

## *Dirty Tricks*

*By Timothy Blundell*

**T**hirty pieces of silver, not a bad wage in the long run, not really. True, there were better earnings to be had in the world, and indeed more enjoyable ways to earn them, but from where he lay, on his back in the shade of the hay bale, the fruits of his treachery weighing heavily against the profitable side of his purse, those thirty pieces of silver didn't seem half bad.

At least one shilling would go towards laundering the crimson bloodstains from his jacket, and another two he owed to a boy for his small part in the venture but outside that his salary was secure. Furthermore, in the bleak underground of the Liverpool Docklands twenty-seven pieces of silver could go quite a long way in rebuilding a broken man. He hadn't visited his home city in a good few years and in some ways he was reluctant to return to the province of his past but still he felt a draw to the place, the city was a part of him he had something of a duty to return.

Christian Tennant had not been in the field for long, and if the farmer were to find him, he wouldn't be there for much longer, but it barely mattered not in the wake of a job done. It had not perhaps been a job well done, the shoddily bandaged cut to his arm stood as testament to that but it really was a small price to pay for the rewards it brought and by that, he didn't mean the money in his pocket. His employ, for the moment at least came in the prelude to the general election, though neither he nor his profession were much concerned with politics.

Nor, despite the blood dribbling from the gash on his arm, were they concerned with acts of violence, aggression or vandalism. At least not in a physical sense, for vandalism would quite neatly sum up his line of work, work which had finally drawn to a welcome conclusion. As he sat, his short auburn hair glinting in the late afternoon sun, he allowed a rare smile to play across his youthful face.

It was a pleasant day, there were not quite so many birds as he might have liked and perhaps one or two too many clouds, but he could hardly afford to be pedantic on a day such as today. Eyes closed, he leant back into the grass allowing the wind to wash serenely over his newly tanned skin and ears, willing the crickets lullaby to whisper him to sleep in the warm country air. If not for a minor, inconvenient distraction he might even have dozed off where he lay, but the rustic groan of the wooden gateway brought him from his doze and back to reality. For the briefest of moments, Tennant feared that the farmer or worse, one of his burly sons had discovered his trespass and his eyes snapped towards where the gate stood in a pillar of amber sunlight.

What they met was an altogether more welcome sight. An open grin split his face for the man approaching confidently through the field; was James Clegg, a thin, unhealthy but still friendly looking man, the brimmed hat of whom did little to disguise the unhealthy sallow stretches that the sun revealed in the skin about his face. Tennant's grin widened for despite the red coat of the militia that adorned his torso, it

had been this man's younger brother, Matthew, who had helped Tennant in the day's handiwork.

"How is it James?" Tennant called, in his predominantly highbrow English accent, hoisting himself first to his knees then to his feet as his spoke, "That no matter where I go you always know exactly where to find me?"

The smile was reflected in his friends' face, as he bantered back,

"The question you should be asking yourself Chris, is *why* I continue to find you after all these years, it hardly does my health much good."

"Can't think what you mean Clegg," his answer was jovial enough, may even have passed for sincerity, but his attempts to hide his bandaged arm where not so successful. Catching his old friend's exasperated glance he suppressed a blush,

"Glass, nothing too dangerous, shattered when I was climbing through a window"

The man's smile was laced with scepticism, as he reached downwards into the satchel at his waist. Clegg knew better than to ask what his old friend was doing clambering in and out of windows, in truth he knew already for once, a long time ago they had been in the same line of work. For the briefest of moments the pair stood staring at each, though not uncomfortably. Tennant's grin widened,

"I presume you have come for your brother's wage, I hadn't forgotten," he reached towards the purse at his waste as he spoke, allowing his long fingers to unwind the leather thong holding his thirty silver pieces to his waste. He faltered at Clegg's sceptical look,

