

# Gallows Maid

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## [Anno 1582]

I should've known better. It was the annual fair in Antwerp, where all the rich folk like to strut with their starched ruffs and their fur coats. I could've pinched the little pouch that was dangling from the drunkard's belt, the one with the feather in his hat. I could probably have nobbled the woollen tabard the wine merchant had left hanging over the arm of a bench. Where no one could see it, the fathead! I could've nicked the little pouch and the tabard without anyone noticing a thing. Blind Sus would've coughed up a pretty penny for the tabard later tonight. It could've been a good day, what with that and the purse. But on this feast of Saint Andrew, as November draws to a close, all I'm interested in is the little lady with the sable fur. I follow her as she steps onto Antwerp's market square, and I hear the cawing of a crow, a witch's bird, which makes me look for the nearest church steeple and cross myself to ward off ill-fortune.

'Superstitious goose,' Charlie Churchpisser whispers. He's two years older than me and the best cutpurse in Antwerp. He's my sweetheart too, and he holds my hand when we're sitting in front of the fire at Black Peterkin's place.

I point to the little lady in the sable fur with my chin. He shakes his head.

'Another time,' he says. 'Catch the wine merchant over there. He left his new tabard on the bench.'

'I want the sable', I hiss and spit on the ground to show I mean it.

The little lady with the sable fur can't be more than sixteen years old. She has dark eyes and colourless lips. Her skin is white as sour milk, and her auburn hair is combed up neatly into a black bonnet. Her ample skirts form a balloon under a grey woollen jacket, wrapped around her meagre frame. The merchants on the market greet her, because she's as rich as the king of Spain. A man doffs his hat to her, a woman curtsies. But they get nothing in return. The little lady glides across the market square, her eyes as cold as the winter surrounding her, her breath a haughty wisp. She's probably the daughter of one or other merchant who calls her 'my flower', lives in a stone house with three chimneys, is dressed in the morning by a chambermaid called Greta or Matilda, warms her feet in the evening at an open hearth, eats grilled meat every day – except Friday – on pewter

plates, is allowed to have a steaming bath on her birthday with lavender oil. And eleven out of ten, her engagement's been arranged to a young gentleman who knows his numbers and his table manners, and reads books to her full of wisdom by candlelight until the bitch falls asleep from boredom. I hate that little lady with the sable fur. I hate her with every drop of spit in my mouth.

The sable in question is a pricey piece of fluffy fur with a small pair of gemstones where the creature's eyes used to be and shiny silver coins on its limp front paws. The little lady is wearing it over her sleeve. Most women of standing tend to wear a fur like this round their neck or on their belt, but she, the little lady, is different. She's knotted the sable fur round her sleeve so she can prance with it like a polder goose, its wagging rear end plump with feathers. Keep moving, little lady! Look around. You won't see me. You won't hear me. I glide through the crowd. I'm a grey shadow in a swarm of colour. My cap is red, that's all, and it has a pin in it, of the Blessed Virgin. But everybody's wearing colourful caps with pins in. No one sees me. The tax inspectors with their notebooks, the constabulary with their muskets, the citizens of Antwerp gaping at the merchandise spread out for sale on wooden tables. None of them pay the least attention. I avoid the gaze of the art merchants and the stall keepers, the gentlefolk and the servants, the biscuit boys and the clergy. I brush up against them and mumble my apologies. I am humbleness personified. But my fingers are gentler than the wind and my pocket knife is sharper than the point of a Spanish sword. I can cut the strings of a purse in a cough. I can remove the ring from a chubby priest's finger before God in heaven has even had the time to notice. I see everything. I miss nothing. I am the revenge of the poor. And before you know it, little lady with the hearth and the three chimneys, you'll be wondering what happened to that dumb little sable fur of yours. Before the clock strikes noon, you'll be sobbing to your father and fiancé. Tonight I'm planning to visit Blind Sus, a couple of houses beyond The Jolly Brabander Inn. Sus isn't blind, of course, and he'll pay a tidy sum for the gemstones and silver coins, enough to keep us in food, drink and a place to sleep for at least a week. I'll keep the sable fur for myself. I'll drape it round my neck, light a candle stump and look at myself in the broken mirror on the rafters. The sable fur might not match my grubby boyish garb, my face full of scratches, my jagged teeth and my blond spiky hair. But it'll be my sable fur.

