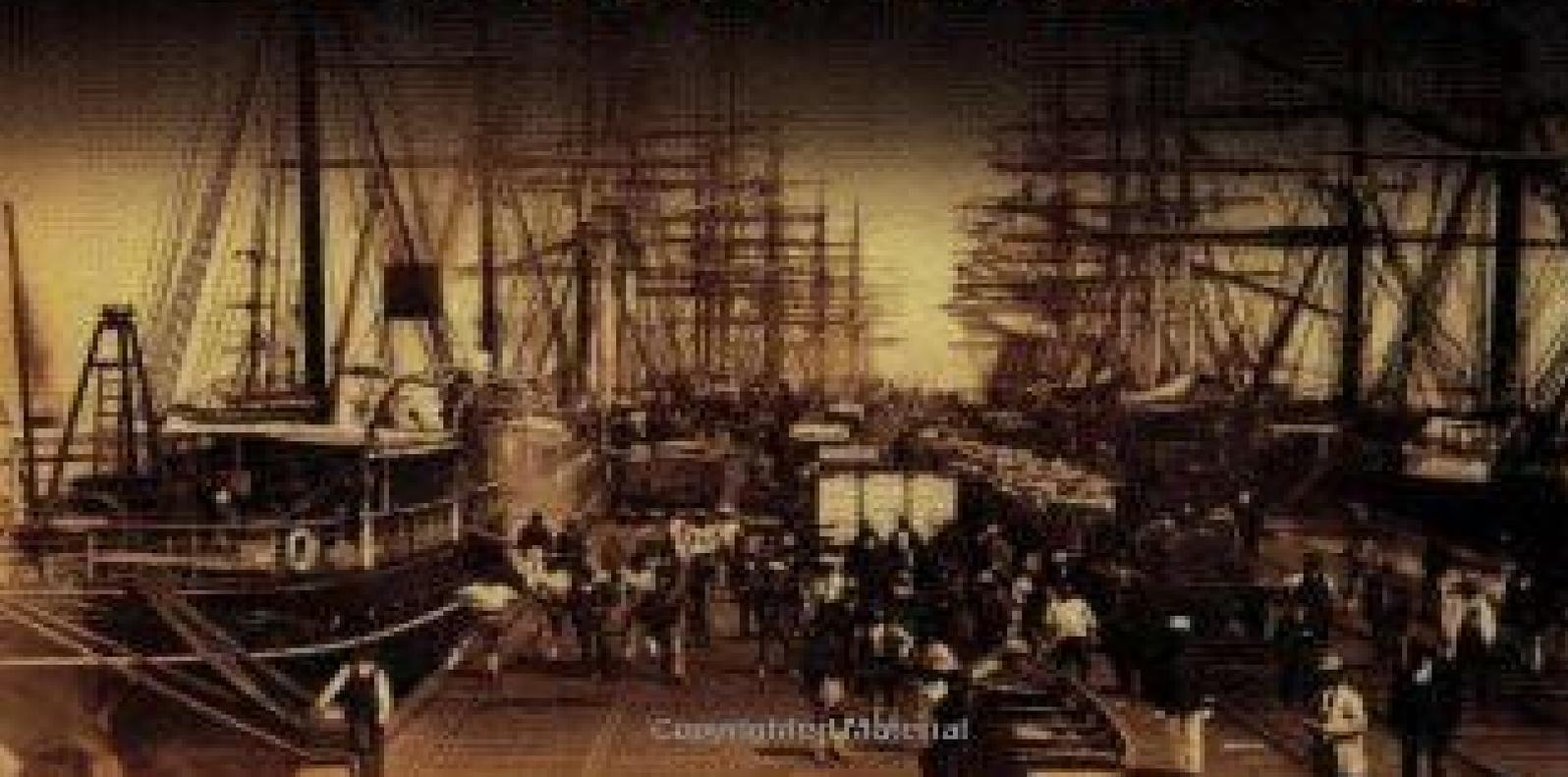




# Bryce Courtenay

THE POTATO FACTORY





# Bryce Courtenay - The Potato Factory

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Preface

Some people are bound to argue that this book is the truth thinly disguised as fiction and others will say I got it quite wrong. Both sides may well be correct.

That Okey Solomon existed and was perhaps the most notorious English criminal of his day is not in dispute, and wherever possible I have observed the chronology of his life and that of his wife Hannah, and their children. That Charles Dickens based the character Fagin in his novel *Oliver Twist* on Okey Solomon is a romantic notion which I much prefer to believe. But the moment I allow him and all the characters in this book to speak for themselves I have created a fiction of the fact of the historical existence. By every definition this is therefore a work of fiction.

In reading it I ask you to take into account the time in which my story occurs, the first half of the nineteenth century. In these more enlightened times this book may be regarded as anti-Semitic; in the terms of the times in which it is written, it is an accurate account of the prevailing attitudes to the Jews of England.

These were dark times, bleak times, hard times, times where a poor man's life was regarded as less valuable than that of a pig, a poor Jew's far less valuable even than that. That Okey Solomon's life could have happened as it did in fact, allows my fiction to exploit the ability of the human spirit to transcend the vile tyranny of which humankind has proved so consistently capable. In these terms Okey Solomon was a real-life hero and my fiction cannot possibly do him justice.

In history there are no solitary dreams; one dreamer breathes life into the next.

Sebastiao Salgado

Be This a Warning!

This little work is held up as a warning beacon to keep the traveller from the sands of a poisonous desert, or from splitting upon the rocks of infamy.

It is necessary in such a case to point out 'hells' and brothels, girls and bawds, and rogues, by name and situation, not as a direction for youth to steer towards them, but that he may take the contrary course - for no reasonable man would enter a whirlpool, when he could pass by it on the smooth surface of the reaches of a tranquil river crossing.

The life of Ikey Solomon is filled with iniquitous adventure; he has acted with the rope round his neck for twenty years, but by his cunning always avoided being drawn up to the beam, where he is likely to end his infamous career.

We are duty bound to hold him up as a depraved villain, whose conduct must disgust, and whose miseries, with all his wealth, will show how preferable a life of honesty and poverty is to a guilty conscience, and treasure gained by blood and rapine.

From Ikey Solomon, Swindler, Forger, Fencer & Brothel Keeper, 1829

Book One : London

# **Bryce Courtenay - The Potato Factory**

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# Chapter One

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Ikey Solomon was so entirely a Londoner that he was a human part of the great metropolis, jigsawed brick that fitted into no other place. He was mixed into that mouldy mortar, an ingredient of the slime and smutch of its rat-infested dockside hovels and verminous netherkens. He was a part of its smogged countenance and the dark, cold mannerisms of the ancient city itself. He was contained within the clinging mud and the evil-smelling putrilage. Ikey was as natural a part of the chaffering, quarrelling humanity who lived in the rookeries among the slaughterhouses, cesspools and tanneries as anyone ever born in the square mile known to be the heartbeat of London Town.

Ikey was completely insensitive to his surroundings, his nose not affronted by the miasma which hung like a thin, dirty cloud at the level of the rooftops. This effluvian smog rose from the open sewers, known as the Venice of drains, which carried a thick soup of human excrement into the Thames. It mixed with the fumes produced by the fat-boilers, fell-mongers, glue-renderers, trip-scrapers and dog-skinners, to mention but a few of the stench-makers, to make London's atmosphere the foulest-smelling place for the congregation of humans on earth.

The burial ground in Clare Market was full to the point where gravediggers would be up to the knees in rotting flesh as they crammed more bodies into graves. Corpses piled on top of each other often broke through the ground emitting noxious gases, so that the stench of rotting bodies was always present in nearby Drury Lane.

Since infancy Ikey had grown accustomed to the bloated effluence of the river and the fetid air that pervaded St Giles, Whitechapel, Shoreditch, Spitalfields and the surrounding rookeries. His very nature was fired, hammered and hardened within this hell which was the part of London he called home.

