

## The Ambitious Stepmother

### Chapter One: Ragoo

A high season's dish after the French way.

'Twould be hugely vogueish to have an enormous looking glass on the mantel. Very French and à la mode.' With a sweep of her chubby hand, Lady Anastasia Ashby de la Zouche, Countess of Clapham, Baroness Penge, etcetera, twirled round to address Alpiew, her writing partner and erstwhile maid.

'Surely not, madam.' Alpiew was trying to keep her temper. They had acquired this money through hard and dangerous work and she wanted it spent instead on improving their living conditions. 'If we are to spend our well-earned money upon renovating the house, 'twould be better utilised in repairing the roof and the upper chambers, which are currently fit only for pigeons, rather than ornamenting this already comfortable room.'

'Nonsense!' The Countess span round in the other direction, arms extended. 'This is the showpiece. It might as well be our advertisement. It shows the world how successful we are become.'

As she swung back to face Alpiew she swayed sideways and almost knocked Godfrey, her decrepit manservant, to the floor.

In a vain attempt to break his fall Godfrey grabbed at the air and staggered forward, arms outstretched, lunging towards Alpiew.

'Hands off those, you filthy old cur!' yelled Alpiew as, with a wily jab, Godfrey's knobbly fingers came to rest upon her ample bosom. She shoved him back in the direction whence he came. Projected backwards from Alpiew's push, Godfrey landed with a loud crack on a chair, which immediately disintegrated beneath him.

'If you won't consider the upper chambers,' snapped Alpiew, 'perhaps the money would be better spent obtaining some solid furniture.'

'Nonsense, Alpiew, we have more than enough furniture!' The Countess sank down on to an easy chair, which made a strange creaking noise, causing her to edge herself slowly back to a standing position. 'A mirror on the mantel is the latest thing. Remember the saying: "One might as well be out of the world as out of fashion."'

'In that case, madam –' Alpiew surveyed the Countess's mantua, of high quality certainly but, despite recent alterations, still noticeably of an earlier era – 'let us get the roof done and buy some new dresses.'

'I don't want new dresses,' grumbled Godfrey from the floor. 'What would I look like in a dress! I'm not a sodomite, you know.'

'The plasterer will be here any moment, Godfrey. He is going to make good the fireplace so that the looking glass will "sit plumb", as the glazier called it.' The Countess moved out of the room. 'And, I thank you both, but there will be no more discussion on the subject.'

Alpiew followed her out into the hall. She looked up the staircase with a sigh. All those unused rooms upstairs could do with a new skim of plaster, and the roof with a new set of tiles, and here was her mistress deciding instead to redecorate the only decently appointed room in the house.

The Countess was already swinging a kettle on to a hook over the fire when Alpiew reached the kitchen.

‘If we spent the money carefully, milady, we wouldn’t have to live in the kitchen.’ Alpiew surveyed the mess of papers, books, beds and tables and realised that if the upstairs rooms were made habitable they could at last each have a bedroom of their own and she would not be kept awake by the midnight rumblings, snores, groans and other unthinkable noises emitting from Godfrey’s bed.

‘Nothing wrong with living in the kitchen.’ The Countess gave the room a cursory glance. ‘At least it’s nice and warm.’

‘I think we should spend the money on a holiday,’ said Godfrey from the door. ‘We could travel abroad and see all those awful disgusting French women.’ He lurched over to the table and hacked a couple of slices of bread from the loaf. ‘I’ve heard they get up to all sorts of bawdy amorous tricks. Revolting.’

‘Thank you very much, Godfrey, but there’s quite enough to revolt me here at home.’ The Countess turned round to make a further announcement but was interrupted by a heavy thudding on the front door. ‘Please answer that, Godfrey.’

‘But I’m makin’ me toast.’

‘Godfrey!’ The Countess glared. ‘The door!’

With a grunt, Godfrey slouched out.

‘To spend all that money on a looking glass does seem pretty extravagant, madam, when you look about and see how much we could get for just the price of one silly mirror ...’

‘I have said I’ll have no more discussion on the matter, thank you, Alpiew.’ The Countess sat at the table and sighed. ‘If only my darling Pigalle was here, she would back me up. She knows all about the latest fashions in décor. Mirrors are the most à la mode thing in the world.’

‘Well,’ said Alpiew clutching at a possible straw. ‘Why don’t we wait until the Duchesse de Pigalle comes back from France, then we can take her advice?’