Charlie tugs at the sleeve of my hand-me-down jacket.

'Leave her be', his voice crackles.

'You don't dare', I answer.

We don't look at each other when we speak to avoid people thinking we're up to something. Charlie Churchpisser, professor of thievery, taught me the craft of stealing. He taught me how to cherish a little knife and give it a name. How I should sharpen it on my shit stone, the shiny stone I use to wipe my arse just like everybody else. I was to use the stone to sharpen it from the tip down to the cord that protects the grip. He taught me how to make it disappear up my sleeve and slip it out again in the wink of an eye. He taught me how to stuff a stolen glove or severed purse into my belt or my shirt unnoticed. He taught me to run, climb and to burgle.

'Too risky. Too difficult', he whispers without turning his head.

'Not if you lend a hand.'

'You're crazy', he hisses, but he doesn't mean it.

Snow flurries through the air, and there's a thick layer of ice on the river Schelde, so thick that the ships moored at the quay are stuck in it. If it's true what they say – if Saint Andrew under snow doth double, next year's harvest faceth trouble – then we can look forward to yet another hungry winter.

Antwerp's market is surrounded by the tallest mercantile houses in the Netherlands. Their chimneys spew a thick black smoke from the black coal they burn in their furnaces for heat. The buildings have three or four or five stories, and some have step-gable roofs to make them look even taller. Behind the coloured glass windows, an entire army of clerks count money and prepare invoices. The coins slip incessantly through their ink-stained fingers. All the money belongs to the owners of the merchant ships that sail from Antwerp across the seas and return with Italian silk, English worsted, wine and spices. They bring it all here, to this cobblestone field, to this market of markets, to this city people call the crossroads of the nations. You can buy anything here.

Enormous wine vats lie in wait along the quays. Smaller tents are propped up against the wine merchants' stalls; jug makers, cork cutters, coopers, cellarers, bottlers and distillers, all trading in whatever has to do with brandy and wine. Next in line are the herb specialists. The gentle aromas of aniseed, thyme, and camomile drift on the biting winter air, but the people with their runny November noses barely notice. The tobacco producers follow, each with their own secret blend. Then it's the turn of the cloth merchants and, a little further, the ivory merchants and timber dealers. The market swells and swells until it collides with the stone houses, where women sell lacework from petite folding tables perched under tiny canopies.

But I don't give a jot about the world and all its merchandise. The only thing I'm interested in is the little lady and her sable fur. The little lady is in the company of her governess, a pace behind her, a dockside crane of a woman with cheeks like bagpipes and fingers like stuffed sausages. She's done up in blue from head to toe, and one dirty look is enough to scare off any man mad enough to even think about bothering her mistress. She is also carrying a small silk cushion for the little lady when she goes to pray in the church later. Then she won't have to rest her knees on the cold church floor. The governess and her mistress make their way to the ivory merchant. The little lady runs her hand over the mighty yellow tusks. The merchant assures her that the tusks are from African elephants, harvested south of the great deserts, and not from cheap walruses from the frozen northern seas. The little lady doesn't bother to respond and continues on her way. The merchant shouts after her, that he has magnificent ivory trinkets for sale, but she's already lost interest. The ivory merchant emerges from behind his stall and shuffles after the little lady with a clattering ivory necklace. The governess blocks his path. For a moment I imagine her punching the man to the ground with her chubby fist, but the sternness of her glance is enough to scare him and make him turn on his heels. The young lady with the sable fur saunters up to an animal dealer. In addition to baskets of multicoloured birds huddled together against the cold, the man has a cage with three little monkeys in it. Dressed in woollen jackets, the creatures cling with their claws to the wooden bars of the cage and snap at the fingers of a couple of lads pestering them with sticks. The little lady is amused by the monkeys, which come from the hills of Malta if the merchant is to be believed. The man assures her in a heavy Spanish accent that the creatures are playful and perfect company to boot. He chases the two lads away from the cage and takes out one of the monkeys to prove his point. It has a collar round its neck, attached to a thin chain. The animal shrieks like a swarm of demons, climbing in panic onto the merchant's shoulder and seeking nervously left and right for the hills of Malta. Curious market-goers wrapped warm in scarves and hoods peer at the screeching beast, stunned by the spectacle. I notice Charlie lurking behind the stall. He catches my eye. I nod. It's now or never.

