

A BETTER LIFE

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Imogene Fey thought back over the past month. Her parents had been fighting a lot, and her usually docile mum was continuously arguing back to her father. Mrs Fey had also been going out every evening after supper which Imogene found unusual. Imogene would watch in secret from her bedroom window as her mum headed out into the night. Her normally long skirt hiked up to show a bit of leg above her boot tops.

The previous night Imogene heard her parents arguing once again only this time her mum did not hide the fact she was angry.

“How can you dare ask me to sell my daughter, we will make ends meet, I will have to go out more often, what choice do I have?”

Imogene also heard mum remark on how slow the market sales have been and that she would continue to help feed the children best she could. Her Father mumbled something Imogene couldn't quite make out and eluded to a woman he had met in the pub who offered Mr Fey an “option” for his daughter.

Finally the pair calmed down and the conversation turned to “deciding what was best” She could hear mum talking about “a better life” and asking how Madam Dunn would “put her to work in her house here in Southwark”.

Imogene was not sure what her mum was talking about, but it didn't sound good and she was certain they were talking about her. Not once did mum say her name but her words made Imogene feel that this was going to be something she wasn't going to like.

Mum continued... “I don't want to do this either but we are so poor, we will starve and the other children will die. In a few years hopefully the boys can get jobs in a factory.”

Imogene imagined her mum was referring to her being sent off to work as a scullery maid or a laundress somewhere.

The next morning Imogene was told to lay on the bed in her parents room. When she asked “why?” both of her parents glared at her as she was ushered into their room with no further argument.

An unknown woman had arrived specifically to see Imogene. With no explanation she waited in the room confused, scared and unsure what was happening, worst of all she felt vulnerable and alone. Imogene had been told nothing outside of the fact the woman was there to examine her.

Her Mum told her not to be scared and not to scream as it would all be over quickly. Imogene also noticed a strange man waiting in the other room talking to her father about what this woman might say.

The woman entered the room with Imogene's mum. Imogene froze in fear on the bed. Her mind raced trying to sort out what to expect. The woman barely looked at her but she did say she would do her best to make the procedure as painless as possible.

Imogene's mum was asked to leave the room and to close the door behind her. With tears streaming down her cheeks mum tried her best to not catch her daughter's gaze as she left the room.

Imogene knew something wasn't right in the house that day. From the moment she awoke everything seemed "off". It wasn't strange enough that her Mum made her favourite breakfast of oats and milk but now she was here on the bed with this strange woman. She felt like a sheep, of no concern or worth. The woman directed Imogene to position herself like her mum when she had a baby, legs up on the bed and splayed open.

Imogene's mind whirled and her eyes became blurry. Her breathing grew rapid and she felt as though she was going to faint. She clenched her teeth and closed her eyes tight trying to block out what was happening.

"Oh my God she is putting her fingers into my private parts, I won't scream. I won't scream" Imogene repeated to herself over and over.

In what felt like an eternity Imogene could only try and stop herself from screaming so instead she cried. At first it was shallow as if caught in her throat. "I won't cry" she repeated aloud, the woman glared at her. Finally Imogene let loose and the tears flowed down her cheeks. Her sobbing annoyed the woman who left the room without a word.

Imogene's Mum came in and helped her daughter dress. In the outer room the woman, the stranger and her father were talking.

“She is pure,” said the woman and she gave a paper she had in her apron pocket to the stranger. When you take her virginity, do her a favour and chloroform her. She won’t feel the pain. This will make her a better worker for you.” With that the woman left the house.

The male stranger handed Imogene’s father a 20 pound note and turned to Imogene and her mum. “ Come with me, I own you now.” he remarked as he grabbed Imogene’s arm. Imogene was horrified at the revelation.

She did not want to go, but her parents forced her out. Her father literally pushed her out the door and closed it.

Imogene sobbed as she was put into an old carriage and taken from her home with only the clothes on her back. The next few days were awful, the stranger was very mean to her. He yelled at her, gave her no food, and got angry enough that she thought he would hit her, but instead he mumbled under his breath about not damaging the merchandise.

On the third day he came in and handed her soap and a small bucket of water. He told her to wash herself. Imogene had never had a bucket of water to herself before, she had always had to share with her siblings. When she was finished washing he gave her a small hand mirror, a brush for her hair and a different dress to wear.

