

Chapter 1

'Keep your heads down!' The wagon-driver's voice was brusque, urgent. 'Two riders coming to meet us. They could be highwaymen.'

Molly's eyes were as sharp as any other seventeen-year-old's, but she could only just make out the tiny specks of blue a mile or more ahead of them on the dirt road stretching through the rough scrub of Finchley Common towards London.

Around her, the half dozen other women passengers whimpered nervously and huddled together under the hooped canvas cover. The four men among them, ranging in age from the callow to the decrepit, with hardly an able body between them, scrambled for their unaccustomed pistols and moved to protect the back of the wagon as they'd been instructed. Molly crept forward, peering past the driver at the road ahead, feeling her heart thudding in her chest.

A high cloud scuttled across the sun, and the sudden shadow mixed all the bright spring colours into a muted palette of greens and browns that spread out to the horizon. The riders blended into the landscape.

Or, perhaps, Molly thought, they've spurred their horses into the trees beside the road ahead, waiting under cover until we've drawn alongside, ready to... Ready to what?

Ready to rob us, of course.

Her dream of adventure slumped into the disappointment of reality. Five days on the road from York, only to be robbed an hour or two from London. She set her jaw defiantly and took a deep breath. If I'm to be robbed, so be it.

Again, her resolve faltered. Robbed, aye. But what else? And how do they go about their business? Are they really gentlemen of the road, or simply cut-throats on horseback? She'd heard tales; she'd read the broadsheets; but she'd never come face to face with a highwayman before, nor even seen one hanged.

After the bright early evening sunshine, the unwarmed breeze seemed unusually chill. She shivered, perhaps with cold, perhaps with fear, perhaps with excitement.

The sun broke free again. The pinpoints of blue resolved themselves into the silhouettes of two horsemen. The Waggoner loosened the

pistols in his belt and cocked them, unbuckled the straps that held the blunderbuss tight against the seat and tucked it close to his thigh, lifted a primed carbine onto his lap. He cocked the carbine and rested the long barrel in the crook of his elbow, still clutching the reins of the four heavily plodding horses in front of him.

The parson trailing a dozen yards behind spurred his horse into a gallop and caught up with the driver. 'Let me have one of your pistols,' he demanded. Sweat beaded his forehead.

The driver flicked a dismissive glance at him. 'You could no more fight off a highwayman than I could preach a sermon,' he growled. 'If you're afeared, get in the wagon with the women.'

The parson let his horse drop back to the rear of the wagon, where he might be able to take cover if he had to.

The passengers in the York Wagon crouched down amongst their luggage; but Molly kept her gaze fixed on the approaching horsemen. Fear and a perverse anticipation tingled over her shoulders, down her body, into her stomach. As they came nearer, she could see them clearly. Both unshaven, both in ill-fitting blue topcoats, both with their hats pulled low over their eyes. The evening breeze twitched one of the coats aside to reveal a pistol tucked into the waistband of the rider's breeches.

Eying the wagoner's ready armoury, they separated to pass either side of the wagon. The wagoner followed one with his carbine, and lifted the blunderbuss with his other hand to cover the second. As they passed, he dropped the reins, stood up in his seat and turned to face them over the hooped canvas top, both weapons at the ready. The four trembling but cocked pistols poking out of the back of the wagon supplied the clinching argument, and the two men spurred their scrawny mounts into a trot.

'A safe journey to you,' one of them called.

'And to you, good sirs,' the wagoner replied. Uncocking the two fire-arms, he sat down again, took up the reins and continued with the journey. 'You can uncross your legs now, girls,' he called back to his passengers. 'Your valuables are safe.' The giggles of relief behind him subsided into excited chatter.

'Were they highwaymen?' Moll asked him.

'Maybe, maybe not. They might just have been honest gentlemen out

for a breath of air on the Common - but if they were, they'll be lucky to get as far as Finchley without having their throats cut.'

