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**PERIL ON
THE ROYAL TRAIN**

EDWARD MARSTON

CHAPTER ONE

Spring 1858

Jamie Farr held the body in his arms and ignored the blood that was dripping onto his smock. The corpse was still warm. It was the third victim in a month and it left him at once saddened and enraged. Others might say that it was an unfortunate accident but, in his eyes, it was nothing short of brutal murder. He could still hear the killer, thundering unseen on its way to Glasgow, leaving smoke and tragedy in its wake. Farr hated railways. A tall, wiry lad with a shepherd's protective love of his flock, he viewed steam locomotives as ruthless enemies, ugly iron monsters that invaded the southern uplands of Scotland, terrorising livestock and mangling to death any animals who caught their feet in the rails. Compensation was difficult to squeeze out of the railway companies and often inadequate when it was paid. They argued that it was the responsibility of farmers to keep their cattle, sheep, pigs and horses away from danger. That only served to anger the young shepherd even more. How could anyone afford to build fences or walls of dry stone that ran for miles? In any case, he asked, why should such beautiful countryside be turned into a place of lurking menace?

Farr shook with impotent fury. He didn't even feel his leg being rubbed. It was only when Angus barked that he realised what the sheepdog was doing. Angus wanted a pardon. It was not his fault that the lamb had scampered down the hill towards the line, then frozen with fear as the train bore down on him. The flock was too large for one dog to manage. Farr understood what the animal was trying to say. When he'd put the remains of the lamb gently to the ground, he gave Angus a reassuring pat. Relieved of guilt, the dog barked in gratitude. One ewe and two lambs had been slaughtered in the space of a month. No matter how vigilant they were, Farr and his dog couldn't guarantee that the rest of the flock was safe. Sheep were inclined to wander. They loved freedom of movement. Nobody had told them about train timetables or warned them about the hurtling speed of the locomotives.

Other shepherds had been forced to accept the coming of the railway. Some had even been heard to concede that it had benefits. Farr's own father, a shepherd like him, took a philosophical view, albeit one that was spiced with strong language. Railways were there to stay, he said. You had to get used to them. Along with foul weather, foxes and rustlers, they were just one more threat with which a shepherd had to live. Jamie Farr didn't share his father's attitude. He was too young and too headstrong. He'd never acknowledge the railway's right to torment livestock and kill indiscriminately. As he gazed down at the tiny lamb, crushed obscenely and now being sniffed by its grieving mother, he was overwhelmed by a sense of injustice. A heinous crime had been committed. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. A lust for revenge swelled up inside him. There had to be a way to strike back.

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‘Look at it, will ye?’ said Dougal Murray. ‘There’s no’ a soul in sight out there.’

‘Aye,’ agreed Jock Laidlaw. ‘I can see naething but empty fields and hills. I like it tha’ way, Dougal.’

‘It doesnae appeal to me. I want to see toons and people and things going on.’

‘Ye’ll get your share of tha’ farther up the line.’

‘But there’s still too much countryside to go through yet.’

‘A body can *breathe* out here,’ said Laidlaw. ‘I dinna feel shut in by hooses and factories and the like. Too many people make my heed spin, ye ken. I always feel lost in a big city.’

The two men had to raise their voices over the hiss, roar and clatter. Laidlaw was the driver of the goods train and Murray, his fireman, stood beside him on the footplate. They were taking a mixed cargo from Carlisle to Edinburgh, rattling along at a good speed and seeing all that the billowing smoke allowed them to see of their surroundings. Laidlaw was bigger, older and more compact than the stringy Murray. They were friends as well as colleagues, enjoying leisure time together. Not that their rota on the Caledonian Railway permitted them much leisure. They worked hard for very long hours. Laidlaw was a jovial man, experienced and easy-going. Murray always looked to him for advice.

‘What d’ye think Alan will be doing?’ he asked.

Laidlaw smiled wryly. ‘Can ye no’ guess?’

‘The mahn will be fast asleep by now, I reckon.’

‘Tha’, he will – and wi’ a pipe stuck in his gob.’

‘Alan took a fair bucket of drink last night.’

‘So did we, Dougal, but you’ll no’ find us dozing off at work.’

‘It’d be the death of us if we did.’

Alan Grint was their guard, the man who was nominally in charge of the train and who occupied the brake van at the rear,

separated from the locomotive by an endless row of wagons. Never without his pipe, Grint was inclined to nod off in his little van where nobody could see or challenge him. Whenever they reached a station, however, he was miraculously awake and alert. Laidlaw and Murray knew the truth. Since they were fond of Grint, they overlooked his weakness and never for a moment considered reporting him.

As the train rumbled on, it approached a point where it had killed a lamb a week earlier. Driver and fireman were unaware of what had happened. It was different when they hit a cow or a horse. Large animals could derail a locomotive but a spring lamb offered no resistance. It had been sliced open effortlessly.

