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A Most Dangerous Woman

L M Jackson

L.M. Jackson

*A Most
Dangerous
Woman*



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Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise](#)

[Also by L.M. Jackson](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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A Most Dangerous Woman

L.M. Jackson lives in London with his partner Joanne and daughter Clara. He has written four books under the name Lee Jackson, the first of which, *London Dust*, was shortlisted for the Ellis Peters Historical Dagger Award. He is fascinated by the social history of nineteenth-century London and maintains the popular website www.victorianlondon.org which is devoted to exploring the minutiae of daily life in the Victorian metropolis. *A Most Dangerous Woman* is the first in a new series of mysteries featuring lady detective Sarah Tanner.

Praise for L.M. Jackson

'Victorian London is brought vividly to life from the very beginning ... plenty of wry humour ... and engrossing historical detail' *Time Out*

'Victorian London can be such an evocative place, having captured the imaginations of countless crime writers. To Conan Doyle, Anne Perry, Andrew Martin ... we must now add Lee Jackson who [with *The Welfare of the Dead*] makes this patch his very own' *Guardian*

'[Jackson] demonstrates quite brilliantly what the genre can do. [*A Metropolitan Murder*] is a rare and succulent piece of work' *Literary Review*

'The smoky, foggy, horse-dung laden atmosphere of the London streets steams off the page' *Spectator*

'Full of power and substance, *London Dust* is an assured debut ... a compelling and evocative novel that brings the past, and its dead, to life again' *Guardian*

'Victorian London is vividly brought to life ... for an atmospheric picture of the period it's hard to beat' *Sunday Telegraph*

Also by L.M. Jackson
(writing as Lee Jackson)

London Dust
A Metropolitan Murder
The Welfare of the Dead
The Last Pleasure Garden

PROLOGUE

Sarah Tanner bought her coffee-house in the spring of eighteen hundred and fifty-two. It was a small, rather dusty premises, situated upon the corner of Leather Lane Market and Liquorpond Street, in the parish of St. Albans, Holborn. The previous owner - a widower who had taken to drink upon the death of his wife - had rather let himself go, and his old business had rather gone with him. Little remained in the way of fixtures and fittings: only a bronze coffee urn, dull and discoloured, that stood upon the counter, and the faint, melancholy aroma of roasted mocha - or, more likely, the scent of some more economical berry, laced with chicory - which had, over the years, permeated the woodwork.

To some, regardless of the interior, it might have seemed an unfortunate location for any commercial undertaking. For the district was mentioned in the *Police News* with disturbing regularity and, if the respectable folk of nearby quarters said anything of their Leather Lane neighbours, it was generally to condemn them as thieves and parasites; or to commend their souls to the care of the local Home Missionary, which amounted to much the same thing. Sarah Tanner, however, had given the matter some thought: the area was a poor one, but she had known worse; the two little rooms and attic above the shop seemed perfectly adequate for her own comfort; and, most importantly, the proximity of the street market meant there would always

be a passing trade. From thirsty costermongers, who set up stall at the break of dawn, to the weary females who scrabbled for bargains at the close of day, the pavement outside was rarely empty. And if the occasional cadger or out-and-out villain should stumble upon Sarah Tanner's new establishment, she did not much mind - as long as they paid their way.

Mrs. Tanner - she had resolved to appropriate that title to herself at an early stage in proceedings, though only twenty-seven years of age and unfamiliar with the married state - proved to have a sound business mind. The little shop, once cleaned and renovated, soon began to prosper. In fact, it was not long before she employed both a waiter - an elderly man by the name of Grundy, reputed to have known better days - and a certain Mrs. Hinchley, who, upon interview, declared herself 'a plain cook and no nonsense', which was precisely what was required.

Mrs. Tanner's greatest commercial asset was that she kept regular hours. For she happened to have that most useful of objects, a little mahogany clock - a rarity in Leather Lane - and a striking one at that. Thus she opened her door at precisely six o'clock in the morning, rain or shine, and closed it again at midnight - in marked contrast to the neighbourhood's more established eating-houses. Her food, too, was both edible and reasonably priced - a rare combination - and provided the costermongers with a breakfast which was, in their own words, 'a proper tightener'. Tea and coffee came by the pint - one penny - or the small cup - a ha'penny - and something hot was always ready on the grill, from eggs and bacon in the morning to sausage and potatoes at night.

