

A GRIPPING TALE OF GREAT MINDS
AND GRUESOME MURDERS

THE
Secrets of the
**LAZARUS
CLUB**

'Highly ingenious,
roars to life'

THE GUARDIAN

'A rip-roaring
historical thriller'

THE TIMES

TONY POLLARD



www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

The Secrets of the Lazarus Club
by
Tony Pollard

Copyright © Tony Pollard, 2008

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from
The Secrets of the Lazarus Club

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

Prologue

The waterman whistled as he pulled on the oars, his small craft carrying him slowly but steadily upstream along Limehouse Reach. He'd set out from Greenwich, across the river from southern tip of the Isle of Dogs, and then headed north, passing Millwall and pulling on beyond. The trip took in almost three miles of river, and it was his pitch. There were other watermen and other pitches but this was his and over the years he had come to know every eddy, backwash and mudflat and had long regarded it as home.

Pausing for a moment he tugged down the peak of his cap against a shower of rain which for a short while turned the brown surface of the water into a sheet of hammered copper. Around his feet were collected all manner of things: pieces of timber, lengths of rope, cork fenders, bottles, various sodden items of clothing and even a small chair. He didn't care who they once belonged to; they were his now. He was employed by the bailiff to clear the river of obstacles to navigation but any stray object floating in the water within the bounds of his beat was legally his property once lifted aboard the boat. All very official it was: you only needed to look at his smart blue uniform to see that.

He had been out since dawn and by now had covered half the beat – the ache in his arms and the twinge from his back told him that much. It had been an average day thus far but he was pleased with the chair: the wife could put it by the fire. The boat hugged the eastern side of the channel, where it was out of the way of the heavy traffic but also close to where most of the stuff drifting downstream would naturally be drawn by the current. At low tide much of the floating windfall would be left stranded on the flats, where it would fall prey to the gangs of mudlarks working both sides of the river. There was no such worry now, though, as the tide was at its fullest.

Moored boats were always a good place – sometimes three or

four would be tied together, side by side. These tethered flotillas served as traps for anything coming into their path and so the waterman would paddle around them and snag whatever was bobbing against the hulls or caught in the ropes. It was to such a spot that he was pulling now, just on the edge of the shipyard where Brunel's great ship was being built, side on to the river. The yard also yielded more than its share of treasures – planks of timber, paint pots and lengths of heavy rope. The boats, a skiff and a pair of barges, were moored just fifty yards or so downriver from the yard and so provided the perfect opportunity for a good haul.

Favouring one oar over the other, the waterman manoeuvred the boat to the stern of the stationary vessels and with the long-poled boat hook in hand began to look for floating objects. Wedged between the barge in the middle and the skiff was a length of broken ladder, just long enough, he judged, to be of use again. After some difficulty in pulling it free he stowed it with the rest of the stuff.

It was then he heard the noise, a scuffing and scratching interspersed with the odd sharp croak. Using the hook against the stern of the middle vessel, he nudged the small boat a little closer into shore. That was when he saw them.

Two scabrous-looking gulls were perched on something floating in the river but seemingly fastened to the lee board of the shoreward barge. They were squabbling over whatever it was the larger of the two was jealously clutching in its beak. It took the waterman a moment or two to realize that the birds were perched on the back of a dead body, the head having become wedged between the lee board and the hull. The corpse was white as a ghost and entirely naked. With its slender limbs and long hair spread out on the water like a dark weed it could only be a woman – that or a child.

Although he found the nudity distasteful, as he did the vision of two birds fighting over a freshly plucked eyeball, coming across a body in the river caused him little upset. He had, after all, encountered dozens of bodies in his time, many of them suicides who had thrown themselves off one of the bridges further upstream. Quite often they were sucked under almost immediately by the current and dragged downstream, to surface again only once they reached

his beat. He had no idea how many of them remained submerged and made it all the way down the river to be expelled into the open sea beyond.

Clearing the river of dead bodies, or ‘floaters’, as they were known in the trade, was all part of his job as a waterman. Indeed, he was paid a small bonus for every corpse he fished from the water and delivered back to the land.

After edging the boat as far between the two barges as the gap would allow, he stood in the prow and used the boat hook to dislodge the birds, forcing them to continue their fight over the morsel elsewhere. Then he used it to lever back the board just enough to allow the corpse to slip free. As it came free the body rolled over on to its back – the usual position for a female floater. It was then that the stench hit him.