Laidlaw waited until Murray had shovelled some coal into the firebox.

‘Have ye set a date yet, Dougal?’

‘It isna down to me,’ said Murray, gloomily.

‘Well, has your lassie set a date?’

‘If it were left to Annie, we’d have been wed years ago. It’s her mother who’s dragging her heels. She says that Annie’s too young to marry.’

‘When a lassie has a shape on her like Annie Bray,’ said Laidlaw with a chuckle of approval, ‘then she’s good and ready. Take ma word on that. Ye’ll have to run off to Gretna with her.’

‘Dinna think it hasnae gone through my mind.’

‘What’s stopping ye, mahn?’

‘I need to save a wee bit more first.’

‘Marry now and save later.’

‘That’s a fine thing for ye to say, Jock,’ said the fireman, jabbing him with a grimy finger. ‘No woman has managed to get *ye* down the aisle. Yet ye keep on at me to get wed.’

‘Ye *need* a wife, Dougal. I don’t. I’m no’ the marrying type.’

‘Wait till you’ve met the right woman.’

‘Och,’ said Laidlaw with a lecherous grin, ‘I’ve met ma share of those along the way, believe me. I love wummen – always have. I just don’t love them enough to take one as a wife.’

‘Do ye no’ want to raise a family?’

‘It’d be too much of an ordeal. Look at Alan, will ye? He’s got a wife and four bairns. When he goes home at night, he’s up to his armpits in family life. No wonder the puir mahn is fair exhausted. Coming to work is the only rest he gets. Be warned, Dougal. Too many bairns can be the death of ye.’

‘We havna thought that far ahead,’ admitted Murray.

‘Then it’s high time ye did.’

Laidlaw was about to explain why but the words died in his throat. They’d just come round a bend and expected to see a clear line ahead of them. Instead, they were confronted by a large pile of rocks. Surging towards it, the locomotive was doomed. There was no time to slow it down, still less to stop it. Laidlaw and Murray didn’t even have the presence of mind to jump from the footplate. Disaster was only seconds away and they stood there transfixed. When it came, the impact was deafening. Cast iron met solid rock in a fierce collision. The locomotive was instantly derailed, rolling down an embankment and dragging the wagons after it, their loads scattered willy-nilly across the ground. Driver and fireman were killed outright, pinned beneath tons of metal and wood. There’d be no wedding for Murray now and Laidlaw wouldn’t be able to pass on any more advice to his friend. Their futures had been cruelly obliterated. When hot coals spilling from the engine started a fire, flames licked hungrily at their bodies.

Back in the brake van, Alan Grint fared no better. The guard never even woke up. The sheer force of the impact flung him across the van so hard that he dashed out his brains against the unforgiving

timber and collapsed in a heap, his pipe still held grimly between his teeth. Ahead of him, dozens of wagons snaked and bucked and fought a losing battle to stay on the rails. It was a scene of accelerating destruction. Nothing escaped. From locomotive to brake van, the goods train contracted violently until it was almost half its original length, its power gone, its timetable cancelled, its cargo flung far and wide, its destination for ever beyond reach. Both sets of lines were impassably blocked. Traffic on that stretch of the Caledonian Railway had come to a decisive halt. Wheels of upturned wagons rotated pointlessly in the eerie silence that followed the pandemonium. All was lost.

From the top of the hill, someone looked down with quiet satisfaction.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Let them sort out their own mess,’ said Tallis, peremptorily.

‘But they asked for our help, sir,’ argued Colbeck. ‘More specifically, they requested my assistance by name.’

‘You’re needed here in London.’

‘I’d say that Scotland has a greater need of my services.’

‘Damn you, man! I decide where you go and what you do.’

‘Are you going to refuse their appeal?’

‘I have to,’ said Tallis, slapping the telegraph down on his desk. ‘It’s a question of priorities.’

‘What can possibly take precedence over a train crash?’

‘I don’t want you gallivanting north of the border when we live in the capital city of crime. There’s more than enough to keep you occupied here.’

‘My instinct is that I should go, sir.’

Tallis snorted. ‘I’m a martyr to your instincts,’ he said, rolling his eyes. ‘You’re forever relying on guesswork instead of on cumulative evidence. We don’t even know if foul play was involved. The crash could have been caused by a random fall of

rock. It may not be a police matter at all.'

'I can see that you're not familiar with the Caledonian Railway,' said Colbeck, icily calm in the face of provocation. 'The engineer who surveyed the terrain was Joseph Locke. The contractor who actually built the line was Thomas Brassey, a man whom I had the privilege to meet when investigating a case in France. Locke and Brassey are renowned experts in their respective fields. They'd never construct a railway that was likely to be imperilled by falling rock. That accident was contrived,' he went on. 'The three men were murdered.'

