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WHEN MALICE
SURROUNDS YOU

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CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

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Wellington's Officers Series Book 2

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Editor: Alex Blackburn

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Chapter 1: A GRAVE IN ST. GILLES

June 1809, London, Saint Giles-in-the-Fields.

A fine black calf's-leather bootee tapped on the big grey slab of limestone on the church floor. It hesitated when it felt a slight tilt.

The woman lifted her skirt from her ankles so that she could look more closely at the well-trodden horizontal tombstone. It was lying in the middle of the path which led from the rows of seats for the congregation straight to the exalted, barely adorned altar. No doubt every poor soul that entered the now disreputable church would place at least one dirty foot, probably more,

on that slab that covered the rotting corpses beneath the tiles.

Saint Giles-in-the-Field hid the way into the Rookeries, the most feared, criminal neighborhood in all of London. It was the Cerberus to London's hell that stretched as far as Great Russell Street and lay flanked by another poor man's cursed region called Seven Dials.

Perfect! It was just perfect!

A sardonic smile played around lush lips, hidden behind the black lace of her heavy veil. She felt like gathering the spit in her mouth and dropping it on the stone. She would have performed this disgraceful act if she had not seen someone praying fervently in the benches at the back.

The woman curved her lips; she had noticed the pious wreck peeping at her through wrinkled dirt-stained hands.

“May you burn in hell, William the Fat,” she whispered. “May your flesh crinkle like lard in a hot pan and may it grow back on your evil body and start your agonies all over again, every single day you’re doomed to stay there!”

She stepped back two paces, gloating as she looked at the place where her elegant black boots had rested.

“I hope I am standing on your useless dick,” she muttered, careful to keep the venom from her voice.

She heaved her left foot and let the heel come down hard. She almost yelped when the slab of stone moved.

“Ma’am?”

She immediately recognized the eager voice of the young vicar and raised a hand to remove the black widow’s veil which was covering her face. She slid her black wrap from her shoulders with the other.

The Reverend Simon Desmond, newly appointed vicar of the suffering church of Saint Giles-in-the-Field, stood hesitantly before her. She wondered if he had not immediately recognized her as his stare was directed at her highly indecent neckline, which was decidedly inappropriate for a mourning widow.

He was a handsome man, this young vicar. His crow black hair curled around his ears. His jaw was firm and his eyes shone with what could be

easily interpreted as devotion. He lacked height but that gave him the opportunity now to stare directly at her barely covered chest. She wondered if he would be so bold as to put his nose against her cleavage and suppressed a grin.

“Reverend Desmond,” she murmured, “I did not hear you approach.”

Simon Desmond almost fell down on his knees when he acknowledged his latest benefactor at last. Her cleavage had not only been revealing but also very distracting.

“Mrs. Alexander,” he chanced to mumble, almost unable to look up into her lovely face. It was hard to choose between the milky, fleshy, mounds in the black silk bodice or the beautiful heart shaped face that was

now surrounded by a mantilla of black lace.

“So this is his final resting place?” Marguerite Alexander’s voice was husky as if she was swallowing tears.

“Yes, yes, I am afraid so,” the vicar confirmed, wringing his hands.

“I explained to you that it would be hard to find a suitable place inside the church...”

Marguerite put a mesmerizing black satin-gloved finger on her almost visible breastbone.

“Don’t you worry, Reverend,” she breathed, “my husband would not have wanted any other place...”

In order to hide her smirk, she turned her head away from the light that fell through the high, coloured windows.

Saint Giles-in-the-Fields, his preferred place of burial, indeed! He would now be turning in his shallow grave if he could. The place was the messiest burial site in all of London. The bodies in the graveyard almost flowed out of the coffins onto the sticky mud whenever it rained in this terrible part of the city. The always present stench of decay was a fierce attack on the senses, and any normal breathing person would hardly be able to stand the smell for more than a few minutes without fainting. She could. She, Marguerite Alexander, formerly the Honourable Miss Marguerite Aurora Ross, the late Baron Halkhead's daughter, just stood there in this hell of decay, almost dancing on the grave of her tormentor: her so very dead

husband, William Alexander. She imagined that his decrepit smell of degeneration was probably in her very nostrils right now.

The Reverend Desmond had initially refused to take her husband in for burial. He had not wanted him inside the church and neither had he wanted him in the cramped graveyard. Everybody in London knew that the church of Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was overflowing with dead bodies; rotten corpses, everywhere.