Ikey Solomon was the worst kind of villain, though in respectable company and in the magistrates' courts and the assizes he passed himself off as a small-time jeweller, a maker of wedding rings and paste and garnet brooches for what was at that time described as the respectable poor. But the poor, in those areas of misery after Waterloo, had trouble enough scraping together the means to bring a plate of boiled potatoes or toasted herrings to the table. If Ikey had depended for his livelihood on their desire for knick-knackery, his family would have been poorly served indeed. In reality he was a fence, a most notorious receiver of stolen goods, one known to every skilled thief and member of the dangerous classes in London. In Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham your pickpockets, footpads, snakesmen and the like referred to him in awed and reverent tones as the Prince of Fences.

Ikey Solomon was not a man to love, there was too much the natural cockroach about him, a creature to be found only in the dark and dirty corners of life. It might be said that Ikey's mistress loved him, though she, herself, may have found this conclusion difficult to formulate, love being a word not easily associated with Ikey. Mary wasn't Ikey's wife, nor yet his mistress, perhaps something in between, an attachment for which there is not yet a suitable name.

The doubtful honour of being Ikey's wife was reserved for Hannah, a woman of a most terrible disposition who did little to conceal her dislike for her husband. Such acrimonious sentiments as were commonly expressed by Hannah were usually forbidden to a woman, who was expected to accept with a high degree of stoicism her husband's peregrinations in life. A woman, after all, had no rights to censure or pout at the results of her partner's misfortunes. Nor decry his errors in judgment or his lack of moral rectitude but share the good, silently accept the bad and hope always for the best, which is the female's natural lot in life, though if this was ever made plain to Hannah, it had not sunk in too well.

Moreover, setting aside for a moment what might be considered formal filial duty, Hannah had a good case against Ikey. Their children also were on her side, both puzzled and somewhat ashamed of the curious man they took to be their father.

If Ikey understood the duties of a father he chose never to exercise them. To his children during the hours of daylight he was a dark, huddled, sleeping bundle wrapped in a large, extremely dirty coat from which protruded at one end strands of matted grey hair surrounding a mottled bald dome. Looking downwards, first there was a thick hedge of unkempt eyebrow and then a nose too long for the thin face from which it grew. Still further downwards in the area of the chin grew an untidy tangle of salt and pepper beard, thick in some parts and in others wispy, all of it most uneven and ratty in appearance.

From the other end of the greasy coat stuck a pair of long, narrow, yellow boots, their sharp snouts concerted inwards and pointed upwards. These boots were never seen to leave his feet and the curious eyes of his children their dented snouts seemed to act as sniffing devices. With the first whiff of danger they would jerk Ikey from the horizontal into a wide-awake seated position, the snouted ends testing the air like truffle pigs, quickly establishing the direction from whence the danger came. Whereupon, Ikey's boots would become in appearance two yellow cockroaches, plant themselves firmly on the ground, then scuttle him away into some dark, safe corner.

Ikey was also a series of daylight noises to his children. A cumulation of slack-jawed snoring and wet spittle sounds issued constantly from a mouth clustered with large yellow and black teeth. Several appeared to be broken or missing, worn down by the gnashing and grinding of a torturous sleep which came to an end precisely at six thirty of the clock in the evening.

At night Ikey's children, hugging each other for moral support, would watch wide-eyed from dark corners as he shuffled about the house, sniffing, snorting and whimpering as though expecting somehow to find it changed for the worse during his sleep. If Ikey should come across a clutch of children he would halt and stare momentarily as though curious to who they might be.

'Good!' he'd snort at them and shuffle away still sniffing and whimpering as he carried on with his inspection of the premises.

At seven of the clock precisely, the Irish woman who looked after the children in Hannah's absence would place in front of him a mutton and potato stew with a thick wedge of batter pudding. He'd eat alone in the skullery, his only implement a long, sharp pointed knife with which he'd stab a potato or a fatty piece of mutton and feed it into his mouth. Then, when the solid contents of the bowl were disposed of, he used the batter pudding to soak up the broth, polishing the bowl clean with the greasy crust. Ikey's evening meal never varied. Neither beef nor fowl ever replaced the greasy mutton and he would complete his repast with a bowl of curds swallowed in one long continuous gulp which made his Adam's apple bounce in an alarming fashion. Milk with meat was not kosher and Ikey, who had a regular seat in the Duke's Place synagogue, was a good Jew in all but this respect. With his hands, first the left and then the right, he'd wipe the remains of the frothy curd from his lips then rub both greasy palms down either side of his coat, this action bringing scant improvement to either. At this point the children listening at the door would strain their ears for the various oleaginous noises coming from his stomach. They'd hold their breath for the magnificence of the burp they knew must surely follow and the horrendous fart which would cap it, a single explosion which signalled the end of Ikey's repast.

His evening meal over, Ikey picked his teeth with a long, dirty fingernail. He would then take up Hannah's ledger and repair to his study. Before he unlocked the door he would pause and look furtively about him, then enter and immediately lock it, restoring the brass key to somewhere within

the interior of his overcoat.

Ikey would light the two oil lamps in his study to reveal a smallish room thick with accumulated dust except within the precinct of his writing desk. This he kept pristine, the quill and blacking pen neatly lined up, a tablet of evenly stacked butcher's paper to the right.

Ikey would then take a cheap imitation hunter from the interior of his coat and lay the water together with Hannah's ledger upon the desk. He then removed his coat and waistcoat, leaving him standing in his dirty woollen undershirt. The coat and waistcoat he hung upon the coat-stand, one pocket of which already contained his flat-topped broad-brimmed hat. Then moving to one corner of the room, he sank to his knees and, in turn, pushed four knot-holes contained in the floorboards. They immediately sprang up an inch or so at one end, whereupon Ikey carefully removed the nails from the holes. He lifted the floorboards to reveal a small dry cellar no deeper than four feet and filled with ledgers. Ikey removed three and carefully clicked the sprung floorboards back into place, positioning the nails in the holes in which they belonged. He then crossed to his desk, placed the ledgers down, seated himself on the high stool and lit the lamp which hung

directly above his head. Seated quiet as a mouse, he worked until midnight.

Precisely ten minutes later, the time it took to tidy his desk, return the ledgers to the cavity beneath the floorboards, get into his coat, fix his hat upon his head, douse the lamps, lock the door to the study, take Hannah's ledger back to the pantry and place it in the sack containing potatoes and to leave the house, he slid furtively from a half-closed front door into the passing night.

Ikey wore his great coat buttoned tightly with the collar pulled high so that it wrapped around his ears. He pulled his hat down low across his brow and hardly any part of him was visible as he moved along, the hem of his thick woollen coat inches from the scuffed and dented caps of his scuttling yellow boots.

The irony was that Ikey's entire identity was revealed in his very self-concealment - his wrapping and scuttling, chin tucked in, head turned around at every half a dozen steps, dark eyes darting, though seen through a brass letterbox slot; the crab-like sideways movement, stopping, sniffing, arm deep into the pockets of his great coat, instinctively seeking for a wall to sidle against, so that the shoulders of the coat were worn with scuffing against brick and rough stone.

These mannerisms clearly identified him to the street urchins and general low-life who used their rapacious eyes for observing the comings and goings of everyone they might prey upon. If Ikey had completely disrobed and walked, bold as a butcher's boy, in broad daylight, whistling among the stalls in the Whitechapel markets, this would have been a more complete disguise.

Perhaps the broad daylight aspect of such a disguise would have been the most effective part of it, for light in any form was repugnant to Ikey who, like Hannah, was nocturnal. Both were involved in duties best completed well after sunset, and before sunrise.

Ikey would be out and about after midnight, sniffing for business in the thieves' kitchen, netherkens and chop houses in the surrounding rookeries, while Hannah was the mistress of several bawdy houses which traded best as the night wore on.