'How can you possibly know that?'

'Would you care to accept a wager on it, Superintendent?'

Edward Tallis smouldered in his chair. Colbeck met his hostile glare with a challenging smile. It was at moments like this that the underlying tension between the two men came to the fore. While they shared a degree of mutual respect, they also had grave reservations about each other. A former soldier, accustomed to unquestioning obedience, Tallis resented the fact that his inspector always teetered on the brink of insubordination. The resentment was shored up by envy and disapproval. Tallis was jealous of the praise that the so-called Railway Detective routinely garnered at the end of a successful investigation, while he – technically in charge of the case – was usually given short shrift in the press. Then there was the question of the inspector's private life. Having lectured Colbeck on the importance of having no distractions, the superintendent was mortified when he chose to get married, fearing that it would weaken his effectiveness.

For his part, Colbeck was ready to acknowledge the time, effort and commitment that his superior put into his job, but the man's single-mindedness was a flaw in his character. Tallis had no existence outside Scotland Yard. That was his kingdom and he

liked to rule the roost. He had no understanding of the lives of his officers and treated them with a mixture of strict discipline and distrust. Colbeck could make allowances for the man's envy and shrugged off his disapproval of the recent marriage. But he could not countenance the way Tallis tried to interfere in cases, causing both delay and frustration. Over the years he'd learnt to cope with the superintendent but he still couldn't bring himself to like the man.

'The matter is settled,' decided Tallis, taking a cigar from the box in front of him. 'Forget that you ever saw this telegraph.'

'I'm afraid that I can't do that, sir.'

'You'll do as you're told, Inspector.'

'We can't turn down an appeal like that,' insisted Colbeck. 'Instead of bickering about it, I should be finding out the time of the next train to Scotland.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind.' Tallis paused to cut off the end of the cigar before thrusting it into his mouth and lighting it. He puffed hard then exhaled a cloud of smoke. 'Is that clear?'

'It may be clear, sir, but it also happens to be wrong-headed.'

Tallis bridled. 'Do you *dare* to question my judgement?'

'Ordinarily, it would never cross my mind to do so,' said Colbeck, smoothly, 'because your judgement is usually sound. In this case, I submit, you haven't taken all the facts into consideration.'

'We *have* no facts. The telegraph is terse in the extreme.'

'The word "disaster" is enough for me, Superintendent. That, and the fact that three railwaymen were killed. This is a crisis. We must respond to it.'

Tallis's only response was to jab the cigar between his teeth and puff on it as if his life depended on creating a smokescreen. He was momentarily obscured. It was pure accident that Colbeck even knew about the accident. When the telegraph from the Caledonian

Railway arrived at Scotland Yard, it went first to the commissioner. The man charged with taking it to the superintendent's office happened to bump into Colbeck in the corridor.

'Another case for the Railway Detective,' he'd said, waving the paper.

Colbeck had taken it from him. 'Let me see.'

When he'd read the summons, he acted as the delivery boy, taking the telegraph into Tallis's office and handing it over. Eager to be told to leave for Scotland, he was dismayed when the superintendent wanted to keep him shackled in London. When other pleas for help had come in from different parts of the country, Tallis had been willing to dispatch him instantly. For some reason, he was not going to do it this time.

Colbeck rose to his feet and adjusted his frock coat. He was a portrait of elegance, tall, slim and debonair. It was another thing that Tallis held against him. Colbeck was such a dandy that he made the superintendent feel unkempt. Detectives in the Metropolitan Police Force were not well paid but Colbeck had private means that enabled him to retain the services of a good tailor. That set him apart from his colleagues – as well as from most members of the criminal fraternity. What he and Tallis had in common was an iron will. A collision between them was imminent.

'Perhaps I should take the matter up with the commissioner,' suggested Colbeck with feigned politeness.

'You'll do nothing of the kind!' yelled Tallis, banging a fist on the desk.

'But the telegraph was sent directly to him.'

'It was then passed on to me for consideration. Unfortunately, you had an unauthorised glance at it before it was put in my hands.'

'It was just as well that I saw it, sir. Had I not done so, you'd have rushed into a foolish decision to disregard the summons.'

‘My decisions are never foolish.’

‘Let’s call them rash and overhasty, then.’

Tallis’s cheeks reddened. ‘You are not going to Scotland.’

‘The commissioner may take a different view.’

‘And you are not bothering the commissioner,’ asserted the other, jumping up and inadvertently flicking cigar ash all down his waistcoat. ‘He has empowered me to take whatever action I feel necessary. I expect loyalty from my detectives,’ he boomed. ‘Try to go over my head and you’ll suffer the consequences.’

‘The only consequences that interest me are those that emanate from the train crash. They are desperate for my help in Scotland. It would be cruel to deny it to them.’