Mrs. Tanner also understood the value of advertisement. After two or three weeks in the business, she hired a Frenchman, a self-proclaimed genius with a brush, much down upon his luck, to hand-paint a signboard, which spelt

out the words *Dining and Coffee Rooms* in black and gold. Then came tickets, announcing 'A Good Dinner for 8d.' and 'Leg of Beef Soup, 2d. per cup', placed prominently in the window, above the red curtain that concealed diners' lower extremities from passers-by. And, of course, there was the best advertisement of all - the rich smell of sizzling chops, kippers or Yarmouth bloaters that occasionally escaped from the narrow confines of the kitchen. And it was a narrow little room - for the shop was not a large one, by any means. The front, which consisted of a small plate-glass window and a very plain door, set back a little from the street, could not have measured more than twelve feet across. Inside, there was just enough space for four booths against the wall, the serving-counter, and a pair of tables by the window. It was only after purchasing the lease that Mrs. Tanner discovered the room itself was rather irregular and wedge-shaped and, upon close inspection, she found that the walls buckled inwards slightly, as if the victim of monumental tight-lacing. Still, she was not daunted by the discovery and it soon became clear, to anyone who took an interest, that the new coffee-house on the corner was being admirably managed and maintained by its new proprietress.

But what of Sarah Tanner herself? Now, *there* was something of a contradiction. For example, it was said that she had the good manners of a respectable upper servant but was far too young to have been pensioned; that she spoke as if she had received an education, but knew the costers' slang as if she were born-and-bred to it; and that she not only had no husband - which was a commonplace on Leather Lane, where husbands came and went with remarkable ease, generally via the local beer-shop - but seemed never to have possessed one. This latter point was particularly remarkable, since she had a pretty face, with dark brown hair and deep hazel eyes, and a full, graceful

figure - a figure which, upon first sight, some of the more impetuous costermongers even remarked upon to their wives. It was, doubtless, these unfortunate remarks that prompted a few of the coster-women to declare Mrs. Tanner a queer character, not quite 'on the square'; and to suggest that she had got her shop and money *somewhere*, and *they* didn't care to inquire where that might be.

One thing was for certain: Sarah Tanner was not going to tell them. And if, upon her arrival, she was the subject of gossip, it was the proverbial nine-days' wonder, soon overshadowed by more exciting news, like the mysterious theft of old Bill Teach's donkey during the night, or Sal Perkins 'clouting' her rival in love outside the Presbyterian Chapel. Indeed, the streets between Leather Lane and nearby Saffron Hill, whatever the morals of their inhabitants, howsoever poor they might be, were never short of incident. The mystery of Sarah Tanner was soon put to one side and Mrs. Tanner, for her part, was quite content with the outcome. For she went about her business with - well, not shyness by any means, but a certain degree of reserve. And even Ralph Grundy, who saw her every day, would happily testify that his employer was 'a close 'un, and no mistake'. And, if asked to say any more on the subject, Mr. Grundy would merely tap his nose, raise his glass, and refuse to reveal any dark secrets.

To a degree, this was a natural discretion on Ralph Grundy's part; but, principally, it was his own ignorance of Sarah Tanner's history. All the same, relying upon the wisdom of his years - for he was in his sixties, and rather given to solitary speculation - he privately concluded that his employer had 'a past' of one sort or another, one that might well catch up with her.

And, of course, he was quite right.

CHAPTER ONE

It had just gone half-past eleven at night and the little coffee-house on the corner was quite empty of customers. Mrs. Hinchley had long since gone home and Ralph Grundy was busying himself in the kitchen. Sarah Tanner, meanwhile, had moved from her usual seat behind the counter to stand in front of the fireplace and warm her hands. It was just as she stood there that she heard the shop-door creak behind her.

‘Sarah? It’s never you, is it?’

The interruption startled Mrs. Tanner. It was peculiar for anyone on Leather Lane to address her by her first name. She turned to see a figure at the door, a man two or three years older than herself, dressed in a smart brown suit and hat, with a russet-coloured waistcoat and rather extravagant red cravat.

‘Don’t say you don’t remember George Phelps?’ continued the newcomer, an exaggerated look of sorrow on his face. ‘Don’t say it, old gal!’

The proprietress of the Dining and Coffee Rooms visibly paled at the sight of her visitor.

‘I know you all right,’ Sarah Tanner replied quietly, stealing a nervous glance over her shoulder, towards the kitchen. The man, in turn, grinned and sat down onto a bench seat in one of the shop’s little booths.

