02. Ape Bobby

By the next morning I didn't feel quite so cocky anymore. That might have had something to do with spending the night in a prison cell, or with the fact that I had made a total mess of my plan, or with the fact that I hadn't been able to get myself calmed down enough to sleep until midnight.

And when I finally did fall asleep on the hard, uneven bunk bed in the prison cell, I dreamed of a dozen Bobbies, reinforced by a whole platoon of Ancient Greek statues, chasing me through the dark streets of London all night, shouting: 'Stop her! Stop the feminist! She has to be at work on Monday! At nine sharp! Catch her!' I'm not sure which was more disturbing, the horrifying chase or the fact that the stone statues on my tail looked suspiciously like Mr Rikkard Ambrose.

I awoke sometime around three am, my heart hammering so fast I knew I would never be able to go to sleep again.

Instead, I surveyed the luxurious hotel suite the nice policemen had put me in for the night: six square feet of the best of what London's police stations had to offer. The walls of my temporary home were decorated in an intricate pattern of mould and graffiti. The panorama window – about two square feet covered with a beautiful set of iron bars – offered a spectacular view over the gutter of one of London's finest dingy alleyways. The door, of course, was designed to fit the standards of the window and was similarly crafted from highly decorative iron bars. The bed, as my back could attest, was also made to fit the highest standards, and was able to reduce your back muscles to a tangle of aching knots within five minutes. All in all, it was a breath-taking place with a charming atmosphere. The previous tenant had even left me a little present in the form of a puddle of well-matured goo in the corner. It emitted the most delicious, stomach-turning odour and completed the whole ambience to misery in perfection. The pale light of the moon which filtered in through the small window didn't make the scene any cheerier.

At least there was no one else in the cell with me. The policemen had put me in solitary confinement. I would have liked to think that was for my protection, but truth be told, they probably thought it was safer for the other prisoners. After all, they couldn't want those poor misunderstood thieves, burglars and murderers in the same cell as a raving madwoman who had dressed up as a man and thus had given proof of the fact that she had absolutely no morals whatsoever, could they?

Groaning, I shuffled until I was sitting on the bunk, my chin resting in my open palm. A truly philosophical position, ideally suited for pondering my fate. What would be my punishment for my little subterfuge? Would I be sent to prison for daring to defy the laws of England? Or put in the stocks? Or transported to the colonies like a common thief? That last thought cheered me up considerably. I had heard that some of the colonies were much more civilized and advanced when it came to the independence of women than our dear mother country. Plus, my aunt and uncle would then be a few thousand miles away from me.

But then I thought of my friends and of my little sister, Ella, and immediately regretted my selfish desire to be shipped off to a criminal colony. I couldn't leave. And even if I could get out of England, I knew I would rather stay and fight for my rights. Running from my problems had never been my style. Grabbing them by the throat and shaking them until they capitulated, that was more my way of dealing with things.

Not that this particular strategy had proven very helpful to me recently. After all, I had tried to grab political freedom for women by the throat, and it had just slipped through my fingers. Would it be like that with every other kind of freedom? Yes, it probably would. It wasn't just voting that ladies weren't allowed to do. I was well aware that there were other, even more essential, freedoms.

Shifting uncomfortably, I could feel Mr Ambrose's card pressing against my skin where I had stuffed it into my sleeve to conceal it from the Bobby who had taken my personal effects. Yes, a lady definitely lacked certain freedoms. Such as the right to work for a living, for instance.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

You are not seriously thinking about going to his office on Monday morning, are you? I heard a nagging little voice from the back of my mind. Forget it! Forget about him. Forget he ever existed, or that you met, or that he offered you a job. He won't give it to you now, knowing who you really are.

He wouldn't, would he?

No, certainly not.

Almost certainly.

But...

