FAIR AND TENDER LADIES
The Richard Nottingham Historical Series by Chris Nickson

THE BROKEN TOKEN
COLD CRUEl WINTER *
THE CONSTANT LOVERS *
COME THE FEAR *
AT THE DYING OF THE YEAR *
FAIR AND TENDER LADIES *

* available from Severn House
FAIR AND TENDER LADIES

A Richard Nottingham Novel

Chris Nickson
For Lynne Patrick
With gratitude
But I’m not a little sparrow  
I have no wing with which to fly  
So I sit here in grief and sorrow,  
To weep and pass my troubles by.

If I had known before I courted  
That love was such a killing thing  
I’d have locked my heart in a box of golden  
And fastened it up with a silver pin.

_Come All You Fair And Tender Ladies_: traditional song
The Prosperous Town of LEEDS

1. St. John's Church
2. Workhouse
3. J. Sedamwick's House
4. The Talbot
5. Moot Hall
6. The White Swan
7. Jail
8. Holy Trinity Church
9. Mrs. Ward's Brewhouse
10. Meagor's Court
11. R. Nottingham's House
12. White Cloth Hall
13. Crown & Fleece
14. Emily's School
15. Parish Church
ONE

The rain fell gently at first, a whisper that slowly grew louder as thick clouds rolled in from the west. By midnight it was a storm, the sound loud enough to fill the world. He watched it from the window, wind rattling the panes so hard it seemed they might shatter. He closed his eyes, welcoming the noise that drowned out his sadness.

The darkness was when he missed her the most. The ache for her hadn’t gone; it felt stronger than ever, still filling his mind every day. Finally he lay on the bed to let the thunder and lightning take him away.

Before dawn it had all passed, the air clean and calm, with a soft breeze from the south and the puddles in the roads already beginning to dry up. In the half-light of a Saturday morning, Richard Nottingham, Constable of Leeds, stood in the graveyard outside St John’s church, deep mud clinging to his boots.

‘Rob,’ he said, ‘you go round the other side to the vestry door. Be ready in case he comes out.’

Rob Lister, in charge of the night crew, ran off and disappeared around the building. A crowd had gathered outside the lych gate, their voices angry and busy, kept back by two of the Constable’s men.

Nottingham checked the load in his pistol and unsheathed his sword. ‘Are you ready?’ he asked, and John Sedgwick, the deputy constable, nodded as he swung his blade in the air.

At the church door, the Constable took a deep breath and turned the handle. ‘Right,’ he said.

The man was inside; they knew that. A carter had spotted him climbing over the wall and passed the word. They were ready to take him for murder, stabbing someone in the night for no reason. Nottingham had been pulled from his bed to lead the hunt, and for the last hour folk had pursued the man
around Leeds, down by the Bridge, along Boar Lane, all the way up to Burley Bar then through the dark, stinking courts behind Briggate until they’d ended up here.

Pale light came through the church windows, catching dust motes in the air. The Constable took three paces; his footsteps boomed and echoed through the high building. Too many shadows, he thought, too many places to hide. He gestured to the deputy, then began to walk slowly to the aisle on the far side, alert for any sound or movement.

He felt the sweat on his palms as he gripped the hilt of the sword, and fear prickled at the base of his spine. He breathed softly and looked around, moving then stopping again, gazing and waiting. He heard the sharp click of the deputy’s heels on the flagstones.

Something at the corner of his sight made him spin to his right. A dark blur rose from one of the box pews on the other side of the church, the man’s voice a growl that became a scream.

‘John!’

They brought him out between them. He was battered, bruises rising, the blood still flowing heavily from a cut on his face. The Constable let him fall to the ground, gesturing for two of the men to take him off to the cells.

He watched them leave, the mob following close behind, their voices strident and angry.

‘No damage?’ he asked.

‘Didn’t even cut me. It was a good thing you shouted, though, boss.’ Sedgwick sheathed the sword and grinned. ‘I’ll tell you what, that’s left me parched. I could use something to drink.’

‘There’s a jug back at the jail.’ He waved Rob over as he emerged from the far side of the church. ‘It’s all over, lad, you missed it.’

Then, from somewhere down Briggate the Constable heard a roar. Without even glancing at the others he took off at a run, hearing their boots clatter behind him. By the time they reached the bodies on the ground the people had already dispersed, not a soul to be seen on the street.

