

The Rival Queens

Chapter One: Terror

Fear without the apprehension of why. Aroused by objects of aversion.

Eyebrow raised in the middle, nose and nostrils drawn up. Everything strongly marked. The face pale, eyes and mouth wide open, the hair standing on end.

‘If you don’t reduce your pace, I shall have an attack of the spleen, madam,’ shrieked the Countess at her maid, Alpiew, who was running a good twenty yards ahead.

‘But the girl’s heading for the Tower,’ Alpiew called back to her panting mistress. ‘If I slow down, we’ll lose her.’ Alpiew hitched up her skirts and prepared to speed up. ‘You wait inside the gate, I’ll give chase.’

Taking a great puff as Alpiew raced ahead, Anastasia, Lady Ashby de la Zouche, Countess of Clapham, Baroness Penge, reduced her stride to a very gentle trot. How had it come to this? At her age and station she should be sitting at home being served hot chocolate and biscuits while reading some juicy scandalous broadsheet. Instead she was near penury, forced into working for a living, chasing after scandal all over London to provide the tittle-tattle for other ladies to read while lounging in their cosy homes, gulping down buckets of best bohea tea.

With a sigh she trotted across the meadow of Tower Hill. High above her, on top of the slope, loomed the awful spectre of the scaffold and gallows. Luckily today was not an execution day, or she’d not be able to move for the crowds. The day before, however, had been one, so the place was still spattered with litter. The Countess side-stepped a pile of oyster shells crawling with maggots before joining the queue for the Tower of London .

This morning she and Alpiew were after a wayward girl. Miss Phoebe Gymcrack, only daughter of a City alderman, Sir John Gymcrack, fancied to raise herself out of the ranks of the City into the Court. The only trouble was, though she had told all and sundry of her plans to snare a rich lord, she had not bothered to drop his name into the conversation. This had to be wormed out or the story was no story at all.

The Countess pondered as she strolled along beside the wooden paling fence. Then she stepped briskly through the stone building known as the Lion Gate. With this story written up and waiting for delivery to Mr and Mrs Cue (printers of the London Trumpet and her employers), she and Alpiew could happily take the rest of the week off.

Miss Gymcrack had been dancing at a masquerade till midnight . The Countess knew this because she had also been there, watching to see if the potential lordly stepping stone discovered himself. But the girl had never danced twice with the same fellow, and from her demeanour it was clear that Mr, or rather, Lord Right was not even at the function.

When the girl rolled home in the early hours, Alpiew took over for the night-watch outside the alderman’s City home. Mayhap the rake would come serenading at her window. But no. Alpiew had spent a fruitless and uncomfortable night curled up in a doorway for nothing.

At first light the Countess was preparing to leave her home in German Street , St James’s, to bring Alpiew some food and to take over the watch. She had just popped upstairs to search out an old bag

that she had left in one of the derelict upper rooms of her house when there was a thundering at the door. She peered down over the banister to see two bailiffs making their way through to the kitchen. One of them was waving a debt order in his hand.

The Countess had no interest in finding out how much the debt order was for, as she knew she didn't have any cash to spare at the moment. So she darted down the stairs and out into the street. Scurrying across the quiet road, she entered the church of St James's, exiting into Pickadilly, which (luckily) at this time of day was quite a commotion of wagons, as well as flocks of geese and sheep being driven to market. Thence she took a route involving as many bustling streets and markets as she could, making sure she blended into the crowd until she had lost the burly bailiffs.

At the very moment the Countess caught sight of Alpiew standing in the shop doorway, the Gymcrack girl appeared at her front door, wrapped in a great cloak and hood, and strode out. She had a furtive look on her face, and it was clear that the object of their interest would shortly be at hand.

Through the City they had given chase. The Gymcrack girl marched proudly along in front, with Alpiew loping behind and the Countess in her wake, rapidly getting left behind.

The Countess had expected her to roll up to some City mansion, but was surprised by this destination. The Tower of London! This turn-up presented only two possibilities: the favoured lord was using the place for an assignation among the crowd, or (and if this were true – what a story!) he was imprisoned within.

The Countess marched on, passing a large wooden hoarding painted with a likeness of a lion, or rather a likeness of a man in a lion costume, which announced, 'Within: lions, a leopard, eagles, owls, a two-legged dog, a cat-a-mountain, and a hyena with the voice of a man.'

A Yeoman Warder stood just inside the gate, taking entrance fees. The Countess plunged her hand deep into her pocket, hoping she had the required pennies somewhere about her person. She paid and, looking over her shoulder to check that no bailiff was behind her, entered the Tower.

The Countess shoved her way through the peering folk enjoying their morning excursion, and stood on tiptoe trying to locate Alpiew. She must already be across the moat. Gritting her teeth, the Countess trotted over the bridge. She crossed her fingers – Please let Miss Gymcrack come up trumps and provide them with a juicy story. She took a deep breath and instantly regretted it. In the April sunshine the moat-water lapped pleasingly against the grey stone of the outer wall, but it exuded a rank and stagnant stink.

At the Byward Tower a parcel of Warders stood chatting under a huge iron portcullis. The Countess suppressed a smile. For all their pomposity, in those silly blood red-costumes with ribbons and braids and fancy velvet hats they resembled nothing more than a group of Morris dancers up from the country for the May Fair.

'Whither goest thou?' A Gentleman Yeoman barred her way with a long halberd. The blade sparkled ominously in the sunlight.

'I would have thought that was rather obvious ...' The Countess peered over his shoulder, still seeking a glimpse of Alpiew. For her smile he returned a dark scowl. Oh lord! Perhaps he would arrest her and drag her back to the bailiffs. She contemplated turning and running back the way she had come. Surely debt collectors didn't employ Yeomen of the Tower. Or did they?

‘Madam,’ huffed the man, looking her up and down, ‘are you carrying any weapons – swords, daggers, muskets, etcetera, etcetera?’

‘Do I look as though I am?’ panted the Countess, still wondering whether this guard in pantomime costume was about to arrest her.

‘Then you won’t mind me checking.’ The Yeoman started to frisk her, running his hands up and down her rotund form. The Countess formed the distinct impression that he did this rather more often to women than to men.

‘Pshaw, sirrah! Could you hurry along. I have lost my maid. She has run on ahead.’

‘Mmm,’ sighed the Yeoman with a contented smile. ‘Pert, pretty thing, golden hair?’

The Countess shook her head, then realised the man was talking about their quarry, Miss Gymcrack. ‘Yes, that’s her. Which way did she go?’

‘As you can see, madam, at this point in the Tower there are only two ways to go: forward and backward. And as she did not pass you on your way in, we must presume she went forward.’ His hands poked about in the folds of her skirts.

The Countess leapt back. ‘Unhand me, sirrah! You are inches away from committing a rape upon my person.’

The Yeoman grunted. ‘If you weren’t wearing such voluminous skirts ...’

