

The *Crimes and Confusions* Sampler
a preview of the
five short stories contained in
the *Crimes and Confusions* anthology by
Kathy Lynn Emerson

Story #1:

THE REIVING OF BONVILLE KEEP

Bonville Keep lay two days ride from Edinburgh. Driven by his desire for revenge, Sir Gavin Dunnett and his men made the journey in one. Only the temporary truce between England and Scotland prevented them from laying siege to the castle. An act of war against an English baron would have angered the king of Scots, to whom Gavin now owed allegiance. He was obliged to employ more devious means to gain entry.

At dusk, he donned the full, black gown of a Benedictine and entered enemy territory alone. What he found inside the curtain wall astonished him. The place was ripe for reiving. Guards lazed at their posts. Half the servants were far gone in drink. Even the steward seemed lax in his duties. New to the Borders, Gavin decided. From the bleary look in his watery blue eyes, the fellow had also imbibed a considerable quantity of ale.

“We are about to sup,” the steward said. “Will you join us, brother?”

Careful to keep his hood raised to hide his lack of a tonsure, since a full head of black hair on a monk would raise far too many questions, Gavin accepted the invitation.

“A pity monks cannot perform marriage ceremonies.”

“You wish to wed?” Gavin asked as they entered the great hall. “Who is the lucky woman?”

The steward gestured toward the raised dais at the far end of the room. “Lady Bonville is a new-made widow and ripe for the plucking.”

It was as well the steward did not have all his wits about him, for Gavin could not control his start of surprise. Lord Bonville was dead? Then who had sent him word of Isabella’s death?

The logical answer to his question sat in regal splendor at the table on the dais. Beatrice Bonville. Gavin’s old nemesis. His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. Seven years had passed since he’d last seen her but she still possessed an exotic beauty. Sleek, glossy, raven locks contrasted with milk-white skin. For a woman whose husband had recently died, she seemed most merry. In spite of losing him? Or because he was no longer alive?

As Gavin watched from a place at a lower table, Lady Bonville smiled and flirted with her flaxen-haired steward and with the black-avised man who seemed to be the husband of one of her stepdaughters. Three of them shared the dais. With their distinctive Bonville hair, its color so pale a shade of yellow that it was nearly white, Gavin had no difficulty picking them out. Two of them looked enough alike to be twins.

A waiting gentlewoman, small of stature with a plain face and drab brown tresses, stood just behind Lady Bonville. Without warning, her mistress turned and boxed her ears. She had been too slow to refill a goblet with wine. The pockmarked servant lad who stumbled and sloshed the sauce as he set a platter full of steaming food on the table, received a hard pinch on the forearm for his carelessness.

“Heartless bitch,” muttered the burly halberdier seated to Gavin’s right.

“What has Lady Bonville done to you?”

“Refused to pay our quarterly stipend. Says there is no money at all. None to pay her servants. None to attract husbands for Bonville’s three youngest daughters. There’s talk she means to send them to be brides of Christ at Holystone Priory.”

Gavin had a hard time believing Lord Bonville had died penniless. There must be some gold left. Some of *his* gold. He had sent enough of it here over the years, he thought bitterly.

“There is the child to be dowered, too,” the halberdier said.

Gavin dipped his venison in pepper sauce. “What child is that?”

“The half-Scots wench. The old lord’s granddaughter. Just seven years old is Mistress Isabella, but they do say she’s been ill, nigh unto death, mayhap.” He crossed himself piously before draining another mazer of ale.

Gavin scarce noticed if the taste of the sauce on his tongue was fierce or merely pungent. He felt his heart contract. His breathing became labored. His daughter was still alive? What trick was this?

“From what illness does she suffer?” he asked cautiously.

“No one knows.”

“How long has she been ill?”

After a moment’s computation, something which seemed to tax the fellow’s inebriated brain, he answered. “Nearly a month now. ’Twas shortly after Lord Bonville’s death. To keep any possible contagion from spreading, the widow had her moved to the north tower.”

Gavin scowled at the dais. Beatrice Bonville had exiled a sick child. Left her to die alone. He drank deeply of his own ale and tried to make sense of what he’d just heard.

Two days earlier, after he’d sent word to Bonville Keep that he intended to reclaim Isabella, he’d received a missive, signed by Lord Bonville, telling him that his daughter, his only child, had died in infancy.

