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THE MURDERESS AND THE HANGMAN

by

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Chapter 3
Richmond, A Nice Place to Live
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The fruit and vegetable vendors are unloading their carts as Kate pays for a cheap boarding house for the night and after a few hours rest, she leaves Covent Garden just before dawn. Between a cloudy sunrise and pale-sinking moon, day follows night in sleepy harmony. The theatres in nearby Drury Lane from the Theatre Royal along Bow Street are all silent. No policeman haunts the early morning streets. All the newspapers and suspicious litter of the night has gone, washed into makeshift gutters to Trafalgar Square.

Gingerly, in new clothes clean from the prison wash-room and bent on fresh employment, Kate follows the slum route to Seven Dials, past the flower Market, the Piazza. Her white petticoat and purple frock flutter about her legs, distracting her. She is not being used to ladylike clothes. Known for seedy lodging houses, she weaves up alleyways between the Turkish baths and brothels - the Great Square of Venus - and leaves central London. At the corner of Chandos Street and the Strand she pays a boy a penny to take her down to the Thames. From there she can walk alone.

At eleven o'clock, the winter sun still muffled in cloud, Kate knocks on the door of Mrs Julia Martha Thomas at No. 2 Vine Cottages, Park Road, Richmond. She has arranged the meeting but is early and Mrs Thomas is just going out to Church.

"Yes?" the older lady says, opening the door a jar. "Can I help you?"

Unknowingly, Kate stands on the brink of her future, and stares into the hall. She sees a grandfather clock lining the wall, and next to it, a small crumpled woman edging seventy, hardened skin below her ears.

Mrs Thomas peers into the daylight, cheeks sagging, hair tied up in a comical bun. Her expression is shrewd, focused on the surprise visitor, and not unfriendly but not welcoming either.

Kate looks back, surprised.

"'ello," she says, suddenly lost for words. "I've come about the job. I'm new in the city and I saw your note in the London Illustrated." She touches a hand on her hat, drawing attention to its mock finery, its yellow sash tied neatly under her chin in the new fashion of seventeenth century. Somehow the gesture works and she attempts a

smile, fearing it must be crooked, but her melancholy expression is sufficient to relax Mrs Thomas, who opens the door, then closes it. The quiet expanse of a secluded street, flowerbeds along the hedgerows, is left behind.

"Well, you better come in then. Mind the carpet."

They move into the living room. Kate looks around at the gentility. She is in a curious mood and Mrs Thomas seems stern, but something in Kate is drawn to the older woman's firmness, to its promise of direction. They stand either side of a rug displaying a giant red rose; behind Kate a newly fitted double-glazed window looks out on the lawn. An upright piano dozes in the corner of the room. All is perfect, except the white curtain is caught under the piano lid, the victim of a playful crocodile.

"You said you were in service?"

"I was, both here and in Ireland. I'm from Killane near Wexford."

"Irish," Mrs Thomas says and tuts audibly. "I once hired a Catholic girl like you from Cork. She turned out a 'bad'un' as they say - ran away with the silver plate." She gestures to the mantelpiece where a wooden case holds cheap silverware. "So I had to move her out!"

"Well, you won't need to worry with me," Kate says. "I've been in Lord Rochester's house in Dublin, and I can send references from his Farthing House. They are late in coming."

"How long have you been in the city?"

"Well, almost a year, after six months in Liverpool."

"Liverpool's no place to be."

Kate nods, uncertain how to proceed, until Mrs Thomas ignores her and strides over to the window with a surprising burst of energy. "I must be going, anyway," she says and lifts an umbrella from a stand in the corner and gestures to the street. "The gang is waiting for me." Outside a small collection of elderly women is gathered at the end of the garden. "Paradise calls - St. Barnabus - and I cannot miss another service. I've not been well recently, you see. This dreadful cold!"

"Yes, of course." Kate's eyes, filmy with staged weakness, alight on Mrs Thomas and she sees that the old woman's sternness somehow agrees with her. "I would like to work here," she says and waits.

