



PERIL *on the*
ROYAL TRAIN

A DANGEROUS NEW MYSTERY FOR THE RAILWAY DETECTIVE



EDWARD MARSTON



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CHAPTER ONE

Jamie Farr held the body in his arms and ignored the blood that was dripping onto his smock. The corpse was still warm. It was the third victim in a month and it left him at once saddened and enraged. Others might say that it was an unfortunate accident but, in his eyes, it was nothing short of brutal murder. He could still hear the killer, thundering unseen on its way to Glasgow, leaving smoke and tragedy in its wake. Farr hated railways. A tall, wiry lad with a shepherd's protective love of his flock, he viewed steam locomotives as ruthless enemies, ugly iron monsters that invaded the southern uplands of Scotland, terrorising livestock and mangling to death any animals who caught their feet on the rails. Compensation was difficult to squeeze out of the railway companies and often inadequate when it was paid. They argued that it was the responsibility of farmers to keep their cattle, sheep, pigs and horses away from danger. That only served to anger the young shepherd even more. How could anyone afford to build fences or walls of dry stone that ran for miles? In any case, he asked, why should such beautiful countryside be turned into a place of lurking menace?

Farr shook with impotent fury. He didn't even feel his leg being rubbed. It was only when Angus barked that he realised what the sheepdog was doing. Angus wanted a pardon. It was not his fault that the lamb had scampered down the hill towards the line, then frozen with fear as the train bore down on him. The flock was too large for one dog to manage. Farr understood what the animal was trying to say. When he'd put the remains of the lamb gently to the ground, he gave Angus a reassuring pat. Relieved of guilt, the dog barked in gratitude. One ewe and two lambs had been slaughtered in the space of a month. No matter how vigilant they were, Farr and his dog couldn't guarantee that the rest of the flock was safe. Sheep were inclined to wander. They loved freedom of movement. Nobody had ever told them about train timetables or warned them about the hurtling speed of the locomotives.

Other shepherds had been forced to accept the coming of the railway. Some had even been heard to concede that it had benefits. Farr's own father, a shepherd like him, took a philosophical view, albeit one that was spiced with strong language. Railways were there to stay, he said. You had to get used to them. Along with foul weather, foxes and rustlers, they were just one more threat with which a shepherd had to live. Jamie Farr didn't share his father's attitude. He was too young and too headstrong. He'd never acknowledge the railway's right to torment livestock and kill indiscriminately. As he gazed down at the tiny lamb, crushed obscenely and now being sniffed by its grieving mother, he was overwhelmed by a sense of injustice. A heinous crime had been committed. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. A lust for revenge swelled up inside him. There had to be a way to strike back.

'Look at it, will ye?' said Dougal Murray. 'There's no' a soul in sight out there.'

'Aye,' agreed Jock Laidlaw. 'I can see naething but empty fields and hills. I like it tha' way, Dougal.'

'It doesnae appeal to me. I want to see toons and people and things going on.'

'Ye'll get your share of tha' farther up the line.'

'But there's still too much countryside to go through yet.'

'A body can *breathe* out here,' said Laidlaw. 'I dinna feel shut in by hooses and factories and the like. Too many people make my heed spin, ye ken. I always feel lost in a big city.'

The two men had to raise their voices over the hiss, roar and clatter. Laidlaw was the driver of the goods train and Murray, his fireman, stood beside him on the footplate. They were taking a mixed cargo from Carlisle to Edinburgh, rattling along at a good speed and seeing all that the billowing

smoke allowed them to see of their surroundings. Laidlaw was bigger, older and more compact than the stringy Murray. They were friends as well as colleagues, enjoying leisure time together. Not that their rota on the Caledonian Railway permitted them much leisure. They worked hard for very long hours. Laidlaw was a jovial man, experienced and easy-going. Murray always looked to him for advice.

‘What d’ye think Alan will be doing?’ he asked.

Laidlaw smiled wryly. ‘Can ye no’ guess?’

‘The mahn will be fast asleep by now, I reckon.’

‘Tha’, he will – and wi’ a pipe stuck in his gob.’

‘Alan took a fair bucket of drink last night.’

‘So did we, Dougal, but you’ll no’ find us dozing off at work.’

‘It’d be the death of us if we did.’

Alan Grint was their guard, the man who was nominally in charge of the train and who occupied the brake van at the rear, separated from the locomotive by an endless row of wagons. Never without his pipe, Grint was inclined to nod off in his little van where nobody could see or challenge him. Whenever they reached a station, however, he was miraculously awake and alert. Laidlaw and Murray knew the truth. Since they were fond of Grint, they overlooked his weakness and never for a moment considered reporting him.

As the train rumbled on, it approached a point where it had killed a lamb a week earlier. Driver and fireman were unaware of what had happened. It was different when they hit a cow or a horse. Large animals could derail a locomotive but a spring lamb offered no resistance. It had been sliced open effortlessly.

Laidlaw waited until Murray had shovelled some coal into the firebox.

‘Have ye set a date yet, Dougal?’

‘It isna down to me,’ said Murray, gloomily.

‘Well, has your lassie set a date?’

‘If it were left to Annie, we’d have been wed years ago. It’s her mother who’s dragging her heels. She says that Annie’s too young to marry.’

‘When a lassie has a shape on her like Annie Bray,’ said Laidlaw with a chuckle of approval, ‘the she’s good and ready. Take ma word on that. Ye’ll have to run off to Gretna with her.’

‘Dinna think it hasnae gone through my mind.’

‘What’s stopping ye, mahn?’

‘I need to save a wee bit more first.’

‘Marry now and save later.’

‘That’s a fine thing for ye to say, Jock,’ said the fireman, jabbing him with a grimy finger. ‘Naw woman has managed to get ye down the aisle. Yet ye keep on at me to get wed.’

‘Ye *need* a wife, Dougal. I don’t. I’m no’ the marrying type.’

‘Wait till you’ve met the right woman.’

‘Och,’ said Laidlaw with a lecherous grin, ‘I’ve met ma share of those along the way, believe me. I love wummen – always have. I just don’t love them enough to take one as a wife.’

‘Do ye no’ want to raise a family?’

‘It’d be too much of an ordeal. Look at Alan, will ye? He’s got a wife and four bairns. When he goes home at night, he’s up to his armpits in family life. No wonder the puir mahn is fair exhausted. Coming to work is the only rest he gets. Be warned, Dougal. Too many bairns can be the death of ye.’

‘We havna thought that far ahead,’ admitted Murray.

‘Then it’s high time ye did.’

