

The Devil's Feast

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Prologue

The fire in the grate had burned itself down to a series of glimmering embers in amongst the drifts of ash, and the room was now dark, save for the candle. The one small window high in the wall brought in the evening's cold, for the nights were still sharp.

He shivered.

The room was mean and ill-kempt and well below his station. The floor was covered in dust and debris and the walls bloomed with mildew, but it served his purpose well enough. For furniture, there was a worn cane chair, a deal table and on one wall two stained and dusty shelves. On the table, carefully arranged in a line and neatly labelled, were several bottles and boxes. In front of these were four bowls and four teaspoons – too fine for their surroundings – two sets of metal tongs, a plate on which lay part of a stale loaf of bread and a bottle of beer, opened.

On the shelves behind there were two long, well-used leather cases. One contained a hacksaw with several spare blades; in the other, upon old but beautiful watered silk, were two knives with bone handles and long, thin, well-polished blades, sharp on the side and blunt at the tip.

He bent over the table, squinting in the half-light, the candle flickering in the draught, as he sought the correct bottle, ignoring the scratchings and whimpers. Finding it, he pulled off the top and poured out a heaped spoonful of white powder and tipped it into a clean bowl. He again perused the bottles and boxes. Havering between two, he finally took up a slim, blue bottle, with a fresh spoon scooped out more powder and decanted this into another bowl. Into both bowls he then poured a generous helping of beer.

He sat and watched.

The two dogs were hard-tethered against the bare brick on either side of the hearth. The one on the right sat complacently, maw open, tongue lolling, expectant, its thick coat and rolls of fat cushioning it against the rough floor. The other was a sorry beast, crazed with hunger, frantic at one moment, listless the next. Now, it was dashing its head from side to side

and issuing a low growl. Its eyes were bloodshot and its hair was mangy across its hollow haunches. Had it been shaken, its ribs would have rattled. It was only the short leash and the muzzle tight round its jaw that kept it in check. He imagined the animal loose, falling upon him, its foul breath in his face, its fangs meeting in his neck.

On the other side of the room the two rats lay in their cages: one lazy, fat and well-fed, the other ugly, starved and desperate.

'Not long now,' he said to the room.

The mixtures had sat long enough; it was time. He took up the stale bread and broke it into four pieces, placing two in each bowl to soak up the liquid. Then he seized one pair of tongs, picked up a piece of dripping bread and set it down before the fat dog; the other he dropped before the hungry dog, taking care to evade its snapping jaws. The first idly nosed the offering, while the starving one had snapped it up almost before he had snatched back the tongs. The first dog continued to sniff its portion quizzically for some time, before slurping it up with its tongue.

Now the rats. He unhooked the top of each pen, placing the morsel before each one. The starved rat leapt up, its claws and teeth scrabbling for bare flesh. But when the bread landed, the famished creature gobbled the whole thing in one gulp. Meanwhile, the fat one sniffed its portion fastidiously, then turned away from it. He considered for a moment, then took the honey he had brought and spooned a little over the bread. The rat returned, sniffed consideringly, then started upon the bread with small, precise bites.

He took to his chair. He waited.

The starving rat was first. Within a few minutes it began to twitch and squeak piteously. When he held the candle above it, its little jaws bared involuntarily. A few moments later its whole body spasmed as if it were being stretched on an invisible rack. When this passed, it thrashed about and clawed, first at its belly, then at its face, until it was taken by another violent seizure. This brought back the rictus grin but also caused the rat's head and spine to bend backwards into a hideous, trembling arch. It gasped for breath, producing a pathetic, breathless hawking. He watched, fascinated, as despite its weakness and hunger, it fought vainly against its fate.

By now, the cadaverous dog was in distress. It forced itself up, pulling against its leash, and coughed up a thin spew of yellow liquid. Within two or three minutes it was unsteady on its feet and had begun to froth about

the mouth, choking and gasping. It staggered a few steps and fell, lying on its side, one front paw clawing at its neck and chest, the other scratching uselessly at the wall. The well-fed hound began perhaps ten or fifteen minutes later, whimpering and barking as the burning began in its stomach.

To his surprise and satisfaction, the fat rat's symptoms came last of all. It, too, began to writhe, its little body rolling around and convulsing in its cage. He watched them all silently, as their struggles waxed and waned. The starving rat succumbed first, falling upon its back, as a series of final spasms finished it off. The dogs continued to writhe and bark and whine.