Charlie kicks the cage and turns away before it reaches the ground. The result is better than expected. The cage door flies open and the two remaining monkeys escape, shooting up the supports of the stall onto the canvas canopy and making an incredible racket. The merchant curses in some unchristian language and the little lady is completely distracted. At that very instant, while everyone has their eyes glued on the monkeys, I snip the strings of the sable fur with my knife and pluck it from her noble sleeve. All in the space of a gasp. The little lady hasn't noticed a thing, diverted as she is by rascal monkeys and the commotion. I immediately stuff the sable fur under my jacket. Time to make my escape. The monkey dealer lunges through the crowd, chasing his shrieking monkeys as they leap from hat to bonnet. I jump out of the way, ready to disappear between the stalls and make myself scarce in the lanes and alleys of the city. But at that very moment someone clouts me on the head so hard I fall to the ground, my cheek scuffing over the cobblestones. I try to scramble to my feet, but I'm treated to a second clout and a third. I see stars, comets and holes in the moon. Then I sense an enormous weight on my back and it feels as if the bones in my spine are snapping one by one. I thrash about but there's no escape. I force myself to look up, and through a haze of shuffling feet, pointing fingers and grinning faces I see the governess, a mountain of muscle and blubber, her enormous buttocks perched on my back.

'I caught a thief,' squeals the hulk in skirts. 'A thief!'

'Get off me,' I scream, my head pounding. 'You're breaking my back. I didn't do anything.'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' the woman shudders, 'and the Three Kings into the bargain. It's a girl!'

Pale faces with red noses and winter headgear gather round the robust governess. From my less than comfortable position, I see the charming little lady stare at me with a mixture of surprise and contempt on her face. My body burns with hate. Take a good look, little lady, with the hearth and the three chimneys. That's right; I'm just a piece of filth, the filth of the street I'm lying on. I'm nothing more than a slimy insect you find under a stone. But I piss on you, little miss high and mighty.

I hear the constabulary before I see them, their noisy clinking swords and their clattering plates of armour. There are two of them. I recognise Jacobus Croes. He's had me by the collar before, a year or so ago. Damnation! I've had better days. If that louse Jacobus recognises me, I'm done for. The black crow was a sign. I should have known!

Jacobus Croes towers over me. I see only his shoes at first, and hope that the cracks in them leak through to his stockings. He's dressed in wool and steel, and has a grey moustache that makes him look more important than he is. Two pouches and a dagger hang from his belt. He's decked out with a black earring to impress the ladies. I hope they give him a nasty disease, the arrogant fool! Jacobus grabs me by the collar and lifts me from the cobblestones.

'Are you a lad or a lass?' he asks. I pretend to be unsteady on my feet, as if might fall to the ground at any minute.

'I haven't done anything,' I exclaim. 'That whale just sat on me! I can't stand straight. I think my back is broken.'

'Let the girl go. She's done nothing!' I hear Charlie Churchpisser shout somewhere in the crowd. What else can he do? Right now it's every man for himself.

The delicate little lady comes up to me and yanks the sable fur from under my jacket.

‘And this then?’ she whines in a high pitched voice of silk and gold thread. ‘This is the zibellino you snatched from my arm.’

Of course she calls the sable fur her zibellino, pretentious bitch. The little lady speaks Flemish with a Spanish accent. She must be the daughter of a wealthy Spanish merchant.

