

Fortune's Slave

Chapter One: Tear

One or more bubbles deliberately introduced into glass by pricking it and letting the resultant bubble expand in the heat.

‘What was that noise?’ The Countess sat bolt upright in bed, leaving her wig on the pillow. ‘Listen! We’re being burgled!’

Anastasia, Lady Ashby de la Zouche, Countess of Clapham, Baroness Penge, etc ... was not accustomed to worrying about burglars. She never usually had anything worth stealing, but, for once, she was sitting upon a fortune: one hundred guineas in bright shiny coins. ‘Someone is upstairs. Don’t you hear?’

A body in an adjacent bed shifted, groaning, and a blanket fell to the stone-flagged floor.

‘Burglars, inside the house!’ repeated the Countess. ‘Listen! Hear the boards creaking.’

A series of dull squeaks and the muffled sounds of padding feet seemed to pass across the ceiling above.

‘Shut your row!’ growled Godfrey, the Countess’s ancient steward, letting another blanket slip to the floor. ‘Some folk are trying to sleep.’

‘Criminy, I hear it!’ In a flash of white linen, Alpiew, the Countess’s quondam maid, leaped out of the third bed and stood with her ear pressed to the door, a raised poker in her hand. ‘He’s coming down the stairs!’ She snatched the carving knife from a nearby shelf. ‘Watch out for me, milady. I’m going to check.’

The Countess held up her hand, signalling Alpiew to wait while she gave Godfrey a wallop and pulled his bedclothes right back. ‘Come on, you lazy slubberdegullion,’ she hissed. ‘You’re meant to be the man of the house. Get out there with Alpiew.’

Baring his gums in an ineffectual snarl, Godfrey got up and took a position behind Alpiew while the Countess lit a candle from the dying embers of the fire.

‘Wait till I have light.’ The Countess shielded the flame and moved towards the door. ‘Let’s get him.’ She gave Alpiew a nod.

Alpiew inched the kitchen door open. ‘Go!’ she shouted, dashing into the hallway just as the front door slammed shut. ‘I’m going after him.’ She loped the length of the hall, pulled the door open and stood on the step, looking left and right along German Street .

But she could see no one running into the moonless night.

‘Where the devil? Help ho! Watch!’ cried Alpiew from the doorstep. ‘Where is the night-watch?’ In her night-gown, still clutching the poker and knife, she ran along the cobbled street to the small box which housed the night-watch Charlie, and hammered upon the side.

An elderly man kicked the door open and lifted his head. ‘What an almighty noise,’ he grunted, pulling his coat around him. ‘What are you waking me up for? I was asleep.’

‘So I see, you bone-idle bugger. Might I remind you, you dribbling dotard, that you are paid to stay awake at night,’ yelled Alpiew. ‘Someone was just now inside our house and made their escape by running right past you while you snored away your hours of duty ...’

‘That’s a nice pair you’ve got ...’ The old man was focused upon Alpiew’s enormous bosom and quite lost to all reasonable thought. ‘Can I ’ave a feel ...?’

‘No, you cannot.’ Alpiew pulled her night-gown up almost to her chin. ‘You’d better fetch the constable, and fast.’

‘But I’m a war veteran ...’

‘I don’t care if you’re the ghost of the Great Protector himself. Get on with it!’ Alpiew slammed the door on his foot and ran back towards the house.

The Countess, who had been lingering on the doorstep, waving the candle about and peering into the dark, turned and went back inside. She started to mount the staircase.

‘Wait for me, madam.’ Alpiew ran past her into the kitchen, where she replaced the carving knife with a gimlet and small hammer. ‘Who knows what else you might find up there.’

‘You mean ...?’ The Countess, who was already half-way up the first flight, stopped where she stood and placed a chubby hand on her heaving bosom. ‘Of course! He may have an accomplice.’ She leaned over the banister and shouted down. ‘Godfrey! Come upstairs. We need you.’

‘Hold the light aloft, madam.’ Alpiew handed the poker to the Countess as she overtook her, and, squinting into the dark, climbed the stairs to the first floor.

The candle guttered. The draught from their movement threw leaping shadows on to the decaying white walls as they reached the first landing.

The two women stood still and listened. Silence. Huddling together, the poker held out before them, the hammer high in the air, they tiptoed towards the first room. The Countess gripped on to Alpiew and nodded. Alpiew lurched forward and flung wide the door, revealing a dusty, dilapidated, small empty chamber. Pressing themselves tight against the landing wall they edged along to the next door. Again Alpiew held up the hammer, the Countess the candle.

Alpiew kicked the door. It slammed back, hitting the wall, revealing another larger rundown room. A lump of plaster fell from the ceiling and landed with a thud on the bare floorboards.

A sudden crash from the floor above made them leap up and shriek. Wax from the candle spilled down on to the Countess’s hand, burning her skin.

‘Godfrey! Godfrey!’ Alpiew called down as she ran up the next flight of stairs. ‘Go into the street and raise the hue and cry!’

‘But I’m half-way up now ...’

‘Do it!’ ordered the Countess.

Alpiew had already thrown open the door to the back top room and was now at the doorway of the front attic. She took a deep breath as she entered. She watched the casement fly open, bounce against

its hinge, and slam shut with a thud. In the dark she crossed the room, pushed the window open again and looked out across the adjacent empty roofs.

‘’Tis nothing, madam,’ she yelled back in the direction of the puffing Countess. ‘The wind blowing the window, making it bang in its frame.’

‘These stairs!’ squawked the Countess. ‘I’m sixty years old. Too old for mountaineering.’

As the Countess reached the top landing a hollering from below heralded the arrival of the constable and his headboroughs. Waving their lanterns and clutching smoking links, a band of men in night-gowns, boots and coats thumped upstairs.