He looked up at the small window, his concern that they might be heard outside getting the better of him. He tiptoed up the broken steps. Outside, the street was filled with night sounds and traffic: he need not have worried. He descended again, listening out for barking, but the creatures were now quiet. When he re-entered the room, the hungry dog was in its last struggles, surrounded by a pool of filth; the fat one had quite given up.

The smell was unpleasant, to say the least. But the result was just as he had hoped. Hungry or well-fed, they had all succumbed more or less at the same time, and in the same way.

'A step closer,' he whispered to himself, and gave himself up to a moment of exaltation.

PART ONE

Chapter One

I stood on the south side of the Thames – ‘over the water’, the locals call it – by London Bridge, looking at the north bank. They say it is one of the great sights of the world. It was certainly one of the most congested. Lining the shore, wharves and warehouses crushed against each other, and below them the sides of the slick, viscous river were crowded so deeply with ships and barges that only a narrow channel in the middle remained, through which, nose to tail, skiffs and steamships all passed. In India, I had seen wider rivers and bigger vistas, but nothing compared with scale of human activity upon and around the banks of the Thames. Only the view upwards at the high panorama of the city, the dozen needle spires and the dome of St Paul’s reaching up out of the smut, gave any sense of tranquillity.

I turned away from the river and jostled my way down Borough High Street for some few hundred yards, then turned right into the streets west of the coaching inns, into that place that had once been the haunt of fugitives and criminals, of Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, and was known picturesquely as the Liberty of the Mint. Little about it was picturesque now. The broken-down dens and sewers stank and were crowded with wretched, beggarly men and thin, dirty children who would steal from you as soon as look as you – as I had already discovered to my cost.

It was almost with relief that I reached the old brick wall of the prison and followed it round to the entrance. The gatekeeper smiled obsequiously and shook his keys; I dropped a penny into his hand as I went in but did not look at him. The long yard – bare and chilled by a bitter spring wind – was peopled with the usual seedy rabble. New arrivals wandered about gloomily, clutching their worn coats and scarves about them, as they waited for a third or fourth day to be apportioned a room. The regular inmates, driven out of their

cramped and unventilated lodgings, watched them. Wives and daughters, some resigned, some tearful, sat with husbands and fathers, while, indecently near, the prison whores touted for trade.

There were three houses in that first yard. The first was occupied by those who could afford their own quarters; the second housed the tap room and the female prisoners. I made for the third, mounted the staircase to the first floor and took the rickety walkway to the last door.

It was a dismal room, narrow and dark. The walls were grey and the day overcast, and the small, dirty window contributed little light.

He sat at a small table with a flickering taper wrapped in his old Indian banyan. There was, of course, a pile of books before him, but he was not reading. His chin was propped upon his palm, his eyes were in shadow – the half-light cast the scar on his eyebrow into dark relief and made the stumps of his missing fingers strange – as he listened to the nervous whisperings of a small, inconspicuous man with a threadbare moustache who sat next to him.

On the only mattress lay the grizzled shipping clerk with whom he shared the room. Seeing me, this man looked up blearily and without a word rose, felt around for his comforter, and departed. The other man glanced up anxiously and said, ‘You’ve a visitor, Mr Blake. I’ll take my leave.’

Blake said, ‘If one of your creditors will not agree to your release, you will have to stay here, though you’ll get a little money from the county and from charity, but only just enough to get by, and like as not you’ll be stuck. It’s up to you.’

‘Thank you, Mr Blake. Thank you. They all says you is a fine, kind gentleman, and that you is.’

‘I’m no gentleman,’ he said.

The little man darted out of the room, as if fearful of catching too much of my attention.

‘You should charge a fee, Jeremiah,’ I said. I deposited my prizes on the table: three large oranges, a covered bowl of cooling but tasty stew, and another weighty tome, and sat down. ‘At least it would pay for your dinner.’

He lifted a pewter mug of beer and took a sip. 'Oh, he sees to it I'm fed.'

He took another mouthful. Cautiously, I made my next move.

'People have been asking after you.'

'Who?' he said suspiciously.

'Friends. Mayhew, for one. Miss Jenkins, your devoted neighbour, for another. She saw me coming from your lodgings. She was worried. And while I was speaking to her, a man I did not know asked after you.'

