



The Fool: Beginnings, Fearlessness, Folly



It wasn't a sin to steal if you only took forgotten things. Leander had been watching the ugly mutton pie in the bakery window for hours. It was lopsided and slightly squashed. All day customers had ignored it in favour of plump loaves, golden apple pies and sugar-sprinkled shortbread. The pie was left alone, unwanted and forgotten.

Leander knew how that felt.

Lurking by the doorway, he breathed in hot, sweet air each time someone went inside and his stomach ached with emptiness. The evening grew dark and people rushed along the cobbles, pulling coats and shawls tight to keep out the chill. Nobody would buy the pie now.

Wastefulness was a sin, too, and Leander was so hungry.

He had tried to find work, but nobody wanted to hire a scruffy orphan with no schooling and no one to vouch for his

character. Every now and then, he'd earn a few coppers for a day of labour. Last week he'd spent two days mucking out a pig shed – horrible, cold, smelly work – only for the woman to say his work wasn't up to snuff, and short him half his money. Since then, nothing. People always thought he was up to no good – even when he wasn't. So, if he wanted to eat, he usually had to steal. Honesty and hunger were in constant competition for his soul and today hunger was winning.

Peering through the steam-clouded glass, Leander waited for the wiry baker to turn his back, then darted in. He snatched the pie, shoved it into his pocket and ran.

'Oi!

The baker was after him. Leander sprinted up the high street, pushing between two men in top hats and dodging an old lady with a cane. He darted across the road, narrowly missing the wheels of a carriage.

'Whoa there!' shouted the driver.

'Thief!' the baker cried, still on Leander's heels.

Leander scrambled over a wall and rounded a corner. If he was caught, he'd get a thrashing or worse – be taken before the law. He dashed into an alley, his panicked footsteps sending rats skittering from their hiding places in the shadows.

Up ahead, warm light spilled from low windows. The inn.

If he was fast and clever, he could lose his pursuer in the crowded alehouse. He shoved the door open, breathless, heart pounding.

'Watch it, son—' He almost collided with a man carrying tankards.

‘Sorry!’ Leander hopped over the legs of a sleeping drunk and squeezed between tables. Lucky he was so small and skinny for his age. The air was stuffy-warm, heavy with tobacco smoke and the stale scent of old beer. He ducked beneath a man’s arm and kicked an overturned chair out of his path.

The baker thundered in. The gaffer was fast.

Leander dropped to the sticky floor and crawled under tables, avoiding booted feet and puddles of drink. This was too close. He raced to the opposite corner and through the narrow black door that led to the adjoining coach house.

Cool night air washed over his flushed cheeks. The coach house was a cavernous room, with wooden beams and an earthy hay smell. The big barn doors were chained and bolted – no escape there. To his right was a row of horse stalls. Could he hide there? No, unsettled horses would give his location away.

Then he saw it. A pristine black carriage, empty and waiting patiently for its owner’s return. Perfect. He yanked open the door and jumped inside.

The smell came first, dry and sharp, sour and musty all at once, like last autumn’s rotten leaves after the snow melts, and old books, and pine tar, and spoiled meat.

Pots, pans and bundles of herbs hung from the ceiling, brushing against his ears. There was a bench on one side covered with dusty blankets and rugs. The other wall was fitted with dozens of wooden drawers and compartments, some gaping open, leaves and spoons and feathers poking out

at all angles. Every other inch was covered with ramshackle shelves crammed with cards and papers and bottles of murky coloured liquids and – Leander leaned in to inspect the biggest jar – was that the skeleton of a rat? Why would anyone want such a thing?

A noise. Someone was here.

Footsteps click-clacked across the flagstones. Not the powerful gait of the baker. These were sure and sharp.

Stupid! He should have checked there was no one around. If he'd been seen climbing into the carriage, he was in bigger trouble than ever.

'Who's there?' a woman's voice called from the far corner. 'Who is in my carriage?'

