

Jane the Grabber

A Pat O'Malley Historical Mystery

JIM MUSGRAVE

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DEDICATION

To readers everywhere. May you be well and prosper.

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As the *Bhagavad-Gita* summarized the human quandary:
"Thinking of sense-objects, man becomes attached thereto.
From attachments longing and from longing anger is born.
From anger arises delusion; from delusion, loss of memory
is caused. From loss of memory, the discriminative faculty
is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes."

PROLOGUE WHITE SLAVERY

Boston, Massachusetts, April, 1868

John Allen and his wife Susie had a simple method to procure young women. As a former religious student, John knew that the churches attracted many people who were previously “full of sin” and who now needed to become “cleansed in the way of the Lord.” The young women were no exception, as the parents used the Christian faith as a method of inoculating their sons and daughters against the temptations of the devil. John and Susie were well aware of these temptations, as these enticements had formed the bedrock upon which they had built their entire lives in New York City.

Waiting outside the newly erected Church of the Covenant on Newbury Street, John and Susie were staring up at the gigantic Gothic steeple. They each wore the Sunday dress of the cultured elite. He was in his blue suit with matching waistcoat, vest and white straw hat. She was wearing a hooped dress of crimson red taffeta and many petticoats beneath, and her outfit was completed with a red parasol and what John liked to call her “fire engine

bonnet.” Each layer of the church’s steeple progressed upward, as if it were assembled to rule the sky. The pointed top had the tiny cross of Jesus--without the Catholic martyred body--firmly ensconced, like a lightning rod for God.

Susie chuckled and asked, “You figure these churchgoers believe they’re in a house of God because it’s so high?”

John looked down at his little wife, as he was over six feet and four inches in height, and she was a tiny lady of five feet and one inch. “It was made to rise above the Bunker Hill Monument. It is the purpose of these so-called men of God to always be one step ahead of the state or the king, whichever ruling elite is in charge at the time. For they understand that the only power they possess over these elite is death. Even the rich must die, as Shakespeare knew so well. To die, to sleep; to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub. Since the rich and powerful must control both their own futures in the hereafter and those of their subjects, the church intrudes itself in the role of the shaman or ‘keeper of ecstasy.’ I am now a keeper of the authentic ecstatic experience, and we are here to offer it to these young women.”

The married couple from New York City watched as the young women broke away from their parents and ran down the grass embankment toward them. Their hair flowed in the wind like silken strands of glory, their Sunday bonnets bobbing on their backs, their long stockings stretching with each long stride they made.

John saw one that looked like a prospect. She was not running wild with the freedom of being released from the Lord; no, she was carefully wending her way down the proper beaten path, looking all around her at the burgeoning springtime. He watched as she stopped to

bend daintily over to pick a wild flower.

She held it up to the sun, watching its blazing light penetrate the fragile softness of the flower's petals. She squinted at the flower, twirling it around and around between two fingers and thumb, finally stopping this twisting to begin plucking the petals with her other hand.

John watched her red lips move as she severed the petal from the central golden source of the bloom. His lips moved with hers as he whispered, "He loves me, he loves me not. He loves me, he loves me not."

John Allen motioned to his wife to follow closely behind him. He then began to walk toward the young woman, who had completed her chore and was now standing still, watching the approach of these two strangers with vague curiosity.

"Oh, Miss! Do you have a moment?" John cried, beginning to pick-up his pace as he came closer to this young lady. She was wearing a black dress with satin borders, and she had the sadness of one who knew death at an early age.

But her face was bright and curious, and John knew her kind of beauty was world-weary and in the need of a change. The girl shook her hair when she spoke, and the auburn bangs on her round forehead flew backward like a horse that was rearing up to attack.

"What is it?" she asked. The adolescent impatience in her tone was there, like all of these girls, and it was just the manner he thrived on.

"I'm so sorry, but my wife and I were looking for the theater district. Do you happen to know how we can get there from these parts?"

The girl's eyes grew wide. "Theater? Are you from the theater?" she asked.

"Why, how did you guess? My name is Doctor Alberto

Rubio, and I direct in the Palace Theater of New York City. My wife, who is our theater's manager, and myself are here to look for new talent. We like to visit the local theaters and talk with the staff. The new season is coming soon, and we need actresses to perform." John accented the word "perform" by pronouncing it "per-fahm."

