

FLOTSAM AND JETSOM

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Crime, Thriller, adventure, suspense

When Michael Lamont finds a message in a bottle, claiming the author has been marooned on an island, he sets off on a world-wide trip of discovery. As his investigations come to fruition he finds a new wife and realises there is a very dark secret to the Tollomy family, which puts him in peril. Near to solving the injustice and taking Tollomy to trial, the case becomes full of Flotsam and Jetsam to impede him.

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FLOTSAM AND JETSOM

PART 1 - PARADISE

The sand was white, the sea and sky blue. A perfect setting. Yet I was bored. I've heard it said that you can have too much of a good thing. As I lay in a hammock, slung between two palm trees that dipped into the gently lapping azure water – I believed it. The wind was soft and warm and out of the sun I felt just....comfortable. I had the beach to myself and perhaps that was the problem. Was I too lonely to enjoy it, or was I missing the rush of city life? No, I wasn't missing that.

I turned over and fell out of the hammock. It's at times like those that you're pleased there's no one to see you. Feeling foolish, I stood and dusted off the white sand from my browned body. As casually as I could, I walked along the beach, back towards the hotel hidden in the dense fringe of jungle, that separated it from the water.

The sand looked like it had been scrubbed and there wasn't a mark, or footprint, on it. Except mine, of course. The sun was warm, but not too hot. It was out of season and the tourists had gone back to work and their busy lives. I had nothing better to do than enjoy myself. Except, I didn't feel I was enjoying myself. The sea felt cool to my feet and I sat on the sand and let the breeze stir through my thoughts.

Had I made the right decision? I thought so – at the time. Was I regretting it now? I didn't think so – at this time. I was a rich man, with no cares, nor worries. No partner either. But that could change. There was that pretty girl that worked in the restaurant in the nearby village. What was her name – Mia. I saw her looking at me and got the distinct feeling she was interested. Perhaps tonight, then. I'll see if I can take it any further.

At thirty-eight I'm still a relatively young man. Just about in my prime and a fair catch for the right woman. I'm not the best looking man in the world, but neither am I unattractive. I'm partner-less by choice – well, more because I worked every hour of the day and didn't have the time to find many suitable women. Those I found soon tired of my schedule and left. But now, I have all the time in the world. And a renewed desire to find a mate. A desire bordering on desperate crossed my mind, but I let it slide away. I wouldn't find one sitting on a deserted beach, so I stood up and headed towards the hotel.

The isolation was certainly getting to me. I was used to tall buildings, busy life-style, people and bustle – noise. It was too quiet for me. For years I'd dreamed of getting away from it all and walking a deserted beach somewhere far, far away. Now I had achieved that dream, it wasn't what I'd thought it would be. The sand was soft through my toes as I edged towards the jungle fringe.

The pathway to the hotel was up ahead and I hesitated. Sit alone in my hotel room, in the bar, or alone on the beach. Three options – none of which really appealed to me now I was here. A few months ago those images were so strong I could almost taste them. In the final negotiations with the buyer, I held those thoughts in my mind and it got me through the hour, the day and the week. When Sakamara finally signed the last paper, I could hear the sea in my ears and smell the warm breeze off the ocean.

Now I had walked that same stretch of sand for the last two weeks, I wanted something else. I slipped on my sandals and pushed into the jungle to take an alternative route to the hotel. This was high adventure – pushing into unknown territory. My first step told me I was wrong to do this. Danger lurked in the jungle. My second step confirmed it was wrong to do this, I heard a noise. I took one more step out of bravado and slipped and fell. If a man falls in the jungle and there's no one to laugh at him – does he still feel foolish? Damn right.

I leapt to my feet before a horde of spiders and snakes could get their fangs into me and was heading for the safety of the beach. I looked down and saw what had made me miss my footing. It was a bottle. Half buried so long ago, in a high tide. Dead leaves and a cigarette packet rotting in this small pile of flotsam and jetsam. I picked it up. It was an old Coca Cola bottle. I stepped quickly into the light and moved away from the jungle's edge. In the bright sunlight I could see the bottle was old and encrusted with age-old grime.

As I wiped the dirt from its surface I could see something was inside. It was a piece of paper. I continued back to my hotel room, intent of finding something to help get the paper out.