Hannah had been born a beautiful child and lost none of her fine looks as she grew into a young woman, but then the pox had struck. Unable to restrain herself she had scratched at the scabs until the blood ran, leaving her pretty face and pubescent breasts badly and permanently pocked.

From childhood Hannah had imagined herself away from the hell of Whitechapel and occupying a small residence in Chelsea. She would be a courtesan, exquisitely perfumed and coiffured, dressed in fashionable gowns of shot silk. She would wear diamonds from Amsterdam and pearls from the South Seas which, naturally, were the grateful gifts of the young gentlemen officers of the Guards, the Blue

and no other, or of the older, though equally handsome, titled members of the Tattersall Club. She would be seen at the opera and the theatre and remarked upon for her extraordinary beauty.

Wherever Hannah went young swells and flash-men on the randy would evoke her name as one might a princess, knowing her to be beyond the reach of their impecunious pockets, dreaming of a windfall which might cause such unfortunate circumstances to be overturned.

Instead the dreadful scars had caused her to become a barmaid at the Blue Anchor in Petticoat Lane. Here her pretty figure and large blue eyes could have earned her a handsome enough living as a part-time prostitute, but the idea was repugnant to her. She was not prepared to deny her previous expectations to work on her back as a common whore.

Hannah's bitterness had left her moody and recalcitrant and the young men who paid her attention soon dwindled. Her tongue was too acerbic and her expectations too high for their aspirations and resources. Quite early in her pock-marked life she had conceived of the idea of owning a high-class brothel. She saw this as her only chance of resurrecting the original dream to associate with the better classes in dress and mannerisms, if not in respectability.

So she cast her eyes about for a likely patron. Perhaps an older man easily pleased with her generous hips and big breasts whose needs, after his nightly libation, were seldom onerous, satisfied after a half-dozen grunts and jerks whereupon he would fall back exhausted onto his duckdown pillow to snore and snort like the fat pig he undoubtedly was.

When Ikey, who at the age of twenty-one was already coming on as a notorious magsman and was thought not without spare silver jiggling in his pockets, came along, his very repulsiveness made him attractive to her. True, he was not elderly nor yet rich, but young, clever and careful, his dark eyes always darting. Appearing suddenly at the door of the Blue Anchor, he scanned the patrons, his eyes sucking in the human contents of the room before he entered. Hannah could sense that he was greedy, secretive, a coward and moreover he made no advances of a sexual nature during his pathetic attempt at courtship. What she had expected to find in an older man she now found in Ikey. Ikey would be her ticket to glory, the means by which she would achieve the remnants of her earlier ambition.

They were married in London in 1807 in the Great Synagogue at Duke's Place with all the trappings and regalia of the Jewish faith. It was a bitterly cold January morning, but it was well known that a morning ceremony was less costly and Hannah's father, a coachmaster, was not inclined to waste a farthing even on his family. If, by a little thought and negotiation, a small extra sum could be saved for ratting, the sport on which he chose to gamble most of his earnings, so much the better.

Hannah and Ikey were a well-suited couple in some respects and they shared a thousand crimes and ten thousand ill-gotten gains in their subsequent life together. As a consequence they became very wealthy, though Hannah had not achieved her ambition to mix with the male members of the best of society and be seen in the gilded boxes of the opera and theatre. Instead her bawdy houses were frequented by lascars and Chinese and black seamen from North Africa, the Indies and the Cape of Good Hope, and of course all the scum from the English dangerous classes. Panders, crimps, bullies, petty touts, bimbos, perverts, sharpers, catamites, sodomites and unspecified riff-raff, as well as the famine Irish with their emaciated looks and long thick swollen dicks. They were more in need of a feed than a broken-down tart, robbing their families of what little they had to boast of fornication with a poxy English whore.

Ikey counted himself fortunate to have found a wife as avaricious and morally corrupt as himself yet one who could play the prim and proper lady when called upon to do so. Upon their marriage Hannah had adopted the demeanour in public of a woman of the highest moral rectitude with the strait-laced, scrubbed and honest appearance of a Methodist preacher's wife. This was only when she

was in the presence of her betters and as practice for a time to come when, she told herself, she would run the most exclusive brothel in London Town.

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Ikey's success as a fence had precluded such an establishment, designed, as it would be, to cater for the amorous needs of the better classes. It would be too public and draw too much attention. Hannah had reluctantly and temporarily put her ambitions aside.

Instead, by working at the lowest end of the sex market, she often proved to be a useful adjunct to Ikey's fencing business.

This subjugation to her husband's needs did not come about from loyalty to him, but rather from simple greed. Ikey had been successful beyond her wildest expectations. Hannah began to see how she might one day escape to America or Australia, where she could set up as a woman of means and attain a position in society befitting her role as a wealthy widow with two beautiful daughters and four handsome sons, all eligible to be married into the best local families. It had always been quite clear in Hannah's mind that Ikey would not be a witness to her eventual triumph over the ugly scars which had so cruelly spoiled her face and with it, her fortune.

In the intervening period, Hannah felt that she had sound control of her husband. Her sharp and poisonous tongue kept him defensive and it was as much in her natural demeanour to act the bully as it was for Ikey to be a coward. She prodded him with insults and stung him with rude remarks as to his appearance. Ikey was constantly shamed in her presence. He knew he possessed no useful outside disguise to fool his fellow man and he greatly admired this propensity in her, who added further to his infatuation by giving him six children and proving his miserable, worthless and reluctant sex partner accountable.

Moreover, Hannah had gratified him still further, for none of his children had inherited an onerous part of his physiognomy and all took their looks strongly from her.

She claimed that Ikey's puerile seed had been overwhelmed by her own splendid fecundity and, he had no confident reason to doubt that this was true, he was grateful that she brought an end to his line of unfortunate looks. Hannah, who so clearly held Ikey in her thrall, had no cause whatsoever to suspect him capable of dalliance with another.

The thought of a Mary or any other such female coming into Ikey's life was beyond even Hannah's considerable imagination or lack of trust in her husband.

# **Bryce Courtenay - The Potato Factory**

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## Chapter Two

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Temper and charm, it was these two contradictions in Mary's personality which were the cause of her constant problems in her life. She showed the world a disarming and lovely smile until crossed. Then she could become a spitting tiger with anger enough to conquer any fear she might have or regard for her own prudent behaviour. In a servant girl, where mildness of manner and meek acceptance were the characteristics of a good domestic, Mary's often fiery disposition and sense of injustice were ill suited. However, without her temper - the pepper and vinegar in her soul - it is unlikely that she would have captured Ikey's unprepossessing heart.

Mary was the child of a silkweaver mother and a sometimes employed Dutch shipping clerk. She grew up in Spitalfields in pious poverty brought about by the decline in the silk and shipping trades in the years following Waterloo. Mary's consumptive mother was dying a slow death from overwork. Her despairing and defeated father sought solace in too frequent attention to the bottle. At the tender age of five Mary had learned to hawk her mother's meagre wares in nearby Rosemary Lane and to defend them from stock buzzers and the like. She quickly learned that a child faced with danger who screams, kicks, bites and scratches survives better than one given over to tears, though it should be noted that she was of a naturally sunny disposition and her temper was spent as quickly as it arrived.

Mary was also the possessor of a most curious gift. Although she could take to the task of reading and writing no better than a ten-year-old from the more tutored classes, she could calculate numbers and work columns of figures with a most

astonishing rapidity and accuracy well beyond the ability of the most skilled bookkeeping clerk.

This ability had come about in a curious manner. Her father, Johannes Klerk, a name he amended simply to John Klerk when he'd come to England, had wanted Mary to be a boy and instead of learning the art of silkweaving, as would have been the expected thing for a girl child to do, he had taught her the ways of figuring on an abacus.

He learned this skill as a young man when he'd spent time as a shipping agent's clerk in the Dutch East Indies.