But if there was a chance, even a tiny chance, that he might still hire me, shouldn't I take it? This wasn't just about demonstrating my will to be free to the oppressors of womanhood. This was more serious. Often enough had I wondered about what would happen with me if my uncle, the one who took me and my siblings in after our parent's death, were suddenly to die. Deep inside, I knew the answer. There was no one to take care of us. We would be out on the streets faster than you could say Jack Robinson. We would be reduced to begging or seeking charity. And there were already plenty of people in line for that.

What could a young lady like me do, really do, to earn money? Would they even let me into a factory? There were tens of thousands of working-class men, women and children available for those jobs, and I suspected they were ten times better at spinning and weaving cotton than I would be. For one thing, they'd had a few decades of practise.

Besides, these jobs were bone-breaking work for little money. I had taken the time once to calculate whether I could survive on my own out there if I were able to get such a job. A factory worker earned about 1s 3d per day. That made about 400s per year, or in other words, £20. The average rent for a nice, comfortable home was about £100. So, if I took up factory work, I would be able to rent one fifth of a house, provided I managed to live without food, water or clothes for an entire year. I really wasn't that keen on intense fasting or full-time nudity.

Sometimes I wondered how those working-class people managed to live at all. But I soon stopped wondering, because I had enough problems of my own.

Once again I thought of the card in my sleeve. Yes, factory work was out of the question. This kind of work, however... Mr Ambrose had offered me a job as a private secretary. That was a prestigious post, and well-paid. It could be the way to my freedom, the opportunity I had hoped for all my life. What if I just tried to go there and...?

No!

I shook my head. But the card in my sleeve didn't seem to think much of my denial. It pressed into my skin in an ever nastier manner, proving itself to have quite sharp and annoying edges. Well... I looked around. There was nobody here but me. Nobody would see. It couldn't hurt to just take out the card and look at it again, could it?

Quickly, I fished it out and held it up into the moonlight filtering in through my panorama gutter-window.

Rikkard Ambrose

Empire House

322 Leadenhall Street

Hm. It still appeared strange to me that it didn't say anything about his titles or occupation – as if the man expected everybody to know who he was. And maybe, just maybe, he might be right to assume so. Leadenhall Street... the name rang a bell somewhere.

With sudden realization, my head jerked up from where it rested on my knees and I snapped my fingers. That was it! Wasn't Leadenhall Street in the very heart of the banking district? Where all the largest banks and companies, even the East India Company and the Bank of England, had their offices? What was Mr Rikkard Ambrose doing there if, as I had assumed, he was a simple government official?

Maybe I had misjudged him. There apparently were a few things hidden under that cold, flinty exterior.

What would he say if I took him at his word and on Monday actually... no! Again, I instinctively shook my head, trying to chase the mad thought away. I had to forget about it. It had been a preposterous idea in the first place. He would kick me out of his office as soon as he caught sight of me, or get his goons to do it. Maybe that mountainous fellow Karim. He looked like he could kick you all the way from here to Hampshire. And that wasn't considering what he could do with that pig sticker of his.

And still... still the possibility was tempting. My eyes glazed over as I considered the possibilities. My own job! My own money, earned with my own hands. Money to do with as I pleased. No longer would I be dependent on my miserly relatives, no longer would I have to dodge my aunt's not-so-subtle attempts at marrying me off.

The mental image of a vulture-like little woman violently cut short my daydream of independence. Ah yes, my beloved aunt, Mrs Hester Mahulda Brank. Like most greedy people on this wonderful earth, she was most desirous of obtaining what she could not have. First and foremost among those desires was a craving for social status, which her nieces, as daughters of a gentleman, automatically had, and she, as the daughter of a pawnbroker and a lady of questionable honour, was incredibly jealous of.

Mrs Brank was determined, as recompense for all her expense in feeding and clothing us girls for all those years, to squeeze as much social advancement out of us as humanly possible, and would have happily auctioned us off to the highest bidder if by so doing she could have gained an invitation to a duchess's tea party. The sale of relatives, however, unfortunately being illegal in England, she was confined to trying to marry each of us off to as rich and noble a bridegroom as possible, thus killing two birds with one stroke: not only would she be ridding herself of expensive mouths to feed, but she also would be gaining entrance into higher society through her nephews-in-law. In this way, the six bothersome girls who had infested Mrs Brank's home for years would finally be turned from unremunerative properties into valuable investments.