Imogene sheepishly looked in the mirror, the face staring back shocked her. She was amazed by her big blue eyes, rimmed with thick long lashes and the shine of her long dark raven hair. She had never seen herself in a mirror before, only a faint reflection in her bedroom window and seeing herself in the mirror for the first time she felt pretty.

The stranger took her for a walk along the Thames. Imogene was easily distracted by everything along the way. The wild flowers that grew along the edge of the street were especially sweet smelling and the ships spewing out black smoke as they chugged along the river enthralled her. So much so she kept falling behind. The man in his impatience grabbed her harshly by the arm and dragged her along at his pace.

After a while they turned into the walkway of a beautiful Manor with a beautifully manicured yard and lovely entrance gate it was a grand sight. "This is a real house" Imogene said aloud. Her family home was nothing more than a hovel dashed together with some cobble stone and timber with crude walls inside separating it into rooms. Imogene had a tiny room off the kitchen while her parents shared their bedroom with her siblings.

Arriving at the impressive front door the stranger told her to behave and not embarrass him or she would be sorry. He knocked on the door and a servant answered. They were ushered into a gorgeous room with elegant furniture and a lot of books. Imogene could not help but notice the women and young girls in the room dressed in beautiful clothes although there seemed to be a lot of skin showing as well. All the men present were dressed in suits. Imogene knew right away that the men were important and had more money than her father.

From the top of the staircase a beautiful middle aged woman descended. Imogene imagined her to be someone out of a fancy painting. She was the picture of elegance, tall with a slim figure and auburn hair done up in the most elaborate style. Her dress was emerald green and flowing, Imogene was fascinated. The woman came down the staircase and crossed the hall to where they were standing.

The stranger bowed to the woman and kissed her hand, "This my dear Madam Dunn is Imogene, your latest acquisition. She is pure, I have her certificate from the midwife stating so."

Without a word Madame Dunn gestured and dismissed the man, who left the house immediately.

"Come my dear, let me have a look at you." she remarked. "You are indeed a beauty. You will need some rouge and a hint of colour to bring out that pout in your lips, but you will do quite nicely."

She called to an adorable young girl with a porcelain doll appearance who had been sitting at the top of the stairs watching. The girl appeared to float down the staircase and across the floor in her long blue dress. Her fiery long, red curls mesmerized Imogene.

"Lilly, please take Imogene upstairs and get her ready. I am going to auction her off this evening." Madam Dunn as she was known then moved away from the two girls sending them out into the hall as she spoke to a man who had been watching their conversation.

Lilly took Imogene by the hand and led her upstairs to a small, yet bright room. There she brushed Imogene's long hair until it shined and put some rose colour tint on Imogene's cheeks and lips. Lilly told her to stand up straight, but look shy and innocent and never look directly at the men. She also told Imogene if she was lucky, the man buying her would be kind and allow her to be given chloroform. Imogene became very frightened as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"It is always easier the first few times if you don't feel the pain." Lilly told her.

Lilly told her to wipe her tears and to be brave. She offered Imogene a biscuit and a cup of Thistle Tea. Soon afterwards Imogene was called down to the Great Room.

Lilly held Imogene's hand as they entered the room. She nudged Imogene in the direction of the other girls.

Imogene couldn't help but stare at Madam Dunn in all her splendour as she stood in front of the crowd of men. The men were now seated in elegant wooden chairs that had been set out.

Imogene looked about the room with its high ceilings and opulent chandeliers that hung overhead. She marvelled at the wallpaper, a vibrant teal colour with large gold flowers, the likes of such she had never seen before. She brushed her hand against the paper. It felt expensive and rich like fine fabric and Imogene imagined herself in a fancy dress emboldened in the very colour and pattern.

On the opposite wall large arched windows with luxurious golden draperies that pooled on the floor in puddles of excess fabric highlighted the room. As Lilly guided Imogene into place she told her to be prepared for the worst night of her life.

Some of the girls appeared younger than Imogene. She wondered who they were. A few of the youngest ones were holding dolls. Imogene joined the queue, as each girl was brought in front of Madame Dunn. She thrust them in front of her turning them around like a prize on a pedestal. She then gave information about each girl to the audience of men and in turn the men bid on the girls that interested them.

Imogene was terrified, she watched as the other girls were taken away one at a time by the men who purchased them.

“Where were they going?” Imogene thought to herself. “Would they be coming back, and if so where did they all sleep?” Imogene could not make sense of what was going on. Suddenly her name was called and it was her turn. Imogene stared at the floor, terrified she dare not look at the men as Lilly told her.