'How are things with you, eh?' he inquired. 'How long's it been?'

'Never mind that. What do you want here, Georgie?'

'Me?' said George Phelps, removing his hat with something of a flourish, and setting it down upon the table. 'I don't *want* nothing, old gal. I was going my merry way and just saw you standing there, large as life. Gave me a shock, seeing you in these parts. Last I'd heard, you'd ran off with a certain young gent.'

'Then you heard wrong,' replied Sarah Tanner emphatically. As she spoke, the rattling sound of Ralph Grundy industriously cleaning the gridiron echoed from the kitchen. She softened her voice. 'I mean, I'm sure it's good to see you, Georgie, but, if you don't mind, you can oblige me by leaving.'

'Leaving?' replied George Phelps, scratching his chin. 'That's a fine welcome, when I only just pitched up! Don't an old friend deserve better than that?'

'An old friend might.'

'Come on, Sarah, don't be like that. Now, for one thing, the way I recall it, you still owe me two bob for that last cab we took from Norwood. I weren't planning on calling in my debts, mind you. But, seeing as I've found you here, well, I reckon it's fate we met up. We might do some business, you and me.'

'So it's money you're after.'

'Sarah, I just happened to be passing ...'

Sarah Tanner dismissed George Phelps's reply with a shake of her head and walked over to the shop-counter. Opening the till-drawer that lay beneath, she retrieved two shillings and placed them on the wooden surface.

'Now we're square,' she said. 'You can go.'

‘Square?’ he replied, contemplating the money. ‘Maybe. You’re pretty free and easy with that moneybox. Do you work here? Is that it, eh?’

George Phelps sounded incredulous, as if he could not truly conceive of such a thing. But Mrs. Tanner had no chance to reply. For, at that moment, Ralph Grundy’s grey head appeared at the kitchen-door. The waiter peered into the shop.

‘You all right, missus?’

‘Yes, Ralph, thank you. Mr. Phelps here - he’s an old acquaintance of mine.’

Ralph Grundy glanced in Phelps’s direction, but found the stranger’s face inconveniently obscured by the curtains that divided the booths.

‘You finish off, Ralph,’ continued Mrs. Tanner. ‘Then you can help me with the shutters.’

Ralph Grundy nodded and returned to his duties. Sarah Tanner, meanwhile, looked back at George Phelps. Her visitor was chuckling quietly to himself.

‘“Missus”?’ he said. ‘You? Don’t tell me you’ve gone and settled in this queer little rat hole? I’d never have believed it! Not in a million years!’

‘I’ll have you know, Georgie Phelps,’ she replied, a degree of indignation in her voice, ‘that I do very nicely here. I don’t need the likes of you to spoil things for me.’

‘“The likes of me”!’ he exclaimed, still visibly amused. ‘Oh! Sarah, I never thought—’

‘Never thought what?’ she said impatiently.

But George Phelps fell silent. Moreover, in an instant, all humour had drained from his face.

‘What?’ said Mrs. Tanner, puzzled.

‘Hush, listen!’

George Phelps dropped down into the booth, his back to the window. Hunched up, concealed from the street, he motioned for Sarah Tanner to come and sit opposite him. His expression was so urgent and insistent that she obeyed.

The sound was that of heavy footsteps - sturdy boots, walking at a steady pace, along the street outside, close by the shop-window. Sarah Tanner peered out through the glass. Directly beneath the flare of gas that illuminated the Dining and Coffee Rooms sign-board stood a tall, blue-uniformed figure, a heavy-set man with large side-burns and moustache, and a high glazed hat.

'It's a Peeler, ain't it? Big fellow, whiskers?' said Phelps.

She nodded.

'Don't catch his eye, for God's sake,' said Phelps, pulling her back.

'At least you haven't changed much, Georgie,' she whispered.

George Phelps said nothing. He stayed quite still, a finger to his lips. After what seemed an age, they heard the sound of the policeman moving on.

'He's been dogging us all the way from Covent Garden,' he muttered, mumbling a curse under his breath.

'With good reason, I expect.'

'Maybe,' said Phelps. 'I thought I'd lose him round the alleys.'

'What was it this time?'

'Some hotel work,' he replied. 'Though I don't know how he got fly to it.'

'What if he catches up with you?'

'He won't find a thing on me; I ain't even done the job.'

