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about 2,300 words

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THE MURDERESS AND THE HANGMAN

by

Matt Fullerty

Be cheerful, sir.  
Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

William Shakespeare, The Tempest (1611)

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us  
that our existence is but a brief crack of light between  
two eternities of darkness.

Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory (1947)

Like beer and tea, sprouts and plum duff, hanging suited  
England.

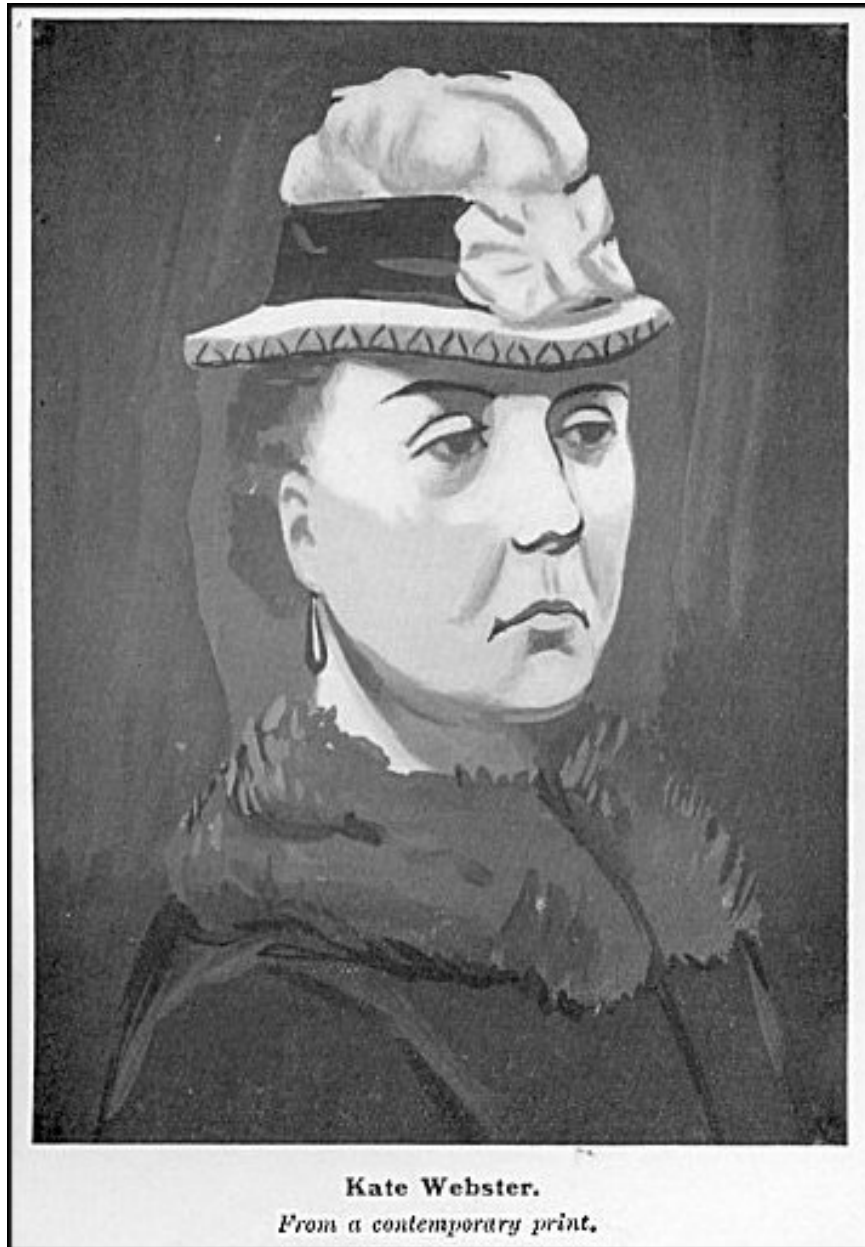
Howard Engel, Lord High Executioner (19\_\_)

Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,  
Sae dauntingly gaed he;  
He play'd a spring, and danc'd it round,  
Below the gallows-tree.

Robert Burns, MacPherson's Farewell (1788)

Man stands amazed to see his deformity  
In any other creature but himself.