But there was no doubt at all in the minds of his passengers. The women had survived a brush with not only one but two highwaymen, and had miraculously escaped unrobbed, unharmed and unraped - thanks to the bravery of the men who had held the desperadoes at bay with their pistols. It was a tale enough to make them heroes and heroines in every letter they wrote home for the next year.

And when that topic tired, they could refresh it with a description of the gibbet they'd passed a mile back, the eyeless corpses of four hanged highwaymen dangling in chains, with a court of crows dancing attendance.

How their stay-at-home cousins would envy them!

The wagon lurched and trundled along the rutted track. Molly continued to peer past the swaying driver, drinking in every glimpse of rooftop, every distant spire as London hazed into view.

She smiled to herself, excitement blushing up through her throat and lips and into her cheeks. Stolid, dull York was two hundred miles behind her. Cousin Tom and her brave new life in London were just an hour or two ahead.

London. She closed her eyes and hugged herself, stroking her hands down her upper arms in sensuous anticipation.

London. Fashion. Elegance. Fine manners...

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Black husband, black wife, white lover, a squealing baby neither black nor white. And a smell of violence as arousing as musk.

The crowd began to gather. There was sport to be had. Better than bare-knuckle fighting. Better than a cockfight. Almost as good as a hanging at Tyburn.

A husband face to face with the father of his wife's bastard.

'I'm goin' kill you, whoremonger! First you, then her!'

A narrow streetful of spectators roared them on, the sweating ant-hill of Wood Street, jostling for position, pitiless, laying bets, baying for blood. Thieves, harlots, children, cutpurses, beggars. Dogs of all sizes picked up the bloodlust scent, yelped backwards and forwards, boiled

into throat-seeking fights of their own. Two Town-bucks lounged on the fringes, hoping for an amusing tale to tell. A scared lawyer, bewigged in his sedan chair, sniffed a nosegay, pretending not to be interested in the fight while the two chairmen temporarily abandoned him. A swarthily handsome, but impatiently scowling young Jew, balked on his way to the Royal Exchange, clamped one hand on his watch, the other on his purse, and waited. A vinegar-seller's donkey, startled, skittered sideways, its panniered barrels bumping a knot of spectators into a cursing eddy.

And the Watch nowhere to be seen.

The squat negress was screaming incoherent curses at her husband, her cries echoing back from the high peeling walls before being swallowed by the uproar around her.

The two men ignored her, circled each other, looking for a chance to wound, to maim, to kill.

One, Newgate-pale, wiry, wearing the frayed red coat of a discharged soldier, held a broad-bladed knife out in front of him, taunting his adversary, beckoning him with his free hand, half-grinning, half-snarling, his tongue flickering behind yellow teeth.

The other, the shiny-black husband, shaven-headed, older by ten years, stripped to the waist above his grimy breeches, gripped a broken wagon-shaft in his huge fists, setting his feet, holding his balance.

For the crowd, this was more than entertainment. The odds were weighed, the wagers accepted. 'Two to one the Captain! Three to two the blackbird! A shilling says the Watch will get here first!'

The younger man laughed, and put both forefingers up to the sides of his head to make horns. 'Cuckoo!'

The wife thrust her baby into the arms of the red-haired woman next to her and dashed towards the men, screeching in a strange tongue. As the wagon-shaft swung powerfully at the head and the horns, she hurled herself at her husband, cannoned into him, clawed at him. The mocking horn-maker ducked to avoid the blow. But the woman had dragged the shaft downwards. As he raised his arm to defend himself, the thick wood crunched into his forearm, just below the elbow. A sharp crack, a howl of pain, a grunt of victory, a knowing intake of breath from the spectators. In that one second, the fight had been lost and won.

The knife wheeled out of his hand, glinting in the evening sunlight, and clattered to the cobbles; hunching himself close, he clutched at the shattered bone, feeling it jagged through his coat; he staggered backwards, desperate to keep his balance.

The fight was over. But the retribution wasn't.

The bludgeon swung again, this time upwards, this time between his spread legs. This time no howl, but a deep, rasping sigh of agony and despair, echoed in sympathy by the watching crowd. He fell to the cobbles and rolled onto his side, moaning.