I sat on the balcony and looked out to sea. The horizon was almost empty, just a few local fishing boats, no sailing craft – nothing. I sipped at my orange juice and worked on the bottle again. The bottle had a stopper which was a piece of roughly cut cork. It was lodged in the neck and refused to come out. It took me ten minutes, but eventually it eased out and I could get at the paper. It was tightly rolled and appeared very fragile. I carefully unrolled it and held it down with a few glasses and bottles from my room bar. It was once a white sheet, now yellowed with age. There was handwriting on it and it looked like pencil. I could only just make out what it said.

“Help. I have been deliberately marooned on this island by the Tollomy family. I don’t know where it is, but I can see another island, too far to swim, or make out any details. Tide goes from east to west. Date is somewhere around June 1983. I feel I am going to die here.”

William Ansell.

I read it again and stood up. Leaning on the balcony I looked down at the pool and the few people swimming and relaxing. It seemed so far away from this poor man’s plight. It seemed genuine enough. But it could be a hoax. Either way, the man could be dead by now, over twenty years on.

The thought kept nagging at me and I went back to the table. The paper looked genuinely aged, the graphite fading and flaky. If this was a hoax, or forgery – it was a good one. I had nothing better to do, so I decided to look into this find of mine. I allowed the paper to curl back to its original shape and slipped it into the fridge. I went down to reception.

Someone was using the single Internet machine and so I had to wait. I had a beer and talked to the barman until I was called. I did a search for Tollomy family and to my surprise there were many results. I started to trawl through them, printing off the relevant items that interested me. It took me an hour and my beer grew warm, but at least I knew there was a Tollomy family. The Tollomys were a high class, politically connected, Boston-based family. But to accuse them of being responsible for marooning a man on a deserted island – it seemed unthinkable. Perhaps William Ansell was mad. If he existed at all. I made another search.

There were many William Ansell’s. I had nothing more to go on, so I couldn’t decide which of the several hundred he could be. I gave up with the Internet. I got myself another beer and walked around the pool. Out to sea a few more fishing boats were coming in before the sun set. I had an idea.

The village was a mile walk and was relatively civilised, mainly due to the proximity of the high class hotel. The small harbour was very picturesque, with several features added by the hotel, for the benefit of the tourists. A small breakwater swung out into the quiet sea, new looking and only semi-practical. A few bars and restaurants looked new, with brick built structures, rather than the local wood and string methods. I walked to the edge and looked for a fishing boat just returned. I found several and asked if anyone spoke English. With a few universal gestures, I was directed to a withered looking old man sitting on the dockside. I called into the nearest bar and bought two beers. I handed the fisherman a bottle and sat beside him. He was instantly distrustful and I couldn’t blame him. I started to talk.

The sun was setting and it looked truly beautiful. I couldn’t speak Indian at all, but he had a basic knowledge of English, as taught by an American. But we managed to get along nicely. Six beers later I had what I wanted and he went home happy. I sat in the bar and thought through what I’d learned. There was one possible island, from which the bottle may have originated. Vijay considered the tide and any islands that might lie in its path. He narrowed those down to an island that had a close companion. *“I can see another island, too far to swim, or make out any details.”*

I sipped at my beer and looked at the lights coming on in the village. A string of fairy lanterns lit the main road, another addition by the hotel, no doubt. It certainly looked pretty. Speaking of which, it reminded me I wanted to speak with Mia again. I slowly finished my beer and felt a tingle of excitement. I had persuaded Vijay to take me to the island in the morning. I knew I could be wasting my time, but it was something to do. I finished the beer and paid the barman. He was pleased with the tip.

The restaurant catered mainly for the residents of the hotel. It was too upmarket for any of the locals to afford and consequently they resented its presence in their old village. Times moved on, but for people leading the more simple life on the planet, it was difficult to accept. At least, that's what Mia told me. We were walking back along the main street and it was getting late. The restaurant had closed and she was going home. I offered to escort her. For some reason she thought that was funny. Some misunderstanding of the word 'escort' I suppose.

I told her about my find and that I was going out in the morning to the island. She had an enigmatic smile that implied she knew more than anyone else, but wasn't giving away the secret. It was a lovely smile. Her English was very good and her dark eyes flashed when I complimented on her subtle use of the language. She was flattered and enjoyed speaking to English people. I told her I would like to see her again. That smile flashed and she turned away. Had I spoken too soon?