Marguerite had offered to pay through her nose to get William Alexander inside the church. And so it happened. The church was a poor man's church and how could a vicar in need of funds refuse to fulfil a dying man's last wish? If Mr. William

Alexander had expressed his preference for his last resting place in the picturesque church in the middle of his beloved city of London, who was the humble vicar to refuse?

The grave had been shallow, narrowly accommodating the big coffin. The slab of stone was wobbly because it almost rested on the lid of the coffin. It had been somebody else's grave, because the slab of stone carried the name of a corpse long gone: another William. This one may have died peacefully amongst his beloved family in 1745, instead of perishing on his smelly commode, shitting himself in his last moments of agony, when his black heart and bilious liver deserted their services. His own servants had turned their

heads away from his corpse, pinching their noses when he had been carried away for the necessary rites. The corpse had been coloured yellow and green and had reeked worse than a pig's sty full of shit.

Marguerite had to bite her lower lip to keep from smiling at the memory of how her husband's ever-fawning staff had been disgusted with their employer, whose demise had been so undignified.

Smelly Pig William, tucked away under somebody else's stone. The affront! The delight!

Nobody had been there when his heavy coffin had been lifted into the shallow hole of the grave; none of his old cronies, none of the other misers, none of his Scottish family members

who had only come out later in full force to get their hands on his fortune. Such loneliness in death! Such sweet revenge!

She had professed to be on the way to the funeral, but her heavy carriage was delayed in the crowded streets. She had meticulously planned a route that took her through the narrowest streets, which she had ordered her unwilling but obedient coachman to take.

At last, the vicar, tired of waiting, had started the service in honour of William's demise without her, exactly as she had intended. In June, one could not delay a burial for too long and it was not right anyway to bury a law-abiding citizen after six o'clock. There were the evening prayers for

the parish, and in any case, the body had emanated a smell that sickened the coffin bearers to gasping and heaving and had to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. It was assumed that the widow was having such a bad time parting from her husband that his fat and fast decomposing corpse had remained a few days too many on this earth. She had insisted he should be buried on a Sunday, the Day of the Good Lord, as she had whispered. A bit scandalous; burials were for the weekdays, but after another sum had parted from her black satin reticule, the needy vicar realized that the Bishop lived far away and would anyhow, most certainly, approve of the extra funds for the poor parish, if not for the vicarage.

No doubt in her sadness, the widow had not realized that the body could be partly embalmed and sprinkled with specific herbs to prevent that awful smell, which was causing everybody who approached the expensive, but curiously dripping coffin within a circle of twenty yards to gag; the stench was unbearable.

“Are you well, Mrs. Alexander?” the vicar asked, still not able to remove his stare from her breasts.

Ah yes, the vicar! It had taken her the loan of a dress from one of the serving wenches and an afternoon near the women’s bathhouse, filthy to the rafters, to find out that yes, the vicar was too good for this world! He just could not say no to the needy, and no, the vicar was not married. Yes, he

had his small vices, but didn't all men of flesh and blood? Especially as he was not blessed with a tall body (snicker), but the face of an angel, nay make that the boulder Lucifer with his dark good looks and his crow-coloured hair.

One of the younger misses had told her with a giggle that the vicar, although very serious and probably pious, had not been able to keep his sights nor his hands off his generously endowed laundress, suggesting he might marry her, although he had already checked the registers and found out that she was firmly wed to a sailor. That had been a bit of a setback for Marguerite. Such a man could easily become a nuisance to her not very serious intentions.

The next confession had convinced her to try to seduce the man into burying her spouse in the most obnoxious place in London. The girl said he did not “feck”, which meant, within a good translation, that the vicar touched, but did not put his cock inside a woman of his parish. He obviously had narrowed down the biblical idea of “carnal knowledge” to the act of penetration itself, not to the delights of touch and suck.

Marguerite had felt a pang of desire worming its way down her belly to a very sensitive place between her legs. Ah, God, but touch and suck would suit her very well! There would be too much explaining to do around the birth of a child more than ten months after the death of one’s husband

nearly in his dotage anyway. Further information had taught her that the vicar preferred abounding mounds of flesh on a woman's chest (which Marguerite could amply supply). The girl had giggled profusely, obviously hiding a few more juicy details. She did reveal that he had this thing about women clad in black. It was almost eerie and all too close to the description of a widowed Marguerite, but there it was! As a final insult to her deceased tormentor, she would seduce the vicar who put him in his undignified grave.