‘Is there a woman in the land who doesn’t?’ She adjusted her wig, which had slid back slightly, lending her an Elizabethan stretch of forehead. ‘And the word you are searching for is voluminous.’

A dapper-looking man nearby in the queue was looking on, smiling.

‘And at what?’ – the Countess frowned in his direction – ‘are you smirking, sirrah?’

‘If I am not mistaken ...’ The man stepped forward. ‘You are Anastasia, Lady Ashby de la Zouche ...’

‘Baroness Penge, Countess of Clapham ...’ She automatically uttered the words, then her mouth ground to a halt. She’d been tricked. This grinning man was clearly a bailiff in disguise. He was everything one wouldn’t expect in a bailiff – he was short, well shaved, clean, and elegantly dressed to the point of being foppish. And look how young he was! But that was what they always said – the forces of law were getting younger by the year. This fellow had the scrubbed pink look of a child.

The Yeoman gave her a shove. ‘Pass!’ he yelled, delighted to finish as a particularly attractive lady was stepping through the gate behind her. ‘Yeoman Partridge!’ he called to another beribboned redcoat. ‘You can accompany this lady and gentleman.’

‘It’s all right,’ simpered the Countess, nimbly stepping away from the gentleman in question. ‘I do not need a guide. I am here upon business.’

But the Yeoman guide was already steering her further into the Tower.

‘Step this way please-uh!’ Yeoman Partridge had a pompous method of pronunciation that added a superfluous ‘uh’ to the end of every phrase. ‘Members of the public-uh may not gratify their desires within-uh, without you must take a Gentleman Warder-uh.’

Whatever that meant. The Countess raised her eyebrows in the direction of the dapper gentleman. He raised his eyebrows back at her. If it was going to happen, if he was about to arrest her, she wished he would get it over with. The suspense was bringing on a sweat. Was he about to pounce with his wretched debt order, and have her thrown into the Fleet Prison? Or was he just another member of the paying public on an outing?

‘This ’ere, upon our right-uh, is the infamous Traitors’ Gate-uh.’ The Yeoman pointed to a walled area of water with great iron wicket gates. ‘Royal prisoners entered through these-uh said same gates. Most-uh never to see the outside world again-uh.’ The Countess gulped as the waters roared through the gates like a cataract at full flood. She gave an involuntary shudder and, her eye sneaking a sideways glance at the dapper fellow beside her, followed the Warder up the hill to Tower Green.

Without any warning the young man took hold of the Countess’s elbow. She jumped back, ready to make a run for it.

‘You are a writer, milady, as I remember?’ he said, hovering.

‘I may be ...’ The Countess smiled wanly. ‘Who says so?’

‘May I introduce myself?’ The man thrust his hand forward. ‘Colley Cibber, esquire. Actor, writer and bon viveur.’

‘Of course, of course ...’ The Countess smiled graciously with relief. She’d never heard of him, but at least he was not about to arrest her. ‘I’m sorry if I appear distracted, sir, but I am on an assignment.’

‘Me too!’ Colley Cibber whispered in her ear. ‘Who are you doing?’

The Countess inched away. She wasn’t sharing her story with anyone.

‘Ann Boleyn, perhaps?’ Mr Cibber pulled a frivolous face. ‘Or Sir Walter Raleigh?’

What was the man drivelling on about? They were both dead. How could you write a scandal story about someone who’d been a century dead?

‘I understand.’ Cibber tapped the side of his nose. ‘Early days, early days. But I am quite willing to share with you the secret of my latest work.’

They had reached the top of the steep incline and the Yeoman Warder stopped and continued his well-rehearsed recitation. ‘And before us-uh stands the impressive keep-uh, distinguished by the historical name of Julius Caesar’s Tower-uh.’

‘It must be very dark within,’ said Cibber, peering up at the great white keep. ‘For look, there’s nary a window in the place. It is where they keep the gunpowder and weapons, I believe.’

‘The Tower of London is one of the remaining Liberties-uh. Within its bounds any citizen is protected from arrest-uh.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘Which is paltry relief for those poor creatures the prisoners, whom we are employed to hold in captivity-uh.’

'I need to sit,' the Countess announced to the Yeoman, flooded with relief that the dapper man was only an actor, and that, anyhow, within these walls she was safe from arrest. She also had a distant hope of shaking the Warder off, along with this tiresome actor-writer. She flopped down on a great brass cannon and fanned herself. At last Alpiev was in view. She too had taken leave of her Warder by sitting and fanning. The Countess glanced over at Alpiev, who shrugged in return. The scheming minx, Miss Phoebe, was clearly cornered. Now as at last night's ball, all they could do was wait.

Cibber pointed to the building beside the hill they had just climbed. 'That's the place of interest to me.' He leaned down and whispered intimately: 'The Bloody Tower. Though it seems to me inconsistent to give the "Bloody" name to a Tower where two children were smothered.'

The Countess smiled vaguely. What was the man talking about?

'My project,' he said, as though he could read her thoughts. 'Richard and the princes!' hissed Colley Cibber. 'How about that? I'm going to write a play about Crookback Richard. There's a part to tear a cat in, eh?'

'Already been done,' said the Countess. 'By that Elizabethan hack, Shakespeare.'

'Ay, madam,' said Cibber with a smug smirk. 'But I hope to inject theatre with a new responsible morality.'

The Countess repressed a yawn. She could see that Alpiev had engaged her young Warder in conversation.

'Yeoman Partridge?' She rose. 'I have espied my maid, Alpiev. I shall no longer require your guided tour.'

'You may not be left to your own devices in this place, madam-uh. For although it is a place of recreation, I must remind you it also serves as His Majesty's prison-uh. And for all I know you are part of a plot-uh to secure the liberty of one of our ignoble inmates.'

'There is no problem in that, sir.' The Countess rose and waddled off. 'For I shall join the Warder yonder, who is speaking with my Alpiev, and leave you free to inform Mr Kipper of all he wishes to know about the Bloody Tower.'

'Cibber,' muttered the actor under his breath. 'But, milady, let me follow. I should prefer to assist you.'

Yeoman Partridge waved across to the Warder with Alpiev and signalled that he was relinquishing his two visitors, then set off down the hill to pick up his next tour.

'I met him, you know,' said Cibber, walking along in the Countess's wake.

'William Shakespeare?' snapped the Countess, giving him the up and down. 'You must be a lot older than you look.'

'No, no,' said Cibber with a gay laugh. 'The King.'

Clearly the man was demented. Richard III had been dead for centuries.

'I was only a child, but he cut quite a figure. He was in Saint James's Park, with his dogs, feeding the ducks.'

The Countess smiled wanly at the grinning fellow. His condition must be serious. She was in two minds whether to call for assistance.

‘You were with him, actually.’

The Countess stopped in her tracks and turned on the young actor. ‘I may look like a superannuated harridan, but I assure you my great, great, great grandfather had not been born in the time of Crookback Richard.’

