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Fugitive from the Grave

EDWARD MARSTON

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12 Fitzroy Mews
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CHAPTER ONE

1817

London was awash with beggars. Hardly a road, street, lane or alleyway was free of them. They haunted the riverside, lurked in doorways and descended on St Paul's Cathedral like a swarm of locusts. Some worked alone while others were members of criminal gangs. Begging was a profession open to all: males and females, children and old folk, the blind, the diseased, the disabled and those returning from the war with hideous wounds. Everyone had his or her favourite pitch, jealously guarded against intruders.

Striding through the heart of the city, the man peered out from beneath his umbrella. His clothing and demeanour suggested wealth, so he raised a chorus of appeals wherever he went. Most of those he passed earned no more than a glance, their pathetic cries scarcely reaching his ears. Pickpockets hid in the shadows but none dared to single him out as their prey. Tall, robust and moving swiftly, he exuded a sense of strength and determination. When he turned down a side street, he saw that the beggars had largely disappeared and that he could actually walk a dozen yards or more without being subject to a desperate plea from some sodden wretch.

It was when he reached the end of the street that someone

finally caught his eye and brought him to a halt. Sitting on a doorstep, an old man was staring into space. There was an air of desperation about him. Though his clothing was threadbare and his hat crumpled, he was clearly no ordinary beggar. Gaunt and unshaven, he nevertheless had a strange dignity about him. It was ironic. Having ignored those who'd called out imploringly to him, the newcomer had stopped beside someone who'd remained silent and who seemed to be locked in a private world. He knelt down beside the man, shielding him from the rain with his umbrella.

'You don't belong here,' he said, solicitously.

'What's that?' The old man came out of his reverie and looked up nervously. 'Am I doing something wrong, sir?'

'On the contrary, my dear fellow, I believe that something wrong has been done to *you*.'

'They keep moving me on. Wherever I stop, someone tells me that I've taken his place. They use harsh words and often add a punch or a kick to send me on my way. Do forgive me, sir,' he went on, struggling to his feet. 'I hadn't realised that this spot was reserved.'

'It should never have been occupied by you in the first place,' said the other, putting a friendly arm around his shoulders. 'What brought you to such a condition?'

'I have no money. I beg or I starve.'

'What of your family and friends?'

'My dear wife died years ago and our only child lives abroad. When I had a thriving business, there were many who sought my company. Now that my fortunes have declined, they look the other way. Poverty is the surest way to exile, sir.'

'You look ill. Why have you not sought a doctor?'

'They require money.'

'When did you last eat?'

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Where do you sleep at nights?’

‘Wherever I can.’

‘Look at you – you’re nothing but skin and bone.’

The man gave a wan smile. ‘That’s what I’m reduced to, sir.’

‘Then the first thing we must do is to get some food inside you.’

‘Thank you, kind sir. This is unexpected kindness.’

‘And we must get you out of that tattered apparel. It’s no longer fit for a man of your breeding.’

‘Oh, I had to forfeit my breeding, alas.’

‘There are some things a man never loses.’ The newcomer glanced over his shoulder. ‘I’ve no time for those wailing beggars with their tales of woe. They were born to this life. You, I can see, were certainly not. Come, sir, lean on me and keep under the umbrella. We’ll stop at the first tavern we come to and let you taste wholesome food again. It’s no more than you deserve.’

The older man was overwhelmed with gratitude. ‘I’m a complete stranger,’ he said in disbelief. ‘Why are you being so good to me?’

‘You need help. It’s my duty as a Christian to provide it.’

Slowly and gently, he guided the old man away.

CHAPTER TWO

When he walked slowly past the house, Peter Skillen appeared to show no interest in it at all. Out of the corner of his eye, however, he made a swift assessment of the building. It was a nondescript three-storey house in the middle of a row of dwellings that were all in need of repair. For most people, there'd only be two possible exits, one at the front of the property and another at the rear. But the man he was after that morning would also have a third means of escape. Notorious for his ability to evade arrest, Harry Scattergood had more than once fled over the rooftops of his latest refuge. Small, agile and fearless, the thief was a master at shaking off pursuit. Peter had resolved that Scattergood would be caught and convicted at long last. It was not only because of the large reward on offer. He had a genuine interest in meeting the man face-to-face.