She had come to the church this morning, dressed in her inappropriately low-cut widow's weeds to see how to go about that task. She had known he would come to the church as soon

as he had seen her burly coachman, Crowley, holding the leading horse of the carriage in front of the church. Three armed footmen were standing next to her town-carriage to avoid any molestation on the part of the less honourable people that crawled out of London's Rookeries.

She turned to the vicar with a sad face. She had already noticed that "sad" drew more of his attentions than anything else.

"I do feel a bit faint..." she said with a weak gesture of her gloved hands towards her temple. She moved slowly as if she was on the verge of falling to the floor. At that moment she felt his helpful hands high on her waist, his thumbs closely under her high corseted breasts.

Vicar Simon Desmond originally came from a good family; his father was a country-squire in Kent. He had been the third of seven children and at the time serious enough to be deemed suitable for a religious calling. He was only twenty-six years of age when he had become the vicar of a very small village in Sussex. There he met a wealthy widow who used her sexual wiles on him. They had a somewhat stormy 'affair' until she found somebody else to her liking: richer, older, another man of the cloth. Regrettably one that surpassed poor Simon in rank and position. When Simon started to stalk his paramour after a great fit of the mopes and threats to his competitor, word suddenly reached the bishop about his

unsuitable behaviour. He was given the choice of a vicarage in another hole in the ground in Northumberland or Saint Giles-in-the-Fields; the disreputable and poor parish in London. He had chosen wisely for the city of London. It was just that Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was possibly the worst place one could be called to. It was dirty, filled with criminals and was the poorest section of London. It was also worldly however. Its inhabitants did not frown if you leered at pretty, fleshy girls, they merely expected you to. His background protected him from the all too ambitious girls who would like to share his bed and the household of the small vicarage by means of a snug golden ring on their finger; his golden ring. The likes of

him did not marry the likes of them, and that was final.

His small victories over willing girls were sensibly few within the parish. He did not mix with the abounding Magdalena's of the neighborhood, who represented about half of the Rookeries population, if not more, except for taking their confessions and tending to their last rites.

The not so few times his mind was overpowered by his overwhelming manly desires, at twenty-seven one still had his baser needs, he had taken off his vicar's garb and disappeared into the anonymity of the crowds near Covent Gardens. He might have to take a paid woman against a wall in an alley, always putting on the French letter his ex-lover, the widow, had

provided him with, but it silenced his rampant needs for some time. Being a vicar did not protect one from being human or horny.

Without the clothes of the clergyman on his back he assumed he could stretch the words of St. Paul to an agreeable extent; that he was only a sinner finding carnal knowledge with somebody outside the boundaries of the parish. To be truthful, his was not a calling but a job.

The almost fainting widow Alexander, although way out of his league, was now resting comfortably on his lower arms. She had been subject to his erotic musings and dreams for many long, shameful and rather hot nights in a row of late.

She could never fool him with her demure behaviour. As a man of the world, he knew she was nurturing lustful feelings for him. After all, this was something he had to cope with on a daily basis.

When he tried to straighten her a bit he rested a hand on the delightful underside of her generous bosom.

Her slight little smile told him all he needed to know, so he convinced her to come into his vicarage for a strengthening cup of tea.

Only when she turned around to peer at her husband's grave did he see the vengeful expression on her exquisite face. Vicar Desmond was well aware of her obvious thoughts of revenge, his widow in Surrey had been full of it as well, and he was not

disinclined to be used for the purpose of it. After all, his life had not been a bed of roses either.

He did not mind being ‘used’ by the poor beautiful Mrs. Alexander, especially now that she was so recently widowed and poor in the way of the spirit, not to mention the deceased husband’s fortune that was now hers to spend as she pleased.

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From the diary of M. Aurora Ross

Third of June 1809

Dear Diary,

Welcome to my life. I never dared to have you when the Fat Man was still alive. I know everybody including him spied on me and I even suspected

that poor Mr. Baines, his man of affairs, had strict orders to report every small thing about me that would be of interest to the Fat Man.

Of course, I could have given you into the care of Rose, my wonderful maid, but I had already burdened her enough with my scraps of newspaper about H.A., and I didn't want to make another nuisance of myself. The Fat Man would not have been above punishing poor Rose if he had any inkling that she was hiding my most intimate thoughts put on paper. I know he disliked Rose utterly, and for sure, the feeling was mutual. The only condition I dared pose, before marrying him, was that Rose would come and be allowed to stay until mine or her dying day.