Story #2:

THE KENDUSKEAG KILLER

The body fetched up against the pilings of the covered bridge at the upper end of Harlow Street.

A physician, as well as one of Bangor, Maine’s coroners, Dr. Benjamin Northcote was accustomed to grievous wounds. As remains went, these were less stomach-turning than most. He gave the corpse a cursory examination, fully expecting to determine that the dead man had drowned.

He probably had . . . but that did not explain the oddly-configured hole in his back.

Once the deceased had been loaded into a wagon for the trip to Ben's surgery, he returned to the bank of Kenduskeag Stream to study the rapidly moving current below. With the first spring thaw of 1888 had come flooding, and on this bright morning in early April, the water level was still high.

A short distance downstream the Kenduskeag joined the Penobscot River. Upstream there were rapids. Every year about this time some damn fool got drunk, tried to paddle a canoe through them, and ended up going over Six Mile Falls upside down and backwards. The fortunate ones came away from the experience with nothing worse than a good soaking. Ill-fated paddlers were thrown out onto the rocks and more than a few had died as a result.

That was not what had caused this man's death.

Constable Mayhew, one of Bangor's nine newly-elected city marshals, came up beside Ben. "Had a watch and some change on him," he said in a laconic drawl. "Musta been a suicide."

They shared a humorless smile at the familiar rule of thumb: bodies found floating in Kenduskeag Stream or the Penobscot River with empty pockets were assumed to be victims of robbery and murder; those who still had their possessions had usually taken their own lives . . . or fallen into the water and drowned while under the influence of drink.

"Did you notice the way the dead man was dressed?" Ben asked. "His clothes were in every particular the attire of a woodsman—gray kersey trousers, two red flannel shirts worn one on top of the other, and high spiked boots. The only thing missing was the little black felt hat. If he'd been found in the Penobscot, I'd have wondered if he might have perished in a log drive."

The river drivers—called "Penobscot men" in these parts and "Bangor Tigers" by people from away—were a breed apart from ordinary woodsmen. They risked their lives countless times every year to get their heavy, slippery product to market. Ben knew that the days of bringing twenty-foot pine logs to Bangor sawmills were long past, but even the four-foot lengths of spruce used to make pulp for paper could do a lot of damage if a man slipped and fell into the water among them.

"Too early," Mayhew said. "The drive hasn't started yet. Besides, nowadays, by the time they get to the last stretch before Bangor, all the logs are lashed together into rafts and piloted in."

Although Ben had lived near the Penobscot River all his life, and could tell when the spruce arrived by the pungent perfume in the air, he had to admit he didn't know much about the process of getting logs to market. River drivers and other woodsmen inhabited a world far different from his own. Their paths did not usually cross unless one of them needed medical attention.

"This fella prob'ly come in from one of the camps," Mayhew mused. "Been woodsmen down in the Devil's Half Acre for the last couple of weeks."

"Any serious incidents?"

"No other bodies. Just the usual brawls. The drive can't begin till ice out and she's still frozen along the West Branch. Got to figure a few river drivers use the time between the end of cutting and the start of the drive to visit the groggeries and whorehouses.

Looks to me like this fella was one of them. Prob'ly got into a fight, got killed, and whoever done him in dumped his body into the stream to get rid of it."

"Why not throw him into the Penobscot, then? That way there'd be a chance the body would be swept out to sea."

Mayhew thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Killer was too drunk to figure that out, maybe. Killed him up this way, so he threw him in here."

Ben was thoughtful as he walked back to his office on Spring Street. Mayhew's answer didn't satisfy him. "Up this way" was an area of houses, mills, lumber yards, and the occasional factory—not the usual haunt of the woodsmen. As Mayhew had said, they tended to congregate in the Devil's Half Acre, the waterfront area where the Kenduskeag and the Penobscot met and small hotels and boarding houses catered to woodsmen and sailors, giving both groups plenty of opportunity to spend their hard-earned pay on delights of the flesh.

Story #3:

THE TELL-TALE TWINKLE

Wednesday, April 4, 1888

Diana Spaulding checked her appearance in the mirror for the fifth time, tucking one of her thick, mahogany-colored locks back into place beneath the most staid hat in her possession, the brown straw with its thin gray illusion veil. Even with her recent raise in pay she could not afford to buy a new wardrobe.

