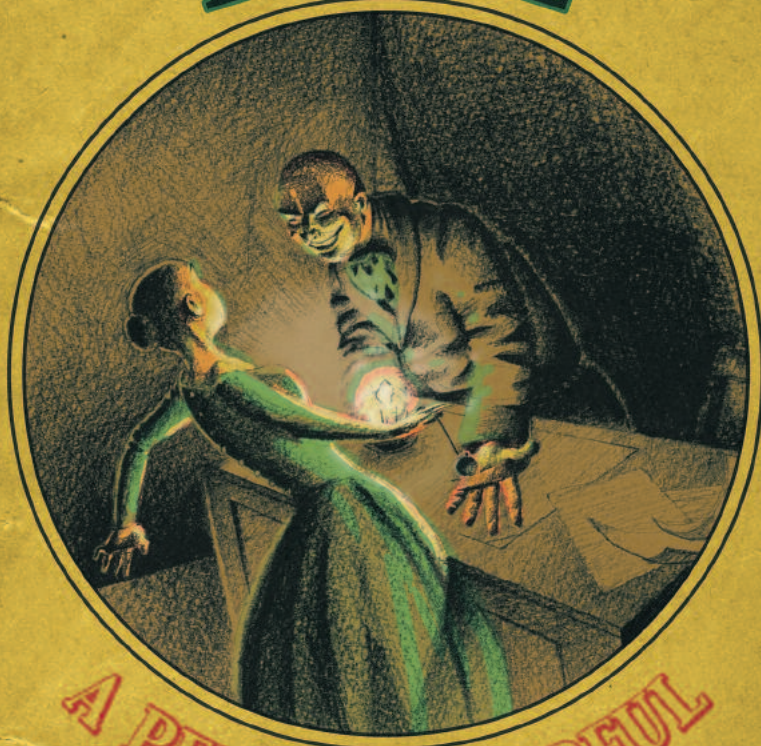


FINGERS TO THE BONE



A PENNY DREADFUL

BY ANDREW TAYLOR

VIVIDLY ILLUSTRATED THROUGHOUT

Biography

Andrew Taylor's crime novels include *The American Boy (An Unpardonable Crime* in the US), which involves the young Edgar Allan Poe and is set in the nineteenth century. It was selected by the Richard and Judy Book Club and won both the Historical Dagger and the Audie. He has also written the Dougal Series, the Lydmouth Series and the Roth Trilogy. He is the only person to have won the Historical Dagger of the Crime Writers' Association twice. He won the CWA's John Creasey Award with his first novel, *Caroline Minuscule* and he has been shortlisted for both the Gold Dagger and Edgar.

Andrew Taylor's novels are widely translated. According to public library figures, he is one of Britain's most borrowed authors.

His next novel, *A Stain on the Silence* (Michael Joseph/Penguin), will be published in April 2006. His website is www.andrew-taylor.co.uk

Also by Andrew Taylor

The Dougal Series

Caroline Minuscule

Waiting For The End Of The World

Our Fathers' Lies

An Old School Tie

Freelance Death

Blood Relation

The Sleeping Policeman

Odd Man Out

The Lydmouth Series

An Air That Kills

The Mortal Sickness

The Lover of the Grave

The Suffocating Night

Where Roses Fade

Death's Own Door

Call The Dying

Naked To The Hangman (forthcoming)

The Roth Trilogy

The Four Last Things

The Judgement of Strangers

The Office of the Dead

Requiem For an Angel (omnibus edition)

Other

The American Boy (US: *An Unpardonable Crime*)