No, Rose was disgusted when she heard I was to marry the Fat One, but who were we to oppose the wish of my grabbing parents?

What I had wanted to put on paper anyway, in those last five years in my prison on Berkeley Street, was his abusive annoyance with me when he found out that I could excite him enough to feel some stirrings in his lower regions, but as soon as he contemplated to do the deed he would go as limp as a lily. (That was not my own expression, but one out of those naughty books out of the Far East that were lying around in his dressing room.) I had wanted to write about his unreasonable jealousy if a younger man dared to look at me twice. I was not suffering from leprosy or any such

thing and men always stared! So many dinners I had on a tray in my bedroom because he did not wish his customers to gawk at me. I was not aware at the time that he resented their licentious thoughts about me, because I never noticed that they nurtured anything of the kind, which was silly and stupid and naïve of me. Alas, that is what I was when I married the Fat One: silly, naïve and mercenary. Oh Sweet Lord was I mercenary!

Should I have counted the number of days that I was not allowed to leave that miserable house? Because he was scared out of his wits that I would smile at the street sweeper and have him debauch me in a hidden street corner? Should I have stated the obvious, that I was to be released only

those few times, when it could not be helped, like that dinner with the London Mayor because London and the Prince needed money?

Oh Lord, how I hated those invitations. He always took his revenge later by doing those abhorrent things to me as soon as we returned home –back into that prison. He was such a vile man, that Fat One! I will only be consoled by the fact that he never, never...

But today, I had my day of revenge.

Today I stamped on the stone that covered his stinking fat body. Today I came back to check if he was there, at the most detested place I could think of. Sweet Good Lord- I had the impression I could smell him where his body decayed. Speedy decay: it

was just as the Apothecary had promised me when he gave me that powder to throw over his disgusting corpse when it was securely in its gross, leaking coffin.

I had tea with that young vicar who looks like an angel but who had adopted vices that would make even Lucifer himself blush. It was just like that laundress said, but heavens, did he bring me to the gates of Paradise with his tongue and his fumbling! Am I naughty enough to describe it to you? Oh, why not, he is not here to read it, he is dead, dead, dead!

I had seen it in one of those books that the Fat Man kept in his dressing room. I just never guessed it would be such a wonderful thing to experience! To have someone's tongue actually

licking your very intimate spot, while he was doing things to that strangely rigid member of his. I call that strangely rigid, but the laundress said that almost all men get to that stage when they are properly 'excited.' I asked her afterwards. She told me all those things for only one sovereign. She sat with me in the carriage. I had Crowley look for her and she was not very far away. The whole neighborhood had come out to watch the carriage, imagine! I was sitting in it talking to this girl, who knew everything!

She was not shy at all about it and I was happy to hear an experienced account of those things people normally keep secret from a 'respectable' woman.

I wonder if Rose ever knew about those things. She had been married, you know, although that must have been before I was born. If I remember correctly, there was no husband around when she worked for my stepfather and mother.

We have our own laundress at Berkeley Street but still I offered this one the job, just to have her close to me. I was astonished that she refused to come, but she said she was seeing somebody special and that she hoped he would come to live with her and her mum. She told me her husband never came back from his sea-voyage to the Far East, as the ship was reported to have gone down near Aden, wherever that is.

Imagine preferring a life in the Rookeries with a specific person, to serving in a great house in Mayfair! I had to make her swear to keep silent forever about our conversation; but she only laughed and said that everybody knew about what she was explaining to me. Imagine; everybody, except for me! Well, I knew about that thing where the Fat Man forced me to take him in my mouth. Good sweet Jesus, he was rank and stale with that terrible pungent odour of his! This must have been because he hardly ever took a bath and that useless old valet of his was not allowed to wash him “there.”

Well, there had been enough punishment for me to last me a lifetime! Yes, punishment, for my mercenary

thoughts when my stepfather convinced me to marry the Fat One.

People say I was forced, Rose says so, but I did say 'yes' in that chapel four years ago, didn't I? I wanted all that money and the luxuries at the time and I never once looked back at poor Hengist, who begged me to run away with him after that one kiss.

Oh, my wonderful Hengist! I was only just eighteen and certain that being married to the Fat One would be the right thing to do. Hengist was only a captain at the time, and although he is the second son of the Earl of Loghaire, normally a great catch for a girl like me who was only 'Honourable' and just a lady, he would never have the money his brother might

inherit (said my stepfather), if any would have been left, of course.