"Actresses? Why, I've acted in several of my school's productions! I was Beatrice in *Seven Sisters* just last year."

John knew he had planted the hook deep within her psyche. "I couldn't help but notice, my dear, your dress is funereal. Has there been a tragedy in your life?"

The girl swept her white hands over the front of her black dress and looked down at her shoes. She then slowly raised her head and considered his face. "My father passed. He was all I had. But I have a boyfriend, Jeffrey," she stammered, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Little Susie moved over to put her arm around the girl's shoulders in mock sympathy. "Don't you have anybody to look after you, dear? What's your name? How old are you?"

"Irene Sanders. I am sixteen. My Aunt Margaret has taken me in, but I don't like her. She never lets me go out with friends, and I have to do all the chores."

John knew it was time to present the bait. He took out the glossy playbill from the Palace Theater. It was, of course, all fictional, but it looked impressive, especially to a young lady from the farmland outside Boston. The print said, "Palace Theater, New York City is auditioning for the coming season. Ingénues are preferred, and experience is appreciated."

"What's an Ingénue?" the girl asked.

"It's a character we need," said John. "She is the innocent girl from the country who falls in love with the dashing young city boy. He falls in love with her and

teaches her all about how to become a sophisticated young woman in the heart of the throbbing metropolitan excitement.”

“I could do that!” Irene said. “I can sing, and I can even dance! Will there be musicals?” The girl’s gray eyes were sparkling with expectant joy.

“Is your aunt waiting for you up there?” Little Susie asked, looking up the hill toward the church.

“No. She waits for me at the cable cars. She likes to eat her sweets at the corner confectionary.”

“I don’t want to be too premature, but I do believe you may just be what we’re looking for,” said John, taking Irene by the hand. “Come with us to our hotel, and we shall see if you really can perform,” he added. “I don’t see why your aunt needs to know, do you? My wife and I have turned young women just like you into popular stage performers. Don’t you think it’s high time you were in charge of your own destiny, Irene?”

“Yes! Of course I do!” she said, and she squeezed John’s hand and smiled up at him. Behind her, Little Susie was dipping her hand into her handbag. The laudanum was there. She knew the audition would be brief, and her sleep would be long. It would last all the way back to New York. “To sleep, perchance to dream,” she said, and she saw Irene turn her head back to recognize her.

“Shakespeare! Hamlet is it not?” she asked.

“You are so right, Irene! I know you’re going to be perfect for the Palace,” said Little Susie, and she winked at the young girl and smiled knowingly. “There are all kinds of young men who will become entranced by the likes of you!”

* * *

Hester Jane Haskins, better known in the Tenderloin as “Jane the Grabber,” stood over Irene, who was splayed out

on a plush red divan in the center of the suite where Jane auditioned her girls for the entertainment. Irene was wearing a blue nightgown and red slippers given to her by Jane.

Jane wore a Chinese silk robe with a black and white panda on the back, and she was counting money seated behind a business secretary table. Up from the floorboards there was the slightest odor of machinery coming from down below.

After a week under her special care and treatment, the older woman knew the girl was now conditioned by the drugs and the booze, so she was drifting in and out of a hazy reality that made her as pliable to manipulate as a gingerbread doll.

“Get up! Go see John. He wants you to be ready for tonight’s action. I want you to serve drinks and look beautiful. You won’t see any food or drugs until you learn your place around here. Are you clear about that, little lady?”

Irene nodded her head drowsily. She stood up on baby bird legs and began to walk out the door. John’s room was right next to Jane’s. Irene had watched all the new girls as they went to John’s room. Their heads were cast down, and they seemed to be fearful, but when they came out of that room the next morning, they would often be singing and looking quite changed. Irene knew this was no real theater, even though the girls did do some acting and dancing in this converted playhouse from the 1840s. But Irene knew that wasn’t all that was required of them.

The door was unlocked, and she knocked on it before entering.

“Come in!” said John Allen. Irene now knew his real name. He was no director, Doctor Rubio. He was John the bartender. And his wife, Little Susie, was a woman

who could roll drunks quicker than Irene's father had once milked a cow in a contest at the fair outside Boston.

As she opened the door, the room inside became a wonderland of gas lights shining through multi-colored panes of stained window glass, and John Allen was sitting on top of an Arabic cushion smoking an opium pipe.