John Webster, The Duchess of Malfi (Norton Renn.  
P1476)

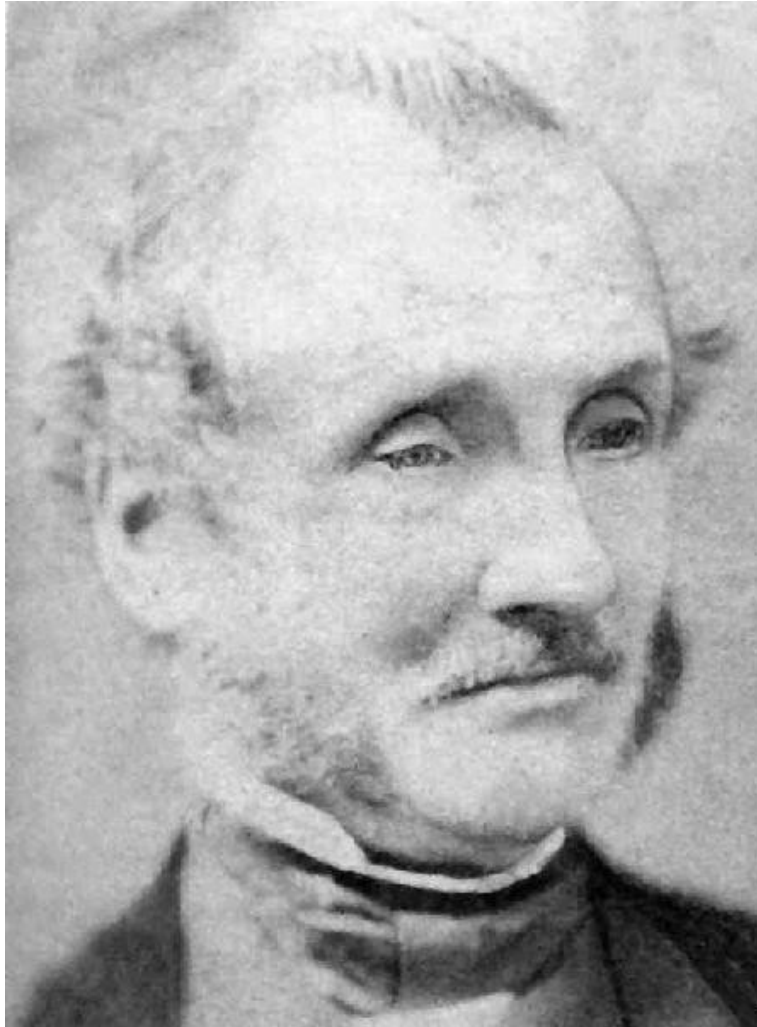


**Kate Webster.**

*From a contemporary print.*

Catherine Lawler, alias Kate Webster, as Mrs Julia Thomas.

Every Dog Has Her Day.



William Marwood, Hangman of London and Middlesex.

Unchallenged on the scaffold December 1874-September 1883.

"The jury agrees with the judge, but the judge agrees with me, for mine is a higher calling."

## **Character List**

### **The protagonist and antagonist (in no particular order)**

Kate Webster, murderess, thief, liar, loving mother

William Marwood, state hangman, gentleman executioner, man of science, loving father

### **The accomplices and families (the guilty and the innocent, in no particular order)**

Ellen Marwood, William's wife

Aldous Marwood, William's son

Daniel Webster, Kate's son

Henry Porter, her unknowing accomplice

Martin Crane, her furniture mover and loving dupe

Robert Porter, Henry's younger son

Charles Porter, Henry's elder son (ADD)

Mrs Ann Porter, wife of Henry Porter

Mrs Sarah Crease, caretaker of Daniel Webster

Benjamin Woods, friend of Marwood (ADD)

David Kuss, assistant to Marwood (ADD)

Dr Adams, examiner of the body (ADD)