Laidlaw was about to explain why but the words died in his throat. They’d just come round a bend

and expected to see a clear line ahead of them. Instead, they were confronted by a large pile of rock. Surging towards it, the locomotive was doomed. There was no time to slow it down, still less to stop it. Laidlaw and Murray didn't even have the presence of mind to jump from the footplate. Disaster was only seconds away and they stood there transfixed. When it came, the impact was deafening. Cast iron met solid rock in a fierce collision. The locomotive was instantly derailed, rolling down an embankment and dragging the wagons after it, their loads scattered willy-nilly across the ground. Driver and fireman were killed outright, pinned beneath tons of metal and wood. There'd be no wedding for Murray now and Laidlaw wouldn't be able to pass on any more advice to his friend. Their futures had been cruelly obliterated. When hot coals spilling from the engine started a fire, flames licked hungrily at their bodies.

Back in the brake van, Alan Grint fared no better. The guard never even woke up. The sheer force of the impact flung him across the van so hard that he dashed out his brains against the unforgiving timber and collapsed in a heap, his pipe still held grimly between his teeth. Ahead of him, dozens of wagons snaked and bucked and fought a losing battle to stay on the rails. It was a scene of accelerating destruction. Nothing escaped. From locomotive to brake van, the goods train contracted violently until it was almost half its original length, its power gone, its timetable cancelled, its cargo flung far and wide, its destination for ever beyond reach. Both sets of lines were impassably blocked. Traffic on this stretch of the Caledonian Railway had come to a decisive halt. Wheels of upturned wagons rotated pointlessly in the eerie silence that followed the pandemonium. All was lost.

From the top of the hill, someone looked down with quiet satisfaction.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Let them sort out their own mess,’ said Tallis, peremptorily.

‘But they asked for our help, sir,’ argued Colbeck. ‘More specifically, they requested my assistance by name.’

‘You’re needed here in London.’

‘I’d say that Scotland has a greater need of my services.’

‘Damn you, man! I decide where you go and what you do.’

‘Are you going to refuse their appeal?’

‘I have to,’ said Tallis, slapping the telegraph down on his desk. ‘It’s a question of priorities.’

‘What can possibly take precedence over a train crash?’

‘I don’t want you gallivanting north of the border when we live in the capital city of crime. There’s more than enough to keep you occupied here.’

‘My instinct is that I should go, sir.’

Tallis snorted. ‘I’m a martyr to your instincts,’ he said, rolling his eyes. ‘You’re forever relying on guesswork instead of on cumulative evidence. We don’t even know if foul play was involved. The crash could have been caused by a random fall of rock. It may not be a police matter at all.’

‘I can see that you’re not familiar with the Caledonian Railway,’ said Colbeck, icily calm in the face of provocation. ‘The engineer who surveyed the terrain was Joseph Locke. The contractor who actually built the line was Thomas Brassey, a man whom I had the privilege to meet while investigating a case in France. Locke and Brassey are renowned experts in their respective fields. They’d never construct a railway that was likely to be imperilled by falling rock. That accident was contrived,’ he went on. ‘The three men were murdered.’

‘How can you possibly know that?’

‘Would you care to accept a wager on it, Superintendent?’

Edward Tallis smouldered in his chair. Colbeck met his hostile glare with a challenging smile. It was at moments like this that the underlying tension between the two men came to the fore. While they shared a degree of mutual respect, they also had grave reservations about each other. A former soldier, accustomed to unquestioning obedience, Tallis resented the fact that his inspector always teetered on the brink of insubordination. The resentment was shored up by envy and disapproval. Tallis was jealous of the praise that the so-called Railway Detective routinely garnered at the end of a successful investigation, while he – technically in charge of the case – was usually given short shrift in the press. Then there was the question of the inspector’s private life. Having lectured Colbeck on the importance of having no distractions, the superintendent was mortified when he chose to get married, fearing that it would weaken his effectiveness.

For his part, Colbeck was ready to acknowledge the time, effort and commitment that his superior put into his job, but the man’s single-mindedness was a flaw in his character. Tallis had no existence outside Scotland Yard. That was his kingdom and he liked to rule the roost. He had no understanding of the lives of his officers and treated them with a mixture of strict discipline and distrust. Colbeck could make allowances for the man’s envy and shrugged off his disapproval of the recent marriage. But he could not countenance the way Tallis tried to interfere in cases, causing both delay and frustration. Over the years he’d learnt to cope with the superintendent but he still couldn’t bring himself to like the man.

‘The matter is settled,’ decided Tallis, taking a cigar from the box in front of him. ‘Forget that you ever saw this telegraph.’

‘I’m afraid that I can’t do that, sir.’

‘You’ll do as you’re told, Inspector.’

‘We can’t turn down an appeal like that,’ insisted Colbeck. ‘Instead of bickering about it, I should be finding out the time of the next train to Scotland.’

‘You’ll do nothing of the kind.’ Tallis paused to cut off the end of the cigar before thrusting it into his mouth and lighting it. He puffed hard then exhaled a cloud of smoke. ‘Is that clear?’

‘It may be clear, sir, but it also happens to be wrongheaded.’

Tallis bridled. ‘Do you *dare* to question my judgement?’

‘Ordinarily, it would never cross my mind to do so,’ said Colbeck, smoothly, ‘because your judgement is usually sound. In this case, I submit, you haven’t taken all the facts into consideration.’

‘We *have* no facts. The telegraph is terse in the extreme.’

‘The word “disaster” is enough for me, Superintendent. That, and the fact that three railwaymen were killed. This is a crisis. We must respond to it.’

Tallis’s only response was to jab the cigar between his teeth and puff on it as if his life depended on creating a smokescreen. He was momentarily obscured. It was pure accident that Colbeck even knew about the accident. When the telegraph from the Caledonian Railway arrived at Scotland Yard, it went first to the commissioner. The man charged with taking it to the superintendent’s office happened to bump into Colbeck in the corridor.

‘Another case for the Railway Detective,’ he’d said, waving the paper.

Colbeck had taken it from him. ‘Let me see.’

When he’d read the summons, he acted as the delivery boy, taking the telegraph into Tallis’s office and handing it over. Eager to be told to leave for Scotland, he was dismayed when the superintendent wanted to keep him shackled in London. When other pleas for help had come in from different parts of the country, Tallis had been willing to dispatch him instantly. For some reason, he was not going to do it this time.

Colbeck rose to his feet and adjusted his frock coat. He was a portrait of elegance, tall, slim and debonair. It was another thing that Tallis held against him. Colbeck was such a dandy that he made the superintendent feel unkempt. Detectives in the Metropolitan Police Force were not well paid but Colbeck had private means that enabled him to retain the services of a good tailor. That set him apart from his colleagues – as well as from most members of the criminal fraternity. What he and Tallis had in common was an iron will. A collision between them was imminent.

‘Perhaps I should take the matter up with the commissioner,’ suggested Colbeck with feigned politeness.

‘You’ll do nothing of the kind!’ yelled Tallis, banging a fist on the desk.

‘But the telegraph was sent directly to him.’

‘It was then passed on to me for consideration. Unfortunately, you had an unauthorised glance at it before it was put in my hands.’