‘Oh, yes.’ The actor rocked with laughter. ‘They all said you were amusing. Now I see it for myself.’

The Countess gripped her fan, ready to give the young man a swipe.

‘I spoke of your King, madam.’ He held his hands up before him. ‘Old Rowley.’

‘Charles!’ Instantly the Countess softened, her face took on a winsome expression and her body rearranged itself into a coy posture. ‘The darling man. Everyone misses him so.’

‘Indeed and indeed,’ said Cibber with some enthusiasm. ‘He had the peculiar possession of so many hearts. The common people adored him.’

‘Those were the days, Mr Kipper ...’ The Countess took the young man’s arm and strolled along in step with him. ‘So you are an actor, you say, and a writer ...’

It was with some difficulty that Alpiew had cornered her prey. Miss Gymcrack held a special pass that entitled her to be escorted immediately to her beau. The frisking Yeoman had taken particular delight in searching Alpiew, for she was exceptionally well endowed in the bodice area. He even had the nerve to ask whether he might search her cleavage in case she was hiding anything down there. It was all Alpiew could manage to prevent herself from giving the man a wherret in the chops. Instead she took a deep breath and peered ahead to see the Gymcrack girl trip past Traitors’ Gate and turn into the main part of the Tower.

Once allocated, along with a party of enthusiastic foreigners, to her own Yeoman, Alpiew kept straying from the pack in order to peep through the gate and watch the pert miss skipping up the hill and turning to her right at the White Tower .

While the tiresome foreigners in her party were plying the Yeoman with their faltering questions about Queen Elizabeth entering the Tower as a prisoner, Alpiew marched on up the hill before them. Yeoman Jones, unable to decipher much of what was being asked, decided to take the tourists with him in pursuit of Alpiew. The party of exotically dressed Indian Musselmen, their silks, satins and feather headdresses rippling, raced up the hill after him.

Alpiew reached the Julius Caesar Tower just in time to see Miss Gymcrack disappear into a low door on the other side of the green to her left. ‘What is that place?’ Alpiew pointed after the girl.

‘ Beauchamp Tower ’ – Yeoman Jones was bent double, wheezing – ‘prison quarters to errant members of the nobility. Lord Guildford Dudley, husband to Lady Jane Grey, was imprison—’

‘Enough history,’ snapped Alpiew, just as the bewildered foreigners trailed to the top of the hill. She marched off again, beckoning them all to follow. ‘Who is locked up in there now?’

‘Oh, only a young lord who has lived his whole life as a ne’er-do-well. Leader of the Tityre-tus gang, I believe ...’

‘The Tityre-tus!’ Alpiew knew all about them. A gang of hell-raising rich boys who had great drunken sport each night in and around the taverns of the Covent Garden Piazza. Their delight was to upset chairs carrying elderly ladies, wrench knockers off doors, shout obscenities at pretty women and topple the boxes of the night-watchmen, preferably with the ancient Charlie asleep inside. It couldn’t make a better story. ‘Who is he? The name?’

‘Rakewell,’ muttered Yeoman Jones. ‘Lord Giles Rakewell.’

‘Where eez ’ed of Amber Lane?’ One of the foreigners was pulling at the Yeoman’s be-ribboned sleeve.

‘Amber Lane?’ The Yeoman scratched his head. ‘Never heard of him.’

‘No, Amber Lane is woman.’ The visitors shrugged at each other in their very foreign way.

‘Anne Boleyn!’ The Countess was tottering towards the group. ‘They are looking for the head of Anne Boleyn.’ She pointed down the hill towards Yeoman Partridge and spoke clearly with dumbshow. ‘He will show you head of Amber Lane ...’

‘Tourists!’ She nodded politely to Yeoman Jones as the foreigners shuffled off, talking excitedly among themselves. ‘Only ever after one thing – blood!’ She rubbed her chubby hands together. ‘So, Alpiew, the Yeoman seemed to be telling a very interesting tale before he was so rudely interrupted by our friends from the Indies.’

‘He is guarding Lord Rakewell – leader of the Tityre-tus.’

‘Tityre tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi,’ said the Countess with a knowing nod. ‘Virgil, first Eclogue. “Tityre-tus loved to lurk in the dark night looking for mischief.”’

‘Oh, bravo!’ Cibber gave a little clap.

The Countess was so excited by their potential story she had almost forgotten the eager young fellow at her side.

‘Oh yes, Alpiew, Yeoman Jones, allow me to introduce Mr ... Haddock? Cod ...? What the deuce was your name again?’

‘Cibber.’ The actor made a slight bow towards Alpiew. ‘I have been at the end of the jibes of the Tityre-tus,’ said Cibber with a grimace. ‘They climbed on to the stage once while I was mid-soliloquy, and tried to remove my breeches. It was very embarrassing.’

‘Dissolute scapegraces, each and every one,’ the Countess tutted. ‘But their leader ...’ Her eyes scanned the bleak wall of the Beauchamp Tower. ‘She has visited him often, the young Miss Gymcrack?’

‘Two or three times only.’ Jones followed her gaze. ‘Brings him sweetmeats and suchlike. She is very pretty.’

‘All you need is a title,’ shrugged Alpiew, ‘and the world’s your oyster.’

‘You don’t have to tell me!’ The Warder nodded. ‘He lives a merry life in there. Gets all the best food sent up from his kitchens, has all sorts of luxury furniture. It’s a better life than mine, and I didn’t commit a murder.’

‘Murder!’ exclaimed the Countess, in a voice tinged with outrage.

‘Oh yes,’ said the Warder. ‘Cut down a gentleman in an ambush back in January.’

‘Disgusting, I call it.’ Alpiew shook her head. ‘A known criminal consorting with the daughter of a City alderman. What is the world coming to?’

‘A murderer!’ The Countess picked up the thread, still peering up at the gloomy grey walls of the Beauchamp Tower. ‘How long has he got before ...?’ She did a small mime of a noose being tightened round her neck.

‘If it follows the same pattern as the last times, he’ll be back on the streets in a couple of days, a free man, perpetrating his usual midnight brawls and atrocities.’ The Yeoman gazed up at an arrow slit on the first floor. ‘It’s not the first time we’ve looked after Lord Rakewell here, nor the first time he was done for murder.’

‘So ...?’ said the Countess following his gaze to the window beyond which she deduced the wild lord was held.

‘His trial comes up the day after tomorrow. At Westminster Hall. But for some reason his lordships seem to like the fellow. They’ve already let him off twice for hacking men down in the street.’

The Countess beamed at Alpiew. This was an unbelievably juicy story for the paper. The eligible daughter of a prominent City alderman throwing herself at a known murderer. Mr and Mrs Cue would be very pleased with them. With a story as good as this, they might even ask for a little bonus to pay off the Countess’s debts and get the bailiffs off her back.

‘It makes one wish to have been born into that cosy club of port-swilling parasites, does it not?’ Cibber looked ruefully at the Countess. ‘To be born high gives you the right to comport oneself low.’