The Raven on the Water

The Barred Window

A Stain On The Silence

For further information about these and other books, see

www.andrew-taylor.co.uk

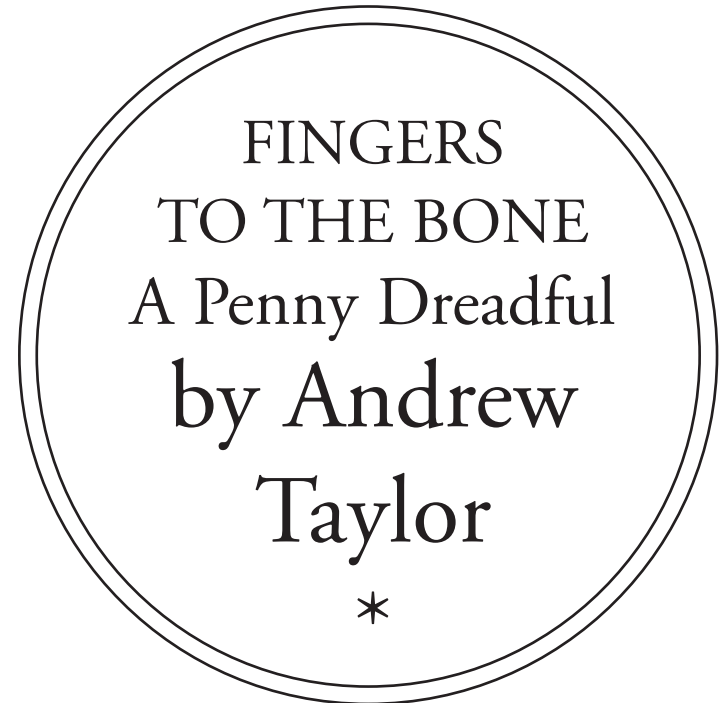
FINGERS
TO THE BONE
A Penny Dreadful

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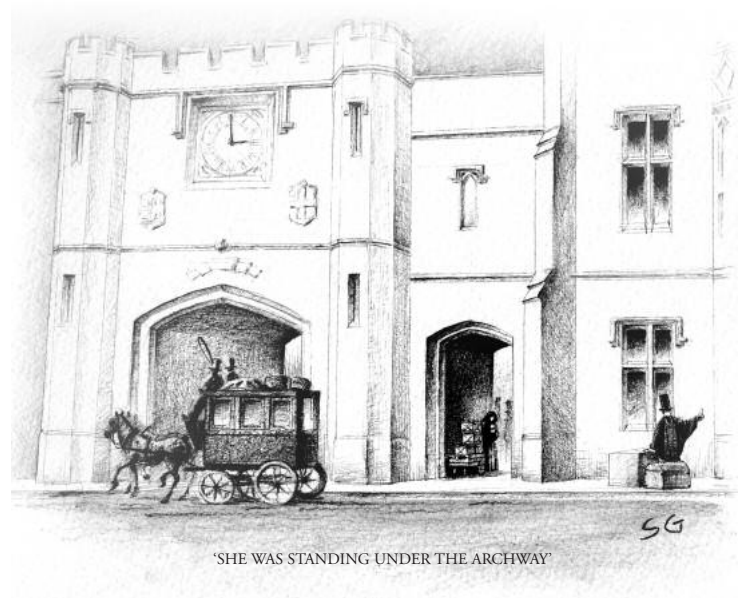
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Foreword

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Myles Allfrey and Adrian Muller, co-hosts of Left Coast Crime 16.



'SHE WAS STANDING UNDER THE ARCHWAY'

1: The Arteries of Wealth

Robbie Trevine saw Mary Linnet before she saw him. She was standing under the archway, tucked in the angle between the wall and a trolley laden with corded boxes. She wore a dark cloak that belonged to her mother, and she had drawn up the hood, holding it across her face with her hand. Her fingers were white and thin, like bones.

Two trains had recently come in, one of them Robbie's, and people hurried through the archway to the city of Bristol beyond. He wriggled through a group of soldiers, arrogant in scarlet and gold, and touched her on the arm. She flinched and pulled away, jarring her shoulder on the wall. She glared at him as if he was a stranger.

"Mary, what is it? It's me."

"Creeping up like that! You scared the life out of me!"

"What are you doing? Collecting?"

"No." She looked away. "Not today."

Sometimes Mary collected money for the Rodney Place Missionary Society, though usually she took her box up the hill to Clifton or down to Queen Square, where the pickings were better because the people were rich enough to afford to be generous. Sometimes she was sent further afield, to Bath or Chippenham or Swindon. The railways had made the world smaller, more manageable.

“So why are you here?” Robbie asked.

“Taking the air.”

“Here? At Temple Meads?”

“Why not? The doctor brought a nurse, Mrs Allardyce. She’s sitting with Ma.”

“How is she?”

“No better. Worse if anything. And what are you doing here?”

“Tried for a job. Just digging, that was all. Foundations for a signal box. But they’d already –”

“Robbie,” she cut in. “Go now, please. Go.”

He gawped at her. “But why?”

A door had opened on the other side of the porter’s trolley. A man laughed. Mary gripped his arm. “Too late. Look at that notice. You don’t know me.”

“You’ve lost your wits.”

“Just do as I say.”

He turned away and pretended to study a notice concerning the transport of livestock on the Great Western Railway. The fact he could read it all was due to Mary’s mother. Several gentlemen emerged through the doorway. They exchanged farewells and most of them strolled through the archway to waiting carriages.

But two of the gentlemen lingered. Side by side, cigars in hand, they surveyed the seething crowds. Porters shouted and cursed. Trains murmured and hissed and rattled. The sounds rose to the high vault of the roof.

“Ten years ago this wasn’t here, Sir John,” said the younger and smaller of the two. “Twenty years ago it was barely conceivable. Thirty years ago it would have been beyond the wildest dreams of an opium eater.”

“Impressive, I grant you,” answered his companion, a white-haired gentleman of perhaps sixty years of age. “But the noise is intolerable.”

“Noise? Yes, indeed. It’s the sound that money makes. The Great Western Railway has restored prosperity to the towns it touches. Railways are the arteries of wealth. As you yourself will discover, I trust, when the Lydmouth and Borders Railway is built.”