"Well, if you can send those references in the next week, you can start right away. And if all works out next week, there won't be a problem."

"I used to lodge with the Mitchell family too in Teddington. But I left because they suffered hard times."

"Hard times?"

"Their child died, a little girl."

Mrs Thomas peers at Kate and twirls her umbrella like a walking stick to the door. "Hmm...I have a daughter...She lives in Camden Town." Mrs Thomas's face changes as though connecting the two families, and her sympathy for the non-existent Teddingtons clinches the job. "Can you provide a reference from them?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to bother them."

"No matter," says Mrs Thomas and turns at the door. "The Irish connection will do. Now follow me, young lady. I must be going. You can come back tomorrow, after four o'clock when my Rummy friends will have gone. Rummy the card game, that is! Do you play?"

"I used to, Mrs Thomas."

"Mighty fine game! And your name is?"

"Catherine, ma'am. Catherine Lawler."

"Well, tomorrow at five, good show. I can show you your room then." Together the two ladies exit the premises. "Fly ahead, fly ahead," Mrs Thomas pronounces, her hair bob still attached, and follows her new maid up the garden path. Kate nods to the three women at the gate, each pruned in the face in her own way. They smile, graciously and in open judgement and pretend to gesture to the weather. Mrs Thomas says nothing more, except to greet her friends, and Kate is left standing in the street.

"Looks like she bought new clothes," one of the women whispers, trying not to be quiet.

"And has cleaned herself somewhere..."

Kate decides not to watch but, picking up her dress in amusement, she climbs up the gentle incline of Park Road back to the High Street. She glances over the manicured gardens through the lace-curtained windows of Richmond. A face appears here or there in disapproval; immediately she turns away. But the first flush of her success is upon her. The wear and tear of the last few days, the release from the Roundhouse, and looking after Daniel, all is ebbing away! In a matter of hours she has acquired fine clothes, a school for her boy, and a job. Could this be a new start? She even has the whole day stretching ahead with nothing to do, and in a polite neighbourhood. What better thing to do than have a little drink? "Yes? Can I help?" Kate mimics her newfound self, chuckling. "Oh, hard times, you say? I've seen some hard times, dearie." She pulls away the bonnet to feel the cold air. "I bet you have!"

Over the crown of Kew Hill, Kate turns towards Richmond Bridge. Now that the light has risen the sun is

clearing away the hump of night clouds: Kate pushes her knuckles in her eyes and looks along the High Street - all is quiet on a Sunday morning. Cut off from London and its own private plot of heaven, Richmond enjoys much of the feel of a village. And prying her eyes Kate instinctively can tell the Richmond village hall and petite Norman tower churches dotting the High Street; the market pubs are closer to the bridge. Deciding on a compromise she quietly doubles back on herself sensing the finer establishments intersect. Following the bend she is not wrong and soon strays upon one of the finer tea-drinking suburban pubs, the White Conduite House, half restaurant half traveller's house.

At the door Kate takes a seat at a private round table, the bar an earshot away, though no one is around. Immediately she announces she is Mrs Jacobs of 11 Worcester Place, Kew Gardens.

"Put it on my tab, young sir." A lad of no more than twelve, the serving boy does so. "Where else do you know for scones?" Kate asks, enjoying the ridiculousness of her costume and repartee.

"Cuper's Gardens," the boy says, "does a good cuppa."

"Cup of tea," Kate corrects. "Cup of tea."

"That's right ma'am. You be wanting owt else?"

"Anything else, my man. Will I be wanting anything else?"

"That'z wot I sez." He stares at Kate dumb-looking. "You know Kew cos that's where you're from? That tea garden inside the garden of Kew Gardens."

She leans in. "How about a decent liquor place?"

"Begnigge Wells has got 'em best. You can bet on bridge with orange brandy, aniseed, citron."

"Barbadoes water?"

"They got that too."

Kate nods sagely. "Just bring me a double brandy and we'll call it a morning. And a cheap Spanish cigar too, if you would."

"A cigar."

"You heard me, lad."