‘False alarm!’ The Countess leaned over the banister and called to them. ‘The window had come loose.’

‘Are you sure no one is here?’ A burly fellow, bearing the painted staff of constabulary authority, bounded up the stairs three by three. ‘No intruder? No murderous malcontent with malice on his mind?’ He shoved into the attic room, holding his staff before him in both hands, ready to use it as a weapon. His colleagues poured in behind him, sweeping Alpiev along in their wake.

‘Someone made his exit through the front door a few minutes ago.’ Alpiev did not like looking a fool, especially while standing in dishabillé in a room full of men. ‘But I suspect he may have come into the house this way.’

The headboroughs ambled over to the window. They gathered in a huddle, scratching their stubbly chins, taking it in turns to glance out of the window. One after another they swung open the casement then shut it, examined the catch and the hinges, looked out into the night and then back into the room. All the while they nodded and grunted to each other.

‘If a felon was here,’ said the swarthy constable, handing his staff to a junior while brushing down his military coat. ‘And if they used this particular window as a method of entry, I would suggest that the said intruder was a child of no more than ten years of age.’ He stared out across the roofs. ‘Definitely a child. A man’s weight would have broken something out there, a tile perhaps, and a man would have been hard pressed to squeeze himself through this little frame.’ He pulled the window shut. ‘Not only that, I wonder if you were right in your assumption that there was an intruder at all.’ He looked around the room, at the holed ceiling, the peeling walls, the lack of any furniture or adornment. ‘What would a burglar be after? This place looks singularly uninviting for a thief. I’d venture a guess that no one has entered this room in months.’

‘If it’s any of your business,’ snapped the Countess. She did not like people to know she had run into hard times and sold up all the furnishings and let the rest go to ruin, except for two rooms – the kitchen and the front parlour. ‘We prefer the lower floors.’

‘Wait!’ said Alpiev. ‘Someone has been in here.’ She stooped in the corner and picked up a piece of nutshell. ‘What is this?’

‘You think someone came into your house to leave you a nutshell?’ inquired the constable, looking at Alpiev as though she was an escapee from Bedlam.

Alpiev lurched towards him, fists raised.

‘I didn’t mean to offend, madam. But you should go to a locksmith and get this window seen to in case of a repeat visit. There is a good man in the Hay Market, I believe.’ He stood to attention and saluted. ‘I am John Shaw, by the way, your new constable.’ He thrust out a sturdy hand. ‘Formerly a captain in His Royal Highness’s army, but now that the late strifes are ended, the wars in Europe resolved, and we proud English are supposed to pretend to be friends with the idiotic Dutch, the stinking French, the stupid Irish, the dirty Scots, the smug Spanish and all the other nasty foreign shagamuffins, I am engaged to serve my time instead hereabouts, on the streets of London, protecting the individual English citizen from locally bred miscreants.’

The Countess gave a wan smile, wondering if he had finished his speech.

After a few seconds silence, when it became clear that he had, she thanked him and ushered him and his colleagues down the stairs and back out into the street.

‘If the dirty little diver bothers you again, madam, know that, if I am not on the prowl keeping the streets safe, you can always rouse me at the green door next to The Feathers.’ John Shaw lifted his coat to show a pistol tucked into his wide leather belt. ‘Mesdames, witness! My weapon stands idle waiting upon your call.’ He leaned close to the Countess and whispered into her ear. ‘I have no doubt in my mind that if a child was employed to get in, there are other villains working in league with him.’ He tapped his nose. ‘Be alert!’

The Countess smiled and patted her nose by way of reply, leaving a grey dusty smudge.

‘I shall watch while you secure your front door.’ Captain Shaw saluted, then folded his arms and with a stern expression stood in the centre of the street, his legs planted firmly apart. ‘Good night to you, ladies.’

‘Come on, Alpiew,’ whispered the Countess. ‘We’d better check that the you-know-what is still under the you-know-where.’ She ushered Alpiew in and closed the door behind them.

‘Godfrey!’ The Countess shouted, although Godfrey was standing only a few feet away. ‘Balance a chair under the handle. Let’s make sure we have no further nocturnal visitors.’

‘Much good that’ll do,’ muttered Godfrey slouching off to fetch a chair from the kitchen, ‘when all the windows are rotten and all the catches broken.’

‘The catches work perfectly, but first, Godfrey, they must be applied,’ the Countess called after him. ‘Some male member of the household should make it his business to go round each night and check.’

While Godfrey shoved a chair under the door handle, the Countess and Alpiew ran up the stairs to check on their stash of money, which was hidden in small amounts all around the house.

Alpiew stuck the gimlet down into the floor of the front attic room, used the hammer to prize up a board and plunged her hand down into the rafter void. She pulled out the sheet-wrapped parcel. ‘It’s still here, and it’s heavy enough.’ She unravelled the fabric, revealing the dull glint of coins.

‘I was worried.’ The Countess took hold of the moneybag and cradled it as though it was a swaddled baby. ‘The rest of tonight this precious cargo will stay under my pillow, and tomorrow morning I suggest we find some way to dispose of it.’

With cups of hot spiced beer and milk posset, the Countess, Alpiew and Godfrey sat up for hours discussing the problem.

‘We could entrust it to a goldsmith for safe-keeping.’ The Countess stroked the sheet-wrapped parcel on her lap.

‘Milady, how often have you heard the tales of goldsmiths who absconded with their clients funds, or went bankrupt, having secretly spent all the money that they were paid to keep safe? We would never know it was gone till it was too late. At least we trust each other and while we hold on to it can keep checking to make sure it is all here.’

‘We could buy lots of valuable jewellery or paintings,’ said Godfrey. ‘Some folk do that.’