On the wall, directly above his head was a strange glowing image of a circle. Within the circle were two shapes of the same size that looked like tears. One was black and the other was white. Inside the black tear was a white ball. Inside the white tear was a black ball. Her young mind, addled by the laudanum, became increasingly wary. Why did they want her to meet John? What was happening to her?

"What's wrong, my pet?" John asked, and that's when she turned and ran.

She stumbled down the winding stairs to the street level, pushing against other girls who watched her run past them with a vague disinterest. Irene flew outside into the cacophony of sounds and excruciatingly pungent odors of Satan's Circus.

As she ran, her addled senses took in the gambling men sitting at the dark tables, the smoke from their cigars circling around their heads like clouds of doom. She stumbled into her next-door neighbor's tavern, and the man inside took her by the arm and pulled her into a back room.

She was frightened for her life until she saw that in his hand he held a Bible. He looked sincerely into her face and smiled. "Don't fear, young lady. I am here to save you from that den of iniquity. The name's Jerry McAuley, and I was once held in the devil's grasp. Demon rum was my lord and savior, by God, until I saw the light! I can now save you! Just let me give you some fresh coffee, and we

can talk over what you've experienced."

Before Irene had a chance to respond, John Allen came bursting into the back room. He had with him an officer of the law, a skinny youth with a night stick in his hand and fuzz on his pale face. "McAuley, you scoundrel! Unhand that young lady!"

Jerry McAuley reluctantly stepped back. "John Allen, you are the wickedest man in New York! You will rue this day. Mark my words. The Lord has ways of dealing with your kind, and crooked police won't be there to protect you, either!"

John pulled Irene by her arm. She squirmed at first, but then, when Allen gave her another dose of laudanum, pouring the elixir into her open mouth, she retreated back into her make-believe world of addiction.

All she could remember was when the tall bartender pulled off his black coat and undid his white shirt; she saw his body was tattooed with dozens of snakes! They seemed to wriggle upon his naked torso like the Garden Demons they represented, and John Allen picked her up into his arms and carried her to his bed.

"Now, young lady, I am going to put you into joyous ecstasy. For, you see, I am no longer just a man of Jesus. I am a convert to an ancient religion of Nature. I am a soothsayer, the Shaman of our tribe, and you are one of my mistresses! I shall now show you the worldly pleasures of the flesh such as you have never in your life experienced. It is the pleasure that Adam and Eve beheld in that ancient Garden of Eden, so long before. It has now come to the Palace Theater, and you can partake of it until you've become a woman of the Godly flesh at last!"

Irene felt his hands all over her body as she lay there, and her mind reeled with a mixture of shame and loss of innocence. She whispered one word only as he entered

her. "Jeffrey!"

In the adjoining room, Jane the Grabber heard the girl cry out, as the walls of the old theater building were quite thin. She chuckled to herself as she counted the money from last evening's proceeds.

There had been a procurement of fourteen new girls from New England, the land of plenty, as she called it. Innocent young wenches were lured into the big city by well-dressed agents like John and Little Susie Allen, believing in dreams, and becoming indentured to Jane by the dreams of opium.

Soon she would be wealthy enough to move uptown into the territory of her despised rival, Miss Rebecca Charming. Hester Jane Haskins knew, however, that she needed to make one big push in order to earn enough for the high cost real estate buildings supplied by Tammany Hall.

She needed to discover a way to guarantee victory over Charming and that stupid boyfriend of hers, Pat O'Malley. O'Malley was just like the only honest cop in New York, another Irishman, John Kennedy. The draft rioters in '63 almost beat Kennedy to death, but some do-gooders came along and convinced the gang that the police chief had died. They had left him, good as dead, but now he had risen, like so many of these pot-lickers did, to make it their sole purpose in life to put her out of business.

There were also the intellectual scammers like Doctor Edward Bliss Foote. He gave women birth control in the mail! Becky Charming used his book, *Medical Common Sense*, and she believed in his free speech group, a collection of free-thinkers and nincompoops. Charming even allowed her girls to wear Foote's womb veil instead of aborting the problem at Madame Restell's on Broadway the way Jane did. Restell gave Jane a percentage of each abortion, and it

put the fear of God into each slut who experienced it.