‘But, Alpiew, I have told you, she could be there for years. She has a new vocation: founding a school for impoverished young ladies. She might not be back before Christmas. And I am not keeping a stack of money here in the house, living in fear and trembling that thieves will come in and steal it, until Pigalle comes home. I would prefer to invest the money in something to enhance all our lives.’

‘It’s for you.’ Godfrey slouched back in, tore a hunk from his bread and shoved it into his mouth.

‘Well?’ asked the Countess. ‘Who is it?’

‘A workman of some variety,’ said Godfrey, spitting out white globs of chewed dough as he spoke. ‘He’s waiting for you out there, cap in hand.’

With a tut, the Countess trotted into the hall.

‘Good morning, madam,’ said the man. ‘I am here to offer you an irresistible opportunity. This special is a once in a lifetime chance to have all your casement windows taken out and replaced with the latest in window design: the sliding sash.’

‘I’m sorry?’ said the Countess. ‘Are you not here to do the plastering?’

‘The sliding sash represents a breakthrough in the technology of window-glazing, being both easy to open, and easy to close ... And all this could be yours for one down payment and twenty-four monthly payments thereafter ...’

The door knocker banged again.

‘Godfrey!’ the Countess called back to the kitchen. ‘The door.’

‘Well, you’re just beside it,’ growled Godfrey from the kitchen. ‘I’m makin’ me toast.’

Smoothing down her dress, Alpiev came into the hall.

‘Mr, er ...?’ said the Countess.

‘Wells,’ said the sash-window man.

‘Mr Wells is telling me about the latest thing in windows, Alpiev,’ said the Countess. ‘Perhaps that might be an alternative to the looking glass. Or maybe we could do both. Tell me again about this payment method?’

Alpiev pulled open the front door.

‘Good morning, madam,’ said a dapper fellow dressed head to toe in velvet. ‘I am here to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime. Finest velvet curtains, which draw open from the middle. A real investment for any property, and I can propose very reasonable payment terms ...’

Alpiev slammed the door shut.

‘But, Alpiev!’ the Countess yelped. ‘Curtains which open from the middle! That sounded like a wonderful idea. How à la mode!’

‘Tell me what is the point of velvet curtains, madam, whether they pull from the middle or from the side?’ Alpiev sighed. She’d seen it so many times before. ‘Whenever the window is open every priggish hand in the street will reach in and steal them in a minute, and then what will you do? You’d have to go on paying for years for an empty window, while the curtains are miles away making a tidy profit for some opportunist thief who needed a bit of money to pay for his next mug of ale or wad of tobacco.’ She looked at the sash-window salesman. ‘Nor do we need your newfangled windows, thank you, mister.’

The door rattled a third time. ‘Here we go again,’ said Alpiev. ‘They won’t take no for an answer, these people.’ Alpiev pulled the door open. ‘Not today, thank you,’ she yelled, ready to slam it again.

‘Countess?’ A lady had her delicate satin slipper wedged firmly against the door. ‘Lady Ashby de la Zouche?’

Through the crack Alpiev could see that the woman was wealthy. Her clothes and the carriage that stood behind her were new and of a very high quality.

‘Who should I say is calling?’ said Alpiew, indicating to the Countess that she had better dismiss the salesman without delay.

‘Mrs Franklyn-Green, the wife of Alderman Franklyn-Green.’ said the woman. ‘I have an offer to make the Countess with regard to Virginia, my daughter.’

Alpiew could see a sulky-looking girl at the woman’s side, kicking at the dusty doorstep with her elegant satin slipper.

‘Stepdaughter, actually.’ The girl slouched from one foot to the other and scowled. ‘Though why do you bother to pretend consulting me, Stepmama, dearest? I’m just the baggage you want parcelled off —’

Mrs Franklyn-Green yanked the girl’s hand while still maintaining a fixed smile. ‘Adolescents!’ She raised her eyebrows and gave Alpiew a conspiratorial shrug. ‘May we step inside and have a word with her ladyship?’

The Countess was in the front room, hastily picking up pieces of the broken chair. Once Alpiew saw her toss them into the fireplace she pulled the front door open and showed the two women into the receiving room.

The Countess waved Mrs Franklyn-Green to a sturdy easy chair while she sank gingerly into the wobbly one.

‘A cup of chocolate all round,’ said the Countess. But Alpiew had shut the door on her and was busy in the hall ejecting the sash-window salesman.

‘I heard that you take on chaperone work?’ Mrs Franklyn-Green smiled.

‘Not exactly,’ said the Countess. ‘I did used to, but I now work for the London Trumpet.’

‘I feel sure that you will want to take this job. I will be offering good money.’

