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Soot

Written by Andrew Martin

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SOOT

Andrew Martin

CORSAIR

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For Lisa, who bought me a silhouette.

Letter from Mr Erskine, Attorney-at-Law, to Mr Ralph Taylor, Chief Magistrate of York.

Precentor's Court, York, Wednesday January 16th, 1799

My Dear Taylor,

You will find herewith a narrative of the events following the murder of Mr Matthew Harvey, the painter of shades, or silhouettes as they are sometimes called (after a certain French minister, a somewhat shadowy and insubstantial personage no doubt).

The greater part of the relation is made up of transcriptions from the diary of Mr Fletcher Rigge, in which he described the commission he undertook on behalf of Captain Harvey, son of the murdered man. You will discover in Mr Rigge's writing some disobliging remarks about the judicial system of the city. You may find these painful to read or possibly – as you have suggested to me, with your customary good nature – instructive, as reflecting the views of the more intelligent sort of York

citizen, for Rigge was undoubtedly among their number, whatever else we may say about him.

Also presented are transcripts from another diary, that of the young woman called Esther (her surname has not yet come to light), mistress to the Captain. These are bawdy and occasionally obscene. Some of young Rigge's writings show a similar tendency, which he apparently reprehended, if his frequent crossings out are anything to go by. I have asked my clerk, Mr Bright, to decipher these passages – at which he is remarkably adept – and to transcribe them in a clear hand.

For the rest, it is a matter of letters, and transcriptions of the examinations conducted by myself or – more often – Mr Bright, who remained forbearing in the face of the great unreasonableness of some of his subjects. As to dates, I have included these where they seem of assistance. (Where information was obtained after the principal events I have left them off, as being anterior to the main story.) Where the documents demand further amplification, I have deployed prefatory notes or postscripts written by myself or by Mr Bright.

As we have discussed, Mr Bright and I were destined to become actors in the story ourselves. We were involved in the question of the house, Aden Park, and the disposal of the estate at Adenwold. Only when we discovered Rigge's diary – in circumstances disclosed at the end of this documentation – did we begin to appreciate the fuller picture.

I preface the bundle with two items from the public record. The first is an account of the murder of Matthew Harvey, as given in the York Courant, with all the extreme brevity that illustrious journal reserves for the most interesting events. The second is the entry for Mr Rigge in the Castle Journal, made when he was admitted, a prisoner for debt, in September of last year. But before we come to those, I ought to give a brief description of our young protagonist.

I believe that Fletcher Rigge was twenty-one or twenty-two at the time of these events. In looks, he was a slender, rather graceful young man, with an habitual expression varying between wistful and downright forlorn. His lowness of spirts – offset by a mordant wit and a prideful obstinacy – can be readily understood. His mother had died when he was at an early age; his father was esteemed for a man of honour, but came to be in the grip of a mania for cards and dice. This poor fellow ended by forfeiting his estate – which had fetched about three thousand a year – and then his own life, by a self-inflected gunshot wound. Yet Rigge idolised his father, whom he took to be the best sort of old-fashioned country gentleman.

You see, my dear Taylor, our young man was afflicted with rural romanticism. He was anti-modernity in farming, and against enclosures especially since they are invariably accompanied by the destruction of the common

lands, and the creation of a labouring class where once had been – to his mind – a happy peasantry. The prejudice is well expressed (I am told) in Goldsmith's poem, The Deserted Village:

'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay . . .'

Rigge's father had kept up the rights of common, and the cost of doing so had driven him to the gaming tables. In the brief interlude during which he controlled the estate, Rigge tried to perpetuate this Merrie England but the expense of repairing some of the labourers' cottages quickly sunk him, and he was removed to the York Castle, a prisoner for a sizeable debt.

At the outset of our tale he had been incarcerated for three months, with no prospect of release, for he refused to seek any charitable assistance. Not that any such offer was likely, for he had no surviving family, and the sum he owed would have daunted all but the wealthiest of benefactors.

In Rigge's character, capability and ambition (to reclaim his estate, and to marry a certain pretty young woman) contended with fatalism. There were further paradoxes besides. While Rigge professed to disdain the vanities of York society, few members of 'the dandy set' were as carefully attired as he, or acquitted themselves so well at a country

dance. And Rigge was acute in his observation of his fellows – which is surely a metropolitan sort of skill, and one that had been noted by the initiator of his adventures, namely Captain Harvey.