This Charming would have to pay handsomely for her high and mighty attitude and her Vassar College education! Jane the Grabber was moving up into high society, and she was going to take down the likes of Becky Charming as she did so.

“Oh God! Yes!” The new girl was heard screaming from the other room.

“John! Shut that bitch up!” screamed Jane, and she slammed down the lid on her money box with a loud bang.

1 FREE THINKING AND ANIMAL MAGNETISM

New York City, First Presbyterian Church, April, 1868

Becky and I were seated in the back row of the lecture hall at 428 Broad Street inside the First Presbyterian Church. Ironically, it was the same location that the now defunct American Emigrant Company had held its meetings. My father had infiltrated their membership and we had broken the case by going down to Tennessee and finding the kidnapped inventor and Jewish philanthropist, Doctor Arthur Mergenthaler. As a result of our bringing the miscreants to justice, I was still close friends with the widow, Missus Bessie Mergenthaler, and her son Seth.

We were attending a meeting of Rebecca Charming's favorite organization, the free speech group, co-founded by the man who was at the rostrum this very evening, Doctor Edward Bliss Foote. We had arrived a bit late and were forced to settle for these rather confining seats in the back pew row. I was used to the rear because that's where I sat when I attended Mass, which was fairly infrequently.

I was occupying my time by observing all the others as they listened to Doctor Foote speak. They were all keenly observant in their city finery, wearing hooped skirts, waistcoats and top hats; they were leaning forward in their pews, gravely nodding their heads whenever they agreed with what the good doctor was saying.

These people made up the liberal establishment of New York City, the free-thinking stalwarts of academia, business and the arts. Most of the Tammany Hall crowd would never be caught dead inside a lecture of this sort, as they were busy making thousands of dollars off the poor women about whom Doctor Foote was presently expounding from his pulpit.

Doctor Foote was a handsome man in his late forties, with thick brown hair and a well-groomed mustache, and the piercing gray eyes of a man of learning who could also spot a business opportunity. His brown suit and vest were pressed and distinguished-looking as he stood behind the podium and poured water from a carafe into a glass and took a long drink before he continued speaking to the assembled

crowd of supporters.

“In my medical practice, I have seen these women suffering the scourge of venereal disease, eventually spreading it like the plague amongst an unwary populace. The only sane method of preventing such devastation is through proper personal hygiene, examinations by a reputable physician and through the use of my womb veil. It is my practice to make this contraceptive available to all free-thinking women, regardless of social standing or race, so we can all be protected from diseases like syphilis and gonorrhea. I have updated my book, *Medical Common Sense*, and you can purchase a copy at the back table where my clerk, Roger, is now standing.”

Becky stood up and raised her hand.

Doctor Foote immediately recognized her because she was on his Board of Trustees. “Yes, Miss Charming? You have a question?”

“Doctor Foote, I wanted to know about your new electro-magnetic machine. Do you believe it can really cure physical maladies?”

I knew that Becky believed wholeheartedly in Doctor Foote’s machine, as she was now going to see him each week to receive a treatment. I frankly thought it was all a bunch of malarkey, but I listened to his response along with the crowd of eager followers.

"Happily for suffering humanity, the therapeutic value of the electrical discoveries of Galvani, Faraday, Cross and others has been tested in the universities and hospitals in England, France and Germany. Galvanism, electro-magnetism and other forms of electricity, are now extensively employed in the best institutions of the old world with the most flattering results."

“Is it also true that one must be magnetic himself in order to deliver the charge efficiently and with best effect?” Becky asked.

“Oh yes! The reputation of electricity has suffered by its bungling application in the hands of inexperienced operators. Being an eminently successful electrical operator is a God-given gift. He must be in the possession at all times of a good supply of animal magnetism. To be a first-rate operator, a physician must be a battery unto himself!"

I heard several of the women as they gasped. I leaned over to Becky and whispered into her ear, “I believe the good doctor has just inserted his electric foot in Doctor Foote’s handsome mouth.”

“Shush! You have never had his treatment have you, Patrick?” she admonished.

“No, and I plan not to. You are enough of a charge for me, young lady,” I said.

Becky did her usual half-smile, half-smirk, and turned back around to listen to the rest of Doctor Foote’s speech.