The black funk came straight from the charnelhouse and caused him to retch and his eyes to water. He knew from past experience that the sickly-sour smell of a human corpse is just as much a taste as it is a smell, but this was the worst he had ever experienced. This one must have been under for quite some time – retting like flax in the murky depths. When his eyes recovered he was horrified to see a further reason for the noisome stench. Where the chest had once been there was now a gaping chasm, two folds of ragged flesh lying open on either side of it like the pages of a book no one would ever care to read. Catching the hook under one of the armpits, he pulled the fleshy mass toward him, taking care to turn away when he needed to take a breath. What kind of accident could have caused that wound?

Using one of the rags in the bottom of the boat to cover his hand, he took hold of an arm slippery with corruption and pulled the corpse most of the way up the side of the boat before thinking better of it and letting it drop back into the water. There was no way he was going to have that thing on board. Instead he took one of the lengths of rope and looped it around a wrist before securing the other end to the stern.

Perhaps she had come into contact with a ship’s paddle wheel or one of the new-fangled screws? They’d make a mess of you all

right. At times you could barely move out on the water, what with so much traffic plying its way backward and forward from the pool of London.

He had tried not to look too hard but now, with her so close, he couldn't help himself. There was enough of the face left to tell it was a woman and that that was no accidental injury. She'd been carved, deliberately cut open – slit from stem to stern. He'd seen murder before but nothing this bad.

Peering closer, he saw something dark glistening inside, something stirring in the cavity of her chest. Whatever it was began to thrash, sending out spurts of water. Then it sprang forth, uncoiling its sleek black body and launching itself at the waterman. He let out a yell and fell backwards, landing in the bottom of the boat alongside the dreadful thrashing form of the eel. Recovering himself, he tried to get a hold of the writhing creature, but it slipped away and wriggled between the objects in the hull. Eventually he managed to trap it in a shirt and, after wrapping it as best he could, he threw the garment and the eel as far away from the boat as possible. Within an instant the shirt had disappeared beneath the surface as the beast thrashed its way downward, for a while the best-dressed fish in the river.

Returning his attentions to the corpse, he checked his knots and, not being able to resist one last look, ascertained that there had been space for the eel in the poor woman's chest because her organs – heart, lungs, everything – were missing. Surely to God the eel hadn't eaten them? He thought he was going to be sick.

Pulling himself together he took a seat and, after pushing away, replaced the oars in their locks. Although the yard was close he thought it better to land his gruesome catch on a quieter part of the shore and so he headed downriver awhile, the body bobbing along behind. As he sat with his face to the stern he had no option but to watch as the pale form of the woman dipped beneath the water with each stroke, only to resurface a moment later. At times the free arm flexed and it looked as though she were swimming, trying to catch up with the boat.

He rowed faster.

I

Hard used, the cadaver was reduced to little more than a tattered shell and would last no longer than one more dissection. Apart from the brain, which I would remove tomorrow, all of the internal organs had been decanted into buckets sitting on the sawdust-covered floor. In one of them was the heart, along with the liver, kidneys and lungs, while in the other coiled entrails glistened like so many freshly caught fish.

William fetched a bowl of warm water and took away the buckets while I washed the gore from my hands. The boisterous press of students had departed with its usual rapidity, and believing myself to be alone, it came as a surprise to hear a bench creak as a weight shifted upon it. I looked up to catch sight of someone moving in the gloom of the gallery. Reaching the aisle, he walked down the steps toward me – a short man, shoulders hunched beneath a head perhaps too heavy for them to bear.

He stepped into the winter sunlight shafting down through the skylight. His face was round and pale, with eyes set back in caves of tired flesh. Whiskered jowls sank below the rim of his collar and only the well-defined lines of his lips, which were clamped tightly around the stub of a cigar, suggested good looks only recently worn away. His clothes were well cut but crumpled, as though he had given up taking care of his appearance. He stopped beside the operating table and looked for some moments into the yellow face

of the cadaver. This man was clearly no medical student, but nonetheless there was something familiar about him.

‘It comes to us all,’ I said, wiping my instruments clean before packing them away. The stranger continued to study the cadaver, his eyes travelling down the length of the gaping torso.

‘Death perhaps, but surely not this,’ he said, without removing the cigar from his mouth nor his gaze from the corpse.

‘I think you can rest assured of that, sir. This poor soul came from the workhouse, but may as well have come from a prison.’

He looked at me and pulled out the cigar. ‘So he wasn’t robbed from his grave then? I thought that was how you fellows got hold of your bodies.’

This made me smile. ‘You have been reading too many Penny-bloods, my friend. That sordid trade came to a stop over twenty years ago, with the passing of the Anatomy Act. Now we get our subjects legally from the hospitals and the poorhouses – generally from among those who can’t afford funerals. There is no shortage of them, I’m afraid.’

