

THE CONSTANT LOVERS

The Richard Nottingham Historical Series
by Chris Nickson

THE BROKEN TOKEN
COLD CRUEL WINTER *
THE CONSTANT LOVERS *

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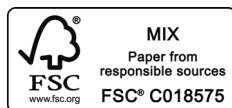
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*For Thom Atkinson,
The best writer I know, a good, true friend.
Just because, dammit.*

*And now every night at six bells they appear
When the moon is shining and the stars they are clear
These two constant lovers with each other's charms
Rolling over and over in each other's arms.*

Traditional broadside ballad

One

Richard Nottingham crossed Timble Bridge as the bell in the Parish Church chimed seven. The morning air was July warm, and the low water in Sheepscar Beck slipped quietly over the rocks. He stopped for a moment, feeling a gentle joy in life. For a few small minutes at least, everything could be right with the world. No crime, no anger, just the sound of the stream and the quiet chatter of birds up in the trees that shaded the bank.

All too soon, once he walked past York Bar and up Kirkgate, Leeds would envelop him and life would return. The noise and the full, heady stink of the city would rush in like a wave. Once again he'd be Richard Nottingham, Constable of Leeds. After such a long winter of cold, ice and deaths, this summer of 1732 was exactly what people needed, placid and peaceful. He lingered, loath to go, his hands resting on the wood of the trestle, letting his thoughts wander. Finally he turned, pushed the fringe of hair back from his forehead and walked into the city.

As he passed the Parish Church his eyes flickered to the graveyard, immediately picking out the spot where they'd buried his older daughter, Rose, in February. The grass grew thick and green over her bones; next spring the earth would have settled enough to put up the headstone that waited in the mason's yard.

He carried on past the White Cloth Hall where the wool merchants would be adding to their fortunes later in the day, and the jumble of houses, new and old, that lined the street, to the jail at the top of the street. He unlocked the heavy wooden door, opened the window to release the stifling heat that already filled the room, and settled at his desk.

Spring had been quiet, just small crimes and the minor everyday violence of life. But as June arrived they'd caught a thief. It was fortune, sheer good luck rather than skill that had reeled him in. The man had been dead drunk at the Rose and Crown, and his tools and the carefully packed gold coins had tumbled from the pockets of his waistcoat when Nottingham tried to rouse him.

The trial had been short and the sentence the only one possible. A week later the man had been taken up to Chapeltown Moor in the back of a cart and hung from the gallows. The event had drawn a good crowd, pulled in by the spectacle and the glorious weather. For a short time it had almost felt like a fair, with jugglers and fiddlers and a hastily printed broadside, everything building to the climax of the noose.

But in the end it had proved to be a poor business. The man had been heavy and no sooner had he been put to swing, the cart leaving him jerking and dangling, than his neck had broken. It was over in an instant.

The hundreds gathered hadn't been happy. They'd been drinking, anticipating the cheap enjoyment of long minutes of suffering and it had been snatched away from them. For a short time they swayed on the edge of mayhem and riot and the Constable had tensed. Then the hangman had cut down the body and they'd roared towards it, pulling at clothes and hair, women rubbing their babies against thick dead fingers for luck.

Once the dangerous moment passed he'd been able to leave, walking back to the city, bowing his head obediently to the aldermen and mayor as they passed in polished coaches or on sleek horses, chattering away earnestly about markets and profit with no mention of the life that had just ended.

And now it looked as if some false servants had come to Leeds, taking work and then robbing their new masters – a service lay. Just the day before, Morrison the chandler had reported that the maid who'd been with him barely a week had vanished. Five shillings had gone with her, along with three fine lace handkerchiefs that belonged to his wife. There'd been a similar incident a fortnight earlier, this time a male servant who worked for a merchant. He'd only been employed for three days and had run off with ten shillings in coins and some silver plate.

Nottingham had barely sat down to write his daily report when the deputy arrived, breezing in on his long legs and tossing his battered old hat on to the chair.

'Morning, boss.' He was smiling, happy. John Sedgwick had grown into his position, a long way from where he'd started out as a rough, raw lad, lanky and awkward, all too aware of the pox scars across his cheeks. He'd blossomed to become an ideal deputy Constable,

resourceful, persuasive, and willing to put in the long, aching hours the job demanded.

