

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant, cursive script. The letters are positioned above a thin white horizontal line. This entire logo is centered within a solid black rectangular background.

a&b

**Date with the
Executioner**

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CHAPTER ONE

1816

Putney Heath was the chosen location for a death. At that time of the morning, it was deserted. A breeze was making the grass ripple gently. The two coaches arrived at dawn, emerging out of the shadows into the first light of day. They rolled to a halt on either side of the clearing, hidden from sight by the encircling foliage. There was a sense of secrecy vital to the enterprise. Duels were illegal. Those involved were risking punishment. That was why they'd come so far out of the city. Like Leicester Fields, Chalk Farm and Wimbledon Common, the place was a popular choice. Swords had clashed there many times and pistols had often been discharged in anger. Blood had irrigated the Heath. Deaths had occurred in the questionable name of honour.

Paul Skillen had had misgivings from the start about the issuing of the challenge. He was acting as second to Mark Bowerman, who was so incompetent with a pistol in his hand that he'd come to Paul for lessons in how to shoot straight. Bowerman was a fleshy man in his early forties, blessed with wealth enough to live in comparative luxury for the rest of his days. Yet he was prepared to take part in a duel against an adversary who, even at first glance, held many advantages. Paul had urged his friend to extricate himself somehow from the situation but Bowerman would not hear of it. That would not only smack of cowardice, it would lose

him the love and respect of the woman he adored. The duel, he insisted, was over an affair of the heart. Having once fought in a similar contest, Paul understood how he must be feeling. The difference was that Paul was an expert with any weapon, whereas Bowerman was clumsy and inexperienced. What drove the latter on was a passion that blinded him to doubt and danger.

‘I’ll die sooner than yield her up to *him*,’ he vowed.

‘That would be a poor advertisement for my skill as an instructor,’ said Paul, wryly. ‘My chief aim is to keep you alive.’

‘You’ve nothing with which to reproach yourself. Nobody could have taught me so much in so short a period of time.’

‘Follow my orders to the letter and you may yet survive.’

‘I’ll do more than that,’ said Bowerman with a surge of bravado. ‘I mean to kill him for his insolence.’

He glared across at his opponent. Stephen Hamer was a tall, lithe, handsome man of thirty with impeccable attire and an air of supreme confidence. Paul could see that he was extremely fit. The man was at once relaxed yet eager for action. After glancing at Bowerman, he whispered something to his second then sent him across to his opponent.

‘He’s coming to ruffle your feathers,’ warned Paul.

‘Then he’s wasting his time,’ said Bowerman.

‘Hold your tongue and let me give him his answer.’

‘I’ll do my own talking, if you don’t mind, Mr Skillen.’

When the second reached them, he gave a polite nod of greeting. He was a thickset man in his late thirties, well dressed and well spoken.

‘Good morning to you both,’ he said, politely. ‘We had not expected you to turn up, Mr Bowerman, so you deserve congratulations, if only for that. We all know that this is an unequal contest. During his time in the army, Captain Hamer won several shooting contests and more than one duel. He bade me tell you

that he has no wish to kill you and offers you the opportunity to withdraw before your fate is sealed.'

'Never!' cried Bowerman.

'You would, of course, have to render an abject apology and give your word as a gentleman that you'll cease to bother the lady forthwith.'

'Miss Somerville is *mine*. I'm here to defend her from that vile rogue.'

'Is that the message I am to carry back with me?'

'It is,' said Paul, stepping in to get rid of the man before Bowerman lost the remains of his self-control. 'Away with you, sir, and take your insults with you.'

With a gracious smile, the man turned on his heel and went quickly away.

'Ignore him, Mr Bowerman,' said Paul. 'He was sent to vex you.'

'Hamer will be made to pay for that.'

'It's essential that you remain calm and collected.'

But there was no chance of that. Bowerman was throbbing with fury. Hamer, by contrast, was laughing happily with his second. It was as if the whole event was a joke to them. Paul feared the worst. The information that Hamer was an army man was unsettling. Both of the duellists had taken the precaution of bringing a surgeon with them but it was clear to Paul that it was Bowerman's who would be called upon.