I took off my surgeon’s coat and hung it on a peg before trying to extract an introduction from him. ‘I don’t recall seeing you here before. You’re not one of my students, are you?’

The cigar had long before burnt out and he looked for a suitable receptacle in which to deposit the well-chewed stump. For a moment I feared the open trough of the cadaver’s torso had been selected, but to my relief he elected to drop it into the pocket of his frock coat.

‘Oh no,’ he replied, eyes still fixed on the corpse. ‘I think I’m a little long in the tooth to be taking up a new profession. I’ve only just mastered my own and think I’ll stick with it, if you don’t mind.’ Looking up, he held out his hand. ‘Dr Phillips, let me introduce myself. Brunel’s the name.’

‘Isambard Kingdom Brunel?’ I asked, now realizing why he appeared familiar to me. The man and his engineering exploits were well known, and his portrait often accompanied articles dedicated to one or other of his creations.

His handshake displayed a strength belied by his rather unhealthy appearance. He looked back at the cadaver. ‘Yes. The engineer.’

‘The whole of London is talking about your ship. When will she be launched?’

‘I would rather not discuss her at the moment, if you don’t mind, sir,’ he snapped. ‘That ship has become the bane of my life.’

His sharp response should perhaps have come as no surprise, as barely a week of 1857 had gone by without the newspapers revelling in the difficulties related to the ship’s construction, and now that she was finally ready to be launched they took pleasure in predicting that Brunel would never get her into the water. She was, after all, by far the largest ship ever built.

A change of tack was required. ‘What brings you to St Thomas’s, sir? I am not accustomed to men of such reputation as yourself sitting in on my lectures.’

Brunel’s expression warmed a little. ‘My apologies for being brusque with you, doctor. The past few months have been a very stressful time. And as for my presence here, they say you are one of the finest surgeons in London. I hope it was not improper of me to invite myself along?’

‘You flatter me, sir, but no, not at all, I am delighted you found my little performance worth your time.’

He didn’t seem to be listening, for the cadaver had once again captured his attention, and so I called for William to remove the cause of his distraction.

‘I have been around machines for far too long, doctor,’ he said with a touch of regret. ‘I have devoted my entire life to things mechanical. I thought it was time to learn something about the machine that I am. I hope to god, though, when the boilers go out they don’t break me down for scrap, not like that poor wretch.’

There was a loud crash as William slammed the trolley into the side of the door. I suspected he had been drinking spirits in the storeroom again.

‘William, be careful!’ I shouted, not wishing to cause my visitor any more upset over the treatment of the cadaver. As a matter of course I wouldn’t give two hoots. The dead are dead and that’s it. They don’t care if you put them in a hole, chop them up or feed them to a fire. At St Thomas’s, however, the corpse was never left

to such a wasteful end. After they had been worked to the bone William would take what remained down into the cellar and boil them up a vat, removing any last remnants of flesh. The bones were then taken to the articulator, who, after purchasing them for a small fee, which William was always careful to share with me, wired them back together and sold the skeletons on to students as anatomical specimens.

I went to put on my overcoat while Brunel pulled on a strap drawn tightly across his chest to reveal a leather satchel from behind his back. Unshackling a buckle he exposed the tips of a dozen or so fresh smokes sitting side by side in what had to be the biggest cigar case I had ever seen; Brunel was clearly a man who didn't do things by halves. He pulled one out and rolled it gently between his lips, moistening the end before biting it off and spitting it on to the floor. As he played a match over the rolled leaf it gave off thick clouds of smoke and a pungent aroma which even the sickly haze of preserving spirit could not mask. One puff was enough to improve Brunel's humour.

'That was the third of your lectures I have attended, doctor. I have found them fascinating, most fascinating. But one thing has been puzzling me. I have been addressing you as doctor, just as I have heard others call you, but is it not usually the case that you surgeons refer to yourselves as mister?'

'Well spotted, sir. There has long been a fashion for surgeons to be misters rather than doctors; it goes back to our medieval origins as barbers, when razors were used to cut more than beards. But in addition to my training to be a surgeon I also earned a doctorate in philosophy for my research, so people tend to use my academic title. Anyway, my patients seem happier believing they are being treated by a doctor rather than a plain old mister.'

Brunel smiled. 'Research, eh? Well, *doctor*, that brings me to my next enquiry. I was hoping that you and I could talk further on aspects of an anatomical nature.'

The prospect was an intriguing one, but this was not a good time. 'Sir, it would be a pleasure to talk further with you and share whatever knowledge I have, but I am afraid I have commitments in the hospital for the rest of the day.'