He had first come across the rapid clack-clack-clacking of beads sliding on elegant slender wire runners in Batavia. To his mortification, the framed contraption being used by the Chinese clerks in the spice warehouses soon proved superior in making calculations to his most ardent application by means of quill and blacking. Johannes Klerk soon learned that he could never hope to defeat the speed of their heathen calculations and so he determined to learn for himself the ancient art of the Chinese abacus. This curious skill, never developed to a very high aptitude in John Klerk, together with a few elementary lessons in reading and writing, was his sole inheritance to his daughter.

As an infant, the bright red and black beads had enchanted Mary and by the age of six she had grasped the true purpose of the colourful grid of wooden counters. By ten she had developed a propensity for calculation that left the shipping clerks at her father's sometime places of employment slack-jawed at her proficiency with numbers. Alas, it was a skill which her family's poverty seldom required. But this did not discourage Mary, who practised until her fingers flew in a blur and her mind raced ahead of the brilliant lacquered beads. Despite her father's attempts to obtain a position for her as an apprentice clerk in one of the merchant warehouses on the docks, no such establishment would countenance a child who played with heathen beads. Added to this indignity, God had clearly indicated in his holy scriptures that those of her sex were not possessed of brain sufficient to work with numbers, and her ability to do so just as clearly indicated a madness within her.

When Mary was eleven, she was entered into domestic service by her father, her consumptive

mother having died two years previously. John Klerk passed away not long after he'd secured employment for his daughter; he was a victim of a minor cholera epidemic which struck in the East India Docks.

Mary found herself quite alone in the world as a junior scullery maid in a large house where she was to begin what became a career, the outcome of which was determined more often by her fiery disposition than her maidenly demeanour.

Mary was popular among the below-stairs servants, well liked for her cheery disposition and boundless intelligence, but her quick temper at some injustice shown to those unable to come to their own defence got her into constant hot water. She would inevitably alienate the cook or under-butler or coachman, those most terrible senior snobs in most households, who would thereafter wait for an opportunity to bring her undone. As a consequence Mary's career as a domestic servant was always somewhat tenuous.

At fifteen Mary was promoted above stairs, where she was a bedroom maid who would sometimes assist as lady's maid to her mistress. Her lively intelligence made her popular with her mistress, who felt she showed great promise as a future lady's maid.

That is, until an incident occurred with a lady of grand title from Dorset, a weekend guest to the London house of her mistress to whom Mary was assigned as lady's maid. Mary was most surprised when the very large duchess took her by the wrist after she had delivered her breakfast tray to her bed. 'Come into bed with me, m'dear. You will be well rewarded, now there's a dear.

Come, my little cherub, and I promise you will learn one or two useful little things in the process!'

Whereupon the duchess, visibly panting with excitement, had pulled Mary off her feet so that she fell onto the bed across her large bosom. 'Oh I do hope you are a virgin, a nice little virgin for mummy!' the duchess exclaimed, planting several kisses on top of Mary's head. Mary, a product of the Spitalfields rookery, wasn't easily given over to panic.

She simply attempted to pull away from the fat duchess. Whereupon the huge woman, thinking this most coquettish, locked her arms about her and smothered her in further wet kisses. At this point Mary lost her temper. 'Lemme go, you old cow!' she gasped, still not taken to panicking at the mixture of sweet-smelling rouge and foul, dyspeptic breath which assailed her senses.

The duchess, much larger and stronger than the young servant girl, clasped her tighter so that Mary found her face smothered in heaving breasts and thought she might at any moment suffocate. She was no match for the strength of the duchess even though she fought like a tiger to break free.

'Such a silver tongue! Oh, you are a fiery little maidikins! A plump little partridge and all of that for mummy!'

With one huge arm the duchess continued to pin Mary down and with the other attempted to remove her bodice.

'Come now, darling,' she panted, 'be nice to mummikins!' Mary, pushing away with her arm, momentarily managed to get her head free from the giant canyon of heaving flesh.

'You fat bitch!' she yelled. 'You keep your soddin' 'ands off me!'

It was to this last remark that her mistress, hearing the commotion, had entered the room. As a consequence, Mary lost her job, though her mistress was careful to furnish her with a good reference. It was well known in all the better houses that the duchess preferred her own sex to the wizened Duke of Dorset. She had, after all, come from poor stock, an ex-Drury Lane actress who had married the elderly and heirless duke and given him two sons in an amazingly short time, whereupon she had converted her stylish figure and good looks into lard and her taste from male to her own sex, with

decided preference for plump young servant girls.

~~In those late-Georgian times there remained in some London households a little of an earlier~~ tolerance for the sexual proclivities, preferments and foibles of the nobility, and Mary's mistress was not as scandalised over the incident as might have been the case a little further into the century when the young Victoria ascended to the throne.

Her parting words to Mary had proved most instructive to the young maidservant.

'You are a good worker, Mary, and quite a bright little creature, though you really must learn to respect the wishes of your betters and to control your peppery tongue.

Have you not been instructed in your childhood in the manners required of your kind?

Were you not taught by Mr Bothwaite the butler by heart the verse of the noble Dr Watts when you came into our employment?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'And what does it say? Repeat it, if you please!'

Mary scratched around in her mind for the words to the catechism which every young domestic was expected to know upon commencement of employment in a big house. In a voice barely above a whisper she now recited the words to the verse:

Though I am but poor and mean,

I will move the rich to love me.

If I'm modest, neat and clean,

And submit when they reprove me.

'There you are, so very neatly put in a single verse by the great hymnist, you would do well to remember it in the future.'

Whereupon Mary's mistress gave her a not unkindly smile.

'Now you will not mention this unfortunate incident at your next position, will you? I have given you an excellent reference,' she paused, 'though it can always be withdrawn if it comes to my ears that there has been some idle tittle-tattle below stairs.'

She placed her hand on Mary's arm. 'You do understand what I'm saying, don't you, my dear?'

Mary understood perfectly well. From the incident with the duchess she had derived several lessons; the first being not to resist the advances made to her, but instead to profit from them. The next, that a scandal, should she be caught with a member of the family or guest, gave her power to negotiate and so to leave her place of employment with her reputation intact.

Mary also understood the different standards which prevailed for promiscuous behaviour below stairs. Similar comportment involving a male member of the household staff would leave her without references, on the street, without the least prospect of obtaining a job in any respectable London house.

Mary even understood that she could learn to keep her big mouth shut. Though in this last endeavour she was never to prove very successful and she would privately, and to the secret delight of the junior maids below stairs, declare the verse by the great Dr Watts to be a load of utter shit.

Before her ultimate undoing she had served in two further households. In the first, the master of the house had left her several gold sovereigns richer, and in the second she had been promoted to the position of abigail, that is, lady's maid, and the youngest son in the family had been inducted by her into the delights of Aphrodite in return for lessons in reading and writing.

When two years later this scion of the family went up to Oxford, Mary was promptly, though discreetly, dismissed, again with an excellent reference and, as a result of her lover's tuition, a smattering of knowledge of Latin and a facility at writing which was contained in a good copperplate hand.

studiously learned from a copybook he had bought for her. On return from the Michaelmas term his boy lover was said to have wept openly at the discovery that his dearest mumsy was now attended by a flaccid and cheerless personal maid in her late forties.

Mary's next billet was to prove her final undoing. Appointed as upstairs maid she soon found herself at odds with the family nanny, a middle-aged lady of imperious manner known as Nanny Smith. Well established in the family, the old woman exercised considerable power over all the other servants. She soon took a dislike to the new young maid, who seemed much too forward and confident around the male servants in the house and was not in the least afraid to speak before she was spoken to.

For her part Mary accepted Nanny Smith's carping instructions and held her tongue. But one day the old girl accused her of poisoning her cat, an aged tabby named Waterloo Smith who coughed up fur balls on the Persian rugs and stumbled about with a constant wheeze and permanently dripping nose. Mary had made no attempt to conceal her dislike for this creature, who returned the compliments by arching its back and hissing at her whenever they met along a corridor or in one of the many upstairs rooms.