‘It was just as well that I saw it, sir. Had I not done so, you’d have rushed into a foolish decision and disregard the summons.’

‘My decisions are never foolish.’

‘Let’s call them rash and overhasty, then.’

Tallis’s cheeks reddened. ‘You are not going to Scotland.’

‘The commissioner may take a different view.’

‘And you are not bothering the commissioner,’ asserted the other, jumping up and inadvertently flicking cigar ash all down his waistcoat. ‘He has empowered me to take whatever action I feel

necessary. I expect loyalty from my detectives,' he boomed. 'Try to go over my head and you'll suffer the consequences.'

'The only consequences that interest me are those that emanate from the train crash. They are desperate for my help in Scotland. It would be cruel to deny it to them.'

Tallis was peevish. 'If I sent you up there, you'd only be in the way.'

'That's not the impression I get from the telegraph, sir.'

'They'll have enough people to look into the disaster. The railway police will already be asking questions and the procurator fiscal will launch his own inquiry. If memory serves me, there's also a sheriff who's likely to get involved as well. Then, of course, there's the railway inspector. That stretch of line will be crawling with officers of one kind or another. In short,' concluded Tallis with an air of finality, 'you are redundant.'

'There's something you're forgetting, Superintendent.'

'I very much doubt that.'

'Competent as any investigation will surely be, it's unlikely to be led by someone with direct experience of a railway disaster. That's where Sergeant Leeming and I have the advantage.' Colbeck took a step towards him. 'Do I need to remind you of the catastrophe that befell the Brighton express some years ago?'

'No, you don't – it was one of our greatest successes.'

An express train had been derailed at speed and crashed into a ballast train coming in the opposite direction. The railway inspector had described it as an accident brought about by a serious error by the driver, a man killed on the spot and therefore unable to defend himself. Colbeck had proved that the disaster had been deliberately contrived by someone with an obsessive grudge against the London Brighton and South Coast Railway and one of its regular passengers.

'Investigating that crash gave us insights that can be put to practical use in Scotland,' said Colbeck reasonably. 'We know how to avoid the blind alleys.'

Tallis was unmoved. 'You are staying here,' he decreed. 'As you well know, the Detective Department is plagued by an insufficient budget and a shortage of manpower. I can't afford to send two of my best men hundreds of miles away for what may well be a lengthy investigation.'

'You were happy enough to send us off to Devon last year.'

'That's immaterial.'

'I disagree,' said Colbeck, locking horns with him. 'What took us to Exeter was the murder of a stationmaster. Regrettable as it was, it doesn't compare in scope and significance with a calamity like this. Three people have been killed and the damage to freight and rolling stock is immense. We simply must answer the call.'

'Out of the question,' snapped Tallis. 'You could be away for weeks.'

'I'll stay in Scotland for months if that's what it takes.'

'You won't be going anywhere near that benighted country. There's work for you right on our doorstep. A publican had his throat cut in Whitechapel last night. You and Sergeant Leeming are to take charge of the investigation.' He treated Colbeck to the withering stare with which he used to control rebellious soldiers during his army days. Then he turned his back to signal that the discussion was over. 'The details are in the folder on my desk,' he said, coldly. 'Study them on the cab ride to Whitechapel.'

Colbeck ignored the command. Instead of touching the folder, he reached for a piece of blank stationery and took the quill from the inkwell. When he heard the scratch of the pen, Tallis swung round in disbelief.

'What – in God's name – are you *doing*?' he cried.

'I'm writing a letter of resignation,' replied Colbeck. 'It will take immediate effect. Send someone

else to Whitechapel.'

~~'But I'm giving you an order.'~~

'You are no longer in a position to do so, sir. We've obviously come to a parting of the ways. My place is on the Caledonian Railway. If you refuse to sanction my departure, I've no alternative but to resign and go of my own accord.'

'But you'd have no authority,' blustered Tallis. 'You wouldn't have the weight of Scotland Yard behind you.'

Colbeck's retort was crisp. 'At the moment, I feel that it's right on top of me and it's a burden I need to shed. As for authority,' he went on, drawing himself up and casting off his natural modesty for once, 'it lies in my reputation and there's not a detective alive who can match my record of solving crime on the railways of Britain. I cannot – and will not – turn my back on this emergency. Now, sir,' he added, motioning the other man back, 'I beg you to stop looming over me so that I sever my links with Scotland Yard in favour of Scotland.'

Tallis was thunderstruck. Colbeck was in earnest. Rather than obey orders, he was going to resign. The superintendent quailed at the thought of having to explain to the commissioner why the finest detective in the department had left them. Blame would fall directly on Tallis. There was a secondary fear. If the inspector did resign, he would not be abandoning the fight against crime. He'd simply continue that fight on a different basis. Instead of being able to utilise Colbeck's rare gifts, Tallis might be in competition with them. Railway companies in dire need would turn first to a man of proven ability. Robert Colbeck, private detective, would be free to choose the cases he took on. It was a terrifying possibility.

There was a final indignity. As he tried to draw solace from his cigar, Tallis discovered that it had gone out. His glowing certainty had also dimmed to the faintest glimmer. His will of iron cracked. He reached out a hand to grab Colbeck's wrist.

'There's no need to write any more,' he said with a note of appeasement, forcing his features into the semblance of a smile. 'Let's talk about Scotland, shall we? You may, after all, have a point.'

CHAPTER THREE

In the wake of the crash, there were two immediate priorities. The first was to recover the dead bodies, a simple undertaking in the case of the guard but a daunting one where driver and fireman were concerned. Their mutilated corpses, blackened by fire, were at the very bottom of the wreckage. Rescue workers strove hard to shift the mounds of debris in order to get the two men out before their relatives arrived. At all costs, they wanted to prevent grieving families from seeing the hideous sight that greeted them on arrival. Jock Laidlaw and Dougal Murray were unrecognisable, their heads smashed to a pulp and their roasted bodies twisted into unnatural shapes. Laidlaw had lost an arm. Both of Murray's legs had been cut off at the knee. Death had been mercifully swift but it had left a repulsive signature.

While a team of men addressed the first priority, another team turned its attention to the second. The line had to be cleared. It was a Herculean task but there were many volunteers. As word spread, people swarmed in from every direction, some carrying spades, axes or other implements, others merely bringing strong arms and a desire to help. They worked with railway employees throughout the evening and on into the night, reinforced by fresh assistance from the surrounding villages and farms. Darkness brought another problem. Fires were lit to illumine the scene and to burn some of the debris but they only cast a fitful glare over the devastation. It meant that the discarded freight was at the mercy of nocturnal predators, quick-fingered thieves who sought to exploit the disaster for their own ends rather than joining the rescuers. Railway policemen were powerless to stop them. They were hopelessly outnumbered and, even with lanterns in their hands, couldn't easily pick people out in the dark.