Brunel walked back to the bench on which he had been seated and picked up a tall stove-pipe hat. Pressing it on to his head, and in so doing adding at least a foot and half to his height, he turned back to me. 'No matter. I have an appointment with a pack of scoundrels at the docks anyway. Perhaps I could call on you at a time more convenient to both of us?'

'Very well,' I replied, pushing my hand free of my coatsleeve just in time to shake his once again.

With that he was gone, leaving behind him a cloud of cigar smoke which had still to disperse by the time I made my own departure several minutes later.

There is always something special about making the first incision in a fresh cadaver, breaking the skin which, until my intervention, has served to hold inside the wonderful mechanism which is man. But today William seemed set on taking the shine off the occasion.

'That may be the last for a while, sir,' he said, mournfully surveying the corpse he had just delivered to the table.

'What do you mean, the last? You sound like a butcher running short of birds at Christmas.'

'There may be one or two, but it's the typhus – the city fathers 'ave suspended all supplies until it passes. They're burnin' the stiffs – I mean corpses – that would normally be comin' our way.'

Of course I was aware of the outbreak, but I had not yet considered it a threat to our supply of cadavers. Under normal conditions the hospital created not far off enough corpses to feed its own teaching needs and, as I had explained to Brunel, any shortfall was made up by sources such as the workhouses and jails, but an outbreak of typhus or cholera anywhere in the city meant that all fresh corpses were buried in quicklime or burned on communal pyres.

'Then we will have to hope for a swift end to the outbreak, won't we?'

William seemed doubtful. 'My sister says she's thinkin' of movin' back to the country.'

'I can't blame her, William. What do we expect when the Thames

itself is nothing but an open sewer? From what I hear, though, the source is Newgate Prison, and not for the first time.' It was well known that the inmates were kept in such dreadfully cramped conditions that any contagion spread like wildfire and inevitably escaped into the wider population.

'Give me an escaped murderer over pestilence any day of the week,' commented William.

'We must be extra vigilant. Break out the brushes and keep scrubbing. Just how bad is the situation?'

'Pretty grim, I think. Twenty or so dead. But no sign yet on our own doorstep.'

'No, William, not the typhus, the cadavers. How many do we have left?'

'Oh, can't tell you that just now. I need to do a stocktake.'

I looked at my watch. 'Well, there's no time like the present. We still have half an hour before the students arrive. Let's go down to the cellar.'

William was apt to preside over the cellar like some goblin prince of the underworld, and he was initially a little put out by my insisting for the first time that I accompany him into its depths.

'You need to be careful,' he warned. 'It can get a little close down 'ere, what with the fumes an' all.'

In the low, vaulted chamber, the walls of which were slicked with moisture, the light was poor, what illumination there was provided by a series of vents which opened out at street level; and the footsteps of pedestrians could be heard as they passed by on the pavement – they would quicken their pace if they had any inkling of the use to which the space beneath their feet were being put.

In one corner of the brick-floored room was a large iron cauldron perched upon an inert hearth with a flue above it. It was here that William boiled down the remains of cadavers once I had no further use for them in the theatre, removing all trace of flesh and leaving nothing but the bones. In the centre of the room was a huge wooden vat, its barrel-like staves bound tightly by iron hoops and surrounded on the outside by a timber walkway at the top of a

short flight of steps. William took a long pole with a hook on the end from a rack on the wall and, once on the walkway, began to stir the dark fluid within.

'Here, give me that,' I said, eager to assess the situation for myself, but before I could take a hold of the thing the vinegar-like bite of the preserving spirit threatened to knock me off my feet and I let out a choking sound.

'You may want to tie your 'ankerchief round yer mouth, doc. Like I said, it's pretty strong stuff at this volume, and you don't want to be fallin' in there.'

I did as he suggested. 'Doesn't it get to you?'

'Not any more, sir. Guess I've been pickling myself from the inside for long enough not to be fussed.'

I laughed, only to start coughing again.

'Steady, sir. Sure you don't want me to do that?'

I shook my head and swept the pole through the fluid. It continued unhindered from one side of the vat to the other. Drawing out the hook, I changed position on the walkway before trying again. This time its passage was obstructed, and with a firmer hold on the shaft I pulled the hook toward me. First an outstretched arm and then the head and torso of a cadaver broke the surface. It was a male of indeterminate age and, like a friend of William's, his mouth was set open as though to drink in the liquid in which he floated. Pulling the corpse to the side of the vat before allowing it to sink again, I moved once more and made another sweep. Nothing.

