



Sins of the Father

The haunted life of Doctor James Parker

Harry Riley

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Sins of the Father

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the late 1980s I bought a small farm workers cottage in a Northumbrian village on the banks of the river Tweed and close to Berwick on Tweed, intending to renovate and eventually to retire. Cross the ancient stone bridge at the edge of the village and the white saltire on a blue background proudly proclaims you are in Scotland. 'Sins of the father' is based in this village (by a lightly changed fictional name) just after the end of World War two.

I also changed the name of the ancient church, added a village pond and one or two other fictional features to aid the storyline.

*For Margaret and Karen, and for Stephen without whose technical,
knowledge, help and assistance this tale would never have seen the light of
day.*

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1 ... Billy's hammer blow

The moon came partly into view and lit up the night sky in a pale glow. No one else was about at this lonely spot. It was approximately eleven thirty in the evening and the dark hooded figure stooping at the wayside, looked up at the sky in nervous anticipation lest the moon should expose him more fully in his nefarious activity. He was quite alone.

The scene briefly illuminated, was that of a country lane at a very sharp bend. The road was icy and dripping wet from the spitting sleet, and a deep ditch at the nearside edge was already half filled with murky water. The figure, now straddling the white line painted in the middle of the road, was that of a large male with the agile movements of a young person.

His feet moved with a definite purpose and his legs were bent in a half crouch, but his arms made odd jerky movements, going from side to side. A closer inspection would have shown him pouring a thick viscous liquid down onto the surface of the road. This was heavy motor oil, being vigorously shaken out of a large metal container, and liberally spread over the glistening tarmac.

A motorist, approaching from the other direction had his headlights blasting full on as he slowed right down and approached the bend. The figure leaped over the ditch and into deep cover just in time as the bright lights swept around and illuminated a road sign. The black and white direction sign bore the legend 'Norbridge Village' four miles. This was Northumberland at the Scottish Borders just after the end of World War Two.

The vehicle slowly carried on its way and the crouching figure made himself as comfortable as possible, pulling up his hood more fully in the damp night air, clasping and unclasping his hands in joyous anticipation of the mayhem to come.

He had not long to wait. Very soon a sporty saloon came into view.

The gleaming, black Mk. IV Jaguar, with its elegant, long bonnet

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and frog eyed headlamps, blazing light, was being driven slightly erratically, veering across the centre of the road and travelling very fast, way too fast for this bend, on this wet and windy night.

Billy Turpin was the hooded youth. He peered out from between the waving foliage of his hiding place and waited in readiness as the inevitable disaster came to pass. His eyes lit up and his young face contorted into a demented snarl of satisfaction.

Just before the bend the car's tyres hit the patch of oil that had expanded on the wet tar. There was a sudden, late, screech of brakes being applied harshly and in desperation. The silence was shattered as the vehicle skidded and lurched over to the wrong side of the road with the driver struggling for control. The situation was hopeless; the car now had a mind of its own.

Back it came, miraculously, onto its correct side of the road, but the front tyres, by now covered in thick, sticky oil, failed to grip, and were within inches of the edge of the gully. The driver, with the moon back-lighting his hunched figure, as he squinted through the windscreen, could be seen quite clearly as, with eyes popping out of his head and teeth fixed in a rigid death mask grimace, he made a valiant final effort to regain control of the front wheel skid, and might have succeeded had the camber of the road been more favourable.

A hideous screech rent the air as the vehicle careered right across the road again and one and a half tons of highly sculptured steel rammed into solid oak, bouncing off and finally coming to rest a few feet away. Absorbing the impact, the mighty tree creaked and groaned and shook itself down, sneezing a mighty shower of dusty rainwater out of its myriad of timbers, cracks and crevices, and in the process, evicting the sleepy and over-wintering wildlife from its comfy rest, but it never gave an inch! The car had crashed headlong through the heavy wooden barrier and hit a local landmark. The giant Hanging Tree at Devils Dyke!

Billy watched spellbound.

