

# The Arrow Chest

A Victorian Mystery



ROBERT STEPHEN PARRY

*to Ruby*

eBook based on the paperback ISBN-13: 978-1499366013

First published 2011

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*Also by the same author:*

'The Testament of Sophie Dawes' 2016

'The Hours Before' 2015

'Elizabeth' 2014

'Wildish' 2013

'Virgin and the Crab' 2009

*Cover illustration: 'Daphne' by Amos Roselli*

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## *Prologue*

*I know only this, that our earliest love is an experience that must shape us in a way that is quite unique. It has become clear to me now, that in my blind ambition and greed I have made a terrible mistake. I should be the most happy of creatures, and yet have become the most wretched - the key to my heart, the means to my salvation, clasped within the hand of a tyrant. I have done everything possible, tried so hard not to love you, but have failed. It is useless pretending otherwise. And now I must face the consequences. I know now that I shall love you, and only you for the rest of my life and neither age, nor time nor the vagaries of fortune shall make wanton with my determination never to forget you.'*

From an inscription written in the margins of a book of verse, once owned by Lady Bowlend, and in response to which, over a number of years, the painter Amos Roselli, compiled the following extravagant and implausible story:

## *Chapter One -Tower Green, London, 1876*

**M**<sup>r</sup> Roselli?’

The lantern held aloft with its meagre glow hardly cuts the fog that makes it seem like night upon the river, as along the cobbled pavements of the Inner Ward the gentleman approaches. He is dressed formally in top hat and tailcoat. ‘So good of you to come,’ he adds.

‘You must be Doctor Murry?’ Amos responds by way of greeting, aware that his voice is trembling. Will he really be able to go through with this?

‘Correct,’ the older man states in a crisp, officious tone and, after the briefest of handshakes, turns to lead his guest along the narrow lane of flint and limestone walls towards the hallowed building - merely glancing back over his shoulder from time to time as he goes and adding, with the typical black humour of the medical profession, ‘A rather special lady awaits you, if you care to step this way.’

‘Indeed, if what you suggested in your letter can be verified,’ Amos begins again.

‘Oh, it’s her all right,’ Doctor Murry interrupts, still walking with brisk and echoing steps towards the Chapel doorway. ‘The wood of the arrow chest that served as the coffin has long since decayed, of course, but the skeleton remains - or most of it.’

‘Most of it?’

‘The skull is separated by some distance and rather fragmented, as you will see, though I have distinguished it from the others.’

‘The others?’

‘Oh, yes - the workmen have unearthed dozens of them. All victims of summary justice in former times.’

With his large leather portfolio containing his sketchpad and artist’s materials clutched to his side, Amos Roselli turns up the collar of his topcoat, not entirely sure whether it is the

cold or his own inner chill of terror that urges him to do so. He has been the recipient of some bizarre commissions in his time - but never anything quite like this.

The Chapel of Saint Peter ad Vincula with its great Tudor windows that seem to occupy almost every available inch of its south-facing wall is familiar to him as a tourist visiting the Tower, though he has never ventured inside until now as, together, the two men enter through its surprisingly small doorway - the all-invasive, penetrating fog of the city seeming to accompany them. Here inside, all is silent, pungent with incense and the smell of mould and damp - but also with the distinct, musty odour of freshly dug earth.

'I did consider asking you to bring along one of those newfangled *camera* things,' Doctor Murry says, availing himself of a pair of pince-nez spectacles and fixing them to the bridge of his nose with a nervous little wriggling movement, 'but given the brief time available I concluded that a good artist's eye, pencil and paper would prove to be the most practical. Would you agree? The light is very poor. Not easy to find your way in, let alone get around.'

'To be entirely truthful with you, Doctor Murry, I think at this moment I am more concerned with being able to find my way *out*, if need be,' Amos states, setting aside his top hat and feeling that the scarlet of his own cravat might be the only remaining trace of colour left in the entire world - and even that becoming drained of its pigmentation in the all-pervasive gloom. He is aware of an echo to his own voice in the empty building.

'Over here you will discover the positioning of the bones, and their condition,' the doctor continues, and not responding much to the younger man's attempt at levity as he hands him the lantern and with steadying hand motions him towards an area close to the aisle of the chapel where all across the floor leading up and into the chancel a considerable number of ancient flagstones have been lifted to reveal the yellowish-brown London clay beneath. It is clearly an extensive and major renovation of the entire chapel that is being undertaken. All the wooden pews that would normally have been ranged in the centre of the nave have been stacked against the north wall,

leaving just one abandoned haphazardly in the centre for use by the workmen, and upon which the Doctor himself takes a seat as Amos, lantern in hand, crouches above the bare earth at the foot of the chancel and looks down.