The hat, together with a snowy white shirtwaist, a plain, dark gray skirt, and the well-traveled Modjeska jacket with the quilted lining and beaver fur trim, would have to do for her professional debut as a crime reporter. She touched the cameo brooch at her throat for luck, plucked a pair of silk gloves and a small leather bag from the top of the washstand, and sallied forth to begin her new career. The bag contained cab fare, a handkerchief, and the tools of her trade—a small notebook and two pencils.

She was ready for this, Diana told herself on the way down the back stairs of Mrs. Curran's boarding house on 10th Street. It was normal to be nervous, but she knew she was well prepared. Hadn't her editor, Horatio Foxe, loaned her his own autographed copy of the most authoritative book on the subject of criminal activity? *Professional Criminals of America*, written by New York City's own Chief of Detectives, Inspector Thomas Byrnes, had been published two years earlier and contained a wealth of information about every sort of crime.

Diana filched a fresh roll from her landlady's cooling rack on her way to the front hall. "Beautiful day," she remarked.

"It is, yes," said Mrs. Curran, the lilt of Ireland in her voice in spite of the fact that she'd been in America for many years.

A small, bird-like woman, Mrs. Curran had enjoyed a long, successful career on the stage before retiring and buying her little house on 10th Street. She took in female boarders, but only those with a theatrical connection. Diana had qualified both because

her late husband had been an actor and because she had written, until just recently, a theatrical gossip column called "Today's Tidbits."

With her landlady's blessings ringing in her ears and optimism in her heart, Diana set off at a brisk pace for police headquarters.

* * * *

The other police reporters all wore suits and derby hats. Conversation and card games alike stopped when Diana entered the "Reporter Office." Some of her new colleagues radiated suspicion, others hostility. Nowhere was there a welcoming expression.

The smell of cigar smoke and unwashed spittoons engulfed her as soon as she crossed the threshold, and here there were no newspapers on the floor, as there were at the offices of the *Independent Intelligencer*, to sop up stray puddles of tobacco juice and prevent the hem of her skirt from being soiled. She took a few more steps and stopped to study the room. It was furnished with a large table and a number of wooden arm chairs—all of them occupied—a smaller table containing a coffee urn, and a tall wicker wastepaper basket. Light came from an overhead lamp with two shades and two gas jets under each. Framed pictures of scantily clad girls decorated the walls, although there was also an alarm bell mounted on one.

Before Diana could decide how to proceed, a police officer came into the room. His initial reaction was no more hospitable than that of her fellow journalists. When she was so bold as to introduce herself, he looked her up and down with something resembling contempt and said, "Girlie, you ought to stick to your knitting."

"I have been assigned to offer readers a woman's point of view on crime," she informed him, speaking loudly enough so that everyone in the room could hear her words.

"Women shouldn't read newspapers at all, let alone the crime stories," the officer said.

She bit back a retort. Why waste her breath?

And why did she think the stories she wrote now would receive any better treatment than those she'd turned in on theatrical and literary subjects? Her earlier sense of anticipation faded. Reporting real news was a step up from what she had been writing for Horatio Foxe, but only a small one. She'd been told outright to produce accounts of crimes for the entertainment and edification of her readers. The push to inject scandal and sensationalism into stories of human misery fueled the *Independent Intelligencer*—and the even more infamous *National Police Gazette*—and would dictate what she wrote and how she wrote it . . . and how much Foxe added to the result.

One of the reporters sidled up to her and slung a too-familiar arm around her shoulders, breathing a noxious blend of tobacco and peppermint into her face. "Best to face the truth, my lovely. Women are frail creatures, unsuited to hearing all the lurid details of murders or bank robberies. If you must write about crime, you'd best stick to domestic squabbles."

"Ah. You mean husbands murdering wives and the reverse?" A jab with her elbow persuaded him to release her.

"I've got just the story for you, Mrs. Spaulding," another man said. "A case of boarding house theft."

Diana gave the speaker a sharp look. He'd tipped his chair back against the wall and lounged there insolently, one foot resting on the opposite knee. The cheroot dangling from his lips threatened to set fire to his scraggly mustache and over-long mutton chops.

