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THE MURDERESS AND THE HANGMAN

by

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Chapter 2
The Shoemaker of Horncastle
1879

That same Valentine's Day, William Marwood esquire is home in Horncastle, Lincolnshire, a country village on the eastern shoulder of England, a far cry from London's metropolis. He sits in the Portland Arms, his local pub on the corner of Church Lane, drinking a single stout. Marwood stares in the middle distance, relaxing after a day in his cobbler's shop. At nine o' clock the new steel clock behind the bar chimes the hour and Marwood will walk the cobbled street sixty yards back to his shop, his wife and son.

The bar atmosphere is more subdued than normal; for several weeks now William Marwood esquire has been the talk of the village - as usual - but has rarely showed his face. This evening he sits in an alcove both with a panoramic view of the bar rack with its hanging bottles of spirits and beer mugs, and the entrance where the farmers, locals and traders mingle. Marwood is busy rolling his fingers over a letter, his black eyes sunk into his cheeks, a whisper of a smile cut into the smoothly shaven chin with its single dimple at the centre. Drawn by the prospect of free travel and new adventure, he has almost decided to accept the letter's proposal, a commission from the Sheriff of London and Middlesex to take up a new post in the city: hangman for the South. It is the promise he has been waiting for, working for, practicing his trade for, and now it has come. But ever a cautious man, there Marwood sits folding the paper in his long careful fingers, peering into the dark mist of his settling pint. He waits; he looks up at the faces lining the bar, the farmers all trussed up in hardy coats, the blacksmith, the church chaplain in his faded dog collar, their eyes now flickering at the well known stranger.

"You remember the Phoenix Park murders?"

"As if it were yesterday."

The individuals waddle over and sit chummily facing Marwood. Both are burly men, one losing his hair but sprouting a beard like a manic vegetable growth, the other clean shaven but more suspicious-looking with thatches of red hair clamped to his ears. Marwood knows them as the ironmonger and butcher for Horncastle, the Tooley brothers who like to know the local talk, and fearless of no-one. They draw bar stools together in solidarity and self-amused intimidation.

"So Willy, my boy," says Fred the butcher.

"Mr Marwood, head of the headless," laughs Aldous the ironmonger.

"You came back to us!"

Marwood looks up over his pint, pretending he isn't worried.

"I couldn't leave you for long," he says, reaching for his pint.

"The village wouldn't have you gone long," Iain replies.

"No, no, we can't be doin' all the law n' order."

The brothers laugh and slap palms, their long hair shaking, teetering slightly on their stools.

"Steady," Marwood says, summoning the nerve. "I wouldn't want you to drop."

"A hit!" cries Fred, the more learned of the Tooleys, "a palpable hit!"

But Iain recognizes the challenge and decides to make his move. He leans on the table, elbow high. Then he takes Marwood's pint, lifts it, threatens to pour it over him, and drinks it down in three large gulps. All three regard the froth bubbling up Iain's chin and slipping back down the glass. He coughs a little, showing no embarrassment, and Marwood is wise enough not to smile.

"Now listen here, we know you've been to Kilmainham Gaol, and took care of them boys."

"The Queen's enemies, you mean."

"If you believe in the Queen," the larger brother with the beard, Fred, chimes in.

Marwood glances up. "I'm not sure this crowd would appreciate your anti-royalist speech."

"This crowd don't know its arse from its elbow," Fred adds. "You aren't in the home counties here, ma' boy."

"I've lived in Horncastle all my life," Marwood replies, determined not to lean back.

"Well, we ain't all Queen's men here, boyo, and there's plenty like us. Now you listen again, hangman, and listen good. I'll count 'em out once. Brady, Kelly, Curley, Fagen and Caffrey. You took care of 'em all. Dublin Castle."

"That was months ago."

"Well, you keep a low profile, and here's a public place."

"You can come to my shop anytime."

"We don't need shoes, we just need the laces to hang you by."

"That's a threat, Iain. You step too far out of line..." but Marwood isn't able to finish the sentence. Fred fixes

his hand on Marwood's, and takes up the pepper pot and sprinkles it over his fingers.