One of the few wagons that had somehow remained on the track was carrying a consignment of cheese, destined for a wholesaler in Edinburgh. Much of it would never reach him. Once discovered the wagon became a magnet for the thieves who grabbed everything they could carry, hid it nearby then went back for more. And there were other foodstuffs on hand for those bold enough to steal them, not to mention crates of dead or squawking chickens tossed out uncaringly during the crash and piled up at crazy angles. If something could be carried, it was likely to disappear.

Nairn Craig was disgusted by the reports he received next morning.

'How could any decent man behave like that?' he asked.

'It's human nature, sir,' replied his companion, dourly. 'A tragedy like this brings out the best in some people and the very worst in others. And it wasn't only men involved. I heard the rustle of skirts clearly. Women can pilfer just as well. They and their menfolk swooped down like so many vultures.'

'They should be sent to prison for a long time.'

'That's easier said than done, Mr Craig. How can you arrest people when you don't know who they are? They were phantoms in the night. By dawn, they'd vanished into thin air. Besides,' he said, raising a meaningful eyebrow, 'they weren't all driven by criminal intent. Wages are low for farm labourers and those out of work have even emptier bellies. There's a lot of desperation in this shire, sir. When they see a chance like this, the needy can't stop themselves.'

'That's no excuse, Superintendent.'

'It's not an excuse – it's an explanation.'

'Theft is theft, whichever way you look at it.'

Rory McTurk gave a nod of agreement. As superintendent of the railway police, he was one of the

first on the scene and been appalled by what he found. He was a huge bear of a man with a black beard and bushy eyebrows that all but concealed the deep-set eyes. Relishing his authority, McTurk liked nothing better than ordering people about in his gruff voice. In the presence of the general manager of the Caledonian Railway, however, he was more subdued and deferential. Nairn Craig was a stout man of medium height and middle years with flabby cheeks that quivered as he spoke. Even though he wore the tallest of top hats, he still looked short beside the towering figure of the superintendent.

‘Naturally,’ he said, surveying the scene with an anxious eye, ‘our sympathies must be with the families of the deceased. But we must also concentrate on clearing the track and getting it repaired where it was ripped up. Every hour that we’re unable to run trains on this stretch of line is costing money. More to the point, it’s a gift to our rivals. The North British Railway will be rubbing their hands. When our passengers and freight customers are denied uninterrupted traffic on the western route in and out of Scotland, they’ll obviously use the eastern route instead. The NBR will profit from our loss.’

‘It was the first thing that crossed my mind, sir,’ said McTurk, pointedly.

The manager blinked. ‘You think that *they* might be responsible?’

‘They’d be at the top of my list of suspects, I know that.’

‘Well,’ said Craig, rubbing his chin, ‘they’ve employed some underhand methods in the past to get the better of us, I grant you, but even they would draw back from something as despicable as this surely.’

‘All’s fair in love and war, sir – and we’ve been at war with the NBR for many years. I’d point nothing past them. When the procurator fiscal launches his inquiry, I’ll point in their direction.’

‘You must do the same to Inspector Colbeck.’

McTurk was startled. ‘What does he have to do with it?’

‘He’s the man we most need at a time like this, Superintendent. I sent a telegraph to Scotland Yard this very morning. Pray God he answers my plea.’ He saw the evident consternation on McTurk’s face. ‘Colbeck has no peer. You must have heard of the Railway Detective.’

‘I’ve done more than hear about him, sir,’ said McTurk, guardedly. ‘I’ve met the inspector. Our paths crossed when I was working in England. A mail train was robbed in broad daylight. It was a crime that I could easily have solved myself,’ he boasted, ‘but I was severely hampered by Colbeck.’

‘I’ve heard nothing but praise of the man.’

‘Oh, he’s well intentioned, I’ll give him that. But he’s too high-handed for my liking. Besides, he knows nothing at all about the operation of the Caledonian Railway. The only person who can get to the bottom of this outrage is someone with local knowledge – someone like me.’

Craig was brisk. ‘I beg leave to doubt that, McTurk,’ he said. ‘This is beyond you. The procurator fiscal will set up an investigation but his men have no experience of dealing with a catastrophe on this scale. Inspector Colbeck does. He solved a not dissimilar crime in Sussex and was feted by the railway company involved. I read reports of it. As for local knowledge,’ he continued with a flick of the hand, ‘you can provide that, Superintendent. I’m sure that Colbeck will call on your expertise. I look to you to offer it.’

McTurk squared his shoulders. ‘I’d do so unwillingly, Mr Craig.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because this is a Scottish disaster occurring on Scottish soil and only Scotsmen should be entitled to root out the villains behind it. We can do it alone, sir, without interference from south of the border.’

Craig was caustic. ‘This is no time for misplaced patriotism,’ he said, sharply. ‘In my opinion Scotsmen are much better at committing crimes than solving them. Spend a Saturday night in the rougher districts of Glasgow and you’ll see what I mean. I’m proud of being a Scot but I’m also aware

of a bellicose instinct that lurks inside many of my fellow countrymen. You're a prime example. You can be quickly stirred to action. That's what makes you such a good railway policeman.'

'I also have skills as a detective,' contended McTurk.

'Confine yourself to your duties, Superintendent. In a situation like this, I want the best man for the task and his name is Inspector Robert Colbeck. My only hope is that he's on his way here even as we speak. Assist him to the best of your ability.'

McTurk's gurgling reply was muffled by his beard. He was seething. He'd not only been put in his place by the general manager, he'd been ordered to cooperate with a man he despised. The only way to assuage his anger was to prove that he could solve the crime on his own account and that's what he determined to do.

After clearing his throat, he spoke obediently.

'Very well, Mr Craig,' he said, 'I'll do all I can to help.'

But he vowed inwardly that Colbeck would get no welcome from him.

For a man who hated railways as much as Victor Leeming, even a small journey was something of a trial. If he couldn't walk somewhere, the detective sergeant's preferred mode of travel was a horse-drawn cab. Indeed, he'd often thought that his life would have been much easier and far less stressful if he'd joined the army of London cab drivers. There was much to be said for serving those citizens who could afford the luxury of a cab. Some of them would tip the driver handsomely. And though he'd be out in all weathers, Leeming would at least see more of his wife and children. As a detective, he was at the mercy of distant crimes. Today was a case in point. Being sent off to Scotland for an indeterminate period was his notion of purgatory. He felt deprived. Seated in a train racing north with a rhythmical rattle, he grimaced and made an already unappealing face look positively grotesque.

'Scotland is a foreign country,' he moaned. 'They speak a different language up there.'

'They speak the same language but with a different accent,' said Colbeck.

'That's not true, sir. When I was in uniform, I worked with a constable from Glasgow and could only understand one in every five words he spoke. If he lost his temper – and he did that whenever drink was taken – then I couldn't hear a word that I recognised. It was probably just as well. Knowing him, they'd have been vile.'