An hour later, she tops it with a pint of Genuine Stunning, best ale of the South.

"To keep the cold out," the boy says, wiping the spillage on his blue apron, and reminding her for a moment of Daniel. Her eyes gain their transparent watery look and then roll back to steady.

"Yes, she muses, and to put the hell fire in." She winks at him as she leaves.

Kate smokes the cigar walking up to Richmond Bridge, knowing she's got the better of the village during church services.

"Tea, with three cups, and six slices of bread and butter, a shilling," she whispers softly, reading the signs and puffing on her cigar. Passing three workmen constructing a fence on the corner of the High Street and Pine, their wagon loafing on the grassy curb, Kate ignores the wolf-whistle, the first she has experiences in a long while, and blows the smoke over her shoulder. She cannot help but blush, men being the last thing on her mind, and cannot turn round. But the feeling of being 'half cut' on a Sunday morning in Richmond will not leave her for a while, least of all because she has to be back at 2 Vine Cottages in the morning.

Next she's tempted to go for lunch, spying the Mountaineer's Arms up ahead. A cloth sign, unfurled down the wall, displays all the treats for Sunday lunch. In a formal dining-house, she salmon n' shrimp sauce is a half-rice special, not to mention rump-steak puddings and warm pigeon-pie.

"I should do this just once," Kate says. "If I still had any ill-gotten gains, I'd eat in fine style!" Peering through the window, neck staining and her breath on the glass, she sees a communal long table dining being set up, all the silverware glinting, the maids milling round in sky blue pinafores. No one is there yet - and Kate imagines them taking their places like at Café Savoy, their faces disgusting like pigs, bottle-noses and pimpled cheeks all signs of the debauchery that passes for good living away from the grime of London.

Stumbling from the window, she heads back across Richmond Bridge. She looks down at the river and thinks of all the silver in Mrs Thomas's house. One day she will partake of a seat at the Cafe Royal, the Criterion Restaurant, or the Pond Gaiety Restaurant, and the Mountaineer's Arms has only whetted her appetite. Next to the Gaiety Theatre in the Strand, the Pond Gaiety is the one to aspire to. Kate will park her Hansom cabs in the entrance, men in top hats will escort her to the dining hall where Jamaica rum and Madeira port will be mixed as a light welcome for her, the entrée dishes will sizzle in the pan placed before her, still on fire, and the whole circular ceiling will dazzle with ostentatious design, stained glass windows mixing - somewhat irreligiously - with carnivorous hunting scenes dripping blood and beauty from the walls.

The reverie must end. Water bubbling in her mind, Kate stares at the Thames, the face of Mrs Thomas her employer staring formally back at her in devout reproach. A single diamond jewel sparkles from Mrs Thomas's arm and Kate tries to recall if she definitely saw it there.

Eventually she is working up Kennington Lane and over Vauxhall Bridge. Needing to rest she buys a baked potato from a street stall and spies Green Park where she can finally lie down. Lowering her expectations, she plods along, her clothes more rumpled, her lemon bonnet dusty. She dreams of Gatti's Hole at Charing Cross because they play music. She knows it is an all-male old-fashioned chop-house, but something about the smell every time she passes drives her to unwarranted acts; for she is tired now and another day trudging the city streets has left her 'ready for the knackers' yard.' Weaving down where the Chelsea Road becomes the King's Road and eventually the Queen's Road, she round the Palace Garden stables, and slumps into Green Park, barely making it to the base of Constitution Hill.

Kate takes to a bench and instead of politely resting, she drags herself behind a bush and lies down full-length hoping the Bow Street runners will take pity on her, if they find her. Another night in the Roundhouse would be unbearable. She sits very still, and can't help but laugh. Already she knows what has to be done - that old woman has to go. The revelation washes over her in little alcoholic waves of joy.

Eureka! She giggles, and lays the yellow sash from her hat neatly on the ground beside her. "Can't damage that!" she whispers. "Got to be good for a disguise!"

The last word son her lips are "Daniel" before she falls into a deep day-time sleep, only waking when it is darker and colder still.