Madam Dunn talked about how she was pure with a certificate of virginity and then described her beautiful looks. Imogene’s mind raced, she could hear the men bidding on her and finally Madam Dunn ushered her away to be with an old, heavy set man who had won her.

Imogene was led into a bedroom. Her terrified eyes scanning the room for an escape. The door was closed behind her and she heard a key turn in the lock. In the centre of the room sat an elaborately carved wooden bed decorated with soft, voluminous bedding. There were flowers and pretty heavy curtains but even with the beauty around her Imogene knew this was bad. She stood petrified not knowing what to do.

Once again Imogene heard the key turn in the lock and Madam Dunn entered the room. She smiled at Imogene and sat her down on the bed. She took Imogene’s small hand in hers and whispered in her ear.

“My little one, I am afraid this will be very painful for you, the man who paid for you does not want you to sleep. I can not give you anything. Be nice to Mr. Jones and when it is over I will take care of you. If you please him you will have a life of luxury beyond your wildest dreams.”

With that, the Madam opened the door and allowed the fat old man whom she introduced as Mr. Jones to enter. She then left once again locking the door.

Soon, Imogene’s screams could be heard throughout the house. Mr. Jones had no feelings for her, she was merely a pretty vessel he could break. After what seemed hours, Mr. Jones dressed and knocked on the door to signal he was ready to leave.

The key rattled in the lock once again only this time it was Lilly who entered with a jug of warm water that she emptied into the basin on the wash stand. She motioned for Imogene to wash herself and she left the room again. A few moments later she returned with clean bed linens. Lilly looked sadly at Imogene and told her it would get easier with time.

Madam Dunn reentered the room and noticed the blood on Imogene's wash cloth as well as the bed linens Lilly had removed. She asked Lilly to get Missus Rose who would give Imogene something to help ease the pain.

Terrified, Imogene sat waiting for Missus Rose. When she entered the room she asked Imogene to lay down on the bed so she could examine her. She was nice to Imogene, almost soothing in her words as she placed a cloth over Imogene's face and Imogene fell into blissful sleep. When she awoke she was in bed with fresh clothes on. A tray of Thistle tea, a biscuit and a piece of fruit awaited her and she ate them ravenously.

Imogene fell back to sleep not knowing whether it was morning or evening. She awoke to the sound of the door opening as Madam Dunn came into the room and opened the drapes to let the sun in.

"Good afternoon my dear girl, Mr, Jones was delighted with you." she said as smiled at Imogene.

Imogene stared in disbelief, she could not utter a word in response. She could not get past the horrors of her past few days and feared her life was now in ruins wondering what had her parents done to her.

Madam Dunn looked earnestly at Imogene then spoke.

"Let me explain a few things to you. I am very fair with all my girls. If you perform well in return I will teach you how to read, write and play the piano. I will also give you money, yours to do with with as you please. Most of the girls love to buy fancy new dresses when they can afford them. You in turn work for me, entertaining men and women. Your fee is four pounds every day regardless of how many clients you see. You will also receive two meals a day, when you take them is up to you, and all the thistle tea you need. The tea helps avoid pregnancy. You must not get pregnant or you will be asked to leave immediately. The money you pay also offers a doctor's services should any clients get out of hand. Once a month you will pay an additional five pounds to me.

Three pounds will go to Missus Rose who will examine you monthly and verify you are clean. Our clients are very particular about not taking home disease to their wives or husbands. We run a clean and elegant house which is why I have done so well. The other two pounds goes toward your laundry. Right now I want you to put on the ruby coloured dress in the wardrobe and have Lilly come assist you in fixing up your hair. Once you have done that I want you to go see the artist downstairs. He will draw your picture and it will be put into the next Swell Guide.

By the way, you can tell me anything and everything. The girls here call me 'Abbess', as I know and keep many secrets." With that Madam Dunn left the room.

While petrified of Madam Dunn, Imogene was a very smart girl. She realized it would be better for her to be on the Madam's good side. She talked to the other girls her age in the house such as Lilly and learned tricks on how to make things less painful for herself and what clients expected.

She also excelled at her academic studies and in a few years became one of the most valued girls in Madam Dunn employ. Her beauty and wit as well as her fine voice and piano playing charmed many a patron. Her skills in the bedroom were also well noted.

