

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

THE DEMON BARBER



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For four and a half decades I served as the last line of defence for hundreds of accused men and women. In these memoirs I will give an account of a life spent trying to save theirs. Many times, I failed in my assigned task, but I have no complaints about the justice system. There is only one case, my first, where I am certain that an innocent man was condemned and that was not the fault of the learned judge. The true facts were beyond his comprehension and, originally, beyond mine. As so much time has since passed, I am at last able to tell the real story of the trial of Sweeney Todd, dubbed the demon barber in gossip, and his accused accomplice, Vislor Turlough.

Those two men stood in the dock at the Central Criminal Court on 29 December 1800 charged with the most heinous crimes in London's darkest history. Multiple and motiveless murder remains rare and cannibalism rarer still, at least in our civilisation. Yet sensational though the matter was, you will not find the names of the accused recorded in the Newgate Calendar or heading any gallows broadsheet. The reasons will become apparent as I break my silence and perhaps risk my own prosecution. More likely I predict that this will be dismissed as the ramblings of a man gone mad, which was exactly my response when the Doctor entered my office. I had been fortunate to secure small premises in Middle Temple Lane, where my inexperience unfortunately showed against my larger rivals. Eventually they became my friends and acquaintances, some envious of my success which I owe to the Doctor.

There was nothing in his appearance to indicate a medical man and, indeed, I never saw his qualifications if he possessed any. He dressed like a gentleman might in the East Indies, completely unsuitable for the world's capital in winter. He later said it was a cricketer's costume, unaware that English gentlemen played the game in black Oxford shoes. I could not afford to employ a secretary in those days, so the Doctor strolled out of the snow and sat down opposite me, without being announced. He casually told me that I had been recommended by none other than the Prime Minister. William Pitt the Younger.

Before deciding to specialise in criminal law I assisted Mr. Pitt with some comments on the Act of Union, receiving a small stipend that facilitated the completion of my legal studies. For those who might be ignorant of history, the start of this century saw the bill passed that

united the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland. Mr Pitt fought extremely hard to include Catholic emancipation within the bill and, as a Catholic, an allegiance which I may now fully acknowledge, I supported these efforts. It was gratifying to know that he had remembered my contributions. I could not declare my religion but suspect that he was fully aware of it.

The Doctor explained that he and Turlough were travellers. I assumed that Turlough was his manservant then learnt that he was a companion who awaited trial on a capital charge. I hastily picked up *The Times* and turned to the courts section. The facts as described in the most factual of all newspapers were as follows:

The Bow Street runners, those admirable defenders of the city, had discovered a number of skeletons in an underground tunnel running from a barber's shop owned by one Sweeney Todd to a house owned by a widow, Mrs Lovett, who had recently committed suicide. Turlough was found standing over the bones and was accused by Todd. A magistrate decided that both men were culpable, and they were remanded in Newgate until the next hearings on 29 December, a week away. None of the victims were identified. It was believed that they were street dwellers. The runners alleged that they were customers of Todd's who he robbed but no wealthy men had been reported missing.

I advised the Doctor that Turlough's best chance of acquittal was to turn king's evidence against Todd. As the Burke and Hare case proved twenty-eight years later it was better for the lesser partner in a murder to go free if it meant that the most culpable hanged. The Doctor disagreed, saying that Turlough was innocent. He proceeded to tell me a most remarkable story.

He said that he and Turlough had not arrived on a boat from the colonies but came from another world and time. In an attempt to prove this, he showed me many objects pulled from his vast pockets, including documents dated far into the future. I pointed out that they could have been fakes or purchased in the colonies. Readers will undoubtedly share my scepticism, for despite the Doctor's genial nature, no rational man could accept his outlandish story without irrefutable evidence.

Undeterred he asked me to meet Turlough, a journey I did not wish to make. Improvements have since been made to Newgate prison but then it was a fearful place where convicts chained twenty to a cell made for one prayed that cholera would take them before the hangman did. This year there has been twelve executions in the whole country. In 1800 there were 36 in London alone. I agreed to go because I needed the case. The rent for my office was only paid until the end of January and other prospective tenants were waiting to move in. Without funding I could not continue my career and was not in a position to decline any reasonable offer.

Turlough was confined in the common cells. He wore a suit that bore the insignia of Brendon School, an institution I was, and remain, unfamiliar with. Criminals were allowed to keep their own clothes then. When he realised that I knew the Prime Minister the gaoler unchained the man, I cannot consider him as a boy, and gave him a private cell. We were allowed to interview him there whilst well-meaning women sang carols outside. They failed in their honourable intentions to lift spirits. None of the convicts were in a festive mood.