Turning back, he crossed the road and approached the house. As soon as he used the knocker, he heard a bedroom window open above him and caught a glimpse of a man's head popping out before vanishing quickly out of sight. The front door was opened by a middle-aged woman of generous proportions with a powdered face and a startling ginger wig. When she saw the handsome, elegant man on her doorstep, she exposed yellowing teeth in a crooked smile.

‘Good day to you, sir. Can we be of service to you?’

‘Indeed, you can. I need to speak to Mr Scattergood.’

Her smile became a scowl. ‘We’ve nobody of that name here.’

‘My information is usually very reliable,’ said Peter. ‘I believe that, in all probability, he is at present occupying the front room on the first floor. You may, of course, know him by a different name. He has a whole range of them.’

‘There’s no gentleman staying here at the moment,’ she said, raising her voice so that it could be heard throughout the house. ‘I’ve never even heard of Mr Scatter-thing.’

‘His name is Scattergood and he’s certainly no gentleman.’

‘You’ve come to the wrong address.’

‘I don’t think so.’ He lifted a warning eyebrow. ‘Are you aware of the penalty for aiding and abetting a criminal?’

She folded her arms defiantly. ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘The magistrate will think differently.’

‘Good day to you, sir.’

She tried to close the door in his face, but Peter stopped it with a firm hand. The look in his eyes was easy to translate. Whether she liked it or not, he was going to come into the house, even if he had to do so by force. There was no way to stop him. With great reluctance, she stood back out of his way.

‘Thank you,’ he said, bestowing a benign smile on her.

Harry Scattergood, meanwhile, was listening to the conversation from the top of the stairs. Now in his late forties, he was remarkably lithe for his age and confident in his ability to get out of any awkward situation. One confronted him now. He remained in position until Peter came to the foot of the stairs. Having taken a good look at him, Scattergood then set off like a greyhound, dashing into a room at the rear of the house and barricading it

swiftly with every piece of furniture he could lay his hand on. He flung open the window, clambered through it and dropped feet first through the air, landing on the cobbles below with the lightness of a cat. Since discovery had always been a possibility, he'd taken the precaution of leaving his horse saddled in the stable and ready for instant departure. Once again, he congratulated himself that he'd made a miraculous escape. Taking a good run at the hindquarters of the animal, he vaulted effortlessly into the saddle, intending to ride swiftly away from danger.

But there was a problem. The moment he landed on the horse, the saddle gave way completely and he was tipped violently onto the ground. Before he could move, he felt a sword point at his neck.

'We had a feeling you'd leave this way,' said Paul Skillen, stepping into view, 'so I took the trouble of cutting the girth on your mount. You won't be riding a horse for a very long time, Harry.'

Mouth agape, Scattergood stared at him in amazement.

'How the hell did you get out here so fast?' he demanded. 'I left you standing at the bottom of the bleeding stairs.'

'That was my brother. Come and meet him.'

Taking him by the scruff of the neck, Paul dragged him out of the stable, then yanked him to his feet. 'There he is,' he went on, pointing upwards. 'You fled from Peter into the arms of Paul.'

'We always work together,' explained Peter, leaning out of the window through which the thief had leapt. 'Strictly speaking, Paul made the arrest, but we always share reward money equally.'

Scattergood looked first at Peter, then at Paul, then back again at Peter. Realisation slowly dawned on him.

'I've heard about you,' he said. 'You're twins.'

'We've heard about *you*,' said Paul, grinning. 'You're nabbed.'