"It could be you next," Iain continues, his red hair bouncing up and down. "That's all we're saying. Like they do in the Southern United States."

"You know what lynching is?"

"I do, Fred," Marwood replies. "But this is England. We operate according to justice."

"It ain't no machine," Iain replies, letting go of the pepper and shoving it back in Marwood's face. The butcher then proceeds to talk while Marwood coughs, and the men all stand up. "I told you their names, and it's on your conscience."

"I am a servant of the Crown," Marwood replies. "Ask any man in here." He looks over his shoulder, but the Tooley brothers are being ignored by the rest of the pub. "The remainder of the gang were imprisoned in Downpatrick gaol. They have their lives."

"I heard the story," Fred says. "You went to Ireland dressed as a cleryman with that assistant of yours, Bartholomew Binns."

"You'll never find him," Marwood says. "He's long gone."

"Yes, back down south, where they all go."

Marwood thinks of the letter in his pocket. A quiet unboastful man, the locals will soon regard his move to London with mixed pride and shame. He is one of theirs, but leaving them, and they have mixed feelings about what he did in Ireland.

"I'm still supported here for the Dublin hangings," Marwood says. "You aren't Englishmen, that's the difference."

At these words, the brothers step back, and hook their thumbs in their belts.

"We're Anglo-Irish, and as Protestants we have as much right to be here as you do there. So chew that, Marwood, and chew carefully. We came back because we didn't like the way Catholic Irish were ruled over, so call us sympathizers if you like. They's plenty of us left in England."

Marwood now stands. "Those boys were responsible for killing Thomas Henry Burke, permanent Under-secretary and Lord Cavendish the Chief Secretary of State for Ireland. They called them the Invincibles..."

Iain takes this moment to spit at Marwood's feet and the whole pub goes quiet.

"You hanged 'em," and they were ordinary people facing up to the government," Fred says. "You should be ashamed."

"I'm ashamed of nothing," Marwood replies. "Those men were a mob, and they went from brawling that night to stumbling on Lord Cavendish in Phoenix Park, and beating him to death with sticks and broken glass. Call that heroic?"

"I call that fine rebellion," says Iain puffing up his chest.

"I saw to them on the scaffold and I would do it again," Marwood replies. "I'll stick to my shoes and you stick to your trades."

Marwood stands defiant, and despite his narrow frame he is taller than expected. The moment hangs uncomfortably in the air, and his adversaries begin to smirk. The Tooley brothers point at him silently and announce to the pub: "He'll get his in the end, he'll get his. Don't be too proud of your local hero."

"That's just it," Fred echoes, "you don't stick enough to your trade."

"The people don't love me for it," Marwood responds, sitting back down again. "It depends which trade you're talking about."

"We can see that," Iain laughs and together they leave the pub, the door closing behind them with a defiant click. The cold country air ruffles the pub before calm descends once more.

Marwood sits for a minute, somewhat bewildered, then walks to the bar and orders a fresh pint. He sits between the old men of Horncastle, the market men and schoolteachers, the clergy and retired military men, those too tired to wish for anything than conversation and comfort, and he is not shunned. Known as a raconteur, Marwood has always been welcome in pubs, most of all in his local.

"So, no one will stand up for me when the time comes. I am the outsider in a small place, the outsider among outsiders."

No one replies; but Marwood is patted on the back by landlord Fortinbras Truman, a childhood friend now sporting a pot belly and brown apron he's worn for decades.

"You stood up to them well," Truman offers.

Marwood looks up and nods, his black eyebrows raised for amusement then dropping over the hooded supports of his soft eyes.

"How's your plan going to solve the National Debt?" says Aldousy Watkins, a local dairy farmer.

"It isn't," Marwood replies.

"You gonna pick it up?"

"Nope," the hangman replies. "I'm gonna let it lie." Ponderously he drinks his pint and stares at the old steel clock, built for the railway line that never quite made it to Horncastle, and watches the second hand click round. "Toe the line, that's what I should have said. Toe the line."

"Like you were about to hang him? He wouldn't have liked that much."

Marwood looks up at Truman. "No, he wouldn't, and it might make him think we'd meet on the scaffold one fine day."