Leander's heart raced. Whoever owned this collection of strange and eerie things wasn't a person he wanted to meet. He jumped out and darted behind a wooden post.

'What mischief is this?' the woman said.

Click, click, click.

The footsteps came closer, slower now but unhesitating. Blood pounded in Leander's head and he pressed his back against the post. His warm breath made white clouds in the cold air.

'Come out. I know you're there. I can smell you.'

Out of sight, horses shifted in their stalls, hooves scraping over straw and stone.

'Now then, don't be shy.' There was almost a laugh in the woman's voice. She paced round the carriage towards Leander's hiding place.

Beyond the inn door the muffled fury of the baker's voice grew louder. If Leander stayed put, the baker would see him the moment the door opened. But, if he ran for the back door, he'd collide with the carriage owner. He felt like a fox with hounds closing in on both sides.

Thinking quickly, he dived under the carriage, feeling the pie squish in his pocket as he rolled over and tucked himself behind the back wheel.

The inn door was flung open.

'When I get my hands on you—!' the baker roared, stopping abruptly as he noticed the woman. 'Beg pardon, ma'am. Did a boy come this way?'

Leander's chest tightened. Any moment now, he'd be dragged out and . . .

'No,' replied the woman. She stepped in front of the wheel and flicked out her dress, obscuring Leander's hiding place. 'I haven't seen anyone.' Leander could only see her ankles, but from her fancy blue dress and crisp speech he could tell she came from money.

'Been thieving. Yay high,' the man said, panting. 'Long hair, short trousers.'

'I assure you I'm quite alone.'

Leander was confused. Why would this woman lie for him?

'Right you are,' said the baker. 'Sorry to trouble you.'

'Not at all.'

'Sneaky little blighter. I've 'ad a few things go missing lately. First time I've seen who was responsible.'

'Is that so?' the woman said.

‘Best keep an eye out, ma’am. He’s a wrong’un.’

‘Thank you, I shall.’

Leander held his breath as the baker’s footsteps retreated. He listened for the *creak-thud* of the inn door closing.

‘A thief, is it?’ the woman said. ‘Out with you, then.’

Not likely. Leander scabbled away beneath the carriage and out the other side only to find the woman already looming over him. She was tall, with coal-black hair piled high beneath a peacock-green hat. Although she was beautiful, a coldness hung around her, more biting than the November air.

‘Why were you in my carriage?’ she asked, not unkindly.

‘Wasn’t.’ He sidestepped to get round her, but she blocked his path.

‘There’s no need to lie, but you must explain yourself.’

The blue satin of the woman’s dress brushed against his legs. Any closer and she’d be standing on his feet. He sized her up; something was unsettling. Why would this grand lady have a carriage full of feathers and bones and other oddities? And why would she save him from a beating from the baker . . . ?

‘I wasn’t doing anything.’ He shrugged. ‘Just looking round.’

‘And if I should check your pockets?’

‘Check them.’ He raised his chin defiantly.

‘Terrible things happen to liars and thieves, little boy.’ Her voice was musical, her lips smiling.

Their eyes met and, for several seconds of hideous silence, Leander didn’t dare look away. It seemed the woman could

see every dark spot on his soul and every bad thing he had ever done.

‘What’s around your neck, child?’ Her voice was still steady and calm. ‘Something of mine?’

‘No. Truly I didn’t take anything.’ The moment she looked away, he’d be out of there. She might have protected him, but he didn’t trust this woman with her strange carriage. He desperately wanted to go somewhere safe and eat his pie.

‘Come now, I won’t hurt you. Show me.’

The woman stared at his throat like a wolf ready to bite. Leander pulled the locket from his grubby linen shirt. ‘It was . . .’

‘Your mother’s,’ she finished for him.

A pit opened in Leander’s middle. ‘How did you know?’

‘Ah yes,’ she whispered, a dreamy expression crossing her face. ‘Now I see. A motherless child – an orphan, yes?’