‘Did you talk to Morrison?’ Nottingham asked.

Sedgwick shrugged. ‘According to him it was his wife who hired the girl. She says the lass knocked on the door one day looking for work. Claimed to have arrived from Knaresborough.’

‘And she took her on just like that?’

‘It was lucky timing, her maid had left the week before. And there was a reference, evidently. But Morrison’s wife doesn’t remember the name on it. Of course.’ He snorted.

‘Any description?’

‘Nothing worth having. She sounds like half the girls in Leeds – dark hair, small, quiet and polite. Went by the name of Nan, but you can wager good money that’s not what she’s really called. Morrison thinks she might have had blue eyes. From the look on his face I reckon he’d been hoping to tup her.’

‘Do you think he did?’

‘Just wishful thinking, most likely.’

They knew no more about the male servant. Dark hair, obedient, middle height; he could have been anyone. It could be a pair working together, or there might even be more of them. The last time they’d had this problem, three years before, it had been a gang of five, three women and two men, and they’d proved slippery to catch. The Constable sighed.

‘Put the word out. She’ll probably try to sell the lace somewhere. I’m going to check the market.’

The trestles for the cloth market lined each side of Briggate, the main street of the city, winding all the way from Boar Lane down to the bridge over the Aire. Each Tuesday and Saturday morning the clothiers brought their goods in from homes, the dyed lengths they’d woven that were the product of weeks of work, and with the brief tolling of the bell the business of buying and selling drew underway.

Nottingham walked slowly down the street, as amazed as ever at the silence of the transactions. The merchants and factors would move from table to table, inspecting the quality and comparing the dyes against the swatches in their pockets. As soon as they found what they wanted, all it took was a few whispered words. A matter of seconds and the bargain was sealed.

He'd lived here all his life, but the ceremony of it all never ceased to surprise him. It had all the sanctity, the quiet holiness, of church. It was the lifeblood of the city. At each market thousands of pounds quietly changed hands. There was more wealth here than most people could imagine.

The Constable exchanged greetings with some of the merchants. They were dressed in light suits of good worsted, advertisements for their products, waistcoats flowing long and gaudy to their knees, hose brilliant white in the sunlight, shoe buckles shining silver and gold to flaunt their riches.

In his old work coat, stock untied and breeches worn shiny, Nottingham offered a contrast. They had their periwigs, short and lovingly powdered or full-bottom and glossy, while he kept his hair long and pulled back with a ribbon on his neck. They had the money and the power in the city. He kept them safe to enjoy it.

Within ten minutes more than half the boards were empty, the material moved away to be carried to warehouses later. Then the clothiers would lead their packhorses back out to the villages across the West Riding, coins jangling in their pockets, ready to start weaving all over again.

He stopped on the bridge, arms resting on the wide stone parapet. The river was sluggish, as lazy as the weather, bubbles showing where fish rose to snap at flies. He listened to its soft burblings for a few minutes, watching the water as it meandered.

Finally he pushed himself away and back into the tumult of Leeds. There was still plenty of work to be done. He strode back up Briggate, the noise from the inns loud and merry now most of the business had finished.

The merchants were smiling, money spent carefully and much more to be made later. Nottingham had barely turned the corner on to Kirkgate when a shout and running footsteps made him turn.

The man was panting, ancient boots dusty and a sheen of sweat on his face. 'Are you the Constable?' he asked breathlessly.

'I am.'

'You'd better come quick, then. There's a dead lass.'

Two

‘Where?’ Nottingham asked urgently. The man was bent over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

‘Out at Kirkstall Abbey,’ he answered, pushing the words out.

‘That’s not Leeds,’ the Constable told him.

‘Aye, master,’ the man protested, wiping his face dry with large hands, hair plastered against his scalp, ‘but they don’t know what to do. So they told me to fetch you.’

Nottingham considered. Leeds was the largest town in the area. Sometimes they sent for him from the neighbouring villages if a crime was too great for them.

‘Come down to the jail,’ he said finally.

He sat the man down, poured him a mug of small beer and watched as he gulped it down quickly, followed by another.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Luke, sir. Luke Edgehill.’