‘Yes – and a burglar could still run off with them.’ Alpiew had never understood the world’s fascination with precious stones or art-works. ‘We’d be a sitting target.’

‘We could try putting it into one of these new-fangled banks. They are springing up everywhere.’ The Countess counted on her fingers. ‘Why, there is Coutt’s at the Three Crowns in the Strand, Child’s at the Marigold by Temple Bar ...’

‘How comes it, milady, that you suddenly know all these establishments by their addresses?’ Alpiew gave a sidelong glance. What was the Countess about?

‘To tell you truly, Alpiew,’ – the Countess blushed and picked up her cup – ‘I have been living in constant fear that something like this would happen. So I have made a few inquiries.’

‘Me too!’ Alpiew laughed. She had rarely been able to hold on to money for long, and was living in fear that it would somehow vanish.

The Countess too knew the vicissitudes of wealth. Her fortune had whipped up and down since she was a child, and the last ten years had proved the most difficult financially.

And here they both were with a fortune to protect: one hundred guineas earned on an escapade in France which had paid them well.

‘It is a worry, madam, sitting on all this money. I go and check it every day.’ As usual Alpiew did a mental audit of their hidden funds. ‘I’d love to know who left that nut up there.’

‘What nut?’ Godfrey had a shifty look about him.

‘The nut in the attic.’

‘Have you been fiddling with my nuts?’

‘No one likes even to think about your nuts, Godfrey.’ The Countess held her cup out for a refill.

Alpiew faced Godfrey, her hands on her hips. ‘You go up to the attic and eat nuts?’

‘I go and check the money every now and then, and I might bring a bag o’ nuts with me. What’s wrong with that?’

‘So, alas, the nut meant nought.’ Alpiew swung the kettle back over the flame. ‘Ah well, regarding the money problem, milady, tomorrow shall we take advice?’

‘Do you know, I wonder whether having money is almost trickier than having none. I have owned valuable things before, jewellery and the like, but never a stash of coins like this.’ The Countess sank

into her easy chair. ‘We need someone experienced to help us, a person who has always had lots of brass, someone with so much money it is mere air to them.’ She rubbed her chin, leaving a grey imprint like a Spaniard’s beard. ‘I have hit it! Who could know better what to do than my darling friend Pigalle?’

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‘Trou du cul de cochon!’ Olympe Athenée Montelimar, Duchesse de Pigalle, cracked a horse-whip, raising dust from the cobbles. ‘Retournez dans votre banlieue de merde!’

Further down the street a liveried man was running, clutching the seat of his breeches.

‘Olympe, sweetheart!’ cried the Countess, emerging from behind a row of coaches stuck in an early-morning jam outside the Duchesse’s Arlington Street home. ‘What on earth is going on? Wasn’t that your coachman running off?’

‘Voleur! In France we should have had him branded. Zut! He is never to be mentioned again, and zat is zat.’ Pigalle threw the whip up on to the driver’s seat, and stood with her hands on her hips. She was wearing a gentleman’s riding suit in a particularly vivid green damask which clashed vividly with her upright clump of orange hair. She stepped forward and kissed the Countess on both cheeks, leaving a scarlet imprint on either side. ‘Alors! There is nothing else for it. I shall have to take ze reins myself. Are you coming? Now zat I am riding up top there is room for one more inside.’

The Countess hesitated. She only wanted a quick word. But Pigalle was always impossible to pin down, so she thought maybe she should take up the offer of a ride.

She flapped her mouth open and shut again.

‘You look like a sea-lion in ze menagerie, darling. Bien sûr, chérie, Alpiew can ride up with me.’ Pigalle pulled the coach door open. ‘Zut, Ashby! Inside! Or we shall miss all ze fun.’

‘But where are you taking me, Olympe?’ cried the Countess, as Pigalle pushed her rotund backside into the coach and slammed the door behind her. ‘I’ve only come to ask your advice.’

Alpiew clambered on to the driver’s perch. Pigalle leaped up and grabbed the reins.

The Countess leaned out of the window and yelled, ‘Where are you taking us?’

‘Ashby, my darling, where else would we go today?’ Pigalle flicked her whip and the coach lurched into motion. ‘To Tyburn, of course, to see the hangings.’

Inside the coach the Countess introduced herself to Pigalle’s guests, a ruddy middle-aged merchant, Edward Stark, his wife Cynthia and Robinson, her young nephew.

There was an uneasy atmosphere and the Countess wondered whether she had not come into the coach at the zenith of an almighty family row.

‘Are you staying with Olympe?’ asked the Countess, trying to ease the edgy silence.

‘No,’ said Robinson, a thin youth with pale eyelashes and a brown wig which must be much darker than his own hair.

‘Pip! Pip! Pip! Buy my pippins!’ An apple seller was strolling alongside the static carriages. ‘Pip! Pip! Pip!’

A handful of leaflets was thrust through the open window.

“‘Laura’s Lace Emporium’,’ Cynthia read. “‘ Bruges , Bucks, Bobbin and Bedfordshire –”” Before she could continue, her husband had snatched the card from her hand and thrown it out of the window.

‘That’s enough of that,’ he said.

‘Husbands!’ Cynthia rolled her eyes and turned conspiratorially to the Countess. ‘He hates me spending money.’

‘Better to spend it on lace than on the lottery,’ said Robinson. ‘At least we know that lace is certain to appreciate in value.’

The Countess was amazed that people like this were in Pigalle’s coach. The duchesse usually spent her time with disinherited European princes, disgraced players, fairground freaks, cross-dressing vicars, and flamboyant members of the aristocracy, not strait-laced nonentities from the self-regarding merchant class. ‘Have you known Pigalle long?’ By asking this the Countess hoped she might find out what relationship they had with Pigalle and therefore know how civil she need be with them.