The drama he had helped to create, unfolded in front of him. In the years to come he would replay this scene in his mind, over and over again in slow motion, thrilling to the moment of impact, remembering the driver's panic stricken face as the Grim Reaper's bony finger beckoned him on to his fate. Now as he watched, Billy knew it was wrong and that innocent people might die by his actions. But he didn't care, 'emotions were for women and children,' all that caring nonsense had been surgically removed from his psyche at birth when

the umbilical cord was callously torn from his body and an unconcerned mother had dumped him on the steps of the orphanage. 'Somebody had to pay!' He hoped the driver was dead. 'Kill 'em all!' This was his moment and he was enjoying the tremendous feeling of power.

He had made it happen and had ruthlessly started a chain of events that would have violent and untold consequences for many lives. He had chosen this spot with infinite care. This bend in the road was not just any bend. It had once been a crossroads, a busy coaching route, where highwaymen had lain in wait for unsuspecting victims. For many years in past times, the "Hanging Tree" at the crossroads, with its caged and rotting corpse, dangling from a chain, had been a grim warning to all and sundry at Devils Dyke. This ravaged land had been no-mans land, bandit country, where for over three hundred years lawless clans lived in fortified farms and towers and terrorised the English populace with their murderous border raids. They were known collectively as the "Border Reivers."

This troubled land had been akin to the "American Wild West."

He had climbed this magnificent oak with its great canopy, many times, using the muscular strength in his arms and legs to carry him right to the top, higher than any of the local boys had ever dared to go, where the tree ran straight and tall, with virtually no hand or foot holds. The panoramic views from this vantage point gave him sight of the Cheviot Hills in the far distance and backwards across to the North Sea. Clinging like an ape, breathless at the top, he felt as if this was his personal tree, he owned it, Up here on a bright and windy day he had swung precariously in the stiff breeze, his back arched away from the tree and, barely holding on with one hand, with the spike of his heavy black jack-knife in the other, he had carved his initials, deep into the bark for all time.

He had tamed it, and it held an incredible fascination for him, not least because only last summer, along with the other orphanage kids, he had been present when Councillor Binks had organised the placing of a large boulder of local stone, in the lay-by, near the Hanging Tree, but also because *he* was Billy Turpin, bearing the surname of a famous highwayman (the only gift his mother had bestowed on him) so to his impressionable mind, this historical, living landmark held a special, deeper, meaning. For all his pathetic, start in life, discarded in an old basket, like so much unwanted rubbish, he had grown up big and

strong, like a straight young sapling from this very tree. 'He was going to be a mighty oak!'

This was when the original idea had struck like a hammer blow. He was the oldest orphan present at the ceremony, virtually a grown man, and whilst the others were listening with mouths open wide, awe-struck, to the pompous speeches, he was plotting his first audacious ambush. This would set him above the other young tearaways and petty thieves in the district and show everybody that he could plan and execute a daring robbery. His clever, manipulative brain told him that with a willingness to succeed at all costs, and with no stupid morals to hinder or hold him back, he could lie and cheat and have everything he had ever wanted in life. In the event, providence seemed inclined to agree with him.

The portly Councillor had finished his boring prattle and was dramatically whipping away the red velvet cover to expose the carved message they were all here to witness. The boulder was set in a concrete base and was approximately three feet tall. The top surface was cut at an angle and had been dressed and polished smooth, and bore an inscription which was cut deeply into the granite by a local stonemason.

Councillor Binks, who thought of himself as a poet, had composed the stern message as a grim warning to all delinquents and near-dowells.

It read:

'The Hanging Tree'

(Ancient Monument to The King's Lawful Justice.)

'They all rush past the Hanging Tree

The good and the bad have abandoned me

Autumn leaves have withered and gone

And ere I swings for the deeds I done!'

Billy was already a young criminal. He had been in and out of trouble with the police since a very early age. They all knew him at the police station. He cared nothing for authority. Now he was moving on to bigger things! This visit to the Hanging Tree, organised by the Council, was meant as a thoughtful lesson for the young, but to him it had the opposite effect. It inspired him to work out a way of stopping a fast driven motorcar - dead in its tracks, and to incapacitate the occupants whilst he collected his spoils.