'You'll soon get used to Scottish idiosyncrasies, Victor. It's only if we come up against someone who speaks in a broad dialect that we may have trouble. In any case,' Colbeck went on, 'language difficulties have never deterred you in the past. You managed very well when we had that spell in France.'

Leeming scowled. 'That's not how I remember it.'

Though their investigation had had a successful outcome, it had left the sergeant with some searing memories. He'd not only been forced to endure a choppy crossing of the English Channel in both directions, he'd been pitched into a nation of gesticulating Frenchmen and their bold women, then beaten up so badly by Irish navvies that he'd had to withdraw from the fray and return home to recuperate. Leeming didn't want a repeat of the experience in Scotland.

'At least, we won't have to *sail* anywhere,' he said.

'You never know,' teased Colbeck. 'They have plenty of lochs and rivers up there. We may have to use a boat at some stage. That shouldn't worry you, Victor. After all, you're an experienced sailor now.'

It was a reference to a case that had taken them across the Atlantic Ocean to make two arrests in New York City and to extradite the criminals. It was an episode that still featured regularly in Leeming's nightmares. He was an unashamed landlubber. If it were left to him, he decided, he

banish sailing ships along with the entire railway network.

Not for the first time, Colbeck seemed to read his thoughts.

‘Would you rather travel to Scotland by means of stagecoach, Victor?’ he asked. ‘It would be tedious, tiring and take us days. Thanks to this express train, we’ll be there this evening.’

‘But we have no details,’ protested Leeming. ‘We don’t know where the crash actually occurred or what precisely happened. And we certainly don’t have a clue who or what might have caused it.’

‘The telegraph mentioned rock on the line.’

‘How can we possibly find out how it got there?’

‘We follow the obvious guidelines.’

‘I didn’t know that we had any, Inspector.’

Colbeck smiled. ‘That’s because you’re too busy thinking about Estelle and the children. Forget your family. The sooner we solve this crime, the sooner you’ll be reunited with them. Now,’ he added, ‘what day is it today?’

‘Monday.’

‘That gives us our first clue, Victor.’

Leeming was baffled. ‘Does it?’

‘Of course,’ said Colbeck. ‘If today is Monday, the crash took place on Sunday. Immediate suspects must be rabid sabbatarians.’

‘Who on earth are they?’

‘People who believe we should observe the Sabbath in every particular. It should be a day of rest on which everyone attends church or chapel instead of riding around on the railways. From the moment the trains reached Scotland, there were demands that they didn’t operate on Sundays.’

‘Would these sabbatarians actually wreck a train?’

‘It’s a possibility we have to bear in mind, Victor. Religion can ignite the most violent passions. We’ve seen it happen before.’

‘But if they planned this disaster, they must have known there’d be a risk of death for anybody on board that train. “Thou shalt not kill” is what the Bible tells us. Would they ignore that commandment in order to remind people that Sunday is the day of rest?’ Leeming scratched his head. ‘That doesn’t make sense, sir.’

‘I agree,’ said Colbeck, ‘but extremism has a way of blinding people to such contradictions. They act on impulse. And if lives are sacrificed in pursuit of their cause, they may even see it as a justifiable way to gain publicity.’

When the driver and his fireman went into the engine shed, they were astonished at what they found. Across the full length of their locomotive was a message in large, crude letters – NOT FOR USE ON SUNDAYS. The paint was still wet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Word travelled fast on the railway system. News of the disaster crossed the border and went rapid down the line. When the detectives stopped at any station where there was time to get out and stretch their legs, they made a point of questioning railway staff about what had happened and they learnt the details from each conversation. They knew exactly when and where the crash had occurred and had been treated to some fevered speculation regarding its cause. At Carlisle, the terminus of the London and North Western Railway, they had to change trains. While doing so they found additional information in a newspaper on sale at the station. Colbeck would have liked an opportunity to explore the ancient city to see its sights but there was no possibility of that. Besides, Leeming was a reluctant tourist at the best of times. It was no use pointing out to him that Carlisle had been an English stronghold for centuries, charged with keeping the fiery Scots at bay. It was now a thriving community of over twenty thousand souls with a variety of industries that had burgeoned since the arrival of the railways. Its long and battle-scarred history fascinated Robert Colbeck. To his companion, however, was simply a place that was uncomfortably distant from his beloved family.

Passengers had been forewarned of the destruction of the goods train. A fleet of coaches, cabs and other horse-drawn vehicles had been hastily assembled to take them around the obstruction so that they could join a train on the other side and continue their journey north. Those travelling south on the Caledonian Railway were offered the same option in reverse but many were deterred by the prospect of delay and inconvenience. Goods trains were summarily cancelled. There was no way of carrying vast quantities of freight on carts and wagons past the blockage. In some places, narrow roads deteriorated into mere tracks. The important thing, the company felt, was to keep the passengers still had in motion and to ensure that they went in a wide sweep around the site so that were not disturbed by a glimpse of the carnage there. Informed by telegraph that the line would be out of action for days, freight customers were already looking for an alternative means of sending their goods north and from Scotland. The North British Railway, its main rival, was the first to prosper from the Caledonian's misfortune.

'This crash will cost the company a great deal of money,' observed Colbeck. 'And its reputation for reliability will be badly damaged.' He looked across at Leeming, gazing abstractedly out of the window of the train. 'Did you hear what I said, Victor?'

The sergeant came out of his reverie. 'What was that, sir?'

'You were miles away.'

'Was I? Then I apologise.' He shook his head as if to clear it. 'How much farther do we have to go?'

'We'll soon reach the Lowther Hills at this rate,' said Colbeck with a tolerant smile. 'You've been daydreaming for ages. You didn't even notice that we slipped across the Scottish border. Is something on your mind?'

'It is, Inspector.'

'Go on.'

'I keep asking the same question over and over again.'

'Oh?'

'What on earth are we *doing* here?'

Colbeck was amused by the expression of mild panic on the sergeant's face. It was always the same. Leeming hated venturing out of London, yet, once embroiled in a case, he always acted with

commitment and determination. When physical violence was involved, Colbeck had learnt that there was no better man to have at his side. Leeming was a born fighter. It was only before they were really engaged in an investigation that he was morose and homesick. The inspector had his own reason for wanting to bring the visit to Scotland to a speedy conclusion. Married the previous November, he was still enjoying the delights of his new estate and missed his wife every bit as keenly as Leeming was missing his spouse. Detective work, however, took precedence. Madeleine had understood that when she'd married Colbeck and accepted the situation without complaint. Unlike the sergeant's wife, she had been able to take part in the investigative process in the past, so she had a clearer insight into what was entailed.

'We'll be up against competition,' said Colbeck.

'What do you mean, sir?'

