

Any Old Iron

by

Andrew Barrett

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Boom couldn't believe his luck.

He'd looked for treasure in his local territory around Rothwell and Outwood for years, and he always came back to the yard with rags, paper, and bones that fetched him a few pennies if he was lucky. But these days even that treasure had dried up; too many other people down on their luck and sinking into the rag and bone trade; or too many punters dragging their own stuff to the merchants where they could get a better price. Thieves and scallywags took a goodly portion too. Boom was a rag and bone man just as his father had been, and just as his grandfather had been; he had pride – he did the job properly, and with respect. Boom never mixed with his rivals; would never stoop to their wicked level. He and Admiral trawled the streets in rain and shine, slowly filling up the cart with the stuff folk didn't want.

Admiral, an ex-dray horse - dumb as a brick but just as tough and resilient, pulled him along, the sound of his hooves hitting cobbles grew hypnotic and before he realised where he was, Boom had strayed from his own well-worn patch that he'd already stripped bare. He

found himself miles away in a smoky, rundown village called Woodlesford. It had a pub, a church, a Post Office-cum-shop, and a scattering of cottages surrounding a few rows of brick terraced houses.

Boom ladled water from a bucket that gently swayed, suspended by a hook from the seat next to him. He sipped and let Admiral walk him down the lane and into the network of terraced houses in the village centre. The cottages and the outlying farms could wait; get the booty first he told himself, and work your way steadily outwards. The lane grew more narrow, cobbled, and once the houses appeared at each side, Admiral's hoof-falls echoed around the smoke-stained red bricks.

The old wives scrubbed at their doorsteps with donkey stone, or strung washing along lines stretched across back yards. Dogs barked and one or two kiddies squealed in the puddles of yesterday's rain with whips and spinning tops, or played hopscotch where the cobbles were dry enough.

"Any old iron," Boom yelled. Admiral's ears pricked but he kept slogging along, pulling the near empty cart as though it were nothing. Grit crunched

under the steel-banded wheels. A woman appeared at her door, wiping her hands on a pinny. She waved and called, “Ayup, mister.” Boom gently tugged on the reins and Admiral stopped.

He nudged his cap as a greeting. “What ya got, love?”

“Hope you’re feeling strong.”

Boom leapt down, his old pocket watch banged against his chest as he landed. He let himself into the yard, ducked beneath a line of wet clothes, and followed her into the relative coolness of the house. The flagstones were still wet where she’d been scrubbing them, and the plain wooden chairs were neatly stacked atop the kitchen table. A tin bath on hooks dangled above the stove waiting for Sunday, and the queue behind father for the family’s weekly wash.

“Don’t see many o’ your sort round here,” she said.

“Why’s that then?” Could this be it, he wondered. Could this be the big one, the one that saw him rich at last? He said this to himself each and every time he entered someone’s house, and over the past

thirty odd years, he'd entered thousands of homes. And still he was just a poor rag and bone man.

She shrugged, "No idea, they come once, and then..." she shrugged again. "P'haps it's too dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" Boom stared at her, and then he saw she was smiling, and he began to laugh. "You nearly had me there, missus."

The woman smirked. "Mangle," she pointed to the pantry. By the door was a large cast iron mangle that lurched to one side. "Been repaired more times than I can count," she said. "Any road, it's finally given out. Nearly killed me once too often."

This, he thought, with a smile of resignation, was not 'the big one'. Again. "I'll take it, lass."

"Half a crown," she held out her hand.

Boom sighed, here we go. Why couldn't folk just hand him gold and silver! It's what his dad always used to say. You need to get them while they're vulnerable. Vulnerable ones give stuff away without messing about. "Sixpence."

"Florin," she said.

“A shilling.” He winked at her. “And a block of donkey stone.”

The woman blushed, stiffened at his informality. Then she slouched, “Go on, take it.”

And so he did.