Imogene was indeed living a life of luxury even if she had to pay for it in ways she wished she did not. In her free time Imogene enjoyed sitting out on the first floor balcony that faced the main street. The front garden was filled with fragrant flowers in the warmer months and the small settee was comfortable.

Even though the house was set back a ways from the street she could see the people who walked by. She often wondered what life was like outside the walls of the house and how her siblings were doing.

One morning while enjoying a cup of tea on the balcony Imogene saw a woman walking slowly by on the street. The woman appeared very intent on trying to see beyond the hedgerow and past the large front gate to the house.

Imogene recognized the woman immediately as her mother. It had now been a number of years since her parents sent her off with the stranger and Imogene often wondered how she would handle seeing either of her parents again.

Instead of feeling anger at her mother in that moment she felt pity for her. Imogene quickly dashed inside and down the stairs to the front hall calling out for her chaperone. When he appeared she shoved a five pound note into his hands and described the woman who had been outside the gate.

She wanted him to find her and present the money. She then pushed him out the door and told him to hurry up as to not lose her should she make her way down a back alley. No explanation required, simply hand the woman the money and walk away.

Imogene did not realize that her mother had known all along where her daughter had been living. It was no secret that Madam Dunn's house was one where many young girls ended up. The practice of auctioning young girls while deplorable was accepted by many due to the high calibre of the clientele. Imogene's mother had taken to walking by the house almost every day over the years hoping to catch a glimpse of her daughter.

Today was the first time Imogene had noticed her mother. When the chaperone caught up with Missus Fey he handed her the money. She knew right away it had come from Imogene and quickly made her way home to tell her husband.

Soon Imogene's father also passed the house. Every day after he finished at the market he would stand out front on the street. One evening Imogene's chaperone noticed him milling about on the street and confronted him. Imogene's father introduced himself as Mr. Fey and told the story of what happened to his family and how heartbroken they were with their decision to sell their daughter to Madam Dunn.

Imogene's chaperone assured Mr. Fey she was well taken care of but on occasion there had been instances when men had harmed her and some of the other girls and the chaperones were forced to take action by removing these "gentlemen" from the premises.

Mr. Fey couldn't imagine someone harming his beautiful daughter and pleaded with her chaperone to assist him in bringing down judgment on these men.

At first her chaperone was unwilling to help wishing to stay out of the whole affair. Mr. Fey pleaded his case further convincing him he would be doing a good service by releasing the names of the perpetrators. To seal the deal Mr. Fey offered Imogene's chaperone a few shillings for his assistance in providing names.

Her chaperone hesitant finally obliged as he hated most of the men who came through the front door of the house. He considered them pompous, arrogant and rude and was jealous of their standing in the community. He even envied their time with the girls. Imogene's chaperone agreed he would let Mr Fey know who hurt Imogene, or if a situation had gotten out of hand with any of the other young girls.

What Mr Fey really wanted to know was the name of the first man who had "purchased" and hurt his daughter at the tender age of 13.

Imogene's chaperone could not recall offhand but said he would speak to the other girls to see if they remembered. He told Mr Fey he could not guarantee an answer as it had been some years since her arrival at the house and girls came and went as they got older.

Imogene's father told her chaperone Imogene must never find out about their arrangement.

After several days the chaperone reported to Imogene's father the name of the first man who had purchased her that fateful night. He told Mr. Fey the story of how the man had gone out of his way to be exceptionally cruel according to one of the girls named Lilly who had been asked to assist in getting Imogene ready for the auction and tended to her after her "breaking in".

Mr Fey was devastated and angry. He blamed himself for the situation. He handed the chaperone a few shillings and bid him goodnight. Heading for home he thought about how he would punish Mr. Jones for his cruelty. He walked slowly home cutting through several of the back alleys as he plotted out the most minuet of details in his head. Everything had to be just right so that when the perpetrator returned to Madam Dunn's house, he would be ready.

Time passed and no word from the chaperone was forthcoming. Mr Fey continued to wait each night at the pub a few blocks from Madam Dunn's. Discouraged and believing there would never be justice for his daughter Mr. Fey finally received word the perpetrator had returned to the brothel and was waiting for his carriage to take him home after his visit.

Imogene's father arrived out front of Madam Dunn's posing as a representative of the tobacco shop and struck up a casual conversation with Mr Jones convincing him to walk with him to the shop to try out a particularly delightful new tobacco blend from America.

Mr. Jones intrigued by the delightful descriptions of floral, leather and bourbon notes in the flavour followed Mr Fey without suspicion. At the first opportunity Imogene's father shoved the fat, old man into a side alley.