Emily Grimes, neighbour

Mrs Jane Bearing, witness

### **The law (the old bill)**

Detective Gil Sequin, police detective

Assistant Detective Nimrod Jones

### **The victim (the old lady)**

Mrs Julia Thomas, victim, Kate's landlady

**The trial (the pleasure of the state)**

Sir Justice Denman, trial judge

Mr Warner Sleigh, defence

Harry B. Poland, prosecutor

Sir Hardinge Gifford, K.C., consultant

Henry Wheatley, clerk of the court

Jean Baptiste Dupris, Catholic priest

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Bit

Prologue  
The Prison Sleeps  
Monday 28 July, 1879

In the dark of a past sunken world William Marwood stands with his hand on the prison wall. He is fifty-nine years old and thinking about retirement. All around him the blind, narrow, crooked streets of London spiral away from his feet into blackness, as though Newgate were the centre of an unseen world. He looks up at old pigeons, clustered in a huddle on a rough ledge, demented and cramped as the prison herself. For a while Marwood is motionless. He lets the cold stone under his skin, waiting for a feeling of regret, of mournfulness, a sensation that will come tomorrow, he thinks. But the feeling does not come. Instead the oncoming night may prove eternal; the dawn may never come. From where will peace come? Tomorrow at nine o'clock when it is all over? Can he return home a contented man?

An open grate catches his eye with a wooden box hanging from a rough rope - the alms box - and now and then, even at this hour, a soft voice whispers "remember the prisoners, have gentleness in thy heart." He ignores the voice of the stone ledge. As a spectator he is not a hard man and yet any pain that he does not witness or feel himself he cannot understand. It is that simple. He passes below the Newgate great tower, his fingers dragging the prison wall, the cold mingling with his blood with no reaction. She is inside there, he knows, somewhere behind these stones her last hours are draining away. Tomorrow she will be no more.

From the fame of Tyburn to the pillory at Charing Cross, eastwards to Execution Dock gibbets where pirates were left to rot by the navy to Coldbath Fields and Bedlam in the north, all London is consumed by prisons. Fleet Street itself is a veritable sewer of clinks: Newgate, Ludgate, the Fleet and Bridewell then over the Thames to the Surrey prison at Horsemonger Lane to 'the gibbet on the hill' and the grey morning exposing the hulk of prison transportation ships. Close by, mutineers and murderous seaman are strung up together at Execution Dock, the crowd favourites hung in Surrey prison at Kennington common or Horsemonger Lane jail roof for the discerning paying public. But the centre is Newgate, the old matriarch of footpads and pickpockets, the home of thieves and murderers, grave-robbers, rich debtors and any criminal unfortunate thrown away for good: keep them at the centre of the city, make them part of the crowd, feed them through

the hole in the wall and march them across the courtyard to their demise. Disturbing in its brutality, the mother keeps all her children at the heart of London justice. For next to Newgate stands the Central Criminal Court or affectionately for Londoners, the bloody Old Bailey, a stone's throw from the prison if there were windows to allow such disturbances. Instead, Newgate lives in the shadow of its unseen sibling, two arms of the law never touching but always together, side by side, and in eternal league to those of the wrong side of the line.

Between them now, William Marwood searches for any soft feeling. Inside is his captive bird, Kate Webster alias Catherine Lawler, his raison d'être, his victim. Here, between righteous justice and deathly vengeance, amid six million turbulent lives of an Empire's capital, Marwood stands in the dead of night, touching the cold prison and waiting for any sign, not of escape or repentance or forgiveness - it is too late for that - but a brief emotion within his chest, a measuring of his soul. He waits, searches for his sadness or a reason to flee and never come back, but nothing articulate passes through his hand except the dead silence of a moonless Sunday night, the quietest time of the month.

Within hours Kate will walk through the prison yard past the kitchens to the outdoor scaffold, over graves of the dead, and without ceremony or celebration, will be executed in the open air, a Monday morning at nine o'clock. The prisoners will light torch-paper in their cells, flinging the rolls between the bars to unravel and burn up before hitting the ground. Fellow condemned inmates will see her, hear the words of the Common Prayer, waiting for the bell to toll. In the prison yard, only feet away, the prison chaplain will bow but not shed a tear. He will sip a sherry to steady his nerves and avert his eyes from the newly commissioned 'long drop' that will crisply break Kate's neck.

Even now, as Marwood ponders Newgate's insides and takes the air, she crouches in her cell. She is awake, unseen, forgotten, and unrepentant. Already Kate can hear tomorrow, the mourning bells of nearby St Sepulchre's church, and she laughs as only Kate can, at the trick of her imagination. But right now in the garden of good and evil, suspended between one day and the next, between one uncertain life and the uncertain hope of the next, she can hear the future; the sounds of her days ending and beginning. Her last day is no different than her first. The

cruel relief of execution, Kate believes, can only be a blessing to a life of indignity and struggle.