The Old Earl was known to be a terrible gambler and a rogue, until he had that accident and slowly lost his marbles and was at last reduced to live like a plant in a hothouse. Anyway, Mother and my Lord McKenna needed the money then, or better the day before that yesterday. After I wed the Fat One, Mr. Baines had explained to me that the Fat Man had bought off all their debts. Those debts would have been able to reduce us all to a life on the streets, or worse yet, in a vile Debtor's Prison, if I had not consented to marry the Fat Man. I married him because Father and Mother kept on pleading with me and

I truly could not stand their tears and laments.

I had no idea what it would mean to be married to someone. I thought you just said yes, wear an incredibly expensive dress and then depart in a beautiful town-carriage.

Rose tried to warn me, but my mother sent her away on some errand. My mother should then have warned me about my marital duties, but she just told me to lie back, open my legs wide and think of the jewelry I was going to get when I presented my husband with a son and heir.

If only I had talked to the laundress before the Fat One put his dirty hands on me, or even that I had met Simon before everything happened, because when I married the Fat One I did not

have a clue about what it meant to be with a man. How nice it is to have the company of a man like Simon! He's only a couple years my senior and, unlike that Fat Old Ape, he smells good, has nice strong arms and a sweet smelling chest with no hair at all on it.

Of course, I didn't have any experience with men at all. My hag-mother took care of that. I was only allowed to go to church or to the lending library when we lived in Edinburgh, but that is all water under the bridge, now.

I must hurry because Mr. Baines will come to explain the accounting to me. He already told me a lot more about Alexander and Stephenson's, even during the time the Fat One was

still alive and travelling. I think it is very complicated, all of it, but he insists that I know about these things because I own most of it now. Rose shakes her head about it, but I tell her it is very enlightening and does keep boredom at bay.

Mr. Baines' motives might be a bit less noble, I think, than I'd given him credit for, but I don't care. He teaches me to read the balances of the 'ready investments' but I have never been on any of the Fat One's shipyards in my life. I have the impression he wants me to be happy with my fortune, which is reasonable enough. He is looking for someone to buy the shipyards because I have no inkling as to how to run them. Well, I couldn't care less about those shipyards. Truth

be told, the thought of ships gives me a queasy belly, but then, I have never been on a real one except the ferries over the Firth.

Back to happier thoughts. Tomorrow night I will have a rendezvous with Simon. I will take a hackney to St. James Park where he will join me for a ride. God, but I am a wanton woman because I cannot wait to have his... I'd better reign in my wanton thoughts, because I am not certain Mr. Baines will not guess them otherwise.

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Chapter 2: A MOLLY HANGING

*London, Newgate, 23 November
1809*

The crowd seemed to go berserk when the condemned criminals were finally led through the Debtor's Door outside the Old Bailey. The mass of bodies swayed in front of the portable gallows. They surged and pushed shouting, shrieking, and cursing in a merge of England's most colorful dialects and accents. Just for a short time the differences in station, race and sex seemed to disappear as everybody chanted in a strange mutuality: gentlemen, potboys, who-res, shop-girls, and servants alike.

“Bugger! Bugger!” the mob roared in wild elation, obviously gin-soaked

and beer-bellied even at the early hour.

A swat of drunken harlots tried to rush the cordon of soldiers carrying pikes who were placed around the gallows to ensure a neat execution without interference from the mob. The military men just laughed and called out hoarse, raw jokes; pushing the women back with lecherous glee, manhandling them by purposely gripping their sagging breasts, skinny butts, and fishy-smelling mounds. The heavily painted birds of the streets jeered at them, reeking of the night's bad gin, their bodies unwashed after having struggled out of their dirty cots and pallets just to be in time for the early morning's execution.

They leered at the soldiers in the cordon for after-execution custom; anyone there knew that executions changed men into horny rutting beings and business would be good.

The three prisoners stumbled to the short stairway leading to the platform of the portable gallows; their wrists tied in front of their chests, a rope bound their arms, shoulders, and bellies to diminish any motion of the upper body. They wore white night-caps that hid the hair on their rugged heads--obligatory at the execution--lending them a strange innocent look.

All three were shivering, frightened by the teeming mass of people that surged and moved wildly, shouting the vilest curses, throwing dung and

dirt at the convicts who were now visibly white with fear.

“Look at those Harpies,” Lord Morvern mumbled, staring at a group of vicious bedraggled women, who shrieked with foulest insults, throwing handfuls of rotten fruit and vegetables at the hapless convicts. It was clear that the main target of their abuse was the sodomite who tried to hide behind the prison’s ordinary.