'You will notice some decayed fragments of elm wood interspersed with the bones,' the doctor continues pointing in the general direction with his cane. 'As you can see, the skeleton is perfectly consolidated and symmetrical, well formed. The bones of the skull would indicate a well-proportioned oval face, a high intellectual forehead - oh yes, and a large orbital ridge and socket. She would have had large eyes, probably quite remarkable eyes. Well shaped hands and feet, too, with long, tapering fingers. A fine young woman.'

'Any evidence of that notorious sixth finger?' Amos inquires, still holding the lantern over the earth and its scattering of white bones.

'Ha! Ruddy nonsense. Do you imagine for one moment that Henry the Eighth would have settled for a wife with six fingers? Propaganda, my boy - spread by her enemies, of which the unfortunate Boleyn woman had quite a few.'

'Really? I don't know an awful lot about it, to be perfectly honest.'

'No matter. All we require from you, young man, is a record of the find,' the doctor states while getting to his feet to fetch some candles from the altar, and which he brings over to assist in the task. 'The workmen insist that all these *rotten old bones*, as they call them, must be moved away by tomorrow and placed somewhere else. A few sketches will have to suffice. And now, alas, I must be off to meet the wife. A social engagement at the Mercer's Hall, you understand ...'

'What, you don't mean you're going to leave me here - alone?' Amos demands feeling a sense of panic.

'Why you're not afraid of the dead are you, m'boy?' the distinguished doctor teases him. 'Tell you what, I'll ask one of the Yeoman Warders if he might come over to keep you company. How's that?'

'That would be most welcome,' Amos responds. 'And another lantern would also be useful, if he could bring one.'

The doctor nods his understanding - for the already

gloomy afternoon is fast turning to the early dusk of an autumnal evening.

Once alone, Amos unpacks the contents of the slim leather case containing the tools of his trade, including sketchpad, pencils and a small canvas campstool with metal frame, which he unfurls and sets down by the exposed soil. Then with the large pad of cartridge paper perched on his knee, he sets to work with a fine pencil - drawing and recording as intricately as he can in the poor light the remarkable discoveries that have been unearthed just these last few days. According to the newspapers, the bodies of three females have been found in this particular area, two belonging to young women whose ages were under twenty years and therefore, in the view of the historians, most likely those of Katherine Howard and Lady Jane Grey. The body that has commanded the most interest, however, is undoubtedly this one: the three-hundred year-old skeleton of an older woman, probably in her early thirties, and almost certainly, therefore, that of the second and by far the most notorious and maligned of all of Henry the Eighth unfortunate wives: Anne Boleyn.

Staring down at the eerie collection of scattered remains, he tries to imagine the person they would have once belonged to. The famous painting in the National Portrait Gallery is familiar, of course. As a student visiting he had looked upon it many times in passing - and had even been fortunate enough to have seen the magnificent Holbein sketch purported to be the only genuine likeness made of her in her lifetime. A longish face, the high forehead framed by the dark hair, and those large black eyes with the slightly amused, slightly mocking look, shrewd, educated - and in truth probably far too clever for her own good in an age where women were not supposed to be too clever at anything at all. Yet, surely no one deserved a fate such as hers! With a macabre interest he searches for the vertebrae of the neck. But these are hard to detect. Only the rib cage, thoracic spine and scapulae are obvious - and then, some distance away, the skull bones. How many pieces would it be in now, that poor neck, he wonders, becoming lost in concentration?

Just then, however, his attentions are diverted. Footsteps



are heard outside, approaching - marching towards the Chapel in heavy boots, and leading Amos to the happy conclusion that this would surely be the Yeoman Warder sent to keep him company. Thank God! And yet he seems to be taking an inordinate length of time to arrive. The loud, robust footsteps approach, then stop, then come on a bit more, only to pause again, shuffling about: and still always remaining outside.

'What the hell is going on out there?' Amos mutters to himself as, unable to contain his curiosity a moment longer, and with sketchpad under-arm, he gets to his feet and walks to the doorway.

