

Rose and Crown

by Alex Wheatle



Kingston Square, sometime in the Victorian age.

‘Thomas Crown! You’d better not be in bed. Where are you? A gentleman has just arrived and his horses need stabling.’

Standing outside her Seven Kings and Ham Inn, the horses shifted uneasily causing the mud to splash Rose’s dress. ‘Oh, bloody hell!’ Rose swore. ‘I just washed this. Thomas Crown! Get down here!’

Rose accepted the gentleman’s luggage and beckoned him inside. ‘What name will it be, sir?’

‘Charles, Charles Dickens.’

‘And what do you do, Mr Charles, sir.’

‘Oh, I dabble in a bit of writing.’

‘Writing? I don’t think we’ve ever had a man of letters before. Welcome to my humble abode, Mr Charles, sir. How long will you be staying?’

‘Just the one night, maybe two.’

Thomas! Sorry, Mr Charles, sir. My husband’s a bit hard of hearing sometimes.

Thomas!

She led him through the front door and into a small reception room that had a counter on the left hand side for serving ales and food. The kitchen was through another doorway. Thick beams lined the uneven ceiling. Barrels were stacked



against the far wall. A wood fire glowed in a corner. Waxing candles sat on wonky tables that were circled by three-legged stools. The windows were thick with grime.

'Thomas! I could do with another pair of hands!'

Climbing the naked, creaking staircase, Rose glanced over her left shoulder. 'I'll give you the best room in the house, Mr Charles, sir. It overlooks the market square and you can see all the wares and entertainment on a Saturday morning.'

'That's most kind of you, madam. How shall I address you?'

'That's lovely of you to ask, Mr Dickens, sir. Call me Rose.'

Offering Mr Dickens a key, she marched along to the end of the hallway and entered her own bedroom. She found Thomas sprawled on the bed. Drool leaked from his mouth. 'Get up! Get up! We have a gentleman guest! He's a man of letters so at least he'll know how much we're going to charge him. His horses need stabling and his carriage needs cleaning.'

Thomas rolled on to his back. The daylight caused him to squint. 'Can't you do it, Rose? I'm a bit indisposed.'

'Indisposed! You're indisposed! I was up with the larks this morning making Mr Grimmthorpe's breakfast. He wanted an early start with a side of ham. I had to wash the linen, sweep out the rooms, scrub out the back, fetch the milk...'

Thomas covered his ears. Rose continued. '...get some eggs in, barter for a side of ham, wash the jars, wipe the tables...'



'Will you shut up, Rose! It's Friday. I have half day off on Friday's.'

'You had the evening off yesterday,' Rose countered. 'Don't you think I saw you creeping off in the middle of the night to the Sledge and Muck?'

'I work hard all week,' Thomas protested. 'Am I not entitled to a few jugs of ale and join in a sing-song?'

'Not if you're buying ale from someone else! Now get down stairs and stable those horses and clean Mr Charles' coach! You know I don't like touching horses. And if they poop on my sidepath, *you* can clean it up!'

'Nag, nag, nag! That's all I get with you, Rose. I'll find more peace in Bridewell prison.'

'Then be my guest and find a room there! I don't know what they'll make of you there. You're about as much use to me as a stocking made of wet mud!'

Thomas wiped his face, picked out the matter from his eyes and slowly got up to his feet. Before he went downstairs, he offered Rose an evil glare.

'If you wanna be fed tonight, don't look at me like that, Thomas Crown,' Rose barked.

Sixteen hours later, Rose was preparing a dinner of goose, carrots and potatoes for Mr Dickens and three other guests. Thomas had cleaned the stables and groomed



the horses but he was nowhere to be found.

'That bloody husband of mine!' Rose cursed. 'Always leaving me to cook on my own. I bet he's down the Sledge and Muck.'

A loud knock on the door interrupted her daydream of her husband suffering a most painful death. She opened the door to reveal a fat gentleman sporting a black bowler hat, a blue waistcoat, a skinny tie and carrying a cane.

'Mr Fullgrout,' Rose greeted. 'Shouldn't you be busy sending rogues, thieves and the ungodly to Bridewell prison? What brings you to my humble abode?'

'I'm afraid a complaint has been made, Mrs Crown.'

'A complaint?' Rose repeated. 'By the Lord, who?'

'By your husband, Mr Crown.'

'You jest with me, Mr Fullgrout.'

'Madam Crown! I would not waste time walking from my office through mud and sledge to arrive here in jest!'

'What is Thomas's complaint? The horses pooped on his breeches?'

Mr Fullgrout held the lapels of his jacket with his thumbs and forefingers. A window was opened above. Mr Dickens looked out of it.

'Of never-ending and most highly unpleasant nagging, Mrs Crown,' Mr Fullgrout finally replied. 'And I'm sure that you're aware of the punishment.'



Rose shook her head. 'I am aware that the law of this town is an *ass!* A gigantic *ass!* But Thomas would never complain about me.'

'I'm afraid he did, Madam Crown. Do you accept the customary punishment or would you rather spend a night or three in Bridewell prison? You may know that the rats, spiders and cockroaches that make their home there are *not* friendly.'