Rigge had another talent – for writing – which he disparaged as nothing more than a means of passing away the time. In the Castle, he began keeping a journal, and perhaps he sought to understand himself by his writings, I cannot say. What is certain is that his diary kept pace with the frenetic drama in which he found himself embroiled, one of the strangest – I daresay, my dear Taylor – to have unfolded within the walls of this ancient and noble city of ours.

From the *York Courant*, Tuesday August 28th, 1798.

On Friday last, Matthew Harvey, an artist, was found dead, presumed to have been murdered, having been discovered amid a scene suggestive of violent attack, at his house in Coney Street. An inquest is to be held.

York Castle, Gaoler's Journal, Volume 6.

Prisoner: Fletcher Rigge
Prisoner became bankrupt: 1798.
Date of admission: September 15th.
His debts: £150.
His effects: £7 approx.
Notes: A young gentleman, a debtor of the first class, chargeable at three shillings a week for his commons at table.
Fines, Solitary Confinements, Whippings: None as of November 1st.

Diary of Fletcher Rigge, Friday November 16th, 1798.

I write this at nine o'clock at night.

At nine o'clock this *forenoon* I was standing at the window of the Day Room, and looking out. I had left off reading at the long table, and was contemplating the Castle Green, which was just then *white*, being snow-covered. Some of my fellow debtors huddled in the far end of the room, where a very small quantity of coals burned in the very large hearth.

As I watched the snow coming down slantwise, I listened to the new machine that powers the Castle Mills, which contraption I hate. It beats like a broken windmill, keeping not only the debtors but also the felons awake in the prison-mansion that has been my home these past three months. I was calling to mind the contrasting silence of Aden Park after a fall of snow, when it would become a sort of sleeping fairyland. I recollected the sight of a man riding a white horse over those white fields: a farming gentleman from Pickering, coming to game with my father. Their acquaintance marked the start of my season of difficulty, although I did not know it at the time.

Some few seconds after the ninth chime of the prison bell, I heard the Day Room door opening behind me. Under-gaoler Derek Hill entered and declared his presence by a loud fart, which unseemly retort I affected not to hear.

'Morning, Mr Rigge,' said the under-gaoler.

'Good morning to you, Hill,' I said, turning half about. I could see my own breath as I spoke.

The under-gaoler was clutching a document of some kind. 'This weather en't right,' he said. 'They reckon summat's amiss with the moon. They say it stands in the wrong relation to the sun.'

'What sun?' I sighed, contemplating the medieval ruins, the collapsed Castle on the far side of the Green, which gives the prison compound its unwontedly romantic name.

'Or it may be a retrocession of the lunar nodes,' suggested Hill.

'Very likely,' I said. 'Is Lund awake?'

'He en't.'

'Good.'

Having taken his very brief trial, Edwin Lund, sheep stealer, had been elevated from the lower grates to the condemned cell, situated in the debtors' quarters. As he awaited his fate, he had requested to be read to, and I had carried through to him a selection of literature – so-called – from the debtors' library. Rather than some tale of witches or a two-headed calf, the poor fellow had selected a catchpenny work called *A York Calendar*. The thing had been slung together by 'A Citizen of York' and I am heartily ashamed to say that I was the Yorkist in question, the volume being one of my productions for bookseller Skelton. I forbore to mention my involvement to Lund, who in any case had paid attention to my readings for little more than five minutes, after which he would begin to speak in his rapid, stuttering voice, of his favourite – and only – subject, viz. *sheep*.

The execution of Lund was fixed for midday, but Hill did not want to speak about that. He was smiling strangely at me; he held a document, which I first thought was a page from the *York Courant*. Hill would often bring me the *Courant*. 'Now if I was in your sort of pickle,' he'd say, 'I'd give this fellow a go,' and he would indicate a

paragraph detailing the bequest of some eminent citizen to a school or hospital. I believe he did this mainly so I would buy another quire of black-edged letter paper off him, but I would petition these self-declared philanthropists, never seeking charity but offering my labour in return for the discharge of my debt. There had never been any reply, but here perhaps was the first.

The paper that Hill passed over was a letter, on goodish paper, yet smudged with soot. It had been addressed to 'The Keeper of His Majesty's Castle of York, or his Lawful Deputy.' It was signed by a Captain . . . somebody-or-other.

'Your benefactor has appeared,' said Hill.

I told him I had not written to any captains.