‘You ran all the way in?’

‘Aye.’ He grinned with pride. ‘That’s why they wanted me; I can run.’

He was a young man, maybe eighteen, long, dirty blond hair damp and stringy, skin coloured by the sun and the wind. Tall and wiry, with guileless blue eyes, he looked directly at the Constable.

‘What else do you know about all this, Luke?’

‘Not much, sir.’ He scratched at his scalp. ‘One of the farmers found her by the old abbey this morning when he went to look after his sheep. She’d been stabbed, they told me.’

That certainly sounded like murder, Nottingham thought with a sigh; no wonder they wanted him there. But the abbey was a good three miles away; walking there and back would take too long.

‘I’ll ride out there,’ he offered.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Edgehill stood. ‘I’ll go back and tell them you’re coming.’

Through the window Nottingham watched him lope easily up Kirkgate then disappear into the crowds.

At the ostler's he selected his usual horse, a placid animal that he'd come to trust over the years. He never felt comfortable so far off the ground, but at least this beast didn't leave him fearful. Slowly he headed out along the road from Leeds, past the end of Boar Lane, where the houses gave way to fields and cottages that hugged the river.

Sheep grazed on the higher ground, and further down the crops were growing fast, ripening into rich colours. The heady scent of flowers, lavender and honeysuckle and others he couldn't name, clung in the air as he passed, clear and pure after the reek of the city.

By the time he reached the abbey sweat had soaked his shirt, making it stick against his skin. The old buildings, now just suggestions of what they'd once been, lay on a broad strip of ground between road and river. Only the church still had a sense of majesty, the nave a triumph of arches, the crumbling tower clawing towards heaven.

The abbey had once been important and wealthy; it had owned most of the lands around Leeds and beyond until King Henry took everything. That was what Ralph Thoresby had told him long ago, and Thoresby had known all about the history of Leeds. To Nottingham it was nothing more than an attractive ruin. He'd walked out here a few times on Sundays with Mary back in the distant days when they were courting.

In the bright light it looked like a painting sprung gently to life. Trees gave shade, the river flowed gently a few yards away. But close by one of the ruins, now little more than a few heaps of weathered, shapeless stone, a small group of men had gathered. He dismounted, feeling the tight ache in his thighs, and walked the horse over, pulling off the tricorn hat to wipe at his forehead.

'I'm Richard Nottingham, the Constable from Leeds,' he announced. 'One of you sent for me?'

'That were me.' A thickset man moved forward, his bearded face set in a dark frown. He was in an old shirt and breeches, sleeves rolled up over weatherbeaten, hairy forearms. 'Didn't know who to get.' He gestured at a grand house partway up the hill. 'Master's gone for a week, so I sent the lad who works here to fetch you.'

'He said you'd found a girl dead.'

'Aye. She's back there, other side of the refectory.' There was a

restlessness about the man, shifting uneasily from foot to foot as he talked, his gaze moving around. Shock, the Constable guessed, and fear. Seeing a body often left folk that way.

‘Why don’t you show me where she is?’ he suggested.

The man walked away without a word. A black and white dog that had been lying in the shadow of a tree rose and followed him.

‘What’s your name?’ Nottingham asked him as he tried to keep up. It was simple, human talk, trying to put the man at his ease.

‘Tobias Johnson.’ The man offered a broad hand for the Constable to shake. ‘I look after the land for the master. We graze the sheep out here.’

‘When did you find the girl?’

Johnson stopped to calculate.

‘Mebbe two hours ago. Bit longer, perhaps. I’d been working a few fields away and came back through here. The dog smelt summat, started whining.’ He reached down and patted the animal. ‘He dun’t do that usually, so I thought I’d better look. She were just over here.’

They rounded a corner, the fragment of wall that stood thick and taller than a man. The girl lay on the ground, curled close to the stone, almost touching it. Against the lush, even colour of the grass her skin seemed eerily pale, the deep blue of her dress glistening. A knife handle protruded from her back, blade buried all the way to the hilt.