He knelt, checking his men first. One was slowly coming
to, moaning, while the other was dazed, clutching his stomach. Sedgwick held his hand against the prisoner’s neck.

‘Boss,’ he said. ‘He’s dead.’

A blade had found the man’s heart. In the cold cell the Constable ran his fingertips over a thin line of blood under the ribs. Old bruises blotched his skin and he was so thin that his bones protruded. Whoever he was, it had been a long time since he’d eaten well. None of them knew his face and there was nothing in his clothes to show who he’d been or what name he’d carried. The only thing to mark him out was a large patch of deep red flesh, the colour of a ripe raspberry, on his neck. There’d be little chance of finding his killer. Every question they asked would bring a denial. Nottingham sighed, wiped his hands on an old piece of linen and went back to the desk.

‘How are the men?’ he asked.

‘They’ll be fine,’ the deputy told him. ‘I gave them a rollicking.’

‘I doubt there was much they could do. How many were in that crowd? Twenty?’

‘More, probably, boss.’

‘Go and see the undertaker later, John. We’ll get this one in the ground today.’

TWO

In the first light of a spring Monday in 1734, Richard Nottingham, Constable of the City of Leeds, walked down Marsh Lane towards Timble Bridge. Over in the fields the sheep were bleating, mothers and lambs together, the first calls of the shepherds in the distance and the faint lowing of cattle up on the hills.

He stopped and leaned over the parapet, gazing down at the water burbling through Sheepscar Beck. From the corner of his eye he saw something move and for a fleeting moment he thought it was Mary. He turned, drawing in his breath. But it
was nothing more than a bird rising from a tree into the pale sky.

Rob Lister sat at the desk in the jail, writing up the night report. Since he’d become a Constable’s man, working under Nottingham and his deputy, John Sedgwick, the elegant hand he’d been taught at school had grown cramped, the letters uneven and quickly scrawled across the paper. But as long as it was legible that barely mattered; few would read the words anyway. He dipped the quill back into the ink and glanced up as the door opened.

‘Morning, boss.’
‘Anything overnight?’
‘We pulled a body from the river not long after two. The coroner’s seen him. I put him in the cold cell.’
‘I’ll wager Coroner Brogden wasn’t too happy to be dragged from his bed at that hour. Who was it? Anyone we know?’
Rob chuckled softly. ‘Tom Hardwell, so you can be certain it was the drink. Not a mark on him.’

The Constable nodded. Every year a few fell into the Aire when they were deep in their cups, to be found an hour or a day later, washed up against the bank.

‘What about the prisoner we took Saturday? Has anyone managed to find out his name yet?’
Lister shook his head.
‘You might as well go, then.’
Rob stood and stretched. ‘Yes, boss.’

The lad had been courting Emily, Nottingham’s daughter, for almost two years, and since Christmas he’d lodged at the Constable’s house. It was an arrangement to satisfy everyone: respectable enough for the city, yet still allowing the young lovers to be together under a responsible eye. But once the candles were blown out at night, Nottingham’s gaze turned wilfully blind.

With Mary’s death everything had fallen into a time of change. Emily had quietly given up her teaching position at the dame school. Two years earlier she’d been left money, and she’d used some of it to start her own establishment, renting a building down on the Calls to teach the young daughters of the poor their letters and numbers, fighting to give the lasses
a chance of something better than the poverty and the daily grind of desperation as they grew. Within weeks the class had been full, and many more were eager to come, ready to eat up knowledge. Her success made him proud. She’d taken well to the responsibility, prepared to work hard, long hours. But one thing about her hadn’t changed; all too often she had to hare her way through the early morning, dashing up to the door of the school while the mothers waited outside with their girls.

‘You’re miles away there, boss.’

Lost deep in his thoughts, Nottingham hadn’t even noticed the deputy arrive. He smiled. ‘Just thinking, John, that’s all.’

Sedgwick sat down, poured himself a mug of ale and downed it in a long, single swallow before smacking his lips together. ‘Grand, that is. Going to be a good day again today.’ He brought a heel of bread from the large pocket of his long waistcoat, the elegant design long since faded to small smudges of irregular colour. He ate, washing the food down with more drink and gave a contented sigh.

‘Doesn’t your Lizzie feed you any more?’

Sedgwick laughed. ‘I’m still a growing lad, boss. Didn’t you know that? I need my food.’

