

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant, cursive script. The letters are positioned above a thin white horizontal line. This entire logo is centered within a solid black rectangular background.

*a&b*

# Shadow of the Hangman

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# CHAPTER ONE

1815

Ned Greet was a short, slight, wiry man with long, straggly hair and the face of a startled rabbit. He was also one of the most prolific and successful burglars in London. Confident that it would never be claimed, he'd watched with amusement as the reward for his capture increased steadily in value. Most criminals in his position would have decided to lie low for a while but Greet was not going to let anything interfere with his lucrative occupation. Risk excited him. It made his blood race. As he set off into the cloying darkness of the capital that night, therefore, he was tingling with anticipatory joy. His target was a warehouse, piled high with exotic spices. Even small quantities of them would fetch a high price. Before he tried to break into the building, he walked furtively around it to make sure that no night watchmen were on patrol. When he felt that it was safe to continue, Greet used a jemmy to prise open the window at the rear of the warehouse. Climbing in was the work of seconds. Once he was there, he lifted the shutter on his lantern and let its light spill out. Temptation was all around him.

Taking a deep breath, he inhaled a dizzying compound of aromas. What he could smell was pure profit.

Opening the large leather bag slung over his shoulder, he took out a handful of small canvas ones and began to fill each of them in turn from a different sack. Peppercorn, cassia, cinnamon, turmeric, cardamom and other spices were carefully gathered then placed into the leather bag. Absorbed in his work, Greet moved swiftly and deftly, assessing the value of his haul as he went along. He was in his element. Greet was only aware that he had company when he heard a voice behind him.

‘You won’t need those in prison, Ned.’

The burglar swung round to face a tall, lean, well-dressed man in his thirties whose handsome features were illumined by the lantern. Apparently unarmed, the newcomer seemed completely at ease.

‘Who’re *you?*’ demanded Greet.

‘I’m the person who will have the supreme pleasure of collecting the reward money for your arrest,’ said the other, raising his hat in a mock greeting. ‘I could have apprehended you earlier, of course, but I’m a patient fellow so I waited until there was an appreciable sum on offer. Your career as a thief is decisively over, I’m afraid. You were too greedy, Ned, and that brought you to *my* attention.’

Greet was shocked. ‘You’ve been *following* me?’

‘Let’s just say that I’ve been keeping a friendly eye on you.’

‘But I always cover my tracks.’

‘Watching you doing it has been a rare entertainment.’

Greet was cornered. He was shaken by the news that his escapades had been under scrutiny by someone else. He peered intently at the man. The stranger looked bigger and stronger than him so Greet judged that he would come off worse in a fight. Instead, therefore, he snatched the dagger from his belt and lunged. But the man was far too quick for him, shooting out a hand and squeezing Greet’s wrist so hard that he let out a cry of pain and dropped the weapon

on the floor. The man kicked it out of reach. Releasing his hold, he clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

‘That was ill-advised, Ned. Try anything like that again,’ he warned, ‘and I’ll be obliged to kill you, albeit with regret.’

Cowering before him and rubbing his wrist, Greet changed tack.

‘There’s enough here for both of us, sir,’ he said, with an obsequious grin. ‘You can take your pick. I’ll help you fill the bags. Choose wisely and we can both get away with a small fortune. Spices are rich pickings.’ He added with a gesture that took in the whole warehouse. ‘I know where to get the very best price for them.’

‘That’s of no consequence,’ said the man.

‘Don’t you *like* money?’

‘Why, yes, I love it as much as anyone – but what I’d like even more is the satisfaction of seeing you behind bars in Newgate. You’ll enjoy different odours there, I warrant – some of the most pungent engendered by your own miserable body.’

Greet was indignant. ‘I don’t belong in prison.’

‘Then you shouldn’t have taken up thievery.’

‘I’ve a wife and family to support.’

‘They must look elsewhere for sustenance.’

‘Look,’ said the other, panic setting in, ‘I’ll strike a bargain with you, sir. I’ll steal nothing. I leave it all for you.’

‘That’s uncommonly generous of you,’ said the man, laughing, ‘but I spy a problem. These spices are not yours to give away so freely. Morally and legally, they belong to someone else.’

‘They’re yours for the taking.’

‘The same is equally true of you.’

‘No, no,’ said Greet, holding up both palms as his companion took a step towards him. ‘Consider this, sir. I can see by your appearance that you have an excellent tailor. Seize the spoils on offer here and you

can buy a dozen new suits from him in the latest fashion.'

'I have apparel enough to content me.'

Greet was dismayed. 'Is there *nothing* that'll tempt you?'

'I seek only your arrest.'

'Then we must part as enemies.'

The burglar was like lightning this time. Thrusting a hand into an open sack, he grabbed a fistful of pepper and threw it straight into the man's eyes, blinding him momentarily. Greet took to his heels, darting off into the gloom in search of escape. When he came to a staircase, he ran up it as fast as he could. The sound of the burglar's feet clacking on the wooden steps told the stranger exactly where his quarry had gone. With the lantern in his hand, he set off in pursuit. Finding the staircase, he began to ascend it but he got only halfway up before he had a glimpse of a blurred figure ahead of him. Greet had a sack of flour over his shoulder and he hurled it directly at the man, catching him in the chest, knocking the lantern from his grasp and sending him tumbling backwards down the steps.

Having disabled his attacker, Greet elected to cut his losses and get out of the warehouse altogether. He blundered along the upper floor. When he reached the door through which goods were winched up from below, he flung it wide open and jumped into the darkness, landing with cat-like ease on the ground below. To his utter amazement, he heard a metallic click as the shutter of a lantern was lifted and a pool of light was created. Greet found himself staring at the person he thought he'd just knocked down the stairs.

'That's impossible!' he howled. 'You can't be in two places at once.'

The man beamed at him. 'It appears that I can, Ned.'