

Ratcatcher

James McGee

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2006

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 00 721266 6
ISBN 0 00 721267 4 (trade paperback)

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Limited, St Ives plc

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PROLOGUE

The prey was running late.

The horseman checked his pistol and returned the weapon to the leather holster concealed beneath his riding cloak. Bending low over the mare's neck, he stroked the smooth, glistening flesh. At the touch, the animal whickered softly and stomped a forefoot into the soggy, waterlogged ground.

A large drop of rain fell from the branch above the rider's head and splattered on to his sleeve. He cursed savagely. The rain had stopped thirty minutes before, but remnants of the storm still lingered. In the distance, a jagged flash of lightning sprang across the night sky and thunder rumbled ominously. Beneath him, the horse trembled.

The rain had turned the ground into a quagmire but the air smelled clean and fresh. Pale shafts of moonlight filtered through the spreading branches of the oak tree, illuminating the faces of the highwayman and his accomplice waiting in the shadows beneath.

The horses heard it first. Nervously, they began to paw the ground.

Then the highwayman picked up the sound. "Here she comes," he whispered.

He pulled his scarf up over his nose and tugged down the brim of his hat until only his eyes were visible. His companion did the same.

The coachman was pushing the horses hard. Progress had been slow due to the foul weather and he was anxious to make up for lost time. The storm had made the track almost impassable in places, necessitating a number of unavoidable detours. They should have left the heath by ten o'clock. It was now close to midnight. The coachman and his mate, huddled beside him in a sodden black riding cape, were wet, tired, and irritable, and looking forward to a hot rum and a warm bed.

The coach had reached the bottom of the hill. Mud clung heavily to the wheel rims and axles and the horses, suffering from the extra weight, had slowed considerably. The driver swore and raised his whip once more.

By the time the coach crested the brow of the hill, the horses were moving at close to walking pace. Which was fortunate because it gave the driver time to spot the tree lying across the road. Hauling back on the reins, the driver drew the coach to a creaking standstill. Applying the brake, he climbed down to the ground and walked forward to investigate. A lightning bolt, he presumed, had been the cause of the obstruction. Another time-consuming detour looked a distinct possibility. The driver growled an obscenity.

It was the driver's mate, perched atop the coach, who

shouted the warning. Hearing the sudden cry, the driver turned, and started in horror as the two riders, their features shrouded, erupted from the trees. In the darkness, the horses looked monstrous.

“Stand where you are!” The rider’s voice bellowed out of the night. Moonlight reflected off the twin barrels of the pistol he pointed at the driver’s head. The driver remained stock-still, mouth ajar, terror etched on to his thin face.

The driver’s mate was not so obedient. With a muffled oath, he reached down for the blunderbuss that lay between his feet and swung the weapon up. His heavy rain-slicked cape, however, hampered his movements.

The highwayman’s accomplice reacted with remarkable speed. The night was split with the flash of powder and the crack of a pistol. The driver’s mate threw up his arms as the ball took him in the chest. The blunderbuss slipped from his weakened grasp and dropped over the side of the coach, glancing off a wheel before it struck the ground. The guard’s body fell back across the driving seat.

The first highwayman pointed his pistol at the terrified coachman. “You move, you die.” To his accomplice, he said, “Watch him while I take care of the rest.”

As his companion guarded the driver, the highwayman trotted his horse towards the coach. As he did so a large, pale face appeared at the window.

“Coachman! What’s happening?” The voice was male and, judging by the tone, belonged to someone used to wielding authority. “What’s going on out there?”

The passenger’s features materialized into those of a middle-aged man of lumpish countenance. His jaw went

slack as his eyes took in the anonymous, threatening figure towering above him and the weapon aimed at the bridge of his nose.

The highwayman leaned out of his saddle. "All right, everybody out." He motioned with the pistol, whereupon the gargoyle head withdrew sharply and the door of the coach opened.

The highwayman caught the cowering driver's eye and jerked his head. "An' you can join 'em, culley. Move yourself!"

The driver, herded by the highwayman's accomplice, backed timidly towards the coach, hands held high.

The passengers began to emerge. There were four of them.

