



WANTED, AN AUTHOR



24 FEBRUARY 1807

Theodore Swann had frequently been told he defied nature. If he wasn't demonstrating an inexplicable lack of respect and gratitude to his family, or an obstinate inability to honour law, church, or authority, he was indulging in practices with men which were called abominable by, he had to assume, people who hadn't had the pleasure themselves. But never had he defied nature quite so hard as today, because never before had his brain ignored all physical restriction and grown six inches too large for his skull.

It hurt to breathe. It seemed entirely likely that the throbbing of his brain might push his eyeballs out of their sockets, and given they currently felt like eggs on the boil, he wouldn't complain if they went. Worst of all, Martin was snoring, and when the big, deep-chested Martin snored, it shook dust from the rafters. The sound reverberated unpleasantly in Theo's teeth.

In fact, Mr. Theodore Swann had the single worst morning-after head that ever man had endured in the history of the ages, and his only consolation was how much worse the noisy swine next to him was going to feel when he woke up.

Yesterday the House of Commons had carried a motion to abolish the Atlantic slave trade by 283 votes to 16. Theo and Martin had waited in the Yorkshire Stingo public house for the news, along with Martin's housekeeper Peggy, most of his friends, and what seemed like every black Londoner within a mile of Marylebone. Theo had been one of a handful of white faces, outnumbered in this gathering as Martin was every day,

but not made unwelcome for all that. He'd still been very aware of his position as they waited for the vote that would decree whether people like those around him should continue being traded like goods. He didn't think, in a similar situation, he would respond graciously to such a bill's failure.

But it had passed. The news had come, borne by a sweating, gasping runner and greeted with wild cheering. Not from everyone; not from those who felt the ending of an evil was a matter for reflection and mourning the lost rather than for celebration. Theo could understand that sober response, but the celebratory mood had taken hold and within ten minutes sobriety had ceased to be an option. There had been singing of abolitionist anthems, then of popular songs, then of anything. Fiddlers had struck up. He was sure he remembered Martin dancing with Peggy, and Martin never danced. The gin had flowed like ale and there had been people on tables. Theo might have been one of them, now he thought of it.

They'd got back to Martin's home at some point, heaven knew when because Theo had no memory of anything except Martin casting up his accounts in the gutter, and maybe someone helping Theo give him a shoulder. Not Peggy; she'd gone off with her man. Some stranger, perhaps; he had no idea. The main thing was that they didn't seem to have been murdered on the way, although that was a mixed blessing at best, given how he felt now.

And also how loudly Martin was snoring. Theo would normally punch him in the kidneys and pull the blankets over his head in search of more sleep for himself. On this occasion, he didn't. Martin had deserved the celebration as much as anyone—Theo's heart twisted in his chest at the memory of the pure joy on his face when the runner gasped his news—plus, the longer he slept, the better for his mood when he finally emerged. Two morning heads like Theo's wouldn't easily fit in the same house.

Nevertheless the snoring was intolerable, and Theo's bladder was making itself felt. Spurred by the combination of love, bodily urgency, and future self-preservation, he rolled out of bed and made his way to the door rather than risking disturbing Martin's sleep. The room swayed quite badly with every step. They probably ought to get that seen to.

He made it downstairs to the jakes, and pissed like a horse while managing not to fall over. He was wearing only his drawers and was dimly aware that it was very cold, although his body was mostly preoccupied with the aftereffects of gin, port, gin, brandy, and gin, and also the urgent need for fluid that wasn't any of the above. The sky suggested that it was perhaps seven in the morning. He might well still be drunk.

"Oh God," he said aloud, voice rattling like a cart dragged over cobblestones. His alcohol-strangled veins clamoured for liquid, so he staggered into the kitchen, where a man was asleep at the table, and found a jug of small beer. He drank about a pint directly from it in huge, thirsty gulps, standing at the cupboard for lack of energy to move, then spent several moments trying not to throw it straight back up again. A few more cautious mouthfuls stayed down with less protest, and he finally felt able to take a seat at the kitchen table, where the man was still asleep.

Right. Yes. Stranger in the kitchen. He should probably look at that.

The man looked to be well built, and well dressed too from the fine blue cloth of the coat that stretched over broad shoulders. He was slumped forward, face buried in his folded arms, snoring faintly, because apparently Theo was fated to be surrounded by snorers. He was a black man, which meant he was probably a friend of Martin's, or at least someone from the Stingo, and certainly less likely to cause trouble when he woke than some passing swell finding himself in an unknown house. Theo decided it wasn't a problem, or at least not his problem, or at least not enough of his problem that he had to do anything about it now. He sat instead, cold but without the energy to get up and find clothing, the small beer slowly lubricating his parched tissues, gazing into space and wishing for oblivion, until the nearby church clock boomed eight.