‘I have an interest in today’s proceedings at Tyburn, Countess,’ said Edward Stark with a hearty grin. ‘So when the Duchesse told me she was taking the coach we decided to make a party of it.’

Cynthia patted her gaping mouth with her hand and let out an audible yawn.

Phough! The Countess looked round at her companions, astonished. She had never attended a public execution any more than she had sailed single-handed round the Cape to the Indies . It was enough having to drive past the impaled heads on London Bridge , or the tarred bodies of traitors in iron cages at the City gates, without having to witness the grisly deed performed before your eyes.

‘Have you ever witnessed the Hanging Fair at Tyburn?’

The Countess shook her head.

With a shudder the coach stopped. Cynthia sighed and glanced out of the window. ‘Turnpike,’ she stated. ‘Wretched things.’

‘Merde!’ Pigalle jumped down and called into the carriage. ‘Coins? Who has some coins to pay ze road charge?’

Everyone rooted about and presented Pigalle with an assortment of small change.

‘What a thing, to charge us to drive upon our own roads here in ze capital city,’ cried the Duchesse de Pigalle, counting up. ‘But, alors, who would expect any different in zis land where there is neither faith, law nor priest?’ She pulled one coin out of the pool and spat. ‘Augh! Zat one is more trouble zan it is worth.’ She tossed the coin to the ground. ‘Clipped.’

‘There are still so many of them about, these clipped coins,’ sighed the Countess. ‘I thought the Royal Mint was putting a stop to it.’

‘Never can stop a thing when it makes a profit,’ said Robinson.

‘Did you know,’ Edward Stark jumped in to join the conversation, ‘you are more like to hang for defrauding His Majesty’s Exchequer than for highway robbery?’

‘Here!’ Cynthia plunged her hand into her pocket and passed Pigalle a coin to replace the clipped one. ‘Pay up and let’s move on.’

‘Merci, madame.’ Pigalle presented the fee to the turnpike operator. ‘Voilà! And now to ze fair.’ With a howl of anticipation she leapt back up into the driver’s seat.

‘Turkey figs, apricocks and ripe black dates?’ A woman with a basket of dried fruit popped her head into the carriage window. ‘A feast of fruit for a shilling.’ v‘Yes, please.’ This time Cynthia looked to her husband to provide the funds. ‘I am half starved.’

‘You’ve already got a belly on you,’ snapped Edward Stark, pulling a shilling from his vest pocket. ‘You eat too much pudding and drink too much chocolate.’

‘Good!’ Cynthia snatched the money and paid for a paper cone of dried fruit. ‘So perhaps this fruit may act as a purge.’

In the corner Robinson sniggered.

The Countess took out her fan and flapped. ‘Tis hot for May, don’t you think? And so sunny! It seems more like August.’

Robinson laughed aloud and pulled out a handkerchief, feigning a sneeze to cover up.

Cynthia crammed a handful of apricots into her mouth and let out a contented sigh as she chewed.

‘What have you there?’ Edward Stark poked a finger into the cone. ‘Five pieces of each fruit, if that.’ He slumped back, jotting down figures in a notebook. ‘The price of these commodities is fascinating, do you not think, Countess? At wholesale a tiny smidgen such as my wife has just now purchased would be worth a penny, if that. So, somewhere along the line, someone is clearing a handsome profit. Perhaps the market in dried fruit is worth an investment.’

‘Holiday prices, dear husband!’ Cynthia spoke through a mouthful of half-chewed fruit. ‘Everyone knows at fairs and suchlike the prices shoot up. ’Tis the very nature of high days. You have a captive market. Something you’d know all about.’

The Countess gazed out of the window, wishing heartily that they would soon arrive at their destination so she might excuse herself from this kinship of discord.

Pigalle decided to abandon the coach under a tree at the corner of the park. They could walk the rest of the way. All around, parties of eager excited people were spilling out of carriages and chairs, making their way to the gate out of Hide Park .

‘The procession must be well past St Giles,’ said Cynthia, dropping down on to the grass. ‘Listen to the roar! Now to find somewhere where we can see more than the flea-ridden perukes of the man standing in front of us.’ Cynthia took Robinson’s arm. ‘You’ll be a gentleman, won’t you, Robinson dear, and get me a good spec.’

‘Excellent situation, ladies and gents!’ yelled a man at the foot of a long ladder leaning on the tall wall which edged the park. ‘Beautiful Prospect! Only five pennies a perch.’

The Countess turned and assessed the proposition. The top of the park wall was already precariously full of drunken spectators. One of them stopped swigging from a wine pouch and pointed along the Tyburn Road. ‘Here they come!’

‘Zut!’ said Pigalle, thrusting herself into the festive crowd. ‘Follow me!’

‘A young man and a maid

Together lately played ...’

Nearby a fellow played a jaunty tune on a hurdy-gurdy. A woman stood beside him, hands on her hips, singing.

‘What lovely music, Mr Stark!’ cried the Countess. ‘It makes you feel like dancing.’

The singer clapped her hands and continued her song with a fervour verging on wantonness.

‘Put in all!’ she sang.

‘The maid she did protest

She bid him do his best!

Put in all! put in all!’

Rather embarrassed at having drawn Mr Stark’s attention to such a lusty song, the Countess pressed on towards the sideshows. All around her pie sellers and cherry girls swung through the mob crying their wares.

Children were riding on their father’s shoulders. Lovers kissed as they strolled along. Red-faced women tucked into juicy pies and sweetmeats, their faces raised to the warm sun. Gaggles of people stood before the row of sideshows hollering and laughing at the antics of clowns, singers and magicians.

‘What a lovely day for a hanging,’ said Edward Stark. ‘I’m so glad. It’s very depressing here when it rains.’