The Countess gave a little shudder at the dreadfully structured aphorism and smiled. ‘Mr Kipper is a writer too, Alpiew.’ The Countess took his hand and patted it. ‘He writes for the playhouse. He is even this minute improving upon the work of a barbarous Elizabethan third-rater named Shakespeare, for the ...’ She looked back to Cibber. ‘Which playhouse was it?’

‘My last work, Xerxes’ – Cibber shifted from foot to foot – ‘was performed at Lincoln’s Inn Theatre, but I am currently acting with the company at Drury Lane.’

The Countess gave him a sideways look. Xerxes! He’d written that overblown, mind-numbing rant. Perhaps it would be better to give the man a wide berth.

‘I was just saying to your mistress how I once saw her walking in St James’s with King Charles. How very lovely she was then – and of course she is so still ...’

The Countess softened at once.

But Alpiew was not impressed. She did not care for the theatre, nor for actors and it come to that. She had worked backstage, and had seen what went on behind the scenes.

‘Now ladies,’ Cibber clapped his hands together. ‘I can see that you have had a prosperous day ... So may I ask you to join me this evening. I am organising a lecture-evening. Tickets are as rare as hen’s teeth, but I could get you in, gratis.’

‘What kind of lecture?’ said Alpiew, imagining two hours’ purgatory while this little twirp prattled on about himself, as she knew from experience actors so often did.

‘The Passions.’

‘Oh, sirrah,’ said the Countess, gently slapping Cibber’s wrists with her fan. ‘If I were younger, perhaps ...’

‘No, madam, not those sort of passions.’ Alpiew looked to Cibber for confirmation. ‘I believe the gentleman means the Passions as depicted in the philosophical writings of Mr Thomas Hobbes. Am I right?’

‘I’m not altogether certain ...’ Cibber shifted uneasily. ‘The lecture is to be given by Signior Ruggiero Lampono. I am told ’tis something to do with physiognomy and philosophy and painting and acting and so on.’

‘Surely, Mr Cibber, the Passions is the system that will replace the Humours?’ Alpiew was ready for discussion here and now. ‘A codifying of the interior beginnings of voluntary motions.’

‘My maid has some slight eccentricities.’ The Countess was watching Alpiew with an open mouth. From whence had Alpiew picked up this useless information? ‘She enjoys reading the many large works of philosophy littered around my house.’

When she said littered she meant it. For these books lived not on shelves but under table-legs and bedsteads, keeping an equilibrium. Alpiew, however, liked nothing better than to skim through these seemingly impenetrable tomes, leaving the furniture on a tilt.

‘If it’s philosophy you’re after wanting, look no further!’ Before them stood the rotund figure of a priest. ‘Mr Cibber, your servant. And you two ladies must be playhouse creatures too, I take it?’

The Countess took this as a compliment. Alpiew did not.

‘Allow me to introduce myself –’ the priest spoke with a slight Irish brogue – ‘Reverend Patrick Farquhar. Exile of Erin’s emerald shore and the finest dancer of the Biscayan jig this side of the Irish Sea.’ The priest held out his hand.

The Countess wasn’t sure whether to shake it, kiss his ring, or start a foursome reel. She opted for a handshake. The priest grasped the Countess by the forearm and squeezed the inside of her elbow with his thumb. She felt as though he was performing the preliminaries for a wrestling match, but smiled wanly till he let her go and moved over to Alpiew.

‘These two delightful ladies are new-found friends, Reverend Farquhar. The Reverend is chaplain of the Chapel Royal here in the Tower.’

‘Yonder, yonder,’ said the priest, pointing towards a building with a rugged brick exterior. ‘I have in my charge,’ he announced, ‘the bones of three queens – Jane Grey, Katherine Howard and Anne Boleyn – and two heroes – Devereux, Earl of Essex, and Walter Raleigh. Though in the latter case it is only the bones of the torso. The skull is elsewhere.’

‘How so?’ The Countess shivered.

‘His widow had a slight eccentricity. She kept her husband’s head after it was removed from the trunk, and carried it about with her in a red leather bag.’

‘The charming chaplain is going to show me into secret crannies of the Tower where even the Yeoman Warders dare not go, ladies.’ Cibber rubbed his hands together. ‘Would you care to join us?’

The Countess eagerly nodded, while Alpieu tugged at her arm.

‘We have work to do, milady, remember? Much as we would love to join you,’ Alpieu added.

‘But you will come to the lecture?’

The Countess couldn’t imagine a worse way to spend an evening. ‘Will the chaplain be coming too?’

‘Duty, madam. The Ceremony of the Keys.’ The priest smiled brightly. ‘But Colley will put on a good show, I am certain. I am full of envy.’

‘The top players from both houses will be there.’ Cibber coaxed. ‘And the writers – Congreve, Vanbrugh, even Dryden, if his health permits ...’

Alpieu wanted the philosophy, the Countess enjoyed encountering the famous. Both now accepted with alacrity.

‘Then we must part till this evening, ladies. The talk starts at exactly eight of the clock, at the concert hall in York Buildings.’

The Yeoman was glad to escort them back to the exit. He had his well-rehearsed patter and preferred to stick to the run-of-the-mill stories of blood and guts that normal visitors craved. As the Countess and Alpieu swung ahead of him down the hill and through the gate that passed below the Bloody Tower, Alpieu obliged her mistress with the details of the murderous Lord Rakewell. ‘Killed for the first time last year, when he was only fifteen.’

‘Fifteen!’ The Countess rubbed her chubby hands together. What a story! ‘He is a mere boy.’

‘Ay, milady, ran a man through outside a tavern in broad daylight. Gave him a wound twelve inches deep.’ As they turned at Traitors’ Gate, Alpieu glanced over her shoulder and watched Mr Cibber stroll off with the Irish priest. ‘I didn’t like to say in front of that foppish actor fellow, but my Lord Rakewell’s first victim was a player.’

‘A player? Was he well known?’

‘No, a youngster. Non-liveried apprentice.’

The Countess remained silent till they parted company with the Yeoman at the portcullis.

‘Hold, Alpiew.’ From their position on the bridge over the moat, the Countess could clearly see the figure of this morning’s bailiff standing in the meadow outside the main gate. ‘This morning we had a visitor.’ She indicated with her head. ‘He must have followed me here.’

Alpiew recognised instantly the shape of a bailiff. After all, she too had spent most of her adult life avoiding them.

‘On the Green, Madam! What are we to do?’

‘That fellow in there told me we are safe from arrest while we remain inside the gates of this place. So there’s nothing else for it,’ said the Countess, sniffing at the frowzy air coming from the entrance to the Royal Menagerie. ‘Phough, we can spend a happy, if smelly, time visiting the wild beasts ...’ She pointed up at the sign. ‘I’ve always wanted to see a cat-a-mountain.’