'You ought to be dead and buried, you miserable moggy!' Mary would hiss back. Her abhorrence for Nanny Smith's cat was soon the joke of the below stairs staff and no doubt her dislike was soon communicated to Waterloo Smith's ill-tempered owner.

Then one morning Waterloo Smith went missing. Nanny Smith had placed him as usual on the broad upstairs window ledge to catch the morning sun and upon her return an hour later he was nowhere to be seen.

Mary, together with the second upstairs maid, was made to search every cupboard, nook and cranny and under each bed and, in the unlikely event that the disabled creature had somehow managed to negotiate the stairs, each of the four levels of the downstairs area of the house.

Bishop, the butler, had ordered the footman, the stable boy and Old Jacob the gardener to inspect the lavender bushes which grew forty feet below the window ledge where Waterloo Smith had been sunning himself. When this yielded nothing the speculation that foul play was involved started to grow. While nothing was said, Mary's well-known dislike for the cat made her the prime suspect. By evening it became apparent that Waterloo Smith had disappeared quite into thin air, and his distraught owner retired to her bedroom, where her unconstrained weeping could be heard by all who worked above stairs.

Mary was given the task of taking a supper tray to the old lady and upon knocking on Nanny Smith's door the weeping from the other side immediately increased in volume.

'Come in,' the old woman's tremulous voice cried.

'Cook 'as made you a nice bit 'o tea and 'opes you feels better,' Mary said, placing the tray down beside Nanny Smith, who lay on the bed with a silk scarf covering her head.

At the sound of Mary's voice Nanny Smith sat bolt upright, the scarf falling to the floor. 'You did it, didn't you! You killed him!' she screamed, pointing a trembling finger at Mary.

Mary's jaw dropped in astonishment at this pronouncement and as she bent to retrieve the scarf the old woman continued, 'You horrid, horrid girl, pushed my pussy! I shall see that you are dismissed at once!'

Mary should have immediately panicked at Nanny Smith's words, for this time she was in no position to negotiate. The old cow's word against her own left her in no doubt as to who would prevail. Then Nanny Smith snatched the scarf from Mary's hands in such a rude manner that Mary lost her temper and a deep flush overtook her face. 'I never laid a finger on your bloody cat! Though I must say

it's good riddance to bad rubbish, if you ask me, with 'im hiss'n' and wheezin' and doin' 'is mess a over the place! I 'ope 'e broke 'is bloody neck!' The offending words were barely out before Mary regretted them.

The following morning, in the manner to which his breed had been trained for countless generations, Samuel the family spaniel politely presented Waterloo Smith, stiff as a board, to Mr Hodge the cook at the kitchen door.

Waterloo Smith's fur was matted and covered in fresh dirt, suggesting that Samuel, finding the dead cat in the lavender bushes, had contrived a hasty burial in some remoter part of the kitchen garden, but that later his conscience got the better of him and he'd repented by laying the dead cat at the feet of the cook.

Later at the inquest held in the library, Mr Bishop, seeking to console Nanny Smith, opened the proceedings by suggesting that the unfortunate creature might have died from natural causes - a fit, convulsions or similar which had by natural movement catapulted Waterloo Smith from the window ledge? However, the dead cat's distraught owner, red-eyed from weeping, wouldn't countenance the suggestion and declared flatly that her darling had been brutally murdered.

Nanny Smith glared meaningfully at Mary, who had been summoned to the library together with the other upstairs servants. 'We all know who the murderer is, don't we?' she sniffed and then buried her head in her hands and wept copiously.

Turning to Mary, Mr Bishop enquired, 'Mary, the room in which Waterloo Smith was last seen is your responsibility to clean. Did you see the cat on the window ledge?' 'I saw 'im, Mr Bishop! But I swear to Gawd I never laid a finger on 'im! I swear it on me dead mother's grave!'

With no further evidence to go on, Mr Bishop terminated the proceedings and Waterloo Smith's murderer, if such a person existed, was never apprehended. In fact, Mr Bishop had been correct in the first place; Waterloo Smith had suffered a violent fit followed by a stroke, the contractions of which had thrown him from the sun-bathed window sill to a merciful death in the lavender bushes four storeys below.

However, Nanny Smith was not to be thwarted and she caused such a disturbance with the master and mistress of the house that the butler was summoned and Mary, despite her protestations of innocence and Mr Bishop himself believing her not guilty, was stripped of her starched pinny and mopped cap and banished below stairs to the laundry.

The laundry was the most onerous task among the skilled domestic duties and therefore the most humble and disliked. But Mary, who had never been afraid of work, discovered that if she worked hard she had time for reading and for practising her handwriting. Besides, the laundry was the warmest place in the big cold house and, like most children from the rookeries, she suffered greatly from chilblains.

Mary remained in the laundry for three years, even taking pride in her work, in starching and ironing, removing stains by bleaching with the juice of lemons and in mending, so that she became useful, though not excellent, seamstress. By this time her reading and writing skills were much enhanced and she had graduated from the penny papers that pandered to the taste of the lower class for bloodthirsty plots and overblown romances, to serious literature. Mr Bishop, feeling guilty for having politely complied with her demotion to the laundry without positive proof that she had pushed the cat from the window sill, negotiated for Mary to use the master's library. The master had agreed to this, providing the books were always taken from the shelves in his presence and after he had closely inspected the state of her hands.

It was in books that Mary discovered a world beyond any of her possible imaginings - Defoe

Robinson Crusoe and Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels which she especially liked and read many times, quoting often from it to Mr Bishop; Thackeray, Macaulay, an excellent English translation of Cervantes' wondrously mad Don Quixote, Jane Austen and Fanny Burney. All these and a host of others she devoured with a great thirst for knowledge.

While reading became her abiding passion, Mary did not connect the lives of the people she read about in books with her own. Her earlier life had been difficult and the people about her for the most part poverty-stricken, dulled and witless from lack of proper sustenance and the absence of an education. That is, apart from the kind needed to survive among thieves, scoundrels and villains. From a young age she knew the world to be a wicked place and had learned to defend the small space she occupied in it with her teeth and nails.

However, the human mind has the fortunate capacity to forget pain and misery.

Mary had been in the protected environment of a domestic servant in a big house from the age of eleven, so by the age of twenty she had all but buried the turmoil of her younger years. The sheltered life she now led meant she had gained little additional experience of the adult world other than the hurriedly taken copulative embraces thrust upon her by two of her past masters and the infinitely more pleasant, though inexperienced, couplings with the young master of the last employer.

Mary did not regard these hasty assignations as the same act of fornication she had observed against the walls in alleys or on the dark stairwells of shared lodgings or in the nesting midnight rooms, occupied by three destitute families, in which she and her father had been reduced to living the years before she'd entered domestic service.

Some unknown affliction in childhood had rendered Mary sterile, not that she even equated the hasty love-making with her betters with the act of childbirth. Despite the presence of children in the houses in which she'd served, if she'd thought about it at all, she would perhaps have concluded that the idle rich had their children conveniently delivered by a stork, the evidence of this being ever present on the nursery wall. That the better classes should employ the same vile animal instinct which had been such a familiar aspect of her childhood would have seemed to her unthinkable.

In fact, Mary was both streetwise and naive all at once. While she longed for romance she knew in her heart that it was not intended for her kind, that doing it in some privacy with a clean and half-decent someone was the best she could hope for. Her body developed into a very desirable womanliness, and she would often feel the ache to use it other than by the deployment of her probing and urgent fingers.

Her moment came one morning at Shepherd Market in nearby Mayfair where she had been sent by Mrs Hodge to purchase the master's luncheon sole, Billingsgate being too far to walk and the coachman out with the mistress of the house all morning. 'Take the one wif the clearest eyes, lovey. The young man pointed to a fish which lay upon a block of ice slightly to one side. 'That one! See thine eyes, clear as a gypsy's crystal.'