The negress rushed to him, knelt beside him, cradled his head, her curses diminishing into sobs. The gnarled hand of her husband swatted her out of the way. Flinging the broken shaft aside, he drew back his boot and axed it into the fallen man's groin, then again and again, splintering the protecting fingers, wrenching the already broken arm.

The woman tried again to get between her lover and the crashing boot. 'Leave him! Leave him!' she shrieked.

The back of her husband's hand smashed into her face, splashing blood into the air and sweeping her full length into the foul gutter flowing down the middle of the cobbled street.

'You goin' get no more bastards on my wife!' he growled at the groaning heap. A last kick drove into the already broken fingers, the already crushed testicles. 'Nor on no man else's!' He grabbed his wailing wife by her thick, curly hair and hauled her to her feet. The back of his hand lashed across her mouth again.

Struggling, spitting blood, she stumbled along behind him, away from the main street, down Love Lane towards the wooden staircase leading up to their dark rooms opposite the back entrance to The Bell. 'You be in Newgate for this!' she shouted. 'They goin' hang you!'

'Who goin' believe you, woman?' he shouted back at her. 'The word of a highwayman? The word of a woman taken in adultery?' His fist split her cheek, once, twice, as he dragged her up the steps. He stopped at the plain-boarded door, turned and looked down at the smirking spectators below him. 'She work at The Bell,' he proclaimed from his pulpit. 'She ain't one of their harlots.'

From Cheapside, the elderly Watch gaggled into view. Before they'd hobbled more than a few yards, Wood Street was empty; only the crumpled red rags of the loser bleeding onto the cobbles gave any clue

that anything had happened.

'Nobody saw nothing,' said the wronged husband as he kicked open the door. 'You and me and him, that's all. They ain't no one else here to tell!'

'Cuckold!' The bright blood streamed from her nose and mouth and cheekbone, running down her chin and onto the white muslin tucked into the neck of her bodice.

'Better cuckold than eunuch,' he spat. 'Cus that's what he is now.' He looked down at the red-haired woman who had followed them to the back door of The Bell, cradling the now-sleeping brown baby. 'Two hours, Annie,' he called. 'We collect the highwayman's bastard in two hours.' He thrust his wife through the door. 'No need tell Mother Wickham 'bout this.'

The red-haired Annie nodded. No hint of emotion disturbed the pale stillness of her face; nothing stirred behind her withdrawn green eyes.

With a heave of his muscular shoulders, the negro pulled his wife up the rest of the stairs, through the door, slammed it shut behind them.

For several minutes, Annie stood by the door to The Bell, holding the sleeping baby to her, rocking it to and fro as it slept. She could hear its parents' voices, but she couldn't make out the words.

Wood Street and Love Lane were back to normal.

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'Whoa!' The wagoner brought his horses to a standstill in front of the spiked tollgate at Hornsey.

Though the thick-wooded, dapple-green hills on either side of the gate were the same, the perils of Finchley Common were behind them, and the safety of Hampstead Heath was all that lay between them and the Great City.

Where the common had been deserted, the heath was bustling with men calling their cattle home for the evening's milking, with rumbling carts labouring under huge casks of water, with shrill-voiced women carrying bundles of firewood. Long shadows stretched away to the east of them. The wind had died, leaving a clear sky and a clean chill that goose-pimpled the skin. Woodsmoke caught at the nostrils, with

its promise of warmth and welcome.

'We leave again in a quarter of an hour,' the wagon-driver called, climbing down and walking forward to greet the gatekeeper, counting out his tenpenny toll as he went.

The passengers climbed stiffly out of the wagon, the men to piss against the wheels of the wagon, the gossiping women to traipse out of sight behind the tollbooth and wait their turn at the canvas-covered privy above a slope running down to a sluggish stream. The parson, as bladder-full as the rest, sought the cover of a patch of bramble some yards apart.

Content to be last in line, Molly jumped up onto the second of the turnpike's five bars, the better to see London's skyline. The dipping sun threw the shapes ahead of her into relief, and she tried to guess at them. Was that tall spire St Paul's? Was that great brick building the Tower of London? Whereabouts was her cousin Tom's house?