‘Me too.’ Alpiew dug into her pocket for the entrance fee. ‘I hear they’re awful handsome fellows. And owls, I hear, have eyes as big as the glasses of a convex lamp.’

‘I’m sorry, Alpiew.’ The Countess took her arm. ‘I hope we don’t have to stay here very long.’

‘I confess, madam, it smells foxy enough,’ Alpiew laughed. ‘But when we spot a large party exiting, we can leave among ’em. And you will wear my cloak. We will effect as good an escape from the Tower as many a noble prisoner before us.’

* * * * *

Later that evening carriages and chairs crammed the narrow north entrance into York Buildings from the Strand . More people were arriving from the south by river, and spilling up the York stairs from the shore.

Alpiew and her mistress stood across from the entrance to the concert hall, near the Watergate. Just as Alpiew had promised, they had escaped from the Tower amid a large party. Only when they were in the shadow of All Hallows Church did the bailiff espy the Countess and give chase. But there were enough alleys and twists and turns down behind Custom House Quay to shake him off.

They had retired to a little nine-penny ordinary full of sailors and spent the best part of their last shilling on a cheap but filling meal of oyster pie and syllabub. Doubly grateful now for Cibber’s offer of the lecture – as it would provide somewhere warm to sit where they could delay their homecoming till well after the hours of darkness – they wandered along the riverside, passing the busy quays at Billingsgate, Fishmongers’ Hall, and Queen’s Hythe before attempting the city roads. Dusk was falling by the time they arrived at York Buildings and took up their position.

‘Tell me if you spot anyone famous, Alpiew. My vision is not what it was in my youth.’

Although it was nearly eight o’clock at night the entrance was almost as bright as day, lit by scores of lanterns and links held aloft by servants, link-boys and postilions.

‘I am so excited, Alpiew.’ The Countess stood on tiptoe to see above the heads of the waiting crowd. ‘To be among the beau monde once again!’

Alpiew didn't like to point out that the beau monde was wearing the latest fashion, while the Countess sported the latest fashion of a quarter-century past; or that the beau monde was being carried here, while they had footed it, evading the attentions of a particularly nasty-looking bum-bailiff.

'We must keep our eyes peeled, milady. Who knows, we may find next week's copy here tonight.' Alpiew crossed her fingers, inspired by the sudden idea that if they delivered two stories at once, perhaps Mrs Cue would pay them two weeks in advance and they could discharge the Countess's debt – however much it was. A sudden thought made her shuffle nervously. What if the dandified actor they had met that morning at the Tower didn't show up to honour his pledge of free tickets? What if he turned up with tickets and demanded two guineas apiece? It would be humiliating for her ladyship and infuriating for her. Now that she had had her appetite whetted for the lecture on the Passions she would be disappointed to miss it.

Only a few days ago, while the Countess was taking a nap by the kitchen fire, Alpiew had pulled Hobbes' Leviathan from a pile of books propping up the kitchen table. It was a fascinating read. Starting with Good and Evil, Hobbes had worked out a system to define the emotions, all of them from Hope and Despair through to Emulation and Envy. Love, he said, becomes jealousy when there is a fear that the love is not mutual. Appetite with an opinion of attaining is called Hope, while without such an opinion it becomes Despair. Alpiew's curiosity on the subject being so great, she had been particularly pleased when Hobbes pointed out that it was curiosity that distinguished man from beast.

'Duck!' hissed the Countess, turning and all but plunging her face into Alpiew's bosom.

'Where is he, madam?' Alpiew prepared to run. 'Which direction?'

'He?' The Countess shook her head. 'No, it's that ghastly old harridan, Honoria Bustle. I was at school with her, Alpiew. As you know I was given the Christian name Anastasia. Dear Honoria persuaded everyone to call me Nasty Ass. I abominate the woman. Come, Alpiew, let's go the other direction.'

The Countess turned her back on the milling crowd and trotted towards the shadows near the river.

'But the lecture, madam!' Alpiew chased after her. 'The lecture is that way.'

Torn, the Countess peered back at the glittering crowd. 'You are right. So tell me when she is safely inside the hall. I could not bear a confrontation with that grizzled old harpy.'

'Tis all hot! Nice smoking hot!' A man lit by the orange glow of his brazier stood down by the Watergate dishing out gingerbread. 'Hot gingerbread. Ha'penny a piece.'

'Why do you not wait here, milady, while I press ahead and find the Cibber fellow and his tickets?'

The Countess nodded and made much show of buying a halfpenny slab of hot gingerbread to explain why she was not jostling forward with the rest of the crowd.

Alpiew pushed through the throng. From the escutcheons emblazoned on the coach doors, she saw that there were members of the nobility here as well as notables from the theatrical world. She watched people effusively greeting each other. So much shrieking and laughter. How had Hobbes described it? The grimace of Sudden Glory.

Lady Bustle was in sight. With a physiognomy carved with disdain, she limped into the foyer of the concert hall where she was roundly greeted by a large fat man with the appearance of a gentleman farmer.

Alpiew pushed nearer. Milling around outside the doors was a group of poorly dressed people who reached out to touch the skirts or jackets of passing actors. Some of them held out posies and letters. One woman actually threw herself before an actor to plant a kiss upon his cheek. The actor merely smiled and, giving the crowd a little wave, strode inside, where, Alpiew noticed, he wiped his cheek dry with a handkerchief.

Alpiew marvelled at the enthralled faces around her. Some of these people looked as though they could not afford decent shoes, or food, and yet here they were prostrating themselves before these vain, conceited things called players.

With a surge she was jostled forward a few feet.

‘I thought you’d let me down,’ said a gentle voice behind her. Alpiew turned to meet the eyes of Cibber, who stood holding out the two tickets. ‘Your writing partner is with you, I hope?’

‘She was seduced by the aroma of the hot gingerbread.’ Alpiew took the tickets. ‘She will be here shortly.’

‘Look!’ screamed a nearby phanatique. ‘It’s Sir Novelty Fashion!’

The clamorous crowd swirled round Cibber. He plunged his hand into a deep pocket and pulled out a handful of sweetmeats, which he handed round to the enthusiastic mob.

One man took his sweetmeat and hurled it back at Cibber, hitting him hard in the face. ‘For Anne,’ cried the man. ‘Merry Anne! My love.’

With a grin pasted across his face, Cibber steered Alpiew away from the rabble and up the steps into York Buildings.

‘Who’s Anne?’

‘She is a fellow player.’ Cibber thrust her into the foyer of the Music Room. ‘Playing tonight, I hope.’

‘And Sir Novelty Fashion?’ Alpiew removed her arm from his grip.

‘It’s a role I played last season. Had quite a success with it. Wrote it myself, actually.’

‘And the sweetmeats?’ Alpiew was intrigued. It seemed that Mr Cibber had come prepared for the pestering of the playhouse phanatiques.

‘It’s the public who pays my wages. So I do my best to keep on their good side.’ Cibber pushed against the crush of people. ‘We must wait inside if we want to escape those desperate creatures.’

