albatross, in the poem," Thorne muttered.

The rain eased for a moment between gusts, and he noticed again the figure standing in the mud. It was man, surely! Thorne looked down, but the rain instantly smeared his window so that everything in view was water-blurred, fluid and oozing, changing into things strange to his confused eyes. He waited for the gust to abate, so he could look again. Thorne was a man who liked to be sure of his surroundings; sure that nothing odd and untoward was near. His work had made him security conscious, and he was unhappy at the thought of a person just below his home, up to who knew what?

The sharp ring of the phone distracted him. Turning to answer its urgent summons he left the river and what might be there for the certainties of the business call he'd been expecting. As Thorne raised the handset, but before putting it to his ear, he thought he heard a voice:

"Pull me out."

He started in surprise. Where had the words come from? His caller was already speaking, and - like Thorne - was not a man given to wasting words. Not odd ones like that, anyway. In a moment his mind was on work, and concrete matters that had to be taken care of instantly. In a few minutes he was on his way out of the flat, keen to be off and doing; the tasks he performed did not wait on the weather. The odd, intrusive voice was quite forgotten.

It was not until a week or so later, when the tide was in and the river lapped just below the balcony of the flat, that Thorne noticed the rotting post again.

He leant over the railing and looked down at the wrack and detritus that the tide had brought to cling to the side of the building. A scum had formed on the water's surface, yards wide and just a few feet below; he wondered how safe his new home would be if the

Thames ever flooded.

The ever-present gulls soared over the river. Some had actually been perching on his balcony, and he'd disturbed them by going outside to take some air. They hovered around, their cries grating on Thorne's ears, floating insolently on the air just out of reach as if mocking him.

"I don't like them, Thorne," his companion had said, taking a step back to retreat into the security of the flat. "They eat all the rubbish, dead things."

"Someone has to," Thorne said to her. "So do we, for that matter - eat dead things."

"You know what I mean. They eat carrion, and I don't like their beaks. Vicious."

"Frightened they'll give you a peck, Carole?" Thorne grinned at her. "You don't seem to mind when I do it."

She pulled her wrap around herself, hiding the marks on her neck and breasts.

"I like men when they're a bit of a beast," she said, tartly, "but not real animals, and they..." she pointed to the raucous birds, "are nasty. I'm going to make some coffee - you want any?"

He nodded, then turned his gaze back to the river as she went inside.

The birds were quite beautiful in flight, he decided, but there were just so many of them, and the noise they made was awful - almost human in its reproachful tone. It had been gulls in that Hitchcock film; he recalled them attacking a woman. Perhaps he might get it out on video to frighten Carole. Thorne grinned; she probably wasn't the type to be scared of a film, but in his line of work you learned that people reacted strangely sometimes, behaved in all sorts of surprising ways.

The post was sticking up from the oily water, a finger pointing out of a sea of garbage. A gull perched on it, then started strutting up and down on webbed feet. The post began moving slightly as a result, and Thorne thought that the stake had worked its way up to stand higher in the water than when he'd last seen it. He noticed that the birds seemed to congregate around the post. Well, it was a convenient perch. But then he noticed the boat, which seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

There was little traffic of any kind on the river now. Thorne could recall as a child seeing the Thames full of shipping. But today, except for pleasure craft packed with tourists sailing down to Greenwich, the Thames was mostly empty. Even a rowboat was an event, something out of the ordinary. Especially if, as in this case, the vessel was half-full of water; so awash, in fact, that it might have been more appropriate if the boatman had been bailing rather than rowing.

The craft circled round as the rower worked the oars against the tide, which sought to sweep him downstream. Thorne realised that the boat was deliberately making a circle round the post that stood green and slick above the flood. The boatman stood up and grasped the weed-slimed wood with one hand to steady himself. With his free hand he raised a hammer and brought it down hard on the top of the post. The gull he had disturbed hovered angrily, bare inches from the man's face, its malevolent red beak open and jibing at the man as he worked. Three times the hammer struck the pole, and with each stroke it sank deeper. Then the boatman pushed and tugged at the wood, satisfying himself that it was firmly in place before bracing his arms against it and pushing off.