Turlough confirmed the Doctor's story, which is perhaps unsurprising. I thought then that the madmen had colluded but did not believe that either were capable of multiple murder. They claimed to have seen a monster that, like them, came from another world. It resembled a common rat. They chased it to Mrs Lovett's house. She refused them access; quite rightly as what lady allows strange men to enter her house? Sweeney Todd confronted the pair. They reluctantly retreated and the Doctor then told Turlough to follow Todd home.

Meanwhile others had noticed the Doctor loitering outside the house and the runners challenged him. They had no crime to charge him with unless Mrs Lovett said so. After knocking on her door, they heard a scream inside and forced the door. They discovered her body, and a glass which was presumed to contain poison, and the tunnel which led them to Turlough. He said that Todd showed him to it. There remain many tunnels in London, which the government has proposed using for underground trains or sewers. Both are ingenious ideas.

Turlough had no incongruous items to show me but did ask if I thought that he belonged there, commenting on how clean he was compared to the others. Certainly, he was presentable in those most depressing surroundings, and his teeth were intact. I said that the pair should be able to prove their credentials to a court. The Doctor said he had to remain incognito. I asked if Turlough's life was worth more than his privacy. He muttered something about consequences. I wanted to leave then, in the absence of any payment, but surrounded by so many souls facing their last Christmas I invited the Doctor to join me for dinner on Christmas Day.

It was my first Christmas in London without my parents. I knew the cook, Mrs Samuels, was preparing a goose and that she would be on the streets, with her husband who also served me, if I did not receive a case to pay domestic bills as well as professional ones. My parents both passed from this world in 1798 and their financial legacy was nearly gone. When he arrived on Christmas morning, having apparently not changed his clothes, the Doctor brought cash to cover my fees. He said it came from the Prime Minister and the King, both of whom owed him favours. I will not disclose the amount but will say that it was more than I expected.

When training to be a lawyer I learnt how to identify forged notes. Some of the men hanged at Newgate that year were creators of false currency. I looked at every note carefully. They were genuine so I stored them in my safe and spent the rest of the Christmas holiday planning Turlough's defence. I asked for character details to assist me, but the Doctor refused to give a full biography, merely saying that he vouched for Turlough's integrity. The Doctor's story never changed. He was concerned about finding the creature, which he called a Vapiter. "It eats human flesh," he said. "That's why they only found skeletons. Needs to consume about one a month then it hides, usually in a host until it's time to feed again."

I told him that producing the creature would certainly prove his case to me. Mrs Lovett's house was searched. So was Todd's and the tunnel. Nothing was found. "It knew I was chasing it," said the Doctor. "It has a rudimentary intelligence or a survivor's instinct." He believed it hid inside Mrs Lovett's body. "Undetectable. Either it killed her, or she swallowed poison to try and remove it. You don't have post-mortems yet. It gets buried then wakes up and eats its way out." He said this just as the Christmas pudding was delivered to the table. I no longer felt like eating.

The Doctor took a bite of the pudding, with a dollop of custard, then repeated his theory that Mrs Lovett killed herself to try and get rid of the Vapiter. There were others who believed that she was in league with Todd and Turlough. The more vulgar newspapers, which had just started to appear, hinted at an improper relationship between the widow and Todd. If they were correct, then that was another argument in favour of Turlough's innocence. The strongest, as I saw it, was in obtaining proof that he had only arrived in London recently, given that some of the skeletons had been there for weeks, if not longer.

The Doctor could not provide documentary evidence of their arrival date. He wanted to look at Mrs Lovett's body to catch the Vapiter. As I have stated Burke and Hare were yet to be caught but other resurrectionists had been. They took corpses to anatomists under cover of darkness, risking fines and imprisonment. I informed the Doctor that I did not know any of them and was not prepared to violate the dead. However, I intended to put his story to the court,

without mentioning him. I wanted to imply that Turlough was mad. Insanity in legal matters was defined by the M’Naghten rules just two years ago. In 1800 lawyers merely had to convince the jury that the defendant was incapable of distinguishing between good and evil. With the rope substituted for an asylum the Doctor could use his connections to arrange a release. Neither his Majesty nor the Prime Minister dared intervene publicly in a case that so captivated the media and the masses. That was why they paid me to honour their debt, whatever it was, to the Doctor.

