

The Executioner's Sons

Synopsis:

Henry Tatersall has it all: a devoted wife, two sons who worship him, and a job he loves. And though it may seem odd that Henry's work uniform consists of a black mask and a large axe named Ol' Betsy, keep in mind that the year is 1483 and Henry is employed as an executioner in the Tower of London. Henry's career is on the "upswing"; he has already mastered the techniques for beheading and hanging and has recently been certified to disembowel and draw-and-quarter. The Head Executioner is ready to retire and Henry is the favored contender to replace him. Then King Edward IV of England dies, and his two young sons, Edward V and Richard, Duke of York, are brought to the Tower for safekeeping until Edward's coronation. Henry's sons, Thomas and John, quickly befriend the young princes while Henry, likewise, strikes up a friendship of sorts with their guardian, Lord Hastings. But these are dangerous times and there are men who would claim the Throne of England for themselves, including the princes' uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. As cries of treason fill the air, Henry finds himself forced to choose between love and loyalty, friendship and duty... a choice that will alter his life – and history – forever.

Setting: The Tower of London, 1483.

Set: The main room of the Tatersall home, the Tower Green, and an Execution chamber.

Cast Size: 8 (one woman, three men, four boys)

Cast:

Henry Tatersall – a big bear of a man in his early thirties, Henry is an executioner in the Tower of London. Henry's career choice, along with his heirloom axe, Ol' Betsy, have been a Tatersall tradition ever since "the first John Tatersall cleaved the head of William Wallace from its body" in 1305. Henry is determined to be promoted to Head Executioner and to make his ancestors proud... no matter what.

Kate Tatersall – a strong, high-spirited Irishwoman in her late twenties and Henry's wife. Kate loves her husband in spite of his "unfortunate" English heritage (of which she never fails to remind him) and is more than a match for him in wits and strength.

Thomas Tatersall – Henry and Kate's ten-year-old son. Thomas is determined to be as great an executioner as his father and can't wait for the day when Ol' Betsy becomes his...

John Tatersall – Henry and Kate's seven-year-old son. Johnny loves playing "Executioner" with his brother Thomas. He just wishes that every once in a while *he* could be the one holding the axe...

Edward V – the eleven-year-old son of the late King and next in line to the throne. Edward has been brought to the Tower to await his coronation and quickly befriends the Tatersall boys.

Richard, Duke of York – Edward's eight-year-old brother.

Lord Hastings – thirties; friend of the late King. Hastings has promised to keep an eye on the young princes and ensure their safety and he fully intends to keep it – or die trying.

Duke of Gloucester – the late King's brother, mid-thirties. Gloucester has vowed to protect his nephew Edward V, but in reality he eyes the throne for himself.

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING: *London, 1483. The main room of a very humble lodging found within the fortress known as the Tower of London. The room's furnishings consist of a rough-hewn wooden table with two benches on either side, as well as a chair in front of the fireplace, which occupies one wall of the room. The fireplace is multifunctional, serving as a source of light, heat and, of course, cooking. Opposite the fireplace is a curtained partition, which leads to the homes only sleeping quarters. Upstage center is a low door, the only entrance.*

AT RISE: *Night. KATE, the mistress of the house, is sitting in the chair before a dying fire, sleeping. Slowly, the door behind her creaks opens and HENRY enters. He is wearing an executioner's mask and carrying a huge axe. He slowly approaches the fire. KATE stirs, and then sees him.*

KATE

What? Are you just getting in?

HENRY

Aye. Another late night.

(He takes off his mask and places his axe in its proper bracket over the fireplace.)

KATE

Work's been keeping you busy lately.

HENRY

(Shrugging)

You know how it is. Whenever a King is on his deathbed business seems to pick up.

KATE

He's dying, then, Edward the Fourth?

HENRY

So says the word on the street.

KATE

'Tis a shame – he with those two young boys to raise.

HENRY

I don't suppose he'll have a problem finding someone to raise them. What are you doing sitting in that chair?

KATE

What do you think I'm doing, you big lummoxx? I was waiting for you to come home.

HENRY

Ain't we got a bed for you to wait in?

KATE

That we do – and both your sons are right now in it. First it was Wee Johnny, who woke with a bad dream, and then it was Thomas thinking he heard a mouse.

HENRY

Now don't be telling me, woman, that any son of mine is afraid of a mouse?

KATE

And why shouldn't he be, when I've seen his father with me own two eyes jump up on that bench there whenever one crosses his path?

HENRY

You're daft.

KATE

Daft, is it?

HENRY

Aye.