Hitherto, this brilliant scheme had met with little success. All six of us were still unmarried, and if I had my way, things were certainly going to stay that way, at least in my own case.

My dear aunt, with the natural instinct of the born financier, sensed this reluctance on the part of her property – i.e. me – to be dispensed with at a good profit, and was not very pleased about it. She had pointed out more than once that we would not always be able to count on her and her husband's generosity, and that after their death, nobody would provide for us if we were not married.

'And what if I want to provide for myself?' I had asked her once when the subject had come up.

She had stared at me as if I had been speaking a foreign language, and then given me a sour grimace which was probably supposed to have been a smile. She had thought I was joking.

Well, here and now was a chance to provide for myself. A real chance. Thoughtfully, I stared at the card again. Money. Money to earn for myself. A way to freedom.

If I didn't take it... then it would be the street for me. Or worse, the workhouse.

I looked around. Not that I had ever seen a workhouse, myself – but I had heard the stories whispered all around London. This charming little cell might actually give a good indication of what life in such a pigsty of humanity would be like. Criminals and poor people were about the same thing in this glorious metropole of the British Empire, and their accommodations were probably similar. Of course, as a poor workhouse inmate, I wouldn't have the luxury of a cell to myself, and the food would probably be scarcer, because, unlike criminals, poor people don't generate paperwork when they die of hunger. But it was only to be expected that criminals would get better treatment. After all, thieves and murderers were of some interest to the general public: they were the subject of heroic ballades and gripping newspaper articles. They had to be kept alive until they could be hanged to the cheers of the crowd. Poor people, on the other hand, were just dirty and dull. Who would want to waste food and living space on them?

And that was the bright future that awaited me. Unless... Unless Mr Ambrose...

Suddenly, I heard a faint noise. Was it really what I thought? Yes! The jingle of keys. Someone was coming. Quickly, I tucked the card away and looked up. Startled by the sudden bright glow, I blinked and shielded my eyes with my hand. I had been so deep in thought that I hadn't noticed how the time had flown by. Now I saw a faint orange glow falling through the window into the cell. The sun was rising. The jingling from outside the cell grew louder and was joined by the sound of heavy footsteps.

I watched the cell door apprehensively. After a few more moments, a thick-set bobby appeared from around the corner. I could see him approach through the iron bars of the door. He unlocked it with a rusty key and pulled it open, gesturing for me to exit.

'What now?' I asked, not managing to keep apprehension from creeping into my voice.

The portly constable frowned. 'What do ye mean, "what now", Miss?'

'What will happen to me? How will I be punished?'

He blinked like a little piggy. Then, he opened his mouth and started to laugh. He continued to laugh for some time, holding his belly all the while. The keys jingled in the rhythm of his merriment.

'Oh my God, Miss,' he gasped, still holding his belly. 'We ain't gonna punish people for things like that! A woman trying to vote? We might as well punish every nutter running around in the streets, and then we'd be busy till kingdom come. Why, only the other day I met a man in a pub who told me that we're all descendants of apes! Clearly off his rocker, the chap. And I didn't even reprimand him.' He chuckled once more. 'Now come on, Miss. It's time for ye to go.'

'I'm not going to be thrown into prison?' I demanded, actually sounding a little offended. I had expected some horrendous punishment. After all, I had bravely defied the chauvinist establishment. That deserved some recognition, at the very least, didn't it? A few years ago, at the Peterloo massacre, the authorities had come down hard on a crowd of working-class men demonstrating for their right to vote, resulting in twelve dead and three-hundred injured. And now they were simply going to let me go, just because I was a woman? There was no justice in this world! 'That's not fair! They're not even going to put me on trial?'

The bobby shook his head.

'Nay. We wouldn't want to bother a judge with this, he'd fine us for wasting his time. Now come on, Miss.'

