

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'a' and 'b' in a white, elegant cursive script, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the 'b'.

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POINTS OF DANGER

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CHAPTER ONE

1861

Seated opposite each other, they were alone in a first class compartment. As the train slowed right down, the man took the gold watch from his waistcoat pocket, looked at it then heaved a sigh of frustration.

‘Late again,’ he said.

His wife made no reply. She was always slightly queasy when travelling by rail and had to sit facing the engine. Going backwards for any length of time made her want to vomit. She was a still handsome woman in her forties, short, slight, impeccably dressed and with almost elfin features. Both she and her husband exuded a sense of wealth and importance. He was a big man in his fifties with an air of distinction that offset his unprepossessing features. He looked as if he might have been born to wear his glistening top hat.

Irritable by nature, he soon had more cause for complaint. The train juddered unexpectedly and squealed as the brakes were applied. After a glance through the window, he struggled to his feet.

‘What the devil is happening?’ he demanded. ‘Instead of going into the station, we’ve been diverted onto the branch line.’

‘Sit down again, Jarvis,’ she suggested.

‘Somebody will suffer for this,’ he warned. ‘We’re already late enough, as it is. And now, we’re going in the wrong direction.’ He flopped back down on his seat. ‘This is unforgivable.’

He continued to fulminate but his protests were abruptly cut short. The train came to a sudden, jolting halt. Above the furious hissing of the locomotive, they heard the sound of hooves approaching. A rider with a hat pulled down over his face then appeared outside their window, extending a hand to fling open the door. He pointed a pistol at the man and yelled his command.

‘Hand over your wallet and watch.’

The man was outraged. ‘Do you know *who* I am and *what* I am?’

They were the last words he ever spoke. The robber knocked off the man’s hat before shooting him between the eyes from close range. Blood spurted everywhere. The woman screamed in horror and drew back, her reticule falling from her lap. Steadying his mount, the robber reached in to divest the man of his wallet and watch before scooping up the reticule. He then galloped off with his booty.

In less than a minute, he had rewritten railway history.

CHAPTER TWO

‘He’s changed,’ said Leeming. ‘He’s changed for the better.’

Colbeck was unconvinced. ‘I hadn’t noticed.’

‘You must’ve done, sir. The superintendent is a different man. Ever since the abduction, he’s been much kinder to us.’

‘That’s hardly surprising, Victor. We did, after all, help to save his life. Anyone would be grateful to people who did that.’

‘It’s almost as if he’s learnt to respect us – and not before time, if you ask me. I’m almost glad he went through that ordeal. It taught him a lot and turned him into a normal human being.’

‘I’d never describe Superintendent Tallis as in any way normal,’ said Colbeck with a wry smile, ‘and I’d certainly never take pleasure from the fact that he came so close to being murdered in the most agonising way. I wouldn’t wish that fate on my worst enemy.’

‘But he *is* your worst enemy.’

Colbeck laughed. ‘My enemies are on the other side of the law, Victor. With all his faults, the superintendent believes passionately in justice and has dedicated his life to law enforcement.’

The two of them were in his office, Leeming standing and Colbeck adjusting his cravat in the mirror. Though it was months since the event, the crime they were discussing was still at the forefront of their minds. Shortly before Christmas, the superintendent had been kidnapped in Canterbury, held captive and – when he was finally rescued – on the point of being flayed to death by a vengeful soldier from his old regiment. After such torment, most people would have needed a long rest before they returned to work but Tallis’s resilience was legendary. Too proud to show the mental and physical pain he was suffering, he’d been back at his desk almost immediately.

‘He’s more subdued, I grant you,’ conceded Colbeck, ‘but, in essence, he remains the same person he always has been.’

‘How can you say that, sir?’ asked Leeming in surprise. ‘In the old days, we were called to his office with a bellow. You stood up to him, somehow, but I always felt that I was in the dock awaiting sentence. Yet now,’ he went on, ‘he speaks softly to us as if we’re friends as much as fellow detectives.’

‘That may not last, Victor.’

‘Yes, it will – he’s seen the error of his ways.’

‘He’s been through a dreadful experience,’ argued Colbeck, ‘that shook him to the core and left him severely bruised. But those bruises are fading by the day. When they’ve disappeared, the same Edward Tallis will spring back to life.’

‘For once, I disagree, sir.’

‘Does that mean you’d risk a wager?’

Before Leeming could reply, there was a polite knock on the door, then it opened to reveal the very man about

whom they'd been talking. Tallis was uncharacteristically subdued, his body sagging and the glint in his eye replaced by a hesitant glance.

'Can we help you, sir?' asked Colbeck.

'I'm not the one in need of help,' replied Tallis, 'but you can certainly help the Eastern Counties Railway. Its telegraph summons you by name.'

'That's very gratifying.'

'You and the sergeant must leave for Norwich at once.'

'But I have to visit someone, sir,' said Leeming.

'Cancel the arrangement.'

'Can't we go to Norwich tomorrow, instead?'

'You heard me.'

'It's a very special event.'

'This case takes precedence.'

'I promised my wife faithfully that . . .'

The words died on his lips as he saw Tallis undergoing a sudden transformation. It was extraordinary. Gone were the courteous manner and the gentle voice. They were instantly replaced by the old truculence and the familiar growl. In the space of a few seconds, the superintendent was bigger, louder and infinitely more hostile.

'You know my motto, Leeming. Work comes first.'

'Yes, sir,' said the other, cowering.