“You go too fast for me, sir.”

“Because there is no time to waste!” cried the younger man, waving his cigar. “The fruit hangs ripening on the tree. If we do not pluck it, then someone else will. Which is why my directors and I are so desirous of your joining us on the board. Where Sir John Ruispidge leads, other men will follow. Your position in the county, sir, your influence with the Administration, your friends in Parliament – you have it in your power to smooth our way considerably and, I may add, to reap a just reward for doing

so. Once the line is built, you may transport your coal at a fraction of the price you now pay, and at many times the speed. The general prosperity the railways bring – the freer movement of people and capital – cannot but have a benevolent effect on the fortunes of all those concerned.”

“Ah, but the investment must be considerable. Nothing begets nothing, as the Bard tells us.”

“I speak from experience. You must allow me to show you the figures from South Devon.” There was another wave of the cigar. “And consider the convenience of it. You will be able to travel from your country seat to your house in Town within a day, and in the utmost comfort. If Lady Ruispidge desires quails in aspic from Fortnum’s, they could be on her table within a few hours.”

“You are a persuasive advocate.” Sir John took out his watch. “Alas, I must leave you until tomorrow.”

“Good God! Is that a Breguet watch?”

“It is indeed. You have sharp eyes, Mr Brunel.”

Robbie’s eyes swung towards the little man. The great Brunel himself!

“I trust I have a sharp eye for any piece of machinery so elegantly conceived and finely constructed as one of Monsieur Breguet’s watches. But in this case I have a personal interest. My father sent me as a very young man to work for Monsieur Breguet in Paris. He told me there was no better person from whom I might learn what I needed.”

Watch in hand, Ruispidge bowed. “Your father was indeed a man of perspicacity.”

The watch was dangling on its chain from the old man’s hand, swinging to and fro like a pendulum, coming perilously close to the wall. Mr Brunel, Robbie thought, was growing agitated for the watch’s safety.

At that moment, the world tilted on its axis and became an entirely different place. Mary came to life. His friend Mary, whom Robbie had known since he was a child in short-coats; who had played the part of sister to him for most of his life; who went to church at least once, usually twice, on Sundays – his friend Mary, with whom he was more than half in love – well, she picked up her cloak and skirt with her left hand and ran forward, keening like a madwoman.

She snatched the old man’s watch from his hand. Sir John and Mr Brunel froze, both with their cigars moving towards their open mouths. Mary dived into the crowded station yard, dodging among the carriages and horses and wagons until she was lost in the seething mass of humanity.



'THEY WERE NOT FAR FROM THE TOWER OF BRUNEL'S UNFINISHED SUSPENSION BRIDGE'

2: A Gown of Yellow Silk

Robbie Trevine lodged above a cobbler's near the market, where they let him sleep under the rafters in return for sweeping floors and running errands. By the time he had finished his jobs for the evening, the sky was darkening. He slipped out of the house and made his way to Hotwells, to the damp and crowded house by the river where Mary and her mother lodged in a tiny room up four pairs of stairs.

Mary opened the door. When she saw him, she stepped back to allow him into the room. He glanced towards the curtained alcove beside the empty fireplace.

"She's asleep," Mary whispered. "The doctor gave her something."

"Give my love when she wakes."

Robbie reckoned that Mrs Linnet had given him more love than his own mother, though that wasn't hard because, when he was three years old, his mother had gone off for a few days' holiday with a Liverpool publican and never come back.

Mary's face was impossible to read in that shadowy room. "I was afraid you'd come."

"Why did you do it? Why did you steal the gent's watch at the station?"

"I had to do something. The doctor don't come cheap, and Ma needs medicines, and proper food. The nurse is coming back later this evening.

A Gown of Yellow Silk

It all costs money."

"But if they catch you –"

"They won't."

"But selling something stolen is almost as risky as taking it in the first place."

She shrugged and turned her head away from him. "There's someone I know."

"This isn't the first time, is it?"

Mary said nothing. They listened to the breathing of the sick woman.

Robbie said: "I'd do anything to help. You know that."

"Go now," she said. "Just go. I don't want you here."

Robbie stumbled out of the room. He crossed the street and took shelter in the mouth of the alley on the other side. There was a tavern on the corner, and the constant bustle of the place made him almost invisible.

A distant church clock chimed the quarters and the hours. He calculated that he waited nearly an hour and a half before Mary appeared in the doorway of her house. She was hooded and cloaked as before, but he would have known her anywhere. She set off up the street, her wooden pattens clacking on the cobbles. He followed her, holding well back, keeping to patches of shadow and varying his pace. Soon they began to climb towards the dark mass of Clifton Wood.

