

THE TIN BOX

By

Cheryl Alleyne

The weather was dank and overcast: a suitable morning for a hanging. The Governor of St. Alban's Gaol, Frederick Butt, took out his fob watch and looked at it for the third time in as many minutes. 7:45 am...still a quarter hour to go and, much as he hated to admit it, his nerves were getting the better of him. This was a first for the Gaol: its first execution and a woman too.

The gibbet dominated the small prison yard. He stared at it, wrinkling his nose with distaste and hoped nothing would go wrong. There being another hanging at Maidstone this very day, William Calcraft, the General Executioner of Great Britain, was unavailable. One of his assistants had stepped in. By all accounts, Ernest Ruggles was efficient at his job. So far, Butt had to agree: the man, in addition to his fee, had negotiated to keep the clothes and personal effects of the condemned prisoner plus the rope. Only to be expected, he supposed. Mary Grady's case had been highly publicised with feelings running high. All of these things could be sold for good money, especially if Madame Tussaud's were interested for dressing the latest waxwork in the Chamber of Horrors.

He peered at his watch again, then back at the gibbet. He frowned and gently rubbed his stomach.

‘Are you well, Mr Butt?’

Butt turned to his Head Warder, who had moved back several paces and wore a worried expression.

‘Yes, Mr Frobisher, very well thank you. I was just remembering some past horrors I've had to witness at the gallows in other prisons. Let's hope this one goes off

smoothly. No frantic tugging to finish a shoddy job. No decapitation.'

'She would only be getting her just desserts,' muttered Frobisher.

Privately, Butt agreed but said nothing. Unlike most others condemned to die, no one had campaigned to have Mary Grady's sentence commuted. Even those opposed to capital punishment had remained silent. He glanced around and saw everyone was in place. The Under Sheriff of Hertfordshire was looking green about the gills, as he well might. There hadn't been an execution in the county since 1839 and the man had been but a nipper then, so this was a first for him too. All the other observers and participants were gaol officials, Butt having refused all applications from members of the press.

Marianne Edwards leant over the railing and rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe she had been standing here for almost three hours watching Alex slurping through the Thames mud with his bloody metal detector. She was itching to complain, tell him she was bored but with those stupid headphones on, he was oblivious. And what had been the sum total of today's treasure hunt? Three dirty coins. Not even enough for a coffee. Marianne gave a long sigh, her breath a white plume snaking upwards. She wondered how long it was till high tide...

'Hey, look what I found!' yelled Alex. He held out a battered tin box about the size of a large fist. Reluctantly, Marianne reached down and took it. She grimaced at its foul smell, hoping it was only mud that clung to it.

'You're joking, aren't you?' She saw the disappointment in his eyes at her reaction but was beyond caring. She gave it a quick shake but this gave no clue as to what might be inside. From its exterior, nothing promising: it looked cheap. She tried to prise it open but a couple of large dents put paid to that.

'Gee, thanks Alex,' she said in her snidest tone.

Butt watched as the Chaplain led Mary Grady, flanked by two warders, up the steps to the platform. She twisted her head and stared straight at him. A triumphant look: bold as brass. Well, thought Butt, she won't be looking so pleased with herself in a minute or two. Then she smiled...

Sweat broke out on his forehead though the November morning was cool. She was a nasty piece of work but, more than that, she gave him the creeps. He tutted to himself. The damn woman had been no end of trouble since she'd arrived back at the gaol after being sentenced. As usual they were overcrowded with the scum of the lower orders, so the murderess had been put with a dozen others in one of the cells. All night there'd been the usual shouting and fighting from these hellcats. But only eleven came out alive, one woman had been mutilated beyond recognition. None of the other prisoners would say they saw anything, but Frobisher reported to him that the fear in their eyes suggested otherwise. Only Mary Grady appeared unperturbed. Butt suspected she had something to do with the butchery, but no weapon was found and what was he to do? You couldn't hang someone twice. So they'd buried the bodies post-haste and no one was any the wiser.

Marianne watched as Alex climbed the steps towards her. Thank God for that. They could get a late lunch and maybe be back to the flat in time for –

'I'm really pissed off. You've spoiled my day. I told you you'd be bored.'

Marianne's mouth dropped open. He had asked her! How dare he? She stuffed the box in her coat pocket and spelt out the facts clearly for him, starting with 'You bloody liar...'