'Well, for a start, there'll be an inquiry set up by the procurator fiscal. It's an office unique to Scotland. Procurator fiscals are public prosecutors who investigate all suspicious deaths and fatal accidents. This crash comes very much under their jurisdiction. They'll institute a form of inquest.'

'Then they don't need us here, do they?' said Leeming, hopefully.

'The railway inspector will also want to decide on the precise cause of the crash. The same thing happened after that disaster on the Brighton line. You'll remember the problems we had with his counterpart there.'

'I do, indeed – he told us that we were wasting our time.'

'We had to disillusion him on that score,' said Colbeck, smiling at the memory. 'Let's hope we have a more cooperative inspector this time. As for the local sheriff, I'm not quite sure how far his powers stretch.' He heaved a sigh. 'Then, of course, there are the railway police. They usually resent us more than anyone.'

'In other words, we could have a lot of interference.'

'I'm certain of it, Victor. The Scots are very territorial. We're unwanted intruders, part of the nation that invaded and subdued them. My guess is that some people will do everything they can to get in our way. Expect a lot of opposition.'

'That's a disappointment,' said Leeming with light sarcasm. 'I was hoping that they'd put the flag out for us and organise a brass band. When are we going to go somewhere where they actually want us?'

'We'll simply have to win them over, that's all.'

'The best way to do that is to go straight back to London. It's an idea that would win *me* over well.' When the train began to slow down, he peered through the window. 'Thank heaven for that,' exclaimed Leeming. 'This journey seems to have taken days. Was it really worth all this effort?'

'Yes, it was,' said Colbeck, seriously. 'Three railwaymen were murdered. The only way to offer consolation to their grieving families is to solve the crime. It will take a lot more effort to achieve that objective but every last second will be worth it.'

Even in daylight, some of the bolder thieves had returned for more booty. McTurk had laid a trap for them, hiding some of his men near an overturned wagon that had spilt its cargo of meat down the embankment. The superintendent himself was crouched beside a wagon piled high with leatherware from the tanneries of Carlisle, reasoning that it would be less of a target than prime beef and lamb. His instincts were sound. Thinking that everyone there was distracted by the work of clearing the line, a couple of young men in ragged clothing crept furtively towards the crates of meat. It was too big a temptation to resist. When they felt they were safe, the pair of them darted out of cover, ran to a crate and lifted it between them. Intending to scamper away, they were dismayed when three railway

policemen appeared out of nowhere.

One of the thieves reacted much quicker than his companion, leaving go of the crate and cleverly dodging the outstretched arms of the policemen before sprinting off down the embankment. His friend was too slow. By the time he made his dash for freedom, a strong hand was already on his shoulder. He was grabbed, overpowered and held tight. McTurk came out from behind the consignment of leatherware to confront the prisoner.

‘Hungry, are you, lad?’ he asked, curling a lip. ‘Take a good look at all this meat. It’s the last you’ll be seeing for a while. Prison food is like sawdust, only not as tasty. You’ll be lucky to get enough grub to keep you alive.’

‘We didnae mean to tek it,’ said the thief, piteously. ‘We only wanted to see what was going on, swear it.’

‘Is that so? Sightseers, were you?’ He addressed his men. ‘Do you hear that? He and his friend didn’t come to steal. They just wanted to see what was happening here – and whether or not our backs were turned. They’re as innocent as the driven snow.’ There was derisive laughter from the policemen. ‘What’s the name of your accomplice?’

The thief was defiant. ‘I’ll no’ tell ye.’

‘He was a wee bit younger than you and faster on his feet.’

‘Ye’ve got me and it’s all ye’ll get.’

‘Forgotten his name, have you? Then I’ll have to jog your memory, won’t I?’ He took the thief by the scruff of his neck and hurled him against a wagon. It knocked all the breath out of him. ‘I can always get people to talk – it’s so simple. All I have to do is to kick seven barrels of shit out of them and they sing their heads off.’ He lumbered forward and punched the thief full in the face, drawing blood from his nose. ‘Has that helped you to remember his name?’ he taunted.

Before he could administer further punishment, McTurk heard someone call his name and he saw the general manager waddling towards him. He was annoyed at having to suspend his interrogation by what he’d already done enough. Recognising the hopelessness of his position, the thief willingly surrendered the name and address of his accomplice. The superintendent nodded to his men and they hustled the prisoner out of sight. Nairn Craig was panting by the time he finally reached McTurk.

‘What’s going on, Superintendent?’ he asked.

‘We caught a thief, sir. His accomplice managed to get away but he won’t go far. I persuaded the lad to tell us who he is. When we pick him up at his home, I daresay we’ll find a lot of stolen property that disappeared during the night.’

‘Good work!’

‘We know our job, sir.’

‘Our freight customers are already demanding compensation for any losses. They’ll be heartened to learn that you’re catching some of the thieves. But that’s not what I came to tell you,’ he went on. ‘There’s some cheering news. A telegraph arrived at our Glasgow office earlier today. It confirms that Inspector Colbeck is definitely on his way.’ McTurk growled silently into his beard. ‘Indeed, he could be here at any time.’

‘You know my view. We can sort everything out ourselves.’

‘Be realistic, man. You’ve never led a complex investigation before. That’s why we need professional assistance.’

‘We already have it,’ asserted McTurk. ‘Inspector Rae is here at the behest of the procurator fiscal. I’ve been able to give him the benefit of my opinion.’

‘Then you can do the same to the Railway Detective,’ said Craig, tartly. ‘The other piece of news is that we’re offering a reward of four hundred pounds for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for this outrage. Posters are already being printed.’

McTurk was impressed by the size of the reward. To a man on his wage, it was an absolute fortune. A new element was suddenly brought into play. There was pecuniary gain as well as kudos to be had. McTurk wanted both. He now had an even greater incentive to solve the crime himself and to keep all Scotland Yard detectives in the dark. Supremely confident of his ability, he allowed himself a knowing grin.

‘I’ll spread the word, sir,’ he said. ‘That kind of money will loosen a few tongues. We’ll find those bastards who caused all this chaos. You have my word.’

It was beautiful countryside and even Victor Leeming was struck by it. After leaving the train at Wamphray station, he and Colbeck had watched the other passengers climbing into a variety of motor vehicles before setting off on a long curve that would take them past the site of the crash. The detectives, by contrast, were driven directly towards it, travelling through a verdant dale that was ringed with hills. It was a far cry from the narrow streets and abiding stink of London. Shaken out of his apathy, the sergeant forgot all about the discomfort of the long journey.

‘I’d love Estelle and the children to see this,’ he declared. ‘The air is so clean and we can see for miles. It’s ... well, it’s wonderful.’

‘You must bring them here on holiday,’ said Colbeck.

‘Ha!’ Leeming’s face crumpled. ‘There’s fat chance of that ever happening.’

‘Don’t be too sure, Victor. Railway companies can be very grateful if we solve heinous crimes for them. Look what happened after our success at that other crash. You finished up with tickets to take the family to Brighton.’