Alpiew gave a sly look round and saw the large backside of Lady Bustle push through the door into the concert hall. ‘You go in.’ She turned and waved from the step in the Countess’s direction. ‘I must wait for my lady.’

The Countess waddled along the street, ploughing through the crowd ‘Mr Salmon!’ she called in Cibber’s direction. ‘What a delight to see you again!’

‘Cibber!’ He took the Countess’s hand and kissed it. ‘The delight is surely all mine. You are looking radiant this evening, my lady.’

Alpiew glanced at the Countess, her white Venetian ceruse make-up was not only riddled with cracks but now smeared with black specks from the gingerbread man’s cinders. One of her painted-on eyebrows was smudged into a frown and her wig, tilted at a jaunty angle, hung low on her forehead.

Cibber was all smiles and grovelling. Alpiew wondered what he could be after.

‘So did you find what you were looking for at the Tower, sir?’ The Countess received a jolt from someone else trying to squeeze inside and stumbled into Cibber’s arms.

‘Yes, yes. I saw the very spot where the bones of the two boys were unearthed.’ Cibber nodded keenly. ‘It was not many years ago, you know, that they found them. I would have been three years old.’ He pulled a large fob watch from his pocket and flipped open the cover. ‘Only a few minutes to go. Come, milady, I shall show you to your seats, then I will see you again during the interval, when I have reserved a bottle of sherry for our personal consumption.’

‘Do not bother yourself attending on us,’ said the Countess, still eager to avoid a confrontation with the dreaded Lady Bustle. ‘We’ll wait till it is quieter.’

‘Rebecca!’ called Cibber to a woman standing in the corner with her maid. ‘Are you coming in?’

The woman glared at Cibber. ‘Anne Lucas was supposed to be doing this thing.’ She flounced a little and unfurled her fan. ‘But the wretched creature hasn’t turned up! As a result, I have spent the last hour with that odious Frenchman learning all his ridiculous cant.’

‘You are doing the demonstration?’ Cibber exuded a strange mixture of concern and relief.

‘His breath smells worse than asafoetida, and the grease he uses on his moustaches stinks like a civet cat on heat. And frankly, Colley, I have had enough.’

Alpiew felt a strange tugging at the hem of her skirts. A peculiar little dog had her skirts between his teeth and was pulling at them with all his might. She gave a surreptitious kick and the dog let out a high-pitched yelp.

Rebecca’s face blackened, and she glared towards Alpiew. ‘Have a care, miss.’ She took the dog into her arms and cooed over him, while the animal licked at her neck. ‘My dog is a precious pedigree of the papillon breed, favoured by royalty throughout the courts of Europe.’

‘A papillon!’ The Countess stretched out a plump finger and the little dog licked it. ‘Louis XIV has them, or rather the ladies of his Court. How charming. See, Alpiew, the little fellow is named after a butterfly, because of the fall of his silky ears. Am I not right, Mrs Montagu?’

‘I call him Red.’ Rebecca smiled. ‘An abbreviation, really – for Red Admiral.’

‘Should we go into the hall, Mr Cibber?’ inquired Alpiew, surveying the now empty foyer and keen to be out of range both of the actress and her canine companion. ‘We don’t want to miss the start.’

A muscle in Cibber’s cheek was starting to twitch. ‘Until either Rebecca or Anne is available the lecture won’t start at all.’ Cibber smiled grimly towards Rebecca. ‘For one or other of them is the

actress employed to demonstrate the expressions for Signior Lampone, who, for your information, Rebecca, is an Italian.'

'I am waiting to start, Mr Cibber.' A nearby door swung open and a large man with drooping black mustachios strode in, throwing his head back and twirling one end of the moustache between two artistically long fingers. But the most striking thing about his unusual face was that, perched in the centre, he had a silver nose. 'I must deliver my conference upon the expression of the Passions, while my juices are flowing.'

A commotion in the street pulled all eyes to the door. A chair had arrived and a flustered-looking woman fell out of it.

'Drunk, I suppose,' exclaimed Rebecca for all to hear. 'The trapes was always over-partial to cordial waters.' She tickled the dog under his chin. 'Isn't she, darling?'

'Ridiculoso!' The Italian threw his papers into the air. 'I am a grand maestro. I do not work with slatterns.'

Anne Lucas, dishevelled but sober, shoved through the crowd of phanatiques into the foyer. 'Signior Lampone, mia apologia. O molti problemi in casa ...' She turned to Rebecca, and translated coldly: 'I have enormous troubles at home.' She greeted Cibber with a kiss on the cheek, then knelt on the floor before the artist. 'Perdona mia, Signior Lampone. Lavoriamo. Come, let's work!'

'One moment, sir.' Rebecca handed the dog to her maid and stepped forward. 'I have just wasted a precious spring afternoon rehearsing your jigumbob. Does this mean I will not be remunerated for my efforts?'

The painter looked to Cibber, Cibber looked to the floor. 'I can give you a free seat ...?'

'A free seat! I assume you jest?' Rebecca put her hands on her hips, threw back her head and laughed. 'I have given up a full hour of my time in a professional pursuit, and for that I will be paid.' One eyebrow raised, nostrils flared, mouth drawn down at the corners, she stood tapping her foot and glaring at Cibber.

'You see!' screamed the Italian, pointing at Rebecca. 'The woman is perfetto! A great actress. She has demonstrated Wonder followed instantly by Scorn. Magnifico!'

Alpiew shot a sly look at the Countess. This bizarre episode would make excellent copy.

'So tell me, Colley. Do you want that second-rater to demonstrate the Passions?' Rebecca Montagu was clearly determined to milk the moment. 'Here: look at her face ... Subtle, but you can already see Jealousy etched finely upon it.' With a sudden movement, Rebecca turned to Anne and gave her a hearty slap across the face. 'There we are ... Physical Pain followed by Astonishment ...' She took a step back. 'And what will come next? Either Weeping or Anger, I wager.'

Anne Lucas covered her face with her hands and ran into the auditorium.

'Now, sirrah -' Rebecca smiled at Signior Lampone - 'off you trot and give your tedious discourse.' She linked arms with Cibber. 'And I will take you up on that offer of a seat, Colley. I wouldn't miss this debacle for the world.' She turned to her maid, who had hovered inconspicuously behind her throughout the tirade. 'Sarah, you may go home and prepare my supper.'

The maid curtseyed and left at a brisk pace.

The Italian threw his arms into the air, uttered a few incomprehensible oaths and followed Anne Lucas down the aisle.

‘Did I introduce you to my new friends, Rebecca?’ said Cibber with a sly grin. ‘This is Lady Anastasia Ashby de la Zouche ...’

‘Baroness Penge, Countess of ...’ muttered the Countess.

‘And her ...’

‘Maid, yes.’ Rebecca did not even look at them. ‘Shall we go in?’