For a moment, I considered whether I should insist on my right to go to prison. But at heart I was a practical person, and I really didn't want to spend another night on that bunk bed. So, grudgingly, I rose and followed the constable out of the cell to the small office of the police station, which smelled faintly of spit tobacco and bacon.

'Just wait a moment, Miss, while I get your things,' the still-smiling bobby said and waddled off to a cupboard in the corner. Opening the cupboard door, he rummaged around inside and came back with something big and black in his hand. 'There ye go, Miss,' he said in a stern and annoyingly fatherly manner, handing me all my personal belongings, contained in the top hat I had worn when I first set out on my little adventure. 'I really hope this will be a lesson to ye.'

'Yes it will,' I assured him, adding to myself, too quietly for him to hear: 'I'll make sure not to curtsy next time.'

Yes, next time I wouldn't get caught. Next time, I would succeed, because now I knew how hazardous good manners could be. I had never entirely agreed with my aunt, who had always thought them of such great importance, and now I finally knew I had been right all along. They were superfluous and dangerous – they could get you thrown into prison!

The bobby escorted me to the door of the police station, obviously wanting to make sure he would be rid of the madwoman, now that she was out of the cell and could start climbing up the walls or spouting feminist nonsense again at any moment. I was more than happy to oblige him and stepped out of the brick building into a glorious Saturday morning. The sun was shining and the fog was only slight today, the wind blowing in the opposite direction from the River Thames, making the morning air comparatively clear by London standards.

I immediately set out towards home. I wasn't sure what my aunt had made of my overnight absence. She might not even have noticed it. With six of us in the house, and ninety per cent of her brain cells occupied with saving housekeeping money, she sometimes forgot one or another of her nieces. Sometimes I got lucky and it was my turn. Maybe, if I was really lucky, that had been the case last night.

At least I knew she hadn't completely run haywire and contacted the police, fearing I had been abducted or some such nonsense. If she had, the police would have informed her that her dear niece was perfectly safe, though a bit bedraggled and sitting, dressed in men's clothes, in one of their cells. If she had heard that, my aunt would have come to get me. And I don't know whether I would have survived the encounter. As it was, I had hopes of escaping relatively unscathed.

As if in answer to my hopeful attitude, the rows of dark houses parted before me and granted me a beautiful view of Green Park. In the warm glow of the sunrise, the small park looked like a fairy kingdom planted between the strict, orderly houses of middle-class London. A few birds were hopping on the grass, and the wind rippled the surface of a little pond surrounded by wildflowers. Through a clump of trees on the opposite side of the park, I could see the houses of St. James's Street.

My Uncle Buford had lived on St. James's Street ever since I could remember, and we had lived with him and his wife ever since I could walk. We – that is my five sisters and I – had had to quit our family's country estate years ago, after our mother and father died and the estate went to the next male heir of the line. If you believed the stories of my older siblings, who could still remember the place, it had been a veritable palace with hundreds of servants and doorknobs made of gold. I didn't. Believe their stories, I mean. But I did somewhat resent the thing about this supposedly 'rightful heir' snatching away our family's estate just because he was a dratted man!

Oh well, to tell the truth, I didn't remember our childhood home in the country well, and I didn't want to. I was a city girl, and the few trees and lawns of Green Park were as much country as I could deal with at any given time.

Squaring my shoulders, I made my way through the park, enjoying the songs of the birds in the trees and the fresh morning breeze. The country was a nice thing, as long as it was in the middle of town and you could reach a civilized place with shops, libraries and newspapers within five minutes or so.

Five minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, I had reached the wall that encircled our little garden, a rare thing in the city of London. Over the wall, I could see the plain, orderly brick house with its plain, orderly windows, plain, orderly curtains and plain, orderly smoke curling out the chimney in a discreet and economical manner. The flowerbeds around the house were well-kept, but strict and simple. Everything was rectangular and neat. There wasn't a piece of decoration in sight. Sometimes, when I looked at this house I had been living in for years now, I thought it should have a sign over the door saying, 'Fortress of the Bourgeoisie, centre of the realm of hard work and stinginess. Beware of the aunt. She bites!'