Cousin Tom...

My Deareft Molly

Your Rooms have been already prepared for your Vifit: which I hope fhall be a long Vifit; and an eager Welcome awaits you at my Houfe in Thames Street.

Think not of returning to York until we both make ye fame Trip together: which I hope and truft will be a moft happy Occafion.

Your loving Coufin

Thos. Heppenftall

Her head was filled with fancies. All the finest folk in England lived in London: King George and his court, members of parliament, famous actors and actresses. Surely they must walk the streets like other folk? Or at least travel the streets in their carriages. Would she see them? Did Cousin Tom know any grand folk? When she was married to him - if she was married to him - would she get to meet them?

My Lord, I don't think you've met my wife. My Lady, would you do

my wife and me the honour of dining with us? Your Majesty, may I present my wife?

My wife. She mouthed the word silently, savouring the vowel, caressing the consonants. To change her name from Molly Huckerby to Mistress Heppenstall. Even her initials would remain the same, the same MH that was picked out in brass studs on the lid of her trunk, the trunk that contained everything worth bringing with her from York. Very little of value; but it was hers. Her best gown, her needles and threads and scissors for dressmaking, her Bible and Prayer Book, a palm-sized ink drawing of her dead mother in a chipped gilt frame, a battered rag doll she couldn't bear to leave behind. And twenty carefully saved shillings.

'Don't let the wagon go without you,' said a voice behind her. The gatekeeper unlatched the tollgate, waited for her to jump down from it, then pushed it open.

'Wait a few moments,' she called to the wagoner, and dashed to the privy. Within two minutes she was back and clambering eagerly up into the wagon.

After seventeen years in York, her life was about to change for ever.



The late sun peered over the rooftops, creeping down into Love Lane and sidling past the back door of The Bell. Love Lane was deserted, and Wood Street was already in shadow. But Wood Street was beginning to stir.

'Spare a penny, good sir.'

The polished mahogany cane cracked against the beggar's elbow as the strutting young peacock cleared him out of his way. The twittering lady on his arm twitched up the hem of her silk embroidered gown to avoid a puddle of what might have been rainwater but probably wasn't, and carried on chattering about her piquet-party the night before.

'My Lady This, and My Lady That, and Sir Moneybags, and Lord Own-all... and I won a pitcherful of guineas...'

A single guinea was enough to take a beggar out of begging; but fumbling for a penny would be enough to disturb the flow of the couple's conversation. So the beggar nursed a sore elbow and an empty cup. But

without rancour: that was a beggar's life.

The clomp of tired horses and the rattle of iron-rimmed wheels on cobbles, and the street was immediately alive.

The York Wagon. A canvas-covered bone-shaker full of hopefuls who had travelled two hundred miles to The Great City, two hundred miles to escape the cattle and sheep of Yorkshire, two hundred miles to fall prey to the wolves of Wood Street.

Out of the rat-holes crept the cutpurses, the bawds, the pimps, the harlots, all the Cheapside predators who might earn a shilling or steal a florin or gull a fledgling or find a fresh piece of meat to peddle.

And, of course, the beggars. Not with any enthusiasm, of course: since it was the York Wagon, it was hardly worth rattling a cup at. If they had pennies enough to spare for a beggar, they'd have been riding on the stage.

But he shook his cup anyway. It's what beggars do. 'Spare a penny.' He dodged the driver's whip as it flicked idly in his direction. There was no malice; the driver didn't care whether he caught the beggar with the lead tip or not. It was what drivers did. But it was worth taking the effort to dodge. Old Blind Morris who begged on Gracechurch Street was, in truth, only half-blind, with one eye in his head and the other on the end of a wagon-driver's whip.

The first one out of the wagon was old enough to be somebody's grandmother. In less than a second, she was looked over, weighed up and forgotten. As she took her first step down onto the streets of London, the eyes were already hunting beyond her into the wagon for the next dish to be served onto the Cheapside table. They were picking out not only the weakest to feed upon, but the tastiest.