"Am I to believe you didn't come for Matthew's silver?" Tennant's eyes slipped past his friend to the gate where his companion had entered the field, where there was not one but two grey horses tethered to the battered fence, the commanding voice of his accomplice floated through the hot air towards him,

"It doesn't do Chris to lie about and relax when there's money to be earned let alone in the middle some poor farmer's crop, I have a little job for you,"

Picking up his feet Tennant nodded, catching the fresh purse thrown to him by Clegg, it was an age-old protocol, don't discuss the job, just do it, accept the money, and forget you were ever there. The two walked swiftly and wordlessly from the field, leaving no indication but a slight path in the crop that they had ever been there. As he stepped expertly onto the horse's saddle, his companion raised his hand, extending a long barrelled flintlock pistol for his grip. He took it, feeling the rough wooden texture of the stock on his skin before slipping it next to the knife on his belt *it could be useful*. Beside him, Clegg had mounted his horse and was in the process of wrapping the reins about his wrists, noticing his friends gaze the gaunt man indicated his own pistol,

"It's a dangerous territory today Chris, very dangerous."

And with that cryptic job description the two drove in their heels and cantered down the road towards the city.

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It was early evening by the time the two weary horsemen clattered to a stop on the cobbled streets of Liverpool. They dismounted; agreeing for the most part that a pair of horses would be much too conspicuous around these parts, for they were in the slums, the impoverished sector of the great waterside city.

As Tennant leaped down from his saddle, his hard-soled riding boots clattered against the cobbles of the Liverpool street, coughing up sizeable cloud of dust which settled to the foot of his trouser. The impediment to his sense of fashion however was by far the least thing on his mind. The city looked rather dubious in the stretching shadow of the night.

Where wealth may once have once been, poverty lay, the charm and character that he had received so well in his first sightings of the city had been torn away to make way for beggars, harlots and worse. As they walked Christian saw an elderly veteran corporal, lying sodden in the gutter, the faded crimson of his uniform just visible through the grubby bandages and crusted blood, a shaking hand dropped a few pennies into his upturned shako as he passed. Not able to meet the deadened eyes of the man, Tennant strode wearily up the street, ever conscious of the hungry eyes of desperate people, following his each and every step.

“So,” Tennant interjected into the silence, “now we’re here, what’s the job?”

His associate prolonged the pause momentarily, the sallow skin about his temples tightening as he struggled to find the appropriate words,

“It is...” he paused again “...an important one,”

The unimpressed expression staring from the face opposite him provoked him to elaborate, “This job comes from the top, from Master William Pitt himself, it’s an interrogation.”

Interrogation. That was a new one. The job was usually to publicise rumours against a member of an opposing party, spread lies or better, infiltrate the ranks of the opposing party learn secrets and divulge them to the world. He was a professional Judas, paid thirty pieces of silver for each betrayal, a government agent, an unpleasant business but a steady one. Interrogation was an entirely new field of work, an alien one, and he wasn’t sure he liked the sound of it.

They continued and through the thin cotton of his shirt, Tennant’s tough flesh felt the piercing blows of the wind. He allowed himself a tremble, knowing that in time, the short bursts of violent vibration would bring some warmth to his wind battered joints. The weather of night-time Liverpool was not at all as agreeable as he had remembered it to be; nor, it appeared, was the architecture. Imposing brick buildings, tall chimneys and billowing columns of smoke dominated the grey skyline. The homeless and the downtrodden dominated the gutters below.

The pair continued to half walk half run in a solitary line down the dimly lit path, each of them carefully placed steps sending a loud crack about the streets many shadows. In a place such as this, the heavy firelock in Christian’s pocket was at least a little comfort as he followed the authoritative steps of James Clegg. He led his companion warily down the road, stopping only to look over his shoulder until Christian found himself to be at the head of a cracked, shallow set of steps. At the

foot of the steps was a damp wooden door, hanging ajar on corroded hinges, the familiar amber flicker of a fire glinting where the rot had already eaten away gaps in the wood. He was not sure whether he imagined it, but he could discern something else, an odour perhaps, a vulgar, unseemly taste on the wind that he could not quite place,

“This is it,” announced Clegg simply, “brace yourself,”

Tennant was allowed no time to wonder exactly what he was to brace himself for, before Clegg had pushed the door aside. Christian blinked, the fiery blaze emanating from the room caused his vision to recoil temporarily it took a moment for him to gather his sight, and later his senses to recognise the reality of interrogation.

