

## *Ben Bolt*

by Thomas Waters

BEN BOLT was the *sobriquet* or nick-name—stolen, I am told, from an old song—of one of the most scampish of scamps I have ever met with. He dwelt, or rather burrowed, in Bermondsey; in one of its slummiest streets too—Pasley-street. He was also known as Cast-iron Jack; I suppose, because he kept a rag and old iron shop. Many persons will remember him. He was killed at the great fire where Mr. Braithwaite lost his valuable life. His real name was Edward Summers. This I did not know till some time after this story commences. The name, painted very cheaply I should say, over his door was Jarvis—Thomas Jarvis. He was not however *all* bad, as the sequel will show. He was a good-looking fellow enough,—sporting “lovelocks,” as such spiral hair-twistings used to be called; believed himself to be irresistible with girls of his grade, and it may be for that reason acquired the appellation of Ben Bolt.

In the crypt of that man’s memory there gleamed, or I was much mistaken, a grim, ghastly skeleton. That merriment, philandering of his was but ghostly merriment, philandering—the parody of a long-since passed, dead-and-buried reality. This notion came thus wise into my head.

Rag, bottle, and old iron shops are marked spots, so to speak, in the ordinary policeman’s beat. Frequently, too, they are honoured with the superior solicitude (excuse me) of a first-class detective. Twice, as I know by my diary, ordinary business took me to 27, Pasley-street, Bermondsey.

The first time I had occasion to call upon Thomas Jarvis, was to inquire if he had purchased certain articles of clothing, which had been worn by the infant-daughter of one Sidney Giles, a grocer, established in business at Swansea, who, with his family, had come to London, to see the Great Exhibition (1851).

He at once admitted that he had purchased the articles I described, and readily gave me such information as enabled me to recover the child, and send the woman who stole her to the treadmill for two years. That, however, is from the purpose of this narrative. It had simply, with respect to Ben Bolt’s history, this effect—that thenceforth he knew me to be Clarke the detective. I do not remember that any grave suspicion of Thomas Jarvis was suggested to me at that first meeting with him. Yet it may, *must* I think, have been so, or why should I, when that poor Jane Winter was found murdered, stripped to her skin, upon Blackheath, have gone to his place, and demanded, with fierce peremptoriness of tone,—not if he had purchased the scarlet cloak and other apparel belonging to the Unfortunate (she was a *gay* girl, as many readers will remember),—but “if he knew, and what he knew of the murder on Blackheath.” The exact words I used, it was afterwards sworn—there were several persons in the shop—the exact words I used, it was, I say, afterwards sworn, but I doubted the literal accuracy of the statement, were:—“Now, Jarvis, tell me all about the murder on Blackheath—of Jane Winter, you know!”

Let me admit, as some foundation for such sweeping *clairvoyance*, that I had seen Ben Bolt talking—toying with Jane Winter in Blackfriar’s-road, not perhaps more than a fortnight before

her naked corpse was found upon the heath. A chain of ideas often originates and remains indissolubly connected with an obscure, buried link of that chain.

What unseen spectre suddenly confronted the man, that he should so startle, so pale?—he, as I knew before another hour had passed, being entirely, and of course consciously, guiltless of any complicity in, any knowledge of the Unfortunate's death; knew too that his perfect innocence could be established by indisputable proof. Yes, innocence—as regarded the death of Jane Winter. But what affrighting image suddenly rises up before you when you are suddenly questioned about the murder of a girl upon Blackheath? Were there windows in men's bosoms, I should see one serpent, if not more than one, coiled around that shrinking heart of thine. Yes; surely one, if not more.

Whilst I was in the shop speaking with Ben Bolt, a white, wan woman's face—rendered visible, as I may say, by the light of large, black, wild eyes—showed itself outside, pressing almost close to the window. Ben Bolt saw the face as soon as I did, and went quietly out. I heard the clink of coppers, bestowed with a hearty curse.

I noticed the direction in which the white, wan woman directed her feeble steps; and after a few minutes further converse with Jarvis, I followed.

She had not gone far—to the next gin-palace only. I closely scrutinised her features—she unregardful—in the glare of the gas.

A handsome face—I mean the wreck of a handsome face; smirched, seared with what has been aptly termed distilled damnation. As to years, she could not have been much over forty. There was a silent sorrow, too, in those wild, dark eyes; the shadow of a terrible grief that would never pass away.

Presently she noticed that I was attentively regarding her.

“Ah, Mr. Clarke!” she exclaimed. “Do you think you will know me again?”

“You know my name, it seems. What may be yours?”

“Lord bless you, Mr. Detective! I have a dozen—Smith, Green, Brown, Jones, Robinson. Pay your money for a quartern, and take your choice.”

“Is Jarvis one of your many names?”

“Jarvis! To the devil with Jarvis!” and her eyes shot lightning. “Ah yes, I saw you in that hell-fire villain's shop. I remember now. You, I suppose, were inquiring about poor Jane Winter's death. He is innocent of *that* murder, Mr. Detective!—though he knew her very well. There is no use in beating that bush.”