When the light had improved enough, the preliminaries began. The referee, a short, squat man with a rasping voice, called the combatants to order. It was too late to turn back now. Bowerman seemed to realise at last the scale of his task.

'If, so be it, there *is* a mishap,' he said, grabbing Paul by the wrist, 'I beg of you to tell the lady that I showed courage.'

'You have my word, sir, though I hope such tidings will be unnecessary. In your own interests, I urge you to put Miss

Somerville out of your mind. The only person who matters to you at this moment is the one intending to shoot you.’

The advice helped to steel Bowerman. Pulling himself to his full height, he marched bravely towards the referee. The rules of the contest were recited, the box opened and the duelling pistols revealed. Hamer indicated that his opponent should have first choice of weapon. After dithering for a moment, Bowerman snatched up a pistol. Paul watched helplessly from the sidelines. Beside him, his valise already wide open, the surgeon was poised to run to Bowerman’s assistance. Neither of them gave him an earthly chance of winning the duel because he was up against a proven marksman. They were being forced to witness an execution.

At the referee’s command, the two men stood back to back then walked the requisite number of paces before turning and raising their pistols. Paul closed his eyes and waited for the gunfire. Instead, he heard loud, warning yells and the sound of many feet. Over a dozen men had suddenly materialised out of the bushes to interrupt the duel and to arrest everyone present. Paul recognised the man in command of them instantly. It was Micah Yeomans, a big, hulking man with unsightly features and gesticulating hands. The Bow Street Runner was in his element, enforcing the law by stopping the duel at the crucial moment and relishing the fact that he’d caught one of his sworn enemies. As the duellists were relieved of their pistols, Yeoman ambled across to Paul and grinned malevolently.

‘Good morning,’ he said, gloating. ‘I’ve got you at long last. Am I talking to Mr Peter Skillen or to Mr Paul Skillen?’

Paul beamed at him. ‘Why not hazard a guess?’

CHAPTER TWO

When the news came, they were in the shooting gallery. Gully Ackford, the big, broad-shouldered former soldier who owned the place, had just finished teaching someone the rudiments of boxing. Peter Skillen, as tall, lean and well-favoured as his twin brother, had spent two hours giving fencing lessons. Both men were glad of a respite. It was, however, short-lived. Their leisure was interrupted by Jem Huckvale, who flung open the door and darted into the room.

‘You’ll never guess what’s happened,’ he said, breathlessly.

‘I’m afraid that I will,’ said Peter with a sigh. ‘My brother took his impulsive client to Putney Heath and is bringing his corpse back to the city.’

‘You’re quite wrong.’

‘Are you telling me that Mr Bowerman actually *won* the duel?’

‘It never took place,’ said Huckvale.

‘Why not?’ asked Ackford. ‘Bowerman would not have run away from the contest. There was far too much at stake for that. Did his opponent fail to appear?’

‘They both turned up and, according to Paul, the duel was about to start when they were interrupted by Micah Yeomans and his men. Everyone was arrested and taken off to face the chief magistrate.’

Peter and Ackford were startled by the information. The

diminutive Huckvale enjoyed his brief moment as the bearer of important tidings. As a young assistant at the gallery, his life consisted largely of doing chores and running errands. It was good to be the centre of attention for once.

‘How did you come by this news, Jem?’ asked Peter.

‘I chanced to meet one of the Runners, Chevy Ruddock. He was there when they jumped out of the bushes on Putney Heath. Ruddock was crowing about the fact that Paul was dragged back in handcuffs. So I ran straight to Bow Street to find out the details.’

‘What did you learn?’

‘All that there was to learn,’ replied Huckvale. ‘The parties involved in the duel were bound over in the sum of four hundred pounds each and a figure of half that amount has been set on those in attendance – including Paul.’

‘I’ll get over there and bail my brother,’ decided Peter. ‘He’ll have moaned about the handcuffs but this might be the best possible outcome. Intervention by the Runners has saved Mr Bowerman’s life. In Paul’s opinion, the poor fellow was about to commit suicide.’

‘Then he’s been very lucky,’ said Ackford. ‘He’s been given the chance to repent of his folly in issuing such a bold challenge.’