Nottingham squatted by the body, turning her slightly to look for any other wounds. She’d been a pretty girl, with long, pale hair. The dress was made of high quality material with a pattern woven in; there was nothing cheap about the fabric or the stitching. He glanced at the weapon: polished rosewood, the fittings shining brass. It was all money.

A few hours ago, a day, maybe a little more, whoever she was, this girl had still been alive. Slowly, tenderly, he laid her back down and rose to his feet, knees cracking.

‘When were you last by here?’ he asked Johnson.

The farmer looked off into the distance, picturing his movements.

‘Late yesterday afternoon,’ he answered finally. ‘I’d been down to Kirkstall Forge with a couple of scythes for mending. I came back up the bank. I’d have seen her if she’d been here then.’

Nottingham thought. It was a long stretch of time, but this was open land, not like the city where people were always around.

'You didn't hear anything last night?'

'Nothing.'

Johnson gave the corpse a last sad look and hurriedly strode off out of sight, the dog close at his heels. The Constable found him around the corner, standing silently, packing tobacco in a clay pipe.

'She's nobbut a lass,' he said mournfully. 'Who'd do that to someone like her? Leave her like that?'

'That's what they pay me to find out,' Nottingham told him. 'Have you seen any of her clothing? Anything at all?'

'Nowt,' Johnson answered. 'Just her, like that.' The Constable could see that the man's hand was trembling, clutching tight on the brittle pipe stem.

'Have some people look around,' he suggested. 'There might be something.'

'I will,' Johnson agreed.

'Do you have a coroner out here?' Nottingham said. Outside the city boundary, this was beyond the writ of Edward Brodgen, the Leeds coroner.

'Usually the master does it, but he's gone, like I say.'

'Have his deputy pronounce her dead. Can you find someone to bring her to the jail?' he asked. 'I'll need her there.'

'I'll get Elias and his cart. He does all the hauling round here.'

'Cover her properly,' Nottingham warned gently. 'We don't want all the world staring at her.'

'Aye,' Johnson agreed, his voice barely more than a whisper. 'Aye.'

'And if you find anything, bring it to me. Anything at all. It could be important.'

He walked away, leaving the farmer to his thoughts, and mounted the horse for the ride back to Leeds. His spine hurt from the constant, jarring movement, and he looked to the distance, happy to see the outline of the city, the roofs and spires that meant home.

Like it or not, it seemed that looking for the girl's killer was going to be his job. She obviously wasn't local to Kirkstall; someone would have known her immediately. Nor did she have the air of the country girl about her. Her skin was too white, too smooth; she'd never spent much time exposed to the sun. When they brought her to the jail he'd look at her hands, but he was willing to wager there would be no calluses.

She came from money. Everything about her said that. Very soon

someone would report her missing and then he'd be under pressure to find the murderer. The mayor, now in the last months of his office, would carp and command. Never mind the poor who died from violence, this would come first.

But there was nothing more he could do until he inspected her body properly. He hadn't paid attention to see if she wore any rings, or had marks on her fingers from them. There would be a few things she could still tell him, even in death.

He sighed, willing the horse back to its stable so he could plant his two feet on the ground. The heat had grown during the morning, and even the small breeze simply stirred the warm air around.

Soon enough, though, Leeds was around him, the noise and press of people, the full, awful summer perfume of the city filling his nostrils. Strangers often found the place unnerving, roaring loud, busy and crowded, but the familiarity of it all comforted him. Smiling, he walked back along Boar Lane, glancing up at the buildings, the inviting scent of ale seeping from the open door of an inn.

Sedgwick was waiting at the jail, the remains of a beef pie on the desk in front of him, his coat thrown across a chair. Nottingham poured a mug of small beer and drank eagerly.

'Any joy with the thieving servants?' he asked.

'No. I've told people to look out for the lace handkerchiefs. I don't think there's anything else we can do for now. If this lot have any sense they'll have moved on by now and be trying it somewhere else.'

'How many criminals have sense?' Nottingham asked. 'We've got something bigger now. We have a murderer to find.'

'Oh?' Sedgwick fixed his stare on the Constable.

'They called me out to Kirkstall. A girl stabbed at the abbey.' He poured more beer and drank. 'From a quick look at her, I'd say she's from quality.'

Sedgwick made a sour face. He knew what that meant.