The sleeping man made a noise into his arms. He rolled his head to half-open one bloodshot eye at Theo, said “Christ,” in a tone of weary dismay, and shut it again.

Theo couldn’t blame him. He rose, not entirely steadily, and found a couple of large mugs, which he filled. “Drink?”

“Ugh.” The man didn’t move for a moment, then pushed himself cautiously up on his arms. He was a good-looking fellow despite the ravages of what had clearly been a heavy night, with strong cheekbones, rich brown skin of a somewhat lighter complexion than the very dark Martin, and deep brown eyes. “Hellfire. Thanks.” He took the mug, drank thirstily, and wiped his mouth. “Thank you. Where am I?”

“You’re at Martin St. Vincent’s house. The coal merchant, in Marylebone.”

“St. Vincent, St. Vincent...doesn’t ring a bell. What am I doing here?”

“I couldn’t say. I don’t think it was my idea.”

The man considered that. “Marylebone. I was at the Stingo. Ah. They passed the bill, didn’t they?”

“They did.” Theo mustered up a smile.

“I’ll drink to that,” the man said. “Although my head suggests I already did. Oh well, it was in a good cause.” He scrubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. “I don’t suppose there’s a long-haired sort of fellow around here? White, reddish-brown hair, probably wearing something ridiculous?”

“I haven’t seen one,” Theo said cautiously, “but I haven’t looked. I was at the Stingo too.”

“My sympathy, friend.”

Theo tipped his mug in acknowledgement to a fellow sufferer. “I don’t think I recall seeing you.”

“We got there late.” The man frowned. “Or at least, *I* got there, but where— Oh, who cares. I dare say he’ll turn up.”

“Who will?”

“Don’t worry about it. John Raven.”

Theo blinked. "Who's that?"

"Me."

"But you don't need to turn up," Theo pointed out. "You're already here."

"What? No, *Corvin* will turn up."

"Who?"

"What?"

They stared at one another, locked in mutual incomprehension. The man waved a hand, took a long draught of small beer, and said, "Let's start again. I'm John Raven. Who are you?"

"My name's Theodore Swann."

Raven's eyes widened sharply. "The devil it is!"

"Well, it is," Theo said, mildly offended. "As good a name as Raven, and just as orni—ornithil—birdy. Or, perhaps not *as* good, speaking as a man of letters, but it depends what you want it for I suppose."

Raven had a hand up. "It's a fine name. I don't have a problem with the name. Keep your name."

"Thanks. I intend to."

"Good." Raven pinched the bridge of his broad nose. "Where had we got to? What I meant was, I was intending to look you up. Or, at least, to look for Theodore Swann, the Gothic novelist. Mrs. Swann, right? That's you?"

"Er, yes," Theo said cautiously. "Why would you be looking for me?"

"I had your name off Gilly Forrest."

That had much the effect on Theo of sticking his head under the pump, an activity for which he hadn't yet mustered the strength. Gilly was a jobbing engraver who had done a no more than adequate job on several of Theo's books, but who more than made up for it in the matter of sucking pricks. He and Theo had kept each other company in back alleys a good few times, in a casual but friendly way. That was before Martin, a lifetime ago, or somewhat under two years by the calendar.

“Gilly Forrest,” he said carefully. “Yes, I know Gilly. Are you looking for an author? Why do you— Hold on. Did you say John Raven?”

“Repeatedly.”

“The satirical artist?” Of course Theo knew the name; he’d laughed often enough at the pictures. Raven had talent, radical views, and a willingness to upset important people. He also, and notoriously, had the sort of aristocratic connections that Theo could only envy. No wonder he could wake in an unknown household without any apparent fear of consequences; he reeked of confidence as much as gin. If he was one of Lord Corvin’s highly disreputable set—

Wait a minute. “You said Corvin. Lord Corvin? Are you telling me you lost *Viscount Corvin* last night?”

“He’ll turn up,” Raven said, adding something under his breath that sounded like ‘bad penny’. “Yes, I’m that John Raven, so if you’re that Theo Swann—”

He held out a powerful hand. Theo shook it, feeling the movement jar along his arm and up into his brain. Raven had either drunk less, or could take his drink more. He was substantially bigger than Theo, which doubtless helped, and given his set’s reputation, probably had a lot more practice. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m fairly sure I met you last night, now I think about it,” Raven said. “Was St. Vincent the one being sick in the street?”