'Is this Lincoln's Inn Fields?' asked the grandmother, her flat vowels sitting oddly on the open-eyed wonder in her words. The outskirts of York were never so magnificent as this, the crumbling brickwork of a London courtyard.

'It's London, missus,' said the wagoner, as he hefted her trunk onto the ground beside her.

'Aye, but is it Lincoln's Inn Fields?'

'As far as you're concerned, missus, it might just as well be.'

'Spare a penny, good lady.' The wagoner's foot kicked out; the beggar dodged; his crutch slipped on the wet cobbles, and he fell sprawling

on his face. His cup clattered away from him, the few coins in it scattering; before the pennies had stopped rolling, the barefoot children had snatched them up like mud-spattered magpies, and had skipped away into the waiting alleys. Hot pastries were more important than fallen beggars.

The grandmother protested. 'Eh, y' dint hafta kick un!'

The wagoner dumped her other case beside the first. 'Give your money to beggars, missus, and you'll soon enough be one yourself.' He turned to his other passengers. 'Mind where you tread, girls. The parson's horse has just mistaken these cobbles for a privy.'

The women giggled. Not at the wagoner's joke, but at the sheer thrill of being in London.

Molly stared about her as she climbed from the wagon, excitement bubbling up from her belly and shivering deliciously into her face. At last, she was in London.

The mean houses with roughly washed clothes drying on lines hung high to be out of reach of the thieving children; the untidy piles of straw heaped against the walls; the gutters running with foul water, sloshing into the horse-shit, the dog-turds, the contents of emptied chamber pots.

The stench of an unwashed city, trapped between blackened walls. The echoing cacophony of street-sellers and beggars, dogs and drays, rolling barrels and reeling drunks.

The crowded, narrow streets, overhung with so many painted shop-signs and inn-signs that it was hard to see the sky without looking straight up. A vintner's bush, a tailor's scissors, a shoemaker's last; a surgeon's striped pole, an apothecary's bottle, a furniture-maker's spindle; and a whole menagerie of red lions, white horses, blue boars, and golden creatures that had never walked the earth.

Among them, the silver-gilt sign of an inn. The Bell.

Not ancient and timbered like the inns in York. Not boldly outlined in black and white, not soaking in the spring sun through leaded windows, not jettied out expansively below gabled roofs. Instead, the plaster peeled off The Bell's brickwork like the skin off a leper's face; the chequerboard tiles above the crudely-framed door hid sullenly beneath a layer of soot and grease; the two front steps sagged wearily, worn, rotting.

Like a pearl in a midden, a fine silver-wigged gentleman stood by the door, with fine silver buckles to his boots, fine silver buttons to his coat, a fine silver knob to his cane. And a fawning servant a discreet pace behind him, attentive to his master's meanest wish.

Molly's gloried in the wonder that was London. London was grand. There was so much to see, so much to do, so many dreams to come true in London.

London...!

Annie looked down on the wagon from an upper window of The Bell, holding the black-white bastard in her arms, humming to it without even pretending to a tune.

'All the way from York, Lily,' she crooned to the sleeping baby. Women, mostly. Come to London seeking work. But what work is there in London for a woman? 'Whoring and thieving, Lily, that's all. Whoring and thieving.' She took up her tuneless humming again.

Oh, there's other work to be had. Honest work, with an honest wage. And, in due course, an honest husband, with honest drudgery and, after it all, an honest burial.

But not in Wood Street. 'Whoring and thieving, Lily. That's all the work in Wood Street. And begging.'

'You! Wagoner!' The parson was squinting at the address on a letter, holding it short-sightedly almost to his nose. His half-starved horse, worn out from following the wagon two hundred miles from York, stooped and plucked up a mouthful of hay. The scavenging dogs danced backwards as the horse clattered a pile of buckets to the ground.

'Spare a penny, your worship.' The tin cup rattled.

'Be off, or I'll thrash you with my whip!' More chance of getting alms from another beggar than from a parson. 'Wagoner! Did you hear me?'