'Someone's going to be bringing her in later. Once we know a little more I'll tell His Worship.' The mayor would need to be informed.

'If we're looking for a murderer we could use someone else to help,' the deputy pointed out.

'I know.'

Until the spring they'd had someone, a young cutpurse named

Josh who'd turned into a promising Constable's man. But he'd left, and Nottingham couldn't blame him for going. His girl had lost their baby and died, and Josh had been beaten bloody by a pair of thugs. There'd been precious little to keep him in Leeds.

Since then he'd talked to a few prospects, but there'd been no one to equal the lad they'd lost. He'd had intelligence and energy, he listened well and was used to being invisible, unnoticed. Finding someone that good was hard, but the Constable wasn't going to settle for less.

'I need to find the right person,' he said. 'You know anyone?'

Sedgwick shook his head. 'None of the men are up to it. They'll do what you need if you prod them but nothing more than that.'

Nottingham grinned. 'Maybe we'll be lucky and solve this one in a day.'

'Aye, and maybe someone will have left me a fortune in his will.' The deputy stood and stretched loudly, his arms extending almost to the ceiling. 'Do you want me to check the Hall later?'

Every Tuesday and Saturday afternoon undyed cloth was sold at the White Cloth Hall. Like the morning market on Briggate it was held in near silence; only the sound of whispers and footsteps echoed around the stone wings of the building. There was never any trouble, but they went when they could, just to walk around and remind people that the law was watching.

'Yes, I suppose we'd better put in an appearance,' Nottingham answered. 'I'll wait here for the body.'

Left alone he slipped next door to the White Swan for a fresh jug of ale and a pie from their kitchen. It would be at least an hour before the carter arrived with the corpse and he'd no intention of going hungry while he waited.

The mutton was stringy but the gravy was rich and spicy, soaking deep into the pastry. The ale tasted refreshing, cool from the deep, dark cellar where a stream ran through the earth. He sat back on the bench, resting his head against the wall, and closed his eyes.

Tomorrow his family would all be together. Emily would have the day off from her post as a governess in Headingley, and walk into Leeds to be with them. Mary would be cleaning the house now, although it was already spotless, ready for their daughter's arrival.

The girl seemed to have settled happily into her position. There was a new air of gravity and maturity replacing the wild ways of

last autumn when she'd seemed uncontrollable. She loved the two young girls in her care, and responsibility agreed with her, smiles and sharp eyes replacing the bleak silences of winter.

But that season had been a bad time for them all. After Rose had died, slipping away to a wraith in just a week, their lives had simply crumbled. Slowly, painfully they'd managed to look ahead. And now, with Emily gone, he and Mary were gradually becoming used to life alone again, cast back on themselves.

It had been a tenuous easing back to old familiarities and intimacies. They were finding each other again, reminded of the pleasure of each other's company once more. With the good weather they'd taken to walking together, just as they had when they were younger, letting their grief evaporate in the long, warm evenings.

The grating squeak of a cart turning the corner on to Kirkgate roused him from his thoughts and he glanced through the dust on the window. The man had made good time from Kirkstall. He gulped the last of the ale and rushed into the street.

The carter had stopped in front of the jail. He was a squat, bearded man, dressed in breeches and shirt, an old leather apron bulging over his large stomach, sleeves rolled up to show brawny, tanned arms.

'Got summat for you,' he said, gesturing idly at the bundle in the back of the wagon. The girl had been covered with a dirty sheet, but there was no mistaking the fact that a body lay underneath. 'I'll help you get her in.'

She was an awkward load, but together they managed to ease her through to the cell the city used as a mortuary.

The carter wiped his hands on the apron. 'Nasty business, that.'

'Do you know who she was?' Nottingham asked.

'No.' The carter answered. 'Not local, though, I can tell you that.' He paused, head tilted to one side. 'Oh aye,' he remembered, 'I've summat else to give you. Come with me.'

The Constable followed him out to the cart. The man reached under the seat and brought out an object in an old sack.

'The knife,' he explained. 'We had to take it out to wrap her. Bigger of a job it was, too. The blade was twisted and caught, didn't want to come.'

He climbed up to the wagon and flicked the reins lightly. The horse started to move. The man didn't bother to look back.