The alley was dark, damp and rarely frequented by anyone save the odd child pickpocket running through during a getaway. It was the perfect location to enact revenge on the man who hurt his only daughter.

Mr. Jones fell hard to the cobbles and let out a moan. Imogene's father wasted no time in attacking him. Letting out a cry of pent up anger he was on top of Mr. Jones holding the large fat man down as best he could.

Imogene's father was not a violent man by nature and couldn't bear to bring himself to stab or bludgeon the horrid fat man to death like so many others would have. He had fantasized about doing it but instead chose to strangle the cowering man. It was not easy but it had to be done.

Mr. Jones begged and pleaded for mercy as Imogene's father tightened his grip around the man's large fleshy throat. Mr Jones was not able to free himself from Imogene's father. His girth simply did not allow him the agility to right himself. Soon the fat old man expired on the cobbles as his last breath was choked from his body by Imogene's father.

"My God what a coward, he had no trouble beating a young girl but cried for mercy when his time came" thought Mr. Fey as he resolutely righted himself and walked out of the alley. A weight had been lifted from his chest, and he was proud of how he enacted justice for beautiful Imogene.

The following afternoon Imogene and Madam Dunn sat drinking tea in the study, over time they had become friendly toward each other. Imogene worked hard, took her work in satisfying clients seriously, and was an intelligent young woman. She had also become one of the most requested girls at the house.

Madam Dunn was impressed and considered giving Imogene more opportunity to help manage the other girls and the house. She believed Imogene would be a wonderful role model who could help the new girls through their first night's experience. Madam Dunn recognized that it was a hellish experience for these frightened girls, but a necessary evil and the largest financial contribution to her business.

Somehow Imogene's experience had given Madam Dunn pause or perhaps she experienced a slight twinge of conscience that night after seeing the damage done to Imogene. Moving forward Madam Dunn insisted each girl was given something for the pain ahead of the act instead of enduring it or being put to sleep with chloroform which was far more dangerous.

Madam Dunn wanted the new girls to be as comfortable as possible even if they were being violated by these men. For the majority of her clients this was an acceptable option however there were some that still insisted they wanted no pain relief or sedation pre-administered as they took pleasure in the pain they caused.

After discussing Madam Dunn thoughts Imogene readied herself for her night's work. Adorned in pale peach silk taffeta, the dress complimented her dark hair and was a near match for the colour of her pale skin. If not for the ribbon details Imogene appeared to be unclothed from a distance. The unexpected look made quite an impression.

This evening like many before offered up new girls to be auctioned, however, the difference was one of the men bidding was known to be quite savage in his treatment of pure young girls. His intent was to violate and beat a young girl at his whim. Like Mr. Jones who had violated and beaten Imogene on her first night, this man was also fat, and squat in stature. His name was Isaac Hooper.

Imogene was on a mission. Her plan was to offer this man a special after he had won his bid. Two girls for the price of one with Imogene presenting herself as the second girl. This way she could protect the young girl as much as possible and take the beating from Mr Hooper herself if need be.

Once Hooper had won the girl of his choosing Imogene followed them to the door of their room and quietly whispered in his ear he had also won her but not to let anyone else know or everyone would want in.

Hooper was delighted with the arrangement. Appearing grateful for the added pleasures he shocked Imogene with his unusually gentle treatment of the new girl and not once did he lay a hand on Imogene. He told her he was very happy with the two for one special.

Of course Madam Dunn caught wind of the situation but instead of scolding Imogene she complimented her on her forward thinking. In future Madam Dunn would announce the "deal" as it was a good way to push the bidding price up and keep the new girls safe.

While all this was going on inside the house out on the streets it was a very different world. Rumours were swirling that the Peelers had been round questioning some of the market vendors living in the neighbourhood.

A story was out that men who frequently abused Madam Dunn's girls found themselves strangled in alleyways.

While Peelers were in short supply what few that were available were found trolling the back alleyways. The men and women who would normally frequented these alleys to sell their services stopped using them. Word on the street was someone was out to avenge a prostitute who had been beaten but no one seemed to know who that prostitute might be.

Even Mr Fey heard the rumours and listened as other vendors at the market gossiped about the murder of Mr Jones, a banker from outside the area. All the market vendors knew Mr Fey had sold his daughter to feed his family some years ago but no one seemed to associate him with the killing of the fat old banker.

