

The Hyde Park Headsman

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Not since the bloody deeds of Jack the Ripper have Londoners felt such terror as that aroused by the gruesome beheadings in Hyde Park. And if newly promoted Police Superintendent Thomas Pitt does not quickly apprehend the perpetrator, he is likely to lose his own head, professionally speaking.

Yet even with the help of Charlotte Pitt's subtle investigation, the sinister violence continues unchecked. And in a shocking turn of events that nearly convinces the pair of sleuths that they have met their match, the case proves to be Pitt's toughest ever

"Very satisfying, a lovely way to spend a rainy spring weekend." -- USA Today

"Thrilling . . . [Perry's] understanding of the historically rich period enables her to devise a plot true to its time yet timeless in its approach to human nature." -- The Orlando Sentinel

Anne Perry is the bestselling author of two acclaimed series set in Victorian England: the Charlotte and Thomas Pitt novels, including *Death on Blackheath* and *Midnight at Marble Arch*, and the William Monk novels, including *Blood on the Water* and *Blind Justice*. She is also the author of a series of five World War I novels, as well as twelve holiday novels, most recently *A New York Christmas*, and a historical novel, *The Sheen on the Silk*, set in the Ottoman Empire. Anne Perry lives in Los Angeles and Scotland. "Oh George." Millicent let out her breath in a sigh of happiness. "Isn't it beautiful? I've never been out in the park at this time of the morning before. The dawn is so romantic, don't you think? It's the beginning of everything!"

George said nothing, but tiptoed a little more rapidly over the wet grass.

"Look at the light on the water." Millicent went on ecstatically. "It's just like a great silver plate."

"Funny shape for a plate," George muttered, regarding the long, narrow, snake of the Serpentine with less enthusiasm than she.

"It will be like a fairyland out there." Millicent had no respect for the practical at a time like this. She had crept out through the park to sail on the dawn-lit water alone with George. What place had the literal at such a point? She picked up her skirts to keep them from getting soaked in the dew; this much was merely common sense, which was a totally different thing. No one wanted the wet, heavy fabric flapping around their ankles.

"There's someone already out," George said with disgust. And in the broadening light it was quite plain that there was indeed one of the small boats about three yards from the shore, but the figure in it was curiously bent over, as if looking for something in the bottom of the boat by his feet.

Millicent could hardly contain her disappointment. Where was the romance if someone else was present, someone not part of the idyll? One could pretend Hyde Park, in the middle of London, were a wood in some European archdukedom and George a prince, or at least a knight, but some other mundane-minded oarsman would definitely spoil it; apart from the fact that she should not be here, unchaperoned, and a witness was not welcome.

"Maybe he'll go away," she said hopefully.

"He's not moving," George replied with annoyance. He raised his voice. "Excuse me, sir. Are you quite well?" He frowned. "I can't see the fellow's face at all," he added to Millicent. "Wait here. I shall see if he will be a gentleman and move a little away." And he strode down towards the bank regardless of his shoes getting soaked, hesitated on the verge, then stumbled to his knees and slid with a violent splash into the water.

"Oh!" Millicent was horrified, painfully embarrassed for him, and having difficulty stifling her intense desire to giggle. "Oh, George!" She ran down the grass to where he was thrashing around in the shallows making a fearful noise and stirring up mud without seeming to regain his feet. Extraordinarily, the man in the boat took no notice whatsoever.

Then in the fast strengthening light, Millicent saw why. She had assumed he was bent forward, as had George. It was not so. His head was absent. There was nothing above his shoulders but the blood-soaked stump of his head.

Millicent crumpled into total oblivion and fell headlong onto the grass.

"Yes, sir," the constable said smartly. "Captain the Honorable Oakley Winthrop, R.N. Found 'eadless in one o' them little rowboats on the Serpentine. This morning' about dawn. Two young lovers off for a romantic trip." He invested the word romantic with infinite scorn. "Poor souls fainted clean away-got no stomach for the like o' that."

"Not unnatural," Superintendent Thomas Pitt said reasonably. "I should find it a very worrying thought if they had."

The constable quite obviously did not understand him.

"Yes sir," he said with bland obedience. "The local bobby were called, when the gentleman pulled hisself together and got out o' the water. I gather 'e fell in wi' the shock o' the event, like." His lips twitched very slightly but his voice was carefully ironed of even the suspicion of humor. "Constable Withers, that was 'im what was called, 'is bein' on duty in the park, like. 'E took one look at the corpse an' knew as 'e'd got a real nasty one, so 'e sent for 'is sergeant, an' they looked a bit closer, like." He drew in his breath, waiting for Pitt to say something.

"Yes?" Pitt prompted.

"That's when they found 'oo the dead man were," the constable continued. " 'Im being an important naval man, and an "Honorable,' like, they thought it should be someone of your rank to 'andle it-sir." He looked at Pitt with satisfaction.