'Nonetheless, you are to be set at liberty with immediate effect.'

'But . . . There must be some condition,' I said.

'You're right,' said Hill, grinning so as to display his teeth, of which he had approximately four, 'there is.'

I returned to the letter. It was all rather jumbled, and I sought amplification from Hill. It appeared this Captain had proposed an arrangement that had been agreed to, as of yesterday's date, by all the concerned parties, viz. my creditor Mr Burnage (the above-mentioned gamester from Pickering), and the Deputy Sheriff of York who had despatched the bailiff to execute Burnage's writ.

The proposal was bizarre indeed. The mysterious Captain had offered, and Burnage had accepted, seventy-five

pounds, being half the sum I owe him. In consideration of this, Burnage had consented to my release for one calendar month, in which time I would perform a service – unspecified in the letter – for the said Captain. If the service were performed satisfactorily, and within the month, Harvey would remit to Burnage the balance of the debt, and I would be free from the shadow of the Castle. If the task were performed unsatisfactorily, or not completed within the month, I would be delivered back into custody. I would be required to engage my word that I would not abscond during the performance of the commission. If I should do so, not only would I be pursued as a common criminal, but an additional seventy-five pounds that the Captain had put in bond for my bail would be forfeit, and since the Captain would be coming after me for that, there would then be *two* plaintiffs against me, and I would be liable for a total debt no smaller than the one I presently owe.

'Take a peep at the address,' said Hill.

I read, 'First Water Lane' – an odd place for kindness to come from, being about the most tumbledown and dangerous thoroughfare in the city. The watchmen only ever go along there in their patrols, never singly; but I recalled that a couple of larger houses kept company with the shambling hovels.

'You'd better say how inexpressibly thankful you are,' said Hill, 'and you'll be able to do it in person, since he requests a conference with you tomorrow.'

'But who exactly is he?' I said. 'I can't make out his name.'

'Harvey – Robin Harvey – son of the shade painter. Him as was killed.'

I nodded, recollecting. The murder of Matthew Harvey, painter of shades, had been much discussed in the city. It had occurred in the week of the August race meeting. Harvey had been pierced in the stomach by a pair of the 'special scissors' he used for cutting out the cheaper sort of shade. It was presumed that one of his sitters had done it, since Harvey received them alone, in one of the lower rooms of his house, being at most other times with his sister – who was also his housekeeper – in the upper rooms at the same dwelling place.

'His son en't the ordinary sort of munificent gentleman,' Hill was saying. 'A man out of the common track is Captain Harvey.'

He departed, and I turned back towards the window. The hangman's black cart had been drawn up on the white lawn. It stood, unattended and filling with snow, but ready to take Lund away to the Tyburn on the Knavesmire, the 'New Drop' behind the Assizes being still in the process of refinement. Only sacks of stones had been hung from there so far, evidently not very satisfactorily. The New Drop was being built according to the latest principles of engineering. It was, no doubt, a 'rational' gallows.

Diary of Fletcher Rigge, Saturday November 17th.

'Tincture?' enquired Captain Harvey, leaning on his cane with one hand, as he poured port wine with his other.

'Tincture', I realised, was Captain Robin Harvey's term for a vast quantity of port wine, and the glass he handed me was brimming. It was the second one I had accepted. I own to a small weakness that way, inherited from my late father, and while incarcerated, I had been reduced to paying extortionate rates for the poor raisin wine supplied by the under-gaoler.

I had been admitted to Captain Harvey's ramshackle house by a dangerous-looking manservant: a squarish, dirty man with long grey hair. He seemed to be called Stephen. He was extremely familiar with his master – whom he referred to as Robin – and this same Stephen now sat on a slumped sofa in the corner of this gloomy, greenish room, lit by little more than a smoking fire and a wick drowning in dirty whale oil on the mantle.

The house was at the very bottom of First Water Lane. Therefore it was nearly in the river, which was half frozen but still for the most part flowed blackly on. It stood alongside the coal wharf, and men had been unloading bushels of sea-coal from a lighter named *Vulture* as I had pounded the knocker. Harvey, I had ascertained, was

contracted to some of the mine owners in the country roundabout: he sold their coal in the city of York, and since the burning of the stuff, and the resulting befoulment of the air, was continually increasing, he must have got a decent income from the business, but he was not alone in it. There were two other agents on the same wharf, and his fortune would be nothing against that of the mine owners themselves.

