DECEMBER

A Richard Nottingham Story

By

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The frost lay heavy on the grass and the branches as he walked towards Timble Bridge, his breath blooming wide in the air. The dirt was hard under his boots and the air bitter against his face. Richard Nottingham pulled the greatcoat more tightly around himself and walked up Kirkgate.

It was still dark, dawn no more than a line of pale sky on the eastern horizon. In some houses the servants were already up and labouring, plumes of smoke rising from a few chimneys. At the jail he checked the cells, seeing a drunk who'd been pulled from the street and a pair brought in by the night men for fighting at an alehouse. Another quiet night.

He pushed the poker into the banked fire and added more of the good Middleton coal kept in an old scuttle nearby. As warmth filled the room he removed the coat and settled to work. So far the winter had been gentle, he thought, but it was still only December. Come January and February, once the bitter weather arrived, the poor would freeze and die.

It was the same every year, he thought sadly. He'd been Constable of the City of Leeds long enough to know that all too well. When the cold bit it was always those without money who paid the price.

Down on Briggate the weavers would be setting up their trestles for the cloth market.

They'd been laying out the lengths ready for the merchants, then eating their Brigg End Shot breakfast of hot beef and beer in the taverns, keeping a wary eye on their goods. He'd go down there before the bell rang to show the start of trading, walking around to watch for cutpurses and pickpockets, hearing the business of Leeds carried out in low whispers, thousands of pounds changing hands quietly in an hour.

He fed a little more coal onto the fire and straightened as the door swung open, bringing in a blast of cold.

"Morning, boss," said John Sedgwick, edging closer and holding his hands out as if he was trying to scoop up the heat. He'd been the deputy constable for little more a year, still eager and hardworking, a lanky, pale lad with pock marks fading on his cheeks.

"Looks like you had an easy time of it," the Constable said.

"Aye, not too bad," he agreed, pouring himself a mug of ale. "You know what it's like. As soon as the nights turn chilly they stay by their hearths at night."

"You wait. It's Saturday, they'll all be out drinking come evening," Nottingham warned him. "You'll have your hands full then." He shook his head. "Get yourself home, John. Have some sleep."

The deputy downed the ale and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "I'll be glad to see my bed, right enough. I might warm up for a few hours."

Alone, Nottingham wrote his daily report for the mayor, nothing more than a few lines. He delivered it to the Moot Hall, the imposing building that stood hard in the middle of Briggate. The city was run from there, from rooms with polished furnishings and deep

Turkey carpets that hushed the dealings and the sound of coins being counted. He gave the paper to a sleepy clerk and made his way down the street just as the Parish Church bell rang the half hour to signal that start of the cloth trading.

The merchants were out in their expensive clothes, the thick coats of good cloth, hose shining white as a sinless day and shoes with glittering silver buckles. They were moving around the stalls, making their bargains and settling them with a swift handshake before moving on to the next purchase. He saw Alderman Thompson softly berating a clothier, his face red, trying to beat the man down in price in his usual bully manner.

The alderman glanced around, noticed him and glared. There was bad blood between them and Thompson was loath to forget it, a man who kept grudges in his mind like a ledger. But the man had been a fool, trying to cheat a whore of a few pennies that would have been food and shelter for her. The girl had complained and the Constable had confronted the man in front of his friends, shaming him, forcing the money from his pocket and passing it on to the lass.

He knew what he'd risked, the enmity of a man who was powerful on the Corporation. But the girl had earned her payment and deserved it; the man could afford it easily enough.

The Constable walked up and down the road, alert for quick movements, but there was nothing. He settled by the bridge, leaning on the parapet and looking at the rushing black water of the Aire. How many bodies had they pulled out of the river this year? Twenty, perhaps. Enough to lose count, certinly. Those who couldn't cope any more with life who'd found refuge in the current, the ones who'd drunk too much and fallen in, unable to get out

again. There was always death, always hopelessness.

He shook his head and started to make his way back to the jail. Atkinson was striding out, thirty yards ahead of him. A girl running headlong down the street crashed into the man, and he batted her away idly with his arm, sending her tumbling before uttering a loud curse moving on.

The girl picked herself up and began to walk. As he passed, Nottingham took her by the arm.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he told her, his grip tight.

“Done what?” she asked, the fright in her eyes as she raised her eyes to him and tried to pull away. She was young, no more than thirteen, thin as March sunlight, cheeks sunken from hunger, wearing an old, faded dress and shoes where the upper was coming away from the soles. Her flesh was cold under his touch.

“You know exactly what you did. You cut his purse.”

“I didn’t” she protested and began to struggle.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked gently. She shook her head, her mouth a tight, scared line. “I’m the Constable of Leeds. I think you’d better come along with me.” She tried to wriggle away, but his hand was firm on her. After a few moments she gave up, hanging her head and shuffling beside him.

The jail was warm, the fire burning bright and loud. He sat her down then held out his hand for the purse. Reluctantly, she brought it from a pocket in her dress and gave it to him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Elizabeth, sir." Now, with the cells so close she could see them, she was shivering in spite of the heat. "What's going to happen to me?"

"Nothing just yet," he assured her. "But I can't make you any promises, Elizabeth. Where do you live?"

"Nowhere, sir." He looked at him. "Me and my man and my sisters, we sleep where we can." It was a familiar tale, one he'd heard so many times before, one he'd lived himself when he was young.

"How many of you?"

"Five, sir."

He nodded at the purse. "How long have you been doing that? And give me an honest answer," he warned.

"Two month, sir. But I've only managed to take three," the girl pleaded.

He sat back, pushing the fringe off his forehead then rubbing his chin. "When did you last eat?"

"Thursday."

"How old are your sisters?"

"Nine, seven and six, sir."

"What happened to you father?"

“He died, sir. A horse kicked him in the summer.” He could see the beginning of tears in her eyes.

“What was his name?” Nottingham wondered.

“William Marsden, sir. He worked at the stables.”

He remembered the name and the incident. The man was a farrier, experienced and good at his trade. He’d been about to put fresh shoes on a horse when it kicked him in the head. He’d died instantly. “Doesn’t your mam work?”

“She has a bad leg, sir, she can’t walk proper.”

“And what about you? You’re old enough.”

“I’ve tried to find work, sir, but no one has anything.” The girl raised her chin defiantly. “I have, sir, honest.”

He stared at her face, all the guile vanished from it now, leaving a terrified girl who knew she could be sentenced to hang for what she’d done. He hesitated for a long moment, then said, “When you leave here, go next door to the White Swan. Talk to Michael and tell him the Constable sent you. He needs a girl to help there. It won’t pay much, but it’s better than nothing.”

Her eyes widened in astonishment and happiness as she understood he was letting her go. “Thank you, sir. Thank you. Do you really mean it, sir?”

He nodded, weighing the purse in his hand. It was heavy enough. With a small movement he tossed it to her. As she caught it her mouth widened into a silent O.

“Rent a room for all of you and buy some food. Now go.”

He stood at the window, watching her in the street, looking back in disbelief before she vanished into the inn. Off to the west the clouds were heavy and pale as pearls. If they came in there’d be snow later.