‘I just hope that he’ll seize that chance, Gully, but I harbour grave doubts. Mr Bowerman is in the grip of an obsessive love that shields him from any acquaintance with reality. So deep is his devotion to the person in question that he’ll take on any rivals for her affections.’

‘Only a remarkable creature could inspire such feelings.’

‘Mr Bowerman described her as a jewel among women.’

‘Is he an authority on the fairer sex?’

‘Far from it,’ said Peter. ‘The only member of it he’s really known is the wife to whom he was happily married. Her untimely death devastated him. He was still mourning her when Miss Laetitia Somerville came on the scene. Mr Bowerman told Paul that she’d resuscitated him.’

‘Is the lady aware that he was about to fight a duel?’

‘Oh, no – she’d have been horrified.’

‘I don’t blame her,’ said Huckvale.

‘What’s the point of being given a new life if he’s ready to throw it away so recklessly? Some women,’ Peter went on, ‘might be excited at the thought of two men fighting over them but, I suspect, Miss Somerville is not one of them. That is why Mr Bowerman and his adversary went to some lengths to conceal the truth from her.’ He moved to the door. ‘But I must be off. Paul will be chafing at the bit.’

After a flurry of farewells, Peter let himself out. Ackford turned to Huckvale.

‘There’s something you didn’t tell us, Jem.’

‘Is there?’

‘The duel was a closely guarded secret. Only a handful of us knew of it.’

‘That’s true.’

‘Then, how on earth did the Runners catch wind of the event?’

Huckvale gulped. ‘I forgot to ask that.’

It was a question that still vexed Paul Skillen and Mark Bowerman. Awaiting their release, they were alone in a private room at the Bow Street Magistrates’ Court. The handcuffs had been removed and Paul was rubbing his sore wrists.

‘This is Hamer’s work,’ said Bowerman, sourly.

‘I think not.’

‘Fearing that I’d kill or wound him, he made sure the duel was stopped.’

‘Whatever else you can accuse him of,’ argued Paul, ‘it is not cowardice. When you issued your challenge, it was promptly accepted and Captain Hamer made no attempt to withdraw. He was incensed when the Runners appeared out of nowhere this morning.’

‘So was I, Mr Skillen.’

‘It was not in his interests to halt the duel.’

‘Yes, it was. His nerve failed him at the last moment.’

‘That was patently not the case. The Runners were in hiding before we even got there. They had advance notice of time and place. Hamer must be absolved of complicity. He was not responsible in any way.’

‘Why are you taking *his* part?’ protested Bowerman. ‘You are *my* second.’

‘I am, indeed, and my prime commitment is to you. That is why I view the interruption – annoying as it was in some respects – as an unexpected bonus.’

‘Bonus!’

‘You are still alive, sir. For that, I am eternally grateful.’

‘I was prepared to surrender my life.’

‘You’ve been spared that unwise gesture,’ said Paul. ‘The sensible thing is for you and Captain Hamer to settle your differences with a handshake, then each of you can go his separate way.’

‘Am I hearing you aright?’ asked Bowerman, spluttering. ‘You’re counselling me to forget that Stephen Hamer has designs on the woman I love? That’s shameful advice, Mr Skillen, and I reject it forthwith. The issue is quite simple. One duel has been prevented. Another must be arranged.’ His eyes blazed. ‘You’ll understand why I’ll employ a different second next time.’

‘That’s your privilege, sir.’

‘I need someone who knows what it is to risk *everything* for a woman.’

‘Oh, I’ve been in that position, I do assure you, and I found true happiness as a result. But that’s an irrelevance. Consider this, Mr Bowerman,’ he added, solemnly. ‘What will Miss Somerville think when she hears that you came perilously close to sacrificing yourself on her behalf?’

‘I hope that she will think well of me.’

‘The lady would prefer you to be alive. You’re no use whatsoever to her when you’re dead.’

Bowerman smiled fondly. ‘That is where you are mistaken.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s none of your business, Mr Skillen.’

Before Paul could question him, there was a tap on the door and it opened to admit his brother. Bowerman had met Peter at the gallery but he still marvelled at the uncanny likeness between the twins. He kept looking from one to the other.