Removing the sheet, Nottingham could see her properly for the first time. The flies had gathered around her mouth and nose and he had to keep brushing them away. Already there was the smell of decay about her, sickening and sweet like overripe fruit.

She was smaller than he'd first thought, no more than five feet and dainty, with the easy slimness of youth. Eighteen, he thought, possibly twenty, but no older than that. She had blue eyes and even features, a girl who was pretty, but with looks that stopped shy of beauty.

He lifted her left hand, turning it over to examine the palm. It was exactly as he'd thought; the skin was soft and pale, she'd never had to work in her life. Her fingernails were clean, not bitten or worn to the quick. He held up the ring finger to the light, noticing a paler band of flesh, the sign of a wedding ring taken from her. There was a small, faint scar, shaped like a C, in the triangle between her thumb and forefinger.

Her feet were tiny, the toes all straight, with no indication they'd ever been forced into shoes that didn't fit. Finally he pushed her on to her side and exposed the wound in her back. The maggots were already there, tiny white creatures crawling and feasting around the gash. He flicked them away with a fingernail, bending to look more closely. There was just one cut, and judging from the position it would have pierced her heart.

Gently he laid her back down and closed her eyelids. There were small bruises on her upper arms as if someone had held her too tightly, keeping her helpless. So perhaps there had been two of them, he thought, one to hold her still while the other stabbed.

Nottingham ran his hands over the dress, feeling slowly along the seams for anything that might be hidden there. Moving down, his fingertips touched something, a pocket cleverly concealed in the fabric. He opened it carefully and took out a piece of paper, folded several times into a tiny square. He opened it up and held it to the light. A note in a man's handwriting: *Soon we'll be together and our hearts can sing loud, my love. W.* Was that just a keepsake she kept close to treasure or something hidden for a reason, he wondered?

He stood back, staring down at the fragile body. Someone had loved this girl, raised her, seen her go when another wedded her. She'd come from a family with enough money that she'd never wanted for anything. People would miss her very soon.

At the desk he picked up the sack and shook out the knife. Blood

had dried on the edges of the blade in veins like rust. It might have been made for cutting meat in the kitchen, but it had still cost someone deep in the purse, an expensive weapon for a killing. This didn't look like a random murder by thieves. If it had been, they wouldn't have left her where the body would be found so easily. There was more going on here.

He sat back, steeping his fingers under his chin. Girls of quality didn't disappear in the West Riding. Especially wives. Today, tomorrow at the latest, he'd have word that someone was frantically searching for her. Then he'd have a name and he could start seeking the person who'd done this.

The easy, languorous mood of early morning had vanished and in its place Nottingham felt a growing tension. From long experience he knew that most murders were solved quickly; the more time went by, the harder his job would become. Half a day had passed already since she'd been found. He needed to know who she was.

He was still wondering, half expecting someone to arrive and give the girl a name, when Sedgwick returned.

'Hot out now,' he commented, shedding his coat to show large patches of sweat darkening his old, darned shirt. 'Starting to get close.'

'Any problems?' Nottingham asked.

'Nothing. The heat must be making them lazy.'

'Just wait until later. Saturday night, plenty of drink and the temperature – there'll be trouble enough.'

The deputy nodded his agreement, pouring the last of the small beer.

'Did they bring her in?'

'A little while ago.'

'And?'

'She grew up around money, no doubt about that. And she was married, by the look of it.' He pushed the knife across the desk. 'Take a look at that.'

Sedgwick hefted the blade, balancing the handle on his finger. 'That's what killed her?'

'Yes.'

'That's not cheap. So either the killer's rich or he panicked a little.'

'The carter said the blade had caught in the bone. They probably

couldn't pull it out. There must have been two of them. Someone else was holding her; there's bruising on her arms.'

'But we've no idea who she was?'

'None at all. Go and take a look at her, see if the face is familiar.'

The deputy vanished for a few moments and came back out shaking his head.

'Then we'll have to wait until someone claims her,' the Constable continued. 'Go on home, John; they'll be keeping you busy tonight.'

With a bright grin Sedgwick drained his cup, gathered up his coat and left, vanishing into the warmth of the street.