Mary turned towards the voice and its owner smiled, showing two missing front teeth with the eye tooth on either side framing the gap and capped with gold. It was a smile devoid of any calculation, though mischievous enough.

Mary found herself smiling back, even though more prudent behaviour was called for from a servant girl in a nice house involved in a casual meeting with a strange man. She found herself immediately taken by the flash young man standing beside her and her heart beat in quite the strange manner.

The possessor of these two astonishing gold teeth was flash in other ways too and wore a fancy corduroy waistcoat with a watch chain. His ankle boots, below a fashionable pair of breeches, were

stitched with patterns of hearts and roses. His cloth coat with contrasting plush lapels was clean and carried large expensive pearl buttons and was cut to the back into heavily braided calf-clingers with a artful line of buttons at their extremity. On his head he wore a beaver-napped top hat that looked to be in excellent order, its nap neatly brushed and shining. 'Name o' Bob Marley, pleased to meetcha,' he said in a single breath, giving her another big grin which caused his incisor teeth to once more gleam and flash. 'Honoured to make yer acquaintance, Miss...?'

Mary had observed that he hadn't once taken his eyes away from her face and unlike most men with whom she had the slightest passing acquaintance, hadn't allowed his eyes to wander over those parts of her anatomy which usually brought a glazed look into their eyes and a gravel tone in their voices. His smile was ingenuous, quite open and impossible to resist.

'Mary,' she said simply. 'Them's lovely teeth,' she added, smiling. Bob Marley jabbed a finger into his mouth, 'Like 'em does ya? Eighteen carat, that is! Pure gold, can't get none better!'

Bob Marley cast his eyes over Mary's firm breasts and trim waist, and in an unabashed voice declared, 'What a corker! Care for a drop o' ruin?' He indicated the public house with a toss of his head. 'Come on then, I'll buy ya a taste o' whatever's yer fancy, gin is it, or a pint o' best beer?'

Mary, though sorely tempted, could not accept his invitation for fear of upsetting Mrs Hodge by being late and returning to the house with the smell of strong spirits on her breath. She was not accustomed to drink, though on the rare occasions when, on a public holiday, she'd ventured out with Mrs Hodge, she'd found gin left her very excited in a physical sort of way.

'I'll not be seen with a costermonger,' she said tartly, this seeming the best way to end the relationship where she was already beginning to feel at a distinct disadvantage.

She noted too that her breasts were heaving and she was finding it difficult to breathe.

Bob Marley drew back with an exaggerated expression of hurt. Cocking his head to one side, his mouth turned down at the corner, he looked down at his chest as though closely examining his appearance. 'Costermonger? Not bleedin' likely, lovey.' He patted a velvet lapel. 'This is me disguise. I'm what ya might call an hoperator, I do a bit o' this and a bit o' that, finding' a bit 'ere and disposin' of it over there, if ya knows what I mean?'

'Oh, a tout?' Mary shot back, bringing her fingers to her lips as she tried to contain her laughter.

'Well not exactly that neiver, jus'... well... er,' he smiled his golden smile, 'an hoperator!' He seemed disinclined to further discuss the subject of his occupation. 'Well, what 'bout yer place, then?' Bob Marley said cheekily tugging on his watch chain and taking Mary by the elbow.

'Who do you think I am? I ain't no dollymop! Shame on you, Bob Marley!' Mary pulled her arm away from him. But then she laughed, enchanted by the young rogue standing beside her. 'You can walk me 'ome and no touchin', that's all I'll promise for now.'

By the time they reached the house in Chelsea Mary was completely smitten by the young rogue. She kept him waiting in the lane at the back of the house while she unlocked the stout door set into the kitchen garden wall, whereupon she went directly into the kitchen to deliver the sole to Mrs Hodge who, predictably, scolded her for the time she had taken on her errand.

Mary's heart pounded in her breast as she returned down the garden path to open the garden door and let Bob Marley within the precincts of the kitchen garden. Quickly locking the door behind him she led him into the laundry. Now, with less than half an hour having passed, fat Mrs Hodge stood over Mary's half-naked body having hysterics and crying out in alarm at the astonishing gymnastics taking place on a pile of dirty linen at her feet.

Bob Marley was the first to react. Frantically pulling on his breeches and snatching up his embroidered boots, he jumped to his feet and fled the scene, knocking aside the stout cook with him.

shoulder and escaping into the kitchen garden. Not bothering to test the door set into the garden wall, he threw his boots over the top into the lane beyond and, quick as a rat up a drainpipe, scrambled after them, stubbing his toe badly in the process, pausing only long enough on the other side to retrieve his boots before making good his escape down the lane and into the Kings Road beyond.

Mary found herself dismissed from her place of employment without references or even the wages due to her. Not an hour after her interrupted dalliance with Bob Marley she stood in the lane outside the rear of the large Chelsea house, her sole possessions the small wicker basket at her feet and her precious abacus under her arm. She glanced up at the big house and observed the odious Nanny Smith looking down at her from a top window. When the old woman realised Mary had seen her she leaned further out of the window and commenced to hiss in much the same manner as Waterloo Smith had done.

'The pox on you, you old cow!' Mary shouted up at her and then, picking up her basket, she proceeded to cross the lane. Then turning once again to look up at Nanny Smith, she yelled, 'I pushed your bloody cat off the window sill with me broom, it done two somersaults before it splattered on the ground!'

Then, head held high and without further ado, Mary proceeded in the direction of Hyde Park, not knowing why she'd bothered to lie to the old crone and not even sure why she had chosen this direction from any other, thinking only that she would find a quiet spot under one of the giant old beech trees and try to sort things out in her head.

Mary's future lay in tatters. She found a bench beside the Serpentine adjacent to a willow which hid her presence from passers-by. But no sooner was she seated than a dozen small brown ducks glided towards her, their webbed feet paddling frantically below the surface to give their smooth little bodies the look of effortless gliding. It was clear that they anticipated food from the wicker basket.

When Mary saw the ducks, quacking and fussing at the edge of the water, she realised Mrs Hodge hadn't even offered her a morsel to eat. A stern Mr Bishop had bid her pack her things and had shown her the door in the kitchen garden. Then, to Mary's enormous surprise, just as he was closing the door behind her, Mr Bishop pressed a small parcel upon her and announced in a deeply injured tone, 'You are ruined, my girl, utterly and completely ruined!' He paused and then added in the same melancholy voice, 'Now I simply cannot propose marriage to you.'

The door had closed behind her before Mary could fully comprehend this curious protestation. Mr Bishop had never entered the smallest part of her amorous imaginings, nor had he, perhaps with the exception of the obtaining of books from the master's library, shown any inclination to be especially kind to her. She placed the squarish parcel absently within her basket.

Now hungry and with nowhere to go, Mary started to weep softly. Although truthfully her tears were more for the warmth and security of Mrs Hodge's kitchen and the steaming plates of food so regularly placed in front of her than they were for love's labour lost with Bob Marley or, for that matter, Mr Bishop.

After a while Mary wiped her nose and dried her reddened eyes. 'C'mon, girl, cryin' never got no day's work done,' she said to herself, repeating a phrase she had heard so often as a little girl coming from her overburdened and sad-faced mother. She thought then for the first time about the parcel the butler had handed to her. Removing it from her basket she removed the wrapping to reveal the book *Gulliver's Travels*, quite her favourite. She smiled, feeling somewhat better towards life and the clumsy man whose marriage prospects she had so inadvertently ruined. Picking up her abacus and wicker basket, she crossed the park in an easterly direction to St Giles, where she knew from bitter experience she could obtain cheap lodgings.