"Any of us could meet there one day," Watkins says. They laugh, a circle of old friends.

"True, true. Well that's me," Marwood says as the clock ticks nine. "Save my pint for whoever's here last."

"That'll be me, then," Truman replies.

"Goodnight then."

Marwood takes his hat from behind the door and slips into the night, a tall shapeless fellow, slim from head to toe. He glances down to the High Street to ensure his friends have gone. Then he turns his back on the Portland Arms and looks up at the pale full moon and the Methodist Church opposite, its ribbed arches in stained glass shadowing the grass. Like a schoolboy making good time, Marwood walks the links of raised stones, thinking of his 'split trapdoor' invention he has yet to try out, or the myriad of Leonardo Da Vinci anatomy drawings he's been copying into his notebook. But somehow he cannot piece together an overall proof of the best hanging technique. As these thoughts skim the surface of his mind, he reaches his house and pauses under the small but important sign, carved in trim bronze:

William Marwood, Esq.
Public Executioner
For hire for the public good
Church Lane, Horncastle, Lincolnshire

No mention is made of his daytime craft. The locals all know Marwood as the mender of shoes, so the sign is part vanity, part confirmation of his residence for the traveller or occasional employee. An average neck-width, the sign announces a humble cottage and the last of a row of thatched terraces; but unlike the other dwellings the front entrance is on Church Lane and looks out at the Wesleyan Methodist church graveyard. Here a sense of privacy is preserved, consolidated by the churchyard

opposite snaking away to the river via the small plot of gravestones: here Marwood savours these few seconds of private walk at the end of the day. The front of the house is far different from the back yard, again, where the garden exits onto Foundry Lane and opens into fields stretching the mind all the way to the North Sea. The garden is hidden from the street and naturally this is where Marwood conducts his experiments, where noise will not travel, and people cannot see. He pauses and thinks. Rarely is he accosted for his fame, unless cornered inside a pub somewhere, or by those bullying or brave enough. On the contrary unlike his predecessor - a showy man who bungled most of his hangings called William Calcraft - Marwood is never followed home by gangs of shouting boys. As his private notepaper announces, he is a 'gentleman executioner' who keeps body and mind separate from the public. As he is fond of saying, "I am solemn, like a shadow."

The Marwood home is a two-storey cottage in which his workshop is the ground floor. Once inside, he descends a few stone steps and looks from the window and sees the Portland Arms, a cloud over its chimney. Looking left he sees the heads of the gravestones, raised over the road, meditating. Nor are there any windows in neighbouring houses from which to spy on his musings. He is quite alone. February is a quiet time in Horncastle, north of the West and Wildmore Fens. Horncastle is known for horses, for its canal and the frequently of flooding from the River X. The horse-fair of last August is long over, and the winter has erased memories of the clear, mild weather of spring, so that sleep and forgetfulness seem the only way to survive the cold. Marwood stokes the iron-grated fire behind the steps, and clears last night's fallen branches away from the chimney. He snaps a few and lights the remaining paper fire-lights, presses them down and watches as a small flame burns. Slowly the room glows into life.

Before the fire can climb too high Marwood is busy at work. Since cooking the evening meal of roast duck with carrots with his wife, marking the Valentine's Day when they met thirty-one years ago, Marwood has not quite completed the next day's orders. As he works, he thinks of all the good times since he married Ellen Andrews of Northallerton, Yorkshire. Still affectionate to his wife, he smiles at the prospect of the warm bed waiting for him although she will be most likely asleep. He transfers this latent desire into his workshop, into the solid iron last, using proper thread, linen and hemp combined, and leather

of various types for uppers, soles, heels. For the next hour he indulges the love he has for work and leaves his wife a while on the anniversary of their meeting.