There was only one bright spot among all the neat tediousness: the window of a first floor room. It afforded a wonderful view over Green Park – which was why, when we had arrived at this house years ago, the room had been dusty and unused, and my uncle had never set foot in it. He had probably been afraid the annoyingly beautiful view might distract him, or worse, tempt him to actually take a walk and thus waste valuable time he otherwise could have spent working.

But that had been just fine with me. When we had arrived at my uncle's, I had seen the dusty, deserted old room, fallen in love with it and taken possession before any of my sisters could complain. I had defended my conquest with my very life! Only Ella, my youngest sister, and of all of them the one I could stomach best, had been allowed to enter my dominion and make her abode there along with me.

Right now, the fact that my room looked out over the back garden came in handy in a way which had nothing whatsoever to do with the beautiful view. Hurrying across the street, I opened the little door in the garden wall with the key I had secretly 'borrowed' from my uncle, along with his clothes and passport. Inside, I quickly made my way to the garden shed. Taking out the rickety old ladder that had been in there since time immemorial, I carefully put it to the wall of the house and started climbing up to the window which I had taken care to leave unlatched. If I was lucky, I would get back into the house without anybody being the wiser.

Climbing up the ladder proved to be considerably more difficult than climbing down had been. My muscles were aching from the night in the cell, and there seemed to be several large lead weights tied to my behind, pulling me down. Or maybe it was just my behind that felt so heavy...

No! It was just generous, after all, not fat. Definitely not fat.

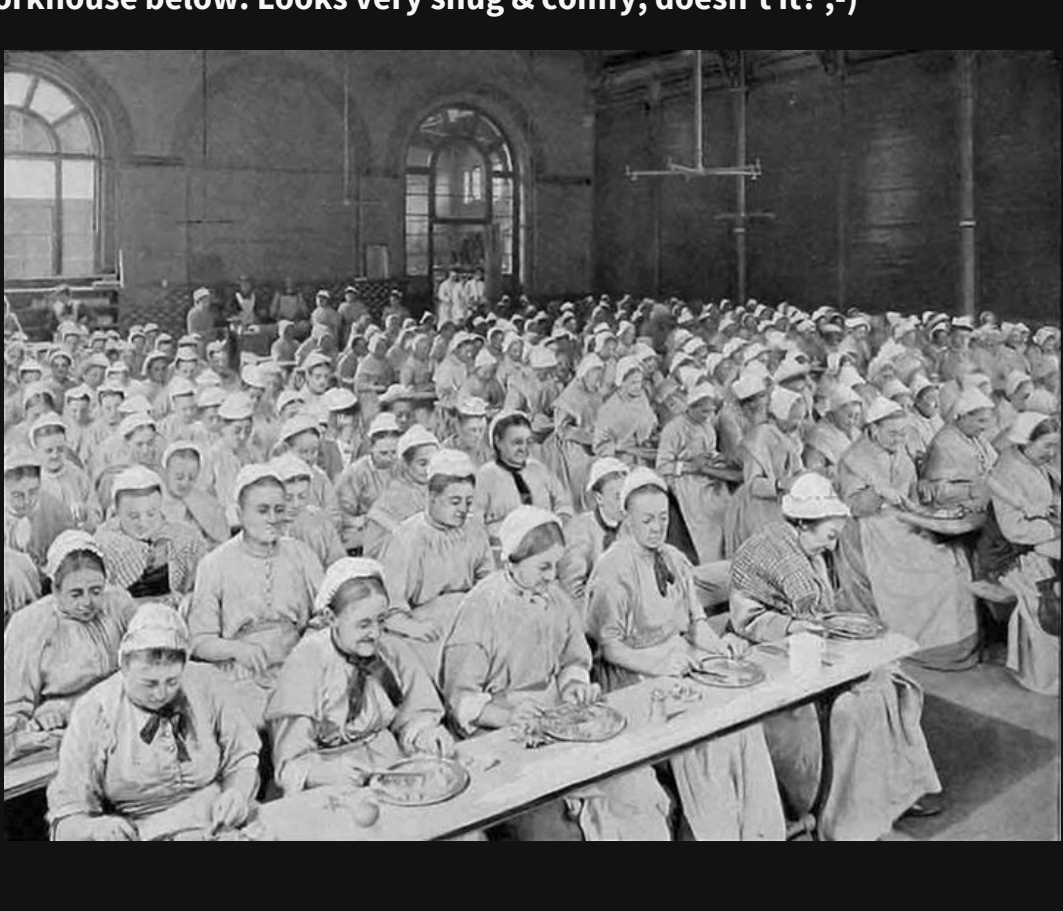
Sweat ran down my face in rivulets by the time I had reached the top of the ladder. I clung to the windowsill for a moment, making sure my aching legs would be up for the task, then I hoisted myself inside and landed rather inelegantly on the floor. Done! I was back home, and nobody had seen me sneak in. I remained kneeling on the floor for a moment longer to catch my breath, and then turned and got up – to find my sister Ella sitting just a few feet away on her bed, staring at me, her mouth agape in shock.