I was allowed to see Turlough once more before the trial. He did not like the idea of feigning madness, so I told him not to speak at all. It would be my words intended to save him. I must be honest and state that I did believe it was an opportunity for me to prove my credentials. To appear in the newspapers and be talked about in the inns. Milton Drutt, the young lawyer, who saved a boy from the gallows. As I said Turlough was not a boy, but he could be spoken of as such to earn sympathy. For me, the case was about building my reputation.

It was customary then to try joint offenders together. The accusations against Turlough and Todd were scheduled to be heard first, mostly because the authorities wanted to clear the crowds that had gathered outside. Within it was a theatre, with the best seats sold out two days prior. Christmas presents in some cases, I believe. The judge found it difficult to pass through, which meant a slight delay to proceedings. After ensuring that there were no women or children present the jury were sworn and my career at the bar began.

It was an unusual beginning. Neither defendant wished to take their oath. Sweeney Todd stared at the bible for a long time then lifted it to his mouth and threw it down. I suspected that he, without a lawyer, would also claim madness. Turlough merely mumbled that he was agnostic when asked to plead.

“Not guilty, your honour,” I told him. “That is the plea.”

“For both defendants.”

“I do not represent Mr. Todd.”

Todd responded by jabbing a finger at Turlough. Sixty years earlier he might have been pressed to death for refusing to plead. Instead the default of not guilty was assumed.

The judge let the prosecution speak. The runners testified finding Turlough and, as the tunnel belonged to Todd, he clearly had to be arrested too. There was no need for any other witnesses. They did not even speak about Mrs Lovett.

I called a medical professional, a friend from my student days who would not accept a fee, to say that it was impossible to determine where the bones came from. The jury were rightly sceptical, as the chances of the bones being deposited by natural causes or belonging to animals were slim. I then outlined a version of Turlough’s story, ignoring the laughter. Here was a gentleman from overseas, unused to our customs and forced to live rough. This desperate situation started to affect his sanity leading to the delusion that a rat patrolled in tunnels eating people. Whilst searching for this he came across the bones, which were placed there by Sweeney Todd. The barber, who owned the house with access to the tunnels, portrayed him as the scapegoat. In a theatre where many actors have spoken, I was rather proud of that performance.

The judge asked the jury to retire. They huddled together in a corner of the courtroom, conversing in whispers. The foreman stood a few minutes later and announced that both were guilty. The judge put on his black cap and pronounced sentence of death. The whole proceedings had taken less than forty-eight minutes. Turlough and Todd were escorted below to raucous whistling and clapping.

After being congratulated by several persons for my spirited defence, I found the Doctor and told him that there was nothing further I could do. The assizes were due to conclude the

following day and, the next morning, New Years' Eve, the condemned would be hanged outside the prison.

The Doctor announced that he would go to the graveyard and exhume Mrs Lovett's body. I again tried to dissuade him of this notion, but he implored me not to have the deaths of innocent men on my conscience and warned of the dangers that the Vapiter could cause in London. "In human terms it lives for about twenty years. That's up to two hundred and forty people killed but I don't suppose anyone here cares about them."

We left the Old Bailey and walked past the freezing beggars and the drunken tramps. If the Doctor was right it was their kind who died in the tunnel under Todd's house and who remained in danger. Then outside St Sepulchres, the Doctor asked me if I had ever done anything illegal. As I started to say no, I looked at the church door and remembered that Catholic mass was still against the law. I also remembered my father talking to me about justice and telling me to do what was right without fear of the consequences. My own experience of religious persecution had taught me to respect the underdog and to listen to the words of the oppressed. I became a lawyer to help people not abandon them.

Therefore, I agreed to give the Doctor a last opportunity to prove his theory. That afternoon I went to the grave of Mrs Lovett and memorised its location. My parents were in the same cemetery so I paused by their joint final resting place and asked if they could intercede with the Lord to guide me home safely that night.

We set off just before midnight. The Doctor refused my offer of a cloak and seemed unperturbed by the ice beneath our feet. One of the gadgets in his pockets gave a faint light which he used to guide us over the shortest point of the cemetery wall. We returned to the grave, seeing and hearing nobody. Even the birds were silent. I carried a pistol, in case there was a monster, and a shovel.