As if it had been waiting for him to turn his back, the post moved, listing ever so slightly. It seemed not to have been fully secured in the mud of the creek. The boatman, meanwhile, struggled for a while against the tide, but was caught by a current that spun the boat around. This caused him to face the post, which was again leaning at an angle. The man's reaction seemed almost comically disproportionate to the problem. Dropping the oars, he raised his hands in a gesture of despair and then buried his face in them.

"Are you okay?" Thorne shouted, intrigued by the odd display.

The boatman had slumped forward and, without raising his head, he cried out in a voice heavy with emotion:

"No, I'm not! How could I be?"

"Can I help?" Thorne asked.

"Of course you can't help - how could you?"

The boatman's voice was muffled, faint against the constant lapping of the water, so Thorne had to strain to hear him. Perhaps he misheard the man's next words:

"I'm on the wrong side and so are you. How can you help me?"

"Don't you think you should try to get back to the shore?" Thorne suggested. He noted that the boat was rapidly filling, now, and must surely sink soon. The current - which must be very strong - had swung the boat back to the creek, bumping it against the post, which listed over still further. The boatman uttered a wail of despair, and began to ply the oars frantically but uselessly. The river seized the boat and carried it down the flooded creek at a startling rate as a final, desperate cry echoed over the water.

As Thorne leant over his balcony rail in a vain attempt to keep the boat in sight, a voice called:

"Pull me out."

The cry must have come from the boatman, of course. But what could Thorne do to help him? He didn't want to call the emergency services, or indeed get involved with anything official. Even if he did they wouldn't be very happy if it were a false alarm. Looking down the wide expanse of water to Milford Hook he saw that the stream was absolutely empty but for the weed-slimed post, which bobbed slightly in the flow. It seemed to be almost free - but not quite. So much for the efforts of chummy in the boat. Gulls wheeled and dived with excitement around the post, and Thorne was uncomfortably reminded of tribesmen dancing around a totem.

"It's Dead Man's Creek."

He started in surprise at the words, and turned to see that Carole stood behind him, a cup of steaming coffee in each hand.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, and she flinched at the unexpected ferocity in his voice.

"That's what they call it, Dead Man's Creek. All of us kids used to call it that."

Carole handed Thorne his coffee.

"I used to live around here when I was a girl, in Milford." She frowned, and took a tentative step forward to look down at the river below. "It's changed so much in just a few years. I would never have thought ten years ago that people would be living here, on the creek."

"I didn't know you used to live round here."

"Well, I did tell you, but I suppose you wasn't listening. Yeah, I'm a Milford girl. Born just off the Broadway." Carole took a

mouthful of coffee and leant over the balcony slightly. A gull swooped close and she recoiled, throwing the hot liquid at the bird, which retreated, squawking its outrage.

"No need for that, Carole," said Thorne, disapprovingly.

"I forgot, you don't like cruelty to animals," she said. "Only human beings."

"Only on business," he replied, eyes narrowing, "and I don't particularly like it."

"Yeah, well, forget I said it, okay?" She turned her face away from his stare. "I just don't like them bloody seagulls. The souls of dead dockers, me dad used to say."

"It was you who told me that," said Thorne. "I remember now. But why is it called Dead Man's Creek?"

"Well, they used to say it was the place on the river where all the dead bodies got washed up. And it was true and all, because they always were. Still are, I suppose. There might be one there now. Just there," she pointed to where the river curled at Milford Hook, "was called Dead Man's Point. They used to say that there was a boat that was always out looking for them. Seeing it was bad luck. Sounds like something out of Dickens, don't it?"

"Funny," said Thorne, "before you came out there was some bloke in a row boat, just by here. He was trying to knock that post further in, and his boat was nearly full of water, about ready to sink." He looked out across the muddy water towards the post, which listed directly toward him now, the gulls still thronging the air around it like worshippers.