We walked in silence until we reached a small street where she needed to leave the safety of the main road. I offered to walk further with her and she shook her head. In a surprise move, she kissed me on the cheek and said tomorrow night she was finishing in the restaurant early. We could go for a walk and spend some time improving her English. It was a start.

The smoke from the worn out engine was making me feel nauseous. The sea was calm, otherwise my breakfast would've joined the fishes. The horizon remained empty for two hours. I began to question Vijay's knowledge of the waters. Could the bottle have travelled all that way? I reasoned it could travel around the world as long as it was water-tight and didn't get swept on to a beach.

Vijay offered me some of his food and my stomach almost revolted at that. Not that I don't like Indian food – I was just feeling queasy. Vijay pointed and I looked towards the horizon. A smudge had appeared.

"Sintra," he said. "Your island."

The boat nudged gently on to the long slope of the beach and Vijay waved for me to get off the boat. "I wait here." He said with a smile. I took my first steps on Sintra and fell in love with it. The beach curved round either side of me, indicating a small island. The vegetation was low and sparse and I walked off the beach and into the main part of the island.

The shrubs thickened and soon palm trees rose above me. It was easy to walk through and I felt no fear, or threat. This island had a peaceful atmosphere. Birds flew overhead and called to one another. There were clicks and rattles all around me, the wildlife going through just another day of survival. I came to a clearing and stopped. A rough shelter had been created, using the larger palm leaves. Lashed together with thin vines. It covered a makeshift bed, on which grasses, long since rotted, had provided someone a more comfortable night. Could that someone have been William?

A worn path led from the clearing and I followed it. Soon I was standing on the beach, the opposite side to where I'd landed. It was a very small island. Out to sea lay another piece of land. "*Too far to swim, or make out any details.*" Had Vijay got it right? Was William Ansell stranded on this island? I walked along the beach, intending to walk all around and back to the boat. The sun was getting hot and I slipped my reed hat on my head. I sipped from my bottle of water and trudged on.

The beach was clean and white. No signs of any human habitation. I must be nearing the boat, I reasoned, when something caught my eye. Slightly inland, something didn't look right. I moved to investigate. It was a structure. Man-made and in ruins. But it was the shell of a hut. It had an opening and I ducked inside. A couple of poles ran through the walls and supported some driftwood. It served as a table, To my surprise a book lay on the rough table. I picked it up and opened the pages. It was a child's exercise book. The once blank pages were covered in writing and was written in pencil.

My immediate reaction was to start reading, but as I flicked through the book I realised that there was hours of reading here. What was clear from the start was that it was some sort of record, or diary, of someone's stay on the island. The first few lines confirmed the author as being William Ansell. This was no longer a hoax. Now I had to find Ansell.

I carried the book with me as I looked around the small clearing outside of the hut. There were stones arranged as if to make a permanent fire. Small indications of man adapting to his environment. A shade made from more palm leaves. Sticks used to dry clothes, or hang fish. I was no camper, but I saw the signs of someone trying to stay alive in the wilderness. What would I do in William's situation? I took another sip from my bottle. Water! That was the key.

I folded the book and put it into my back pocket. Ahead was another small path. I pushed my way along it. Another small clearing. In its centre a tripod structure made from stout branches. Another fireplace comprising slabs of stone, above which was suspended a very large palm leaf, long since rotten away leaving just its stem. A small tin cup stood on the old fire and another to the side. I didn't understand, so I moved on.

The path led to the opposite beach on the island. Here the beach was crescent shaped and the vegetation closed it in on both the points. It was like a private beach. The sun was getting very hot now and I wiped the sweat from my eyes. Something glinted in the sand ahead of me. I stepped out into the direct sunlight and regretted it. I kept going.

The sun was being reflected by something gold. It was a ring and it was attached to a finger. At least what was left of the finger – the bones. I carefully scraped the sand away from the ring and revealed more bones, which collapsed as I touched them. I had found William.

I was relieved to get back to my suite in the hotel. The very first thing I did, was throw up into the toilet. That made me feel a lot better. I sipped some cold water and waited for the nausea to die down. I sat on the balcony and read Ansell's diary.