However, we were not going to be able to hear it because the double cedar doors to the church opened wide to admit a balding, rotund veteran of the Civil War on the Union side, who had become a one-man proponent of America’s morals, and who marched down the aisle flanked by his coterie of suited officials from the Young Men’s Christian Association. He was wearing his walrus beard and sidewhiskers and

his suit of black with the snow-white shirt and cravat. He came right up to the front of the church and stood, at military at-ease, in front of Doctor Foote, waiting patiently until the older man completed his thought.

“Without the freedom to learn from our scientific brethren all over the world, we will never advance in medicine,” Doctor Foote said.

“Doctor Foote, when one is making a profit from the sinful loins of prostitutes and using the public’s trusted postal service to transmit pornographic literature--not science--then there is no advancement. There is only a land of what the Bible correctly termed ‘Gomorrhah!’” I could see spittle flying from this portly man’s mouth, and that’s when I recalled where I had seen this gentleman during my own service to the war effort.

As the crowd boomed and hissed at what Mister Anthony Comstock was saying, I remembered an incident in Atlanta when the 17th Connecticut Infantry was bivouacked next to our regimental tent. Becky’s girls were taking customers, as was their usual occupation for the war-weary troopers, when a man came stomping into General Sherman’s tent. He was dripping wet from the rain, and he was a short corporal. “Corporal Comstock reporting for Reverend Captain Baylor! This is a cease and desist order to stop the illegal prostitution going on in this camp!” The short man handed me the paper. He had the same walrus mustache and sidewhiskers running all along his upper lip to finally encircle his ears like grappling hooks.

I looked down at the letter from this lowly Company H Chaplain and his portly little messenger. “Soldier, do you know that General Sherman himself gave orders that these patriotic women be protected from all enemies--both foreign and domestic--and that you and your good chaplain are, in effect, enemies? I suggest you take this piece of latrine paper and put it to good use. I plan to visit the ladies’ tent myself after I get off watch.”

I watched as this man’s face became beet red, and he began to sputter in exactly the manner I was seeing inside the church. “You and your kind are uncouth, cursing sinners, and you will all burn in hell!” Comstock shouted, turning on his heels and leaving the tent. I never saw him again until this night.

It seemed this Comstock was repeating his errors in civilian life because the Reverend Winston Wheeler of the First Presbyterian Church came down the aisle with two policemen. He was a tall and skinny man with bushy sideburns and matching eyebrows who walked as if he were pushing something in front of him reminiscent of President Lincoln. He stood in front of Comstock and cleared his throat. “Ahem! This is a free speech gathering, and you are welcome to attend, Mister Comstock. However, if you continue to disrupt these proceedings with your interruptions, I will be forced to have you and your associates escorted from this church.”

“How can you call yourself a man of God?” whined Comstock. “This so-called medicine man is breaking all moral codes known to our species! He is violating

Biblical laws and the laws of human decency! I cannot stand by and allow him to continue!”

“Very well,” said Reverend Wheeler. “Gentlemen,” he motioned toward the police, “Please escort these disruptors of this peaceful assembly out of my church.”

We all watched as Comstock’s little group was led down the center aisle, through the double-doors and out of the church. He continued to rant as he walked, and the people seated in the pews booed and held their noses as he passed them. Some were also laughing, as Comstock kept bumping into the escorting policemen because he was walking backwards and raising his fist in the air and shaking it at Doctor Foote.

Comstock’s interruption had succeeded in that Doctor Foote did not continue, and we broke up our gathering for the evening. Several people loitered at the book table and purchased copies, but Becky and I left the building and headed back to her place in the Theater District at Union Square near Broadway.

* * *

When we were back inside Becky’s apartment, she had slipped into her fashionable courtesan robe from the Far East. She enjoyed the soft silks imported on a daily basis into our international shipping docks, and she made most of the robes herself. They were modeled after the Chinese court, and she was wearing a red one with black satin borders called a *Shenyi*. It had drooping sleeves that made her look like an exotic bird. The open cross-collar garment was, as she advised me, worn by both sexes.

I was sitting in my usual position at the end of her French divan. She changed the colors each week, and this week it was canary yellow. I felt like I was seated on an ear of corn. “Why are you so supportive of this Doctor Foote? He seems to be mostly a charlatan. I know he has an entire catalogue of home remedies, and this electromagnetic device he also claims will prevent conception. What about that?”