It didn't take long to move the earth from the top of the coffin, even with the ice. We took it in turns to dig, with the other holding the light as low as possible to avoid detection. I kept glancing around for the runners or the churchwarden, fearing that I would be recognised. Then we saw the wood of the coffin. It was a thin box. Mrs Lovett, though relatively wealthy, had no relatives to agree to an expensive funeral. Her money sat in an account and I believe it was eventually given to the poor.

As we attempted to lift the lid of the coffin with the spade I succumbed to the odious smell of death and was violently sick. I apologised to Mrs Lovett's soul and then stood back, holding the pistol, as the Doctor prised the coffin open.

Inside was the body of Mrs Lovett, partially decomposed. Nothing else. No monster had eaten her. No monster got out of the sealed coffin and no monster was still there. The Doctor respectfully closed the coffin and helped me put the earth back. His face was troubled. "They watched her all the time in the mortuary," he said. "Where else could it have gone?"

I suggested that he might want to leave London, as it would be distressing to witness the execution of his companion. "Leave," he said. "Yes, it could have left. Been scared away by my presence. Back to its own ship or stowing away on one of yours, that's more likely."

"Where is the ship that brought it here?" I asked, pampering to the delusion and desperately wanting to believe him.

"I don't know," he said. "They're small and travel alone. The ship would be about the size of a box."

"Would it resemble a box?"

"Possibly."

Aware of the continuing risk to my own future I left the shovel behind the tree and we went to Mrs Lovett's former house. We passed a couple of watchmen and spoke civilly to them. As I suspected the broken front door had not been fixed and there was no longer a guard. Knowing the house's reputation, the tramps had not entered. As the Doctor shone his light around, we saw several rats. I lifted my weapon, but he told me they were harmless.

The house was empty. Mrs Lovett's belongings had gone, most probably seized by the runners, and sold or donated. There was nothing that fitted the Doctor's description of a ship the size of a box. We even went down the foul-smelling tunnel to Todd's shop. The bones had been left there as nobody knew what to do with them. It looked like the place was being transformed into a pie shop or bakery, with modern equipment installed and a lock on the door. The barber's chair where ill-informed gossip said that Todd slit the throats of wealthy customers was absent. The Doctor's search here was more cursory. We returned down the tunnel in silence. He pulled Mrs Lovett's door shut as far as it could go then said, "I was wrong."

And that was the last time I saw him. He wandered off into the night, carrying his torch and leaving me to find my own way home.

I half expected the Doctor to return the next day. Instead I had two visitors offering me cases, as a result of my performance in court. I had scarcely finished agreeing to the second when I received a summons to Newgate prison. It was not from Turlough but Sweeney Todd. I hastened there. The gaoler searched me to make sure I was not carrying weapons, as they had seen prisoners escape before. The name of Jack Sheppard was etched into some of the cell walls. I was aware of bribery allegations against the gaolers too. There was little governance of prisons then.

Sweeney was chained to a wall, snarling at those who gawped at him. He recognised me and said he wanted to confess. "You need the chaplain," I said. The ordinary visited all the condemned, gave them spiritual guidance and reported on their confessions.

"No," he said. "You need to know that I alone killed those people. I ate their flesh, stripped them to the bones and I loved every minute of it. Mrs Lovett knew. I was her pet."

"I will convey your comments in the right quarters." I had learnt to control my emotions, disgusted by his insinuations. And remembering that I had vomited over the grave of his lover.

"And you will save the boy?"

"Why does that matter to you?"

"Because I matter to him."

That was all Sweeney Todd said. I bade him farewell, as one would say goodbye to a casual acquaintance. I tried not to look at his neck and imagine the rope around it. One day they may invent a less distressing method of execution.

The gaoler, still recalling my connections, let me see Turlough too. He was in a nicer cell, away from the crowds but still watched by those charged with preventing suicides. They had removed his tie after sentence and placed it just out of reach. "Your accomplice has confessed," I told him.

"He's not my accomplice."

"He wants to help you. Why?" It was a lawyer's question.

Turlough shrugged.

It was the gaoler who informed me on the way out that Todd, despite his size, had been targeted by the other inmates. Working class violent men enraged by his notoriety and crimes against their kind. Turlough had stood by him, which meant the gaoler had to intervene. "Couldn't have your friend being killed," he said. It was a most ironic statement given that they

were preparing the gallows. The apparatus of death was portable in those days, rolled out in the early hours of the morning. Two years ago, it had replaced the infamous Tyburn tree.