Pickings around here in Woodlesford were far better than anywhere he’d travelled in several years. Often he’d end a fourteen-hour day with a near empty cart, but now, thanks to Woodlesford, he was already well over half full in just three hours. At this rate, he’d have to go back to the yard and make a second trip. And it’s not as though it was all worthless stuff either. There were plenty of valuable items; mostly cast iron, but some mild steel stuff too - bikes, pans, wash boards, and even a pair of old guns brought home and stashed after the war. They’d all weigh-in nicely. And he had at least ten pounds of rags – they were worth half a crown all by themselves! The point was, this week would be a bumper week for Boom, and his sullen heart lifted at the thought of bacon and proper eggs for a change. Bubble and squeak was lovely, but after eating it for three weeks, he was looking forward to a change.

Boom was occasionally fortunate, like he had been today, but his father was class; he'd never be as good as he was. He kept his father in an urn on the mantelpiece. Douglas was his name, and he'd made no secret of the fact that Boom was a disappointment to him. All apart from his voice, that was – hence the nick name. But he was no swindler, wasn't Boom, and that's what disappointed Douglas the most. "Prise it free from their cold bleedin' hands if ya have to," he'd said. Douglas had chalked up some mighty scores in his day, and he'd shown no remorse for some of the stunts he'd pulled, especially on gullible kids. He'd get them to hand over all sorts of family treasures while their mam and dad were out. But once he'd sealed the deal, with a balloon or two, or maybe a farthing, then, "The deal's done, boy! Ain't no going back." Apart from the urn, all Boom had left of his dad was the horse and cart, the pocket watch, and the bills in his name.

Admiral drifted on along the street as Boom gave this newly discovered place some thought. Only briefly did it cross his mind *why* it was such a bountiful place, why no one else had been along and raked it bare the

way he had. He wondered why he was so fortunate to come across a village this bountiful when it was so ruddy difficult to keep competition off your own patch! Why had no one ventured this way before? He decided not to dwell on it, not to punch lady fortune in the gob – another of his dad’s sayings.

Admiral stopped at the next street, and people were ready for him with old light fittings, clogs, lead pipe of various lengths and diameters; there was even a pair of iron gates and a bedstead that someone was chucking out. He could earn six shillings for those gates, no problem at all. And so far, all it had cost him was two bob, five balloons for the kiddies, and a couple of bars of donkey stone.

This bounty got Boom thinking. How nice it would be to come across a death. Ha, he laughed at his choice of words. He didn’t mean an actual death; what he meant was a house that needed emptying because of a death. Sometimes you could find some really valuable items in them, score big with some gold or silver that’s been hoarded away for years, for generations even. Medals were selling really well just now, especially

those from the Boar war. Those were the *real* treasures, not mangled mangles. But they were a rarity, those jobs. You got them once or twice in a lifetime if you were lucky. Family, see, they tend to get in there first and clear all the decent stuff, and if it wasn't them, then it was the undertakers accepting back-handers from dealers and merchants. Would be great if he could find an undertaker willing to be his partner.

He sighed and sipped more water as the street thinned around him. Admiral's hoof falls lost their echo and the grit crunching beneath the steel-banded wheels became almost imperceptible as cobbles changed to gravel and gravel became dirt and puddles.

Boom glanced over his shoulder at the clattering, swaying load of bric-a-brac and wondered if he should call it a day. He could squeeze a pint or two and a pork pie out of his pocket at The Midland before heading back home. But over the crest of a low hill he saw a cluster of grey buildings with smoke rising from a couple of chimneys. It was a farm, and it was the only one he could see, which meant it had plenty of land, which in turn meant it was probably laden with treasure. Behind

him Woodlesford town and the cloud of coal smoke it lived in, grew smaller, but he promised to visit there again over the next few days and maybe skirt the peripheral cottages next time, eager to soak up whatever they had to offer.

For now, he was content to let Admiral saunter towards the smell of coal fires and the sound of chickens, geese, and Guinea fowl coming from the farm yard.

The nearer he got, the more he noticed the fields. This time of year they should be sprouting barley or wheat, but they were all fallow, gone to weed, neglected. He wondered how the farmer managed to live with no crops to sell and no cattle that he could see or hear to butcher or take to market.

Before long, the wide lane split into two. Right led away towards Colton and Swillington, left went towards the farm, and the lane became considerably narrower, broken fences on both sides of a ditch. There was a name plate in faded red letters etched into a weathered board, the varnish of which was peeling in the sunshine.

Dead End Farm.