He could hold the power of life and death. In this moment he knew he could be, and do, anything he chose. He had a sharp mind and could carve out his own way, not relying on others. He made himself a secret vow. 'I'm going to be wealthy and have all the good things in life, I am going to have the lot, by my own hands and my own brain power, aye, even if I have to kill to get it, and God help anybody who tries to stop me!' He patted the inside pocket of his coat where he kept the letter that never left his side, the letter that had inspired him to hate the world and everyone in it, and in particular, the Parkers, living close by, 'They were in for a big surprise and they'd wonder what'd hit 'em!' This letter had come as a complete shock, out of the blue on his sixteenth birthday. Its contents had twisted his brain and triggered off the mechanism that was to turn him from an awkward, stubborn malcontent into a cunning psychopathic killer. He had been dealt a cruel blow from the beginning and had no family, no one on this earth to call his own. 'He would get even and make his absent father pay heavily for his sixteen years of solitude and misery.'

The strange letter was from a woman he had never met but who claimed to be his real mother, and from the contents he had no reason to doubt it. Unmarried and pregnant and rejected by his father, she had abandoned him at birth.

In the letter she kept her own identity secret but vengefully named the father as Thomas Parker. If her son were to try and seek her out she would deny everything. She believed his father would do likewise as he was now married with a family of his own, being the grocer at Norbridge village. The letter went on that he should change his ways now that he was virtually a grown man and should look to the future and put his unhappy past behind him. 'Fat chance of that!'

But now was not the time for reflection. He had to act quickly. Steam and smoke was hissing from all around the wreckage of the crumpled luxury car. Billy jumped up, slyly wiped the stinging rain from his eyes and looked around for any sign of interference. There was none, he had timed his intervention to perfection. The road was never too busy at this late hour. He warily approached the crash site. The engine had cut out and as he listened to the sudden silence he could hear a radio blaring from inside. Sparks were appearing from beneath the mangled car's radiator and something which looked suspiciously like petrol was oozing out from beneath the shattered engine.

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In the dim light he could see a man's shape hunched over the steering wheel. The man was not moving and appeared to be dead or unconscious. There was no one else in the vehicle, and this car was clearly a write off. All the windows were shattered. The impact had caused the long front of the car to concertina and the ditch was full of metal and glass.

Billy's intention had been simple, stop a car and grab anything of value that he could carry away and sell for drink or drugs.

Seeing the driver incapacitated, he carefully inserted his arm through a broken window. The force of the impact had jammed the doors, so he forced open the offside rear door with the big old carpenter's screwdriver he had filched from Charlie, the orphanage's handyman, and looked around for his loot. His nostrils were instantly assailed by the smell of newness, from the car's swish, grey leather interior. It smelt of money and lots of it! He had expected a briefcase or a bag of some description on the back seat, but there was nothing except a religious magazine, bearing Christ on the Cross to its cover, so he slid his hand into the inside pocket of the injured man's jacket. That person emitted a low moan and stirred. Billy looked up in alarm as the smoke and sparks increased. He had to be quick as the whole lot was about to go up.

The injured man opened his eyes and starred straight at Billy. "O God, thank you... thank you my friend!"

'The stupid fool thinks I have come to rescue him' thought Billy, as the man tried to sit upright. He could not move. The foot pedal gripped his foot.

In an instant the lad's quick brain was working overtime. He now saw a better way to capitalise on his costly 'oil' investment.

"Don't worry I'll soon have you out of here" he said, as he coolly prised open the driver's door with his wide, flat-bladed implement. Roughly shoving his left arm behind the driver's back, he half lifted, half carried the semi comatose victim out of the smouldering wreckage. Luckily the man's feet came free and they both slid backwards into the ditch. Billy, being a strongly built teenager was able to scramble out, wet through and covered in mud and with bits of broken glass clutching at his sleeves.

He then yanked the driver out of the ditch by brute force and dragged him to safety, just as the car burst into flames. At the bend there was a wider strip of grassy land and it was there that Billy laid Frank Mortimer whilst he ran for assistance.

2... *the victim*

The Norbridge Orphanage was only a half-mile away through the dark forbidding woodland and across a shadowy field but as Billy ran that night with the wind whistling through his ears, it seemed like forever, His lungs were bursting as he made his last dash.

The orphanage, with its three tall chimneys, stood in splendid isolation in its own grounds. The approach was from a long, untidy gravel driveway and Billy now passed through the entrance, pushing aside the great rusting iron gates that Charlie never locked. The house was in darkness as all inhabitants normally retired early to conserve electricity and fuel.

