

How
**Thomas of Reading
Was Murdered**

THOMAS DELONEY

“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”

Period Short Stories of Mystery, Crime & Intrigue

#8

All short stories in the “Vintage Short Mystery Classics” series are period works now in the public domain. These e-book presentations are published by:

Hornpipe Vintage Publications

P.O. Box 18428

Spartanburg, SC 29318

www.hornpipe.com/mysclas.htm

“Vintage Short Mystery Classics” have been selected by Daniel Elton Harmon, author of “The Harper Chronicles,” with the intent of introducing new readers to notable works of short historical fiction in the mystery/gothic/crime vein. For more information, please visit the author’s Web site at www.danieleltonharmon.com.

Details of Thomas Deloney’s life have been all but obliterated by a dearth of original records and the passage of time. We know he was a silk weaver by trade; a prolific ballad writer and author of several book-length prose works, as well as pamphlets, by avocation. One source gives his birth year as 1543, and evidence suggests he hailed from either Norwich or London.

Tradesmen were the subjects of much of his writing. This tale is from his book Thomas of Reading, also titled The Six Worthy Yeomen of the West. It’s believed Deloney wrote it around 1597 and died within three years of its completion. It’s included in the current series not only because of its plot (which should engage you admirably, if you can weather the period prose style) but also its Elizabethan derivation.

How Thomas of Reading Was Murdered

Thomas of Reading having many occasions to come to London, as well about his own affairs, as also on the King's business, being in great office under his Majesty, it chanced on a time, that his host and hostess of Colebrook (who through covetousness had murdered many of their guests) appointed him to be the next fat pig that should be killed: for it is to be understood, that, when they plotted the murder of any man, this was always their formula: "Wife, there is now a fat pig to be had, if you want one." Whereupon she would answer thus: "I pray you put him in the hogsty till to-morrow."

This was when any man came thither alone without others in his company, and they saw he had great store of money. This man should then be laid in the chamber right over the kitchen, which was a fair chamber, and better set out than any other in the house: the best bedstead therein, though it were little and low, yet was it most cunningly carved, and fair to the eye: the feet whereof were fast nailed to the chamber floor, in such sort that it could not in any wise fall, and the bed that lay therein was fast sewed to the sides of the bedstead. Moreover, that part of the chamber whereupon the bedstead stood was made in such sort, that, by the pulling out of two iron pins below in the kitchen, it was to be let down and taken up by a draw-bridge, or in manner of a trap-door: moreover, in the kitchen, directly under the place where this should fall,

2 How Thomas of Reading Was Murdered

was a mighty great cauldron, wherein they used to seethe their liquor when they went to brewing. Now the men appointed for the slaughter were laid into this bed, and in the dead time of the night, when they were sound asleep, by plucking out the aforesaid iron pins, down would the man fall out of his bed into the boiling cauldron, and all the clothes that were upon him: where being suddenly scalded and drowned, he was never able to cry or speak one word.

Then had they a little ladder ever standing ready in the kitchen, by the which they presently mounted into the said chamber, and there took away the man's apparel, as also his money, in his mail or capcase: and then lifting up the said falling floor which hung by hinges, they made it fast as before. The dead body would they take presently out of the cauldron, and throw it down the river, which ran near unto their house.

Now if in the morning any of the rest of the guests that had talked with the murdered man ere eve, chanced to ask for him, as having occasion to ride the same way that he should have done, the good man would answer, that he took horse a good while before day, and that he himself did set him forward. The horse the good man would also take out of the stable, and convey him to a hay barn of his, that stood from his house a mile or two, whereof himself did always keep the keys full charily, and when any hay was to be brought from thence, with his own hands he would deliver it: then before the horse should go from thence, he would dismark him: as, if he had a long tail, he would make him curtail; or else crop his ears, or cut his mane, or put out one of his eyes: and by this means he kept himself unknown.

Now Thomas of Reading, as I said before, being marked and kept for a fat pig, he was laid in the same chamber of death, but by reason Gray of Gloucester chanced also to come that night, he escaped scalding.