* * *

It was the time of day when Micah Yeomans and Alfred Hale were usually to be found at the Peacock Inn, eating a warm pie and washing it down with a pint or two of its celebrated ale. The pub had long ago become the Runners' unofficial headquarters, the place where they could relax in comfort and from which they could deploy the various patrols they supervised. Yeomans was a big, hulking man in his forties with dark, bushy eyebrows dominating an excessively ugly face. Hale was shorter, slighter and a couple of years younger, enjoying the power his status gave him yet always deferring to his companion. They were on their second pint when a breathless Chevy Ruddock came into the bar and looked around for them. A member of the foot patrol, Ruddock was proud to be involved in law enforcement and to be working with the two most famous and successful Runners in the city. He was a tall, ungainly, ever-willing individual in his twenties. Panting heavily, he sped across to them.

'I was hoping to find you here,' he said, gulping for air.

'Get your breath back first, lad,' advised Hale. 'There's no rush.'

'Yes, there is, Mr Hale.'

'Why is that?'

'I've brought you important news, sir.'

'What is it?' asked Yeomans.

'I've just come from Bow Street.'

'That's not news, you idiot. You go there every day.'

'But today is different, Mr Yeomans. You'll never guess what's happened. A certain person is finally in custody.'

'Don't stand there gibbering, man. What's his name?'

'Spit it out!' urged Hale.

After pausing for effect, Ruddock made his grand announcement.

'Harry Scattergood is finally behind bars.'

‘These are wonderful tidings,’ said Yeomans, leaping to his feet. ‘That slippery little monkey has been caught at last.’

‘Congratulations, Chevy!’ said Hale, getting up to pat him on the back. ‘In arresting him, you’ve done this city a great service.’

‘I wasn’t the person who caught him,’ admitted Ruddock.

‘Well, whoever it was, he deserves our thanks.’

‘There may even be a promotion in this for him,’ said Yeomans, beaming. ‘We’ve been chasing Harry for years without so much as getting a glimpse of the rogue. I’d love to shake the hand of the man who made the arrest. Who is he?’

‘In point of fact,’ said Ruddock, taking a precautionary step back, ‘it was not one person but two.’

‘Then I’ll buy a pint of ale for both heroes. Who are they?’

‘Peter and Paul Skillen.’

Yeomans blanched. ‘What did you say?’ he growled.

‘It was the Skillen brothers who tracked him down, sir.’

‘I thought you’d brought us good news, damn you!’

‘These are the worst tidings possible,’ said Hale.

‘Credit where credit is due,’ said Ruddock, reasonably. ‘The two of them did something that we couldn’t manage, even though we have far better resources, not to mention an army of paid informers. Those twins have a knack that we somehow don’t possess.’

‘Shut up!’ barked Yeomans.

‘We should learn from them, sir. I believe that—’

The rest of the sentence became a gurgle as Yeomans grabbed him by the throat and lifted him bodily from the ground. A former blacksmith, the Runner had immense power. It was usually reserved for malefactors but, on this occasion, the hapless Ruddock felt its full force. When he was dumped back down on the floor, he shuddered.

‘We are the official guardians of law and order,’ said Yeomans.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The Skillen brothers are mere interlopers.’

‘But they’re remarkably clever ones,’ said Hale.

Yeomans glowered at him. ‘Don’t *you* start as well.’

‘What Chevy said was good advice, Micah. We ought to wonder why it is that Peter and Paul Skillen are better thief-takers than we are. What’s their secret?’

‘They have outrageous good fortune, that’s all.’

‘How did *they* find Scattergood when we didn’t get so much as a sniff of that little toad?’

‘We’d have caught him in due course.’

‘It’s too late now,’ Ruddock pointed out. ‘He’s already caught. The Skillen brothers have stolen our thunder.’

‘They’re trespassing on our territory,’ said Yeomans, angrily. ‘I’ve warned them before about that. They need to be stopped.’

‘You tried to stop them once before, sir.’

‘It’s true,’ said Hale. ‘We arrested one of their friends in the hope that it would teach them a lesson. All we got in return for our efforts was a stern rebuke from the chief magistrate and a demand that we release the prisoner at once. Jem Huckvale walked free and we ended up in disgrace.’

Ruddock was rueful. ‘You made me swear I’d seen him stealing a leg of mutton in the market,’ he said, ‘and I was very uneasy about doing that.’