Captain Harvey had bowed low as I had commenced the speech I had rehearsed in prison: 'Sir, I cannot express the sense I have of your kindness—'

'None of that,' Harvey had said, sweeping me into the house. 'You are in a condition to be of some service to me. You have forfeited your situation at the bookshop, I believe?'

'Forfeited' was not quite the word, but I nodded agreement. Soon after my confinement, I had received a letter from my employer, the bookseller, Skelton, saying that while he was sorry for my troubles, he must inform me that my situation was now being re-advertised.

'Yet in spite of your incarceration,' Harvey continued, 'you have held on to your rooms in – where is it, now? – Ogleforth?'

Ogleforth, that scruffy and unfrequented street full of barking dogs behind the Minster. I wondered how the Captain had come to know everything about me, but there was nothing to be gained by asking.

'Held on to them for now,' I replied.

‘But how can you afford the rent?’ asked Harvey, pointing me towards a faded couch.

‘It is simply a question of not eating anything,’ I facetiously replied.

Harvey smiled sourly. He was lounging against the mantle in such a way that took the weight off his bad leg. He removed a pipe from his coat pocket, and reached for his tobacco tin on the mantle; he inserted a taper into the fire and commenced to smoke.

Captain Harvey is perhaps in the late forties, with a good figure shown off by tight, grubby-white breeches. He is neat-faced, and he wears his own hair. He might get round to a periwig before long, since his own is somewhat thinning, but meanwhile still black with a tendency to curl. He wore a high collar, and a good – but old – black silk waistcoat.

‘And you are against the enclosures,’ he said.

‘That is immaterial,’ I said, ‘since I do not have any land, either to enclose or to farm in the old way.’

‘But philosophically.’

‘Yes.’

‘Explain your objection.’

‘I do not think small copyholders should be made into labourers, or turned off the land altogether.’

‘You hold the country life to be superior to the town life?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

'Because the people are more closely connected. And the country is more beautiful than the town.'

At this, Harvey gave a shrug, and said, 'I daresay we'd all like a pretty little estate, if that's what you mean . . . '

It *wasn't* what I meant, as he well knew.

'To come to particulars,' he said, 'I have had favourable reports of the way you penetrated to the heart of a certain matter.'

I frowned, perplexed.

'Do you know what I'm talking about, sir?' said Harvey.

'No, sir.'

Silence in the room. Snow was accumulating rapidly on the black windows, determined to block out the coal heavers and the dark grey sky of a midwinter afternoon. I thought of the estate, my late home: the crooking brooks, dark woods, cultured and fallow fields – all under snow, the robin the only bird singing.

There came a rattle on the door handle, and a woman entered, hatless in a thin red morning coat, with little more than a single petticoat beneath. I rose from the couch, and the newcomer gave in return the briefest nod and a 'How d'you do?' She was rather beautiful in a gypsy-ish way. She walked over to the mantle and tried to coax the wick – stirring it in its pool of oil – to give a better light. With a soft, sighing, 'Heyday' (for no greater illumination had been produced) she helped herself to port wine. She first sat – then lounged – on the same battered

sofa as the servant, Stephen; and so the picture composed: 'Three Libertines', the artist might have called it.

'You laid your hands on some missing books,' said Harvey, smiling through smoke at me, and I now recollected the matter to which he referred. 'It was a remarkable feat of reasoning,' he said.

'I wouldn't put it as high as that,' I said.

'I know you wouldn't, dammit. But to discover these extremely rare volumes . . . '

'In fact, it was only one. And it was obscure rather than rare.'

'I adore your rhapsodic style,' said Harvey. 'Do give us the tale. I don't think Esther's familiar with it,' and he nodded towards the lounging woman.

Fletcher Rigge, in continuation.

In the gloomy drawing room of Captain Harvey, I began relating the story of the missing book, which had seemed of such interest to that gentleman.

In the first days of May, when I'd lately commenced working at Skelton's Bookshop – a desperate stratagem to keep my creditors at bay – a certain Mrs Bryant, wife of a clergyman at some outlying village, had advertised in the

York Courant the loss of a valuable book. The finder, on delivering it to the printers of the *Courant*, would be paid two guineas. Bob Richmond, the other lad at Skelton's – happening to look over my shoulder as I perused this advertisement – mentioned that the book in question had been purchased from Skelton's a few days prior to my taking up my new post.