Tallis was peevish. ‘If I sent you up there, you’d only be in the way.’

‘That’s not the impression I get from the telegraph, sir.’

‘They’ll have enough people to look into the disaster. The railway police will already be asking questions and the procurator fiscal will launch his own inquiry. If memory serves me, there’s also a sheriff who’s likely to get involved as well. Then, of course, there’s the railway inspector. That stretch of line will be crawling with officers of one kind or another. In short,’ concluded Tallis with an air of finality, ‘you are redundant.’

‘There’s something you’re forgetting, Superintendent.’

‘I very much doubt that.’

‘Competent as any investigation will surely be, it’s unlikely to be led by someone with direct experience of a railway disaster. That’s where Sergeant Leeming and I have the advantage.’ Colbeck took a step towards him. ‘Do I need to remind you of the catastrophe that befell the Brighton express some years ago?’

‘No, you don’t – it was one of our greatest successes.’

An express train had been derailed at speed and crashed into

a ballast train coming in the opposite direction. The railway inspector had described it as an accident brought about by a serious error by the driver, a man killed on the spot and therefore unable to defend himself. Colbeck had proved that the disaster had been deliberately contrived by someone with an obsessive grudge against the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway and one of its regular passengers.

‘Investigating that crash gave us insights that can be put to practical use in Scotland,’ said Colbeck, reasonably. ‘We know how to avoid the blind alleys.’

Tallis was unmoved. ‘You are staying here,’ he decreed. ‘As you well know, the Detective Department is plagued by an insufficient budget and a shortage of manpower. I can’t afford to send two of my best men hundreds of miles away for what may well be a lengthy investigation.’

‘You were happy enough to send us off to Devon last year.’

‘That’s immaterial.’

‘I disagree,’ said Colbeck, locking horns with him. ‘What took us to Exeter was the murder of a stationmaster. Regrettable as it was, it doesn’t compare in scope and significance with a calamity like this. Three people have been killed and the damage to freight and rolling stock is immense. We simply must answer the call.’

‘Out of the question,’ snapped Tallis. ‘You could be away for weeks.’

‘I’ll stay in Scotland for months if that’s what it takes.’

‘You won’t be going anywhere near that benighted country. There’s work for you right on our doorstep. A publican had his throat cut in Whitechapel last night. You and Sergeant Leeming are to take charge of the investigation.’ He treated Colbeck to the withering stare with which he used to cow rebellious soldiers during his army days. Then he turned his back to signal that the

discussion was over. ‘The details are in the folder on my desk,’ he said, coldly. ‘Study them on the cab ride to Whitechapel.’

Colbeck ignored the command. Instead of touching the folder, he reached for a piece of blank stationery and took the quill from the inkwell. When he heard the scratch of the pen, Tallis swung round in disbelief.

‘What – in God’s name – are you *doing?*’ he cried.

‘I’m writing a letter of resignation,’ replied Colbeck. ‘It will take immediate effect. Send someone else to Whitechapel.’

‘But I’m giving you an order.’

‘You are no longer in a position to do so, sir. We’ve obviously come to a parting of the ways. My place is on the Caledonian Railway. If you refuse to sanction my departure, I’ve no alternative but to resign and go of my own accord.’

‘But you’d have no authority,’ blustered Tallis. ‘You wouldn’t have the weight of Scotland Yard behind you.’

Colbeck’s retort was crisp. ‘At the moment, I feel that it’s right on top of me and it’s a burden I need to shed. As for authority,’ he went on, drawing himself up and casting off his natural modesty for once, ‘it lies in my reputation and there’s not a detective alive who can match my record of solving crime on the railways of Britain. I cannot – and will not – turn my back on this emergency. Now, sir,’ he added, motioning the other man back, ‘I beg you to stop looming over me so that I sever my links with Scotland Yard in favour of Scotland.’

Tallis was thunderstruck. Colbeck was in earnest. Rather than obey orders, he was going to resign. The superintendent quailed at the thought of having to explain to the commissioner why the finest detective in the department had left them. Blame would fall directly on Tallis. There was a secondary fear. If the inspector did resign, he would not be abandoning the fight against crime. He’d

simply continue that fight on a different basis. Instead of being able to utilise Colbeck's rare gifts, Tallis might be in competition with them. Railway companies in dire need would turn first to a man of proven ability. Robert Colbeck, private detective, would be free to choose the cases he took on. It was a terrifying possibility.

There was a final indignity. As he tried to draw solace from his cigar, Tallis discovered that it had gone out. His glowing certainty had also dimmed to the faintest glimmer. His will of iron cracked. He reached out a hand to grab Colbeck's wrist.

'There's no need to write any more,' he said with a note of appeasement, forcing his features into a semblance of a smile. 'Let's talk about Scotland, shall we? You may, after all, have a point.'