A stout man in a dark tail coat, now identifiable as the individual who had stuck his head out of the window, was the first to descend, tiptoeing gingerly to avoid fouling his fine buckled shoes. Next was a woman, her face obscured by the hood of her cloak. She held out a hand and the stout man helped her down. She reached up and withdrew the hood, revealing a haughty, heavily powdered face. The highwayman clicked his tongue as the man pulled her to him and placed his arm protectively around her thin shoulders. Husband and wife, the highwayman guessed. She was too old and too damned plain to be his mistress.

The third person to step down from the coach was a slightly built man dressed in the uniform of a naval officer; dark blue cloak over matching jacket and white breeches. The face beneath the pointed brim of his fore and aft cocked hat showed him to be younger than his fellow passengers, though he appeared to alight from the coach with some

difficulty, like an old man suffering from ague. He winced as his boot landed in the mud. His brow furrowed as he took in the two riders. Glancing up towards the driver's seat, his expression hardened when he saw the still, lifeless body of the guard.

The last occupant to step down caused the highwayman to smirk behind his scarf. The man was elderly and cadaverous in appearance. He was clad entirely in black, the wispy white hair that poked from beneath his hat an almost perfect match for the white splayed collar that encircled his scrawny neck.

"All right, you know what to do." As he spoke, the highwayman lifted a leather satchel from the pommel of his saddle and tossed it to the driver. "Hold on to that. The rest of you drop your stuff in the bag. Quickly now. We ain't got all bleedin' night!" The pistol barrels moved menacingly from passenger to passenger. "And that includes the bauble around your neck, Vicar."

Instinctively, the parson's hand moved to the cross that hung from his neck on a silver chain. "You'd dare steal from a man of the cloth?"

The highwayman gave a dry laugh. "I'd take Gabriel's horn if I could get a good price for it. Now, 'and the bloody thing over!"

Obediently, the parson lifted the chain over his head and lowered it carefully into the satchel. The driver's hands shook as he received the offering.

"By God! This is an outrage!"

The protestation came from the passenger in the tail coat, who, with some difficulty, was attempting to remove a watch

chain from his waistcoat pocket. Beside him, the woman shivered, wide-eyed, as she fingered the gold wedding band on her left hand.

“Come on, you old goat!” the highwayman snapped. “The ring! Sharply, now, else I’ll climb down and take it off myself. Maybe grab a quick kiss, too. Though I dare say you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Horried, the woman shrank back, twisted the ring off her finger and dropped it into the bag. A flicker of anger moved across the naval officer’s face as he lifted a small bag of coin from an inner pocket and tossed it into the satchel. Drawing his cloak around him, he stepped away.

“Whoa! Not so fast, pretty boy. Ain’t we forgetting something?”

The air seemed suddenly still as the highwayman gestured with his chin. “What’s that you’ve got hidden under your cloak? Hoping I wouldn’t notice, maybe?”

The officer’s jaw tightened. “It’s nothing you’d be interested in.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it ain’t.” The highwayman lifted his pistol. “Let’s take a look, though, shall we?” Wordlessly, after a moment’s hesitation, the passenger lifted the edge of his cloak to reveal his right hand, holding what appeared to be a leather dispatch pouch, but unlike any the highwayman had seen before. What made it different were the flat bands of metal encircling the pouch and the fact that the bag was secured to the passenger’s wrist by a bracelet and chain.

The highwayman threw his accomplice a brief glance. His eyes glinted. “Well, now,” he murmured, “and what’ve we got here?”

“Papers,” the man in the cloak said, “that’s all.”

The highwayman’s eyes narrowed. “In that case, you won’t mind me takin’ a look, will you?” The highwayman handed the reins of his horse to his companion, and dismounted.

Walking forward, the highwayman waggled his pistol to indicate that the young man should move apart from the other passengers. With his free hand, he snapped his fingers impatiently. “Key!”

The officer shook his head. “I don’t have a key. Besides, I told you, it holds nothing of value.”

“I won’t ask you again,” the highwayman said. He raised the pistol and pointed the twin muzzles at the officer’s forehead.

“Are you deaf, man? I don’t have a damned key!”

The highwayman snorted derisively. “You expect me to believe that? Of course you’ve got a bloody key!”