‘But noble lady,’ I groan, ‘this is all a terrible misunderstanding. The fur fell to the ground when the monkeys escaped and were jumping from one head to the other. I saw it fall and picked it up to return it to you. Then that monster appeared and sat on me. Anyway, what would I want with such a zibellthingy?’

‘It’s called a zibellino, and the strings have been cut through,’ says the little lady, cold as ice, inspecting the pelt and dusting it off.

‘Cut through,’ I exclaim. ‘Impossible. You mean ripped off!’

‘Mind your tongue, whelp,’ Jacobus Croes intervenes, ‘I know how to handle thieves like you.’

‘But respected lord and gentle, noble lady, and madam governess too,’ I stammer fervently, ‘this is all a terrible misunderstanding! I have absolutely no need for a zi-bel-lino. What would I do with such a thing? I’m an honest laundry girl who works for her blind father. I’m as poor as the street. But I’m not a thief. Those screeching monkeys escaped from their cage. The people were alarmed, ran in every direction, bumped into one another. Some almost fell over and more than one managed to stay upright by clinging to the clothes of the person next to him. And then I saw your handsome sable fall to the ground. I think someone must have torn it from your arm trying to stay upright in the commotion. Yes, that’s what must’ve happened... what else? I’m neither thief nor scoundrel. Honestly! I swear on my grandmother’s grave.’

The words gush from my mouth. I see the little lady hesitate. The market folk stare at me. They see the smudges on my face, the scratches on my cheeks, the woolly hat on my head, the boy’s hand-me-downs. For them I’m a poor little girl born to have bad luck. An older man with a comb in the brim of his hat turns away. He’s had enough of the spectacle. Jacobus loosens his grip little.

Ach, mister high and mighty constable Jacobus, stupid black earring, damp stockings and all, let me go for pity sake! Nothing happened. A tattered sable fur fell to the ground and I picked it up. Don’t you have other fish to fry? And maybe a couple of rabbits?

Alright, alright, Jacobus Croes sighs. He’s giving me the benefit of the doubt. Not long now and I’ll have talked my way out of this. Not long. But then that damned whale-woman had to open her big blowhole again.

‘No, no, no,’ the little lady’s governess spouts, ‘I saw it all happen. That girl is a thief, and no two ways about it. She was trying to run off with the zibellino.’

Time to pull my most desperate face and turn on the tears.

‘I only picked up the zibellino from the street to give it back to you, noble lady,’ I snivel. ‘I didn’t give it a second thought. What do I want with a fur? Surely furs are for gentle ladies like yourself? I

wanted you to have him back.' My entire body judders, my lungs peep, my lips quiver. Tears are easy.

Constable Croes has been in the business long enough to have heard it all before: every excuse, every concoction, every feigned illness, and every lie as black as priory ink. But I'm Nita, light-fingered cutpurse, Professor Charlie Churchpisser's best pupil. And when it comes to peddling misery and tears, there's no one my equal. The tears drip from my chin and the cold stone that passes for a heart in constable Jacobus' chest appears to warm, soften and beat.

'Do you swear on God and the Bible that you saw the girl steal?' Jacobus Croes asks the governess.

'On God and the Bible?' she retorts, slightly hesitant. Liars are destined for the kitchens of hell, she can't help thinking, for Lucifer's bubbling cauldron, and she can already feel the devil prick her plump belly with his jagged three-pronged fork to see if she's cooked.

'Did anyone else see the girl steal the fur?' Jacobus Croes asks the bystanders. He looks around. The people avoid the constable's gaze.

'Out with it,' he shouts. 'Did anyone see anything except the lady here?' No one says a word. They were all gaping at those stupid monkeys.

'She did it all the same,' says the governess, but she sounds a lot less sure of herself.

Jacobus Croes lets go of my collar. I lower my eyes and wipe the tears from my cheeks. Croes fishes a small bible from his pocket.

'Do you swear, girl, on the Holy Book, that you're innocent?'

Yes, my lord, completely innocent.

'Swear it on the Bible!'

I look at the bible and the cross embroidered on its leather cover. I hesitate. What if I lay my hand on the bible and the cover turns white hot because of my lies, blistering my palm and fingers? What if my hand bursts into flames?