"Maybe that's where he ties his boat up - but it's so far to the bank. I wonder what he was doing? Let's go out, Carole - we'll take a walk along by the creek. You can be my guide, seeing as how this is your manor."

"Used to be," she said. "Not any more."

He thought she seemed a little nervous; the birds, probably. There seemed to be even more of them, descending on the creek, perching by its banks and on the water stairs opposite. They were waiting for the tide to turn, he realised.

"If you want to go out, we can go to the pub," said Carole. "No point in walking down by the creek. It will be dark soon, so you won't be able to see anything anyway. Sod all there to see anyway." She gave a laugh that sounded slightly forced.

"Okay," said Thorne, "pub it is then. You know anywhere good round here?"

"There's the Lamb, Milford Arms, the Duke. Don't know what they're like now, though. We'll try them all, eh? I'd better get dressed."

Thorne caught her by the robe and pulled her towards him. The garment fell open and he slopped his arms about her waist, pressing her back against the balcony railing.

"Plenty of time for that," he whispered as he kissed her.

"Not here," Carole said, leaning her head away from him, so that her blonde hair fell loose down her back, "someone might see."

"Who? The seagulls? The boatman? The neighbours?"

"Someone," she said, and tried unsuccessfully to push him away. Her robe slipped from her shoulders and she gasped and groaned aloud. But any other noises she made were smothered by the screams of the gulls, which gathered like a mocking audience.

"I'm cold," said Carole a while later, "let me go in and get dressed."

Thorne ran his hand down her bare body. "You enjoyed that, though, didn't you?"

"I always do," she answered, and laughed. "You know what they say? You can take the girl out of Milford, but you can't take Milford out of the girl."

"Who said that?"

"Me." Carole slipped away from him. "I'm getting dressed now. You can stay out here with them seagulls. Their racket was enough to put me off."

"Not quite enough," said Thorne, as he watched her disappear inside. Then he turned again to look at the river, which the setting sun had turned deep red all the way across to the north bank.

On the other side of the creek the bank was in deep shadow, the throng of gulls that stood there looking like wraiths in the twilight. They had grown still for the most part, waiting and watching for what the river would leave them. Thorne heard a splash and thought of the boatman again. Was he still afloat, now trying to escape down the creek with the turn of the tide? Something was in the water by the post, he felt sure. A sack? Or a dead man, waiting to be cast out by the river? The boatman might well find it, whatever it was. Unlucky to see him, Carole had said. She was usually a sensible sort of girl; he would ask her some more about it. He didn't know this part of the city well. In his old neighbourhood they'd called it Bandit Country.

Thorne decided that he didn't like the river, not really, not here. He'd prefer to live somewhere with woods and mountains, if he had the choice. But some things were just not affordable right now, though they soon might be. And this was as good a place as any, until the time came to move on.

Was something bending over the dark shape in the water? It was just the post again, leaning, almost falling over. It almost seemed as if the floating thing - some waif or stray of the river - was trying to gain a purchase on the weed-slimed pole.

"Pull me out."

Thorne listened to the voice calling over the water. It was the same voice he'd heard before, he was sure. He listened carefully, knowing that sound would be a good guide to anyone hiding from him in this uncertain twilight. But the water could play tricks with sound as well as light - voices carried further, he knew. All the senses that you normally relied upon could be confused by the river, sound and light changing the mundane to odd and liquid forms, unnerving to a man who liked to be sure of the world around him.

"Pull me out."

The unseen speaker had begun to vex him. Thorne began to suspect the voice might belong to someone who lived in the flats, playing some silly game. He looked along and up at the other balconies. All seemed to be deserted - but it was hard to be sure. Another splash from the dark water below took his attention. Was there a swimmer down there? Though anyone in the water of Dead Man's Creek would have to be mad. Mad or...

"Carole," he called to her, "come here."

In a moment she'd joined him, now wearing tight jeans and a long leather coat.