Pitt was newly promoted to superintendent. He had fought it long because he knew his real skill, which was very considerable, lay in working with people, both with the denizens of the semiunderworld, the poor or the truly criminal, and with the inhabitants of the servants' quarters, the front parlors, and the withdrawing rooms of the gentry.

Then in the late autumn of last year, 1899, his superior, Micah Drummond, had retired from office in order to marry the woman he had loved ever since the appalling scandal that had ruined her husband and finally taken his life. He had recommended Pitt to fill his place on the grounds that although Pitt was not a gentleman, as Drummond most certainly was, he had the experience of actual police work, at which he was undoubtedly gifted, and had proved himself able to solve even the most delicate cases involving the politically or socially powerful.

And after the fiasco of the Whitechapel murders, still unsolved and perhaps destined to remain so, and the fierce unpopularity of the police, the public lack of faith in them, it was time for a bold change.

So now in the spring of 1890, the dawn of a new decade, Pitt was in charge of the Bow Street station, with special responsibility for sensitive cases which threatened to become explosive if not handled with both tact and extreme dispatch. Hence P. C. Grover was standing in front of him in the beautiful office which he had inherited from Micah Drummond, telling him of the decapitation of Captain the Honorable Oakley Winthrop, knowing that Pitt would be obliged to handle the case.

"What else do you know about it?" Pitt asked, looking up at Grover and leaning back in his chair, although at times like this he still felt it to be Drummond's chair.

"Sir?" Grover raised his eyebrows.

"What did the medical officer say?" Pitt prompted.

"Died of 'avin' 'is 'ead cut orf," Grover replied, lifting his chin a little.

Pitt considered telling him not to be insolent, but he was still feeling his way with the men in his command. He had not worked with them closely before, always having one sergeant with him at most, more often no one at all. He was regarded more as a rival than a colleague.

They had obeyed Drummond because he was from a distinguished family with private means and had a career in the army behind him, and thus was of a class doubly used to command. Pitt was totally different, a gamekeeper's son who spoke well only because he had been educated, by grace, with the son of the estate. He had neither the manner nor the appearance of one born to lead. He was tall, but he frequently stood awkwardly. His hair was untidy, even on his best days. On his worst it looked as if he had been blown in by a gale. He dressed with abandon, and kept in his pockets a marvelous assortment of articles which he thought one day might prove handy.

The Bow Street men were slow to get used to him, and he was finding leadership alien to his nature. He was used to disregarding the rules, and being tolerated because he succeeded. Command placed quite different obligations on him and required a stiffer and

less eccentric example to be set. Suddenly he was responsible for other men's orders, their successes and failures, even their physical safety.

Pitt fixed Grover with a cold eye. "Time of death, Constable," he said levelly. "That would be more instructive to know. And was he killed in the boat or brought there afterwards?"

Grover's face fell. "Oh, I don't think we know that, sir. Not yet. Bit of a risky thing to do, though, chop a man's head orf right there in the park. Could 'ave been seen by anyone out for a walk."

"And how many people were out for a walk at that hour, Grover?"

Grover shifted his feet.

"Oh, well, don't seem as if there were nobody but them two as found 'im. But your murderer couldn't 'ave counted on that, could 'e." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Could've been anyone comin' home late from a party, or a night out, takin' the air . . ."

"That is if it was done in daylight," Pitt pointed out. "Perhaps it was done long before that. Have you found anyone else who was in the park yet?"

"No sir, not yet. We came to report it to you, Mr. Pitt, as soon as we realized as it were someone important." It was his ultimate justification, and he knew it was sufficient.

"Right," Pitt agreed. "By the way, did you find the head?"

"Yes sir, it was right there in the boat beside 'im, like," Grover replied, blinking.

"I see. Thank you. Send Mr. Tellman up, will you."

"Yes, sir." Grover stood to attention momentarily. "Thank you, sir." And he turned on his heel and went out, closing the door softly behind him.

It was less than three minutes before Tellman knocked, and Pitt told him to enter. He was a lean man with a narrow aquiline face, hollow cheeks and a tight sarcastic mouth. He had come up through the ranks with hard work and ruthless application. Six months ago he...

Other Books

Dark Assassin. On a patrol boat near Waterloo Bridge, police superintendent William Monk notices a young couple engaged in an intense discussion. Seconds later, the two plunge to their deaths in the icy waters of the Thames. Was it an accident, a suicide, or a murder?

Ever the investigator, Monk learns that the woman, Mary Havilland, had planned to marry the fair-haired man who shared her fate. He also discovers that Mary's father had recently died in a supposed suicide. But Mary's friends share their own darks suspicions with Monk, who now faces the mysteries surrounding three deaths. Aided by his intrepid wife, Hester, Monk searches for answers. From luxurious drawing rooms where powerful men hatch their unscrupulous plots, to the sewers beneath the city where poor folk fight crippling poverty,

Monk must connect the clues before death strikes again.

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