Marwood has a new pair of shoes to make for Fortinbras Truman, his old friend and faithful barman. As he works, the hangman often thinks of the people in his life. First he takes the barge cement, dips it in the alcohol he left out, rolls it in beeswax, and waits. The thread soaks and he stares into the liquid, thinking how nicely Truman prepared his pint and a half of stout just as he entered the pub at a quarter past eight. Then he takes the hammer and pincers, scours the edge off a single razor blade, and places the five shoes nails in his mouth. The butt-stitching will require an edge-flesh for the shoes Truman likes to wear, or else a grain stitch if the leather is too tough. True to his methodical nature, Marwood prepares the curved awl, soaks the thread skein in the beeswax, now melted, and again waits. As he smoothes the wax through the heat of his fingers, globs falling onto the long wooden table, he thinks of his wife, asleep upstairs. He wonders how much gin she's consumed tonight while he was at the pub, the drinking of the cheap sloe-gin their only shared vice, their mutual chastisement. Setting the candle aside a moment he takes a seat in his old raised work-chair high on makeshift stilts like a scarecrow's throne while his mind drifts to his son, Aldous, and whether he will cope alone - with his mother? - with the bullies of Horncastle? What will become of the Marwoods if he takes the job in London? How will they survive?

"I must teach Aldous how to stitch," he whispers, the flame a blue and orange reflection around his face creating a kaleidoscope. He continues to work silently, threading both pieces of leather and wiggling together the fibres. In creating the diagonal angle, Marwood finds himself a little sleepy with the effect of his stout and the fire. The flame softens as he threads hole after hole until the thread suddenly buckles and unwinds. He applies more beeswax, straightens and re-twists, but the thread keeps hitting the join and won't pass. As ever he solves the problem by re-imagining the shoe as a man's head, and for a few seconds he is no longer a cobbler, but preparing a hanging. He points the awl towards the joint as though it were the ear of the prisoner, tightening the leather as though it were the large knotted rope around the victim's neck, the washer rolling free on a metal ring. Not yet does Marwood see he has made the first step towards a surer way of hanging, and a safer way, in that it will prevent either strangulation

or decapitation. This metal X secure against the prisoner's neck will ensure all, a steady fall, a close grip, a sudden death. But for now Marwood mends the shoe with the dexterity he applies to the scaffold. He does not see the improvement.

Instead he grows sleepy. Tightening the last threads on the shoe, his fingers roll the awl automatically and once again he is thinking of people he knows. Only this time, since the shoe-mending reminds him of darker experiments, a face slowly moulds out of the split beeswax. He is looking into the past. Taken from his reading of X, there is Mary Blandy, convicted over a hundred years ago at Oxford Assizes for the murder of her father at Henley. Marwood remembers the disappearance of her father, the accusation, the witch-hunt, the hanging. As though it were happening now in the basement, he sees Mary's heart-shaped face dissolve into a supplicating plea in the molten wax, her mouth half open, her prayer turning to horror. Tightening the shoes, working in a vaguely puzzled way, he remembers the rest of the case. Could she be guilty of poisoning her father, adding arsenic to his wineglass but claiming the drug was a 'love philtre' to make him kind to her lover? So that her father would let a certain Captain Cranstoun marry her? Did anyone believe her?

Marwood stitches up the last shoe, quite aware that Cranstoun abandons her to her fate. But as a stout Methodist, Marwood is a modern man, a believer in free will, and as such he is conservative on the subject of 'just desserts': in his eyes, Mary Blandy chose her future when she chose her lover over her father. As though to confirm his belief, the shoemaker tightens the last leather noose, then lays aside to dry Fortinbras Truman's completed leather walking shoes. But the haunting of Mary Blandy is not quite finished. Her pained face is melting in the leftover beeswax, a ghost of an ugly past. Marwood is a practical man, though, and he destroys the image by wiping the redness from below his eyes, using the base of the candle, down along his thin black eyebrows. He takes a deep breath.

It is then that he sees her, a woman hanging in a black crepe dress, her arms and legs tied with black paduasoy ribbons, her whole dress extremely neat. What upsets Marwood is the way she dies, not the fact she is executed. Second by second, as though he were executioner, he sees the rope circle her neck without care. It touches her face, giving her cheeks a dreadful and unwarranted shiver. Then with her own fingers, a poignant detail, she

moves it to one side. She is holding a rose, and for all of Oxford in Port Meadow, high on the hill she is strung between two trunks on the 'fatal tree,' a beam between two fruit trees. Marwood shakes gently, his hands wavering around the table. He can see nothing but Mary Blandy's face, her shame and horror, the quivering of her limbs as they tighten the rope. For her fear of pain before death itself he feels for her, but cannot explain his empathy to himself. After climbing four rungs of the ladder, she whispers: "Gentleman, do not hang me high, for the sake of decency."

