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The American Boy

Written by Andrew Taylor

Published by Flamingo

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THE AMERICAN BOY

Andrew Taylor





Flamingo
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Flamingo
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB

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www.**fire**and**water**.com

Published by Flamingo 2003
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 710961 X

Typeset in Ehrhardt by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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I

We owe respect to the living, Voltaire tells us in his *Première Lettre sur Oedipe*, but to the dead we owe only truth. The truth is that there are days when the world changes, and a man does not notice because his mind is on his own affairs.

I first saw Sophia Frant shortly before midday on Wednesday the 8th of September, 1819. She was leaving the house in Stoke Newington, and for a moment she was framed in the doorway as though in a picture. Something in the shadows of the hall behind her had made her pause, a word spoken, perhaps, or an unexpected movement.

What struck me first were the eyes, which were large and blue. Then other details lodged in my memory like burrs on a coat. She was neither tall nor short, with well-shaped, regular features and a pale complexion. She wore an elaborate cottage bonnet, decorated with flowers. Her dress had a white skirt, puffed sleeves and a pale blue bodice, the latter matching the leather slipper peeping beneath the hem of her skirt. In her left hand she carried a pair of white gloves and a small reticule.

I heard the clatter of the footman leaping down from the box of the carriage, and the rattle as he let down the steps. A stout middle-aged man in black joined the lady on the doorstep and gave her his arm as they strolled towards the carriage. They did not look at me. On either side of the path from the house to the road were miniature shrubberies enclosed by railings. I felt faint, and I held on to one of the uprights of the railings at the front.

"Indeed, madam," the man said, as though continuing a conversation begun in the house, "our situation is quite rural and the air is notably healthy."

The lady glanced at me and smiled. This so surprised me that I failed to bow. The footman opened the door of the carriage. The stout man handed her in.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured. "You have been very patient."

He bowed over her hand. "Not at all, madam. Pray give my compliments to Mr Frant."

I stood there like a booby. The footman closed the door, put up the steps and climbed up to his seat. The lacquered woodwork of the carriage was painted blue and the gilt wheels were so clean they hurt your eyes.

The coachman unwound the reins from the whipstock. He cracked his whip, and the pair of matching bays, as glossy as the coachman's top hat, jingled down the road towards the High-street. The stout man held up his hand in not so much a wave as a blessing. When he turned back to the house, his gaze flicked towards me.

I let go of the railing and whipped off my hat. "Mr Bransby? That is, have I the honour –?"

"Yes, you have." He stared at me with pale blue eyes partly masked by pink, puffy lids. "What do you want with me?"

"My name is Shield, sir. Thomas Shield. My aunt, Mrs Reynolds, wrote to you, and you were kind enough to say –"

"Yes, yes." The Reverend Mr Bransby held out a finger for me to shake. He stared me over, running his eyes from head to toe. "You're not at all like her."

He led me up the path and through the open door into the panelled hall beyond. From somewhere in the building came the sound of chanting voices. He opened a door on the right and went into a room fitted out as a library, with a Turkey carpet and two windows overlooking the road. He sat down heavily in the chair behind the desk, stretched out his legs and pushed two stubby fingers into his right-hand waistcoat pocket.

"You look fagged."

"I walked from London, sir. It was warm work."

"Sit down." He took out an ivory snuff-box, helped himself to a pinch and sneezed into a handkerchief spotted with brown stains. "So you want a position, hey?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Mrs Reynolds tells me that there are at least two good reasons why you are entirely unsuitable for any post I might be able to offer you."

"If you would permit me, I would endeavour to explain."

"Some would say that facts explain themselves. You left your last position without a reference. And, more recently, if I understand your aunt aright, you have been the next best thing to a Bedlamite."

"I cannot deny either charge, sir. But there were reasons for my behaviour, and there are reasons why those episodes happened and why they will not happen again."

"You have two minutes in which to convince me."

"Sir, my father was an apothecary in the town of Rosington. His practice prospered, and one of his patrons was a canon of the cathedral, who presented me to a vacancy at the grammar school. When I left there, I matriculated at Jesus College, Cambridge."

"You held a scholarship there?"

"No, sir. My father assisted me. He knew I had no aptitude for the apothecary's trade and he intended me eventually to take holy orders. Unfortunately, near the end of my first year, he died of a putrid fever, and his affairs were found to be much embarrassed, so I left the university without taking my degree."

"What of your mother?"

"She had died when I was a lad. But the master of the grammar school, who had known me as a boy, gave me a job as an assistant usher, teaching the younger boys. All went well for a few years, but, alas, he died and his successor did not look so kindly on me." I hesitated, for the master had a daughter named Fanny, the memory of whom still brought me pain. "We disagreed, sir – that was the long and the short of it. I said foolish things I instantly regretted."

"As is usually the case," Bransby said.

"It was then April 1815, and I fell in with a recruiting sergeant."