"I'm all ready," she said, and shook her hair out before running a brush through it.

"Listen," said Thorne, "can you hear anything?"

Carole stood and listened, still brushing her hair; the electric sound was the only noise in the still evening. She pulled a few pale strands from the brush and dropped them. They floated, gossamer-like, over the rail of the balcony, the light from behind her illuminating them for a moment before they drifted away towards the creek.

"What am I supposed to be listening for?" she asked after a few moments.

"Nothing. I just thought I heard someone calling."

"It's the gulls, that's all - they can sound human."

But the birds had fallen silent as the night descended swiftly around them. Thorne wondered if that was something else about the river, this early, sudden darkness. Surely the water would reflect any light available - from lamps, the setting sun, the moon and stars? It might well be that it was only in this place, with the high-sided abandoned buildings that flanked the creek, that the night was drawn down so fast.

"Can we go now, Thorne?" Carole looked doubtfully out at the darkness in the creek. "I always hated this place as a kid, you know. Never imagined that I would be staying in a flat by here, in this spooky old place. I fell in the creek once - or rather, I was pushed in."

"Where? In there?" asked Thorne.

"No, further down, by the bridge before the Broadway. I'll show you where. I was fourteen and some boy did it. There was a load of us mucking about, and he was chasing me and caught hold of me, but I didn't want that, so he got annoyed and pushed me, the bastard. The water tasked horrible. I had to go to the hospital and have me stomach pumped out."

"Well," said Thorne, "if we meet him tonight then we'll throw him in."

"Good idea," said Carole, as they went into the flat together. "I wonder if I'll meet anyone I used to know? We'll go down the Duke first. That was the first pub I ever went into. I was thirteen then - twenty years ago. Late starter for round here," she laughed.

"I pushed someone in the Thames once," said Thorne, as he closed and carefully locked the balcony door, "but that was by Hammersmith."

"What you do that for?"

"Because he was out of order."

Carole raised an eyebrow. "Did he get out?"

"I threw a life belt at him, but it hit him on the head and he sank."

"Are you joking?"

"I never joke," said Thorne, smiling thinly, "about business."

But the smile faded as he listened and thought he heard the voice call once again, faintly through the glass. He was about to shout to Carole to come and hear, but she was already out of the flat. So he shrugged and joined her, leaving whoever or whatever cried out over the creek to call to no one.

It was later - very much later - that night when they returned. They had taken a cab back from the pub on the Broadway that they had ended up in. Carole was laughing at something that he had said, and stood by the door of the flats waiting for him as he paid the driver. A slight mist had risen, hanging in the air; it was not quite thick enough to fully obscure their surroundings, but enough to turn the world a shade of anonymous grey. It would, Thorne thought, be good for concealment. As the cab had crossed the bridge over the creek coming from the Broadway the mist had thickened alarmingly, to clear after a moment as they reached the far side.

"Always like that down here," said Carole, "when there's a mist on the river. Comes right up so that you can't hardly see a thing."

Carole now lived in a part of north London, a much posher district entirely, and so felt compelled to add that she wasn't posh herself, not always, and not back here. Then she repeated several times her remark about taking the Milford out of the girl.

"We could take a walk," Thorne suggested, "by the creek."

"Not at this time of night," said Carole. "It's too misty and I want to go to bed, right now."

It was an offer he could hardly refuse, so he opened the door to the building and they walk up the one flight to his flat. Carole walked a little ahead of him and, giggling, had begun to remove her coat and blouse before they even reached the door. Once in the flat she began to throw her clothes about, then went into the bedroom and started calling for him.

Thorne was in no hurry, and poured himself a glass of whisky, then went to the window to look out at the creek, where the mist had risen thick below. He opened the door to the balcony and stepped out, just for a moment, just to see the grey blanket that lapped just below the level of his feet. The water, he thought, might have risen under cover of the mist to lurk only a couple of inches below, so that anything in the river could reach out unseen to grab a victim. He strained his eyes against the grey and saw that the post was sticking up like a finger, and seemed almost on a level with the balcony. But no, that was impossible, unless the entire building had somehow sunk, or the post had been lifted out of the creek mud. If it had been lifted someone would have to be holding it upright. Someone who might be looking at him now.