Mary followed the rising ground towards the Downs in the north west. They were not far from the tower of Brunel's unfinished suspension bridge, looming over the Gorge and the river Avon. Before she reached the Downs, however, Mary turned into a terrace of great stone-faced houses set back from the road. Only one of the houses had shuttered windows, and this was the one she approached. Robbie, watching from across the street, saw her dark figure descending into the basement area in front of the house.

He crossed the road. A plate had been screwed to one of the gateposts. It was too dark to decipher the words engraved upon it. He ran his fingertips over the brass, tracing the cold metallic channels of each letter.

THE RODNEY PLACE MISSIONARY SOCIETY

*

Mary knocked on the basement door. A candle flame flickered in the black glass of a nearby window. Bolts scraped back. The door opened.

"Child," said Mr Fanmole in his soft voice. "You are long past your time."

"I beg pardon, sir. The nurse was late and I couldn't leave my mother."

When she was inside, Mr Fanmole closed and bolted the door. He wore a long grey dressing gown of a silken material that gleamed in the

A Gown of Yellow Silk

candlelight; his little head was perched on a broad neck that rose from narrow shoulders.

“Come, child.” He led the way along a whitewashed passage vaulted with brick, his shadow cavorting behind him on the wall. “You saw him?”

“Yes, sir. He came out with the other gents, and then he stopped for a while and talked with one of them. Mr Brunel himself.”

She followed Mr Fanmole into a room at the back of the house. A coal fire burned in the grate and there were shutters across the two windows. He sat down at a mahogany table laden with papers and angled his chair to face the fire. He beckoned her to stand before him.

“Well, child? What did you learn?”

“He’s interested in a new railway but he hasn’t made up his mind. He’s lodging at the Royal Western Hotel. And... and I took his watch.”

Mr Fanmole slapped the palm of his hand on the table, and his pen fell unnoticed to the carpet. “I told you to be discreet, you little fool. This was not an occasion for thieving.”

“But he was playing with it, sir, just asking for it to be priggid. And my ma, she’s took bad again, and she needs a nurse as well as a doctor – and it’s a good watch, too, sir. You give me a sovereign for the last one, and I’m sure –”

“Hold your prattle.”

“Sir, he didn’t see my face, I swear it. And I was away through the crowd before he knew the watch was gone.”

“Give it me,” he commanded.

Mr Fanmole held out his hand and she dropped the watch on his palm. To her surprise he smiled. “Ah! He will be enraged. He’s deeply attached to his Breguet timepiece.”

“Sir,” she asked timidly. “How much will I have when you sell it? My mother –”

“It’s too precious to sell, child. Far too precious.”

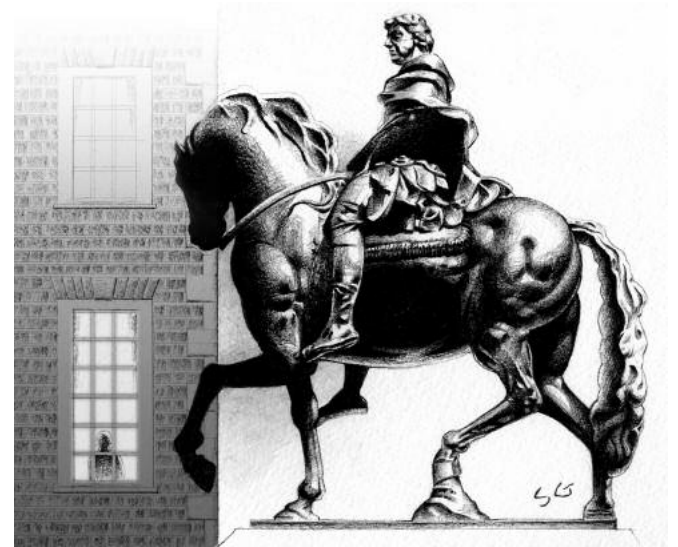
“But, sir, I don’t understand.”

He gazed at her, whistling tunelessly, and put down the watch, very gently, on the table. “You don’t have to understand.”

“I – I thought you’d be pleased, sir.”

Suddenly he was on his feet and looming over her. His hand shot out and seized her by the hair. He dragged her to a tall cupboard built into the wall on the right of the fireplace. He opened the door. Hanging inside was a yellow silk gown.

“This is how to please me, child.”



‘THAT EVENING HE DINED IN QUEEN SQUARE’

3: Not Quite The Gentleman

In the opinion of Sir John Ruispidge, Mr Brunel was not quite the gentleman. But it would be churlish to deny that he had been kindness itself after the distressing theft of the Breguet watch on Temple Meads Station. He had summoned police officers and urged them to prosecute their enquiries with the utmost vigour. He had ordered advertisements to be placed in the Bristol papers, offering a reward of twenty guineas for the watch’s safe return.

“Not for the world, my dear sir,” he had said, “would I have had such an incident occur.”

Sir John could well believe it. The long and the short of it was that Brunel had every reason to keep him sweet.