'I heard you.' He lifted the tailgate back up into place, and dropped the latch-pegs into their iron rings. 'If you want Cheapside, follow my wagon. If you want elsewhere, follow someone else.' He walked to the front of the wagon, and climbed up into his seat.

The parson coaxed his horse level with the wagoner. 'I wish to call upon the Bishop of London,' he said, loud enough for the remaining travellers in the wagon to hear.

'Well, you won't find him in Cheapside, that's for sure.' He hawked, rolled the phlegm round his tongue and spat into the street. 'Giddup!' The wagon creaked into motion and lumbered downhill towards the Thames, its leather brakes squealing, its horses skidding and neighing, its iron-clad wheels screeching and grumbling over the cobbles, scant inches away from the scarred brickwork of the houses.

'Spare a penny, miss.'

Molly tried to make her reply both apologetic and encouraging. 'I en't got a penny to spare. But I'll give you this ha'penny if you'll tell me where I'll find Thames Street.'

A kindly, middle-aged, motherly voice broke in. 'Thames Street, dear? Did I hear you say you're looking for Thames Street?' Mother Wickham, moving in with a wary anticipation, like a rat sniffing at a new-born chick.

'Aye, that's right, Thames Street. Do you know it?'

In a blink, Mother Wickham had taken inventory. Brown eyes in an outdoor face, full-bosomed and strong-shouldered, pretty in a rustic sort of way, plainly dressed in pale blue and laundered white, the crimson flash of the rose at her breast reflected in the ribbon trimming her wide-brimmed hat. The scissors and pin-cushion dangling from her wrist told her trade: dressmaker. Both the girl and the rose were limp and tired from the journey; but her face was alive with excitement.

An innocent. Fresh, green produce that would fetch a good price at market.

Above them, Annie moved away from the window into the dimness of her room; but she continued to watch the scene being acted out below. God help you, child, if you should fall off the York Wagon into the arms of the most relentless bawd in London.

Mother Wickham oiled closer to Molly. 'You can't be walking all the way to Thames Street, dear - not with that heavy trunk and all the rest of your luggage.' She smiled as she clasped the girl's hand. Long-nosed and bulbous, pock-marked and pallid, her voluminous gown of scarlet sparked garishly against the rose on the dressmaker's bosom. 'Come into The Bell, here. You must be tired. Have some refreshment before you go on with your journey.'

'Oh, I - I couldn't.' The merest pause. Not enough to be a hesitation... 'I couldn't go into an ale-house.' ...but enough for the pin-sharp rat-eyes

to spot the weakness.

'Ale-house?' A faint overtone of disappointment, of disapproval. 'Oh, The Bell isn't an ale-house, dear. It's an inn. An inn for travellers - such as yourself. And for gentlemen like Colonel Charnell and his friend, yonder.' Silver wig, silver buckles, silver buttons. 'Real gentlemen. Gentlemen who have the ear of the King.' She gestured to a scowling scar-faced man, who shuffled forward to pick up the coffin-shaped trunk. 'You come in, dear, and rest your bones. There's plenty of time to get to Thames Street before nightfall. Why, I'll take you there myself. And Jed will carry your trunk for you. Later on.' She reached up and touched her ungloved hand to the girl's cheek. The mother's caress of love; the stranger's hand of friendship; the professional's judgement of quality. 'But come inside, now, and I'll see if I can introduce you to Colonel Charnell.' Her hand fluttered down to the young dressmaker's elbow. 'What's your name, my dear?'

'Molly. Molly Huckerby.' She allowed herself to be manoeuvred a few feet nearer The Bell.

'Molly. Such a pretty name.' When the girl stopped, the bawd stopped. Seduction is a patient craft. 'My very own daughter is called Molly. So, Molly Huckerby, I shall call you Moll - so that I shan't get you mixed up with my daughter. Because I can see we're going to get on so well together, I might start thinking you are my daughter.' Her friendly arm slipped through Molly's arm, and they walked a few more yards. 'And you must call me Mother Wickham. Everybody calls me that. Mother Wickham.' Molly halted; Mother Wickham halted. 'You'll be looking for work, I suppose?'