Everyone in the market knew Imogene was at Madam Dunn's house although not one of them could afford a prostitute there. Those girls were reserved for the wealthy of the Southwark area.

The fact that Imogene was there did have a few tongues wagging, however, they also gossiped about several other women who had become common Jennys to make ends meet. There were two young Scottish lasses from the box factory that seemed to garner plenty of attention and another vendor's new wife, twenty years his junior who serviced men to make a few extra bob. No one was surprised and most while telling the stories sympathized with the situation. Mr. Fey's fellow vendors knew the sadness that had taken him since Imogene had gone but several joked he showed a pronounced spring in his step since news of the killing.

"Hey Mate, heard your lass was earning her keep at the Dolly house right around the corner from the killing. Funny that, don't ya think?" chortled the fish monger.

"Aye! She is" answered Sam the baker "Our own Mr Fey is the killer for sure, you can see it in his step." he quipped.

The gossiping and jabs continued. No one actually expected Mr Fey to confess and in true character he kept to himself. Life at the market continued on for Mr Fey as did Imogene's life inside Madam Dunn's house.

Word at Madam Dunn's was a young man and member of a wealthy family would be arriving to procure services this coming Saturday evening. All the girls hoped the young man was handsome and ended up in their bed. It was an exciting prospect to have this new man arrive and talk of his impending "good looks" was all the younger girls could twitter on about.

Saturday afternoon arrived and Imogene and few of the other women sat talking while getting ready for the evening ahead. Their sordid experience gave rise to them cracking crude jokes at one another in jest. There was a bond between the girls even though they competed for customers they also looked out and protected each other too.

Imogene and Lilly had become best friends, Lilly was only a year older than Imogene and the two had become inseparable since Imogene's first night five years ago. Lilly's parents sold her at age twelve, but unlike Imogene's parents who wanted to help the family, Lilly's parents were alcoholics and sold their daughter for a jug of cheap gin. While both girls ended up at Madam Dunn's under different circumstances they shared the same fate.

Imogene and Lilly were excited to meet this young man.

Madam Dunn described Sir Thomas to the girls, "His tall frame cuts a dashing figure . He is charming, well travelled and 24 years of age. He also has impeccable manners so be on your very best behaviour."

Elegantly dressed the girls presented themselves in the main parlour of the house. Madam Dunn made sure she chose girls closer in age to Sir Thomas as he requested. The younger girls were ushered into the second parlour to await Madam Dunn's other clientele.

Sir Thomas arrived promptly at 7 pm, carrying a bouquet of white roses. He bowed to Madam Dunn and asked her to present each girl with a rose on his behalf. He then graciously talked to all the young ladies present. Being around Sir Thomas the girls felt like real ladies of society. He took the time to ask each of them their likes and dislikes and thanked them for their time.

The girls anxiously waited with baited breath, wondering who would be chosen.

After making the rounds to each of the girls he excused himself from the rest of the group and with a smile and a slight bow Sir Winston took Imogene's hand.

Lilly winked at Imogene and stood up excusing herself. Her exit was Madam Dunn's signal to enter the room and give each of the other girls a white rose as she sent them off to see their regular clients in the other parlour.

Sir Thomas leaned in toward Imogene. "My dear, may I have the pleasure of your company?" His voice sounded like music to her ears.

"Of course Sir Thomas, it would be my pleasure" Imogene replied. She felt a little unsure as to what to expect. This man seemed too kind and too gentle and from previous experience men like this were often the opposite once in the bedroom. Imogene took Sir Thomas' hand and they retired to the finest bedroom in house.

Closing the door behind them she heard Madam Dunn turn the key in the lock. No matter the outcome Imogene was in it until the end.

Sir Thomas gestured for Imogene to sit on the bed. He then spoke once again in his soft kind voice, "I have been with women while married, as my wife is not inclined to wifely duties and would rather serve tea to her friends than be with me. I know this makes me appear a bounder but I can assure you it is very difficult to feel unloved by one's own wife." Sir Thomas lamented.

Imogene nodded in understanding.

Sir Thomas continued "But, My Dear Imogene...may I call you Imogene? I do not know your last name. I looked at your picture in the Swell guide and saw your wonderful kind eyes, and they spoke to me. I told Madam Dunn I was only interested in you but she insisted I see all the girls that fit my requirements. I know that I don't know you but I am hoping now that we have met I may continue to see you moving forward. If possible I would like it to be once a week".

Imogene was overwhelmed and stumbled to answer.