‘No, Rebecca. I was going to say her writing partner, Alpiew.’ Cibber smiled graciously. ‘Lady Ashby de la Zouche and Mistress Alpiew write the society news for the London Trumpet.’

Alpiew was delighted to watch Rebecca’s face struggle to suppress a rotation of the Passions, chiefly Horror and Rage, while demonstrating a frantic smile in her direction. She was clearly not used to demonstrating her passions in such close proximity to the press.

* * * * *

The candlelit auditorium was crammed full of chattering people. The only seats left were in the back row and had reserved signs upon them.

Cibber ushered the three women in as the pre-show music concluded and the musicians took a bow. Cibber stood by the door at the back of the aisle, prepared for all eventualities.

Signior Lampone and Anne Lucas climbed up on to the rostrum, and the applause swelled. Lampone raised his hands for silence.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you this evening to speak upon the subject of Expression. This chimerical science is a necessary study to all artists, whether painters like myself, or players, like my esteemed friend Anne Lucas, who has graciously agreed tonight to demonstrate the fundamentals of the theory.’

Another smattering of applause.

‘You will also find my philosophy useful simply as a tool for living. So, ladies and gentlemen, first I will explain that a Passion is a movement of the sensitive constituent of the soul. It consists of many parts – principally the internal movements, as when in Hatred the pulse races, or when in Desire the heart beats faster; and the external movements, as the clenched fist of Anger, or the running away induced by Fear.’

Rebecca shuffled in her seat and muttered under her breath. ‘Or the yawning induced by abject boredom.’

The Countess smirked. She could not have put it better herself.

‘But the part of the body most expressive of the Passions is, of course, the face. The face which receives quickest and most intensely the signals from the brain.’

The Countess suppressed a yawn. Over an hour of this claptrap? She glanced round the room for moral support, but she and Rebecca seemed to be the only ones who weren't enthralled.

'Now I will show you a simple exercise.' Lampone turned to face Anne Lucas. 'Please, madam Lucas, empty the face of expression.'

Anne stood in the centre of the rostrum, Lampone moved behind her.

'Wrinkled brow, drawn down and frowning.'

Anne moved her eyebrows down.

'The eye sparkling, the pupil looking out at the corner, in constant fire.'

Anne Lucas moved her eyes into position.

'Nostrils open and drawn back, mouth shut, the corners pulled back and downwards, the teeth clenched.'

Anne flared her nostrils and set her mouth.

'Now, may I ask someone in the audience to tell me what they perceive?'

'A second-rate actress with constipation,' muttered Rebecca. The Countess restrained herself from laughing.

'Which of the Passions, ladies and gentlemen, do you see before you?' He pointed towards a gentleman in a shining brown peruke.

'Jealousy?' suggested the man.

Lampone gave a smug shrug and Anne relaxed her face. Applause.

'Now, Anne, eyebrows higher in the middle, down at the sides, eyelids lowered.'

Alpiew could see that many of the audience were also following Lampone's instructions.

'Mouth slightly open, corners drawn down. Head negligently leaning to one shoulder.'

He addressed the audience again.

'And this time? Madam?' He was pointing towards Rebecca.

'May I say, Signior Lampone, that I believe you are a genius ...' A smattering of applause. Anne Lucas's facial muscles were starting to quiver. 'I would suggest that Mrs Lucas's expression indicates the sorrow she feels when she contemplates that I am the better player.'

Some of the audience laughed, others shifted uneasily in their seats.

Anne Lucas froze for a moment, then started sobbing as she ran from the podium through a small door at the back of the stage.

Lampone seemed unsure whether to follow the distraught actress backstage or continue his demonstration alone. He continued talking for some minutes, attempting to pull the appropriate faces as he spoke. At last he threw his arms up in the air. 'E un disastro! Un fiasco!'

The audience shuffled uncomfortably.

'Ladies and gentlemen' – Cibber strode up the aisle and mounted the platform – 'may I suggest we take a short interlude. In ten minutes I am sure Signior Lampone will be delighted to continue his discourse.' He turned towards the backstage door, which was ajar. Two heads peered through the gap. 'Musicians? Please could you play again.'

Cibber looked up to where Rebecca Montagu sat smirking and gave her the signal to come to the stage and join him.

The Countess and Alpiev left with the other members of the audience, and decided to stroll along the terrace by the Watergate and compare notes.

'What a turn-up,' said the Countess, wrapping her cloak around her.

'I am heartily sorry she spoke,' said Alpiev. 'I was enjoying the lecture.'

'You jest?' The Countess looked at her in amazement. 'I'd be happier watching the waterworks in motion.'

A couple of row-boats bobbed gently a few yards away in mid-stream, although the river tide was low, and the black shadowy beach stretched along before them. One of the boatmen pointed to the terrace, noticing that there were people about – potential fares. He turned his oars and pulled in towards the shore.

'We have almost enough copy for a month,' said Alpiev, counting on her fingers. 'The Gymcrack girl and her murderous lover, the row between the actresses, this disastrous evening ...'

Just then a shadow fell across the Countess's face.

'Nasty? I say, it's Nasty Ass!' Lady Bustle was upon them. 'Looking a bit worse for wear, dear. Where did you get that ancient dress? It should be in a museum by now, surely.'

The Countess flipped her jaw up and down, speechless. Bustle laughed.

'Well! There's a new Passion for Mr Lampone. What's it called, Nasty Ass? Moonstruck?'

'It is called,' Alpiev interceded, 'Dignity in the face of gross rudeness.'

It was Bustle's turn to be lost for words. 'Listen, wench, I will take no insolence from a mere menial. If I were you, I'd hold your clack.'

'If you were me, madam, you'd be a lot better looking and realise that wealth is no justification for discourtesy.'

A horse pulling a hackney coach gave a snort that seemed to punctuate Alpiev's retort with a raspberry as the carriage rolled away towards the Strand .

With a huff, Lady Bustle staggered through the Watergate and down the steps towards the water. 'Boatman!' she called. 'I am leaving. I have never been so insulted.'

Alpiew put her arm round the Countess, whose chin was set on a precarious wobble, and walked her to one of the stone seats within the Watergate.

'I might as well be back at school again. After all these years ...'

'Watch this, madam.' They peered out to the row-boat; the shadowy outline of Lady Bustle sat facing the oarsman, jammed up against another passenger, presumably her farmer friend. The boatman, with the usual medley of curses, called Lady Bustle every name under the sun. 'I told you to step carefully, dowager. The excesses of your avoirdupois has got us stuck in the mud. I didn't know from your voice you were such a fat slubberdegullion, there's more blubber on you than on a whole school of whales.'

'Rivermen, madam –' Alpiew squeezed the Countess's arm – 'never let an insult go past!'

'The lecture will start again in a few minutes, ladies and gentlemen.' Cibber came out into the street behind them ringing a handbell. 'Please take your seats.'

The Countess gazed down at the river. With a plopping of oars the sculler finally drew away from the far end of the steps, taking Lady Bustle off into the darkness.