Thorne stepped abruptly back from the edge of the balcony, and as he did so something rose white and wraithlike from out of the mist. Another gull. He hadn't thought they would fly in such poor visibility. Silently the bird hovered before him, and as Thorne drained his whisky he thought of throwing his glass at the bird. Yet he'd complained when Carole had done much the same thing. A dull splash sounded from below, and he looked down again, but it was useless - there was nothing to be seen in the all-embracing greyness apart from the hovering gull and the post, which he was positive had moved closer.

It might be possible, he reasoned, for someone to lean the post against or just below his balcony, then climb up it to gain entrance to the flat. A ladder would be a lot easier, of course, and that slithery weed-slimed post would be too difficult for any normal person to use. But Thorne felt certain the post was moving towards him, almost like a shark's fin through the mist. It was impossible - yet he hadn't had too much to drink. He never did.

"Pull me out."

The sound was strange in the mist, as if muffled by more than moisture in the air.

"I'd like to know who's doing that," said Thorne, to the air, "and when I do..." He threw his glass as the post, where it landed

with a crack, shattering to fall into the mist.

"I will have you out," he said, pointing to the post, "and whoever it is that's holding you up, as well."

Whether from his threat or the force of the glass striking it, the post began to sink gradually down into the mist until only the top was visible. The gull perched on it to stand with wings spread, staring up at him.

"Thank you."

Thorne swore as the muffled voice called again, and looked all around for the speaker. Someone in one of the other flats, it had to be.

"Are you going to come to bed or what?"

Carole stood invitingly naked at the balcony door, and Thorne looked from her to where the post stood almost invisible in the mist. He pointed to it and asked:

"What can you see? What can you hear?"

"I can't see nothing in this mist, and I'm not going out to look."

Thorne shot out a hand and grabbed her wrist, dragging her forcibly outside. He held her by the arms in front of him like a shield and repeated:

"What can you see? What can you hear?"

"Nothing, Thorne, nothing," she gasped. "Careful, you're hurting me. Let me go in, I'm freezing. I can't stand out here like this."

"Like what?" he asked, relaxing his grip slightly.

"Stark naked. Let's go in." She shivered and pressed against him.

"In the river? Shall I sacrifice you to the spirit of the creek?"

"I'd like you in with me!" she cried, struggling. "No, Thorne! Not out here, I'm freezing. Inside, please, you bastard!"

"Quiet, Carole," he said, ignoring her protests, "don't want to disturb the neighbours, do we? Whoever they are."

And in a moment urgent matters took up his thoughts and energy, and he forgot what he had seen on the river, and what might have seen him.

"I don't mind doing it al fresco, so to speak," said Carole, as they lay in bed the next morning, "but it was cold and someone might have seen."

"Someone may well have," Thorne replied, "but I don't care. Give them something to think about. Anyway, it's healthy doing it in the open air."

"I noticed you didn't take any of your clothes off out there. For a minute I really thought you was going to throw me in. It was a bit scary."

"Better things to do with you than throw you in," he said. "Anyway, you haven't upset me enough for that." Not yet, anyway. He went on: "We'll do it again later, out on the balcony."

"We'll see," said Carole, raising herself on her elbows so that her breasts hung before his face. "What about breakfast?"

He pulled her down onto him. "Good idea, who's doing the cooking?"

"Me," she said, as she snuggled against him. "I'll give you my breakfast special."

"There's nothing to see down there," said Carole, "believe me, Thorne, I know, I used to live round here."

"I want to take a walk down there," he said stubbornly, "after breakfast."

"I thought we were going out somewhere," she complained, "somewhere nice."

"We might do later," he conceded, "but I might have to go out on business. There could be a call - we'll see."