He took another pinch of snuff. "Doubtless he made you so drunk that you practically snatched the King's shilling from his hand and went off to fight the monster Bonaparte single-handed. Well, sir, you have given me ample proof that you are a foolish, headstrong young

man who has a belligerent nature and cannot hold his liquor. And now shall we come to Bedlam?"

I squeezed the thick brim of my hat until it bent under the pressure. "Sir, I was never there in my life."

He scowled. "Mrs Reynolds writes that you were placed under restraint, and lived for a while in the care of a doctor. Whether in Bedlam itself or not is immaterial. How came you to be in such a state?"

"Many men had the misfortune to be wounded in the late war. It so happened that I was wounded in my mind as well as in my body."

"Wounded in the mind? You sound like a school miss with the vapours. Why not speak plainly? Your wits were disordered."

"I was ill, sir. Like one with a fever. I acted imprudently."

"Imprudent? Good God, is that what you call it? I understand you threw your Waterloo Medal at an officer of the Guards in Rotten-row."

"I regret it excessively, sir."

He sneezed, and his little eyes watered. "It is true that your aunt, Mrs Reynolds, was the best housekeeper my parents ever had. As a boy I never had any reason to doubt her veracity or indeed her kindness. But those two facts do not necessarily encourage me to allow a lunatic and a drunkard a position of authority over the boys entrusted to my care."

"Sir, I am neither of those things."

He glared at me. "A man, moreover, whose former employers will not speak for him."

"But my aunt speaks for me. If you know her, sir, you will know she would not do that lightly."

For a moment neither of us spoke. Through the open window came the clop of hooves from the road beyond. A fly swam noisily through the heavy air. I was slowly baking, basted in sweat in the oven of my own clothes. My black coat was too heavy for a day like this but it was the only one I had. I wore it buttoned to the throat to conceal the fact that I did not have a shirt beneath.

I stood up. "I must detain you no longer, sir."

"Be so good as to sit down. I have not concluded this conversation." Bransby picked up his eye glasses and twirled them between

finger and thumb. "I am persuaded to give you a trial." He spoke harshly, as if he had in mind a trial in a court of law. "I will provide you with your board and lodging for a quarter. I will also advance you a small sum of money so you may dress in a manner appropriate to a junior usher at this establishment. If your conduct is in any way unsatisfactory, you will leave at once. If all goes well, however, at the end of the three months, I may decide to renew the arrangement between us, perhaps on different terms. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ring the bell there. You will need refreshment before you return to London."

I stood up again and tugged the rope on the left of the fireplace.

"Tell me," he added, without any change of tone, "is Mrs Reynolds dying?"

I felt tears prick my eyelids. I said, "She does not confide in me, but she grows weaker daily."

"I am sorry to hear it. She has a small annuity, I collect? You must not mind me if I am blunt. It is as well for us to be frank about such matters."

There is a thin line between frankness and brutality. I never knew on which side of the line Bransby stood. I heard a tap on the door.

"Enter!" cried Mr Bransby.

I turned, expecting a servant in answer to the bell. Instead a small, neat boy slipped into the room.

"Ah, Allan. Good morning."

"Good morning, sir."

He and Bransby shook hands.

"Make your bow to Mr Shield, Allan," Bransby told him. "You will be seeing more of him in the weeks to come."

Allan glanced at me and obeyed. He was a well-made child with large, bright eyes and a high forehead. In his hand was a letter.

"Are Mr and Mrs Allan quite well?" Bransby inquired.

"Yes, sir. My father asked me to present his compliments, and to give you this."

Bransby took the letter, glanced at the superscription and dropped

it on the desk. "I trust you will apply yourself with extra force after this long holiday. Idleness does not become you."

"No, sir."

"*Adde quod ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes*." He prodded the boy in the chest. "Continue and construe."

"I regret, sir, I cannot."

Bransby boxed the lad's ears with casual efficiency. He turned to me. "Eh, Mr Shield? I need not ask you to construe, but perhaps you would be so good as to complete the sentence?"

"*Emollit mores nec sinit esse feros*. Add that to have studied the liberal arts with assiduity refines one's manners and does not allow them to be coarse."

"You see, Allan? Mr Shield was wont to mind his book. *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, book the second. He knows his Ovid and so shall you."

When we were alone, Bransby wiped fragments of snuff from his nostrils with a large, stained handkerchief. "One must always show them who is master, Shield," he said. "Remember that. Kindness is all very well but it don't answer in the long run. Take young Edgar Allan, for example. The boy has parts, there is no denying it. But his parents indulge him. I shudder to think where such as he would be without due chastisement. Spare the rod, sir, and spoil the child."

So it was that, in the space of a few minutes, I found a respectable position, gained a new roof over my head, and encountered for the first time both Mrs Frant and the boy Allan. Though I marked a slight but unfamiliar twang in his accent, I did not then realise that Allan was American.

Nor did I realise that Mrs Frant and Edgar Allan would lead me, step by step, towards the dark heart of a labyrinth, to a place of terrible secrets and the worst of crimes.