'Well, perhaps you had better be off, all the same,' she suggested. 'He might come back.'

'Aye, he might at that,' replied George Phelps.

Sarah Tanner said nothing.

'Well, as you like,' said Phelps, getting up from the booth and pocketing the two coins that still lay on the counter. 'I'll remember you to Her Majesty, anyhow.'

'I'd rather you kept it dark, Georgie.'

'Would you now? Well, I suppose it weren't the best parting, now that I come to think about it. Still, you know me, darlin',' he replied with a wink. 'I won't say a word. Word of honour.'

The look upon Sarah Tanner's face rather implied that she knew nothing of the sort. Nonetheless, George Phelps, with a rather satirical bow, proceeded to make his way to the door.

'I'll see you again, *missus*,' he said with a grin, as he stood in the doorway. Then, out upon the street, he turned up his collar and walked quickly away.

Mrs. Tanner returned to her counter, with every intention of counting the day's takings. But her mind was distracted and she continued to gaze out of the window - until her reverie was interrupted by an unexpected sight. For the burly figure of the policeman passed by the shop a second time, doubtless having completed a circuit round the back alley. It was not his presence that unnerved her, nor the grim determined look upon his face as he passed beneath the gas-light. Rather, it was the item he held, partially concealed in his hand, just visible above the curtain that covered the lower portion of the window. It was not the familiar wooden truncheon of the Metropolitan Police. She could see it clearly - the glint of a sharp metal blade.

Sarah Tanner tried to gather her thoughts. After a moment's hesitation, she called out to Ralph Grundy -

bidding him to mind the shop - grabbed her shawl from where it lay behind the counter, and hurried outside.

Leather Lane was all but empty. The only exception was a trio of convivial gentlemen, staggering out of the Bottle of Hay, the nearest public-house. Nonetheless, beyond them, she could just make out the policeman, a couple of hundred yards distant. Then the drunken men veered off, towards Saffron Hill, and the policeman took the opposite direction, turning into Baldwin's Gardens.

Mrs. Tanner knew the road. The 'Gardens' were, in fact, a dingy, narrow side-street, quite barren of any flora - like most metropolitan thoroughfares which make historic claims to rusticity. She walked slowly to the junction, her face partly concealed by her shawl, and glanced warily round the corner. To her annoyance, there was nothing to be seen. For the gas-lights above the little row of nearby shops - long since closed - were not illuminated.

She resolved to press on, just a few steps further. And it was then that something drew her attention to a little alley on the right.

What was it?

Was it the choking, spluttering sound that suddenly assailed her ears?

Or the hint of movement in the darkness, the scratching hands, scraping in the dirt?

Both were terrible enough; quite sufficient to cause a chill to run down her spine. In truth, another woman might have screamed and fled.

And that woman - wise, sensible creature - would not have witnessed the death-throes of George Phelps, the bloody twists and turns of his guts spilling out onto the mud.

Nor would she have seen, in the distance, the sight of a blue-clad figure casting a wary glance in her direction, then

disappearing into the darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

At first, Sarah Tanner felt sure that she was dreaming. For it seemed quite impossible that George Phelps's ruined body lay before her. To her stunned senses - even as desperate half-formed sounds issued from the man's throat - the scene resembled some strange piece of bloody theatre, staged for her particular benefit. But, at the same time, there was no doubting the evidence of her eyes. Nor could there be any doubt that George Phelps was dying.

George Phelps himself seemingly became aware of her presence and raised his head. His eyes silently pleaded; his hand reached out, grasping at thin air in short convulsive movements. But she found that she could only stand and watch, like a dreamer; passive; utterly helpless.

How long was it, before he died? She had not the slightest conception. It seemed an eternity. It was only the smell that finally woke her from her daze; it was like the scent of the slaughterhouse, the stench of the back-streets of Smithfield Market; it was the blood pooling at her feet. Instinctively, she stepped back.

She might cry for help, she thought to herself. She might cry 'Murder!' and raise the alarm.

But what then?

George Phelps was dead.

It was too late. What good would it do?

And it was the policeman that had killed him.

She turned it over in her mind.

The policeman?

It was Georgie's fault, she assured herself - his bad luck. Mixed up in something he oughtn't to be.

Murder.

It was a bad business - terrible - but not *her* business. Plain and simple.

Sarah Tanner made her decision. Quietly, cautiously, she turned round and retraced her steps back to Leather Lane.



