

Out of The Shadows

“Do you for a shilling, sir?” The woman stepped out of the shadows, a smile on her lips, but not in her eyes.

Northam shook his head, barely looking at her, and swiftly moved on. Too easy, and too world-wise, he thought. He gathered his cloak around him and swept his silk scarf over his mouth and nose as he made his way through the dark, narrow streets. He knew that he was not the only gentleman of quality who liked to roam the squalid alleys of the poorer districts, in search of satisfaction, but he would not be able to bear the shame if he was recognised. He did not want to risk word getting back to his wife or family. He would never be able to show his face at his club again.

The smoke from a thousand chimneys helped his subterfuge, hanging in drifts in the wider streets, and funnelled by the breeze down the myriad of narrow alleys. It was only the quality of his attire, particularly the beaver hat, which marked Northam out in the darkness amongst the poorer night inhabitants of the area.

He reached the end of the alley, and found exactly what he was looking for. Across the street, she stood on the opposite corner, looking slightly apprehensive. She was young, and her nervousness added to her look of innocence, and, to Northam’s excitement. She was possibly Irish, with clear porcelain-white skin and ringlets of dark, auburn hair framing her face. She must have only recently arrived in London, as the ravages of the big city had not yet taken their toll in her complexion. Northam felt that glorious mix of tension and excitement knot in the pit of his stomach, and made himself retain his composure before he approached her. He was about to cross the street, when he heard the clapping of horses hooves on the cobbles, and a Hanson cab appeared in the light under a gas lamp.

Northam stepped back into the shadows of the alley, not chancing the possibility of the occupant of the cab recognising him. As the cab disappeared into the night, Northam checked the street again, only to see a damn constable ambling along, whistling softly and tunelessly to himself. Whilst a couple of shillings would be enough to ensure the constable did not ask Northam any awkward questions, it was too much for the skittish young girl. When Northam looked again, she was gone. Blast that peeler, Northam thought. But already aroused, Northam decided to go back to the whore who had approached him earlier – she would have to do for tonight. He quickly retraced his steps along the damp, dirty alleyway, and was relieved to see she was still there.

“Do you for a shilling, sir?” the woman asked again at his approach. Her unimaginative soliciting did not discourage Northam. He was not desperate for satisfaction, and nodded his approval.

“This way.” Northam followed the woman back down the alley, and through a gateway into a tiny courtyard. The yard was enclosed on three sides by crumbling brick houses, with small windows obscured by years of grime. Northam savoured the exquisite feeling of excited anticipation – it was almost as satisfying as the act itself. With her back against a wall, the woman raised her skirts. Northam fumbled to loosen his trousers.

“Shilling first,” the woman said flatly.

“Oh – oh, of course.” As Northam dug into his pocket for a shilling, he felt a sharp pain in his stomach. He looked down, and in shocked amazement, watched the woman draw the knife across his abdomen. His intestines bulged against the gash,

and he felt faint, staggering backwards against the opposite wall, his beaver hat toppling from his head.

Expressionless, the woman stepped forward, pushed Northam's head back against the wall with the palm of one hand, and pulled the sharp blade across his throat. With blood soaking his shirt and silk scarf, Northam slid down the wall.

The woman paused only to take the shilling from Northam's hand, and the purse of money from his waistcoat, before leaving the courtyard. She did him all right.

END

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