The sun set and lights were coming on. I switched on the balcony lights and got another large glass of water. I read on. My stomach started grumbling for food and I looked at my watch. In horror I saw it was ten o'clock. I was supposed to be meeting Mia. I pushed the diary into my safe, quickly showered and changed. I ran into the village and slowed to a walk as I approached the restaurant. As I entered Mia was just coming out.

She smiled and said, "Right on time."

We sat on a bench overlooking the harbour. The lights were very romantic and I'm sure she thought so too. I held her hand and she squeezed mine, ever so gently. She asked me all about my day and I told her of my grisly discovery. She pulled a face. I changed the subject and encouraged her to speak of her family and she briefly told me of her parents, brothers and sisters. I nodded in all the right places and let her finish.

"I am looking for....a way out." I looked puzzled. "Off this island. I do not want to stay here the rest of my life. I want to see the world. America. England!"

"But it's beautiful here. A paradise," I said with a smile.

Again that knowing smile. "Only if you don't live here. We are very poor and no way of getting richer. Employment....only the hotel. Their wages are low. They know we have nowhere else to go for work. The restaurant, owned by the hotel. Same wages."

I nodded in sympathy. "I suppose you know what it's really like."

"Will you take me to England?"

I paused before saying, "That is possible, but we have immigration laws. It would be difficult."

The smile faded, "You don't want me to go with you to England?"

The thought struck me hard. I DID want her to go with me to England. But did I want her as a wife, for that would be the only way I could get her in permanently. I could certainly get her there on a holiday permit. The more I thought about it, the more the idea intrigued me. She was certainly a beautiful woman. She was clearly intelligent and had a very pleasant personality. Yes, I could get her to England, but should I get her there?

The delay in my answer made her think the worst. "You don't want me to go to England." She almost pouted.

"It's not that I don't. More whether I can. It's a legal minefield. It will be difficult." Then I knew why I was hesitating. "I don't really know you, Mia. You could be a bunny-boiler, anything."

"What's a bunny-boiler?"

"It's a woman who could be....difficult to live with."

"I can make you happy."

"I'm sure you can. Look, give me some time to think this over. I'm not leaving yet."

She was looking downcast and I lifted her chin and smiled at her. The village lights were sparkling in her dark eyes. Before I knew it I was kissing her. Her arms slipped around my neck and the kiss grew deeper. She certainly knew how to kiss. I could feel passion rising and held her closer, my hands stroking her back. I slid them around to her front and felt the lips ease off. She pulled back looking at me.

"I must go home now."

"Of course," I said, embarrassed. Too far, too soon. What was I thinking?

The walk was made in silence. At one stage I felt her hand slip into mine and we walked on. She had a half smile on her face as we came to her corner.

"I could make you very happy in England. But not here."

"I understand."

"You think about it," she said with a last full kiss. Then she was swallowed up by the dark road. No street lights here.

"I will," I said. And I meant it.

I walked back to the hotel, my mind in a whirl. The day before I had been bored, now I had too much to think about. Mia on the one hand and William Ansell on the other. It wasn't late so I stopped off at the bar for a beer and made small talk with the regular barman, Raj. The written words of Ansell were rolling around my mind, entwined by the spoken words of Mia. After a few more beers and a bar snack, I decided to call it a night.

I lay in bed reading some more of Ansell's diary. I had made up my mind. The man was completely mad. Admittedly the bottle had proved true, but the words were the ravings of a madman. But did that mean there wasn't some truth in there somewhere? I changed my mind and compromised. Tomorrow I'd report the death to the local police and let them take it from there. I had answered Ansell's call for help, albeit forty years too late.

I fell asleep and dreamed of Mia. We were making passionate love on the beach and a skeletal hand rose out of the sand. It held a wedding ring. Mia took it and smiled that wonderful smile of hers. I heard a voice behind me and turned to see a skeleton standing there. One hand was missing and the jaw wobbled as it said, *"I feel I am going to die here."*

I woke up sweating. I drank some water and lay on the top of the bed, thinking. The call of nature made me get up and I realised I was now awake and wouldn't get back to sleep. I went down to the small room that housed the Internet connection. The sleepy receptionist took little interest as he handed me the key and I turned on the computer.