'Some paltry arrangement of yours shrinks to insignificance beside a gruesome murder on a train.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then why do you dare to question my order?'

'It was a mistake, Superintendent.'

'That, alas, is not a novelty. Your whole career at Scotland Yard has been a compendium of mistakes.'

‘That’s unfair, sir,’ said Colbeck, coming to the aid of his friend. ‘Sergeant Leeming has been an exemplary detective. There’s nobody in this building as reliable as him.’

‘In one sense,’ said Tallis, ‘you are quite right. The sergeant can always be relied on to put family before duty and to ask inane questions at the most inappropriate time. In short, he is reliably *unreliable*.’

‘That’s a bit harsh, sir,’ bleated Leeming.

‘It’s both harsh and unjust,’ argued Colbeck. ‘But let us turn our attention to the call for help. Who is the murder victim?’

‘Come to my office and we’ll give the matter our full attention.’ Tallis glared at the hapless sergeant. ‘We can discuss the crime more sensibly without the irritating presence of a man obsessed with his social life and poised to make his latest mistake.’

Storming out of the room, he left Leeming dazed as if from a blow. Colbeck raised a teasing eyebrow.

‘Do you still think he’s a new man, Victor?’

Now that she’d passed her first birthday, Helen Rose Colbeck was an even more definite presence in the family. Having taken her first halting footsteps, she’d quickly learnt how to totter boldly around the room and make light of any tumbles. Her personality had blossomed, her laugh was infectious and identifiable words were coming from her mouth. The child’s face glowed with what her parents chose to believe was a blend of happiness and intelligence. Every day seemed to bring some small but exciting development. Whenever Colbeck returned home from work, his wife welcomed him with the latest bulletin.

Though Madeleine enjoyed spending more time with her daughter, it came at a price. She could no longer disappear into her studio for the best part of a day and devote herself to her latest painting. Helen's needs came first. Having played with her that morning, her mother was relieved when the nanny came to put the child down for her customary nap. It would allow Madeleine precious time in which to work. Before she could go upstairs, however, she was intercepted by the maid who handed her a letter that had just arrived. Since she didn't recognise the elegant handwriting, Madeleine's curiosity was aroused. She opened the missive at once and read it.

Her eyes widened with a mixture of surprise and delight.

In his own office, Tallis reverted to his former self, pulling himself up to his full height, glowering at Colbeck and rasping out his question.

'Well, what do you think?'

'I think that the Eastern Counties Railway company has done us a favour,' said Colbeck, handing the telegraph back to him. 'As a rule, any plea we get is terse to the point of rudeness. This one actually gives us some real information.'

'The victim is obviously held in high regard.'

'That's understandable, sir.'

'Why – is he a director of the company?'

'Jarvis Swarbrick is much more than that. He is – or, at least, he was until today – its appointed saviour. Not to put too fine a point on it, the ECR has a perfectly awful reputation. It was the first railway to be constructed in East Anglia and, from the very start, has been dogged by all manner of setbacks. Jarvis Swarbrick has ambitions for the

company. The one thing the telegraph omitted to tell you is that he happens to be a Member of Parliament.’

‘How on earth do you know that?’

‘I always like to follow notable developments on the railway system,’ explained Colbeck. ‘That’s how his name came to my attention. East Anglia is bedevilled by its profusion of railway companies and by the chaos they often generate. Mr Swarbrick has been trying to introduce a bill in Parliament to effect an amalgamation that will both simplify the system and make travel in the region more efficient. In my view, that gives us a possible suspect.’

‘Does it?’

‘Someone is set on preventing the merger.’

‘This crime has nothing to do with it,’ said Tallis. ‘The telegraph makes that clear. Mr Swarbrick was shot by the man who robbed him.’

‘There’s a telling detail that you missed, Superintendent.’

Tallis looked at the telegraph again. ‘Is there?’

‘What does it say about the gentleman and his wife?’

‘They were travelling alone in their compartment.’

‘That’s the crucial piece of information, sir. There were, no doubt, several other people in the first-class carriages. Other compartments may well have been filled to capacity.’

‘I don’t follow your argument.’

‘That’s because you don’t think like a criminal, sir.’

Tallis reddened. ‘I should hope not, damn you!’

‘Consider this,’ said Colbeck. ‘If someone intended to rob passengers on a train, he’d surely wish to maximise his profits. Why settle for a compartment containing only two people when he could have found others with far richer pickings?’

‘Ah,’ said Tallis, fingering his moustache, ‘I’m beginning to catch your drift. He deliberately chose Swarbrick’s compartment.’

‘The robber was there to kill as well as to take their valuables. There was no need to shoot Mr Swarbrick. When a pistol is pointed at someone, he or she is usually quick to comply with any demand. I may, of course, be wrong,’ admitted Colbeck, ‘but my first reaction is this. The robber was either stupid enough to ignore compartments that would have yielded a far bigger haul, or he was a hired assassin with only one person in mind. I prefer the second option,’ he went on. ‘The killer knew exactly where to find his victim and went straight for him.’

Tallis blinked. ‘How ever did you deduce all that?’

‘It’s no more than an informed guess, sir.’

‘And it’s a persuasive one, at that.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Well, don’t hang about, man. Get on the next train to Norwich.’

‘I will,’ said Colbeck, moving to the door before turning on his heel to face the superintendent. ‘Oh, by the way . . .’

‘What is it now?’ snarled Tallis.

‘Welcome back, sir.’