He grimaced, 'And you answered –'

'– that I had no idea where you were,' I said, unable to hide my exasperation. 'Do not fear, I keep your little secret.'

'What were you doing with Mayhew?' he asked.

'If you recall, I like him.' I said. 'Besides, he has arranged for Mr Jerrold to take me to the Reform Club – since you cannot – so I may see Matty Horner before I return to Devon.'

'So you are going home.' This more a statement than a question.

'I would stay, were there a reason. But there is no point, is there? I depart tomorrow.'

He nodded, staring at the mildewed wall before him. I searched his face for any sign that he might have relented.

I made my play. 'You will not change your mind?'

'No.'

Irritation – anxiety mixed with it – rose in me.

'Please. Reconsider. Do not leave yourself like this. Do not let Collinson do this to you.'

'And yet you are here on his behalf.'

'I am here because he told me you were here. Please, Jeremiah. Surely, accepting Collinson's task cannot be worse than being confined in this foul place.'

'To me it is.'

'That is madness. No, not madness. Typical perversity. Stubbornness.' I could hear myself, and I was not persuasive: an unfortunate combination of pleading and anger. 'For God's sake, Jeremiah, take the commission! It would not be so bad. I would stay, assist you in any way you needed. It would be done in a couple of days.'

I had no great hopes of my speech. I had already made it at much greater length several times.

‘It would be done, and then Collinson would have another job for me. And another. I have told you, I would rather be here than in bondage to him.’

‘But, Jeremiah, you are in bondage *here*. Fire and fury! Everyone is in thrall to someone. From the top to the bottom. It is how the world works. Every man to his master, every smallholder to his landowner, every clerk to his chief. I am bound to the calls of my father, my second cousin whose tenant I am, even my –’ I stopped. ‘This is your work. What you are good at. Is the task really so terrible?’

‘He trades my labour for favours from men I despise. I will not work at his whim.’ He coughed, a horrid, wracking sound, and his body shook.

‘What news of my namesake? Is he any better?’

I grinned. He knew that any mention of Fred – Frederick Jeremiah – my son of four months, would distract me. ‘He is indeed. My sister Louisa wrote to say his fever is down and his cough is much improved. He is back to gurgling and smiling. His hands and feet are a matter of utter fascination to him. He is almost sitting up.’

‘That’s a good thing,’ he said, and gave me his rare smile. ‘And Mrs Avery?’

‘Helen. She is . . . relieved. Matters are better, I think,’ I said, nodding my head vigorously, though I did not really think this was true. ‘We are doing our best.’

He nodded back.

‘Oh, Jeremiah! There must be another way. You cannot stay in this place.’

‘Stop clucking over me, William,’ he said. ‘I shall get along. I managed well enough before I knew you. Did you bring me what I asked for?’

This, I had dreaded. From inside my coat I drew out what looked like a filleting knife but shorter and very sharp. I handed it to him. ‘If you are managing so very well, why do you need this?’

He did not answer.

‘Oh, eat one of your oranges,’ I said, pushing them at him. He picked one up and began carefully to peel it. ‘Do we even know how great the debt is?’ I asked.

‘I do.’

‘Well?’

‘It is between me and Collinson. I’m not telling you. You’d do something foolish and get yourself into trouble.’

‘It must be registered somewhere. I shall find out myself.’

For the first time, Blake was roused. ‘I forbid you to.’

‘Do you?!’

Thus it was that my friend, my associate, my burden, Jeremiah Blake, had fetched up in the Marshalsea Prison, imprisoned for debt by his sometime patron Theophilus Collinson. Collinson was quietly influential in London’s highest political and social circles. Blake was a private inquiry agent, Collinson essentially his patron, sending him to investigate and resolve matters which his rich and powerful acquaintances did not want to leak into the public domain. Blake was paid for his work, and Collinson built up a bank of favours. But Collinson had come to feel he had a justified hold over Blake, and Blake was not – and as far as I could tell never had been – good at taking orders. He had a wholly prejudiced dislike of the aristocracy and what I had once heard him call ‘the undeserving rich’. He hated doing Collinson’s bidding and despised many of the people for whom he was forced to work. And though a skilled dissembler when he cared to be, when it came to Collinson and his friends, he did not try. Matters had reached such a pass that when Blake had refused his most recent commission, Collinson, a man used to having his own way, had had him arrested and imprisoned for debt. He had sharpened the punishment by enforcing a special rule that Blake, unlike all the other Marshalsea debtors, could not leave the prison during daylight. The debt appeared legitimate, but I was in no doubt that the whole thing had been got up to punish Blake. Collinson had papers which apparently showed that he had paid Blake a figure in excess of his usual fee as an advance for services he had subsequently refused to render, and had passed this off as a debt.