It took several attempts, but I eventually found what I was looking for. I sat and stared at the screen. The island of Sintra was privately owned. By the Tollomy family. Just how mad was Ansell? Did they really dump him there to die? What had he done to deserve it? It was all there in the diary – if it could be believed. I made my way back to the receptionist.

"Do you have a photocopy machine I could use?"

He told me it was for hotel use only, not guests. I handed him a fistful of Rupees and a deal was struck. I went back to my room to get the diary.

By the time I'd finished copying all the pages, the sun was up and the dining room opening for breakfast. I put the diary in the safe and took the pages down to read while I ate. The more I re-read it, the more the facts sounded credible. Ansell's writing style was the problem. He wrote like a madman. I finished my breakfast and asked the way to the local police station. The new receptionist was very keen to help and asked me to wait in the lounge – he would bring the police to me.

I was reading the diary two hours later when the local station supervisor entered the almost empty lounge. We exchanged pleasantries and he had a good command of English. He was served tea and he settled back to hear my problem. I told him the full details of everything I had found and waited as the full implications settled into his mind. He finished his tea and looked at me.

"There is nothing I can do."

"What? Why? A man was being imprisoned and has since died. Isn't that murder, or manslaughter, or something?"

He nodded, his dark skin shiny in the humidity of the mid morning. "But it is on a private island. Not my jurisdiction."

"Can you not report it? To someone in your government, or higher in the police system?"

"I am thinking of the paperwork. You may, if you wish, but I ask you not to involve me. We are a very small force here, you know."

"So you're washing your hands of it, then?"

"I do not understand what you mean by, 'washing my hands'. What does this mean?"

"Have you heard of Pontius Pilot?" He shook his head. "Never mind. Thank you for your time."

He stood to leave, pulling his hat over his receding hair. "I must advise you, Mr. Lamont. You may be trespassing on other people's property. Your visit to the island of Sintra may be an illegal act. Walk carefully." He smiled and left.

The parting jibe struck home and annoyed me. If he wasn't going to take up Ansell's case, who would? It only left me. I needed to see Vijay again. A second visit to the island was called for. But I would walk carefully.

I watched Vijay's boat head back out to sea and hoped he'd remember to pick me up on time. I waited until the sickness receded and began to carry my gear into the heart of the island. I decided to set up camp in Ansell's old hut. I started to take photos and a video with my digital cameras. I wanted a proper record of everything I could find. I was determined to take this case further than the friendly police officer wanted.

I assembled my camp bed in the clearing. There was no forecast for rain and I felt secure that a night in the jungle would do me no harm. I even had a mosquito net. The hotel had provided me with most of the equipment. What they didn't have, they sent someone out to buy. It hadn't cost me much to get a night on the island, to experience just a small part of what Ansell had endured.

I left the stores in the hut and went to pay my last respects to William. His arm was sticking out at an odd angle, just as I'd left it. It took me a while to dig him carefully out of the sand with a shovel and took a long while to make a decent sized hole in the dry earth to bury him in. I removed his ring, a bracelet and a neck chain, placed them in a plastic bag and sealed it tight.

I'm not a religious man and as I stood over the small mound of earth I realised I didn't have the words to say that would be appropriate. So I said, "Sorry it took me so long to get here. I'll see what I can do to get your case heard."

I don't know whether it was the solitude of the moment, the whispering wind in the trees, the peaceful aura of the island. It could have been a release of years of hard work and intense business negotiations. It could have been any of those things, or all of them. But I cried. I made a cross from two bits of driftwood and pushed it into the ground. His grave was in the shade of a particularly tall palm. He wouldn't get too hot in the day, or too cold at night. He could hardly rest in peace, not until someone had sought justice for the way he was treated. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I was prepared to give it a go.

I sat on the beach watching the sun going down. I was ready to slide into my net-covered bunk when I was tired. I sipped my hot tea, boiled on a portable gas stove. Hardship to me, but it would've been luxury to Ansell. As the sky darkened, I went back to the hut and sat under the light of the kerosene lamp. I tried to read more of his journal, but found it difficult to concentrate on. A small pile of flotsam and jetsam was all that remained of Ansell's empire. He'd spent his last few days trying to survive on nothing.