It was true, with his tousled hair, long legs and eager lope he often looked like an overgrown boy, always hungry for something to fill his lanky frame. He was fiercely proud of his family, his son James, doing well at the boys’ charity school, his daughter Isabell, over a year old now, toddling and curious about everything in the world.

‘Tom Hardwell drowned in the night.’

The deputy snorted. ‘That was bound to happen sooner or later.’

‘You’d better go and see his widow, ask what she wants to do about the funeral.’

‘Yes, boss.’ He stood, and crammed the last of the bread into his mouth before leaving.

Nottingham wrote up the daily report and walked over to the Moot Hall to leave it on the clerk’s desk outside the mayor’s office. At least the wound he received in his belly the year before had finally stopped troubling him. There was no more need to walk with a stick, and the twinges of pain rarely bothered him. Only the hurt in his heart still nagged.
As he turned the corner back on to Kirkgate, he saw a man standing outside the jail with a fretful expression, moving from foot to foot nervously. He was thin as wire, raggedly dressed, with a face caught on the cusp of age.

‘Can I help you? I’m Richard Nottingham, the Constable of Leeds.’

‘My brother,’ the man said, raising dark, hopeless eyes. ‘I’m looking for my brother.’

There was so much pain in the words that it made the Constable stop and look at him again.

‘You’d best come in, Mr . . . ?’

‘Johnson.’ The man gave a small bow, a strangely formal gesture for a man dressed like a scare-the-crow in a tattered coat and holed breeches, the soles of his shoes held to the upper by twine. He carried a small sack over his shoulder. ‘Simon Johnson, sir.’

Inside, the Constable gave the man ale and sat back in his chair.

‘Your brother’s a grown man, Mr Johnson?’

‘He is.’ The man hesitated. ‘That is, he’s . . .’ he began, then completed the sentence in a rush: ‘Andrew isn’t right in his head. I look after him.’

‘Look after him?’ Nottingham wondered. ‘How?’

‘He can’t speak,’ Johnson explained. ‘And he doesn’t think properly. Not like you and me. So we travel together. I protect him.’ He gave a wan smile. ‘We never stay anywhere long. People don’t like him. He gets angry.’

‘What happened to your brother?’

‘At night I tie his ankle to mine, so he can’t wander away while I sleep. When I woke up on Friday he’d gone. I’ve been looking for him since then.’

‘There are plenty of people in Leeds, Mr Johnson.’

‘He’s easy to spot, Constable.’ The man leaned forward and rubbed the back of his neck. ‘He had dark red skin here. Would you look for him, please? I don’t want him to be hurt.’

There was no gentle way to tell him, nothing to say that could lessen the pain.

‘Mr Johnson,’ he said quietly, ‘I’m afraid your brother’s dead.’

‘But—’ the man began, then, ‘It’s Andrew? Are you sure?’

‘He had a mark on his neck like your brother. He killed
someone and then he tried to attack my deputy. I’m sorry.’ At least he could spare him the worst of the truth.

For a long moment Johnson remained silent, all the sorrow, the anger and the loss playing across his face.

‘Can I see him?’ he asked finally.

‘We buried him on Saturday. We didn’t know who he was and no one came to claim him . . .’ His words trailed away. He couldn’t give Johnson any consolation.

The man stood slowly, shoulders stooped, looking older than when he’d entered.

‘Constable,’ he said, his voice achingly dignified, ‘I’m sure you had no choice in what you did. You didn’t know my brother. But I hope you’ll understand if I say I hate Leeds and the men who did this to Andrew.’

THREE

The young man entered the jail warily, glancing around as if he wasn’t certain he should be there. The Constable looked up from the papers in front of him as the candle guttered and threw dark shadows around the room.

It was still before dawn. When he’d walked up Kirkgate there’d been only the faintest glimmer of blue on the horizon. He’d found little to report from the night, and sent Rob off early to spend time with Emily before school.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked. How often had he said those words over the years? The man moved forward into the light. He looked no more than nineteen or twenty, with honest eyes, a tangle of thick, pale hair and soft down on his cheeks, his face creased by worry and fear. Dust covered his old, heavy boots, and he wore a coat that was threadbare at the elbows and cuffs, his tan breeches thin at the knee. The best clothes of a country lad, Nottingham decided. Someone lost, perhaps.

‘I’m looking for my sister,’ the man answered nervously. ‘She’s run off and I think she’s in Leeds.’

Not lost, he thought. Searching.

‘What’s your name?’ Nottingham asked. ‘I’m the Constable.’