He had assumed the shock would subdue Blake's rebelliousness: he had made it clear that he would withdraw the claim if Blake accepted his commission. Collinson had, however, underestimated his adversary's stubbornness. Blake had refused, choosing to remain in prison. They were at a stand-off: Blake stuck in the noxious Marshalsea; Collinson gnashing his teeth and desperate to have Blake out and working.

Collinson's next move had been to write to me, knowing I would be horrified to hear of Blake's situation and that I would rush from my home in Devon to try to have him freed. This was exactly what I had done. I had met with Collinson and was in no doubt of his intentions, but I had been unable to see any way of having Blake freed other than him agreeing to his patron's terms. And of course he would not, and so this was my fourth visit. All to no avail.

The only thing upon which the two men were agreed was that Blake's situation should remain secret. And so, to my further frustration, I had to undertake not to speak of it. I had once before broken a promise to Blake; the consequences had been disastrous. He knew I would keep this one. However, while polite society knew nothing of Blake's whereabouts, London's criminal community had found out about it. A blackguard with a grudge against Blake had deputed a particularly unsavoury inmate of the Marshalsea, who gloried in the name of Nathaniel Gore, to do him as much harm as he could. Thus the knife.

Blake seemed remarkably sanguine about this. As the days passed, I, however, had grown increasingly desperate to free him. I was sure that there were more than a few wealthy men in the capital who owed him a good deal and would be happy to pay the debt, but he refused to countenance the thought, as well as flatly forbidding me to pay off the debt myself (not, I confess, that I would necessarily have been able to do so).

'Lord, you are perverse!' I said. 'When I depart, what then? You will stew here with no visitors, wasting away from boredom and sickness, until that demon Gore gets you! Collinson will let you rot here, you know, and your friends will know nothing of it.'

Blake shrugged in his most annoying manner and ate a piece of

orange. I almost stamped my foot. We did not speak for some minutes.

‘So you have made all your calls?’ he said.

‘Just Matty left to see.’

On my last visit to London a bare few months before, we had rescued Matty Horner from a life on the streets. Blake had found her and her brother, Pen, work in the kitchen of the Reform Club, which, under the direction of Alexis Soyer, was said to be the Eighth Wonder of the World. Soyer was the most famous chef in London – perhaps in the world; even I had heard of him. The Reform Club was a political club, an alliance of Whigs and Radicals, or ‘liberals’, as some of them now called themselves – which had been founded to counter the Tory party. Opened for not quite a year in grand, new premises in Pall Mall, it had quickly become the most desirable dining room in London.

‘As a Tory born and bred,’ I said, ‘I won’t be entering the club itself, but Mr Jerrold has arranged for me to visit the kitchens. Shall I send Monsieur Soyer your regards?’

Blake snorted. He thought little of my political affiliations. ‘You keep me out of it.’ Then he moved his head so his eyes were again in shadow and his expression unreadable.

I could not resist further needling. ‘Why you should be so keen to keep your achievements a secret, I do not understand.’ My voice was thick with sarcasm. ‘Why hide the fact that you have gone to such trouble to put yourself in the Marshalsea, resisting all efforts to release you, apparently determined to get yourself killed?’

‘Enough.’ He suddenly looked utterly fatigued, and I was anxious again. ‘Truly, William, I am glad you came. I am. I just – I can’t do otherwise.’

I gave a small, defeated nod.

‘I saw Matty about a month ago,’ he said. ‘She’s doing well. Kitchen’s impressive. Introduce yourself to Soyer. He’ll like you.’

‘Jeremiah, I hate to leave you in this place.’

He looked pained.

‘Tell me you have a plan. That there is some rhyme and reason to this.’

He looked away.

I stood up abruptly. 'I cannot help you, Blake, and I do not know when I shall see you next. I would ask you to take care of yourself, but it seems you are determined not to.'

'Do not fret for me, William. Please.'

He returned to his former pose, head propped upon his hand. I strode out of the room on to the walkway, scattering inmates in my wake.