'What *was* the book, Mr Rigge?' Harvey asked, while removing himself to the green and greasy couch, on which I was sitting. 'I know the tale but do not recollect that detail.' The Captain stretched out full length on this, nearly touching me with his coal-dusted boot heels.

'It was called *A Key to the Symbolical Language of Scripture*,' I replied.

'Just the sort of thing I like to tackle,' said Harvey, from his recumbent pose. He propped his head on his hand. 'And who wrote the damned thing? I must ask these questions, sir, since you are rather sparing in your narrative.'

'A clergyman.'

'Mrs Bryant's husband?'

'Another one. The *dedication* was to Mrs Bryant's husband.'

'Is that what made it valuable?' asked Harvey.

'That and the quantity of gold leaf used in the binding.'

I explained that, by coincidence, this same Mrs Bryant – a great buyer of books – had turned up in Skelton's shop the day after that on which I had read her

advertisement. I had used the opportunity to quiz her about the loss.

'You did so in hopes of the reward?' Harvey put in.

'No.'

'What then?'

'It was simply a diversion . . . and I might be of some service to the lady.'

'Well, what did you ask her?' Harvey enquired. 'You will notice I'm giving you every opportunity of blowing your own trumpet, but you won't damned well oblige!'

'I asked her what she did after she'd bought the book.'

'And what was that?'

I explained how, on the day of the loss, *The Key to the Symbolical Language of Scripture* had been wrapped for Mrs Bryant in the black paper used at Skelton's. She had then continued her 'shopping', as she called it. Being rather flurried, and oppressed by the departure time of the coach that ran to her village, she had hurried along Stonegate to Carlin's the confectioner's, where she had set down her book in order to inspect some glacéd pears. She'd then hastened to Whitley, the glover in Spurriergate, where she had an appointment. It was in Whitley's that she discovered her loss. She hurried back to Carlin's, and asked if anyone had found a book. They had not.

'On hearing all this from Mrs Bryant,' I said, 'I asked precisely how she had couched her question at Carlin's. Had she asked after a book, or a black parcel?

She had asked for a book, and that was her mistake.'

'Oh, but why?' interjected Stephen, the servant. His voice was higher and more refined than I had expected.

'Carlin's,' I said, 'will deliver its chocolate to anywhere within the city—'

'Not to First Water Lane, I'll wager!' Stephen piped.

'Oh, do keep quiet for a minute, Stephen,' said Esther.

'. . . But they will not deliver without the city walls,' I continued. 'Therefore it seemed unlikely that Mrs Bryant, who lived a good way outside town, would know that all the chocolate they deliver is wrapped in black paper, the same black paper indeed (it comes from Barraclough, the stationer on Blake Street) as used at Skelton's. She would also be unaware that much of this chocolate – whether for eating or drinking – is moulded into tablets or slabs, the stuff being easier to consign in that form.'

'I think I'm beginning to see,' said Stephen.

'I gave Mrs Bryant a dish of tea,' I continued, 'and desired her to wait a little while on the sofa at Skelton's. I then walked along to Carlin's, whose back office, from where the chocolate is despatched, was, as usual, full of black packages. My surmise was that Mrs Bryant's parcel had found its way into that office.'

. . . It was Captain Harvey who concluded the story for the benefit of Esther: 'Then, my dear, it was simply a question of feeling the parcels for the tell-tale indentations of a book.'

Not so *very* simple, I recollected. I'd been the best part of an hour over the business.

'*I* know about the Carlin slabs, Mr Rigge,' said Esther, smiling sleepily in my direction. 'I had one for breakfast only the other day.'

'Naturally, you had the reward?' said Captain Harvey, blowing smoke towards the broken chandelier.

I shook my head.

'Why ever not?'

'I waived it.'

'Extraordinary!'

'You *waved* it adieu!' cried Stephen.

'I think somebody said, "Virtue is its own reward",' observed Esther, toying with her black hair. She looked up towards me. 'I mean, nobody in this *room* has ever said it, but I believe *somebody* did.'

It was Sir John Vanbrugh who'd written those words, but I did not think it worth mention. A silence fell. Was this the end of my interview? I looked the question at Harvey, who smiled back.

'We mean to show you six shades, sir,' he said.

'When?' I said, just as though I understood the remark, which I did not, at least not completely.

'Tomorrow, sir,' he said. 'Would you be willing to return here at the same time?'

'I am at your complete disposal,' I said, which was more or less literally true.