Oh, did I happen to mention she hadn't known anything of my leaving yesterday?

Blast, blast, blast!

Good morning, my Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen! ;-)

I sincerely hope that you enjoyed the chapter number 2 of my newest book! If you would like to find out more about what exactly a workhouse looks like, I've included a picture of the dining hall of St Pancras Workhouse below. Looks very snug & comfy, doesn't it? ;-)



Oh, and incidentally, in case you weren't quite able to follow Lilly's monetary calculations in the chapter you've just read: British currency throughout the nineteenth century was rather different from the various modern monetary systems that we're used to nowadays. The majority of our modern monetary systems are based on a decimal system, meaning on multiples of ten, like as a dollar being divided into 100 cents. Rather than doing it the easy way and having everything straightforward, the British, with their stiff upper lip and typical island individualism, made up a system that was a little bit more complicated and crazy ;-)

While today, they use the British pound divided into one hundred pence, back in those days, British money consisted of three different kinds of coins: the pound (£), one of which was worth twenty shillings (s), one of which in turn was worth 12 pence (also called pennies, usually abbreviated by the letter d). At first glance, it might seem quite a bit strange that "penny" would be abbreviated as the letter "d" instead of the letter "p" - but if you dig a little into the history of the term and stumble across the fact that the old Roman word for the penny coin was actually "denarius", it starts to make a a little bit more sense. Also, it is worth mentioning that one British Pound back in the nineteenth century was worth a lot more than one pound would be today, which isn't really that surprising, taking into account the fact that the coins at that point in time were made out of pure gold. Just the right thing to put into a treasure chest and bury on a deserted pirate island...

Now, can any of you tell me how much pennies are £243 and 17 shillings? You've got three seconds to calculate, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen... Haha ;-)

For now, I must bid you fairwell. Au revoir...

Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Criminal Deportation: Criminals the British did not want to have around were often simply shipped off to one of their colonies. Australian politics make so much more sense when you know that most of their politicians are descendants of thieves and cutthroats, now, don't they? You have to keep up family traditions, after all... ;-)

Workhouse: The place where all the people who had no work or other means of supporting themselves ended up in Victorian London. It was an image of horror parents used to frighten their children with, which probably tells you enough about the conditions in such places.

Metropole: The central city of an Empire.

Being descended from apes: In the early 19th century, the forerunners of Darwin's theory of evolution first appeared, such as Lamarck's "Theory of Transmutation" from 1809. For many people, finding out that they were supposed to be the descendants of apes instead of the creations of God's divine will was a rather big disappointment, so many chose to simply ignore or not believe in the new scientific theories. Of course, Darwin never actually said that we were descended from apes. What he said that humans and apes had a common ancestor way, way back. But most people in the 19th century didn't pay attention to little details like that, and there are still some who don't today.

Continue reading next part ☐