The next time he came he was laid there again, but before he fell asleep, or was warm in bed, one came riding through the town and cried piteously that London was all a fire, and that it had burned down Thomas Becket's house in West Cheap, and a great number more in the same street. "And yet," quoth he, "the fire is not quenched." Which tidings when Thomas of Reading heard, he was very sorrowful, for of this same Becket that day he had received a great piece of money, and had left in his house many of his writings, and some that appertained to the King also: therefore there was no way but he would ride back to London presently, to see how the matter stood: thereupon making himself ready he departed. This cross fortune caused his host to frown. "Nevertheless," quoth he, "the next time will pay for all."

Notwithstanding, God so wrought, that they were prevented then likewise by reason of a great fray that happened in the house betwixt a couple that fell out at dice; insomuch as the murderers themselves were enforced to call him up, being a man in great authority, that he might set the house in quietness; out of the which by means of this quarrel, they doubted to lose many things.

Another time when he should have been laid in the same place, he fell so sick, that he requested to have somebody to watch with him; whereby also they could not bring their vile purpose to pass. But hard it is to escape the illfortunes whereunto man is allotted: for albeit that the next time that he came to London, his horse stumbled

and broke one of his legs as he would ride homeward, yet hired he another to hasten his own death; for there was no remedy but he should go to Colebrook that night: but by the way he was heavy asleep that he could scant keep himself in his saddle; and when he came near unto the town, his nose burst out suddenly a bleeding.

Well, to his inn he came, and so heavy was his heart that he could eat no meat: his host and hostess hearing he was so melancholy, came up to cheer him, saying: "Why, Master Cole*, what ails you to-night? Never did we see you thus sad before: will it please you to have a quart of burnt sack?"

"With a good will," quoth he, "and I would that Tom Dove were here, he would surely make me merry, and we should lack no music: but I am sorry for the man with all my heart, that he is come so far behindhand: alas, so much can every man say, but what good doth it him? No, no, it is not words can help a man in this case, the man hath need of other relief than this. Let me see: I have but one child in the world and that is my daughter; half that I have is hers, the other half my wife's. What then, shall I be good to nobody but them? In conscience, my wealth is too much for a couple to possess: and what is our religion without charity? And to whom is charity more to be shown than to decayed householders? Good my host, lend me a pen and ink, and some paper; for I will write a letter unto the poor man straight; and something I will give him. The alms which a man bestows with his own hands he shall be sure to have delivered, and who knows how long I shall live?"

* *Editor*: "Master Cole" is Thomas of Reading.

With that his hostess dissembling answered: "Doubt not, Master Cole, you are like enough by the course of nature to live many years."

Quoth he: "I never found my heart so heavy before."

By this time pen, ink, and paper were brought, and he wrote as followeth: "In the Name of God, Amen. I bequeath my soul to God, and my body to the ground, my goods equally between my wife Elinor and my daughter Isabel. Item. I give to Thomas Dove of Exeter one hundred pounds, nay, that is too little, I give to Thomas Dove two hundred pounds in money, to be paid unto him presently upon his demand thereof, by my said wife and daughter."

"Ha, how sayest thou, host," quoth he, "is not this well? I pray you read it."

His host looking thereupon, said: "Why, Master Cole, what have you written here? You said you would write a letter, but methinks you have made a will, what need have you to do thus? Thanks be to God, you may live many fair years."

"'Tis true," quoth Cole, "if it please God: and I trust this writing cannot shorten my days. But let me see, have I made a will? Now, I promise you, I did verily purpose to write a letter: notwithstanding, I have written that which God put into my mind. But look again my host, is it not written there that Dove shall have two hundred pounds, to be paid when he comes to demand it?"

"Yes, indeed," said his host.

"Well then, all is well," said Cole, "and it shall go as it is."

Then folding it up he sealed it, desiring that his host should send it to Exeter. He promised that he would:

notwithstanding Cole was not satisfied, but after some pause, he would needs hire one to carry it. And so sitting down sadly in his chair again, upon a sudden he burst forth a weeping; they demanding the cause thereof he spake as followeth: "No cause of these fears I know: but it cometh into my mind, how when I set toward this my last journey to London, how my daughter took on, what a coil she kept me stay: and I could not be rid of the little baggage a long time, she did so hang about me; when her mother by violence took her away, she cried out most mainly: 'O my father, my father, I shall never see him again.'"

"Alas, pretty soul," quoth his hostess, "this was but mere kindness in the girl, and it seemeth she is very fond of you. But alas, why should you grieve at this? You must consider that it was but childishness."

"Ay, it is indeed," said Cole, and with that he began to nod.