"Always business with you, isn't it?" She smiled ruefully into her coffee cup.

"You know I work odd hours," he answered, "and I did tell you I might have to go out."

"True," she allowed, "and it's an odd business you do, too."

He stared at her and she held his gaze. Carole wasn't stupid; she knew what he did for a living, and he didn't particularly care that she did.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, finally.

"No. But it's just... well, I worry about you."

"Nice to know somebody cares," he said dryly, and slid his chair back.

"Let's go for that walk, up along the creek. You can do the washing up later."

"Thanks," she said, and threw a tea towel at him. "Just so long as you dry."

A few minutes later they stood outside the entrance to the flats. Thorne's only forays out so far - apart from the pub last night - had been to the Tube station or to the main road, the shortest routes out of the district. He found it hard to get his bearings.

"The creek's to the left," Carole said, and arm in arm they set off.

There was much building work in evidence. Most of the old buildings were being converted into flats. None now seemed to be used for work, and many stood derelict and seemingly abandoned. Carole led him through a gap between the dark wall of two of these empty hulks. The high walls felt close and claustrophobic, and he was relieved when they reached the end of the narrow way and saw the creek before them.

They stood at the point where the creek curved to the right of Thorne's balcony. The buildings on either bank formed a gloomy canyon where the stream passed to turn again and disappear around yet another bend. Flotsam bobbed on the oily waters and covered much of the revealed mud at the margins. It seemed as if all the rubbish of the Thames had made its way to the inlet. It was just the sort of place where you could imagine bodies floating, bobbing up from the slimy depths of the river.

Thorne felt a shudder pass through him at the thought. He'd never been sensitive to that sort of thing before. Turning to look towards the creek mouth he saw the wooden post standing, a lonely sentinel amid the mud and lapping water, temporarily deserted by the gulls. He looked at it very carefully. Had it moved again? It listed towards the point where he and Carole stood, yet it had

definitely been pointing at the balcony barely an hour ago. It must have been moved by the complex currents at the creek's mouth. And then, as if summoned by his regard, the voice cried out again over the mud and water of the creek:

"Pull me out."

The echo was trapped by the canyon of buildings, so that the words rang against the stone.

"Did you hear that? Someone was calling," Thorne demanded of Carole.

She shook her head and a frown creased her forehead. "I heard. I don't know. It was just them gulls."

Suddenly the birds were swooping all around them, returning to the creek, hovering over the water and stepping through the mud, red beaks jabbing at whatever edible matter the river had discarded.

"It was a voice," Thorne insisted. "I've heard it before, calling 'Pull me out'." He pointed at the block of flats at the end of the creek where it became one with the river. "I think there's somebody in there, mucking about, and I'd like to know who it is."

"You hear funny things round here," Carole said seriously, "on the river - I know."

"What do you know, Carole?" he asked. "About this place?"

"What I know," she said emphatically, "is that I don't like this place one little bit. They used to tell stories. All cobblers, I suppose, but... well, I just don't know." She shivered and clung close to Thorne. "I've never liked it here. Come on, let's go back to your flat."

"We might be able to walk right up to it from here," he said. There was a narrow path by the creek that seemed to end just by his building. It would be quicker if they could get in from there. And it might prove handy, anyway, to find more a second way to enter his home - and another way to leave it quickly, for that matter. Yes, that would be a good idea.

The path by the waterside was too narrow for them to walk arm in arm, so Thorne led, holding Carole by the hand. As he walked and looked down at the wrack and rubbish choking the creek mouth he thought his nice, pricey new home might well be described as situated above an open sewer. Then, to his annoyance, a blank wall met them just short of the building. It was a bloody nuisance - there was his flat, just a few yards away, and he couldn't get to it. Unless...

"I'm going to climb up onto the balcony," he told Carole. "If I stand on the wall I should be able to grab hold of the bottom of the railings and pull myself up."

"Don't be daft," she said dubiously, "it's too far. You might lose your balance and fall in. They say if you fall in Dead Man's Creek you can never get out. The mud will swallow you up."