Becky walked in from her pantry area. She had a silver tea set with two cups and saucers, a long-stemmed pot and spoons. She set down the tray on the mahogany table in front of the divan. As she poured, she looked over at me and addressed my question.

“Doctor Foote is the only man in New York who respects the privacy of women. He actually sells three devices for birth control purposes. His inventions are all supporting a woman’s right to choose when to become pregnant. That’s what I want for my ladies, you know that Patrick. I detest the abortionists in this city! They all get their support from Tammany Hall, and the girls go through their knives like cattle. It’s a profitable enterprise that often leaves women scarred for life.”

“What did he invent? I’ve seen these so-called inventions. A membranous envelope made from fish bladders. A rubber penis cap. A rubber womb veil. And now, this electrical machine that’s supposed to change your electrical force during intercourse, and it costs fifteen dollars per treatment! Am I going to be electrocuted when I make love to you, Becky?” I had to laugh, and I immediately wished I had not done so.

“My ladies have not become impregnated for over a year because of Doctor Foote’s contraceptives. I have encouraged that they use more than one contraceptive to maintain their personal safety. I am the only person who can afford to use his electrical therapy, and you will enjoy its advantages also, or you will not enjoy me, Patrick James O’Malley!” Becky’s green eyes flashed.

“Are you certain he won’t be the gentleman providing the electrical charge?” I asked, and Becky’s right foot came from under her lap and struck me in the side. It hurt.

“I wanted to tell you something about which my ladies have been warning me. As the real estate values near the Tenderloin have been increasing, so have the schemes to make more money in my business. There is a woman named Hester Jane Haskins who has threatened my ladies by physically accosting them on the street. She sends out her goons to warn them to stay out of the hotels and theaters where she says she has territorial rights. You know I allow my women the freedom to make friends with the men they trust will treat them like ladies. They go to the high class establishments to meet them. If they can’t go there, then my entire business will be in jeopardy. Is there something you could do to stop this woman?”

I picked up my tea cup and looked down into it. I knew that Becky believed that one could determine one’s fortune by reading the random configuration of how the leaves settled onto the cup’s bottom. I was attempting to see what I should be telling her.

“Of course I want to help you, Becky. You are the light in my life. However, I think you should come with me on a tour of the other side of the tracks. I want you to see what we are up against when it comes to stopping this scourge of opportunists and scoundrels. My father, Robert, whom you met on our excursion down to Tennessee, is now an alderman in his Five Points District. He tells me that the Tammany leaders at City Hall are behind all of this graft and corruption. They support women like Haskins because they pay more rent, and they sell more liquor. The only fellow fighting them is the Superintendent of Police, John Alexander Kennedy. And the only power Kennedy has over the City Hall embezzlers is his attempts to enforce the metropolitan excise law.”

Becky sat forward in her chair. “Is that the law that licenses establishments to sell alcoholic beverages? I never allow liquor to be sold in any of my houses. It has an immediate corruptive influence, and many of my ladies have told me that many of them have been beaten, sometimes to death, by intoxicated men.”

“You see? People like Haskins make most of their money from booze. Then, after they get their clientele drunk, they roll them for money and make even more profit. Also, they are determined to keep all their business inside where they can control the activities. Whereas you allow your ladies to roam free to solicit proper gentleman callers, as you term them, the brothels and taverns in Satan’s Circus and the Tenderloin have no such liberal policies.”

“I understand that. I am always getting reprimanded by the City for my girls. Whereas the women in these pigsties are never arrested, I constantly have to bail out my ladies at the women’s detention facility.”

“So, there you have it. These blackguards at City Hall get their pound of flesh one way or another. The only way we can work against these dens of iniquity is to go down there and see what we are truly up against. Come with me,” I said, and I stood up, reached down, and lifted Becky to her feet.

“Wait one moment,” Becky said. “Do you think I can go downtown wearing this?” She twirled around in her robe. “I’ll change my attire, and then we can go on your little expedition.”

Becky was wearing a spring frock of pink chemise, with frills on the collar and the sleeves, and her wide hoops made her step seem angelic as her petticoats rustled and her slight bustle in the rear moved provocatively so that many gentlemen out for a stroll would turn and appreciate her beauty. Her hat was also pink, and the white frills daintily covered the heart-shaped front.