She found that the door to the coffee-shop was locked, the gas-light turned off, and the shop's rickety wooden shutters already slid into place. Ralph Grundy, however, kept sentry inside, his face just visible through the gap between the protective boards, his thin features pressed against the plate glass.

'Thank you for locking up,' she said, hurriedly, as he opened the door.

'Them shutters are a blessed trial, for an old man on his own.'

'Then you should have waited for me,' she replied.

The old man shrugged and looked back at her. 'Something up with your pal, was there, missus?'

'Yes,' she said, with only a slight hesitation. 'He forgot his gloves.'

'Oh, gloves, was it?'

Mrs. Tanner merely nodded.

'Ah, well,' said Ralph Grundy, buttoning his coat. 'I'll be off then.'

'Good night.'

‘Night, missus.’

Ralph Grundy put on his hat and quit the shop. Sarah Tanner, meanwhile, locked the door behind the old man, though it was more through force of habit than any conscious decision. Then, just as she did every night, she took the oil-lamp that sat upon the counter, and carried it carefully up the back stairs to her bedroom above the shop. It was the privilege of the owner: a small room, overlooking the street. It contained a bed, dressing-table and washstand, all kept clean and tidy, a comfortable armchair beside the window, and a rather grand old wardrobe, only a little scratched here and there.

She sat upon the bed, unlaced her boots, and unbuttoned her dress. There was already a small fire burning in the hearth - a luxury she always carefully prepared a good hour before closing - and, as was her custom, she undressed with her back to the glowing coals, changing into her woollen night-gown.

But she knew in her heart that she would not sleep.



Morning crept stealthily over Leather Lane, a faint and smoky half-light, filtering through the murky metropolitan sky. And with the break of day came news of a terrible discovery in the region of Baldwin's Gardens. The intelligence came neither from the street-patterers, who daily gathered at either end of the market, armed with dubious ballad sheets of bygone murders, outrages and tragedies, nor from the penny papers, who would have to wait a full twenty-four hours for their opportunity; nor even from the Metropolitan Police, although they gave the matter their full attention. Rather it darted spontaneously here and there, communicated in quiet whispers and loud speculation, until at last it came to the notice of a certain

respectable old matron, who cooked breakfasts, 'full hot', in a certain coffee-shop upon the corner of Leather Lane and Liquorpond Street. And she, in her turn, had no desire to keep the information to herself.

'Murdered in cold blood,' said Mrs. Hinchley in her most matter-of-fact tone, brutally cracking an egg on the rim of the frying-pan. 'They found him off Baldwin's Gardens not three hours ago.'

It was almost half-past seven in the morning. The kitchen of Mrs. Tanner's Dining and Coffee Rooms, a rather dark and gloomy place at the best of times, seemed particularly dismal as Mrs. Hinchley made her grim pronouncement. Nothing, however, could dampen the curiosity of Ralph Grundy, who stood nearby, in the little corridor that led through to the shop, waiting to serve up the fruits of Mrs. Hinchley's labours.

'Quite certain are they?' inquired Ralph.

'Certain? I'll say,' continued Mrs. Hinchley, rapidly poking a fork into a pork chop, and depositing it upon the gridiron, warming to her theme as the meat began to sizzle. 'Cut up something awful too. Proper gutted he was, too, like a bleedin' mackerel.'

'Gutted?'

'And they reckon dogs had got to him, poor beggar. Margie Bladstow saw it, and she'll swear on it. And now the Peelers are leaving him there 'til the inquest this artemnoon. It ain't Christian. Not from round here, neither; Margie would had know'd him if he were.'

Ralph Grundy nodded his head. Finding Mrs. Hinchley preoccupied with a second and third egg, he glanced back into the shop, where Sarah Tanner stood behind the counter.

'The missus don't look too clever, neither,' he remarked.

'Just!' replied Mrs. Hinchley. 'I said to her first thing, I said, "You're sickenin' for something, my gal. Mark my words. Dodd's Pulmonic wafers. One in the mornin' one at night. I swears by 'em." Looked right through me. She's too proud, that one.'

Ralph Grundy muttered his agreement and turned to look back at his employer for a second time. There was something wrong with her, that much was certain.