'You were right, William. This soup is thin, far too thin.'

Our faces shrank and then expanded in the surfaces of the large glass jars lining the shelves. Suspended in the clear preserving fluid were the various members of the anatomy collection; body parts now become artefacts in this museum of life made possible only through death. There were organs, limbs, almost-entire bodies, some normal, some displaying disease, others deformed. Flesh was discoloured in preservation, everything appeared strangely unreal in this freak-show cum hall of mirrors I knew as a workplace.

Brunel peered into the jars. Moving from one to the next, he stared, fascinated. I pulled one down and placed it on the table. A heart bobbed in the unsettled fluid. We had talked for most of the afternoon, and it was by now very clear that his interest in human anatomy centred around this organ in particular. He rested a finger against the glass as the liquid stilled. The heart turned gently before coming to rest. I pointed to the various parts, rotating the jar on the table as I spoke their names and explained their various functions.

I had not proceeded far when William returned from the preparation room to inform me that my instructions had been carried out. I told him to bring the subject to us and returned to my tutorial, explaining to Brunel the role of the severed vessels protruding from the organ. My guest stifled a query as William appeared again, this time carrying a wooden board with a freshly removed heart perched upon it. He put the board on the table next to the jar and returned to his duties.

I pushed the heart, which just happened to be our last fresh specimen, around the board with the blade of a scalpel. This allowed me to clarify points of detail which may have been less than clear due to the incarceration of the previous example. After pointing out the pulmonary veins, the aorta and vena cava, I turned the heart and moved on to the ventricle and the heart bulb. Brunel asked one question after another, his incisive comments and queries forcing me to dust off an expertise which had lain almost dormant since completing a programme of detailed research some years before. It felt good to be stretched, so much so that I determined to spice up the perhaps rather stale heart and lungs lecture I regularly gave to my own students. But before then, of course, I would need to acquire fresh specimens and in the midst of the current typhus epidemic that was not going to be easy.

Once the discussion of the heart's outer appearance had been concluded to Brunel's apparent satisfaction, I began to dissect, bringing the blade down on the surface at a point just to the front of the vena cava superior. For an instant the muscle refused to give, the resilient tissue springing under the blade. Then it went, and

with a snap the scalpel began its work, dividing the sinews and cleaving its way through the outer wall of the heart. I cut down and back, opening a deep incision across the ventricular and auricular margins. Rotating the heart, I continued round with a sawing motion, parting the edges with my fingers. Then it was done, and the organ fell apart, separated into two slightly unequal parts.

With the internal parts exposed we studied the chambers, the walls and the entrances and exits through which the blood passed. In order to assist my demonstration I poked a brush bristle through one opening and indicated to my student where it would reappear in another. I explained that the right side, with auricle to the top and ventricle below, was the venous side, where dark blood drained of its life-giving properties arrives first, from the upper part of the body via the vena cava superior and from the lower via the minor, into the auricle and then the ventricle, after circulating around the body. From there, I went on, it is fed through the pulmonary artery into the lungs. After being arterialized the refreshed blood then returns to the left side of the heart via the pulmonary veins, pumping into the left auricle before being drawn into the attendant left ventricle. Leaving the heart through the aorta, the blood is then recirculated into the body through the arteries.

Brunel seemed intent on fully understanding the theory of the pumping action. He was fascinated by the tricuspid and coronary valves and the position of muscle walls at various points in the process being of special interest to him. All the while he made sketches in a notebook, furiously scribbling with the stub of a well-worn pencil.

Aware of time drawing on, I took an ostentatious look at my watch. But Brunel was not a man to take a hint. Question followed question until at last I had to be rather abrupt and insist that we brought the session to an end as I was by now late for my rounds. He at last demurred but asked if he could stay behind for a while and take some measurements. I left him working under the blind gaze of a pair of eyes as they floated, one above the other, in a jar beside the door. In life they had been a startling blue but now they were a dull grey.

Now, rushing from bed to bed, I tried to concentrate on the task in hand but my thoughts constantly returned to the engineer and the ease with which he had grasped details I had always considered the domain of my own profession.

Upon returning to the collection room in the late evening, the heart was still on the table and it was obvious that Brunel had made several further incisions. Next to it lay an unsmoked cigar and a note scribbled on a page torn from his notebook:

Dr Phillips,

The day has proven most informative. My thanks to you for your kind indulgence of an engineer's whims. Another engineer, by the name of Leonard da Vinci, once wrote: 'How could you describe the heart in words without filling a book?' Such is your eloquence on the matter that I believe you could. I look forward to renewing our association in the near future.

I. K. Brunel