Earlier I had sat and looked at his contraption in the other clearing. I finally figured out it was a water filter. He took sea water, for there was no fresh water on the island, and boiled it up at night. The steam condensed on the palm leaf and trickled into the other cup as distilled water. It must have taken a lot of effort to get a small amount of water. In this heat and humidity he must have spent most of his time distilling.

Ansell survived for three months on this scrap of land. I intended to spend just the one night. I was already feeling detached from the real world. When idle, the human mind invents its own world. I began to see why Ansell may have gone a little mad. I shone the torch around the small hut and spotted something on the compacted earth floor. It was a tiny end of a pencil. It had become too small to hold and write with. The last line of his diary said it was about to be his last.

The book and pencil had been part of his beachcombing, soon after his arrival on the island. He found several other items that were either eaten, burned, or used to best effect. He stated that:

"If it wasn't for the refuse Mother Nature threw away, my time here would have been truly wasted. If I have a bunch of odds and ends from the beach and get rid of all but one of them, what do I call it? If someone invented instant water, what would they mix it with? These and many other thoughts come into my mind recently."

I smiled to myself. His randomised thoughts were what made me think he was losing his mind at first. *"How can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell another? If our body temperature is normally 98.4 degrees, how come when it's 98 degrees outside, no one is comfortable? Why does mineral water that has*

trickled through mountains for centuries go out of date next year? What would you use to dilute water? "To mention just a few.

William Ansell recorded all the details of his circumstances and had time, and lead in his pencil, to put down some of his thoughts before he died. He must have died from a combination of malnutrition and a bad case of flu. He had arrived on the island with the clothes on his back and nothing else. His survival depended on him using the ingredients the island provided. He made traps and caught small mammals to eat. Water, he distilled from sea water, or collected on the few occasions it rained. The nights weren't too chilly, so exposure was not the problem, but lack of proper food was. He became run-down and susceptible to illness.

It was hard for him to keep going. No chance of escape, no rescue attempts. No one he knew realised where he was. He was kidnapped in his own home in Boston and woke up on the island. It must have taken days to get him here, sedated and unconscious all that time. When he awoke he was so thirsty he wanted to drink the sea water. He nearly went mad until he found some dew on the plant leaves. He didn't know whether he was ingesting poisons, or toxic residue. All he knew was, he had to have a drink, or die. The following day he found the tin cups and a few other items on the edge of the beach. A day later he was sipping his drinkable water. It must have been a proud moment for him. Amongst all his fears, a moment of triumph in adversity.

I lay in my cot and arranged the net all around me. The sounds of the jungle seemed louder when you made no noise. At some time I must have dozed off. I slept fitfully, awake before dawn and already restless to be off the island. Less than twenty-four hours and I'd had enough. William was here for months.

I packed all my gear and hauled it to the beach. I sat on the rucksack and waited for Vijay. The sun climbed into the sky and I finished the last of my water. I had a sudden thought that if Vijay forgot I was here, or he had an accident and hadn't told anyone I was here.....I pushed the thought from my mind. Another thought struck me, I hadn't told Mia either.

The lights twinkled as we sat on the bench we called ours, her arms were around me and her perfume filled the air. When I hadn't turned up to the restaurant the night before, she thought I'd made up my mind and the answer was no. When I met her earlier that evening and said the answer was yes, I have never seen anyone happier.

I hadn't worked out the details fully, but I'd bought two first class tickets leaving tomorrow. Her passport was trickier. It would take some bribes and some fast footwork in the morning. The concierge at the hotel thought he could organise it – for a price. We would have to wait and see. The moon shone down on two would-be lovers. I would be, but she wasn't going to let me. At least not until we got to England.

I said good night and her kisses were even more passionate than before. She certainly showed a lot of promise, but would she deliver? She invited me to meet her family and I declined, claiming I was too busy organising her 'holiday' to England. I said she would have to return home after a month or two and we could get a permanent visa sorted. I would see the family then, if things were working out okay. She reluctantly agreed, still on a high from the best news she had ever received.

I hoped we'd both made the right decision. Only time would tell.

PART 2 – THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

ENGLAND

Mia had come from a humble background and where I lived completely overawed her. She likened it to a Maharaja's palace. I likened it to a small holding in the Buckinghamshire countryside, a converted mill with its own stream. I couldn't look at running water now, without thinking about William Ansell.