‘Really?’ The Countess gave a coy smile, the best way she knew of eliciting such vulgar information as pecuniary figures without seeming too grasping.

‘A small allowance to pay your way, and a large reward when you have accomplished the task in hand.’

‘Large ...’ said the Countess, ‘is an indefinable word.’

‘One hundred guineas.’

The Countess spluttered. That was good money. Quite enough for her, Alpiew and Godfrey to live in luxury for a year at least.

‘And what exactly does the task entail?’

Mrs Franklyn-Green glanced across the room at her stepdaughter, who was gazing idly out of the window where two men were busily adjusting the traces attaching a sleek horse to a very expensive-looking carriage.

‘You must find my daughter a suitable match. A man with a title. A man who has financial means sufficient to upkeep her so that she need not drain her dear father’s purse. And preferably a man to the child’s taste, so that she doesn’t keep bouncing back like a bad penny.’

The Countess was already seeing quite a few drawbacks to Mrs Franklyn-Green’s scheme. ‘This is your husband’s idea?’

‘Of course it isn’t, you silly old frump!’ Virginia turned into the room and put her hands on her hips. ‘My father isn’t a crackpot. This cow of his just wants me out of the way so she can flaunt herself without the encumbrance of a daughter not of her own making.’

The Countess looked at the girl and wondered where she would find a man willing to subjugate himself to a lifetime of such shrewish temper. Or how long would it take to tame the shrew. The job could take years, and even then there might not be a suitable man who’d take a shine to the child. And all for a hundred guineas ... The Countess decided that, even for a thousand, the job was not worth it. ‘Mrs Franklyn-Green ...’ She tried to rise, but the creaking of the chair made it seem unwise to try. ‘Lovely as your stepdaughter is, I feel that my time is limited at present, and I could not ...’

‘That’s a pity.’ Mrs Franklyn-Green rose. ‘Paris at this time of year, I am told, is beautiful. In the springtime, Paris ...’

‘Paris!’ The Countess got up from the chair so fast that she set it wobbling on its uneven legs. ‘Paris, in France?’

‘France, yes. St Germain-en-Laye, in fact, just outside Paris. The royal court there.’

‘The Stuart court in St Germain-en-Laye in Maytime!’ The Countess went into a reverie of her youth during the exiled days of the Commonwealth. ‘You want me to go to Paris with your daughter ...’

‘Stepdaughter!’ bawled Virginia.

‘Not only you, Countess. You must take your woman, er ...’

‘Alpiew.’

‘Alpiew, yes. I will pay for a carriage to take you both there, and pay too for the packet-boat voyage. I hear that a decent standard of living is had for nothing for friends of the Stuart court.’

‘Ah yes.’ The Countess blushed. Mrs Franklyn-Green had obviously heard that she had once been mistress of the late king, Charles II. ‘I do not know King James personally, but I was close to his brother, Charles. So James is sure to know of me.’

She looked to the girl again. Having tightened the girth strap, the two men had moved out of sight, and Virginia turned back, facing into the room. As she caught eyes with the Countess she gave a wide and appealing smile.

The Countess winked by way of reply. So, the girl did possess charm, and with charm anything was possible.

‘I’ll do it.’ The Countess rubbed her hands together, trying to remember where she had stored her baggage. ‘What are the arrangements?’

‘I will order the coach to be here before sunrise tomorrow morning.’ With a relieved grin, Mrs Franklyn-Green rose. ‘As I said, all the expenses of the journey will be prepaid by Alderman Franklyn-Green. I will give you a few guineas to see you on your way; the remainder of the fee you will pick up from me when you return to London and Virginia announces her betrothal to a suitable young man.’

‘I have told you before, I am not going to France, and that is that.’ Virginia turned back to face the window and stamped her foot.

The Countess winced. The girl was as up and down as a barometer.

‘I want no gawping French rakes pawing me.’ Virginia craned her neck round to glare at her stepmother. ‘I will run away into the woods and get murdered by rogues and gypsies rather than go to France. Then you’ll all be sorry.’

‘There are no woods in the City of London, Virginia. And anyhow, I have told you before: St Germain-en-Laye is full of English people. People who had to flee the country when the last king ran off. Some of them are very well-bred and dashing, I am told.’ Mrs Franklyn-Green faced the Countess with a hand outstretched. ‘Once she is safely in France and sees the goods on offer, I am sure she will settle down.’

‘The business is sealed with this handsel, Mrs Franklyn-Green.’ With a sideways look to the surly child, the Countess shook on the deal. ‘Tomorrow it is.’