They do not tie her dress.

Marwood shivers in the warmth of his worktop, his scarecrow throne rocking, his own black frock coat hung on a peg below the window. Fixed by the daydream, though, he is elsewhere, his gold watch-chain bouncing on his executioner's waistcoat. He was executing Mary Blandy's in his mind, according to English justice and God's law, and no one dares complain. Laughing now, his black hood falls off and reveals a mane of silver hair swirling in the wind, transforming him into a devilish wizard. But looking closely, the dreaming Marwood sees a flash of suffering in his doppelgänger's eye that causes the reverie to break.

Standing in the doorway is Marwood's son Aldous. He looks over to the long wooden table, opened shoes and twisted pieces of leather.

"Good evening, father," he says and before Marwood notices Aldous is standing at his elbow placing a cigar in a miniature guillotine. "There you go."

Marwood smiles. "Thank you. I was just having a bad dream."

"The shoes raining from the sky?" the twelve-year old asks.

"No, not this time," Marwood says with a smile. "Not tonight." He turns to face the boy. "Aldous, you know I'm 'grooming' you, as it were, to take over the family business?"

"Yes, then we can move house..."

"Well, first it means I'll be away for a while. On other business..."

Aldous knows his father is a hangman but they pretend otherwise for mutual comfort if not amusement. "Father, you already keep the shoes of dead men and repair them for sale."

"I know, like Sweeney Todd's victims ended up in the pies, right?"

They smile.

"But why do you have to leave, then?"

"It won't be for long. A few weeks at most. You must take care of your mother, Aldous." He touches the boy's arm. "And you must stop her drinking." He looks stern.

"Yes, father, I'll try."

Aldous is bigger than most boys his age, but clumsy, lacking his father's wiry shape. He is a country boy who could not survive long in the city, and despite his timidity - too shy for the rough and tumble of the open fields - Marwood fails to give him the attention he deserves. Tonight is different however - the hangman knows a path is leading him away. So he allows the boy sit on a raised stool beside him. Together they watch the fire die. Later Aldous beckons to the chess set in the corner, but Marwood says he is too tired.

"That's only for the talented," he says and the chessboard stays under dusty leather. Instead Marwood turns to a cloth on the table edge and slowly peels it back revealing a phrenological plaster cast. The object is exposed as a bald head with large eyes, white all over, and Aldous wobbles on his stool in surprise.

"The head of an executed criminal," says Marwood. "Not the real head, of course."

"Who is he?" the boy stammers, wincing but curious nonetheless. With a flutter of his fingers, Marwood tells his son of "Courvoisier, the Swiss valet. He murdered his employer, a gentleman called Lord William Russell in 1840. But that's not the best bit..." Aldous levels his head with Courvoisier's, trying to discern a flicker of life. The eyes stare obliquely at back, the skin white as chalk, no pupils looking back. "Forty thousand people turned out for the hanging. And over a million and a half broadsides were sold at penny each. Made a dozen Londoners rich!"

"A pretty penny," Aldous says, and reaches out with his hand.

"No don't touch him," the hangman says, and restrains his son. "That's only for the sick. If you touch him when you're not ill, you might get sick yourself." The boy drinks in every word. "It was before my time, and certainly before yours. He was a foreigner anyway, never found his place."

"Why did he do it?"

"No one knows for sure," Marwood answers. "He blamed crime literature for his killings! Too many penny thrillers back in those days. That's why I stick to the science books!"

Before long, resting head on arms, Aldous is half asleep. So, patting Courvoisier on his bald head and covering him up, Marwood tidies the rest of the table.

"Time passes," he whispers to the dying fire, then takes Aldous gently in his arms. He blows out the candle. At the stone steps, he turns briefly. Only a little dust falls from the back of his scarecrow chair.