That evening he dined in Queen Square with two men who might become fellow directors if he decided to accept Brunel’s overtures. Still shaken by his experience, he drank deep and left early. The loss of his watch had been a double blow – first the watch itself, which he cherished, and second the circumstances of its theft. As an old soldier, Sir John considered himself to be a man of action, always prepared for the unexpected. But he had not even tried to apprehend the young person. He had behaved, in short, like a milksop.

But he would not be caught unprepared again. As the carriage whirled him back to his hotel near the Cathedral, Sir John patted the pocket of his overcoat and felt the reassuring outline of his Adams revolver. Only recently

patented, it was a double action model enabling rapid fire; according to his gunsmith its bullet would stop a charging tiger.

The carriage drew up outside the hotel. A servant let down the steps and opened the door. As he climbed down, Sir John stumbled, and would have fallen if the man had not steadied him. He was perhaps a trifle bosky, but he prided himself on being a man who could hold his liquor. There might even be a case for a little brandy to aid digestion before he retired.

His apartments were on the first floor. He opened the sitting-room door and discovered that the people of the house had forgotten to bring lights and make up the fire. He marched towards the fireplace, intending to ring for a servant.

But something stopped him in his tracks, something amiss. There was a perfume in the air, clearly identifiable despite the underlying smell of his cigars. He acted without conscious thought. He pulled the heavy revolver from his pocket. Simultaneously he glimpsed a shadow shifting on the far side of the room.

The revolver went off with a crash that stunned him, the echoes almost masking the sound of scuffling and a cry and the closing of the door to the bedroom next to the sitting room. He was so surprised he nearly dropped the gun. He had not intended to shoot; he had forgotten that the Adams revolver was self-cocking and lacked a safety catch.

“Stop, thief!” Sir John cried, and the words came out little better than a whimper.

He moved unsteadily to the connecting door and flung it open. The bedroom appeared to be empty. A second door, leading directly to the corridor, stood open; the corridor was empty too.

Trembling, Sir John returned to the bedroom and tugged the bell-rope so hard it came away in his hand. As he looked about him for the brandy decanter, a piece of material on the carpet caught his eye. He picked it up and examined it under the light.

It was a scrap of yellow silk.

*

During the following day, Robbie earned a few coppers helping a stall holder at the market. Everyone was talking about the burglar at the Royal Western Hotel, and how an old gent had put a bullet in him. When Robbie got back to his lodgings, the cobbler called out to him from his workshop.

“There’s a woman asking after you. That nurse, Mrs Allardyce. She said you was to go over to Mrs Linnet’s. But first things first. I need a dozen tallow candles from Hornby’s. If you look sharp you’ll catch them before they close.”

Robbie ignored the order, just as he ignored the shout that pursued him up the street. He ran all the way to Hotwells. The house where the Linnets lodged was full of lights and noise but their window was dark. He climbed the stairs and tapped on the door. There was no answer. He turned the handle and went inside the room. The air made him gag.

“Mrs Linnet? Mary?”

“Robbie?” Mary’s mother whispered from the alcove near the fireplace. “Is that you?”

“Yes. Shall I light the lamp?”

He blundered through the darkness and found the oil lamp and a box of matches on the mantel. Mrs Linnet’s face appeared in the wavering light. She was lying on her pallet, huddled under a mound of blankets.

“What’s happened? Where’s Mary?”

“She didn’t come back last night. Mrs Allardyce stayed till morning but then she had to go.”

“Is she coming to sit with you tonight?”

The head rolled on the pillow. “No. I can’t pay her. Mary said she’d bring some money. Where is she, Robbie? I’m worried.”

“I’ll find her. Did she go out again last night?”

“Again? What do you mean? She went out once, and she never came back.”

*

Mary Linnet was on fire. Her lips were chapped and she felt as though her skin was flaking away. Her tongue lay, huge and dry, in her mouth. She was aware of the pain in her left shoulder. There was moisture too, dark and thick and tasting of iron.

She did not know how long she had lain in this dark place, drifting in and out of consciousness. Once, in the glow of a candle, the Reverend Mr Fanmole loomed over her like a great grey slug in a dressing gown. She remembered Mr Fanmole waiting for her with a closed carriage when she had stumbled through the side door of the hotel. She remembered his hot breath on her cheek, and how he had made her lie on the carriage floor as they jolted up the hill to Clifton.

“Don’t sit on the seat, you stupid child, you’ll bleed on the leather.”

Now Mary was lying on a thin layer of straw spread over a flagged floor with a mound of logs in the corner. A barred window was set high in a wall. Sometimes there was natural light on the other side of it – not much, but enough to see the outlines of her prison.

But perhaps that was a hallucination too. She could no longer distinguish between what was inside her mind and what was without.

Not Quite The Gentleman

Once she saw the Breguet watch swinging like a pendulum before her eyes, measuring away her life.