‘I know,’ said Yeomans, shooting him a disdainful glance. ‘Had you given your evidence with more authority, Huckvale would have been convicted and the Skillen brothers would be devoting all their time to saving him from transportation. Jem Huckvale is vital to them. He’s their intelligencer. He *bears* things.’

‘So does my wife, sir,’ said Ruddock, sighing, ‘and it’s always in

the middle of the night. She's convinced a burglar has got in. Some nights I'm in and out of bed three or four times.'

'There's one sure way to stop her from hearing noises at night.'

'Is there?'

'Stuff something in your wife's ears – if not elsewhere in her anatomy.' He and Hale shared a ribald laugh. 'But I return to my point. The Skillen brothers would be helpless without Huckvale. He always seems to be in the right place to pick up information. It's quite uncanny.'

When he was dispatched with a message to deliver, Jem Huckvale had been offered the use of a horse but he preferred to run to and from Covent Garden, maintaining good speed and threading his way expertly through the crowds. He was a diminutive figure in his twenties, but his stature belied both his strength and his ability to defend himself. Having handed the letter over, he began the journey back to the gallery where he lived and gave instruction in shooting, boxing, fencing and archery. Huckvale reached the edge of the market when he noticed a striking young woman and her male companion. Looking around in dismay, they were clearly lost. Because their attire marked them out as visitors from abroad, Huckvale stopped to offer his help.

'Are you lost?' he asked, politely. 'I was born and brought up in London, so I can give you any directions you need.'

'That's very kind of you,' said the woman, appraising him for a moment before deciding that he could be trusted. 'I, too, was born here but I've lived in Amsterdam for many years. To my shame, I've forgotten my way around. We're looking for Bow Street.' She gave a hopeless shrug. 'At least, I think that we are.'

'Don't you know?'

‘I thought I did but, now that we’re here, I’m not at all sure that we’d be going to the right place.’

‘Wherever you wish to go, I’ll be happy to conduct you. My name is Jem Huckvale,’ he explained, ‘and I’m at your service.’

There was something about his open face, his soft voice and his pleasant manner that appealed to her. For his part, he was delighted to be able to help a beautiful and well-spoken woman so obviously in distress.

‘I’m Mrs van Emden,’ she said, then indicated her chaperon, ‘and this is Jacob, my footman. He speaks very little English.’

Huckvale grinned. ‘I don’t hold that against him, Mrs van Emden,’ he said. ‘I can’t speak a word of Dutch. It always sounds such a difficult language to learn.’

‘It is,’ she agreed with a smile. ‘It’s taken me years to get my tongue around it. Fortunately, I have a very patient husband.’ She became serious. ‘My dilemma is this: I returned to England because I heard that my father had died. I’m desperate to learn the circumstances of his death. That’s why I thought my search might start in Bow Street.’

‘Do you suspect that a crime might have taken place?’

‘No, no, I’ve no reason to think that. I just need someone to find the information I want. My immediate thought was a Runner.’

‘Why not begin your search at the church where he was buried?’

‘I don’t know where it is.’

‘Someone in your family will surely tell you.’

‘It’s not as simple as that, Mr Huckvale,’ she said, looking around at the jostling crowd. ‘If you don’t mind, I’d rather not discuss my private affairs out here in the street.’

‘Then you have a choice,’ he told her. ‘You can either turn to the Runners and hope that they have a man who’ll take an interest in your plight, or you can engage the best detectives in London.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Their names are Peter and Paul Skillen, seasoned men who’ve solved murders, caught endless criminals and tracked down dozens of missing persons. They’ll certainly take on your case.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘I have the honour of working for them, Mrs van Emden.’ He could see her hesitating. ‘Why not at least speak to them?’ he suggested. ‘It will cost you nothing. If you have any doubts about their abilities, you can go to the Runners instead.’

‘Well . . .’

‘What can you lose?’ asked Huckvale, with a reassuring smile. ‘This is no chance encounter. I believe that fate guided our footsteps today. We were *meant* to cross each other’s paths. Don’t you feel that?’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘In truth, I don’t feel that at all.’