“He doesn’t usually drink much.”

“And he’s asleep upstairs now.”

“I suppose so,” Theo said. “It is his house.”

“Which we’re in, you and me.”

They looked at one another. Raven’s expression blended understanding with a certain amount of sarcasm. No threat, though. Theo was very familiar with threats and he didn’t feel one here.

Raven went on. “Here’s the thing, Mr. Swann—or is it Mrs., professionally?”

“Theo will do.”

"I need a book written. It's for a gift."

"A book?"

"One to be privately printed, ten copies or so. It won't be circulated beyond a private group, so the author needn't worry about disturbing the King's peace, or any critical opinions the law might hold. If you follow me."

"I follow you," Theo said cautiously. "What sort of book?"

"A Gothic novel. Something like *The Monk*—all the villainy and depravity and landscapes and whatnot, with a sinister villain bent on having his way—"

"And an innocent young heroine?" Theo asked, locking eyes.

Raven didn't blink. "I'm thinking more an innocent young hero."

"The kind who stays innocent?"

Raven grinned. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Right," Theo said. "And you had my name because...?"

"Gilly spoke very highly of your talents, in all sorts of areas."

Had he indeed. Theo had written a couple of pornographic works when he'd been starting out, which Gilly had illustrated with more enthusiasm than plausibility. "Well, that's good of him. Fencing aside—"

"A Gothic novel as I say, but including the parts they normally leave out, and not with the usual cast," Raven said. "I read your book, *Adelina*, I think it was called? The one with the guardian and the hunchbacked henchman."

"That's it."

"That was good. That's what I want. Them, or people like them, as the main characters."

Theo was well aware he'd put rather more of his imagined hinterland between villain and henchman onto the page than he'd intended. He hadn't written a word that would bring a blush to the innocent cheek or, more importantly, a writ to the legal hand, but nevertheless, as Martin had warned him, the reader could tell.

“You want a book about men like them. As the hero, not the villains?”

“Both if you choose. And where the hero doesn’t faint when it’s just getting good. Unlike in *Adelina*,” Raven added somewhat sourly.

“You get prosecuted if you write those scenes,” Theo pointed out, guiltily aware he’d pushed the fainting a bit far in that one.

“Not this time. I want a Gothic novel that doesn’t hold back, written for...let’s say, men who know what they like and don’t give a damn what anyone else has to say. You’ve heard of Corvin, yes?”

“Everyone’s heard of him. The Devil’s Lord, isn’t that what people call him?”

“Some, yes. He probably pays them to.”

“I thought he was a libertine,” Theo said. “Notorious among the ladies, I mean.”

“Did I say he wasn’t? Suppose you imagine someone like that but who might well be found on the south side of St. James’s Park of a summer evening as well. Someone who’s no respecter of convention but loves his Gothic novels. And suppose you write him a filthy Gothic novel as a Christmas present. Does that sound possible?”

“How filthy do you mean? On a line between *Moll Flanders* and *Fanny Hill*, say?”

“Go at it. But in God’s name none of that rubbish about *his plenipotentiary instrument* and *her pleasure-thirsty channel*. I don’t know who decided that was any way to talk.”

“Oh, don’t,” Theo said with a shudder. “I’m not feeling well. Give me Rochester’s poetry any day. At least he doesn’t talk about stiff staring truncheons.”

“It makes you want to join a monastery, doesn’t it? All right, we understand each other. But the important thing is, it needs to be a real book with a real plot. That’s why I’ve come to a real writer. A proper story, just with improper parts as well.”

“A virgin hero, to start with,” Theo mused, trying not to glow too visibly. “A rampant villain. Or several. And you need this by...?”

“I want the book done for Christmas. Is October time enough? I can’t stand private commissions when they expect you to drop everything.”

“As if a man didn’t have a life of his own.” Theo liked John Raven, he decided. “Will you need me to find a printer?”

“No, I’ll do that. You just get me the manuscript.”

“And it’ll be an entirely private readership,” Theo confirmed.

“No names, no identification, if there’s any trouble I’ve never heard of you. Give me the manuscript, take the money, and the rest is my problem.”

Yes, Theo definitely liked him. “That sounds like a bargain. And speaking of money: how much?”



MARTIN DIDN’T WAKE up until gone two in the afternoon. Peggy had made it back to the house by then, with a spring in her step. Theo had gone for an enormous and very entertaining post-negotiation breakfast with Raven, including some three pots of coffee, and had already filled a sheet of Martin’s paper with scribbled thoughts. He abandoned that when he heard the heavy, reluctant noises of his lover moving around upstairs, and presented himself in the bedroom with an extravagantly sized mug of tea in short order.