Her rosy parasol was twirled as she walked, and Becky’s twirl was her signature because she would reverse the twirl and go in the other direction after four revolutions exactly, and then repeat this as she raised and lowered the umbrella’s stem, reversing the movement from her left shoulder to her right like a Navy Marine marching in a parade.

I wanted to first show Sisters’ Row to Becky, which was located at 25th Street near 7th Avenue. These bordellos were the adverse of the ones Hester Jane Haskins ran. In fact, in both décor and cleanliness, these seven brothels were places that a woman like Becky Charming could appreciate. Sisters’ Row was a series of seven side-by-side brothels run by seven sisters, who had come to New York City from a New England village seeking fame and fortune. At first, the seven sisters tried to get legitimate jobs, but then they realized that the sex trade was rampant, out in the open, protected by the police, and quite profitable. So why not make some serious money from this phenomenon?

Sisters’ Row is considered the most expensive bordello in New York City. It is frequented by the blue-bloods of society, and quite frankly, only the rich can afford their prices. The working girls are advertised as cultured and pleasing companions, accomplished on the piano and guitar, and familiar with the charms and graces of correct sexual intercourse. On certain days of the month, no man is admitted unless he has an engraved invitation, wears evening dress, and carries a bouquet of flowers. And on Christmas Eve this year, all the proceeds garnered that night on Sisters’ Row was donated to charity.

Each of these buildings looked like it had recently been painted, and the brass balustrades leading up into each brothel were polished and glistening under the bright gas lamps. There were spittoons on either side of the stairs and faux statues of Grecian goddesses standing tall on the front porches. If one did not know their real

purpose, one could assume these were museums of art or some other city-sponsored cultural pleasure.

“Sisters’ Row runs its houses the way you run yours, Becky. The elite politicians and wealthy industrialists spend their money here, so secrecy is paramount,” I explained, watching Becky’s eyes as they measured the structures’ value and compared them to her own in the Union Square Theater District.

Next, on Sixth Avenue between 29th and 30th Streets, was the Haymarket house. Right after the Civil War, this building opened as an opera house, and the name came from a similar playhouse in London. However, it could not compete with the established playhouses in Becky’s neighborhood like the Tivoli and Tony Pastor’s, so it closed down. When it reopened, under the tutelage of crooked politicians, it became a trap for out-of-town yokels.

“Women at the Haymarket are admitted at no charge. However, men are obliged to pay a 25 cent admission fee, which allows them to buy cheap drinks, dance, and carouse with the young ladies, the vast majority of whom are base and cheap prostitutes,” I explained, stopping in front of the three-story, yellow brick den of iniquity.

I continued my explanation to Becky, “In addition to a huge bar, all three floors of the yellow Haymarket contain small private cubicles, where raunchy women give their marks a cheap rendition of the can-can, and for a few bucks more they turn these cubicles into a New York City version of the French peep shows. And you can imagine what a few bucks more might entice these women to do, and do quickly, so that they can move on to their next victim.”

Becky looked up at me and smiled. “Victim? I believe your word use is quite telling, Mister O’Malley.”

“Indeed it is,” I said. “The real action comes well after midnight, when the Haymarket’s floors are littered with drunken revelers, some of whom are barely conscious. That’s when the muggers and pickpockets spring into action, leaving the poor men, again, most of them out-of-towners, with no loose change to make their way back home.”

Another popular Satan’s Circus hotspot is the Cremorne which is located in the basement of a building on 32nd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. As we came up to it, I explained the business plan of this tavern. “The owner of the Cremorne, which is said to have been named after a British tavern, is an overbearing dolt known only as Don Whiskerandos. This Don is a whale-shaped man with a huge beard and a walrus-type mustache which runs down both sides of his bloated face. Don Whiskerandos’ mission in life is to make sure the scantily clad ladies he employs are able to get the men who stagger inside his dive buying the ladies drinks at inflated prices.”

“How much is inflated?” Becky asked.

“Men’s drinks cost 15 cents, or two for a quarter. But ladies’ drinks cost a

whopping 20 cents, of which the ladies are paid a small commission by Whiskerandos. Every time a sap buys a lady a drink, the lady receives a small brass check to keep a tally on what she is owed at the end of the night. And if a fall guy springs for a bottle of wine for the lady, she keeps the cork as proof of purchase.”

“These truly are scoundrels!” Becky twirled her parasol faster.