Then they asked him if he would go to bed.

"No," he answered, "although I am heavy, I have no mind to go to bed at all."

With that certain musicians of the town came to the chamber, and knowing Master Cole was there, drew out their instruments, and very solemnly began to play.

"This music comes very well," said Cole, and when he had listened awhile thereunto, he said: "Methinks these instruments sound like the ring of St. Mary Overies bells, but the bass drowns all the rest: and in my ear it is like a bell that rings a forenoon's knell. I pray you let them leave off, and bear them this simple reward."

The musicians being gone, his host asked if now it would please him to go to bed: "for," quoth he, "it is well near eleven of the clock."

With that Cole, beholding his host and hostess earnestly, began to start back, saying: "What ails you to look so like pale death? What have you done, that your hands are thus bloody?"

"What, my hands?" said the host. "Why, you may see they are neither bloody nor foul: either your eyes do greatly dazzle, or else fancies of a troubled mind do delude you."

"Alas, my host, you may see," quoth he, "how weak my wits are, I never had my head so idle before. Come, let me drink once more, and then I will to bed, and trouble you no longer."

With that he made himself ready, and his hostess was very diligent to warm a kerchief and put it about his head. Said he: "I am not sick, thank God, but such an alteration I find in myself as I never did before."

With that the screech-owl cried piteously, and anon after the night raven sat croaking hard by his window. "Mercy upon me," quoth he, "what an ill-favoured cry do yonder carrion birds make." And therewithal he laid him down in his bed, from whence he never rose again.

His host and hostess, that all this while noted his troubled mind, began to commune betwixt themselves thereof. And the man said, he knew not what were best to be done. "By my consent," quoth he, "the matter should pass for I think it is best not to meddle with him."

"What, man," quoth she, "faint you now? Have you done so many, and do you shrink at this?" Then, showing him a great deal of gold which Cole had left with her, she said: "Would it not grieve a body's heart to lose this? Hang the old churl, what should he do living any longer? He

hath too much, and we have too little: tut, husband, let the thing be done, and then this is our own."

Her wicked counsel was followed, and when they had listened at his chamber door, they heard the man sound asleep. "All is safe," quoth they; and down into the kitchen they go, their servants being all abed, and pulling out the iron pin, the man dropped out into the boiling cauldron. He being dead, they betwixt them cast his body into the river, his clothes they made away, and made all things as it should be: but when he came to the stable to convey thence Cole's horse, the stable door being open, the horse had got loose, and with a part of the halter about his neck, and straw trussed under him as the ostlers had dressed him ere eve, he was gone out at the back ride, which led into a great field adjoining to the house, and so leaping divers hedges had got into a ground where a mare was grazing, with whom he kept up such a coil that they got into the highway, where one of the town, meeting them, knew the mare, and brought her and the horse to the man that owned her.

In the mean space the musicians had been at the inn, and in requital of their evening gift, they intended to give Cole some music in the morning. The goodman told them he took horse before day: likewise there was a guest in the house that would have borne him company to Reading, to whom the host also answered, that he himself set him upon horseback, and that he went long ago. Anon came the man that owned the mare, inquiring up and down, to know if none of them missed a horse. Who said no. At last he came to the sign of the Crane, where Cole lay: and calling the ostlers he demanded of them if they lacked one, and they said no.

“Why then,” said the man, “I perceive my mare is good for something, for if I send her to the field single, she will come home double.” Thus it passed on all that day and the night following.

But the next day after, Cole’s wife, musing that her husband came not home, sent one of her men on horseback to see if he could meet him. “And if,” quoth she, “you meet him not betwixt this and Colebrook, ask for him at the Crane, but if you find him not there, then ride to London: for I doubt he is either sick, or else some mischance hath fallen upon him.”

The fellow did so, and asking for him at Colebrook, they answered, he went homeward from thence such a day. The servant musing what should be become of his master, and making inquiry in the town for him: at length one told him of a horse that was found on the highway, and no man knew whence he came. He going to see the horse, knew him presently, and to the Crane he goes with him. The host of the house perceiving this, was blank, and that night fled secretly away. The fellow going unto the Justice desired his help. Presently after word was brought that Jarman of the Crane was gone: then all the men said, he had sure made away with Cole: and the musicians told what Jarman said to them when they would have given Cole music. Then the woman being apprehended and examined, confessed the truth. Jarman soon after was taken in Windsor Forest. He and his wife were both hanged, after they had laid open all these things before expressed. Also he confessed, that he being a carpenter made that false falling floor, and how his wife devised it. And how they had murdered by that means forty persons. And yet notwithstanding all the money which

they had gotten thereby, they prospered not, but at their death were found in dept.