Boom snorted a laugh. But in truth he felt more than a little nervous. Dead End Farm. It wasn't something funny, that name. It might be geographically correct, but it sounded dismal. It sounded final. It seemed that Admiral wasn't so keen either. He uttered a deep grumble but for the time being, continued slowly along the rutted lane, head high, ears pricked.

The cart road seemed to go on and on, or maybe it was just that Boom was paying attention now; he was paying close attention. He didn't believe in ghosts or spirits, but he swallowed, and despite the fading heat of the sun, he pulled the collar up over his mucky neck. The light faded with each passing yard, and eventually thick black clouds hid the sun and lent an eerie feeling to his journey. It came in cool, and then it came in cold. And then Admiral just stopped walking. He snorted, ears twitching, and he jerked his head up and down, his reins slapping against his neck, brasses rattling.

“Easy, lad,” Boom soothed. He looked at the farm house, wondering if he should continue. And then he wondered why he was wary and what Admiral was so

nervous of. He laughed again, because he could think of nothing dangerous, nothing to be afraid of. But even the sound of his own laughter sounded weird, sounded scared, scary. It was just a run-down farmhouse, nothing so far out of the ordinary in this day and age. Lots of farmers were down on their luck these days. Actually, everyone was down on their luck these days, but farmers had a certain propensity for doing something about it – something fatal. Dead End farm, he mused.

Boom gritted his teeth and flicked the reins. Admiral was reluctant to obey but eventually set off again towards the darkening buildings, ears still pricked, guttural growl in his throat.

Anyway, Boom reasoned, even if he'd wanted to turn around and head home, he couldn't because the lane was far too narrow. Not that he wanted to head home, he argued, sticking out his chest. But if he *did* decide to turn around, say, on account of he'd got enough plunder for today and it was looking like rain anyway, he'd have to go fifty yards further, to where the lane opened out into the farm's stackyard. Very well, he decided, that's where he'd make the turn, and head home, because of the load

he already had. And because of the rain. No other reason. He'd be back tomorrow of course, once he'd plundered the rest of the houses and cottages Woodlesford had to offer.

But before he reached the stackyard, the clouds proved him right, and it began to rain. Fat lazy drops that turned the bare wooden seat Boom sat upon a dark lustre, made the water in his bucket dance, and turned the dusty lane muddy. The fat drops grew thin but came faster, until water ran from his cap as he reached the stackyard. Admiral grew more nervous, and Boom struggled to control him, raising his voice for the first time, and lashing out with the reins.

He pulled his coat tight around his chest, fastened the twine at his waste to keep out the worst of it. And then Admiral simply stopped.

Boom had a decision to make. To turn around and head back home, to enjoy bacon and proper eggs, or climb down and walk to the farmhouse door over yonder.

The door opened, and there was blackness inside.

Through the bouncing rain, Boom squinted, and saw a young lad, maybe ten or twelve years old appear in the doorway. The lad was smiling, and he beckoned Boom.

Inside was the treasure he'd sought. He just *knew* it. There would be silver cutlery, maybe antique vases, golden jewellery, or pocket watches. He had a feeling that this was his once in a lifetime chance. The lad smiled wide. Boom leapt down into the puddle-strewn mud. "Any old iron," he called. It sounded like 'Aeeolayon'.

The lad nodded. Nothing else, just nodded.

Boom strode towards the open door, a salesman's grin on his face intending to make the punters assured of a friendly professional transaction. The coins in his pocket rattled as he walked, and muddy water trickled inside his hobnailed boots. He grew colder, even as his anticipation grew more intense. But as he neared, his salesman's smile and his eagerness withered until he stood on the threshold, staring down at the pale-faced kid. "What you got, son?"

The boy stood aside. Boom looked back over his shoulder, and saw Admiral twitch. He stepped inside and the door closed behind him.

On the outside, the farm was decaying, buildings crumbling, guttering broken, weeds growing rampant. But in here, it smelled strange, like they'd been burning lime. It was neat and tidy, not so much clean, but very acceptable anyway. "What you got?" he asked again. And the reply made his heart sing.

"We got some silver. Knives an' forks. That kind of thing."

He looked at the boy, with his ashen face and his scabby knees, and his shiny shoes. "Where's your dad?"

"Dead."