'Aye, ma'am. I'm a dressmaker. And I'm a good dressmaker, too.' Her shyness disappeared as she found something she could talk about without blushing. 'I made every stitch you can see on me now. And I've been sewing for my father and my brothers for as many years as I can remember. Ever since I were a lass.'

Mother Wickham's face lit up with a practised delight. 'What a stroke of luck! Only this very morning, I was saying to my daughter how much we needed a good dressmaker in the neighbourhood. The dressmakers at Lincoln's Inn Fields are so expensive, and the ones in Wood Street are...' She glanced around her and lowered her voice. 'Well, to tell the truth, my dear, they're not very good. Clumsy, every one of

them. Haven't had the sort of experience you've had. Now, I've got a petticoat, my favourite petticoat, that needs just a few stitches...'

Up the two sagging steps, out of the early evening sun, into a world where dressmakers didn't stay dressmakers for long.

Mother Wickham's voice echoed out into the once-again deserted Wood Street. 'Colonel Charnell? Colonel, I'd like you to meet somebody...'

Annie turned away from the window and laid the baby down on her bed. God help you, Molly Huckerby.



Candlelight, even though the sun was still edging past the heavy curtain; a dark-panelled room with smoke-dulled picture frames high up near the ceiling; a sturdy oval table set with a dozen square-backed chairs.

The Colonel sat at the table, smoking a long-stemmed pipe. A bottle and glass were in front of him, the remains of a chicken and a loaf at his elbow. Standing behind him, a slightly-built man with thin lips and narrow shoulders rubbed his hands together, ready to serve his master in any way he wished.

'Colonel,' said Mother Wickham, 'this is Moll Huckerby. Such a pretty girl. She's this very moment got off the York Wagon, and I've brought her in for a morsel of food and a glass of ale.'

'Nay,' said Molly. 'My cousin Tom in Thames Street stays dinner for me. Just a glass of water. If you please.'

The Colonel rose, handed his pipe to his servant, touched a hand to his cravat to make sure it was in place. 'Mistress Huckerby,' he said. 'This is London, not York. Any stranger is, to us, a cousin.' His voice was friendly, cultured. He took her hand, the one with the scissors and pin-cushion hanging from it, bent forward in a courteous bow, and raised it delicately to his lips. 'Pray join me.'

The smiling servant pulled back a chair for her; from nowhere, a greasy-aproned, grubby-fingered woman, clearly unused to serving at table, cleared away the chicken and replaced it with a ham, a fresh loaf and an extra glass.

'Thank you kindly, sir, but just a glass of water will do.'

The Colonel mirrored his servant's smile. 'As I said, Mistress Huckerby, this is London, not York. If our springs were only as pure as the ones you are used to, we too would drink nothing but God's gift. But this is London. A little brandy, in moderation, is far safer.' He poured a thimbleful into the fresh glass. 'Mother Wickham. A jug of the boiled water you keep. And some honey.'

'Are you sure, Colonel?'

'Of course, Mother. Don't worry about the cost. I could no more let Mistress Huckerby drink undiluted brandy than I could let her drink unboiled water.' He returned his attention to Molly, his manner devoted to her best welfare. 'To the unwary, neither are safe.'

It was slightly warm to the lips, smooth and comforting to the tongue, pleasantly glowing to the throat.

'A little more?'

'Thank you, sir, but I must be getting to my cousin. He'll be waiting.'

'Quince, carve Mistress Huckerby a morsel of ham.' Thick, juicy, studded with cloves, the richness offset by the clean smell of the fresh bread. 'Not as good as your famous York ham, of course, but after a lengthy journey...' He topped up her glass with brandy, honey, water.

She could feel the weariness seeping into her. But, after two hundred miles in the York Wagon, forcing down badly-cooked food and sour ale in the kitchens of coaching inns, the bread and meat were a luxury.

Gratefully, she accepted more ham, more bread, more brandy and honey.

More bread, more brandy and honey.

More brandy and honey...