Thorne saw she wasn't joking. She seemed worried about something more than his taking a tumble into the muck. Perhaps it was her concern, but Carole seemed younger, somehow, and more frail. He had never known her to be so pensive.

"You fell in," Thorne said, "you told me that, and you got out all right."

"It was further down, I showed you - and I didn't fall in, I got pushed." Carole fell silent as a frown crossed her face. She stared into the water for a moment, then sighed and said quietly, as if to herself: "I might not have got out that time, not really."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothing," she said, her face gloomy, "nothing at all. Anyway, I wouldn't try to climb up there if I were you. That wall don't look all that safe."

"You're not me, and it looks safe enough," said Thorne, who prided himself on being fit and agile. It was a challenge.

"How am I to get in, then?" Carole asked. "I'm not climbing up there!"

"Well, how about if you go first, and I push you, give you a bunk up?"

"Promises," Carole laughed. "You won't get me climbing up there. Give us your keys and I'll go back to the flat and stand on the balcony. I can give you a hand, and if you fall in I can have a good laugh."

"I won't fall in," Thorne said confidently. "But that's a good idea, though, I might need a hand up."

Carole took the keys and twirled them in her hand. "Be careful," she said, and kissed him on the cheek. "Don't try to climb until I'm on the balcony. I'll have a look and see if I can find a buoy I can throw in to you."

"I'd rather you threw a girl," said Thorne, as Carole ran off along the side of the creek. By the mouth of the alleyway they'd come through she stopped and blew a kiss to him before disappearing. He turned to look up at the balcony, already impatient to see her emerge.

"Pull me out."

Thorne frowned and looked at the other flats for the practical joker. Someone was possibly trying to trick anyone who heard the words to go down to the creek, to see if anyone was in trouble. Some people took their amusement from the most peculiar things.

Bored with staring at the side of his apartment block, he turned to face the river. The post was leaning further towards him. Indeed, it seemed to almost float on the water, as if it would only take a push to set it adrift. He wondered whether the boatman would return to try and knock it in again. Most likely he'd given up - talk about a thankless task. Why bother? Perhaps the post was securing something. When he was a child Thorne had thought that the seas and rivers had plugs, like bathtubs, and if they were pulled out the water would all drain away. It would not be pleasant to see what lay at the bottom of the Thames, and in the creek, trapped in the oozing, layered mud of so many centuries.

At his feet lay a pile of builders' rubble and, on impulse, Thorne took up a flat piece of slate and skimmed it across the creek. It hit the water a couple of times before eventually sinking. Feeling exhilaration at finding he still had the knack he looked for another piece. Finding nothing of the right shape and size he picked up a handy-sized stone instead and, taking careful aim, threw it as hard as he could at the post.

"Shot!" he cried, as the stone struck the wood with a dull thump. The post staggered in the water under the impact. Aiming his fingers at it gun-style he said quietly:

"I never miss."

"Knock me out. Pull me out."

Thorne didn't bother to look up at the flats for the caller. He picked up another stone and flung it over the water, to connect again with the slime-covered post.

"I'll have you out, whoever you are," he shouted.

The stone bounced off the wood and it lurched again, turning slowly in a circle to stir the rubbish surrounding it, disturbed ooze forming a black cloud in the already filthy water. The post must be about to come loose.

"Knock me out. Pull me out."

The voice sounded excited, now; expectant.

"I'll knock it out," Thorne shouted, enjoying the game, "then you can come out from wherever you are."

Again he took up a stone and, judging the shot well, had the satisfaction of striking the post for the third time.

"Three's the charm," he declared triumphantly, as the wood tilted slowly in the water, then fell flat among the flotsam. The murky water was further agitated by something beneath the surface, an object rising up, dark and slick with Thames mud. Parting the rubbish it broke the surface, and the wheeling gulls descended upon it, concealing the waif of the river with their wings.

"I'm out now."