“Would you mind sitting back, sir?” The ungodly reeking fat man next to the Viscount urged.

“We all paid the same money for a good view, mind.”

Philip shifted his chair a bit so that he turned away from the stench of the man. Some people did not understand the meaning of soap and water and

this was surely one of them. He got his perfumed handkerchief out of the lace sleeve of his shirt and pushed it against his already long-suffering, offended nose.

He had wanted to do that from the moment he had entered the small, smelly room, but Jefferson had warned him not to appear obnoxious.

Enough was enough, though. Philip inhaled the scent of Bay Rum deeply, his nose hidden in the immaculate linen.

The two men opposite Philip leaned out of the small window as far as they could, as they tried not to listen to the fat man's new protests.

“Oakden's wet himself,” the one closest to the window-sill said glumly.

“Filthy swine! See! There’s piss on the floor right where he stands.”

The fop next to him sniggered, merciless in his glee for the convicted sodomite.

“That will teach him for putting his dick in a boy’s arse!”

Master Jefferson, seated at Philip’s other side, looked very grim. He stared at the three men on the scaffold who were praying with the prison’s ordinary, while in the meantime, the hangman was putting a noose around their necks; tugging and pulling at them, unmindful of the fact that the three men were having their last worldly conversation with their Maker.

The crowd, impatient with the spiritual support the convicts were

seeking, roared, chanted, and threw more rotten objects.

Master Jefferson pursed his lips when a few hardy and filthy hags pelted the praying men with horse dung, trying not to imagine what it must be like to have to die before such a teeming mass of Londoners, wet with one's urine and dirty with unspeakable dreary projectiles.

Although the tickets for the view from this house, directly on the scaffold in front of the Old Bailey, had been arranged by him as soon as it was known that the sodomite would hang, he had hardly uttered a word since they were led to the window with a clear view of the gallows. He simply abhorred London's most favourite pastime: watching public

executions and trying to participate in it as much as possible. He had been appalled by his deceased client's request to bring Lord Philip Agnew, Viscount Morvern, to this particular one.

Philip sighed morosely. He truly wondered what he was doing there, watching three convicted criminals who were shortly to be executed. He did have a distinct idea, looking at the elderly Oakden, who had started to shed tears now.

He needed to piss, but he was mortified that the other viewers in the room would condemn him for being a coward if he disappeared behind the screen, now that the convicts were waiting to have a sack pulled over their heads and the dreadful moment

when the hatch would open was fast approaching. He folded his legs instead, squeezing his genitals, hoping he would not follow Oakden's example and wet his pants.

It was freezing cold outside, and the opened window did not help to keep the room at an agreeable temperature, although the owner of the house had built a big fire in the fireplace and had placed a simmering hot rum punch awaiting their consumption on their small table. Philip clenched an ice-cold hand around his beaker that had long ago been warm. The handkerchief remained pushed against his nose because the fat man started to move in agitation, wafting his pungent odour into the room.

“He’s sniveling, the foul beast!” the young man opposite him said.

Richard Oakden, the sodomite, had clearly started crying after the Ordinary of Newgate had had a word with him; last words of a religious nature, no doubt. Philip wondered how anyone could listen to words of consolation when one was about to be hanged for his so-called unnatural sins of the flesh. Poor bugger indeed.

A roar went up from the crowd when the three criminals had sacks covering their heads and were put on the hatch with the ropes still hanging loosely on their shoulders. “Can’t be long now!” the fop next to the windowsill said excitedly. Philip ground his teeth and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw that the three long ropes were hanging taut and the convicts were dangling waist-deep into the black hole where the hatch had fallen.

“Burnskill has bungled the sodomite!” the young man opposite Philip shouted with glee, “See, the rope is still moving and twisting!”

Philip felt his stomach do a somersault. Christ, Oakden’s neck had not been broken when the hatch opened and now he was slowly being strangled by the rope.

“I gather Burnskill must be hanging at his legs by now so as to hasten the suffocation or stretch his neck,” Master Jefferson said worriedly.

“Serves him right to get Oakden’s shit and piss all over him,” the fop

muttered, “No doubt he did it on purpose. He hates sodomites. They heard him say so when they brought them to the executioner’s room yesterday.”

He looked around with pride that he was able to come up with that juicy piece of information.