'Go on then, girl, why do you tarry? Are you perhaps...'

'Is it a Catholic bible?' I blurt. 'I don't want to swear on some heretic bible!'

A murmur runs through the crowd. There are almost as many Protestants as Catholics in the city of Antwerp, and they're always on the verge of scratching each other's eyes out in the name of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus and his twelve apostles. But I see that Jacobus Croes is wearing a medal of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a sign he's not a follower of those heretics Luther and Calvin. Jacobus' voice turns all soft, almost gentle.

'Rest assured, child, this is the Bible of the true faith. Place your hand on it.'



I place my hand on the bible. It feels cold. The cross doesn't burn a hole in my palm, but I can still smell the sulphurous fumes of hell as I lie. The dogs of Satan will tear me to shreds. But as Charlie Churchpisser, my professor in thievery, would say: we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

'Before God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit,' I declare with complete conviction, my hand on the leather cover, 'I swear that I am not a thief and have never stolen.'

The gargantuan governess growls. Her nostrils quiver. But she doesn't dare say another word.

'What's your name?' Jacobus Croes inquires.

I hesitate for a second and, foolish wench that I am, I look him in the eye. He suddenly appears to remember something. Jacobus Croes has been a constable for more than ten years and he has the memory of a confessor, fathomless, and filled to the brim with the faces of vagabonds, scroungers and layabouts, thieves and burglars, from major riffraff to minor rogues, from old heretics to young beggars.

'I know you', he says.

'Me, sir, me?' I stammer, trying to look surprised.

'You're the girl we arrested last winter.'

'Me, sir? Last winter I was living on a farm in the Kempen... with my blind dad, my ailing mum, my seven brothers and our old pig Flor...'

'Didn't you escape?'

'...and our three starved chickens who only lay one egg a week each.'

'No, hold your tongue. I recognise you.'

'You're confusing me with someone else. I'm from the Kempen.'

'You're coming with us', Jacobus Croes commands. He winks at his fellow constable who heads towards me with his halberd in his left hand and his right fist on the hilt of his sword. The poor man should have kept a hand free. I kick him just below the knee with the point of my shoe, reinforced with iron for occasions like this. The people back away. I fall to the ground, roll over, and pull my knife from my sleeve in one and the same movement. I love my knife. It's sharper than Lucifer's trident, something Jacobus Croes quickly learns when he tries to grab my clothes as I get up. 'Peep,' says my knife, cutting through the flesh of his palm as if it was butter. Blood spurts everywhere. People scream. I throw myself under a tent-cloth and jump to my feet at the other side. I run towards the ivory merchant's stall. He stares at me in astonishment as I leap over his table of tusks, throw myself into the crowd and, unable to slow down, lunge head first into the belly of an aged amulet seller. The old dog folds double and his amulets – saintly protection guaranteed – scatter all over the place. I worm my way through a tangle of legs, jump to my feet again, look back, and see Jacobus Croes pointing at me as he presses a rag into his bleeding hand. His face is purple with rage.

'Stop that girl', he screams, his voice cracking. That Jacobus screeches like a bitch.

I stagger, slither and squeeze my way to the other side of the market, towards the wine merchants and the Schelde. I swipe at a donkey drover with my knife when he tries to grab me. I race towards the quay, past a wall of enormous wine vats, and scurry along the edge of the embankment, the wine vats to my left, the Schelde to my right, hidden from the people on the market, heading south, where the alleys are dark and narrow, where I can be invisible, where no one will find me. The wall of wine vats is close to a hundred metres long, stretching as far as the giant crane, where four adult men tread the inside of two enormous wheels to hoist the cargo from the boats to the dock. This way I can escape the market, with a bit of luck. But when I reach the end of the wine vat wall, another constable appears with a pistol in his hand. Jesus! Are they going to shoot me, for a sable fur! I retrace my steps in a hurry, but one of the wine merchants is standing in my way. If I run up to him and brandish my knife, maybe he'll shy away and I'll be able to slip between his legs like an eel. But the man isn't taking any chances. He pulls out his sword, a metre of steel glistening in the winter light. There's nowhere to go. The constable's right behind me with his pistol, the wine merchant in front of me with his sword. Damnation! I'm trapped! But why not the Schelde? I scramble down a rusty ladder. The wine merchant falls to his knees on the quay and tries to grab me, but all he gets is my red woollen cap and my pretty Blessed Virgin pin. I jump from the ladder barefoot and do the very thing they make you swear as a child never to do: I walk out onto the ice, which isn't yet thick enough for skating.