# **Bryce Courtenay - The Potato Factory**

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## Chapter Three

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It would be nice to report that Mary's literacy skills and excellent penmanship, together with her wizardry with numbers, led to a new and fortunate life. Alas, these were not skills required of a woman at that time and most certainly not of a woman of her class. In the next six months she worked out a pair of stout boots in an effort to obtain employment as a clerk. She was always the lone woman in a long queue of applicants for a position advertised, and she soon became the butt of their cruel male jokes.

Furthermore, her abacus was the cause of much hilarity among the prospective clerks. Mary's persistent presence in the line of men would soon lead to her being known to them by the nickname Bloody Mary. This came about after an incident when a tall, very thin young man with a pale pinched face and sharp rodent teeth, wearing a battered top hat that resembled a somewhat misshapen chimney stack, snatched Mary's abacus from her. He held it in front of her face announcing to the men in the line, 'See, gentlemen, a monkey, a lovely little monkey in a cage playin' at being a clerk with prettified beads!'

It was a feeble enough joke but one which nevertheless brought some hilarity to the anxious line of unemployed men eager for any sort of distraction to alleviate the boredom. Mary snatched her abacus back from the ferret-faced clown and, lifting it, slammed it down upon the young comic's head causing the top hat he wore to concertina over his eyes and halfway along his narrow snotty nose. This created a great deal more hilarity in all but the unfortunate owner of the hat who, upon removing the object of their mirth and pulling and bashing it back into some semblance of its original shape, placed it again upon his head, then delivered a vicious blow to Mary's nose before running from the scene.

Mary's nose had not yet stopped bleeding by the time it became her turn for an interview. The chief clerk, a coarsely corpulent man with a sanguine complexion and the remains of fiery red hair on the sides of a completely bald pate, looked at her with disapproval, shaking his head in a most melodramatic manner. 'What's the name, girl?' he asked.

'Mary, sir, Mary Klerk.'

'Bloody Mary, more like!' The men in the queue laughed uproariously at this joke. 'G'wan't you get a scarpener! Be off with you, girl. 'Aven't you been told, clerkin's a man's job!'

The men clapped and cheered him mightily and pleased with their response the chief clerk played further to the crowd, for he'd witnessed the earlier incident with the clown in the top hat. 'What's become of us if we allow a monkey on our backs?'

There is precious little charity in a queue of starving men, most of whom had a wife and young ones to feed, and soon upon Mary's arrival in any employment queue, a familiar chant would go up. 'Mary, Mary, Bloody Mary Who does her sums on bead and rack Go away, you're too contrary You're the monkey, the bloody monkey You're the monkey on our back!'

The chant was to become such an aggravation that few prospective employers were prepared to even grant her an interview for fear of angering the men. The men, in turn, found it impossible to understand why a woman with a trim figure, of Mary's young age and class, could not make a perfectly good living on her back. More and more they came to regard it as entirely reprehensible that she should attempt to steal the bread from their mouths and allow their children to starve and moreover, that she should attempt to do so with the help of a foreign and heathen contraption made of wood, wire and beads.

They told themselves that a screen that quivered and rattled and ended up doing sums had a distinct smell of witchcraft about it.

As the weather turned colder and the queue more desperate, the resentment against Mary grew out of all proportion. In the fevered imaginations of the unemployed clerks Bloody Mary's presence at a job queue soon took on all the aspects of a bad omen.

When they returned home empty-handed to their ragged and starving families they had come to believe that her presence had 'soured the queue', so the luck they all felt they needed to gain a position had gone elsewhere.

Mary's face had grown gaunt for lack of sufficient nourishment and, in truth, there began to be a somewhat simian look about her. With her large green anxious eyes darting about and her head turning nervously this way and that, expecting danger from every corner, the men began to believe increasingly that she was an incarnation of some evil monkey spirit.

Her dress too began to be much the worse for wear and hung upon her thin frame to give Mary an altogether morbid appearance, her black cotton skirt and blouse, and modest bonnet and shawl together with her worn boots peeping below the frayed edges of her skirt, all showed the wear and tear of the long hours spent standing patiently in every kind of inclement weather.

While there were tens of thousands of women in a similar state of dress, their own wives being much the same appearance, they saw in Mary's forlorn and ragged clothing the black cloth of a witch and weeds. The monkey chant, as it became known, grew increasingly threatening in tone and it took the utmost stubbornness and will for Mary to present herself at an advertised location for a job interview.

Yet Mary persisted well beyond the dictates of commonsense and into the province of foolishness. The long hours spent at reading and writing and the childhood application she had demonstrated with the complexities of mathematics had somehow convinced her that within her capacity lay a destiny beyond her humble beginnings.

Mary's father had told her almost from infancy that her abacus would be her salvation and she could not believe that she might end up like her consumptive silk weaver mother or the sad, destitute and drunken shipping clerk she knew as her father. She saw herself achieving something well beyond the modest expectations of a laundry maid, though quite what this could be was past anything she could imagine. She felt certain that this destiny would all begin, if only she could obtain a position as a clerk.

After six months Mary had used up most of her savings and had repeatedly changed her place of residence, on each occasion moving to a cheaper lodging house, until she ended up sharing a room with a family of five in the very cheapest of netherkens in Shoe Lane.

She would wake at dawn each morning and, with no more than a drink of water and without allowing herself to think, set out to seek employment, fearful that, should she pause to contemplate her increasingly desperate position, she would give up altogether and take herself to Waterloo Bridge and commit herself to the dark, foul river.

One bitterly cold morning she left her miserable lodgings at dawn to be the first in line for the clerk's position advertised in a warehouse on the south bank of the Thames at Saviour's Dock. This was one of the vilest slums in London, and the mist lay thick on the river, and the streets were dimmed to near blindness by the sulphurous-coloured smog from the first of the winter fires.

Huddled at the entrance of the gate and near frozen, Mary was thankful that her presence would be concealed by the thick fog. The misted air about her was filled with the groans of masts and cross-arms. In her imagination, the dockside took on the shape of a jungle filled with the wild and fearsome growls of fantastical creatures, while the howl of the wind through a dozen mizzen masts and the slap of loose canvas became the spirits of the dead which had come to protect her from the living, the men who would soon be lined up behind her and who had the capacity to frighten her beyond any perception.

ghosts.

~~She had not eaten for two days and in her state of weakness must have fallen asleep, for she was awakened by the toe of the gateman's boot placed against her buttocks.~~

'Be up now, the gov'nor will be on 'is way soon!' a gruff voice demanded. Mary stumbled to her feet, clutching her shawl about her thin shoulders. 'Blimey, if it ain't a female!' the voice exclaimed in surprise.

A large man dressed in a military great coat with a shako, polished like a mirror, upon his head stood towering over her. It was the shako cap, complete with its scarlet and white cockade and braided otherwise devoid of any regimental insignia, that gave the man his fearsome authority. Mary had expected the customary gateman in cloth cap, woollen scarf, corduroy breeches and workman's boots, the advertisement having instructed simply that the queue would commence at the gate under the gateman's supervision.

'Yessir, I be enquirin' about the billet advertised. The one for a clerk?'

'Well then, I s'pose it ain't against the law now is it?' The gateman twisted the corner of his large moustache. 'It's a pretty rum turn, but I can't see that it be against the law. First is you? You shall have your interview, miss.'

Glancing fearfully at the formless shapes of the men disappearing into the fog behind her, Mary felt suddenly safe and strangely hopeful. She told herself that such an unpropitious day must surely bring her luck. The first good omen had been that the men standing directly behind her were strange and seemed not to recognise her. The ones behind them, pale shapes in the mist, would surely have among them a great many who were acquainted with her, but these had not yet become aware of her presence in the thick yellow fog.

The gateman turned away from her to address the vaguely defined line of men stretching away behind Mary.

'Now then, gentlemen, me name's Sergeant William Lawrence, late of the 40th regiment, veteran o' the Peninsular War, wounded in action at the Battle o' Waterloo. I am the gatekeeper 'ere and I'll brook no interference. It will be one at a time through the gate, no pushin' and no shovin' and no idle chatter, if you please!'