Martin had fallen back into bed, where he lay with one arm over his eyes. He was bare-chested and in need of a shave, and the room smelled strongly of stale gin.

“Good heavens, you look debauched,” Theo said. “I like it.”

“I don’t.” Martin’s normally deep voice was so gravelly it tingled in Theo’s toes. “I think I may be dying.”

“I’m not surprised. Most of Marylebone is creeping around, wincing at sunlight and praying for the end.”

Martin's lips curved, just a little. "The bill passed."

"It did."

"It's just a start. Just a first step, but...it passed." Martin reached out with his free hand. Theo came to take it, sitting on the bed by him. "I'm glad you were there with me."

"So am I." Martin hadn't had enough joy in his life and he wasn't a naturally ebullient man at the best of times. It gave Theo a peculiar sort of whole-body shiver to see him truly happy. "It was a wonderful night. Probably."

"Probably?"

"It's a bit vague, to be honest. I brought you tea. Lots of tea."

"I love you," Martin said, levering himself up on his elbows. "Thanks."

Theo let him address the cup in silence, watching his face. Maybe it was imagination, or just the aftereffects of too much mother's ruin, but he thought something had relaxed slightly around Martin's eyes since yesterday. The outcome of the vote had mattered more than he'd wanted to admit, more than he had been able to voice, and Theo's early confidence in the outcome had been steadily undermined by Martin's unspoken but all too perceptible dread that they might fail.

And now it was over. They had the vote, a body blow had been dealt to the vilest trade, and Martin would be able to breathe freely again. And so would Theo, for other reasons.

"We had a visitor," he said.

"We? Here? Who?"

"Well, I say visitor, you might even call him a guest. He helped you back from the Stingo and fell asleep on the kitchen table. John Raven."

"Raven. *Raven*? The artist?"

"That's the one."

Martin's brows drew together. "What on earth was he doing here?"

"Sleeping it off, initially. We went out for breakfast. I like him."

Martin sat up. "Theo, do you know who he is?"

“Of course I do. The satirist. Lord Corvin’s bosom friend.”

“Mixing with highly disreputable noblemen at one end of the social scale, and with radical democrats at the other.” Martin was a born merchant, imbued with the proprieties and decencies of the middling sort. Theo, who was not proper or decent, had rather liked the whiff of brimstone he had from Raven. That and the unmistakable smell of money. “He sails very close to the wind. Corvin killed his man in a duel, you know, and was lucky not to be prosecuted. Raven has defended at least two libel suits. That’s not company I’d wish to mix in.”

“Perhaps not. And I wouldn’t say I’m mixing exactly...”

“Theo,” Martin said, warning in his tone. “What did you do?”

He was damnably acute, even with a head on. That, or he knew Theo too well. Theo grinned. “I took a writing commission. Raven wants a particular sort of Gothic novel. A *very* particular sort, and not for general circulation. Ten copies only, private printing. It’s a present for the Devil’s Lord.”

Martin’s eyes rounded. “You aren’t serious.”

“I am. It’ll be anonymous, of course.”

“It had blasted well better be! How much is he paying?”

“Fifty pounds,” Theo said smugly. “Ten on account, ten on delivery of the first four chapters to make sure it’s what he wants, balance on delivery of the final manuscript.” He had been relieved of his debts more than a year and a half ago thanks to Martin’s intervention. That was nowhere near long enough to lose a lifelong habit of scraping and economising and sweating over every penny. A good commission, with money in his hand before he put pen to paper, was balm to his soul, and Martin knew it.

“Well,” Martin said. “You’ll be careful, won’t you?”

“Of course I will. Fifty pounds, though. He’s asked for something like Jasper’s story—you know, Jasper from *Adelina*—with all the Gothic trappings, but characters...well, like us.”

“Not actually like us, I hope. The daily dealings of a coal merchant and a scribbler doesn’t sound very Gothic to me.”

“You made a very good villain when you had to, and I am an excellent henchman,” Theo pointed out. “But I meant—”

“I know what you meant.” Martin regarded him with narrowed eyes. “You’re caught by this, aren’t you?”

“I wanted to write Jasper and his henchman, all the while I was writing *Adelina*,” Theo said. “It’s absurd, really. I’m rewarded when I dream up absurdities—ghosts and castle, murderous nuns and lost heirs and hidden treasure and the tortures of the Inquisition. All of that is my daily bread. But to write something as everyday, as simple and reasonable as you and me...”