Things went rapidly downhill from there. They argued on the tube, in the station car park and during the drive home. Back in the flat things got so heated Marianne jumped on the metal detector and it snapped in two.

'That's it. I can't believe you just did that!' yelled Alex, his face a mask of fury. He'd stared at her then: a cold expression that obliterated her remaining anger. But only when he turned away from her and walked out the door did the tears start to fall. Bloody PMT.

Butt prayed Mary Grady wouldn't cause any more bother as he had some important guests arriving for luncheon and then a tour of the prison: so many pressing things to do. He took out his watch and glanced at it again. Eight minutes to go.

The executioner fastened a leather strap around her ankles and over her prison skirt to preserve her modesty. Butt snorted at this and again, Herbert Frobisher gave him a worried glance.

The Chaplain started to read the burial service.

'Stop that noise, priest. I don't need your prayers. I shall watch you all burn in Hell!'

The cleric let out a low gasp. He stopped in mid-sentence. Silence fell over the yard and only the background hum of voices from the huge crowd outside the prison walls could be heard. From the expressions on their faces, Butt thought many of the men present were mentally crossing themselves at such sacrilege. This virago frightened them.

Mary Grady smirked as the white hood was held aloft over her head.

The watch reappeared. Butt looked down and saw it was four long minutes to eight. He wished he could speed up time and that the prison bell would, at this very moment, toll the hour so Mr Ruggles could complete his task. Nerves stretched taut, he shuffled and tried to resist the temptation to take out his timepiece once more.

Marianne started to stir from her restless slumber thinking she could hear someone talking. Had she left the TV on and fallen asleep on the sofa, she wondered?

No, it didn't feel like that.

'Is that you, Alex?'

Eyes still closed, and not yet fully awake, Marianne's thoughts drifted. She hoped he'd come back and wasn't angry any more. She would buy him another one of those things...and make it up to him in other ways. With that in mind, she almost purred in anticipation.

'Alex?'

No response, just that damned murmuring. What on earth was he up to? A silly game? She shivered, noticing that cool air had replaced the cocooning warmth.

The chaplain stood about three foot from Mary Grady as the executioner pulled the white hood down and covered her face. Butt watched as he started to recite the burial service once more. The woman muttered something. The reverend stopped again and leant his head closer to her. Presumably ordering him to be quiet, thought Butt. This one would definitely be a match for the Devil when she arrived at the gates of Hell.

Marianne frowned as conscious thought sensed impending danger. She was standing up. When did she do that?

Now fully alert, Marianne opened her eyes. But she could only see white as though she was covered by a dust sheet like a piece of old furniture. Her eyelashes scraped against rough material enshrouding her face and head. What was happening? Her hands felt as though they were tied at the front and a thick band tethered her elbows to her body. Try as she might, she couldn't move her arms at all. Her legs were strapped together over a swathe of heavy material and these too were held tight.

Claustrophobia, confusion and panic surfaced as one overwhelming emotion. She tried to scream but, if she stopped moving her head from side to side, the hood was sucked into her mouth, muffling her cries. Her legs buckled, and Marianne felt strong

arms grab her from behind. She squirmed but the arms tightened their grip, keeping her upright. A voice, louder now, from the front...was it the one she'd heard before...seemed directed at her...

‘Mary, keep still. Repent. Make your peace with God, and Heaven will be yours.’

Butt noticed the Chaplain made no attempt to sound sincere. He’d told Butt that it was very rare for him to find someone truly beyond redemption but, from his experiences with her over the last few weeks, the Grady woman was one of them. She had not confessed, nor shown the slightest remorse.

Who was Mary? Did these people think she was someone else? What the fuck was going on? Where was Alex? Wild thoughts jumbled together. Nothing made sense.

The warder who was trying to keep the agitated Mary Grady still, leaned his mouth in close to her right ear, ‘Not so tough now, eh, bitch?’

High on adrenaline, Marianne's body shook with fear. What a bloody awful nightmare! Wake up! Wake up, for God's sake!

But the firm hands still pinioned her and she could now feel something else being put over head. Was that a rope? A dead weight of foreboding dropped into the pit of her stomach. Her mouth opened...

A low continuous groan emerged from beneath the hood. On and on it stretched as though trying to mark every man in the small prison yard. Butt could bear the noise no longer. The woman was a sham after all. He must get this over quickly. The bell began to toll. He waved his hand at the executioner and as the last chime struck, he cleared his throat.