‘I rather imagine if you were one of those going to be hanged the weather wouldn’t matter quite so much.’ The Countess smiled.

‘Yes,’ said Edward Stark. ‘But sunshine makes it more fun for the kiddies.’

‘Come along, Countess.’ Cynthia looped the Countess in her free arm and yanked her away from her husband. ‘We ladies are safer if we stick together.’

‘... her rolling eyes, Put in all! put in all!’ cried the singer with a suggestive wink.

‘My skin is white, you see,

My smock above my knee

What would you more of me? Put in all! put in all!

Put in all! Put in all!’

A line of dusty children steamed through the crowd, marching in step like a squadron on manoeuvre, shoving the two women apart.

Staggering to regain her balance, the Countess found herself swept along in the thick of the mob, her face squashed into the filthy clothing of the sweaty revellers. After a moment’s panic she was reassured by the sight of Pigalle’s carrot-coloured hair bobbing a few yards ahead.

‘My kerchief!’ cried Cynthia, emerging somewhat ruffled and falling in step at the Countess’s side. ‘One of those little dusty bastards has stolen it. Best Flanders too. I always forget that public hangings are a hotbed of crime. Now my swine of a husband will have to let me buy another.’

She couldn’t exactly say why, but the Countess suspected Cynthia’s histrionics were only acted, and that she was inventing this theft in order to get herself a jaunt to the milliners.

With a final shove the two women squeezed through a screeching bundle of Billingsgate fish-wives and arrived near the convent doors.

‘Well, look at that!’ said Cynthia, munching on a piece of dried fig and staring up.

The triple tree of Tyburn, a sturdy wooden triangle eighteen feet high, loomed before them. Men swung like monkeys from the tops of ladders, grabbing on to the crossbars, ready to tie the ropes which were soon to conduct the condemned criminals into the next world.

Nearby, a row of officials were beating back the crowd, making a path for the fated prisoners’ wagon.

‘I could murder a pie!’ said Cynthia, gazing around, hoping to spot a pie seller.

‘Olympe, I need your advice.’ The Countess eased alongside Pigalle and Edward Stark. ‘Alpiew and I have a little nest-egg. How would you recommend we invest our money?’

Edward Stark leaned forward, all ears.

‘Ow should I know zat?’ Pigalle glared at the Countess, threw her arms in the air and let out a squawk. ‘I never had a penny of money to invest in all my life.’

‘But, Olympe ...!’

‘Oh look, darling! How wonderful! A conjuror!’ Pigalle grabbed the Countess’s sleeve and tugged her away towards the sideshows. ‘My favourite!’ She gave a merry shriek and stood gaping up at a magician’s stall as though in a trance.

The Countess was mystified. Her friend Pigalle was famously one of the richest people in Europe and had been so for fifty years, since her father, mother and uncles (some of the most prosperous and powerful people in France and Italy) had all died, bequeathing to her their vast fortunes. Since then a number of lovers, mainly crowned monarchs of both genders, had also left her large legacies.

Nor had the Countess ever noticed her to be particularly interested in conjurors.

‘I say blow by the high and abominable ...’ The magician, wearing a long gown of black and silver embroidered with stars and all sort of hieroglyphs, blew into his gloved hands. ‘... A ho-bee bo-pee! Jacko cracko! Felto!’

He clapped his hands together and flung them up above his head. A fine sparkling mist fell about the stage.

‘Augh! Zere’s no magic in zat,’ said Pigalle. ‘Ze gloves are full of glitter. It’s a mere trompe l’oeil.’

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In the thick of the crowd, Alpiew found herself crushed up against Robinson.

‘Do you have a particular interest in today’s hangings?’ She lurched sideways to get out of the way of a mutton-pie seller whose tray was dripping rancid-smelling fat.

‘I’m just tagging along.’ Robinson grabbed his sword-knot and manoeuvred Alpiew away from a small gaggle of beady-looking ragged boys leaning against the convent wall. ‘I imagine the pick-pockets will be making a good profit today.’

Alpiew thrust her hand into her pocket. She wrapped her fingers around the few coins she had brought with her. She had no intention of being a cully to some young strolling dubber.

‘You know, Alpiew –’ Robinson rubbed his forehead in thought – ‘I feel certain there is a living to be made out of theft.’

‘Of course there is,’ said Alpiew. ‘For the thieves.’

‘No. A legal business. Something like gambling. I have this idea of taking money from a person every week, and if no one burgles them I keep the money. But if they do get burgled, then I must pay out to replace what they lose.’

‘You think people would bet on that!’ Alpiew wondered whether the boy might not be cracked.

‘Why not? People are beginning to pay out in a like manner in case of fire. It’s the new road to a fortune. It’s called insurance. Lloyds coffee house has been insuring ships in this way for many years.’ As he spoke they passed a fire-eater’s stall. The moustachioed entertainer puffed a great orange cloud of fire above their heads. ‘So why not houses?’

‘You’d better not insure the house where he is a lodger,’ said Alpiew.

Robinson looked up at the fire-eater and ignored Alpiew’s comment. ‘I even think it might be something,’ he said, ‘to insure a person against dying.’

‘But we all die.’ Alpiew took a step away from him. Presumably he had something to sell. She had met quacks before who tried to sell secret recipes for elixirs for eternal life, but never one so young, bright and good looking.

‘Yes, but the policy would be against sudden death, and they’d have to pay all the while they were living.’

‘Really,’ said Alpiew. ‘Sounds like a murderer’s charter to me.’

‘I don’t know. But I am thinking about it as an idea. Ho!’ he shouted, waving a hand high in the air. ‘Look ahead! My aunt is up with the magician.’