“I know.”

“I want to write a story about people like us. Well, no, you’re right, that would be dreadfully boring, but *for* people like us. It’ll be about an innocent young man caught in the toils of a villainous guardian and his wicked steward. He places all his faith on his handsome tutor to save him—I think he’s a Romish priest, or posing as one, but I’d better check Corvin isn’t a Catholic—anyway the tutor will prove to be another of the guardian’s accomplices. He’s going to deflower Jonathan and betray him, I know that much. That’s the first part.”

“Jonathan?” Martin asked, looking slightly stunned by the flood of plot.

“The hero. I think I’m calling it *Jonathan: or, The Struggles of Virtue* but I’ll see how it develops.”

“I can see you’ve been busy.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it.” Theo kicked off his shoes and hopped onto the bed. Martin groaned at the impact but shifted up and put an arm round him. “I actually forgot about my head, which was saying something, and I’ve half the story already, as though it was waiting for me. I think I’ve always wanted to write something like this—not just to write it but to have it read. And now I’m being paid to.” That was not ne-

gotiable, and he was grateful that Martin had never suggested otherwise. Theo wrote for money; if money and heart could meet, he would be the luckiest man alive.

Except that he already was precisely that, here in Martin's bed, loved by the best and strongest man he knew, in a world that had taken a step along a road towards better times. If there was fifty pounds in it as well, that was pure cream.

"Paid, yes," Martin said. "Although, by Viscount Corvin, or at one remove from him."

Theo twisted to look up. "Do you mind that? Really?"

Martin's arm tightened. "Not if it's what you want to do. Not if you're careful. And I have a condition."

"What?"

"They need to print eleven copies. We ought to have one of our own. I want to read this myself, and not in your abysmal hand either."

W. Theo smiled up at him. "Thank you for not thinking I'm absurd."

"I do think you're absurd. And irrepressible, and reprehensible—"

"How about insatiable?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Mostly," Theo said. "You know, if your head is *very* bad you could just lie back and let me take your mind off it."

"My head is appalling," Martin said, shoulders relaxing into the bolster as Theo clambered between his legs and tugged away the blankets. "Excruciating. I may never move again."

"See? This is an act of charity. A medical intervention."

"Irrepressible, insatiable, charitable..." Martin's hand brushed his hair. "Adorable. My tomcat."

Theo butted his head up against the stroking hand, since both his own hands were busy coaxing Martin to hardness. "Your writer. A real writer, Raven called me, do you know that? He picked me for that reason. A real writer."

“No wonder he had you around his little finger.” Martin inhaled sharply as Theo took him in his mouth. “Ah, yes. Theo. Ah, that’s so good. Of course you’re a real writer. If you need to hear that I can tell you myself. You’re marvellous.”

Theo attempted to speak with his mouth full, and had to lift his head. “But of course you’d tell me that. You love me.”

“Are you implying my literary criticism is biased by—oh God!”

“Mmm?” Theo suggested.

“I’m biased.” Martin’s fingers were wound into his hair, gripping tight. “I admit it. Fielding and Richardson are mere journeymen by comparison. Mrs. Radcliffe and Monk Lewis cannot compare. Oh dear God, keep doing that with your hands. Sweet Jesus. You are without doubt the equal of Shakespeare and Cervantes rolled into one and oh my God, Theo, *Theo*—”

They lay together afterwards, silent. Martin had drifted off into a doze almost immediately; Theo span stories in his head, weaving his webs. A Gothic tale, a turncoat, a wicked lord...

A happy ending. That was what he would write, and be damned to the conventions of the Gothic that demanded everyone die or, at best, stagger away to a remote hamlet for a life of solitary prayer. Theo was having none of that. Jonathan’s treacherous tutor would turn his coat twice and save the hero after all his travails. There would be love, forgiveness, another chance, of the kind his own hero had given him.

Maybe Theo would even give the villain and his henchman a future as well, albeit one that would probably involve stabbing. A golden ending for everyone, he decided, resting his head on Martin’s broad chest and feeling the first vibrations of a quiet snore. It felt like that kind of day.



Thanks for reading!



*THIS IS AN EPILOGUE to *Wanted, a Gentleman*¹.*

*Find out what happened to Theo's book in *Unfit to Print*², coming 10th July.*

*John Raven, Lord Corvin and friends will appear in *Band Sinister*, coming late 2018. Check out my newsletter or Twitter³ for more!*

1. <https://www.books2read.com/u/4DoVJD>

2. <https://www.books2read.com/u/31MNwv>

3. https://twitter.com/kj_charles