It's been freezing for a couple of weeks, of course, and there's a layer of ice on the water almost stretching to the opposite bank. I can avoid the occasional thin patch if I'm careful. The ice officials still have to give their approval, but those cringers always play it safe. I'm sure it's thick enough to support a fourteen-year-old girl.

'Stop right there', I hear Jacobus Croes roar, 'in the name of the law and the public order!'

But the law means nothing to me and the public order even less. I walk out onto the ice, ten, twenty metres. I hear it crack now and then but it doesn't stop me. Then I turn around. Dozens of bystanders have assembled on the quay, all of them curious to see if my escape across the ice will end in success or failure. They shout at me, tell me I'm crazy, that I should turn back, that I'll die if I don't. All those people are only interested in me and aren't paying attention to their dangling purses and uncovered brooches. If you ask me, the perfect moment for a cutpurse like Charlie to move in. I hope he grabs the opportunity and gives me half the booty. I'm now a good hundred metres from the bank and I can see the wine merchant and the constable climbing down a ladder. The wine merchant is fearless, holds on to the ladder and takes a couple of steps onto the ice. I hope it breaks under his weight, all two hundred pounds of it. But he manages to reach an ice-bound rowing boat. All the constable can do is follow the valiant wine merchant's example. He walks out onto the ice and climbs into the boat. In the meantime, the wine merchant smashes the ice around the boat with one of the wooden oars. I can see the constable waving his pistol, but he doesn't take aim. He doesn't dare fire one of his stone bullets at a fourteen-year-old.

I keep walking towards the middle of the frozen river. The holes in the ice appear to exhale mist. For the people on the quay I'm little more than a silhouette. The further I walk out onto the Schelde, the thinner the ice becomes. It cracks at every step. Suddenly my foot disappears into the water. Cold! Cold! Cold! I manage to pull it out again but lose my balance. I fall on the ice to an awful crack. My heart leaps to my mouth. I hardly dare move. But the ice doesn't break.

I hear more cracking ice in the distance and the splash of oars on water. The wine merchant and the constable have managed to free the boat and are coming after me. I slide forward with the utmost care across the thin ice in the middle of the river. I see the other side, the frozen mud and



the fields of the left bank. I look back for a second and see two shapes in a little rowing boat making steady progress. They're gaining on me, but they're still a distance away. I crawl further on my hands and knees. Faster. The ice starts to thicken again. I'm out of danger. I'm not far from the opposite bank. I'll soon be able to get to my feet, to run, to disappear into the woods on the left bank, and Jacobus Croes will never find me again for the rest of his life.

But then my hand shoots through the ice. Like a living monster, the water takes hold of my arm and pulls me downwards. In the blink of an eye the black river swallows me into its gaping gullet. I barely notice how wet it is, only the incredible weight of my drenched clothes and the murderous cold freezing my snot and my blood. The river's mighty jaws squeeze the air from my lungs. I try to thrash about with my arms and legs, but they're unwieldy and slow. I look up at the mirror the surface has become and push myself towards it with all the energy I can muster. My face breaks the surface for a second. I scream and shriek and swallow water. Then I go under again. My clothes are too heavy. The river won't let me go. This is the end. I'm going to drown! So be it. My last thought is of a bowl of rice pudding with two round wooden spoons. A spoon for me and a spoon for my mother, ready to empty the bowl, to the last grain of rice. Then the water seems to wrench my head and my every last thought from my body in a sudden savage churn. I gasp for air, and get a river in return. After that, nothing.