‘Good day to you, sir,’ said Peter. ‘I’m sorry to find you in such unhappy circumstances.’

‘They are only temporary, Mr Skillen,’ said Bowerman, airily. ‘I will be out of here in no time at all.’

‘My brother can leave immediately. I’ve arranged for his bail.’

‘Thank you,’ said Paul.

‘This whole affair can now be forgotten, I hope.’

‘Then you hope in vain, I fear.’

‘You do, indeed,’ said Bowerman, thrusting out a defiant chin. ‘I will never let the matter rest until I have killed Stephen Hamer and rescued a dear lady from his unwanted attentions. Mark my words, gentlemen, I am resolved to see this dispute through to the bitter end. It can only be terminated by a death.’

After what they saw as a minor triumph, the Runners adjourned to the Peacock Inn, their unofficial headquarters. Micah Yeomans was soon quaffing a celebratory pint with Alfred Hale, his closest friend. After years of humiliation at the hands of the Skillen brothers, they were delighted to have got their revenge on one of them.

‘He didn’t like being handcuffed,’ said Hale. ‘Nobody else was.’

‘I reserved that treat for Paul Skillen.’

‘He was only the second.’

‘I don’t care if he was a casual bystander, Alfred. I wasn’t going to miss the chance to make him suffer. He was at the site of an illegal duel.’

‘I’d have been inclined to let it go ahead.’

‘We have to enforce the law, Alfred.’

‘We haven’t always done so,’ Hale reminded him, ‘especially where we’ve been paid to look the other way. Everyone knows that duelling is a tradition among the nobs. It wasn’t all that long ago that Viscount Castlereagh, our esteemed foreign secretary, fought a duel against Mr Canning, who is now in the same Cabinet. Would you have dared to interrupt that?’

‘No,’ admitted Yeomans, ‘I’d have had more sense than to interfere. I fancy that Mr Canning still rues the day it happened. All that the foreign secretary lost was a button from his coat whereas Mr Canning was wounded in the thigh.’

‘So why do we ignore *some* duels and prevent others from taking place?’

‘The chief magistrate had a letter imploring him to take action. That’s why we were dispatched to Putney Heath before dawn. And the effort was well worth it,’ said Yeomans, chuckling. ‘Paul Skillen fell into our hands.’

They clinked their tankards then drank deep.

A solid individual of medium height, Hale was dwarfed by his companion. Yeomans was not only a man of daunting bulk, he’d acquired strong muscles during his years as a blacksmith. The few criminals brave enough to tackle him were still licking their wounds. As the leading Bow Street Runners, they had built up a fearsome reputation in the capital. What irked them more than anything else was that it was overshadowed all too often by the achievements of Peter and Paul Skillen.

‘It’s a pity we didn’t catch the *two* of them today,’ said Yeomans,

punching his chest with a fist before releasing a belch. 'I'd have found an excuse to keep them behind bars for a whole night. That would have brought them to heel.'

'It might have done the opposite,' said Hale.

'We are charged with policing London, not them. We have the legal right and the proper experience. The Skillen brothers have neither of those things.'

'Yet they do have an amazing record of success, Micah.'

'They've been lucky, that's all.'

'And clever, let's be honest.'

'Paul Skillen won't be feeling very clever after being arrested today. We taught him a lesson,' said Yeomans, complacently. 'As a result, he and that odious brother of his will steer well clear of us. From now on, we won't even get a glimpse of them.'

When the gardener arrived early that morning, he sensed that something was wrong. Though nothing was visible to the naked eye, his curiosity was aroused. He began a systematic search of the whole area, looking at flower beds, shrubs, bushes and trees, and even peering behind the statuary. His instinct was finally rewarded when he reached the arbour. Seated on the wooden bench was a stranger, a gentleman of middle years, apparently asleep. His hat lay on the ground as if tossed there uncaringly. The gardener cleared his throat noisily but it produced no reaction at all. Trying to wake him up, he shook the man vigorously but all that he succeeded in doing was to make him roll off the bench completely. Only then did the dagger embedded in his back come into view. It was surrounded by a large bloodstain.

Mark Bowerman had warned that the dispute could only be resolved by a death. His words had been prophetic.