The fat man next to Philip only belched and took a bite of the shepherd’s pie that no one else had wanted to touch. He stared at the scaffold with a ferocious gleam in his piggish eyes.

Master Jefferson coughed with dismay, roundly cursing his client for exposing him to the barbaric scene of a man struggling for the breath he would never catch again, leered at by grueling lechers that found gra-

tification in his slow struggle with death. Of course the hangman had 'bungled' the poor man. He had probably been paid to do it by one of the righteous pricks that found it necessary to start another witch-hunt against the men that preferred the company of their own sex to that of a woman.

He peered at the scaffold, noting with abhorrence that Burnskill was standing back, with a mocking sneer, while the unfortunate Oakden still wriggled and struggled. The hangman had not bothered to jump down the box and help the sodomite out of his misery.

Philip gazed at the rope until it was still, clutching his handkerchief against his nose. The crowd in the

street had quieted somewhat now that the three men were obviously dead. Some people were staring at the now still bodies; others were turning away from the scaffold. It had been a new day for quite some hours now and work needed to be done.

Only the idlers, the night-workers and the street urchins could afford to wait for the cutting down of the bodies, in about an hour's time. Whores and pickpockets started to move about, searching the area for customers or victims. The harlots did not bother now with the armed soldiers around the scaffold: they would have to stay until the bodies could be removed, and surely they could snatch a client or two before

they went after the willing men of the cordon.

Philip felt relief now that the anxiety over the execution was clearly wearing off.

“I need to piss,” he mumbled in Jefferson’s direction, not realizing that one did not normally speak that way to one’s family lawyer.

He disappeared behind the screen where a chamber pot was placed on a knee-high stool. No wonder the room smelled like a sewer; the pot was almost overflowing. Nobody had emptied that pot since the night before.

“Better sit down, my lord,” Jefferson said when he returned busily buttoning his fly and trying not to

breathe in the stench that permeated the room.

Jefferson reached to close the window, after having conferred with the two men; their fronts were freezing and the choice between stench and warmth seemed an easy one at that moment.

“Must be thousands of onlookers, ’t will be difficult to get to the carriage for some time to come.”

Philip sat down clenching his jaws while looking up at the sky through the dirty glass windows. He felt sick.

“Who set you up to this, Jefferson?” he asked, not caring that the other three people in the room suddenly had grown very quiet and observant since Jefferson had called him “my lord.”

“The late Lady Loghaire,” Jefferson said without a qualm, “in a special addendum of the will, which was not read to you as it was only an instruction to me; thirty pounds for two at this delightful place at the window.”

“Typical of the bitch.” Philip sneered, “Waste of money of course. Is Hengist going to have a similar sort of treat?”

Jefferson smiled and shook his head.

“I dare say he sees enough killings in the Peninsula. Are you appropriately shocked my lord?”

“Inordinately,” Philip drawled. He took one look out of the window where the masses were still teeming. He rose and walked to the fireplace, cursing his dead mother who, of

course, had never understood why he could not be 'normal' like his damned brother Hengist. He had been removed from her will: she had left all her worldly possessions to his hero-brother, leaving him without a bloody penny. He wondered how she could have been so disgusted with him. It wasn't fair; he had always adored her for the forceful, handsome countess she had been.

He sighed, wondering what his last night's conquest, Willy Robson, was at right now. No doubt in his cot, sleeping deeply after spending Philip's money on a bottle of cheap gin. Or maybe he was outside, sitting on a roof, or a ledge, still hazy and hung-over, joking with his noisy friends about the sodomite that

refused to die, not caring to think that Oakden's fate might be his own, one day.

They never hanged lords of the realm like that, did they?

Philip suppressed a shudder. He had not wanted to be impressed by the whole horrid charade that had been played out in front of him, but he was. Oh, the hag had known him so well!

He peered at Jefferson who was stiffly seated near the window, wondering for the umpteenth time that day if the lawyer knew why the countess, now months in her grave, had put him through this demeaning ordeal.

*

Diary of Aurora Ross

London 23rd of November 1809

I am very angry this morning! Rose had told me that all the servants had gone away without even asking me permission. They left some stale bread and a lukewarm pan of tea, and that was supposed to be my breakfast.