“Of course Sir. Thomas you can see me as many times as you wish, but I need to be paid for my services.” Imogene felt awkward as she answered and hoped she hadn’t put Sir Thomas off by her “business as usual” remark. “I’m sorry Sir Thomas, I do not mean to sound ungrateful”

Sir Thomas assured her he fully understood that while he came to see Imogene at Madam Dunn’s it would be a business transaction as was expected by the Madam of the house.

Sir Thomas visited Imogene every week over the next three months. During this time their bond grew closer. Sir Thomas was delighted by her compassion and intelligence. Over the weeks together he learned of her family’s poverty and the hardships they had faced. Given a different birthright who knows what would have happened. Sir Thomas was an open minded young man and could see past Imogene’s current circumstance.

Imogene let Madam Dunn know she no longer wished to service other clients. She was tired of their crass behaviour and in her eyes they were all pigs.

Madam Dunn was worried that Imogene and Sir Thomas were becoming too close, and feared her best girl might be taken away which would put a large dent in her coffers. Something had to be done. In her anxiety Madam Dunn wrote a letter to Lady Thomas asking her to tea so she could discuss the situation at hand. Lady Thomas, did not normally care that her husband saw prostitutes on the side but was alarmed when Madam Dunn’s letter alerted her to the constant return to just one girl. She agreed to discreetly meet Madam Dunn and discuss the precarious situation.

Together they hatched a plan to stop the affair between Sir Thomas and Imogene. Lady Thomas did not love her husband, he was simply a means to end in terms of a better life. The marriage had been arranged between their families to secure a contract between their father’s companies.

When Madam Dunn broached the idea of setting Sir Thomas up as someone who assaulted Imogene and in turn spreading word of her injuries. This action would rid them both of their one common problem, Sir Thomas.

With rumours of a murderer avenging girls abused in houses of prostitution the two women wickedly plotted how Sir Thomas would be the next one strangled in an alley. Lady Thomas was all for the idea knowing full well what the outcome would be. She would appear the victim of a philandering husband and as the distraught wife would surely inherit his estate as there were no children from their union. Lady Thomas would be rid of Sir Thomas and Madam Dunn would have Imogene back at to work.

The two women devised a plan where Madam Dunn would keep Imogene in her room after Sir Thomas had left. She would hire a rough man who would be let into the room and in turn he would beat Imogene just enough to hurt her but not enough to cause permanent damage. Madam Dunn would blame Sir Thomas for the incident and keep Imogene quiet. Word would be passed in the streets that Sir Thomas had harmed Imogene and soon after the killer would strike dispatching Sir Thomas from their lives. Imogene would be forced to turn to her work, hide her feelings of despair and Madam Dunn and Lady Thomas would reap the benefits, with no one the wiser.

Lilly just happened to be in the next room when she overheard the women's diabolical plan and began to formulate a plan of her own. She would be at the ready to defend her dearest friend. Once she decided what to do she crept out of the house to visit the apothecary to procure a little something to address the rat problem that needed fixing.

On Saturday night Sir Thomas arrived at his usual time. Imogene and Sir Thomas headed to the bedroom where they were met by Lilly who was waiting outside the bedroom door for them. She had been entrusted with the key as Madam Dunn was entertaining a lady friend for the evening. Lilly revealed the plan she overheard that laid out the plot to have Imogene beaten and Sir Thomas murdered in an alley. Sir Thomas wanted to confront the Madam but Lilly told him she would take care of the situation herself and that his wife was in the house.

Lilly raced downstairs to let Madam Dunn know Sir Thomas had arrived and she had given the key to Sir Thomas as instructed. She then excused herself and headed to the pantry. Madam Dunn proceeded to the study to meet up with Lady Thomas who had been let in through the servant's entrance.

Imogene and Sir Thomas talked for a while and then put their plan into play. Unsure of where this unknown assailant would come from Sir Thomas thought it best if he left the room to see what would happen. He left the door unlocked and hid himself down the hall. After a few moments the assailant knocked on the door to the room and Imogene responded with "Enter"

Just as the assailant grabbed Imogene and threw her to the bed Sir Thomas burst through the door beating the other man into submission. In the ruckus Imogene let out several yelps and screams to elude that she was being beaten. Once Sir Thomas managed to subdue the assailant Imogene balled up one of her stockings and forced it into the man's mouth. Sir Thomas bound the man with the chords he had dispatched from the drapery.