Another time she saw as clear as day Robbie's face framed by the little window. He tapped on the glass with fingers that were pale as bones; and she opened her mouth to call him, but she could no more speak than she could move.



“DAMME, I SEE IT ALL NOW”

4: A Tribe Of One

On the second evening of his visit, Sir John Ruispidge dined at the Royal Western Hotel. After his adventure yesterday evening, he was pleased to discover that he was regarded as something of a hero. The story had already reached the newspapers – how a distinguished visitor to Bristol had surprised a burglar in his room and coolly put a bullet through the scoundrel. The villain had not yet been apprehended, but traces of blood had been found.

Returning to his rooms after dinner, Sir John passed through the lobby of the hotel. A young man was engaged in an altercation with two of the hotel servants.

“I’m not going,” the man was saying in a strong Bristol accent. “Not till I’ve seen him.”

“You’ll be pitched out on your ear. I’ll summon a constable.”

To judge by his clothes, the young man belonged to the labouring class, but he looked clean and respectable. He had a pleasant, manly face, Sir John considered, and he appeared sober. To the baronet’s surprise, the fellow pointed at him.

“Why, there he is! Sir John, sir, let me speak to you.”

“What is it, my man? Who are you?”

The man pulled off his cap. “Robbie Trevine, sir, at your service. It’s – it’s about your watch. And what happened last night.”

Sir John frowned. "The burglar? What had he to do with my watch? It was stolen hours earlier."

"I know, sir. If you'd let me explain?"

"Come over here."

Sir John led the way to a sofa near the fire. He sat down and the man stood cap in hand before him. The servants hovered but kept their distance.

"The watch was stolen by a young woman I know," Trevine said.

Sir John's eyebrows rose. It had not been given out that the thief was a woman. "Go on."

"She's not a thief, sir, I swear it, not by nature. Her mother's ill, and she can't pay for the doctor."

Sir John waved a hand. "Right is right, Trevine, and wrong is wrong. Nothing can alter that."

Trevine's lips tightened. "Yes, sir."

"Do you know where she is now?"

Trevine nodded.

"Then I'm obliged to you. If this results in an arrest and the recovery of my watch, I shall see that you receive the reward. Tell me where to find her and leave your direction with –"

"I don't want your reward."

"What?"

Trevine lowered his voice. "She's wounded, sir. I saw her through a window not an hour ago, lying in a yellow dress like a streetwalker's. There's blood on her, all over the place. Maybe someone shot her."

"Stuff and nonsense."

"Yes, sir."

Sir John glanced at the servants, making sure they were still out of earshot. He remembered the scrap of yellow silk he had found on his bedroom floor. "And – and where precisely is she?"

"If I tell you, you'll help her, sir?"

"I make no promises." Sir John wished he had not described his burglar to the authorities as "a hulking great brute". "But I'm not a vengeful man. If this young woman can procure the return of my watch, I shall be content to let sleeping dogs lie. But first things first. Where is she?"

"In Clifton, sir – up near the Downs where they're building the new bridge. Rodney Place."

"What number?"

"I don't know, sir. But it's where the Missionary Society is. Mr Fanmole's house."

Sir John slumped back in his chair as though flicked by an invisible

finger. The air rushed from his lungs. "Fanmole?"

Trevine looked at him in astonishment. "Yes, sir. A reverend gentleman."

"Little fellow with a fat neck? Slimy voice and a laugh like a hacksaw?"

"That's him to the life, sir."

Sir John stood up. "Damme, I see it all now." He waved to the nearest servant. "You there! Whistle up a hackney-carriage." He turned back to Robbie Trevine. "Wait – I must fetch something. Then we'll see what Mr Fanmole has to say."

When he came back to the lobby, he was wearing a hat and a big overcoat and swinging what looked like a weighted walking stick. He swept Robbie into the hackney-carriage at the hotel door and they rattled up the hill to Clifton. Sir John talked as they drove – he would have talked to anyone; he was as full of pressure as a GWR Northern Star locomotive.

"That damned rogue Fanmole! My brother gave him one of our livings just before he died. But it didn't take long for the rumours to start. Tittle-tattle about the village girls. Then the mother of one of my tenants died, turned out she'd just altered her will in Fanmole's favour. Next thing I knew, he'd invested some money on behalf of his curate, and the money was lost; and the poor fellow blew out his brains; and guess who owned the company? Fanmole's aunt, or some such. I could have taken him to court, but the scandal would have looked bad. So I made him resign the living; and I had a quiet word with the Bishop too."

"Mary says it's his aunt's house in Rodney Place," Robbie said.

"And what does the aunt say about her precious nephew, eh?"

"If she does any talking, sir, no one's taking much notice. She's in a private asylum in Totterdown. But he runs his Missionary Society from her house."

"For the benefit of the heathen, eh? A tribe of one, I'll be bound, and its name is Fanmole. Any servants?"