Originally the rambling house had been built as a fitting Manor for the Norbridge Village Squire but he had long since died and after a period of neglect it had been acquired by the Borough Council, repaired on a shoestring budget and converted into a home for a dozen or so needy children.

Mary Bundy was a fidgety little scrap of a woman, in her late forties. Her once pleasant, elfin face had taken on a permanently frowsty appearance and her world-weary pinched-eyes had almost vanished into deep sockets. She didn't enjoy life much and enjoyed the children in her care even less. She was Matron of the orphanage, had been, for two decades. She had an understanding with the chair of the Borough Council, Councillor George Binks. In her younger days she had enjoyed a brief fling with him but he had shown no real interest in getting hitched, not to her at any rate. 'His loss.' Thought Mary. 'She could have made him a good wife.' Instead his mind had turned to a younger, more nubile woman, a voluptuous, leggy blond, whom he eventually married and who turned into a nagging-empty-headed shrew. He was always glad to be on council duty, away from her smothering ways.

Mary had buried her disappointment and the good Councillor Binks had used his influence to get her the job of Matron. It was

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probably guilt on his part for leading her on, but he was making amends. She had heard vague rumours of him having an illegitimate son by a young woman of this locality, but that the woman concerned had been quite content with the arrangement and had kept his secret to herself. Also, as in so many small rural communities where everyone knew their neighbour's business, often better than their own, there had been gossip of Councillor Binks taking bribes over one or two dodgy deals, and that he was only in local politics for what he could get out of it by way of perks, not being averse to helping wealthy business men get planning permission for doubtful developments.

So she did not hesitate to enlist his help when the time was ripe. He willingly agreed.

The two of them hatched out a plan whereby he would do the required spot checks on the orphanage but would always tip her off well in advance so she could prepare for the visiting officials. This private arrangement also applied to council grants. Binks would use his influence to secure the best possible funding and Mary would always see he was financially rewarded, privately, for his efforts. This had worked well, because in spite of malicious rumour and innuendo, George Binks was known and liked and had very little opposition at election time over the years. As he grew older he had become very fat and jolly from his good eating and drinking. Council largesse had suited him well.

Consequently at the orphanage there was unusual activity on visiting day and the kids were cajoled and scolded into scrubbing floors and tidying rooms so that everything looked half way decent for the important personages.

Chipped and cracked crockery and cutlery had to be bundled away - to be replaced by best ware; it was then carefully re-packed again afterwards. This was Mary's window dressing. The special pieces of furniture that were covered over and stored out of sight on the upper floor were brought down and positioned to greatest advantage in the main rooms. Mary had done this exercise so often that she now had the process off by heart. Charlie Watson was her helpmate and general dogsbody. Strictly speaking, he was not her lover, but as the occasion demanded, or rather as Matron demanded, he filled a certain need. 'He would do what he was told or be out on his ear!' This small woman ruled her little fiefdom with an iron will, and the orphans lived in dread of her regular tongue-lashings. The

Institute also relied on handouts gifted by various charities. Mary Bundy let it be known that she could never make ends meet. This was true, although partly because for many years she had been secretly hiving off as much as possible into her own private pension fund. Her young charges were permanently kept ill fed and in rags to justify her claims.

Lights came on in the hallway and Matron answered Billy's door banging with her usual frown. Standing there, wearing her hairnet and clad in a worn old dressing gown and carpet slippers, she huffily surveyed his dishevelled countenance.

"I see you've been at choir practice again," she snorted sarcastically.

His clothes tonight though were a good deal more wet, dirty and disgusting than usual and he appeared to be having trouble catching his breath as he straightened up and tried to answer her, whilst at the same time wiping the back of a muddy hand across his face.

"Can you not stand upright?" She asked, still indignant, at his scruffiness. "Look at the filthy state of your clothes! And isn't it about time you settled in a job. You're a grown man now. We can't keep you forever you know, you'll have to leave soon! And the sooner the better." She muttered under her breath.