Up on the conjuror’s stage, Cynthia took a card, glimpsed at it and handed it back.

The magician threw the card into the air. ‘Swift fly!’ He stamped and glared down at Pigalle who stood with the Countess before the middle of the platform. His dark eyes lowered under his black brow. He caught the card and wrapped his fingers around it. ‘Begone!’ Bending forward he blew a thin coil of smoke from his lips. ‘Quick, presto! Passa largo mento. Hi cocolorum! The card is flown.’ He spread his empty hands wide.

‘Pigalle, darling, what is going on?’ hissed the Countess into her friend’s ear. She was not at all interested in the prestidigitator’s capers. ‘Why do you say you have no money? You have always had oodles.’

‘I know zat!’ Whispering, Pigalle peered over the Countess’s shoulder. ‘But Edward Stark and his nephew are both after it. So I am pretending to zem zat I lost it all investing in bad stock.’

‘And why do they want your money?’ the Countess asked, idly watching the magician as he stooped and swirled his hands in a dizzying pattern about a foot above Pigalle’s hair.

‘Ze boy Robinson is a broker and Edward Stark is a banker or something. Zey both want me to invest in them. But I already have invested where I please.’

‘Invested?’ said the Countess. ‘In what?’

‘Oh, Ashby, you are such an innocent. Sssssh!’ Pigalle slammed her finger to her mouth and glanced in Cynthia’s direction. ‘Never, ever tell other people where you have put your money.’

The magician clapped his hands and swerved round to the Countess.

‘Open your mouth, madam.’

The Countess obliged. The magician appeared to pull the missing card from it. The crowd gave a dutiful round of applause.

A sudden drum roll and burst of trumpet at the far side of the ground were followed by a great roar.

The Magician held his hands up. ‘My presentation will now take an interval, for see – here comes the main event! The prisoners are even now arriving at the gallows.’

The Countess turned to see the four condemned riding on a large wooden cart, loose nooses swinging freely from their necks. Another smaller cart behind carried four empty coffins.

‘Let us see who is on ze menu for today’s spectacle.’ Pigalle tossed the programme vendor a shilling. ‘Ze list of ze condemned, please. So what have we?’

Alpiew shuffled the papers and read the headings. ‘A murderer, a female thief, a highwayman, and an old man for treason.’

‘Treason? An old man?’ Pigalle tapped some snuff on to the back of her hand and snorted it, leaving a stain like a black moustache. ‘Ze elderly should behave with dignity. What has ze silly fool done?’

‘Coining.’ Alpiev ran her fingers down the broadsheet. ‘He ran a mint. And did some forgery. Forged bills and official documents.’

‘So, four birds dance ze Tyburn jig today.’ Pigalle punctuated her speech with a number of little sneezes. ‘Zis will be quite a show. Which is which?’

Alpiev ran her finger down the columns, glimpsing up at the prisoners in between reading. ‘The highwayman is a fine-looking fellow, it says here.’

‘Ze one in white,’ said Pigalle, through another loud sneeze. ‘Ze pretty lad with ze golden locks and ze delightful nosegay.’ She sneezed again.

‘The murderer is bald and fat ...’ Alpiev read. ‘He killed a man as he slept. Hacked him to pieces with a meat cleaver. He has a scar on his face.’

‘I cannot see any of them, let alone their scars.’ The Countess bounced up and down, trying to get a glimpse of anything.

‘Cherries-ripe-oh!’ Cynthia came to join them. She cradled a cone of cherries which she popped into her mouth one by one. ‘Anyone?’ She held out the cone.

‘Madam?’ From the stage behind them the conjuror stooped and whispered in the Countess’s ear. She in turn whispered to Alpiev, who handed the man two shillings. A few minutes later the entire party were happily sitting on a highly decorated trunk in the centre of the stage.

‘How many are here would you say?’ The Countess was taking in the magnitude of the crowd. ‘A thousand?’

‘I’d bet you two guineas that there are more than three,’ said Edward Stark.

Three of the prisoners stood proudly on the cart waving and bowing like players in the theatre. The old coiner slumped alone in a corner.

As the cart pulled in at the gallows, the mob surged forward, cheering.

‘That’s the thing that makes you proud to be English,’ said Edward Stark. ‘We have humour, and irony. We laugh at the delicacy of other nations who make such a mighty matter of being hanged.’

Cynthia tutted.

The Countess and Alpiev exchanged a look. The Countess pursed her lips and gave a sly glance at Edward Stark. Oblivious to the frisson his remark had caused, he dug his plump fingers into his wife’s cone of cherries, took a handful and crammed them into his smug mouth.

Ahead of them, the Newgate chaplain, sitting next to the old man, was shouting, reading a passage from the Bible as the cart shunted into place between the gallows’ beams. When it came to a halt, the young blade in white stood. ‘Mummy!’ he cried. A lumbering fat woman was clambering up to him. She swung from his neck, showering his rosy cheeks with kisses. ‘I knew you’d come.’

The mob bobbed up and down, shrieking with approval.

'I am proud to stand here today at Albion's triple tree.' The highwayman put one arm round his mother and flung his nosegay into the crowd. 'My soul is at peace and I am ready to make the great experiment.'

'John O'Hara, of Hounslow, aged twenty-nine,' read Alpiev. 'Terror of the roads around the Heath, from the village of Staynes as far as Tippet's Corner.'

'The hangman is drunk,' noted the Countess. 'Look at him wobbling about.'

The masked hangman balanced on the back of the cart, one hand gripping the head of the chaplain to steady himself, while with the other he handed the loose ends of the prisoners' nooses to the boys swinging from the crossbars.