Marwood knows nothing of this, but as he touches the wall outside, Kate is kneeling, and she too thinks of him for a moment, of one of his hanging stories of all things. It casts a smirk on her face, despite all. She remembers that in decades gone by, and not too long ago, the condemned would dress gaily for the occasion in wedding suits or gaudy colours, hats thrown to the crowd, flowers in their buttonholes. One glorious moment of public love was theirs, a true and defiant respect for all their plights not to be diminished into ugly notoriety, or the passion of the rowdy mob. The people knew who their heroes were, that life was precarious and painful, and no one would stop them celebrating the dance of death. The images bubble in Kate's mind, now that she is beyond resignation and seeking to embrace her fate. "Marwood," she whispers, reciting the old joke. "If Pa killed Ma, who'll kill Pa? Why, Maa-wood, of course."

Again, she remembers how he told her of those Tyburn days, how the crowd always supported the dying hero's bravado. She remembers Marwood reciting how the drink and holiday atmosphere carried the victim down Holborn to the Triple Tree. The hanging was far worse, he told her, but the glory was greater, in days before executions were moved inside prison walls - out of sight. Kate smirks at the warning. But then she remembers how the condemned had their gallows speech ready and their 'Last Dying Speeches' would hit the streets and become famous. She has not written a line. The stone is cold on Kate's knees, not because she is praying but because there is no bench, it being assumed sleep will not come on the last night. Rightly so: sleep is impossible. Instead Kate remembers the previous Sunday in the chapel, when black coffins were displayed to terrify all those gathered in the condemned pew, and when her name was drawn from a hat, literally, for Queen Victoria's pleasure at her demise - in one week's time.

Now that time has passed. Kate, true to form, smiles at the thought of these childish attempts to frighten her: she is scared but only for the rope, not for the theatricals. She will embrace the performance as much as the next clown and she will die as she lived her last months in the costume of an imagined self, playing a role. Only at the last second will she step to the line as the hangman will politely require.

Outside, Marwood is passing Newgate's tiny entrance, an awful little iron door three feet or so from the ground.

He stares at it momentarily and shuffles on. Along the Old Bailey the street gaslights, newly fitted, expand and shrink his shadow as he passes under each lamp. Marwood, he tells himself, has stayed too long and must now retire. A strange mood overtakes him, and he feels at once all the sadness for Kate's plight lift away from him, and in that moment he makes the decision that she must be hung. Almost immediately a lightness returns to his step and he begins the slow walk back to Dorset Square and his lodgings on Gloucester Place.

    "As clever Tom Clinch, while the rabble was bawling,  
        Rode stately through Holborn, to die in his  
        calling;  
He stopped at the George for a bottle of sack,  
        And promised to pay for it when he came back."

To further reassure himself, he whispers how hangmen are 'closest to that thin red line between death and life,' how their perception is keenest of life's containment of death, but they too need to retreat. He glances briefly up at the spire of the Old Bailey where the stone maiden on the roof is weighing justice in her hands. At the corner his shadow disappears completely as the street lights vanish, and the mystery and the majesty of the law is condensed into his solitary shadow. His ordinary coat with tails and deep side-pockets flaps in the light wind. His usual cravat was black, but tonight he wears a low felt hat which he tips for the ladies in the market-place, and he unpeels it for the graceful lady on the spire, and once more for the comatose prison behind, all its prisoners asleep except for one.

Marwood mouths the words of a hanging ballad, only realizing towards the end how he has changed Calcraft in the first line to his own name.

    "My name it is Marwood by every one known  
        And a sad life is mine to you I now own,  
For I hang people up and I cut people down,  
        Before all the rebel of great London town.

    For my old friend Cheshire he learned me the trick,  
        And I dine in the clouds tonight with Old Nick,  
For the people on earth do use me so bad,  
        That with tears I could drown for I feel so sad."

As Marwood departs, morning is still hours away and he should get a good five hours rest. At the corner, he tosses a penny in the jar of a sleeping boy with the face of a blackened angel. He fails to notice the sores covering the child's cheeks where he lies curled like a broken puppet behind a chestnut cart in the doorway of the Maryland and Virginia Coffee House. The boy opens one eye, checking on the dawn, the hour when he needs to sweep the streets. For a brief moment he is relieved by the night. No more than eight or nine years old, the homeless crossing-sweeper closes his eyes as the hangman walks away under the lamps.