“Nor any other, I suppose? Never mind, I shall stand a quartern.”

“I don’t know that I couldn’t point you out a bush that, in a detective sense, would pay for beating!”

“Will you point out that particular bush?”

“Perhaps I will; perhaps I wont. It depends. I *have* sometimes thought of sending to you.”

“Sending to me! About what? Come, out with it. Here,” I added, *sotto voce*, for there was a meaning in the woman’s glance I wished to be interpreted in words—“here, let us have a quiet confab in this inner room.”

“Yes, I will. It may be a Providence. I don’t know. I have dreamt lately—Well, I *will* talk to you.”

A sad, most sad, suggestive story I heard during the next half-hour from those pale, quivering lips; emphasized by the now fierce, now tender flashes of Marian Tredgold’s eyes. (That was her real name.) Yes; a sad, solemn story. I render it briefly.

Marian Tredgold—her maiden name was Raymond—was born in Sidmouth, Devonshire, of very poor parents. If I understood her rightly, the father was fisherman, boat-builder, and night-poacher by turns. That, however, signifies little. The great life-swaying fact was, that before Marian Raymond had seen her eighteenth birthday, Martin Tredgold (the son of a wealthy watchmaker and jeweller in Sidmouth) persuaded her to contract a secret marriage with him. The marriage was repudiated by the husband’s relatives; and the end was that a legal separation was agreed to. The wife had fifty pounds per annum secured to her during the husband’s life. That life closed—opened upon another infinitely brighter one, let us hope—before his child and daughter unclosed her eyes in this. The annuity lapsed, of course; and the stern parents of the dead husband were deaf to all appeals for pity. The mother and widow vainly appealed to them. Not even crumbs from their well-furnished table could she be permitted to partake of. And her own father and mother, long ailing people, died within a few weeks of each other. There is an old country saying, that “An empty sack can never stand upright.” Quite true. And to the consciousness of that truth—felt instinctively to be true by all of us—it is no doubt owing that the mob, whether that of St. James or St. Giles, always sympathize with the weak, the helpless; it signifying little that the weakness, the helplessness, have been by their own acts brought upon themselves.

Marian Tredgold and the paramour she had picked up left Sidmouth and dwelt for some years—till Ellen Tredgold had passed her ninth birthday—in the neighbourhood of Exeter. The man died insolvent, as such men usually do. Then Mrs. Tredgold and her child came to London—the vast maelstrom which attracts, absorbs, hides from view the wrecks that would else, floating awhile upon the solitary sea of rustic, provincial life, be the mark, whilst they so floated, for Scorn to point his slow moving finger at.

Seven more years must, in playhouse phrase, be supposed to have passed; but seven demoralising years, no doubt, as regarded Mrs. Tredgold. But the mother’s is—except in utterly depraved natures—a self-sanctifying, redeeming love. Fallen as she herself was, Mrs. Tredgold

managed in some way—and we may be sure there must have been some struggle and selfdenial to achieve such a result—to keep her child not only uncontaminated, but in happy ignorance of her mother’s guilt and shame. Ellen Tredgold was placed at a boarding-school in Maidstone. Some plausible story was invented—exactly what, I did not hear or care to hear—to account for the isolation of the girl, whom her mother visited once in every month. White days these must have been in that dark life!

Time and the hour running through the roughest day had, as I before stated, brought the mother to her daughter’s sixteenth birthday—the lost woman had no count of years save that. That birthday had been passed—some months passed I believe—when lightning flashed from that one blue spot in the black firmament of life. The miserable mother showed me the letter written by the Misses Parkinson, and addressed, as all such communications were, to Mrs. Stirling, Saint Martin-le-Grand, to be left till called for. It was to the effect that Miss Ellen Tredgold had absconded, that the most anxious inquiries had been made with no enlightening result, &c. The mother, in a state of pitiable distraction, at once hurried to Maidstone; but could ascertain nothing except that Ellen Tredgold had been several times seen in the gloaming with a Mr. Stansfield, a very dashing young gentleman, staying at the principal inn in Maidstone, and yet oftener in seemingly confidential converse with his servant, a much finer person in some respects than his master.

“And after several years of anxious inquiry, you, Mrs. Tredgold, discovered, by the merest accident, that the servant, and in some respects much finer person than his master, was Thomas Jarvis, the rag-shop man.”

“I did not say it was entirely accident, because—”

“Well, never mind about that. Jarvis said he married your daughter, and she was drowned, with other passengers, in the Erin steam-packet, when crossing over from Holyhead to Howth, near Dublin, where he (Jarvis) was staying with his master at the time. My impression is that the Erin was lost on her passage from London to Belfast. But that is of no consequence—at least of no present consequence. He constantly refuses, you say, to give the name of his master; gives you curses, and at times a few coppers for all reply. You have yourself seen the marriage register at St. George’s Church, Bloomsbury?”