The Countess couldn't understand how she and Alpiev had wound up here at a public hanging, when all they wanted was advice from Pigalle on where to put their money. The prospect of seeing four humans leap from a cart to their deaths, swinging from lengths of rope was not filling her with glee. 'Olympe darling, will we be here long? I have things to do.'

'Zut, Ashby, don't leave me now.' Pigalle squinted and then glared at the Countess. 'Stay here until it is polite for us to leave, and zen I will owe you a big favour.'

'I'm starved.' Cynthia grabbed a passing vendor and bought another cone of cherries, which she gobbled while reading over Alpiev's shoulder.

'I don't understand.' Alpiev's head bobbed up and down, taking a look at the prisoners. 'It says here there is a lady among the condemned. I only see men.'

'She is in breeches and a leather jerkin,' said Edward Stark, pointing. 'Dark hair, swarthy look.' The woman he indicated sat grimly in the corner of the cart. 'She is a house-breaker.'

'Kate Timony,' read Alpiev. 'Of Hounslow. Aged twenty-four.'

The woman stood proudly alone, head held high, while the other prisoners were being embraced by weeping friends and relatives.

'Make your last statements, if you will,' shouted the hangman. 'One at a time.'

He pointed his hand towards Kate Timony.

With a surly sneer, she rose and addressed the mob. 'I have only one thing to say.' She put her hands on her hips and glared at the crowd. 'Is there a midwife amongst ye?'

'Midwife?' The hangman swung round, still clutching the rope which was tied to her neck. 'What need have you of a midwife, you tawdry maux?'

'Because by law you cannot hang a woman who is with child.'

'You're not with child. To be with child you must first lie with a man, and what man would lie with you?'

'A midwife!' Kate Timony spat into the hangman's face. 'Please.'

Some men in the crowd hollered and threw their hats into the air.

Edward Stark bit his lower lip and leaned forward.

A couple of women pushed through to the prisoners' cart.

'Two midwives!' Edward Stark rubbed his hands. 'That's good. That's good!'

Kate Timony pulled open her leather jacket and unlaced her breeches. After a few minutes fumbling the midwives nodded at each other and one yelled to the crowd.

'She's knocked up all right!'

'Let her down,' shouted a young man and everyone else took up the cry, chanting rhythmically: 'Let her down. Down! Down!'

The executioner reached up for the rope, lost his footing and fell down into the jeering mob, who lifted him up to shoulder height and passed him along over their heads.

John O'Hara, the boy in white, released himself from his mother's embrace, climbed up on to the top of one of the cart wheels and sprang up to the crossbar of the scaffold where he worked frantically at untying Kate Timony's knot, until the rope slipped down and fell to the ground. 'All's fair in love and war,' he cried, and jumped back down on to the cart. He took a bow, his own noose still hanging loosely between him and the crossbar.

The sheriff's men were crowding round the prisoners. One picked up the loose end of Kate Timony's rope and yanked on it.

Kate Timony gave a gruff wave to the mob and climbed on to the back of the official's horse. She held her arms up in a triumphant gesture and yelled: 'Today, my friends, is not the day for me to dance the hempen jig from the branches of the deadly nevergreen. Adieu to you all.' She rubbed her belly. 'And pray, drink a toast to the child that saved my neck.'

'And to the brave blind man who put it there,' yelled a nearby wag, to an accompaniment of hoots and whistles.

'How can they know that the woman is with child?' The Countess leaned towards Cynthia and took one of her cherries. 'They only took a quick peek.'

'She'll have a belly on her,' said Robinson.

'My wife has a belly on her,' said Edward Stark. 'A belly can mean anything. Too much cherries and cakes and chocolate, for example. These midwives know how to recognise a baby. They have their secrets. Believe me.' He winked. 'These midwives are no strangers to mysteries of female anatomy.'

'Bellies!' Cynthia snorted into her hand as she fired a barrage of cherry stones into her palm. 'Much you'd know about female anatomy, husband dear.'

'Why don't you use your kerchief, wife? Your fingers are all sticky and messy.'

'Because my kerchief was just taken out of my pocket. One's Flanders can be filched anywhere.' Cynthia punctuated her sentence with a string of hiccoughs 'You are too quick to jump to conclusions. I shall have to replace it.'

'Enough!' snapped Edward Stark, holding up his palm to silence her.

‘So, Olympe,’ the Countess tried to whisper. ‘I am asking you what would you do?’

‘With a measly hundred guineas? How would I know? I only deal in vast amounts of money, tens of thousands, and as you know I use my money to buy land and houses.’

A sombre drum roll echoed against the park walls.

‘And where do you keep any spare money? Where would you put it to keep it safe?’

The three remaining men were told to get to their feet.

The horseman in charge of the prisoners’ cart looked back over his shoulder. ‘Are you all set? Have you made peace with your maker?’

The hangman touched each of the ropes to make sure they were attached to the crossbar.

‘Spare money?’ Pigalle squinted down at her friend.

‘Make your last farewells,’ shouted the hangman, raising his gloved fist. ‘For when I signal, the cart will move away and you will be left, as the law requires, to hang by your necks until you be dead, dead, dead!’

‘Why, ze same place everyone keeps their spare money, of course. Under ze floorboards and in my pillow.’

The crowd gave another roar and the sheriff’s men started pushing people clear of the cart.

‘Hold up the paper, Alpiew.’ The Countess grabbed hold of a corner of the broadsheet. ‘I cannot bear to watch.’

The executioner slammed his fist down and the cart lurched forwards, tipping the prisoners back, leaving them swinging in the air, suspended by the ropes round their necks.

‘The caper begins!’ cried the conjuror, rubbing his gloved hands together. ‘Now we see the grim dance of death.’

All three prisoners writhed and kicked, spinning round on the ropes which were squeezing out their last breath. Their legs bobbed up and down, forward and back, knees jerking as though they were performing some macabre Irish jig.