The officer shook his head again and sighed in exasperation. “Listen, you witless oaf, only two people possess a key: the person who placed the papers in the pouch and locked it, and the person I’m delivering them to. You can search me if you like.” The young man’s eyes glittered with anger. “But you’d have to kill me first,” he added. The challenge was unmistakable. Kill a naval officer and suffer the consequences.

It was a lie, of course. The key to the bracelet and pouch was concealed in a cavity in his boot heel.

The highwayman stared at the passenger for several seconds before he shrugged in apparent resignation. “All right, Lieutenant. If you insist.”

The pistol roared. The look of utter astonishment remained etched on the young man's face as the ball took him in the right eye. The woman screamed and collapsed into her husband's arms in a dead swoon as the officer, brain shattered by the impact, toppled backwards into the mud. He was dead before his corpse hit the ground.

Holstering the still smoking pistol, the highwayman sprang forward and began to rifle the dead man's pockets. Several articles were brought to light: a handkerchief, a silver cheroot case, a pocket watch, a clasp-knife and, to the highwayman's obvious amusement, a slim-barrelled pistol. The highwayman stuffed the cheroot case, knife and watch inside his coat. The pistol, he shoved into his belt.

"By Christ, I'll see you both hanged for this!" The outburst came from the tail-coated passenger, who was still cradling his stricken wife. Beside him, the parson, grey-faced, had dropped to his knees in the mire. Whether at the shock of hearing the Lord's name being taken in vain or in order to be sick, it was not immediately apparent.

The threat was ignored by the highwayman, who continued to ransack the corpse, his actions becoming more frantic as each pocket was inspected and pronounced empty. Finally, he threw his silent accomplice a wide-eyed look. "He was right, God rot him! There ain't no bleedin' key!"

In desperation, he turned his attention to the dispatch pouch. His hands traced the metal straps and the padlock that secured them.

Finding access to the pouch beyond his means, the highwayman examined the chain and bracelet. They were as solid and as unyielding as a convict's manacle. He rattled

the links violently. The dead man's arm rose and flopped with each frenzied tug.

"Christ on a cross!" The highwayman threw the chain aside and rose to his feet. In a brutal display of anger, he lifted his foot and scythed a kick at the dead man's head. The sound of boot crunching against bone was sickeningly loud. "Bastard!"

He stepped away, breathing heavily, and regarded the body for several seconds.

It was then that he felt the vibrations through the soles of his boots.

Hoofbeats. Horsemen, approaching at the gallop.

"Jesus!" The highwayman spun, panic in his voice. "It's the Redbreasts! It's a bloody patrol!" He stared at his companion. An unspoken message passed between them. The highwayman turned back and stood over the sprawled body. He reached inside his riding coat.

In a move that was surprisingly swift, he drew the sword from the scabbard at his waist. Raising it above his head, he slashed downwards. It was a heavy sword, short and straight-bladed. The blade bit into the pale wrist with the force of an axe cleaving into a sapling. He tugged the weapon free and swung it again, severing the hand from the forearm. Sheathing the sword, the highwayman bent down and drew the bracelet over the bloody stump. He turned and held the dispatch pouch aloft, the glow of triumph in his eyes.

As if it were an omen, the sky was suddenly lit by a streak of lightning and an ear-splitting crack of thunder shattered the night. The storm had turned. It was moving back towards them.

Meanwhile, from the direction of the lower road, beyond the trees, the sound of riders could be heard, approaching fast.

The highwayman tossed the dispatch pouch to his accomplice, who caught it deftly. Then, stuffing his pistol into its holster and snatching the satchel containing the night's takings from the startled coachman, he sprinted for his horse. Such was his haste that his foot slipped in the stirrup and he almost fell. With a snarl of vexation, the highwayman hauled himself awkwardly into the saddle and his accomplice passed him the reins.

Rain began to patter down, striking leaves and puddles with increasing force as the highwayman and his still mute companion turned their horses around. The sound of hooves was clearly audible now, heralding the imminent arrival of the patrol; perhaps a dozen horsemen or more.

The two riders needed no further urging. Wheeling their horses about, digging spurred heels into muscled flanks, they were gone. Within seconds, or so it seemed to the bewildered occupants of the coach, swallowed up by the night, the sound of their hoof-beats fading into the darkness beyond the moving curtain of rain.