The next morning, Rose was led by Mr Fullgrout and two of his assistants to a nearby waterway where she was strapped into a ducking stool. Buyers and sellers of the market followed the procession. They jostled for a good vantage point. Some took to the rooftops. The rope was tied tight about Rose's wrists and waist. The dominantly male crowd whooped, laughed and hollered. The water was thick with flotsam, sewage and spoiled food that even the vagrants rejected. Rose closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. She could do nothing about the vile stench that attacked her nostrils. She promised herself not to scream.

The moment came.

She was suddenly dropped into the filthy pool. There she remained for two seconds before she was hoisted up again. The mob cheered and tossed their hats into the air. Rose tried her best to clear her eyes. She coughed, retched and spluttered.

Nightfall came but there was no sign of Thomas Crown. Rose sat in the kitchen.



Her clothes drying on a wooden frame set around the fire. She whispered dark thoughts under her breath.

The back door opened and closed again. Rose looked up. She recognised her husband's footsteps. He entered the kitchen carrying a bag.

'You've got a nerve, Thomas Crown!' Rose roared. 'There's no bed for you tonight! You can sleep with the worms and beetles! Get out of here!'

'I'm sorry, Rose,' Thomas apologised. 'So sorry. I was stupid. I didn't think Mr Fullgrout would go through with it. I swear!'

'Did you watch?' Rose wanted to know. 'Tell me, Thomas Crown. Did you watch the whole town laughing as I was dunked into that mucky pool? Did you? For the life of me I still can't get the smell out of my clothes.'

Thomas sat down at the kitchen table. 'Of course not, my dear. I was drunk when I made the complaint to Mr Fullgrout. I didn't think he'd go through with it.'

'You didn't think that he'd go through with it! Mr Fullgrout hates women! He committed his own mother to an asylum! He sent his own sister to Bridewell prison because she couldn't pay a debt.'

'I've...I've got something for you, Rose,' Thomas said. 'My way of saying sorry.'

Rose folded her arms and side-eyed her husband. 'What's that then? An iron chain and collar so I can drag you around Market Square?'



'No, my dear.' Thomas pulled out three fishes from his bag. 'Pikes! For tomorrow's lunch. I'm sure Mr Dickens and the other guests will enjoy this with bread.'

'And where did you get the money to buy those?' Rose wanted to know.

Thomas didn't reply. Instead, he gazed into the fire.

Rose smiled. 'You're right, Thomas. I'm sure our guests will love a fish lunch. I'll prepare it tonight.'

'Does that mean that I'm forgiven?' Thomas asked.

Rose thought about it. She remembered the taste of the soiled water filling her mouth and nostrils. She recalled the slime curling around her shoulders. 'You're forgiven,' she said. 'But if you complain about me again, you'll be sleeping with the rabbits and their droppings.'

The next day Thomas enjoyed a short nap following a fine lunch of pike, bread and carrots. He had chased that down with a generous jug of ale. He hadn't seen Rose since she served him his meal so he got up to find her. 'Rose? Where are you, Rose? They've got a fiddler performing at the Sledge and Muck tonight. Are you going to escort me, Rose? Where are you?'

Thomas searched the kitchen, the dining room and the stables but couldn't find her. He served himself another half jug of ale when he heard the front door creak open. He hid his jar under the counter. Rose entered with Mr Fullgrout.



'Rose?' Thomas asked. 'Why are you with Mr Fullgrout?'

Before Thomas could answer, Mr Fullgrout approached Thomas with his hands behind his back and regarded him like a gust of foul air. 'I've soiled my boots to arrive here on a matter of *theft*, Mr Crown.'

'Theft, Mr Fullgrout? I don't know anything about any theft.'

'A *liar* as well as a thief!' Mr Fullgrout raised his voice. 'We have the evidence.'

Thomas shook his head. 'What evidence, Mr Fullgrout? There's no thievery occurring underneath this roof.'

From behind her back, Rose presented the fish bones to her husband. She couldn't resist a grin.

'Three pikes went missing from Mr Cornbuckon's fishery yesterday,' Mr Fullgrout revealed. 'If my nose is a reliable guide, your *wife* is holding up the very bones of those missing fish.'

Thomas gazed at Rose with disbelief. He shook his head once more.

'You know the customary punishment, Mr Crown,' Mr Fullgrout said with no little amount of pleasure. 'Or, you can spend the week in Bridewell prison. As you know the rats, skunks and badgers are not too friendly there. Your choice?'

Thomas swapped fierce glances with Rose before answering the magistrate. 'I'll take the customary punishment.'



The next Saturday morning, Thomas's head, hands and feet were placed into wooden stocks in the market square by Mr Fullgrouts's assistants. Spoiled tomatoes in hand, Rose fronted the baying mob of mostly womenfolk. Again, spectators sat atop buildings and hung from chimneys for a better view. Mr Fullgrout raised his right arm. 'For the unspeakably foul and devilish crime of pilfering fish! Not one, not two but *three*. I sentence you for a pelting at leisure by the good people of Kingston!'

Rose was the first to launch her missile. It struck Thomas flush on his right cheek. All manner of rotten fruit and vegetables splat Thomas' face. The crowd roared and chuckled in delight.

A window opened on the first floor of the Seven Kings and Ham Inn. Mr Dickens surveyed the wild and boisterous scenes below him. He smiled as he wrote something in his notebook.