"None that live in, I believe."

The hackney-carriage drew up in Rodney Place. Sir John told the driver to wait, stormed up the steps and hammered on the door. A moment later, bolts scraped from their sockets, and the door opened.

Fanmole blinked up at them. "Why such unseemly noise, my dear sir? In any case, the Society is closed until the morning."

Sir John thrust his stick into the doorway. "You blackguard."

He shouldered his way into the house with Robbie at his heels. Fanmole gave ground before them, retreating up the dimly-lit hallway.

"Where's my watch? Where's that unfortunate girl?"

"The girl you shot, Sir John?" Fanmole said. "Who now lies at death's

A Tribe Of One

door? She came to me for help, and I gave her shelter. She is a common prostitute by the look of her, but no doubt that was part of her charm for you. I wonder what Lady Ruispidge will say when she hears that you consort with common sluts and then murder them.”



5: Nothing Begets Nothing

In the hall of the house in Rodney Place, Robbie said quietly, “You lie. Mary’s no slut.”

Fanmole’s eyes flicked towards him and then returned to Sir John. “I assure you, sir, the girl is a prostitute, and a thief besides. I found a watch in her pocket when I was tending her, and I cannot believe she came by it honestly. I have prayed for her. *Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.* Luke, chapter fifteen.”

“If she’s a thief,” Robbie said, “it is because you made her steal.”

“Take us to her,” Sir John demanded. “Let the girl put her side of the matter.”

“You are not master here,” Fanmole said with his harsh laugh.

Sir John pulled a revolver from his pocket. “I’ve not come here to argue with you.”

Fanmole shrugged. He picked up a candlestick from the hall table and led the way through a green baize door. With their shadows dancing beside them on the white-washed wall, they descended a flight of stairs and reached a passage running from front to back of the house.

“She’s in a wood store,” Robbie said. “Lying on the floor without even a blanket.”

Nothing Begets Nothing

"She was feverish," Fanmole said over his shoulder. "She could not abide to be covered. The wood store was convenient since it is near the office where I conduct the business of the Missionary Society. Ah – here we are."

At that moment the candle went out, and total darkness enveloped them. There was the sound of a blow. Sir John cried out. Hobnails scraped on stone. Something clattered to the floor. Robbie blundered into a wall.

A match scraped; a flame flared. Mr Fanmole had the pistol in his hand. Keeping his eyes on Robbie, he lit the candle, which was now standing on a narrow shelf near a door at the back of the house. Sir John lay motionless on the floor, and there were streaks of blood in his silver hair.

"You've killed him."

"I doubt it," Fanmole said. "I hit him with the candlestick but I used no more than reasonable force. You are my witness. He threatened me in my own house with a stick and a pistol. But let us be charitable. Age has infirmities of the mind as well as those of the body." The barrel of the gun swung from Sir John to Robbie himself. "And what would a court make of your rôle in this, young man? Much depends on how you act now. Our first step must be to restrain this poor gentleman before he does any more damage. Open the back door. You will find the wood store beyond. He might as well cool his heels in there, along with his young woman. And you shall keep him company."

A revolver is a powerful argument. Robbie did as Fanmole had told him. The back door led to a basement area containing the wood store. Robbie unbolted the door, conscious all the while of Fanmole behind him. Light from the candle spilled across the floor. There was no sign of Mary near the heap of logs.

"Take Sir John's legs," Fanmole said.

Robbie turned back. At that instant he saw Mary, standing by the doorway in her bloodstained yellow dress, her face as pale as wax. She held a finger to her lips. In her other hand was a hatchet

"Hurry, damn you," Fanmole urged.

Robbie bent down and took the old man by the ankles. He dragged him slowly into the wood store. Fanmole advanced slowly, the revolver in his right hand. He reached the doorway and gripped the jamb with his free hand.

"Where's the slut gone?" he cried.

Robbie felt the air shift by his ear. There was a thud. Fanmole screamed. The revolver fell to the floor. Robbie saw the muzzle flash before he heard the crash of the shot. Mary fell backwards on to the logs. Fanmole danced with pain, blood spurting from his left hand, flashes of bone where the tips

Nothing Begets Nothing

of two of his fingers had been.

As the echoes of the shot subsided, another sound forced its way down from the house above them: the pounding of the knocker on the front door.

Fanmole raised his head. His nostrils flared.

"The police," Robbie said. "They've come for you."

Fanmole ran up the steps to the garden at the back of the house.

Robbie snatched up Sir John's weighted stick and set off after him. With surprising agility, the little clergyman darted down the garden. The distant hammering continued. Fanmole unbolted a gate and slipped into the cobbled alley beyond. Robbie followed the running footsteps. Once, when they passed the lighted windows of a tavern, Fanmole looked back. His pale features were contorted with pain and effort, the face reduced to something slimy and inhuman, a creature of nightmare.