Leander couldn’t form words. What witchcraft was this?

‘All alone in the world.’ She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand, feather-light. ‘Lost.’

He stuck out his chin. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘May I?’ she asked, fingers already curling round the locket. She leaned in, the thick scent of lavender and violets smothering him. ‘Interesting.’

He wriggled from her grip. ‘I have to go.’

‘You are miserable,’ she said. ‘I know a little about misery. I could help you.’

‘Don’t need help.’ Leander knew she was just pretending to care so she could feel virtuous. He didn’t want her pity.

Yes, he was alone, but that was fine. No one to let him down. People only cared about themselves.

She laughed. 'I think you do. You can trust me. You must be famished.'

Then again . . . Maybe if he played for sympathy she'd give him some money, or food. He could be nice, for a minute, and run if things went wrong.

'I collect trinkets, as you've seen.' She gestured towards the carriage.

Trinkets? A rat skeleton was hardly a trinket, but Leander bit his tongue.

'I'd be willing to buy your locket, as a kindness. It's clear you need the money.'

'Or you could just *give* me money.' He tried a cheeky smile.

'Impertinent little thing, aren't you?' She laughed. 'No. It must be a fair trade. No nonsense.'

Leander's mind whirred. He'd already pawned his mother's boots and coat, sold her pots and pans and even traded her bed sheets to the ragman. The locket was the last thing he had left. If he sold that, too, there would be nothing of hers to hold. It would be like she never existed. The thought made his eyes sting with tears. No. He couldn't part with it. He *wouldn't*. Then, as if reminding him of the reality of his situation, his stomach growled loudly. What choice did he really have? He had no other way to make money, and the more he stole, the more chance he'd be caught. Today had been a close call with the baker, but what happened when his luck ran out?

'It's not real gold,' said Leander. Should he . . . ?

‘Indeed not. But I am a soft-hearted creature, and I’ve taken a liking to it.’

‘I don’t . . .’

‘It would be hard to part with it, I’m sure,’ she said. ‘But your mother would understand. Do you think she’d rather you went hungry?’

And he was hungry. So hungry. Her words brought the ache back to his belly. The flattened mutton pie wouldn’t fill him for long. Three days ago he’d spent his last penny on a pint of pea soup and a hot potato. Yesterday all he’d had were three bruised pears he’d swiped by climbing someone’s garden fence. There was never enough food.

‘Is the latch still intact? Does it open and close?’ she asked.

Leander nodded. To go from being caught stealing to earning some honest money was a good turn of events, but his mother’s locket . . . Could he?

‘I’m sure I can find you a tempting sum. Shall we say ten shillings?’

Ten shillings! He couldn’t remember when he last had a full shilling to his name.

Behind the woman, a girl appeared at the open carriage door. Leander blinked in surprise. Where had she come from? There had been no one inside a moment before . . . The girl put her finger to her lips, urging him to stay silent. Was she trying to steal something, too? No. She looked too neat and well dressed to be a street child. The woman’s daughter perhaps? She looked about eleven, like Leander, and had the same dark hair as the woman.

‘Six, seven, eight . . .’ The woman counted coins from an embroidered pouch. ‘What do you say, boy?’

The girl shook her head frantically and mouthed, ‘No,’ her expression a picture of panic.

The girl’s urgency alarmed Leander back to his senses. He couldn’t possibly sell the only thing he had left of his mother!

‘No,’ he said firmly.

The woman’s face fell.

‘It’s very kind of you, miss, but I couldn’t part with the locket.’

She stiffened up and scowled. ‘A shame. If you change your mind, I shall be here until morning. Ask for Madame Pinchbeck.’

Was that it? She was letting him leave?

Leander glanced towards the girl. The movement alerted the woman, who spun round.

‘How dare you?’ She lunged towards the girl, who retreated into the carriage, the door slamming.

Leander took his chance and ran.