A man, a live squirming man sat gagged and tied to a wooden chair in the centre of the small chamber. His face was warped almost to the colour of parchment, his limbs twisted, and bent in directions they should never have naturally bent; crimson blood splattered his open jacket and chest. His brow furrowed in agony above bulging, bloodshot eyes that followed the man hulking in shadow above him. He himself a thuggish man with a heavy jaw line and a look of sheer sadistic pleasure as he stood over his victim, a white-hot iron of the sort used to brand cattle clutched in his blood sodden grip. Tennant suddenly understood the source of the outlandish smell and struggled against the impulse to wretch. His voice cracked as he stammered the question,

“Who, who is this man?”

Shooting his companion a piercing glance Clegg answered in a casual tone that was quite unnerving under the present circumstances.

“Of course, introductions, Christian Tennant, it is my privilege to introduce Lord Francis Catesby, sympathiser with socialism and a friend of the French Revolution,” he walked over and struck the man across the face, the scream was audible even through the thick rag in his mouth.

“You’ve been plotting rebellion, haven’t you Catesby?” Catesby’s eyes bulged, his head shaking frantically. Clegg nodded briefly to the thug who drove the flaming brand further into his flesh, beneath the sizzling hiss of burning skin and blood, a piercing shriek could be heard as the man begged for death.

“Where did you find him?” Tennant requested his words cracking with a mixture of fear and horror, all the while his hand drifting down the knife at his waist, “where did you find him?”

Clegg smirked, speaking his reply softly, only just audible over the screams of the tortured man, “Friends in low places are infinitely more useful than those in the high; a gypsy hears more on the wind than any politician – a lesson,” he said, with an amused glance at the dying man, “that I would expect a socialist to appreciate, how painfully ironic.”

“Friends in low places, Clegg?” Growled Tennant, signs of his outrage cracking every syllable of his words, “oh yes, low places, this isn’t interrogation, this is torture!” James awarded him the same sardonic smile, “Now you’re just splitting hairs, you can go outside if it suits your stomach better.” Reaching into his pocket he withdrew a short, heavy bladed knife, and started towards the bound man.

Tennant barely heard the answer; the volume of the thundering heart in his chest was drowning all but the hiss of the iron in flesh. *Hiss*. Sweat thick and humid hung in shining globules from every pore on his body, reflecting the fire light and glinting with each heaving breath he took. *Hiss*. His thoughts were stretching, warping, twisting under the unnatural heat billowing through his flesh and mind, and all the while that coarse, unnatural whisper crackled in his ear from before him. *Hiss*. He stumbled backwards against the wall, his heart and soul writhing inside of him, his entire body shaking, writhing and drowning in pity, remorse and anger.

“Stop,” He spoke quietly, his own voice cracking like the flames of the torturer. *Hiss*. “I said stop it!” Slightly louder now, but still his body groaned and shook, and as each of his muscles convulsed he felt his hands clench, his eyes closed, and his fingers twisting and forming into tight fist around the knife-hilt as he unsheathed it from its place at his belt. The hisses and screams echoing from the shadows accelerated, multiplied rose until the whole room was shouting in agony. His bare and shaking fist slammed into the strong, stone, wall and he heard himself screaming into the room,

“Enough!”

The room fell silent, the green of his clenched eyes shone as they flicked open, he was surprised to find himself standing over the three deadly silent men, profound tears cascading down his face. The dying man in the chair groaned slightly, the thug stood, gazing stupidly at Tennant the cherry tipped branding iron still aloft in his hand. Clegg was scowling, but shock of the moment seemed to have left him incapable of speech at least temporarily.