“Yes. It sets forth that Ellen Tredgold and Thomas Jarvis were married on the day named, by banns duly published.”

“By banns, which would have necessitated three weeks’ delay. Very unlikely that, under the circumstances. Still—. You say there was no Ellen Tredgold, no Ellen Jarvis, in the list of passengers who perished with the Erin.”

“No; but Ben Bolt says my daughter went by his request or order under the name of Mrs. Thompson, and a Mrs. Thompson *was* a passenger in the Erin.”

“Thompson! A common name enough. And now tell me again, and with full detail, why you suspect that your child has been foully dealt with? This is a business that must and shall be strictly sifted.”

There is no need to pester the reader with the woman’s prolix narrative. Its purport will be developed by my action in the matter.

“I must speak with you, Thomas Jarvis, as you call yourself,” said I, a few days after my conference with that wretched Mrs. Tredgold. “Let us go into your back parlour. No airs of indignation, *Edward Summers!* I know all about you! Know a good deal about Archer Preswick, Esquire; and must know more of you. Now then, and before the brazen colour returns to your cheek—which it will not do very soon—hear what I have to say, as preface to the revelations you will be anxious to make. To begin with—Mrs. Thompson, who was drowned in the *Erin*, was not Ellen Tredgold. The real Mrs. Thompson’s husband resides in Bryanstone-square. I have seen and spoken with him. Lie No. 1 is consequently pitched to the father of lies, and is no doubt treasured up in that fathomless wallet of his, as one proof that you are his property. Very good. Shockingly bad rather. And worse remains behind. *You* did not marry Ellen Tredgold, at St. George’s Church, Bloomsbury; Archer Preswick, Esquire, married her in your name! And now, my fine fellow—Ben Bolt, Cast-iron Jack, Thomas Jarvis, Edward Summers—tell me, if you think it prudent to do so, where Mrs. Archer Preswick is to be found?”

“She—she—is *dead*,” stammered the shrinking trembling wretch.

“Who murdered her?—you or Archer Preswick? I suppose you, for the three hundred pounds with which you purchased this business?”

I never saw a poor devil more completely knocked over.

“I—I,”—he stammered—“I will tell you all; though you seem to know everything already. I—I am not going to be hanged for what others have done.”

“Certainly not, if you can help it; which may be doubtful. Now then.”

“Master gave me a sleeping-draught, as he said it was—the cruel villain—which I took and gave to his wife.”

“At the cottage *ornée*, a few miles from Ipswich?”

“Yes, yes. Good God! how do you know all this?”

“Detectives know everything. Go on.”

“I gave the draught; believing, upon my soul, that it was harmless as milk. An hour afterwards,—less maybe,—my master comes into the pantry, where I was, and says to me, ‘She’s dead, Ned. You have managed the business famously.’ You might have knocked me down with a feather. ‘What,’ says I, ‘young missus dead!’ ‘Of course,’ says he; ‘dead as the earth by which she will

soon be hidden out of sight.’ Then he goes on in his fierce way, for I could not speak. ‘There, let’s have none of your snivelling nonsense. Be off to London by this night’s mail; and keep quiet, or you may have an awkward crick in the neck some day. Meet me a week hence, at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn. We will then talk further.’ Upon my soul, Mr. Detective, this is all I know about the young woman’s death—though I have never slept quite soundly since. Mr. Archer Preswick did meet and give me the money I bought this business with. Curse his money!” shouted the man, with explosive rage. “It is hell-money, and burns up my life! I have been dying ever since.”

“There, don’t go into fits. The affair may not be quite so desperate as you suppose. May not be, I say. I can understand why Mr. Preswick was desirous of fastening such an accusation upon you—of getting you out of the way—with such an impression upon your mind. Yes, that is easily understood. But now comes the test. Where is Mr. Archer Preswick to be found? and what is his real name?”

“His real name, since it must be told, is Raymond—Archibald Raymond. He is pretty well off now, and has great expectations.”

“Where can I find him?”

“I can find him in London. I know his haunts.”

“That will do. We will be off at once.”

“Mr. Archibald Raymond must leave that game at billiards, and come with me. I am Clarke, the detective, and have instructions to inquire strictly into the circumstances attendant upon the death of your *wife*—ELLEN TREDGOLD.

“Confined as a lunatic in the Essex Asylum? You stand in a fearful position, Mr. Raymond! Still, amends, to some extent, may be made. Of course, you must come with me.”

“A deed of separation, Mr. Raymond,” said the attorney to whom I, with full explanation, introduced Mrs. Tredgold and daughter.—“A deed of separation, Mr. Raymond, securing to your outraged wife five hundred pounds per annum, with reversion to her mother should she survive her child. That is settled then. And now as to ‘Ben Bolt.’ He must have a release from the three hundred pounds you lent him. His promissory note, payable on demand, must be given up. That also is agreed to.”

The game was played out.

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *Autobiography of a London Detective*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864.