Leeming beamed. ‘That’s true, sir – and we had a grand day at the seaside. The children keep asking when we can go again. Do you really think I’d be able to bring them here one day?’

‘It’s not impossible. But,’ said Colbeck, adding a rider, ‘it would, of course, be conditional upon our finding and arresting the culprits behind the disaster. Put any thought of reward out of your mind until then and simply enjoy the scenery.’

After travelling to Scotland in a first-class carriage, they were now being taken along a winding track in an ancient cart. Seated beside the taciturn driver, they had to hold on tight as the vehicle swayed violently and explored every bump and hollow. In the back of the cart, their luggage bounced all over the place. Colbeck tried to prise some information out of the old man at the reins.

‘Have you seen where the accident happened?’ he asked.

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Is it as bad as everyone says?’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Do you live nearby?’

‘Aye, sir.’

‘And where would that be?’

‘Dinwoodie.’

‘We came past there in the train,’ recalled Leeming.

‘Aye, sir, ye would.’

‘What can you tell us about the crash?’ wondered Colbeck.

‘Ah’ll no’ speak of it, sir.’

‘Why is that?’

There was no reply. The driver lapsed back into a hurt silence. Colbeck understood. Shocked by what he’d seen, the man was unable to put it into words that would rekindle ugly memories. He was being paid to transport two people to a site further up the line and that’s all he was prepared to do.

Conversation was too painful for him. If they wanted a description of the wreckage ahead, h passengers would have to wait until they reached their destination.

Wamphray had been over thirty miles from Carlisle and it had been reached at a good speed. The pace had now slowed dramatically. It gave Colbeck time to reflect on what might lie in wait for them and it offered Leeming the opportunity to indulge his fantasies about an extended holiday Annandale with his family. The railway line was never far away from them on the right and, in normal circumstances, it would be singing under the wheels of trains going in both directions. It was deserted now, useless until the track ahead was cleared. They heard the noise of the rescue operation long before they caught sight of it. Smoke from burning debris rose up into the sky and helped to pinpoint the exact spot. As they got closer, raised voices were audible amid the banging and bumping and clanging of metal.

When they finally came round the bend, the driver pulled his horse to a halt.

‘Ye’ll have to walk now,’ he said, averting his gaze from the disaster.

‘We could do with some exercise,’ said Colbeck, hopping off the cart and retrieving his bag. ‘Come on, Victor.’

Leeming was open-mouthed. ‘Look at it!’ he gasped. ‘It’s terrible!’

‘That’s why we mustn’t detain our friend here. He wants to get away and I don’t blame him.’ When the sergeant got down from the cart, Colbeck paid the driver and gave him a handsome tip. It elicited no thanks. ‘Goodbye.’

Turning his cart in a circle, the driver went back in the direction from which they’d just come. Leeming had to move smartly to snatch his valise before it set off towards Wamphray. Both detectives surveyed the scene. Many hands had worked to clear the devastation for a period of over twenty-four hours yet they seemed to have made little impact. A huge area was littered with a frightening array of battered wagons and their erstwhile contents. What could not be salvaged had been sacrificed on one of the fires. The locomotive itself lay twisted and forlorn. The damage to the train was colossal. Colbeck also bewailed the brutal punishment inflicted on the embankment. Large holes had been gouged out and runaway wagons had cut deep channels into it. Green swathes had been sullied by discarded coal. An air of ruin and despair hung over the whole landscape.

Colbeck studied the line on the other side of the disaster area.

‘A train coming from the south would be bound to hit any obstruction when it came around the bend,’ he noted. ‘There’d be no time to stop. Trains coming from the north must have the best part of a mile of straight line before reaching the spot. They’d have seen any rockfall and taken measures to avoid it.’

‘What does that tell you, Inspector?’ asked Leeming.

‘The goods train was a specific target.’

‘There would have been more victims if they’d waited for a passenger train.’

‘But they didn’t, Victor. That’s an important detail.’

‘I don’t understand why.’

‘Neither do I at the moment,’ confessed Colbeck, ‘but I intend to find out.’

Light was fading and evening shadows were starting to dapple the scene. The droves of people engaged in the clearance worked on regardless of the time of day. Colbeck raised his eyes to the hills beyond and thought he saw a solitary figure, silhouetted against the sky with an animal of some kind at his side. When Colbeck concentrated his gaze, the figure and the animal had vanished and he was left to wonder if they’d really been there in the first place.

CHAPTER FIVE

The meeting was held at the Glasgow home of Tam and Flora Howie, a middle-aged couple who – like everyone present – were an image of respectability. There were ten of them altogether, seven men and three women. Seated comfortably in the parlour, they were able to study the framed biblical tracts on the wall and the other evidence of a fiercely Christian household. As their leader, Howie spoke first, rising to his feet and gripping his lapels between thumb and forefinger. Of medium height and spare frame, he somehow seemed more substantial when taking the floor.

‘You all know why we’re here,’ he said, crisply. ‘In spite of years of protest, the railway companies remain defiant. They insist on running trains on the Sabbath and flouting the teaching of the Good Book. We have protested time and time again but all to no avail. Posters and pamphlets have a limited effect. All that they can do is to express our opinion. They are not enough in themselves to change minds.’

‘Tam is right,’ interjected his diminutive wife. ‘We need to do more.’

‘What else can we do?’ asked Gregor Hines, a sagging old man with a white beard. ‘There are only so many ways of legitimate protest. We’ve tried them all.’

‘That’s why we must employ other means,’ insisted Howie. ‘Some like-minded people have already done that and we must follow suit. We must be ready to break the law to achieve our ends.’

A faint murmur of agreement was swiftly muffled under a concerted growl of dissent. They were pillars of the community, law-abiding people who led lives of moral probity. A few might be prepared to consider taking direct action against the railways but the majority felt that it was a step too far. Of the women, only Flora Howie was in favour of it.

‘If we cause trouble,’ she argued, ‘it not only makes the railway companies aware of the strength of our beliefs, it also gets valuable attention. Look what happened earlier today. Someone who understands the true meaning of the Sabbath painted a warning on one of the Caledonian locomotives. It was mentioned in this evening’s paper.’

‘But who saw it?’ croaked Hines. ‘Hardly anyone, I fancy. Readers would only have been interested in the story on the front page about that terrible crash in Annandale.’

‘That was an act of God,’ claimed Nell, his wife, a skeletal figure in a black dress. ‘It was a warning from on high to all who run trains on a Sunday.’

‘It was a warning, certainly,’ agreed Howie, ‘but it was not delivered by the Almighty. The newspaper report was categorical. That disaster was contrived by human hand. Someone is doing our job for us.’

Gasps of outrage filled the room and Nell Hines spluttered in disbelief. Seeing that he’d gone too far, Howie did his best to retrieve the situation.