I was now entirely convinced of Turlough's innocence and sent urgent messages to both the Prime Minister and His Majesty, although I did not anticipate a response. I highlighted his youth and insanity, begging them to believe Todd's confession. At six the next morning, two hours before the hanging, there was a loud knocking on my door. Samuels brought up a reprieve for Vislor Turlough stamped with the King's seal. He said it had been delivered by my strange friend.

There was no time to lose. I ordered a horse be fetched immediately and quickly dressed, leaving without breakfast. The roads were packed due to the popularity of the executions but fortunately I was able to accost a soldier, showing him the precious document. He and his colleagues cleared a path, commenting that I had ruined the day's entertainment. My thoughts on surveying the crowds were of a man carrying a cross through the mocking laughter of those he came to save.

It was 07:45 when they admitted me to the prison. The condemned, six of them, were already in the preparation room having their fetters removed whilst the ordinary prayed with them. A scribe was writing the official records. Sweeney Todd was not amongst them. I thought he might be despatched first, as was sometimes the case for the most depraved. Grumbling, and whining about privileges for some, the gaoler released Turlough into my care.

I explained that I only had one horse. Turlough said he could find his own way back to the TARDIS, which was the name they gave to their mysterious craft. I gave him the document to carry in case he was stopped and for another reason which will become apparent.

After he left, I witnessed the remaining five, all men, being taken away and shuddered at the thought that they would soon be lifeless piles of rags. None of them were murderers. The gaoler had to stay with his other charges, so I enquired about Todd's fate.

"He's gone," said the gaoler.

I crossed myself. "Suicide?"

"Not possible for a man to eat himself," said the gaoler. Outside the bell tolled and the crowd roared its approval.

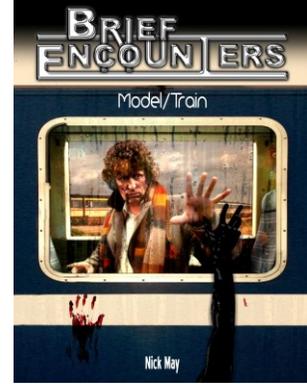
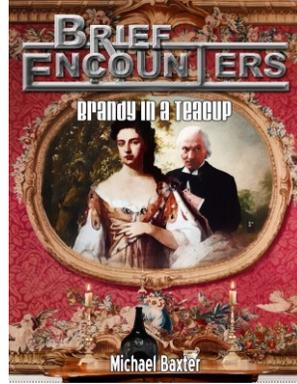
The facts surrounding Sweeney Todd's death have never been made public. At the time anyone who asked was told that he killed himself. Then the whole affair was removed from the records. Todd was in a common cell. The other occupants, those five who hanged, said that a rat came out of his stomach and consumed him until only the bones were left. The gaoler hearing the screams raced along and swore to me that he saw a creature, which he called a demon, climbing through the bars of the cell. It was never seen again. That gaoler was sent to an asylum three weeks later. I know of his terrible fate because his son wrote to me, asking if I could help. I tried but had no authority to intervene.

For the next decade I made it my business to inquire about the numbers of homeless people in the East End, donating some of my new-found income to charities that assisted them. In the first three years I was told of some missing from their usual haunts but was unable to find their bodies. Twenty years, the Doctor said. At least six skeletons were in the tunnel, but we do not know how old the Vapiter was when it came to London or if there were other victims elsewhere. We can be certain that it is now dead.

Whilst I failed in the courtroom to save the life of Vislor Turlough I was ultimately responsible for preventing his execution. I have seen the seal of the King many times and am utterly convinced that the document of respite presented to me contained a forged impression.

Forgery was then, as I have said, a hanging matter, but I said nothing and do not believe that anyone now will challenge me. The evidence is somewhere out there in the stars, with the man who tries to save us all from demons.

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London 1800. People are disappearing from the streets near the barber's shop of Sweeney Todd. The Doctor and Turlough chase an alien rodent to the house of Todd's lover. Turlough finds a tunnel to the shop, with bodies inside, but the Bow Street runners find and arrest him. Charged with murder he and Todd stand trial at the Old Bailey. The Doctor uses his political connections to hire a young but skeptical lawyer.

They have two days to save Turlough's life by proving the existence of an alien that looks like a rat and hides inside bodies. With the lover, who harbored the creature, dead there is nobody to help them.

They search through graveyards and abandoned houses for a spaceship the size of a cardboard box. Finding nothing the Doctor leaves, apparently defeated. Meanwhile the gallows is being built, the crowds are arriving to watch the executions and somewhere nearby the alien is hungry again.

This is another in a series of original fan authored
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