"Blast you ma!" He screamed truculently, "Just get Charlie...quick woman! And stop gabbling, there's an injured man, been in a crash at Devils Dyke, his car's hit the Hanging Tree, and he needs help...and phone for an ambulance...please...*please for God's sake!*" A hoarse wheedling tone crept into his voice as he made this last plea.

Charlie, hearing his name being called, limped into the narrow hallway, his arthritic left knee becoming much more evident as he hastened to Billy's urgent demands.

"I'm here." He said. "What's the blathering about?" He listened intently to Billy's urgent request for assistance. "Okay, just let me get my coat." He turned back and soon returned in jacket and flat cap and with a thick woollen blanket tucked under his arm.

Billy was increasingly nervous as they both neared the dyke, in case a passing Samaritan had stolen his victim and spirited him away, but all was as he had left it, with the car still smouldering and the man laid out on the verge as though dead.

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Charlie bent over the driver and checked his pulse. "Seems he's still with us Billy... did you pull him out of that mess all by yourself?" He enquired incredulously, taking in the scene.

"Of course he did!" This weak voice came from deep down in the victim's throat. "Wonderful, that lad is...he saved my life...I was as good as dead till he pulled me out!"

"What's your name son?"

"Err...Billy...Billy Turpin."

"I'm Frank Mortimer...and I'll...I'll never forget what you did for me." He croaked.

"Don't try and talk." Said Charlie, as he placed his blanket over the man. "You just rest and the ambulance will have you back in the warmth in no time."

Billy bent his head lower to hear Frank speak.

"Just...Just tell me where you live and I'll be in touch," muttered Frank weakly, as the ambulance hove into view.

"I'm at the Norbridge Orphanage," said Billy, self-consciously. 'Things could be different for him from now on if the man survived and remembered to keep his word.'

Billy had several days to bask in the warm glow of 'Hero' at the Orphanage.

"That'll show that old cow of a matron." He said to his crowd of young admirers. And show her he had. But instead of denying his undoubted bravery in the face of danger, she made him an example to the others in her care. "You can all learn a lot from Billy, that man is out of hospital and is coming to see us, He's quite well to do, shouldn't wonder if we don't get an endowment out of this." She positively glowed at Billy in a very unhealthy manner and made him feel intensely uncomfortable.

Of course Matron had another agenda, which she put into action quite quickly. Calling Charlie into her dingy office she bade him close the door and sit down while she stood looking over him in a dominant pose, arms akimbo.

"Now listen to me Charlie Watson."

He gazed up in some alarm.

"What Billy did the other night could have a big benefit for all of us if you do as I say." She stopped talking while she rubbed scales off her sticky left hand down the front of her apron. She had just been gutting a fresh trout she had haggled from a local poacher. (Needless to say, the children would see none of this food; it was for destined for her own supper.)

"That injured driver, Frank Mortimer, has spoken to me on the phone. He is out of hospital and got away with a bit of concussion. He will be visiting us shortly and this is what you must do."

She outlined her scheme. "This man feels he owes a big debt of gratitude to Billy and wants to do something substantial for him. He will undoubtedly remember very little of that night. Crash victims seldom do." She paused for breath.

"This is the important bit. *You* dragged him out of that blazing car! *You* got him to safety, and *you* deserve all the credit! Not Billy Turpin. He is a no good thieving little tow-rag who will probably end up the same way as his useless, invisible mother, who dumped him on our door-step as a baby."

Charlie was dumbfounded; he could not believe what he was hearing. 'How could he steal Billy's bit of credit?'

Mary Bundy would brook no argument. "You'll do it Charlie, and we'll have the money instead. *Yes*, Billy went along and helped you but that is all he did, *he* was just your assistant." She gave him one of her knowing looks that froze Charlie's loins and made him feel two foot tall. "Everybody knows Billy is a thief and a liar. You can do it, believe me. Now, I'll send Billy on an errand into the village just before this man gets here. We must not let him know when Frank Mortimer is due to arrive. Leave it all to me. I'll do the thinking for the both of us, as usual." She treated him to a condescending smile. "Thinking is not your forte, is it?"

Charlie could only suck hard on his remaining cigarette stub and nod miserably. Mary was right, she knew him better than he knew himself. After many years of dull servitude he hadn't got the energy to complain. "One day though, he thought. She might be in for a surprise. You shouldn't take people for granted."