‘Don’t misunderstand me,’ he said, calming them down with outstretched palms. ‘I don’t for a moment condone a strategy that leads to the loss of life. I utterly deplore it. What I applaud, however, is the way that the incident has gained attention. The whole of Scotland is aware of it and it will hurt the Caledonian Railway in its pocket. In short, it achieved its objective. Why can’t we do something similar?’ he went on, raising his voice above the rumbling discontent. ‘Hear me out, friends. I’m not advocating a repetition of what happened. That was a cruel and criminal act. But it does show what consequences flow from a blockage on the line on a Sunday. It would be a wonderful advertisement for our cause.’

‘Are you telling us to commit a heinous crime?’ asked Hines.

‘Shame on you, Tam Howie!’ added Nell.

‘It’s unthinkable.’

‘More to the point, it’s unchristian.’

‘In any case, how are my dear wife and I supposed to block the line? Do you want us to prostrate ourselves across the track like sacrificial victims? Is that the sabbatarian gospel now? Must we spend the day of rest lying horizontally side by side like so many railway sleepers? Away with you, man,’ said Hines scornfully. ‘You’ve taken leave of your senses.’

‘We must do something more extreme,’ declared Howie, eyes blazing with passion. ‘It’s not enough to write letters and organise petitions. We’re on the side of God against Mammon. Our enemies will stop at nothing and nor should we. We must fight fire with fire.’

‘Listen to Tam,’ pleaded his wife. ‘My husband is talking sense.’

‘He’s talking the whole pack of us into prison,’ said Hines, sourly.

‘Only if we’re caught, Gregor,’ countered Howie, ‘and we’re far too intelligent to let that happen. We’ve raised our voices for years and we might as well be baying at the moon. Railway companies will always put profit before religious observance. Where voices fail, action can succeed. You must see that.’

The old man shook his head. ‘What I see is the road to damnation. You’ll not turn Nell and me into common criminals. We’ll defend the sanctity of the Sabbath until our dying day but we won’t do it by breaking the law or behaving like vandals.’

‘Gregor speaks for me,’ said Nell, patting her husband on the back.

‘And for me,’ piped up another voice.

‘Let’s hear Tam out,’ suggested a portly man. ‘There may be a kernel of truth in what he says. Let him finish before we condemn his idea outright.’

‘Thank you,’ said Howie with a nod of gratitude. ‘I’m glad that one person is prepared to listen. My plan of action would be this ...’

But the argument had already been lost. Though his speech was cogent and his conviction undeniable, Howie converted only two of them to his point of view. The rest remained implacably opposed. When a vote was taken, he had to concede defeat. His fellow sabbatarians were always ready to spend time and money on promoting their beliefs. They would happily stand outside railway stations in the driving rain with placards urging passengers to respect the Sabbath but that was the extent of their protest. Taking active steps to prevent trains from running on a Sunday was beyond them. As they trooped out of the house, they bade farewell to their hosts.

Gregor Hines was the last to leave. After shaking Howie’s hand, he peered at it with interest that raised an admonitory eyebrow.

‘You’ve still got paint on your fingernails, Tam,’ he said, knowingly. ‘Since you’re far too honest a man to lie, I’ll not ask you how it got there.’

Nairn Craig was so pleased to see the detectives that he shook their hands with an exuberance that bordered on physical assault. Fires kept the fading light at bay and allowed Colbeck and Leeming to assess the full scope of the disaster. They looked around with a mixture of dismay and sympathy. Colbeck’s thoughts were with the families of the three victims while Leeming dismissed his own family from his mind. To dwell on his absence from them was an act of selfishness. He accepted that now. They’d been right to come to Scotland. What he saw filled him with an urge to catch those responsible for the chaos. It was a crime that yearned for punishment.

‘The facts, as I understand them,’ said Craig, ‘are these ...’

‘There’s no need to explain, sir,’ said Colbeck. ‘We are already well informed about the incident. ~~It was the talk of Carlisle when we changed trains there.~~’

‘I should have known that you’d gather information in transit.’

‘It was not only information, sir,’ said Leeming. ‘We had to listen to a lot of wild guesswork as well. One man claimed that the rockfall was the work of Irish rebels, while another believed that a witch had placed a curse on your company. Then there was the fellow who said that the Caledonian Railway was subjected to the wrath of heaven because of the high prices you charged.’

Craig blenched. ‘That’s certainly not the case, Sergeant.’

‘Rumour is always more colourful than the truth,’ said Colbeck.

He went on to give the general manager a succinct account of what they already knew. Amazed at the detail so far gleaned, Craig was unable to add anything of value. Instead he began to talk about accommodation for the detectives.

‘Before we discuss that,’ said Colbeck, politely interrupting him, ‘I’d like to see the exact spot where the collision took place. I take it that you’ve cleared away the rocks by now.’

‘We have, indeed,’ said Craig, taking in the whole site with a gesture. ‘It may not look like it, but we’ve made huge strides already. Once the cranes and the winches were brought here, we began to make real progress.’

‘That’s commendable, sir. What of the procurator fiscal’s investigation?’

‘It’s being led by Inspector Rae. He’s an able man but has none of the specialist knowledge that you and the sergeant possess. He’s been here for most of the day and will return again tomorrow. You can meet him then.’

‘Was he told of our imminent arrival?’

Craig pulled a face. ‘Yes, he was.’

‘I can see that it didn’t meet with his approval,’ said Colbeck, amused.

‘Inspector Rae does not welcome rivals.’

‘Then he should see us in the guise of assistants.’

‘What about your own railway police?’ asked Leeming.

‘They’ve been working at full stretch,’ replied Craig. ‘As a matter of fact, I believe that you’re already acquainted with our superintendent.’

Right on cue, Rory McTurk emerged from behind an overturned wagon with the dramatic suddenness of a pantomime villain appearing through a trapdoor. The others were startled. It was obvious that he’d been there all along, eavesdropping on their conversation. After glaring at Colbeck and Leeming in turn, he manufactured a cold smile.

‘We meet again, gentlemen,’ he said.

‘I can’t say that it’s a happy reunion,’ muttered Leeming.

‘But we must adapt to circumstance,’ said Colbeck, veiling his dislike of the man. ‘First of all, I must congratulate you on your promotion, Superintendent. When we first met, you were working as an inspector of the LNWR.’

McTurk inflated his chest. ‘The Caledonian Railway recognised my merits.’

‘The superintendent has given us good service,’ endorsed Craig.

‘You’ll not find me wanting, sir.’

‘*We* did,’ said Leeming, softly.

‘This crime took place on my patch and I want it cleared up quickly.’

‘We all share that objective,’ said Colbeck, irritated by the man’s proprietorial tone, ‘but an investigation on this scale is way beyond your jurisdiction and – if I may say so – hopelessly beyond your capabilities.’

‘That’s not true!’ howled McTurk, stung by the criticism.

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