Fighting back, yet again, the strong desire to vomit, Tennant glanced solemnly into the burning agony of the dying man’s eyes. His mind was made up, inverting the knife in the hand behind his back and clenching it until his knuckles were white; he spoke clearly and simply,

“I’m so sorry” then walked forward and plunged the blade between the man’s ribs. The man’s eyes widened, then softened and with a relieved sigh Catesby shook and slumped in his chair. He was at rest at last.

It took a moment for the two torturers to register what had just happened, both stared mouths agape at the imposing figure that had just killed their prize, Clegg was the first to respond,

“You, You just killed our...” he looked frantically at the thug, “kill him damn it, kill him!” The thug heeded the command, blundering forward with the brutal iron bar in hand raising it like a cudgel above his head, but Tennant was ready. He had been ready and willing since the door had first swung open, and he had first seen the tortured man, since he had first caught the scent of death in the air. He hurled himself forward launching his mass onward from the floor and lunged with his entire body, he put his weight behind the outstretched knife and clenched his eyes shut praying for luck in his aim. His prayers were answered. His hand met a fierce jolt of resistance, there was a harsh, guttural yelp and the vicious executioner fell back the knife lodged in firmly in his chest. Tennant stood and turned, leaving the knife in the reeling flesh of the man on the floor.

He turned, blood soaking his hands and sleeves his fists clenched, ready to face his old comrade, what he met was the barrel of a pistol. He froze, the pistol

pointing straight at his face, Clegg's grasp firmly on the end of it. He stayed very still, his gaze passing along the barrel to meet the eyes of his new found adversary

Even now, when he had Tennant at his mercy, he grinned and taunted, "Didn't I warn you Chris? Dangerous territory" he raised the gun straightening his arm to shoot, reaching down with speed born of fear born of anger Tennant wrenched the iron from the grip of the dead brute and swung it wildly about his head, striking Clegg's arm as hard as he could muster. The pistol jolted aside, discharging into Tennant's left shoulder, blowing him backwards. Bleeding but alive.

Tennant's quivering hand sank downwards to the belt where his own primed and loaded pistol hung. Almost instinctively his arm now bleeding from two wounds rose, pointing the guns' long barrel directly towards the murderer's heartless chest.

His lip curled in disgust as he saw that the sallow face was still smiling. A cruel, twisted, sincere smile that was reflected in the deep and hateful eyes that surveyed the carnage that they had caused, at the pain Catesby had endured at his bidding.

"You have done the government, the world no good today Chris,"

A venomous chill reverberated through the pulsing blood in Tennant's veins as he replied, "Oh yes Clegg," he spat "I have".

His finger tensed on the trigger, sparking a flint that stole a life. A long fiery eruption bore the tiny sphere of lead forward from the pistols smoking barrel with an air-splitting crack. The powder was damp in the night air, but his aim was true.

The dull grey pistol ball was lost in the crimson splatter that defaced the scarlet militia uniform with the blood of the man inside it. The killer slumped to the squalid floor; indifferent to the gash in his arm, the hatred in his old friends eyes or the death he left in his wake, he fell, still smiling as the smouldering wound in his chest dragged him to his demise. Christian's senses were numb, through the dense air around him; he could just hear the muffled clatter of his pistol as it to the floor at his side. Betrayal, murder and brutality, three realities laid simultaneously bare to his mind. From confusion, and shock came the prevalent thought to do that that was all a man could do to escape the truth and the gibbet; he turned and ran, ran away from the room into the night.

The authorities found the corpses the following morning. Tennant of course had long since disappeared as a Macavity into the darkness of the Liverpool underground. All that remained for the baffled authorities to discover in the darkness of the dingy cellar was three corpses, a pair of discharged saddle pistols and a purse containing thirty silver pieces.