KATE

Well, it must be true, for me dear old Mum said the same thing to me when I told her me choice in husbands. "Kathleen O'Connor!" she says, "it's daft you are, girl, to be marrying the likes of Henry Tatersall. Why, that man will bring you to no good, and him an Englishman to boot..."

(KATE finds herself caught in a big hug and lifted off the floor.)

KATE (cont.)

What are you doing? Put me down, you lunker, before you're waking the boys!

HENRY

Tell me you love me.

KATE

Ach! Now who's the daft one? Put me down.

HENRY

Not until you tell me.

KATE

It's true, then, the rumor that you were dropped on your head as a wee babe?

(HENRY gives her a squeeze.)

HENRY

Tell me!

KATE

All right, all right! I love you. I love you, you big, clumsy mouse-fearing oaf.

(HENRY lowers her in his arms and they kiss tenderly, passionately.)

HENRY

And I love you, my beautiful Kate-of-Kate's.

KATE

I'll fix you something to eat. You must be half-starved.

HENRY

That I am.

(KATE busies herself about the fireplace.)

KATE

So who was it that kept you so late? Anyone I know? Anyone famous?

HENRY

Ain't it always the famous ones that keep a man up 'til all hours of the night?

KATE

So who was it then?

HENRY

Some bloke named Lord Something-or-other. I didn't catch it all.

KATE

Henry!

HENRY

Well there's no point in becoming friends with them, Katy.

KATE

But what am I to tell me friends when they ask me "Who did Henry kill last night?" I can't very well say "Lord Something-or-other." They'll think I made it up. Really, Henry...

HENRY

All right, all right, stop your nagging, woman. Next time I'll pay more attention. Next time I'll say, "Pardon me, sir, but before I cut off your head, would you mind telling me your name in full so that my good wife will be able to brag about your death to her friends." Will that suit you?

KATE

So it was a beheading, was it?

HENRY

Aye.

KATE

Well, better that than a disembowelment, I suppose. I know you hate the mess and it's a nightmare I have trying to get the blood out of your clothes. I've broken many a rock with the effort.

(As KATE sets the table, HENRY crosses to the fireplace and gently caresses his axe.)

HENRY

They would never order a draw and quarter or disembowelment at night. Nor a hanging, for that matter. They require the proper atmosphere – a crowd of people and all that. The Romans had the same philosophy with their gladiators. No point in putting them out there to be killed if nobody's watching. But a beheading is different. A beheading is more intimate, more personal. Just the Executioner and the criminal together in a room... oh, there may be a few stouthearted souls in attendance, but not many. Everyone is all quiet and hushed and waiting. Why, it's almost religious, like being in Church. Then the gentleman or lady, whichever the case may be, very gently and obligingly lay their neck on the block...

(HENRY *picks his axe off the bracket.*)

HENRY (cont.)

... and I grab Ol' Betsy here, nice and firm, and quick give her the old heave-ho and...

(*He buries the axe into the table. KATE barely notices.*)

... BLAM! Goodbye, Merry Old England. One stroke and it's over. Ol' Betsy here never misses, do you girl?

(*He replaces the axe in its bracket.*)

What I don't understand is why they always want it done in the middle of the night. It seems a bit unChristian to wake a fellow up from a sound sleep just to cut his head off. Why not give the poor bloke a full eight hours is what I say.

(KATE *places a bowl of porridge on the table.*)

KATE

Here. Eat.

(HENRY *moves to the table and sits.*)

Maybe they're wanting to keep it a secret.

HENRY

(*Eating*)

Hmm? What's that?

KATE

Maybe that's why you're never knowing whose head it is you've lopped off. Maybe they're not telling you on purpose.

HENRY

Now why on God's green earth would they do that?

(KATE *shrugs.*)

KATE

I'm thinking maybe these so-called criminals are really innocent.

(HENRY *slams a fist down n the table.*)

HENRY

Dammit, woman! What are you about?

KATE

(Looking toward the bedroom)

Shhh!

HENRY

Are you calling me a murderer now? My own wife? Why, I've never executed an innocent person in my life. Not me, nor my father before me, nor his father before him. Ever since the first John Tattersall picked up Ol' Betsy there almost two hundred years ago and cleaved the head of William Wallace from its body, the Tattersall name has been synonymous with the administration of the King's justice.

KATE

King's justice? Since when is it that the King of England – or any Englishman, for that matter – is knowing about *justice*?

HENRY

Ah, here we go. Spoken like a true Irish mick.

KATE

Watch who you're calling a mick, boy-o. You thought well enough of this one to marry her.

HENRY

Aye, but that was only out of Christian charity.

KATE

Christian *what*?