They proceeded to push the man into a large wardrobe in the room and closed the door. Imogene pushed one of the large bedroom chairs in front to secure the door.

During this time Lilly entered the study where Madam Dunn and Lady Thomas were seated. Both women were conversing and abruptly stopped when Lilly entered the room.

"Good evening Madam Dunn I noticed you had a lady friend with you as I was passing by headed to the kitchen. I was making tea for myself and thought you both might enjoy some too" she placed the tray down in front of the two women.

"Thank you Lilly, how thoughtful of you" replied Madam Dunn as Lilly wished them both a good evening and left the room.

Madam Dunn and Lady Thomas enjoyed the tea and sweets. They continued to talk and commended each other on their plan while waiting for the upstairs maid to alert them to Imogene's mishap as instructed. It seemed to be taking longer than was expected although both women were sure they heard quite a bit of noise from an upstairs room.

To pass the time further Madam Dunn called for Lilly and asked her to bring in some sherry. On her way back to the study Lilly was stopped by Sir Thomas and Imogene.

"Let us bring the sherry in. I need to have a talk with my dear wife" Sir Thomas remarked and took the small tray with the decanter and crystal glasses from Lilly.

Both he and Imogene entered the study. The shock on the women's faces upon seeing Imogene unharmed and Sir Thomas with tray in hand would have been comical if the arsenic that Lilly had put into their tea had not begun to take effect on both women.

Sir Thomas and Imogene looked over at Lilly in dismay. Lilly winked and gestured to the tea cups on the tray and ran her finger across her throat to indicate she set out to kill them both of them and end their evil plan.

Sir Thomas was the first to realize what Lilly had done.

"Oh my!" he gasped. "My dear wife you look horrible whatever if the matter? It appears you will not be needing this sherry after all"

Sir Thomas held up the one glass he intended for his wife as he passed the second to Imogene. "Here my love, it would also appear Madam Dunn does not need hers either."

They were about to drink the sherry when Lilly frantically knocked both glasses from their hands.

"Sorry, I can't have my dearest friend and her love drinking those. I put arsenic in the sherry as well, just in case. I had to be sure this was the end of them both". Lilly faintly smiled at her friend.

Both Madam Dunn and Lady Thomas were now withering on the floor clenching their stomachs and frothing at the mouth. By the time Imogene had written and dispatched a note for the doctor both women were dead.

Sir Thomas returned upstairs and released the assailant tossing him directly out the front door of the house and threatening him to never return as he did so.

Both the doctor and the police were called in. The doctor suspected poisoning and after questioning everyone in the house they found a small box of arsenic in the pantry cupboard and attributed the deaths to the scullery maid who could not read.

During questioning she thought it possible she may have accidentally poured arsenic into the sugar canister. In truth Lilly had done the deed but the police were happy with their conclusion and deemed the incident to be a tragic case of accidental poisoning.

With Madam Dunn gone there was no longer a hold over the girls and Imogene let them know they could leave of their own accord.

A few months later Imogene Fey married Sir Winston Thomas in a small ceremony at what was once Madam Dunn's well known brothel.

Sir Thomas had purchased the grand home and gifted it to his bride on their wedding day. Imogene no longer wanted the home to be used as a brothel but instead as a home for young destitute girls and women who had been displaced in life.

Imogene now known as Lady Thomas put her best friend Lilly in charge of the home that had been renamed "Lady Thomas' House of Mercy".

She and Sir Thomas decided they would live at Sir Thomas's estate on the outskirts of town. On her way to her new home Imogene wanted to stop by her parents. It would be the first time in many years that she entered the very door she was turned out of.

Her parents were surprised to see her. While news of the death of Madam Dunn and Lady Thomas had spread like fire through the streets Imogene's parents dared not speak about it or approach the house after it had happened.

Imogene sat with them for a short time while Sir Thomas waited in the carriage out front. She asked how her brothers were and how her parents were coping. She forgave them for their past deed and told them she still cared for them.

Imogene spoke of how happy she was with Sir Thomas and she promised to help look after her family. She hugged her parents goodbye and stepped into the carriage and drove off to "a better life"

As promised Imogene provided a monthly stipend to her parents to ensure that they would not be hungry ever again. Her father wrote her a note to thank her for her kindness and to let her know how sorry he was that things had come to what they had.

As for the murder of Mr Jones all those years ago, and subsequent others that followed they suddenly ended just as they had begun with no one ever the wiser.