Indeed, a Yeoman Warder in his dark blue uniform with its distinctive scarlet trimmings is there outside, a lantern that he has brought with him set down on the ground at his feet. He is not exactly on guard, however, but is instead leaning up against the wall and smoking a pipe - an object that he deftly and swiftly conceals with an artful swivel of the palm the moment he catches sight of Amos at the door, his other hand waving away any traces of smoke - an instinctive movement of one skilled in hiding his little vices from public view, Amos reflects, as he shares a smile with the good gentleman and thereby disarms the situation somewhat.

'Don't worry, your secret is safe with me,' Amos jests. 'But please do come in, sir. Anyone with the breath of the living would be most agreeable companionship in this place.'

And so it is, with a slightly awkward grin and a nod of gratitude, that the old fellow - and whose name, Amos learns, is Ted - removes his characteristic narrow-brimmed hat and steps inside. More lanterns are discovered and lit, and soon Amos has taken up his pencil and pad again and returned to his bones, much more clearly visible now with the additional light, while Ted himself takes a seat on the solitary pew nearby - though he will not smoke his pipe he states with firm resolve, a mark of respect - since the Chapel has always been, and still remains, a place of worship for all the inhabitants of the Tower, himself included.

'Can't be sure if these are the neck bones,' Amos remarks at one stage, inviting the gentleman to come over and glance down - though this is accomplished merely with a bemused

shrug of the shoulders before returning to his seat, for he is clearly no anatomist, either.

'I suppose the axe would have crushed them at the moment of her execution,' Amos continues, speaking almost to himself.

'Oh, there was no axe, sir,' the Yeoman Warder states quite categorically, confident within himself. 'Queen Anne was beheaded by a swordsman sent over from France. A special act of mercy from the King.'

'Oh, really? Had she wanted it that way?'

'Oh yes, and the King duly obliged. Very good of him, that, don't you think?'

'Very generous!' Amos observes sharing in the old boy's irony as the latter continues to make himself comfortable on the solitary pew by putting his feet up on a nearby toolbox.

'Bit of an artist are you, sir?' he inquires, somewhat irreverently, Amos thinks.

'Yes, that's right. This is not my usual subject matter, of course. But, to be frank, one simply has to take the work as it comes.'

Amos is aware of the other man's eyes upon him, scrutinising his relatively flamboyant appearance. He would be looking at Amos's long curly hair touching his shoulders, aware of his meticulously trimmed half-beard with its pointed tip, he would have noted his unusually colourful cravat and waistcoat and chequered trousers - all conspiring against him and all serving to advertise his eccentricity - *a bit of an artist*, to be sure, conspicuous in this age of dull uniformity, of almost permanent mourning in sympathy with the widowed Queen. For it was a sad fact that ever since the death of Prince Albert the entire nation has been plunged into a continuous state of grieving. Victoria herself wears nothing but black these days and will probably continue to do so from here until eternity - her preferred jewellery all of *jet* or fine black glass - and to some extent everyone is expected, almost by royal decree, to follow suit.

'Not one of them kids, then, with all the money - what do they call themselves, the Raffle-lights or something?'

'The Pre-Raphaelites, you mean? No. I'm not,

unfortunately numbered among them,' Amos replies with a smile, thinking of the long-disbanded brotherhood and beginning to warm to the old fellow despite his direct manner. 'But I am hoping to become an Academician shortly.'

The old fellow's face is an interesting one, Amos reflects as he pauses in his work and glances over his shoulder at the man, still seated there on the solitary pew behind him - quite an old-fashioned countenance, as well, with his turned-up handlebar moustache and bushy sideburns, and it betrays what is no doubt a genuine sorrow for the disruption to the Chapel and all its noble inhabitants - a fine old fellow, and Amos would far rather be doing a sketch of him this evening than what he has to render at present. Yes, he would be a military man, like all the Beefeaters here, someone of long service, familiar with the Tower, its ways of governance, past and present, and would probably view an intruder such as himself with more than a little suspicion; a rebel of sorts. *A bit of an artist.*

'You are aware of the illustrious lady and her story, I take it?' the Warder inquires, and when Amos replies that no, not really, that he does not know too much about Tudor times at all, the old fellow begins to put him right and to lay open its mysteries.