I am even more disgusted with myself for not being able to control the Fat Man's servants. I know they do not care a whit about me; they never did in those years I had to live here, almost like a caged animal. Well, I tell you, this will be the last time I have been treated in such a disrespectful way. I told Mr. Lane that he can go forward and negotiate with whoever wanted to buy the house; that

Earl of somewhere behind York, was it Rotherhood? No! I remember now it was of Ham, Rotherham or some such thing. If I remember correctly he has three daughters and wants to bring them out next season, well two of them, the third is still in the schoolroom. He is welcomed to the house. Mr. Lane says it is worth a small fortune because it is built in the heart of Mayfair.

I know now what Mayfair is like, I did not know all the years when the Fat One was alive. He never allowed me to go out. I was not even allowed to sit in the garden when the weather was warm. Now I take strolls in the park with Rose; the park called St. James Park. I only walk there nowadays in the mornings, when it is

not supposed to be the fashionable hour. I don't want to meet many people because they always stare at me and seem very curious about me. My problem is that I don't know anybody in that park and I have the feeling 'they' know all about me. Well, there isn't anything of interest to know about me, is there? I am a Scottish lass, born from a gentle Scottish laird who died before I was old enough to remember him. My mother then remarried to Laird McKenna and we lived either in Kenna or in Edinburgh in my stepfather's town house.

I had governesses until the age of seventeen when my mother started to educate me for my 'coming out.' I am very mediocre with the needle. My

governesses always despaired of me, but their complaints about my needlework always fell on deaf ears with my mother because she was not any good at it either. I do have a nice voice though, but the last time I sang was when I still lived in Edinburgh. The Fat Man never invited me to sing for his guests and truth to tell I was glad of that.

When the Fat Man died I was quite filled out myself. The food at his table, I should say our table, was always filling and greasy. He liked it that way. He had a terrible sweet tooth as well; he used to eat heaps of buns and cakes for his breakfast. They were always baked in a soft sippy manner because he had hardly any teeth left in his mouth, and whatever

was left was blackish or brown. I supposed I should have pointed out to him that one can make one's teeth last longer if the teeth are brushed with calcium powder every day. Incidentally, his teeth were not so few and bad when I married him.

I was always afraid of him. One could never foretell his reactions to anything; he was impatient and he was a bully, and thought nothing of beating me whenever he felt like it.

Anyway, I told Mr. Lane that I preferred to go and live at the house off Piccadilly which the Fat One bought for me. He actually bought it so that my family could stay there, whenever they were in London. Mr. Baines said it is not half as prestigious as the house I live in right now, but I

truly couldn't care less. I hate this house at Berkeley Street!

I feel very much alone of late. Simon went and married in September and I have not heard from him since. It's not that he was such good company. We actually only indulged, well, in the niceties of the flesh, as he would call it, but he was somewhat of a friend, a familiar person.

To my horror, I read in the paper that Hengist was badly wounded in a battle in Portugal last September and now I am fearful of reading the announcements about the deceased. I have Rose go through them, she does not read extremely well, but well enough to tell me if there is bad news.

I asked Rose why all the servants had taken the morning off and she had

to ask the girl from next door, who was just going for an errand. She would not tell me at first, she said it was too sensitive information for my ears. That really annoyed me to no end. How can one think I am too fragile to hear why the servants took a morning off? After having been married to the Fat Man for four years I fear I have become the most cynical person in the world.

Well, I had to eat my words, because I did not understand at first why people would be interested in the hanging of a 'sodomite.' Rose had to explain it to me and even after all the perversities the Fat Man had subjected me to, I had to blush. I could not for the life of me understand why two men would subject themselves to the

things Rose was telling me about, until she said what happened to two men like that was similar to whatever happened between Simon and me in a way. Ah, that shut me down good.

Simon and I had gone as far as to, well, I was doing it in the way he liked to do it with me, and that is to say, he wanted me to rub his interesting part with my mouth instead of my hand. At first I thought it a bit distasteful, but when I knew he'd washed himself before we had our rendezvous in the hackney I even came to like it in a way, although I always needed to keep a handkerchief ready because I found the white stuff that would emerge at the end quite unsavory. Rose does not know of those details of course. She merely

asked me if I needed her help if I wanted to prevent unwanted pregnancy. I told her I would not need any help from her there, thank you very much, as we did not indulge in the sort of thing that made prevention necessary. Rose just smiled and said that whenever I needed anything she would ask the Scottish apothecary near Covent Gardens. Sometimes I think she nurtures a ‘tendre’ toward the man there. I understand he is in his late fifties just like she is. Well, I hope she finds some compassion there; life was hard for Rose until now. Truthfully, so was mine.

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Chapter 3: A TENT NEAR