As we walked to the next building, I told Becky the story of Jerry McAuley. “This is an establishment with the same name. It looks just like the Cremorne, but it’s not a drinking joint, nor a place where a man might pick up a woman. It is, in fact, a mission run by a former alcoholic by the name of Jerry McAuley. Quite often, and always by accident, some lad looking for a good time will wander into the wrong Cremorne. When this happens, McAuley springs into action. He quickly locks the door behind the befuddled chap. Then after plying him with sandwiches and coffee as thick as mud, McAuley launches into a mighty sermon on the wages of sin caused by the excesses of alcohol.”

“I can see he would be a man after your own heart, Patrick,” said Becky, knowing my tee totaling ways because of my brother Tim’s death from drinking.

“Needless to say, McAuley and Don Whiskerandos are not the best of pals, since The Don blames McAuley for any shortages in The Don’s cash register,” I explained.

Next, we came to the final business on our tour of Satan’s Circus. It was the four-story former theater called The Palace. The proprietress, of course, was Hester Jane Haskins, better known as “Jane the Grabber.” On the outside, it looked like a theater, with a wide entrance that had fifteen stairs leading up to the huge double-doors. It was freshly painted red, and one could see the sparkling chandeliers lighted and blazing inside the tall windows on the street side entrance.

“Here’s where your enemy lives,” I said, matter-of-factly. “I plan to stake this establishment out with men from my friend, Walter McKenzie’s gang, the Plug Uglies. I know he hates this kind of business. Even criminals have their morals, and Walter wants to clean New York of this kind of riff-raff. As you know, Becky, Walter’s money comes from gambling and freelancing prostitution similar to yours. He calls these places ‘diseased roach traps for hicks and idiots.’ If I get something on this woman, it will be with the help of McKenzie.”

“What kind of business does she run here?” Becky asked. “Can you put pressure on her?”

“I told you about Kennedy, the Police Superintendent. He tries to shut down these places when they don’t have a proper license, or when they stay open past the curfew or they sell liquor on Sundays. But, damn, as soon as he gets them shut, the crooks in City Hall have them opened again. If we want to stop Jane the Grabber, we will need something much more heinous on her than just selling booze to the out-of-town yokels.”

“Do you know anything about her or who works for her?” Becky asked.

“No. I plan to personally investigate her and her employees. We need to know

more about their ways before we put our plan into action. She is a smart woman, and she has been in business for many years. She is also constantly coming up with a new gimmick to bring more money into the equation.”

“For example?” Becky asked.

“She holds masquerade balls to lure more gentlemen inside. Her hookers are trained in dance and acting, and she keeps them high on drugs to keep them working at all hours of the day and night. She employs well-dressed couples, usually a man and a woman, who then go out to New England and recruit young women for Jane’s business. They lie to these girls, secretly drug them, and then bring them back here to work as prostitutes. They have no personal security, no rights and no futures. It’s slavery.”

Becky looked up at the stairs leading to the Palace Theater. Well-dressed gentlemen were climbing these same stairs as Rebecca Charming stood there glaring at them.

As we stood there, the doors opened, and a young woman, who looked to be no older than sixteen, stepped outside to stand on the front porch. Her eyes looked up and down the street, as if she were searching for someone she knew. She wore a cheaply made but sparkling dancehall dress with a plunging neckline and sequins all over the front and back. She was smoking a cigarette in a French holder, and her gaze finally met that of Becky.

“Come down here!” Becky yelled at the girl.

The young woman looked behind her at the front door, as if she were wary of being caught, but then she walked hesitantly down the steps until she stood directly in front of my friend.

“What’s your name?” Becky asked.

“Irene. What’s it to you?” The girl’s pupils were dilated, as she was obviously quite inebriated by alcohol or possibly drugs.

“You don’t have to live this way. I run clean houses up town.” Becky took a card from her purse and handed it over to the girl. “Come and see me if you can get away. I can show you freedom,” she added, and the girl’s eyes became brighter for a moment, and she tucked the card down into her bodice.

When I looked up, I saw a tall man wearing a dress suit standing just outside the doors, hands on his hips, glaring down at the girl. “Irene! Get away from there right now! You need to be serving drinks!”

Just before she turned to run back up the stairs, the girl’s eyes became wide with terror, and she whispered, “Aunt Margaret doesn’t know I’m here! Tell her. Will you please?”

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