‘Mary Ann Grady, may the Lord have mercy on your soul.’

With unspeakable clarity in those last few seconds, Marianne grasped what was about to happen to her. This wasn't a nightmare, it was real. She heard a sound like a

bolt being pulled back. Dear God, let it be quick....

As her head exploded with pain, she felt both her bladder and bowels provide a final humiliation.

The newspapers reported Mary Grady had 'died hard' and danced on the rope for almost five minutes before her body finally hung still. They also made much of the fact that the crowd of thousands outside the prison had given a loud cheer when they saw the black flag being raised.

Jimmy Penrose, the gaol's newest recruit, stood in the prison yard with the executioner for the full hour required by law to make sure there was no chance of resuscitation. He stared at the body suspended from the short rope that would soon belong to Mr Ruggles. Jimmy wondered what it must be like in those last few moments as the noose did its work, but hoped he'd never be in a position to find out.

Ruggles idly picked at his teeth with the end of his finger and leant against the side of the platform. 'Odd old hanging, this one, Jimmy.'

Jimmy nodded his head in agreement. The other warders who guarded the condemned cell had told him Mary Grady was as tough and vicious as they'd ever seen. Rumour was she had cut up one of the other prisoners by magic, as no knife had been found and the witnesses were acting like she'd cut their tongues out too. When he'd caught her eye as she was walking towards the gallows, she'd put the frighteners on him. She'd winked and said she'd see him later. She even laughed.

Jimmy and Mr Ruggles watched the body's gentle swing as it was caught by the breeze. They concurred that the woman had held her ground much longer than

expected. Mr Ruggles said even hard men he'd known had acted like babies as the time got close. Often those who started out with a swagger gave themselves away with sweat on their brow or shaking hands when they saw the gallows. Some even wept.

But not Mary Grady.

Positioned next to the Under-Sheriff in front of the gallows, Jimmy noted it was only when the hood had gone over her head and been tied, that she seemed to change and lose her nerve. The reality must have suddenly hit her. She'd started to shake and twist, then her dreadful moaning. Jimmy's thoughts returned to imagining the fear that must have finally overwhelmed Mary Grady.

When the bell tolled nine, the two cut down the body. Following his instructions from the Head Warder, Jimmy was to take the corpse to the 'dead room'. He needed to get everything ready for the doctor who would check the body and authorise the interment within the prison walls in an unmarked grave. The inquest would be held at 11 o'clock after which Mr Ruggles would be able to take his leave. Jimmy and a couple of the other warders would then carry out the grim task of burying her.

Ernest Ruggles and the assistant warder manhandled the still hooded and bound body onto a rough wooden trolley. Whistling his favourite music hall tune as a source of comfort, Jimmy trundled his heavy load from the now empty courtyard to the small room off the infirmary where bodies were laid out prior to burial. Mr Ruggles went off to get a cup of tea.

The rest of the prison seemed unnaturally quiet. Outside the heavy stone walls - where only a few hours ago there had been a large crowd of sightseers, hawkers and passers-by - no sound could be heard. Jimmy had been surprised at the extent of their cheers when they knew the deed had been done. He swallowed nervously, thinking

about the next part of his job.

As the most recent and junior member of staff, much as he didn't want to do these tasks, they were his. Until they hired someone else and he could pass them on. He wheeled the trolley to the end of the infirmary block and let it down on the cobbles so he could open the 'dead room' door. After manoeuvring his passenger inside the empty chamber, he nipped out quickly to the storage room next door to get one of the rough deal boxes produced in abundance by the prisoners. He propped the lid and bottom of the coffin up against the wall, and turned back to the corpse.

The stink of her final sneer at the prison officials had spread like mould through the room. Taking a shallow breath, Jimmy grimaced in preparation for what he was about to see. He'd only had to cope with two hanged corpses so far. Both had been in Durham, when he first started working as an assistant warder. Each experience was permanently carved into his memory. After those hangings on the same day in March, he'd overheard the Prison Governor say that the hangman had got a bit careless. The warder, as part of handing the task over to the new recruit, was demonstrating how to lay out the bodies for viewing by the inquest jury. When the man peeled back the hoods, Jimmy had almost fainted. Both men had grotesque bulging faces. Their eyes had popped and their tongues hung out as if on display at a butcher's shop. The stuff of nightmares and a sight he'd rather forget.