'One of the worst miscarriages of justice ever to have occurred within these walls,' he begins with a rueful shaking of the head as Amos turns back to his work. 'Oh yes, there were many poor souls dispatched by that cruel tyrant, Henry. Folks say he was a great king. But that's rubbish. At the start he might have been, but power corrupts, see. And Queen Anne - well she was just tossed aside when she couldn't produce the necessary male heir. They accused her of all kinds of things to get rid of her - treason, witchcraft, adultery, even incest with her own brother. Not a shred of evidence for any of it that would stand up in a court of law today - not any that has survived, at any rate. Trumped up charges. Why, they say that King Henry ordered up the executioner to be fetched over from France even before the trial had begun! Disgraceful!'

'How long was she married to the King?' Amos inquires, now genuinely engrossed in his drawing and not bothering

much to turn to the other man any longer - content to let him chunter on and get whatever he wanted to say off his chest. It is strangely comforting, moreover, having that other voice in the room. He wants him to go on talking.

'Married little more than three short years,' he grumbles, 'though Henry was courting her for over twice that length of time, they reckon. But she wasn't interested. She had seen the corrupting ways of court life in France where she had been sent for much of her education, and when she came back as a handsome young woman, studied and clever, her sister had already become the mistress of the King - and that, by all accounts, had shocked and appalled her. Though don't get me wrong, Anne was no candidate for the nunnery. No, she'd have had her sweethearts - several gallant young noblemen there were who vied for her hand, but the King warned them off, see. Thomas Wyatt the poet - he and Anne, they were childhood sweethearts - known each other all their lives. She was his inspiration, they say. But the King soon put a stop to all that. And Henry was not the kind of man you argued with, see. He'd have you pulled to pieces on the rack for your trouble - or hung in chains above the river yonder 'til you rotted. No Anne was in his sights, like a creature hunted with arrows, and there was not much she or anyone else could do to remedy it. Oh, she tried to stay away from court, tried to avoid the king's attentions, but it was of no use. In the end it was all too tempting for the family. Imagine the pride, the advantages, the wealth that a catch like that would bring with it. Anne's fate was sealed.

'She made a brave end, though. One of the shortest and yet most excellent speeches from the scaffold ever made by man or woman, they say. The Frenchman took off her head with a single stroke. And what then? How do you reckon she was treated, her poor body thereafter - the woman for whom a king had once given his blessing to a whole new Faith in our land, a Reformation that defied the Pope himself? Why, they put her in an old arrow chest - that is a large box used for bow staves as well as for arrows - not of great length, though long enough, I suppose, for one who has no head. Meanwhile, the unfortunate head itself, upon which a king of England had

once lavished his kisses, was placed alongside her in the same box. They put it beneath the floor here and forgot about her. Terrible. Though if you reckon that was the end of the matter, or of the lady Anne, you would be mistaken. No, not at all for those of us who have served and worked here over the centuries. Her unquiet spirit has always continued to walk within the Tower precincts and is experienced often by reliable witnesses. Sometimes it's just a sound that you get, a rapping noise, or a cry. Sometimes it's a definite shape that you see, like the figure of a woman - as plain to behold as you are to me sitting there drawing her bones.

'Listen, I'll tell you a story, and it's as true a tale as you'll ever hear. It was not that long ago when one of our number was on sentry duty one evening close to the Queen's Lodgings yonder. It was late, and the place was more or less deserted, apart from him, the guardsman, poor soul - because then out of nowhere she came - softly, an apparition, a kind of white mist, he said - shaped like a woman in an old-fashioned gown and as she came close he could see she was wearing a queer-looking bonnet, too - not like the ladies have these days - and that there was nothing inside the bonnet, either, no face at all.'

Amos feels the hair standing up on the back of his neck as the story is related.

'*Who goes there!*' the old man shouts suddenly very loudly by way of continuation, and at which Amos almost jumps out of his chair. A long, unruly pencil mark shoots up across a good proportion of his paper, prompting him - once his heart has calmed down - to reach for his eraser with a rueful glance back at the Warder who is, nonetheless, smiling broadly at his reaction.

'Who goes there - being the appropriate challenge, you understand, under such circumstances,' he continues. 'But it made no difference. And as the apparition continued towards him he thrust out his bayonet. Straight into it he went - only to have something like a bolt of lightning shoot right through him, to which the fellow passed out on the spot. Well, being slumped up against a wall at any time is no position to be found in when you're supposed to be on guard duty. He was accused of sleeping on the job, see, or worse of being drunk in

charge, a very serious offence - and was only saved from the ultimate punishment of the court-martial by the eyewitness account of another officer who upon hearing the challenge that night had rushed to a window in the Bloody Tower yonder and had seen it all take place. He said that the faceless spectre walked right through the bayonet and that the sentry, poor fellow, then collapsed. It was a terrible shock to this gentleman, by the way - and he never really recovered. Died shortly after from a heart condition.'