The answer was flat, where Boom expected some remorse, there was nothing. Maybe his father beat him, and the kid was glad to be free. His hands grew cold, and so he stuffed them in his wet pockets. Outside, the wind sang to them both through missing roof tiles on the outbuildings. Admiral whinnied. "And your mam?"

The boy walked across the stone flags of the kitchen floor towards a doorway. “She’s asleep. Works nights.”

Boom reluctantly followed, segs tapping on the flags. Rain came hard at the windows. It was dark in here, and cold enough for him to see his breath. His enthusiasm for silver at little or no cost faded, evaporating quickly, and Boom began to feel unwell. “Silver you say?”

“Aye.”

“I have balloons aplenty for silver, boy.” He looked back at the door.

Usually when he was dealing with a kid, exchanging their parents’ valuables for balloons, the kid was anxious to see the merchandise, sometimes even talked him into giving away his entire stock of balloons. But this kid registered no interest at all. And although Boom noted it, it just didn’t stick. Maybe it was the thought of this actually being the ‘big one’ that stopped all other, more rational thought from getting through.

The lad opened the cellar door and a dim light crept into the kitchen. “It’s kept out of the way in the cellar.”

“Why in the cellar?”

“Hidden,” he turned his back on Boom and began walking down the steps, “from thieves.”

It made sense. Boom followed. The further he trod down the echoing stone steps, the colder he became. Outside, thunder rolled across the sky. At the foot of the steps, the boy picked up a Davy lamp from a cobwebbed shelf and turned a corner, cutting off direct light from Boom’s intended footfall.

Suddenly blind, he scraped his fingers long the bare walls, pulling webs and grit along with him. And then he stopped, panting, because he couldn’t even see the fading light from the kid’s lamp any more. Now he was in total blackness. And it was crushing. He held his breath. He heard nothing, but when he began breathing again, he could smell the dampness of the cellar but mixed with it, and overpowering it, was another smell. Sweat. Lots of it. And then he heard something, a raspy

kind of... breathing. Someone was standing right next to him, breathing stench across his damp face.

Boom's heart raced.

And when he pushed his trembling hand out into the darkness, it stopped against something soft. "Hello?" he whispered. There was no reply, just more breath. He swallowed and did his best to turn around without losing his balance.

And it was then that another smell came to him. It was blood.

Boom squinted in the darkness but it was no use, he could have had eyes closed for all the good... and then the light was suddenly back. It was the kid with his lamp. "Where've you—"

The sickle at his throat stopped him from saying another word. His eyes were wide and they searched the kid's face, but saw no emotion, no glint in his eye, nothing. Boom slowly turned his head and what he saw almost made him scream. He could still hear the storm outside, could even hear Admiral neighing in the yard, afraid. The face came right up to him. Its breath, like a

dense cloud, engulfed him, invaded him. He felt his heart banging inside hollow ribs.

The thing surveyed him, “You did well.”

The lad took the lamp back a pace or two but Boom was too foolish to even think of trying anything; he could see the sickle ready to arc into the side his neck if he did. The thing was a woman with matted greying hair, blackened skin from years of living in the dirt. Her nails were bloodied, as was her summer dress that swung in tatters across her torn knees, and lay in ribbons across her gouged chest. Her feet were bare, black and cracked. She coughed as though dying of pneumonia, right in Boom’s face, and the wheeze trailed off into an echo that seemed to stretch on for miles.

And then she also took a step back so she could see him easier. Her reddened eyes squinted against the light, head moving to and fro, arms waving slowly as though a breeze blew in her world. And then she stopped.

Boom gagged. “Lady,” his voice was a whisper. “Take what you wish, just let me be and I’ll be on my way. No need for unpleasantness.”

The woman peered at him up and down. As emotionless as the lad. Without taking her eyes off him, she reached out, grabbed the pocket watch and yanked it free from Boom's waistcoat. The movement made him jump and the sickle twitched. Boom grimaced.

She held the watch close to her, and her eyes slid shut as though giving gratitude to some deity. "This is it, lad. This is the one." She looked earnestly at the lad, and gave one almost imperceptible nod. And then she wept as the sickle swung. Boom and his head hit the dank floor simultaneously.

"Put his cart with all the others. Then go fetch grandad's ashes. I need to tell him I got it back."