From the grins, nudges, and winks, exchanged among the other reporters, it was apparent to Diana that no one else wanted to bother writing about such a minor crime, and that they thought they were putting one over on her by convincing her to take an interest. Recalling what she'd read about boarding house thieves in *Professional Criminals of America*, however, Diana was inclined to pursue the subject. "Tell me more," she said.

The chair came down on all four legs. The reporter pulled a scrap of paper out of his jacket pocket and scribbled an address on the back. "This is just down the street from where I live," he told Diana with a wink. "If you're still around when I get home, maybe I'll show you the sights."

Diana snatched the offering out of his hand and made what she hoped was a dignified, if hasty, exit. It was not until she was back out on Mulberry Street that she glanced at the address and discovered that the boarding house in question wasn't even in New York City. It was across the new bridge in the neighboring municipality of Brooklyn.

Story #4:

ANY MEANS SHORT OF MURDER

England, 1579

"The aim is to send the ball into the opponent's goal by any means short of murder," Bancroft said, slinging an arm around Rob Jaffrey's shoulders.

"Aye," Needham agreed. "The honor of Cambridge is at stake. We cannot let the townsmen of Chesterton defeat us."

"But there must be rules," Rob objected. "Every game has rules."

In company with more than two dozen other young scholars from the university, the three of them swaggered along the Huntingdon Way. The frost-hardened land, some of it still covered in white from recent heavy snowfalls, was almost level. Rob had a clear view of the open fields and fenlands ahead and of the village itself near the river. He'd been told it contained fewer than a hundred hearths, but every man, woman, and child seemed to have turned out for the football match. Most waited at a distance, bundled in woolen cloaks against the cold, but a few had ventured ahead to gawk at the competition.

"There are no rules," Bancroft said. "When the first team reaches the goal, the game ends."

"That one is ours—the gravel pit by the castle." Needham pointed to an ancient structure in the distance, then swung around to gesture the other way. "They will be trying for that stand of trees on the road to Histon."

The two points were widely separated—more than a mile apart. "Do you mean to say that our players will have to take the ball straight through the village?"

At Rob's look of consternation, Needham grinned. "Have no fear. The good folk of Chesterton will have prudently barricaded their houses and shops."

"They'd have done better to lock up their daughters," Bancroft muttered.

Rob followed his gaze to a small group of villagers standing by the roadside. Among them were several pretty young women, one of them great with child. She stared back at him before turning to whisper to her companions. Rob had a feeling her comments were not complimentary.

Needham guffawed. "About to whelp, that one is. She'll not be playing today."

"Do you mean to say that the women join in?" Rob could not hide his astonishment. There were no football matches between parishes in the part of Kent where he'd been raised, but he could well imagine that if there were, his sisters and Rosamond and the other girls in Lady Appleton's care at Leigh Abbey would clamor to participate. Rosamond in particular did not like to be left out of anything.

"Not here," Needham said, "but I have heard they do so in some of the northern parishes. I vow I'd like to see that. Where we throw off our gowns and doublets at the start of a match, I warrant females would be wont to dispense with petticoats and kilt up their skirts, as well!"

They'd reached the crowd of villagers now. One man produced the ball, a bladder covered with leather. He identified himself as Thomas Prescott, the village constable. He duly warned one and all against the use of excessive violence but he accompanied the words with a knowing wink.

Rob expected the game to be vicious. He knew that repeated kicks to his shins would likely make it difficult for him to walk the next day. He'd be exhausted, too. The midday sun was high above them now, but his fellows had warned that it might well be dark before anyone achieved victory. Still, it did not appear that more than brute strength and determination were needed to win and he had both in abundance.

In the last year Rob had grown into his feet. He was tall for his age and brawny and there was little that frightened him. He'd earned the right to matriculate at Cambridge with scholarship. Now he meant to secure the good will of his fellow students by a show of physical prowess.

Prescott threw the ball high. As it fell, both teams scrambled for possession. Long minutes passed before it reappeared from beneath the writhing mass of bodies.

Cambridge had possession.

Rob lost all track of time after that. He was soon covered in mud and snow, his clothes dripping. His leather-soled shoes slipped repeatedly on the icy, uneven ground. He lost count of the number of times he was kicked.