Jimmy removed the hood.

He stared down, puzzlement overtaking his anxious scowl. There was no contorted swelling, nor burst eyeballs, but neither was this the face of Mary Grady. He staggered back. Without thinking, he nearly wiped his brow with the hood before dropping it to the floor as though it had seared his skin. What had gone wrong? Who was this poor woman? He rushed out of the room shouting for help.

He ran straight into the Head Warder, gasping frantically, 'Mr Frobisher, Mary Grady's the devil! She's not dead! Someone else is under the hood!'

'Calm down, lad. What on earth are you talking about?'

'God help us, I saw her get hung. But it's not her that's going to be buried...'
Jimmy wrung his hands as he led Mr Frobisher back to 'dead room'.

The Head Warder entered first and Jimmy heard a loud laugh followed by,
'Penrose, get in here!'

Jimmy shuffled through the door with great reluctance.

Mr Frobisher spoke sternly, though his gaze indicated a modicum of sympathy.
'Shouting in the yard for all to hear is not good for discipline, Mr Penrose. That's Mary Grady on the trolley, lad, no one else. Your eyesight must be playing tricks on you. Maybe it was the light?'

Jimmy stepped forward, and peered at the body. He couldn't believe this was happening. It *was* Mary Grady lying there now. He frowned, unsure what to say, but knew he hadn't been tricked by shadows or lack of light. 'I knows what I saw, sir. It was someone else. Not her. But it's her now.'

The Head Warder now turned back to look at the body. 'Yes, it's...but...'

Jimmy saw Mr Frobisher's expression of disbelief. He gazed at the dead woman and now realised its cause: given how long she'd taken to die, it was very strange that there was no sign of it. But for a pale red mark round her neck, her face was unblemished. His insides quivered as he tried to comprehend what this might mean.

'Let's bury her quick, I say, Mr Frobisher,' said Jimmy, in a voice barely above a whisper.

'Aye to that, Penrose.'

The two left the room quickly without looking back. Jimmy, fumbled with the keys

and locked the door.

‘I think you need to get a drink, lad, and calm down. You're shaking. I'll ask the doctor to wait a bit longer and send another warder to help you finish the preparations. We'll have the inquest over and we can bury the woman.’

Mr Frobisher shook his head and added quickly. ‘Remember though Jimmy, we can't have any more nonsense like this or you're out. Understand?’

Jimmy nodded and darted off to the kitchen. He wanted to be done with this job.

But barely half an hour later, he was mortified to be standing in front of Mr Frobisher again, this time with the warder sent to help him.

Hanging his head, he reported that that when they had returned to the ‘dead room’, Mary Grady's body was nowhere to be found.

Later that evening, at his rooms in Lambeth, Ernest Ruggles opened the trunk containing Mary Grady's belongings. He was pleased with the booty. She'd been quite extravagant with gee-gaws and fancy clothes. What his fiancé Mabel did not want, he'd be able to sell for a good price. Picking through the garments one by one, he started to lift out a woollen shawl when he felt from its weight that something was wrapped inside. His fingers were quick to uncover a tin box.

He held it towards the candle for a better look. From its battered exterior, Ruggles didn't anticipate that it would contain anything of value. There was something inside, but although he gave it a tentative shake, he couldn't make out what the contents might be. There wasn't any lock so after a brief struggle, he opened the hinged lid and peered in. A crumpled piece of dirty cloth hid something underneath. Ruggles took

hold of the frayed material and pulled it back to reveal his prize.

Time seemed to stand still. As Ruggles grasped exactly what the box contained, he remembered one of the warders telling him that Mary Grady had been known as 'Satan's whore'. Closing the lid, any excitement about his find drained away completely. He felt sick. Holding the box with only the fingertips of his left hand as though it was contaminated, he collected his key from the mantle and let himself out of the front door.

The cold air hit him sharply but he ignored the need for more than his thin jacket. His only thought now was to get to the river and cast Mary Grady's tainted legacy into the water as quickly as possible. To be lost. For ever. His only hope was that his brief ownership would have no adverse effect on him. Tomorrow, he'd take the trunk and all its contents and have them burnt. Tussauds be damned.

For now, he wanted to get rid of the mummified heart.

The dried shrivelled organ that against all of God's laws was still beating.