There was a murmur in the crowd at the sound of a carriage rattling over distant cobblestones and then the rumble of its wheels as it drew onto the wooden dock-side and shortly afterwards came to halt at the gate, the horse snuffling and shaking its head, blowing frosted air from its distended nostrils.

Mary, who stood close enough to see clearly, observed a small, very fat man alight. He was dressed in a heavy coat which swept to within an inch of the ground in the manner of a woman's skirt, his shoes being quite lost from sight. He wore a top hat which sat upon his head down almost to his eyes and rose alarmingly high into the air for a man so short. The remaining space between head and shoulders was wrapped in a woollen scarf so that in the uncertainty of the mist the whole of him took on the proportions of a very large perambulating bottle. The gatekeeper snapped to immediate attention and gave the bottle shape a rigid salute, his jowls and side-burns quivering with the momentum of it.

'Mornin', Mr Goldstein, sah!' Sergeant Lawrence shouted at the very top of his voice as though addressing the commander of a battalion of soldiers who was about to embark on a parade inspection.

'Goot mornink,' the bottle replied in a muffled voice. Then, without glancing at the line of men, he entered the gate and waddled into the mist towards the unseen warehouse not twenty feet away.

The gatekeeper, pushing his hand between two brass buttons and into the interior of the great coat, pulled from within it a watch chain which soon enough produced a large, though not expensive

looking, watch. Glancing down at it from under his peaked cap he addressed the queue.

~~'I shall allow five minutes for Mr Goldstein to settle and then the first in the line will proceed through the gate to the door! You will oblige Mr Goldstein by knockin' on the outside door whereupon you will remove your 'at and proceed in an inwardly direction and without waitin' for a answer! Mr Goldstein will be in the office to the left of the door upon which you shall again knock and then immediately enter! For them what is ambidextrous and 'asn't 'ad the misfortune to 'ave been trained in 'is Majesty's military forces, the left side is the side what's got the coat-stand!' Anxious laughter came from the mist as men strained to catch every word, fearful of the consequences of making a mistake.~~

The imperious Sergeant Lawrence looked down at his watch again and then glanced sternly at Mary.

'Goldstein, you understand, miss? Mr Goldstein!'

Mary nodded, feeling herself beginning to tremble.

Mary knocked on the outer door of the warehouse and then, without waiting for a reply, did as she had been told and entered. To her left was a heavy, freestanding coat-stand on which hung the overgrown top hat together with its owner's coat and scarf.

Behind it was a door with a frosted glass upper panel on which in gold relief lettering was the name Jacob Goldstein, Prop. The door seemed designed especially for Mr Goldstein, for it was not an inch higher than five feet though one and a half times as wide as one might normally expect an office door to be. Mary tapped nervously on the surface of the glass, her heart pounding in her ears, her knees feeling light, as though they might give at any moment, and the palms of her hands were wet.

'You must be here comink, please,' a voice answered in an accent which Mary immediately recognised. She had spent her childhood around Rosemary Lane and the Whitechapel markets and the accent was unmistakably that of a German Jew.

Mary entered and curtsied to the man, who sat well back from a large desk. He was dressed in a morning suit and his huge stomach, she felt certain, would not permit his very short arms to reach the edge of the desk, the top of which contained a pot of blacking and a goose quill pen, a large writing tablet and a medium-sized brass bell of the kind a schoolmaster might use to summon his pupils from play. 'Good mornin', Mr Goldstein,' Mary said, summoning all her courage into a nervous smile.

Mr Goldstein seemed astonished to see her and commenced immediately to bluster.

'Ach! Vot is dis? A voman? You are a voman! Vot is vanting a voman here?

You are vanting to see me, ja?'

'I come about the job, sir. The assistant clerk... the position what was advertised?'

Mr Goldstein's bewilderment persisted and Mary added desperately, 'It were advertised on the 'oardings, sir.'

'You are a voman and you vant you can be a clerk?' Mr Goldstein was now somewhat recovered though still plainly bemused. 'I'm most 'appy to do a test, anythin' you want, sir! Please, your 'onour, er, Mr Goldstein, don't send me away, give me a chance, I can do it, gov... honest I can!' Mary was suddenly conscious of Mr Goldstein staring at the region of her waist and that the merest semblance of a smile had appeared on his moon-round face. 'Abacus!' He pointed a fat finger at her midriff. 'You can use, ja?' 'Yes, sir, Mr Goldstein, your honour, since I was a brat... er child, give me a sum, any sum you like, sir.'

'In Armenia, also ven I vos a Kind! Das ist wunderbar? he chuckled. 'You are vanting I should give you some sums? Ja, I can do zis!' Whereupon, to Mary's astonishment, he pushed his chair violently backwards.

She now saw it to be on tiny wheels and possessed of a seat which could swivel. She observed that the points of his highly polished boots only just touched the floor. Using them to gain a purchase Mr Goldstein spun himself around so that the chair, with his fat dumpling body within it, flashed past her astonished face fully four times, much like an egg in an egg cup turned into a merry-go-round.

When it came to a halt Mary could see that Mr Goldstein now sat considerably closer to the ground and that his boots were planted firmly upon it. Propelling himself towards the desk his stomach now fitted neatly beneath it, the desktop coming to just under his arms.

'A test? Ja, das is gut!' He pointed to the abacus. 'From vere are you learnink zis?'

'My father, sir. 'E were in the East Hindies.'

'He is Chinee man?'

'No, sir... er, Mr Goldstein, 'e were a Dutchie, from 'Olland.'

Mr Goldstein reached for his quill and dipping it into the small pot of blacking he hastily scrawled an elaborate equation on the pad in front of him. Then he pushed it over to Mary.

Mary examined the problem scrawled on the paper tablet. Then, laying it down, she placed her abacus beside it and began immediately to move the beads across the thin wire rails, her long, slender fingers blurring with the speed of her movements. She hesitated once or twice before once again sending the bright beads flying. In a short time she slapped the last bead into place and stood back looking down at Mr Goldstein. There had never been a more important moment in Mary's life.

She looked up to see that Mr Goldstein was smiling and holding a gold hunter open in his hand. Mary announced quietly, though her heart was once again pounding furiously and she fought to keep her breathing steady, 'Eight 'undred and sixty-twopounds... at eleven pounds, fourteen shillin's and sixpence ha'penny a case, sir... er, Mr Goldstein.'

'Gut! Gut, young lady, in vun half minute! Now ve can see, ja?'

He placed the watch down on the desk and sliding open a drawer produced a large ledger which he opened and examined for a moment, running his fat index finger down several columns until it came to rest.

'Ja! Das is gut! And also schnell!'

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'Very fast!' he beamed. 'You can write also in ledger?' He pointed to the pad on which he had written previously and returning his quill into the blacking pot he handed it to Mary.

'Please... Numbers, also vords, let me see?'

Mr Bishop had not only provided books for Mary from the master's library but, upon her beseeching him, had on several occasions found old ledgers for her to copy out.

Mary had studied these assiduously, emulating their neat columns and precise language a thousand times until she knew the contents of every in her sleep. Now she wrote carefully in the well formed and almost elegant copperplate she had studied so hard at the hands of her young Oxford lover and later for countless hours on her own, to perfect. 34 cases @ a total of six hundred and twelve pounds no shillings and eightpence = seventeen pounds, one shilling and sevenpence halfpenny per case. Then she repeated the sum in neat numerals directly below this sentence. She handed the quill and pad back to Mr Goldstein.

Mr Goldstein examined Mary's writing for a sufficient period of time for her to grow anxious that she might have made a mistake. Then he looked up, his expression stern and businesslike, shaking his fat finger with a large gold ring directly at her as in admonishment.

'I pay eight shillink for vun veek and Saturday only no verk. Half-past seven you are startink eight o'clock you are finishink. Tomorrow half-past seven o'clock report, if you please, Mr Baskin.'

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