When the King heard of this murder, he was for the space of seven days so sorrowful and heavy, as he would not hear any suit: giving also commandment, that the house should quite be consumed with fire, wherein Cole was murdered, and that no man should ever build upon that cursed ground.

Cole's substance at his death was exceeding great: he had daily in his house an hundred men servants, and forty maids: he maintained besides above two or three hundred people, spinners, and carders, and a great many other householders. His wife after never married, and at her death she bestowed a mighty sum of money towards the maintaining of the new builded monastery. Her daughter was most richly married to a gentleman of great worship, and she had many children. And some say that the river wherein Cole was cast, did ever since carry the name of Cole, being called the river of Cole, and the town of Colebrook.

—*THOMAS DELONEY*

Dabbling in Mystery. . . .

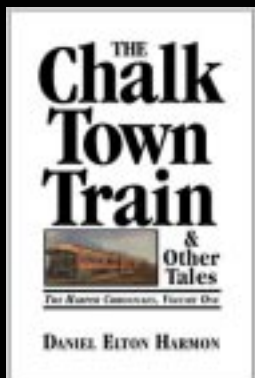
Have a hankering to explain the hitherto unexplained? Curious about the lives of noted mystery authors? Intrigued by their fabricated puzzles—and by real-life enigmas?

Join author Daniel Elton Harmon on the Internet in wide-ranging discourses on historical riddles, unique crimes, the supernatural and the starkly odd. “Mysterious Expeditions” presents notes and commentaries on true mysteries as well as vintage mystery authors and their works. *AND* . . . you’re encouraged to contribute your own findings! Pay a call to this exciting new historical mystery blog: <http://mysteriousexpeditions.blogspot.com>.

South Carolina author and editor Daniel Elton Harmon has written more than fifty books. Recently published by Chelsea House are his six volumes in the “Exploration of Africa: The Emerging Nations” series; *The Titanic*, part of the “Great Disasters: Reforms and Ramifications” series; his history of the Hudson River for the “Rivers in American Life and Times” series; and juvenile biographies in the “Explorers of New Worlds” series. Other of his books are published by Wright/McGraw-Hill, Mason Crest and Barbour Publishing. His freelance articles have appeared in such periodicals as *Nautilus*, *Music Journal* and *The New York Times*. Harmon is the associate editor of *Sandlapper: The Magazine of South Carolina* and editor of *The Lawyer’s PC*, a technology newsletter.

The Chalk Town Train & Other Tales: “The Harper Chronicles,” Volume One is his first book of fiction and the first of his series of short story collections that follow the career of Harper the crime reporter.

Harper is at the scene. . . .



Six unmarked graves hold the secret to an older generation's hideous ordeal. . . .

Escaped convicts invade a riverside campsite. . . .

A ring of prestigious businessmen carry out a massive estate swindle in the state capital. . . .

Shipwreck survivors sheltered at a Low Country fishing village have much, much to hide. . . .

And the president of the United States turns to a small-city journalist to intercept a potentially disastrous item of diplomatic correspondence. . . .

Harper, nonconformist crime reporter for the fledgling *Challenge*, finds himself in the thick of these and other dramas in the post-Reconstruction South. Through intuition, deduction, focused research and on-the-scene investigation, Harper probes to the heart of each affair. In the process, he often uncovers facts and circumstances he can never publish—and enters the hazy borderland between observer and participant.

The Chalk Town Train & Other Tales, Daniel Elton Harmon's first volume of "Harper" short stories, has received rave reviews in history/mystery circles and is available in print. Visit www.danieleltonharmon.com to learn more about this exciting new series and read what the critics are saying!

An author-signed copy of *The Chalk Town Train & Other Tales* (softbound, 157 pages) costs \$15 postpaid. Please make check or money order payable to "Dan Harmon" and mail to the author at P.O. Box 18428, Spartanburg, SC 29318.

(Note: We cannot conscientiously support credit card companies and thus do not accept credit card orders.)