'Do you want to go home?' said Alpiew.

'With that awful bailiff waiting outside to apprehend me?' The Countess shook her head. 'I will join you inside the auditorium in a few minutes. Let them go in first.'

Alpiew looked around at the dark streets, the inky black river. This was not a safe place. 'I can't leave you here, milady.'

'Why not? You go on ahead. I'm not as interested in all that stuff as you are.'

'You are sure?'

The Countess shoed Alpiew away.

When the audience were all inside, the Countess walked back along Buckingham Street. It was very dark. Now that the famous faces were gone the phanatiques had left their positions and had drifted away into the night. Nor was the gingerbread seller in sight. His brazier still burned fiercely, but the man was nowhere to be seen. The Countess sighed. She was hoping to get another slice. She walked round the side of the building and leaned against the balustrade.

Above her a sash window opened and an old bald head poked out. 'What's going on?'

The Countess pulled back into the shadows. She recognised the man, but couldn't think where they'd met. Wherever it was, it was many, many years ago.

'Mary?' The man turned back into his room. 'Did you hear it?' He leaned out again. Another window slid open on an upper floor and a female head popped out.

'You,' cried the man, pointing down towards the Countess. 'You in the shadow! Did you hear it? A call like an albatross, or shrieking of the wind through the sheets in a westerly gale.'

The Countess stepped forward, peering up at the bald head. It looked like the old navy man, who'd worked for King Charles. She remembered he had a silly name: Chirrup, or Toots, or something similar.

'There's been a bit of a stir at the concert hall, sir. That's all.'

'No no.' The man was banging the sill with his palm. 'I heard it distinctly. Wait a minute ...' He leaned further out. 'Don't I know you? You used to work as an actress?'

'Take care, sir, or you'll fall out!' The woman in the upper window called down before disappearing back into the house.

'Ridiculous, building a concert hall on my doorstep! I retired here for a bit of peace and quiet. It's been worse than Bedlam ever since.'

'Come on, Mr Pepys.' The female head appeared alongside the old man. 'You'll catch a cold, and you know how you hate to be ill.'

Pepys! That was it. The Man from the Ministry himself. Samuel Pepys. Always trying to feel your legs under the table, and taking every opportunity God gave him to touch your breasts; with no conversation but the price of sailcloth and the number of barrels of tar required for a voyage to Flushing. Wherever that was.

'I know that woman.' Pepys shook the housekeeper off and pointed down at the Countess. 'Don't I? I know you. Would you like to come in for a plate of tripes?'

'Yes, Samuel.' A plate of tripes sounded like a better offer than having to sit through an hour of face-pulling. 'Of course you know me. It's Ashby de la Zouche – Charles' old friend.'

'See!' Pepys turned to his housekeeper. 'Told you I knew her. It's Lady Ashby de la Zouche.' He waved down. 'Come on up.'

'I must tell Alpieu where I am, Samuel. She is waiting inside the concert room for me. I'll be two minutes.'

Nodding happily, Pepys disappeared, aided by his housekeeper, and the window was shut.

The Countess started to cross the alley. At the same moment a great whoop came from behind her, accompanied by a stampede of feet. As the Countess turned to see what was going on, she stumbled into the wall. A pack of young men swept past her, hollering at the top of their voices. Two held links to light their way. As she pressed herself against the building to avoid them, a dark-haired beau caught hold of the Countess's wig and raced away with it. Slapping her hands up to her bald pate, the Countess reeled into a doorway, while the youth tossed the wig to a friend, and he to another, like a game of catch-ball. 'You niggardly sons of whores,' screamed the Countess. 'Give me back my top-knot.'

'Top-knot?' cried one. ''Tis no top-knot. Sure, 'tis a dead rat.'

At this, with a scream he threw it high against the wall and it smacked against Pepys' window and landed on the sill from which he had just been leaning.

Screeching with laughter, the boys tore off into the night, with the rhythmic chant:

'Don't sleep, don't snooze,

Watch out for the Tityre-tus!'

She waited for their voices to recede before she dared breathe. Then, sobbing with a blend of relief that they had not harmed her and embarrassment at the loss of her wig, she cowered in the doorway. She shut her eyes, slid down and sat huddled on the step.

A few moments later she heard footsteps, then a man's voice a few feet away.

'Hello? Are you all right?' Someone was walking slowly towards her. 'It's the gingerbread man. The swine upset my brazier. Did they hurt you?' His hands reached gently down. 'Boys these days!'

'They took my wig.' She pointed up to Pepys' window. 'It's up there.'

'I'll go find the watch,' said the gingerbread man. 'He can get it down for you with his long staff.'

The Countess looked up at the man's woollen hat. 'Could I ...?'

Without a word, the man took off his hat and handed it to the Countess, who pulled it tightly down over her ears. 'Thank you.' She was frightened that Pepys might start looking out for her. 'I can't stay here. They will think I am a vagrant and I'll be picked up by the constables.'

The gingerbread man helped her up. 'I won't be long.' He walked off into the dark.

'I'll wait over there,' she called after him. 'In the concert hall.'

The Countess walked briskly through the candlelit foyer, taking a smart glimpse of herself in a mirrored sconce. Then she pulled the auditorium door open a crack.

Alpiew was not sitting in the same place. But then, mercifully, neither was Cibber. From the stage, Lampone was talking intimately with his rapt audience.

'Rage, for instance, has the same basic movements as Despair, yet they seem somehow more violent. When Mistress Montagu has had time to prepare herself (I believe she is fetching a cup of water from the drinking fountain behind the building), she will show you the subtle difference between these related passions.'

The Countess at last spied Alpiew. The minx had managed to get herself a seat in the front row. There was no question of her marching up the whole length of the aisle wearing a street vendor's woolly headgear. She took a quick scan of the room. Cibber too was seated near the front.

A heavy thudding was coming from behind the stage. Lampone smiled. 'Here comes the great actress, with a tread like a fairy!'

The back door flung open and Rebecca Montagu staggered on to the podium. Her hair was in disarray, her face contorted in a fixed expression.

'Eccellente ...' said Lampone, resuming his talk. 'A little further into the programme than I was expecting, but see: the arms stretched stiffly forward, the legs in the act of fleeing, the whole body in disorder ...'

Rebecca Montagu stood rooted to the spot, her expression frozen.

‘You will note the eyebrows raised high in the middle, the muscles holding them swollen and taut, the nose and nostrils drawn up, the eyes wide, the pupils unsettled, the mouth wide open with corners drawn back, the veins and tendons very prominent, the hair seeming to stand up at its roots, the complexion pale. This is the epitome of ...’

Lampone gave a smug smile: ‘... of Terror.’

Without altering her facial expression, Rebecca Montagu thrust her hands out for the audience to see and started to scream.

Her fingers were red. Dripping from her fingers and on to the floor was a scarlet liquid that was unmistakably blood.