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When Virginia and her stepmother had gone, the Countess sent Godfrey to the Cues’ office with a note proposing that, while in France, she and Alpiew write a special column for the London Trumpet about the thousands of ex-patriot Britons who, eleven years ago after the so-called Glorious Revolution, had settled in Paris and its environs.

‘But Alpiew’s already gone to the Cues,’ he muttered.

‘She is delivering this week’s copy, Godfrey. I am sending you with a special and rather urgent message.’

By the time Alpiew arrived back in the Countess’s German Street home, she found her mistress flustered and surrounded by packing cases.

‘Pack your best clothes, Alpiew! We are bound for the land of gay balls and all-night gambling parties. It’s wonderful! And all we have to do is go to France and help a pretty girl find a nice husband. What could be easier in the delightful court of St Germain?’

‘France!’ Alpiew shuddered. She had learned from experience that nothing involving the Countess was ever easy. ‘What on earth for?’

‘We have a job. We are going to chaperone a young lady.’

Alpiew collapsed against the table. ‘Not that horrible little tit that was here just now?’

‘Her name is Virginia, Alpiew. And she may be a little sulky, but what of that?’

‘How are we to look after an insolent little madam like that, milady? If she is thus rude to her stepmother, what chance have we of controlling her?’

‘That’s the thing, Alpiew. Mrs Franklyn-Green told me the important thing was getting her to France safely, and then standing back and letting nature take its course. We are to make our way to the English court, where she is expected. Once we are there, all we have to do is parade a line of eligible men in front of her and hope she snares one.’ She rubbed her podgy hands together. ‘And if we succeed in that we will receive a handsome reward.’

‘So answer me this ...’ Alpiew ran her finger over her lips. ‘If it is such an easy and pleasant task, why could not the stepmother take her there herself?’

The Countess thought for a moment. ‘Perhaps her duties as the wife of an alderman ...’ She stooped to open a trunk at her feet. ‘But what matter if the woman is too busy or unconcerned about her stepdaughter? The fact is that she has employed us to do it for her, and I for one am very excited at the idea.’

‘But our job, madam – we are under a contract to write about London society.’

‘I don’t think there is mention of the word “London” in our deal with the Trumpet. And I am certain that Mr and Mrs Cue will be delighted to receive news of all the disgruntled ex-patriots, not least our ex-king, James, with whom we are to share a roof. Godfrey will be back any moment with confirmation of that.’

The Cues were, as the Countess had predicted, bewitched by the idea of printing reports about the English exiles on the other side of the English Channel. Reluctantly Alpiew prepared for the journey.

‘We won’t have to know the lingo, madam, I hope,’ said Alpiew in a last-ditch attempt at getting out of it. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t speak anything except English.’

‘We are going to St Germain,’ the Countess chortled. ‘The English court. And I assure you, Alpiew, you have all the language requirements necessary.’

## **Chapter Two: Poor-Man's Sauce or Carrier's Sauce**

A sauce made of shallot cut very small, with salt, white pepper, vinegar and oil of olives

‘You see! It’s a fact!’ The Countess wafted her dimpled hand through the carriage window. ‘Everything is better in France.’ She took a draught of the misty air blowing through the coach. ‘The food is tastier, the balls and masquerades gayer, the society more dazzling, the fashions more gorgeous, the houses better decorated, warmer and more comfortable. I know we shall have a perfectly wonderful time.’

Alpiew, sitting opposite, gazed out over the flat grey fields of Picardy and shuddered. If she’d had her way they would still be in London, sitting in their cosy kitchen, quietly scribbling their scandal column for the London Trumpet.

She glanced across the carriage to the cause of this seemingly endless journey. Virginia sat grimly beside the Countess. This morning the child seemed polite enough, but Alpiew had an inborn mistrust of rich young things. Why the Countess had said yes to the girl’s stepmother, Alpiew would never know.

At dawn two days previously a coach containing the sullen step-daughter, Virginia, had pulled up in German Street and, once laden with the Countess and Alpiew and their bags, it had sped along the lumpy road to Dover, with a night's stop-over at a dismal inn just outside Canterbury to await a boat and a fortunate wind.

For the entire journey the girl had sat in silence in a corner by the Countess. She gazed out at the ever-changing countryside and never uttered. Once on the boat, she huddled up inside the captain's cabin, casting her eyes to the floor, spurning all attempts at conversation.

Upon docking in Calais, the trio had spent a night in a comfortable French inn and early the next morning, as pre-arranged, Mrs Franklyn-Green's coachman took charge of a hired coach to speed them to the English court at St Germain-en-Laye.