Thorne turned his head toward the building, wondering where the caller could be. Carole should be in the flat by now; she had had plenty of time. With his back to the water he clambered precariously over the low wall between the bank and the creek. He would walk along until he was under his balcony, then reach up - he was sure he could do it on his own. Thorne was a tall man as well as a fit one. It would be a surprise for Carole when she opened the balcony door, to find him there already.

It was surprisingly easy to walk along the wall; he might have a quiet word with the other tenants about the security implications. He didn't even have to balance himself against the building as he stood below the balcony and judged the distance. The trick when doing this sort of thing lay in not looking down - which, on hearing a splash below, Thorne promptly did, and almost lost his balance in his surprise.

The boat floated an arm's length away, with the boatman standing up and staring at him. The stranger held in his hand the long, weed-covered post, which Thorne saw was sharp-pointed at one end. The boatman held up the stake easily, but then he was a big man, almost a giant.

"I knocked it out," Thorne said, suddenly realising the precariousness of his position. "I suppose that was all right - was it supposed to be there to hold something down, or to tie things to?"

The boatman didn't answer, but merely stared and raised the wood in his hands. Suddenly realising what might happen next, Thorne looked up to his balcony to see if Carole had arrived yet. Yes, someone stood there. He called her name, but there was no answer, only the squawk of the gulls. The birds were suddenly very close, their wings almost touching him, their beaks red and feral.

"Carole?" Thorne called again, seeing that whoever stood on the balcony made no movement. But it was her, he realised, blond hair hanging limply over her face as she leant over the metal railing, hands dangling.

"Where have you been?" he gasped, and reached out his hand to hers. He gripped it with his right hand and with his left held onto the bottom of the balcony. With her help he could just do it, swing himself up and over. But his grip was not returned, as her hand was slack. He looked up again and saw that she was leaning dangerously over the rail, her body almost bent double.

"What's the matter with you? Pull me up."

"I'll pull you up."

Thorne felt the drip of slimy wet mud on his face. It fell into his eyes, so he couldn't make out the figure that now leant over beside Carole. Her useless hand slipped out of his, to be instantly replaced by another whose texture recalled the filth covering his face. As the ooze cleared from his eyes Thorne had just enough time to think that it must have been in the mud and water for a long, long time. Then he cried out and fell back to land in the creek. Carole followed, falling silently to land beside him, the wake from her impact swamping him as he rose to the surface.

Gasping in the filthy water, Thorne realised he had surfaced by the boat, and raised a hand for rescue.

"Pull me out!" he cried; but the boatman was already raising the post high above his head.

In a moment all was still and quiet on the water, but for the sound of the boatman's hammer as he knocked the post back into the mud. There was a splash in the creek, then, as something jumped back in from Thorne's balcony. It sank on hitting the water, but surfaced again within seconds. A black and shapeless form among the river's rubbish, it slowly pulled itself to the boat and clambered aboard. Rank with weed and mud, it sat patiently as the boatman, without looking at what had been released from the river, propelled his craft and its burden across the Thames to the far bank. Soon the stream was empty but for the post, once more a sentinel at the mouth of what was known locally as Dead Man's Creek.

Face down in the water, her fair hair floating about her head, Carole made her way slowly along the inlet. She had been right. Once you had fallen in the creek you could never get out, not really. It claimed you in the end.

Much later, a man came out onto the balcony of his flat to watch the nightfall on the river. He stood silently smoking for a while, until the quiet was broken by the sound of a voice calling from somewhere in the thickening twilight.

"Pull me out."

He peered into the dark river and at first thought to see someone standing in the water. But it was just a trick of the twilight, as he realised there was only a weed-covered post that leant to one side, as if it were pointing at him. With a shrug he flipped the butt of his cigarette and watched it fall, glimmering through the air to join the rest of the human debris lost to the river. Then he went back inside, shutting the door behind him.

And there was no one to hear the voice of the waif of the river as it began its patient wait, calling over and over again:

"Pull me out."