The crowd pressed forward. The sheriff’s men pushed them back with their pikes.

‘Cut the coiner down now,’ cried the executioner. ‘He’s a treason case.’

‘What on earth is going on?’ The Countess found that, against her own inclination, she was taking peeks over the top of the paper. ‘Why is the old man to be cut down?’

‘He clipped coins.’ Edward Stark stared intently at the proceedings. ‘Cheating His Royal Highness’s Treasury is a treasonable offence. If he was a woman, he’d be taken off to Smithfield and burnt,’ he added. ‘But as he’s a man he’ll be disembowelled and quartered.’

‘Please, Edward, let’s talk about something else,’ said Cynthia.

Stark did not take his eyes off the scaffold. ‘I was only answering the Countess’s query.’

Half dead, still twitching, the coiner was lifted on to the same cart he had a moment before been pulled from. The cart rumbled away.

‘With male coiners they cut the body into four,’ said Edward Stark. ‘Then they dip the pieces in tar and hang them up at the City gates as a warning to others not to mess with the king’s currency.’

‘Remember zat charognard has cheated us all,’ said Pigalle. ‘It is our money zat he is corrupting and stealing. If you do not punish these people ze world goes into disarray.’

‘You will see him cold-riveted, hanging in a gibbet, every time you go in or out of the City,’ said Cynthia under her breath. ‘Displayed to the north the east the south and the west.’ She had gone very pale, and now looked down at her lap rather than watch the final indignities of the man on the gallows.

Meanwhile the hangman’s assistant grabbed on to the murderer’s jerking legs and pulled. There was a crack as his neck broke. His body hung limp, his eyes and mouth open, his tongue sticking out.

Edward Stark’s knuckles were showing white on clenched fists. His lips tightened over his teeth. He stood up, staring intently at the scaffold, a wild grin spreading over his face.

Like Cynthia Stark, the Countess was intently studying her lap. ‘Oh lord, Alpiew,’ she hissed. ‘Let us get away from this place.’

Alpiew held up the broadsheet and gulped in air.

The hangman grabbed the boy in white by his breeches and pulled.

But instead of the expected crack of neck, the boy fell down upon him. The rope which had suspended him slithered to the ground.

The crowd gasped, then surged forward, hollering.

‘What is going on?’ The Countess tried to get a better view now.

‘The pretty boy!’ Alpiew was on her tiptoes, scanning the mob. ‘It’s the pretty highwayman. He’s made a break for it.’

Anxiously rubbing his lips, Edward Stark sank down on to the magician’s chest. ‘So there was an unexpected ending.’

As the hangman staggered to his feet he looked about, shouting to the sheriff’s men.

In his hands he held the highwayman’s white jacket. But the man himself was gone.

Chapter Two: Founding

The initial heating of the batch so that it slowly becomes a workable glowing liquid

The Countess flapped her fan as she turned into St James’s Market. ‘Four o’clock, and the place stinks to heaven,’ she cried.

A black cloud of flies flew up from a pile of rotting garbage on the roadside. ‘Sometimes I think the night-soil men leave more mess than they cart away – look at the place.’ The street was scattered with cabbage leaves and maggoty oyster shells, old torn newspaper and the droppings of horses, geese, sheep and dogs.

‘Good lord, what a rabble!’ The Countess’s face was squashed against a tall man’s back as a group of stallholders pressed past her, balancing baskets of fruit on their heads.

‘Execution day. Apprentices’ holiday, remember, so the world has gone shopping. Look, the place is crammed with boys and their sweethearts.’

Jostling along Six Bell Alley, past the stalls selling cheap pots and pans, cutlery, candles, candlesticks and snuffers, pewter and leather drinking vessels and other household items, the Countess and Alpiew reached the Hay Market, emerging behind a busy horse sale. The auctioneer stood on a bale of hay next to a roan colt. Tethered to a bar, six other horses waited in line for their turn.

‘Four guineas? Army bred. A good dependable animal. Anyone four guineas the colt?’

A grey mare kicked her hind leg and scattered a bale of straw, making a soft clean path for the Countess. Alpiew squeezed herself up against the wall to get past a wagon laden with barrels parked outside the locksmith’s shop.

‘Cherries ripe, all ripe!’ cried a girl with a basket of cherries on each arm who jostled through the crowd. ‘Cherries, all ripe!’

The Countess reached for some coins from her pocket and veered off towards the cherry seller, but Alpiew grabbed her and pushed her towards the door under the sign of the crossed keys.

‘We can buy as many cherries as you like after we have talked to the locksmith.’

The little workshop was dark and cool.

Tall narrow rows of shelves were crammed with metal parts of locks, cogs and great iron keys. A longcase clock ticked in the corner and on the counter a white cat quietly snored.

‘Third break-in I’ve been told about today.’ Bob Gaunt, the locksmith, dipped his pen, ready to make a note of the Countess’s address. His grey quill scratched at the rough paper of his ledger, spraying black speckles of ink all over the cat. ‘All through roof windows. Some ne’er-do-well had a busy night of it.’

‘We were lucky.’ The Countess could not take her eyes off his hairy hands. ‘We chased him out before he had time to poke around. Did the other people lose much?’

‘Smashed dishes and the like.’ He pushed back his cuffs, revealing even hairier forearms. ‘The villain seems to have no knack for quietness. Fellow woke everyone with his racket.’

‘Perhaps he is deaf.’ Alpiew stroked the cat and got an ink-black palm for her pains.

‘The constable seemed to think the felon was a child,’ said the Countess. She liked to be in the know.

‘When they can’t catch the malefactors they always blame children.’ The locksmith sniffed, and dipped his pen. ‘Lazy buggers, the constables.’