They ran through Sion Place and burst into the open. On the crest of the Downs, the Observatory was a black stump against the paler darkness of the night sky. Fanmole veered to the left, towards the edge of the Avon Gorge.

"Stop!" Robbie cried, but the wind snatched away his words.

The clergyman ran towards Brunel's unbuilt bridge. Within a stone's throw of the Clifton tower, he stopped. His breath came in ragged gasps.

"Leave me." He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out something that glittered faintly. "Take this, Sir John's Breguet watch. Sell it or claim the reward. Just go. Say I gave you the slip in the dark."

Robbie did not reply. The memory of Mary filled his mind, and the bloody stain spreading over the yellow silk dress. He moved slowly towards the clergyman. Fanmole clambered on the low wall around the abutment on which the tower stood, intending to drop down to the little footpath beneath. But Robbie's advance made him change his mind and retreat along the parapet of the wall.

"No," he said, flapping his hand as though waving Robbie away. "Pray leave me. I have valuables concealed in a place nearby. I shall tell you where to find them."

He held out the watch. Robbie stepped forward and snatched it. But Fanmole jerked backwards immediately afterwards. By now he was on the corner of the wall, where it swung through ninety degrees to run parallel with the river more than 200 feet below.

"Watch out," Robbie shouted.

But the clergyman's hunched figure was still moving backwards. His left leg stepped into nothing.

Nothing begets nothing, as my mother used to say.

Nothing Begets Nothing

Fanmole toppled out of sight. Branches snapped and crackled as he tumbled down the steep slope. He cried out only once. Then came a moment's utter silence.

At last there was a thud: and another, longer silence, this time as long as the century.

6: Postscriptum

Clearland Court
Lydmouth
23rd January

My Dear Brunel

You will have heard from my Solicitor that I have decided to accede to your request: I hope it will not be too many years before the Great Western Railway will bring you to Lydmouth.

As to that other business, I cannot tell you how glad I am that the girl, Mary Linnet, is no longer at death's door. Without her intervention in Rodney Place, I might not have survived to write this letter. Both she and her mother are now on the road to recovery and I shall find them respectable employment when their health is restored.

It was fortunate that, with the obstinacy of his breed, my hackney driver chose to pound on the door to demand his fare. Trevine tells me that Fanmole believed the knocking heralded the arrival of the Constabulary, and that this precipitated his fatal decision to flee.

I am informed that goods worth several thousand pounds were found in the shed which Fanmole rented by the Gorge. It appears that the work of his so-called Missionary Society among the poor allowed him to recruit weak-minded young people, such as Mary Linnet, and set them to thieving and other mischief on his behalf in Bristol and neighbouring towns. (So you see, my dear Sir, the railway is not an unmitigated blessing!)

But Fanmole's desire to have revenge on me proved his undoing. When he saw my arrival in Bristol announced in the newspapers, he sent the girl to discover where I was staying; she was then to take hold of me when I returned to the room, ring the bell, and complain vigorously that I had assaulted her! His design was to destroy my reputation as, he believed, I had destroyed his.

As you know, the matter turned out very differently: and this was in great part due to the young man Robert Trevine, who returned my late Brother's watch to me. He appears honest; he can even read and write. I offered to find him a situation on one of my estates – but no! the fellow wants nothing better than to stay in Bristol or its environs and work for you in some capacity on the Great Western Railway! It is true he shows some mechanical aptitude but I fancy that the presence in the City of a certain young woman may have something to do with it. In any event, I should be very grateful if you could find him a position.

I am, Sir, yours very truly

J.Ruispidge

Afterword

This story has two godfathers – Adrian Muller, co-organizer of Left Coast Crime 2006 (www.leftcoastcrime2006.com), and Andrew Kelly, of Brunel 200 (www.brunel200.com).

Chris Morris – author of *The Great Brunel* (Tanner's Yard Press, www.tanneryardpress.co.uk), an excellent photographic essay on the man and his work – generously lent me his collection of books about Brunel and his achievements. Mike Rowland of the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust (www.clifton-suspension-bridge.org.uk) kindly allowed me to draw on his extensive knowledge about the bridge and the city. The expertise is theirs; the errors are mine.

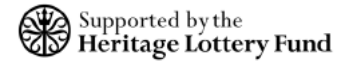
I am also extremely grateful to Simon Gurr, whose illustrations perfectly complement the text.

Sir John Ruispidge, Bt, also appears in *The American Boy*. Readers of the Lydmouth Series will be aware that a branch of the Great Western Railway eventually reached Lydmouth, and that the Ruispidges still lived nearby in the 1950s; indeed they may be there still.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel died in 1859, worn out by years of overwork, at the age of 53. The Clifton Suspension Bridge was at last completed in 1864 as a fitting memorial to Britain's greatest engineer.

AT

Brunel 200 is funded by



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