'God, that's astonishing, isn't it!' Amos says, shaking his head as if in amazement, though continuing to ensue any lengthy conversation - for he is still hoping to complete his labours here this evening as quickly as possible and return to the normal world.

'A most unfortunate young lady,' the old fellow mutters to himself, sounding almost tearful now, his voice. 'The flower of England, the rose of sweet youth plucked down, plucked down ... ah, yes ...'

Amos works on, but after a few more moments he suddenly realises that it has gone very quiet. He turns once more to search for the old fellow, but he is gone - no longer on the pew - nowhere to be seen. Amos gets to his feet and searches around the nave and aisle, but there is no sign of him. Out for a crafty smoke, eh! Amos concludes ruefully. So he goes to the door to check, but again there is no sign of the old fellow outside either, no smell of tobacco as before - and not a sound in the entire empty precinct apart from the distant noises of the docks along the river and a single, penetrating screech from an owl somewhere over at Tower Hill.

Alone, Amos returns inside to his work, and quickly has the whole drawing finished. With a sense of relief, he packs up his equipment and is almost ready to depart when footsteps are heard approaching the Chapel again - two people this time - and to his surprise in comes Doctor Murry once again, arm-in-arm with an elderly woman in a long overcoat and an elegant wide-brimmed hat sporting ostrich feathers - and whom he introduces as his wife. They have come from the Mercer's Hall on their way home to inspect Amos's handiwork, he says. And, setting his lamp down, he takes up the sketchpad

itself to examine the work more closely. Meanwhile, a little hesitantly, with caution in her high heels and lifting the train of her skirt as she goes, his wife steps over to the exposed earth and looks down, determined to examine the remains for herself - out of a certain macabre curiosity, perhaps. Her perfume brings a welcome fragrance to the background of church incense.

'Fine work, m'boy!' Doctor Murry declares holding the sketchpad at arms length for a moment before handing it back to the artist with a nod of approval. 'I should think you could jolly well go home now, don't you!'

'Indeed, I shall,' Amos laughs. 'And gladly!'

Mrs Murry also comes over to take a look at the drawing herself. With a little glance of admiration in his direction, she, too, seems impressed.

'And you have been here all this time on your own? How awful!' she says with a note of sympathy.

'Oh, no, madam,' Amos responds, 'your husband was kind enough to send one of the warders to keep me entertained? I must say, I'm glad ...'

'Warder? What warder?' the doctor asks, looking puzzled.

'The old fellow - the Beefeater who was here.'

'Oh, there was no one available,' doctor Murry replies. 'Sorry about that, young man. I did make enquiries at the barracks. But, what with the Ceremony of the Keys coming up later, there were only three of them left on duty, they said, and they couldn't spare a soul.'

'But he was here ... for at least an hour, while I worked,' Amos protests, though speaking gently still. 'He sat over there - on this very pew, here, look!'

But the good doctor, glancing unproductively towards the empty bench, merely shrugs his shoulders. It is a mystery - and so all three, Doctor Murry, his wife and Amos, wander out and along to the nearby barracks to make enquiries, to ask among the Warders there whether anybody had, indeed, come over to the Chapel earlier this evening. No, they reply, they have all been here, at their duties the whole time. There has been no one else. Could Amos perhaps describe the man in question? - to which he does, and with the utmost urgency, feeling

suddenly most disturbed. He even does a quick thumbnail sketch on the margin of their duty roster to indicate the gentleman's distinctive appearance.

'He said his name was Ted - about your age, he was - a grey beard - upturned moustache.'

At which the three warders exchange meaningful glances among themselves, and appear to be not at all pleased.

'We - er - do know the gentleman to whom you are referring, one of them states rather awkwardly. 'Ted ... he is sadly no longer with us.'

'But he came in and ...'

'No no, sir, I'm afraid what you are describing is the unfortunate colleague of ours who saw the ghost of Lady Anne Boleyn one evening some years ago. He, it was, who was seen to thrust his bayonet into her apparition and fainted. He passed away quite some time ago.'

End of Sample