HENRY

Well, *someone* had to save you from those Irish savages...

KATE

Jesus, Mary and Joseph give me strength not to kill the man.

HENRY

(Ignoring her)

...from years of toiling in the heather and heath...

KATE

That's *Scotland*, you dunderhead!

HENRY

Oh, that's right. 'Twas the *peat bogs* I saved you from...

(KATE *grabs a knife off the table and threatens him with it.*)

KATE

Who you calling a *boggy*, boy?

HENRY

(*Backing away*)

Now, Katy...

KATE

One more word against the Irish, little man, and you'll be the one with your bowels hanging out.

HENRY

Put the knife down, now.

KATE

We were doing fine before you English came with your *justice* and by the grace of St. Patrick we'll be doing fine again once we toss you back across the lovely Irish sea...

HENRY

Now, Katy, you wouldn't kill the father of your own children, would you?

KATE

I don't know. I'm thinking I might enjoy wearing a widow's weeds.

(KATE *jabs at him again.* HENRY *grabs the knife from her.*)

HENRY

God save me from an Irish temper.

(KATE *kicks him in the shin.*)

Ow! Enough, now. Cease and desist, woman.

KATE

Not until I hear an apology from that addled English pate.

HENRY

Never.

(KATE kicks him in the other shin.)

HENRY (cont.)

Ow! All right, all right. The Irish are a noble, mild-tempered people.

KATE

And?

HENRY

And their rock walls rival Stonehenge in architectural achievement.

KATE

That's more like it.

HENRY

(*Rubbing his shin*)

Now, where was I before you maimed me?

KATE

It's prattling on, you were, about your fine King's justice and how you and all the Tatersalls before you have steadfastly doled it out throughout the years.

HENRY

That's right and it's the truth. And in all that time, not one drop of innocent blood has been spilt from our hands. We've executed traitors, whores, liars, pimps, thieves, gypsies and murderers, but never, *never*, an innocent man – or woman, whichever the case may be.

KATE

Then *you tell me* why they behead criminals in the middle of the night.

(HENRY shrugs.)

HENRY

Policy.

KATE

Policy, my arse.

HENRY

Katy! I can't have you thinking this way, girl. I can't. If I thought for one moment that I was about to execute an *innocent* person – why, I could never do my job proper. It would probably take me two or three whacks to get through the bone – *me*, who prides himself on his one-stroke executions...

HENRY (cont.)

I'd be a disgrace to the Tatersall name and to Ol' Betsy herself not to mention I'd be throwing away any chance I had at my promotion to Head Executioner.

KATE

Promotion? Ha!

(She spits.)

That's what I think of your *promotion*.

HENRY

Now, Katy...

KATE

It's two years ago you should have been promoted.

HENRY

I know, I know.

KATE

The very idea of promoting that fool Peter Woolsey ahead of you. Why, if he weren't the Lord Mayor's cousin he wouldn't have been looked at twice.

HENRY

True, true. I am a victim of political nepotism. But he can't last much longer. Old Pete is fifty if he's a day. Poor bloke – his hands shake so bad he can barely lift an axe. Aye, he'll be stepping down soon, and when he does I'll be there to take my right and proper place as Head Executioner to His Royal Majesty the King of England, whoever it may be. Head Executioner – like my father before me, and his father before him, all the way back to the first John Tatersall who cleaved the head of William Wallace from its body.

KATE

Aye, and like your father before you and his father before him and all the rest of it, you'll be getting a pay raise with this promotion, I'm supposing?

HENRY

I suppose so, but that's not important. It's the prestige the position brings that matters most.

KATE

Good St. Brigid and all the saints will you listen to the man! Since when is money not important? And tell me, Axman, will all this prestige entitle you to a few more holidays? It might be nice for the boys if you didn't have to run off Christmas morning to hack away at some poor sod's neck...

(JOHN, Henry and Kate's six-year-old son, suddenly appears in the doorway to the bedchamber.)

JOHN

Mommy? Is Daddy home yet?

(Spying HENRY.)

JOHN (cont.)

Daddy!

(JOHN runs into the room and leaps into Henry's arms.)

HENRY

Hello there, Johnny!

KATE

And what are you doing out of the bed, you rascal?

JOHN

Thomas kept kicking me and I couldn't sleep.

(Suddenly, THOMAS, Kate and Henry's ten-year-old son, appears in the doorway.)

THOMAS

Daddy!

(THOMAS runs to HENRY and hugs him around the waist.)

HENRY

And here's my Thomas!

KATE

Your brother said you were kicking him, Thomas.

THOMAS

Only after he weed the bed, Mum.