What did Mrs. Tanner say for herself? When asked - and Ralph Grundy did make the inquiry - she merely professed that she had not slept well. But that was not the entire truth: for she had not slept at all. She had, rather, lain awake in her bed and contemplated the scene she had witnessed in Baldwin's Gardens. Nothing else had occupied her mind, from the moment the coals in the hearth dwindled into darkness, until the clock upon her mantelpiece chimed six. And the daylight brought no release; for, as soon as she began serving in the shop, the very first words she heard were rumours of an awful murder.

A murder!

Who could imagine such a thing? Sarah Tanner, for her part, feigned astonishment. And when a certain Joe Drummond, a coster, eating his breakfast, contended that the district had 'sunk bleedin' low', she heartily agreed. When another man conjectured it 'were most likely a foreigner', she did not deny it. Indeed, she played along with every conjecture and theory, without contributing anything to the conversation herself. Thus, as the day progressed, no-one entertained the slightest suspicion that she might know a single detail about the circumstances of the tragedy.

The only possible exception was Ralph Grundy. For the waiter had noticed one small fact: that every time a

policeman passed by the shop - and a good many did - Mrs. Tanner was inclined to glance rather anxiously in their direction.

In the event, however, the police did not favour Mrs. Tanner's establishment with their presence. Moreover, if Sarah Tanner noticed Ralph Grundy's attention, it was only upon the several occasions he came over to ask after her health. Thus, to all intents and purposes, Mrs. Tanner spent her day much as she had the day before: serving coffee and busying herself at the counter.

The only difference was that when the clock upon her bedroom mantel chimed midnight - by which time she had ushered Ralph Grundy out of the door, locked the shop, and retired - Sarah Tanner had come to a rather important decision.

In the solitude of her room, rather than putting on her night attire, she went to her wardrobe and selected her best silk gown. It was a fine article: the Paris fashion of the previous year, wholly unsuited to the humble proprietress of a mere coffee-shop.

But, strangely enough, it suited Mrs. Tanner rather nicely.

CHAPTER THREE

Sarah Tanner left her home in Leather Lane at a half-past midnight. She stepped hesitantly into the street, cloaked in a long, ordinary-looking brown shawl, which she had carefully arranged to almost completely conceal her dress. As she stood in the cold night air, she paused and assessed her appearance. The gas above the shop-front was already extinguished and only the keenest observer might have noticed the fine lace trimmings just visible beneath her woollen wrap. Nonetheless, she made a final effort to hide every trace of the gown, tugging at the shawl here and there, until she was quite contented. Then, at last, she set off, walking in the direction of Gray's Inn Lane.

It was a swift progress, to Gray's Inn, along Holborn to New Oxford Street, shunning the worst alleys of Seven Dials, past the towering chimney of Meux's great brewery, all the time heading westwards. She did not falter for a moment, keeping her head slightly bowed, deliberately avoiding the gaze of the few nocturnal stragglers who hung about the streets. They were a motley collection: vagrants without money for even the lowest lodgings; unfortunates for whom the hours after midnight were hours of business; a mysterious few, like herself, whose motives could hardly be guessed by any passing stranger. But Sarah Tanner ignored them all; and everything about her own bearing, from her brisk gait to the expression upon her face, told the world that she would not countenance any delay.

Consequently, no-one troubled her - neither man nor woman - nor even the solitary, rather bored policeman who stood on fixed point duty, at the corner of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road.

Her destination was Regent Street. The object of her quest, however, was not the same broad, respectable thoroughfare that, in the hours of daylight, formed the capital's chief commercial pleasure-ground. It was a more dubious street altogether. True, it looked quite identical: it contained the same grand shops, the same magnificent emporia of linen-drapers and milliners, which were the diurnal resort of the *bon ton*; its neighbours in nearby Mayfair were the same respectable neighbours. But it was Regent Street *by night*: where certain private houses opened their doors to guests; where dice and cards were the only form of entertainment; and where men and women mixed with an easy intimacy - an intimacy that would be quite unacceptable in decent society. And it was to one such town-house, a short distance from the Regent's Circus, that Sarah Tanner repaired. To the passer-by, it must be said, the house's front door gave every indication of respectability, from the solid brass knocker to its smart black paint. But Mrs. Tanner knew better.

She rapped gently upon the door and, in an instant, it opened a couple of inches, a metal chain snapping taut. There was no-one to be seen inside: merely a glimpse of a narrow, tastefully decorated hall, and a man's voice.

'Who is it?'

'Don't you know me, then?' she replied.

'No ladies without a gentleman.'

'A strict rule is it?' she said. 'Well, I'd like to become a member.'

'Who introduces you?'