'It will be like a holiday, Alpiew,' said the Countess. 'We are bound for the most civilised place in the world, with plenty of money. Who knows, perhaps we may find husbands for ourselves.' She shifted in her seat; her husband, though absent, was, as far as she knew, still alive. 'You did remember the money, did you not?' 'Would be a disaster to be in such a place as France, where the very term beau monde originated, and be penniless. We will need money to buy some lovely new clothes, and to gamble, and to entertain ...'

Alpiew grinned. At least the precious money had not gone on a looking glass. She pulled the moneybag from her side-pocket and waved it before the Countess before putting it back. 'Forty-five guineas, milady.' Their joint savings from writing for the Trumpet, the lion's share of the money they'd made from their last big investigation, and the expenses money given them by Virginia's stepmother, 'All safe and held close to my person.'

'I cannot tell you how excited I am.' The Countess sat back and smiled. 'I wonder if King James will remember me?' She displayed a winsome, though brown-toothed smile. 'He knew all about my amour with his brother, King Charles, of course. Though it must be said Charlie was by far the handsomer of the two, and was considerably wittier ...'

In the corner of the coach Virginia broke her silence and let out a low moan. 'I hate France. I don't want to marry some boring old cross-biting cully that you take a shine to, especially not a French one. I want to go home.'

'Don't be silly, Virginia.' The Countess shook her finger. 'You are young. You must open your eyes to Life. As for France, you haven't even tried it yet. I think a spirited young thing like you will find life here very stimulating and, I promise you, within days you are sure to meet an abundance of highly eligible young men, rich, handsome, artistic ...'

'That is exactly what I don't want.' The girl groaned. 'I'm tired of all the foppish men my father's hideous wife parades before me. Anyway ...' The girl paused and gave them a sly look. 'I know something that you haven't been told.'

'And I know many things that you don't, you pert creature.'

'She's made a fool of you, just like she does everyone.' The girl smirked. 'I'd love to see your faces when you find out.'

'Find out what, exactly?'

‘Wouldn’t you like to know!’ Virginia pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows.

Alpiew resisted the temptation to give her a clip round the ear.

‘But you’ll find out by and by. You’ll be seeing a lot of France, I expect.’

Deciding that the girl was going through a moment of normal adolescent pique, the Countess was about to relax back into her seat when the coach lurched to a halt. Outside there were raised voices. Someone leapt up on to the coachman’s perch.

Concerned, Alpiew thrust her head out, and pulled it back in pretty smartly. ‘Oh criminy, madam, ’tis a hold-up.’

‘The moneybag, Alpiew ... Oh fie!’

While Alpiew tried to untie her pocket and push it under the seat, the coach door whipped open and two masked men thrust pistols through it.

Slowly the Countess, Alpiew and Virginia Franklyn-Green raised their hands.

‘Argent ...’ said the taller of the two in a husky voice, wafting his pistol in the direction of their valises.

‘We are English travellers,’ said the Countess, hoping it might make a difference. ‘We speak no French.’

One of the highwaymen spat on the road.

Alpiew tried to push the moneybag out of her pocket and into a crack in the leather seat.

The other coach door was suddenly jerked open and a third bandit reached in, grabbed Virginia by the wrist, and pulled her, whimpering, from the coach. He thrust his hand round her waist and carried her away from the road into a small copse, the muzzle of his gun thrust against her head.

The Countess lurched up to grab at the man. His companion pushed her back on to the seat. ‘Argent!’ he repeated, pressing his pistol into her neck.

‘Oh fie, Alpiew, what if they kill the child?’ She looked the masked man in the eye, and spoke slowly. ‘We ... are ... English.’ She shook her head. ‘No money.’

The masked man slapped her cheek with the back of his gloved hand, while pointing the gun at Alpiew. ‘Argent! Maintenant!’

‘Leave her alone, you big bully,’ shouted Alpiew, shoving him away as she rose from the seat and delved into the upholstery. ‘I have money here.’ She pulled out the bag of gold coins. ‘Take it, but release the girl.’ The short robber grabbed the bag, then roughly pulled Alpiew forward and plunged his hand into her pocket, then down her bodice.

‘Get your filthy French hands off my bosom!’ Alpiew struggled with him. ‘I have given you all that my lady and I have. And though it is in English coin, I assure you ’tis a fortune.’

The robber grunted and threw Alpiew back against the seat.

A gunshot rang out, echoing through the woods and sending crows cawing wildly into the sky.

The Countess crossed herself, and Alpiew blanched.