None of the aches or pains or bruises mattered when Cambridge players entered the high street of Chesterton. Rob was dimly aware of passing a church and a manor house, but his attention was fixed on the castle ahead. He could almost taste victory. It would be celebrated with loud hurrahs and guns firing, or so Needham and Bancroft had assured him. Both were still beside him. The three of them had bowled over countless opposing players, clearing the way for the Cambridge man with the ball.

Without warning, several Chesterton men slipped out of a side street and came at them from behind. No rules, Rob remembered, and turned to meet the ambush with gleeful enthusiasm. The excitement of impending victory made him cocky. Too late, he saw that one of the newcomers wielded a cudgel.

The first blow struck the side of Rob's head, felling him. He was conscious long enough to know that his two friends had also been attacked. Then more blows landed, from both fists and solid English oak, and blackness descended upon him.

Story #5:

THE CURSE OF THE FIGURE FLINGER
(a tale "translated" from Elizabethan English)

Among the merchants of London in the year 1585—a year heralded by prophesies of doom on a scale not seen since old King Henry died—there lived a wadwife who called herself Mistress Fitt. I doubt it was her real name any more than Dame Starkey, the one I go by, is mine. Reputed to be a rich man's widow, she used her inheritance to become more wealthy still. Through connivance, she loaned out money at a rate forbidden by law. Some would say she reaped the reward she deserved.

In other words, one fine spring day she was murdered.

Now the law of England is a peculiar entity. At times it works, but at others . . . well, then there is a need to find out the truth by other means.

I am a figure flinger. For most of the sixty years I have been on this earth, I have made my living finding lost objects and charting the future in the stars. In truth, those are no more than clever tricks learned at my father's knee. If I'd been an able prognosticator I would have seen the constable coming in time to avoid both him and his questions.

Caught in my garret chamber, I assumed I was being sued . . . again. Londoners go to court at the drop of a hat. If flight would not serve, I reasoned, a bribe would have to do to keep me from arrest. I grimaced at the thought, but there seemed no help for it. When Constable Timmons, a bold youth with a shock of yellow hair, asked when I'd last seen Mistress Fitt, I made the mistake of assuming he asked because she'd brought suit against me for fraud.

"Yester e'en," I replied, honest for a change.

"When you cursed her soundly and threatened her with bodily harm if she pursued her charges against you?"

Foolish enough to grin at the memory, I nodded. There had been other shouting matches between us and I anticipated there would be more. Penelope Fitt had always been a most disagreeable person.

"Dame Starkey," the constable said, "you must come with me."

"Now, Timmons. I have no time for this. Go back and tell Mistress Fitt I will draw up a new horoscope to replace the one she does not like." I was reaching into my purse for something to encourage his cooperation when he laid hands on me.

"You are under arrest for murder, Dame Starkey. Mistress Fitt is dead."

* * * *

London's gaols are none of them pleasant. I'd been in Ludgate before, for debt, but felons are taken to Newgate, the worst of the lot. All that saved me from being thrown in the darkest, deepest hole in the place, a dungeon called "the Limboes" that is lit

only by a single candle set on a black stone, is the fact that I am a woman. Female prisoners at Newgate are kept in a single stone tower.

A generous bribe assured me of a private cell with a bedstead, warm blankets, and a charcoal brazier—it is cold even in spring behind the stone walls of a prison. Once I'd paid for these "luxuries" and for food to be brought on a regular basis, the heavy door slammed shut with a solid thunk and the key rasped in the lock, leaving me alone with my whirling thoughts.

The prognosis was not good. I did not have unlimited funds. I'd already had to pay an exorbitant admission fee in addition to the rental and expenses for this "special apartment." I'd also given the keeper £5 for "exemption from ironing." Well worth it, I suppose. Otherwise manacles at my wrists, or fetters or shackles on my ankles, or perhaps an iron collar around my neck, would be chained to the ring in the middle of my floor.

I anticipated daily expenses would continue to mount as long as I was held in Newgate. I'd even be charged a fee for washing water. That commodity flowed freely into the prison through leaden pipes, but the person who brought it to my cell would have to be paid.

When my money ran out, I'd be sent to the common side. There I'd still have to find a way to buy food. In addition, the prisoners themselves collect garnish to finance the occasional evening of drunken debauchery. Those who refuse to donate to the cause have been known to end up naked and shivering, their very clothes confiscated to make up for their lack of contribution.

It did not take me long to reach a conclusion—I needs must discover who killed Mistress Fitt. The only other way out of this place required doing the hempen jig at Tyburn.

After some thought, I sent a carefully worded note, containing just the hint of a threat, to someone who owed me a very great favor.

* * * *

Nicholas Baldwin, prosperous merchant of London, stormed into my cell just as I was about to partake of a simple repast, exorbitantly priced, consisting of rye bread, porridge, and cheese.

"I see, Griselda," he said, "that you have at last met the fate you so richly deserve."

I winced at his use of my real name. I hadn't thought of myself as Griselda Ferrers in years. "Good day to you, Nick. So kind of you to visit."

In the twelve years we'd known each other, Nick had never approved of the way I earn my living, but that he'd turned up at all meant he intended to help me. Otherwise, he'd have ignored my letter and left me to rot.

In a cause as good as saving my own skin, I was willing to endure a certain amount of preaching. I continued to munch on the bread as he surveyed my cell. All the luxury I'd paid for was revealed by candles a cellarman sold for twice what they cost outside Newgate.

"I suppose you want money," Nick said when he'd completed his inspection.

His nose wrinkled in distaste as he spoke. Small wonder! The two large angular stone towers of the old Roman gate at Newgate straddle a broad market street that is dominated, just inside the city walls, by the Shambles. This long row of butchers' stalls

extending toward Cheap accounts for Newgate's nickname, "the Stink," and for the pervasive odor that infects the entire prison.

"I can earn my own coin," I snapped. "There's always some fool ready to pay for a glimpse of his future, even in prison."

He snorted. "How long will that last? You're trapped here. If someone decides you're a fraud, if your prediction doesn't turn out the way you promised, your victim will know right where to find you."

"I suppose you think there's poetic justice in that?"

"Delicious irony at the least," he replied. "I have been told it was because of a horoscope you devised for Mistress Fitt that she intended to take you to court."

"She claimed the prognostication was all untrue."

"And that's the reason the authorities think you killed her?"

I took heart from his choice of words. "There's more," I admitted. "I confronted her. Cursed her, in fact. And naturally insisted, in a loud and carrying voice, that every word in her star chart was gospel."

"And so you were arrested for her murder when she turned up dead the next morning."

"It seems I was the last person to see her alive, saving only the one who killed her."

"Not you?"

"No. Not I. I do not even know how she died, since I was not present at the inquest."

"She was drowned," Nick said.

I could not contain my surprise, and it was that reaction, I do think, that convinced him I was innocent.

"Someone pushed her face into a basin of water and held it there."

I shuddered and muttered, "I knew this was not destined to be a good year."

There had been that partial eclipse on the 19th—the day before I quarreled with Mistress Fitt. Now that was a warning of disaster I should have heeded, even if I'd chosen to discount the malevolent conjunctions shown by the planets and the disturbing signs revealed by the moon.

Nick sat down beside me on the low camp bed. "Easter term begins in less than a week. They'll try you at the Sessions House in Old Bailey Street."

"I know." The quarter sessions were held hard by Newgate, convenient for transporting prisoners.

"Trial to execution is generally only a matter of days, and it is a rare trial indeed that lasts more than a quarter of an hour."

"If I could just get out of this place, I am certain I could discover who really did kill Mistress Fitt. It was likely one of her clients, someone who defaulted on a loan, or was about to."

After a long, contemplative silence, he said, "There is one way you can leave Newgate. The authorities will let you out on furlough, so long as you pay the wages of a guard."

"More expenses," I grumbled.

Nick almost smiled. "And not yet the end of them. Even if you manage to prove your innocence, you will have to return to Newgate to await the grace of the Queen."

Another two months may pass before a royal pardon arrives. And then, to add insult to injury, you'll be charged a release fee."

"Only if I'm alive to pay it."

"At least there's no lawyer involved. None is permitted in a criminal case."

"Small mercy," I agreed. Even moneylenders and fortune tellers, in my experience, are more honest than the average man of law.

If one or more of these stories appeals to you, the entire text is found in the novella-length anthology, *Crimes and Confusions*, an original e-book by Kathy Lynn Emerson.