

The Wretched

~ a Victorian missgeschick ~

~ Part One ~

The Pursuee and the Pursuer

Chapter 1

The convict

An August Monday, 1885

Early evening into night into Tuesday morning

Dartmoor, County of Devon

John Michael Fitzpatrick, an escaped convict known to all who mattered and some that didn't, as Fistie, lay face down in a shallow gully; his forehead and back were damp with sweat; his legs ached, as he would say, like buggery and his lungs burned from exertion. For the last two hours, he had half-run, half-walked, trampled, and stumbled his way across the rugged moorland of Dartmoor. By degrees and turns he slipped into marshy peat bogs, tripped over half-buried stones, and constantly snagged and scratched himself on gorse bushes. Finally, he lost his footing and fell into the dried-out gully.

How long he'd lain there, he was unsure: fifteen minutes, thirty, an hour? Surely not an hour? He shifted onto his side and peered over the edge of the gully. The afternoon light was starting to wane, edging towards evening. He could still make out Dartmoor prison with its tall surrounding wall, off to the south-east, maybe two miles away. By now, the prison guards will have realised he was missing. Hopefully the guard who'd helped him escape wouldn't blab straight away and give up the direction he'd headed.

Fistie sat up fully, looked around and satisfied himself, as best he could, he wasn't being pursued. Relaxing a little, he pulled out the hand-drawn map the guard had pressed into his hand, saying as he did so, "They said to give you this, you might need it."

Truth be told, the guard was only doing what he did because he'd been bribed and not through any belief Fistie should be free or that he subscribed to any bigger cause - whatever that may be.

"That reminds me, that do..." Fistie said to no one except himself. This was a habit he had developed since becoming detained at what everyone, except the Queen herself, called Her Majesty's pleasure.

"Just what is the bigger cause here? Is there a big cause? I know, 'cause I was told, Irish Fenians were behind me escape, but what be their grand plan, eh? Not that it matters; all I wants is to be free. I'll maybe worry about any conditions later. Now, I reckon it be 'bout another hour to an hour and a half, 'til sunset."

Fistie studied the map; it showed a path, maybe once an old drove-way, running past the prison up to and around a disused quarry. In reality, there wasn't really a path, drove-way

or otherwise, at least that he could see. At best, it was a faint trail that came and went and veered off left and right, here and there.

He made a sucking sound with his teeth; if he kept the prison more or less behind and the sun roughly to his left, he should be going north-west and would easily get to the quarry, where, so he'd been told, someone would be waiting for him. Unless, of course, the map was completely wrong, he had no sense of direction, and the quarry didn't lie north-west of the prison. He put that thought to one side.

"Be useful to be at the quarry afore dark; get the lay of the land, afore I goes blundering in, just in case. Trust no one and you won't be disappointed."

Fistie folded the map but kept it in his hand. From what he'd been told, the someone at the quarry would be a man, and he would wait for him, at least until morning. That same man would then get him out of the county and up to Bristol. After that... Fistie shrugged. "Whatever happens, happens." He took one more glance around, then stood up and set off.

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## The Disused Quarry

Fistie awoke with a start and was at first confused. He thought he was still in his prison cell, but no; the usual smell of overnight piss and shit from his slop bucket, and the sound of heavy doors opening and closing, as well as booted feet on stone flooring, had been replaced by birdsong, and the smell of burnt wood.

His brain slowly engaged as his eyes began to focus in the grey, pre-dawn light and he took in the surroundings. No, Fistie-mate, he told himself, this ain't your cell.

"Aye," he said with a croaky voice. "It all be drifting back to us now."

He'd made it to the small, disused quarry, less than a handful of miles from the prison. However, given the wild, untamed Dartmoor terrain, a few miles here would be easily equal to twice that distance anywhere else, or so Fistie told himself. He got to his feet; the building he was in was little more than a ruin with only half a roof and two walls. Perhaps it may once have been a storehouse for the quarry, an office of sorts even. On one side of the room, to the right of where he stood, was a pile of ash and scavenged wood that had been last night's fire. Near his feet a scrunched-up ball of paper that had contained some sandwiches; he'd kept the paper in case he needed to start a new fire. Given the choice, he'd like as not light one now. Despite it being summer, the moorland retained little warmth after the sun went down, unlike the London he'd grown up and lived in, where brick and concrete soaked up the summer heat, giving by turns sultry nights, restless sleep, and frayed tempers.

"I feels as wretched as one of them reptiles they got in London Zoo." Fistie said aloud to no one other than himself. "Needs some sun to get the blood flowin', I does."

He yawned and sucked on his teeth, his eyes falling on the body lying breathless, cold, and dead against the wall. What sort of escape was this was turning out to be? If he were caught, he knew exactly how it would look; an escaped convict found with a dead body...

He spat on the floor and cursed; when he'd arrived last night, at sunset, the man was already dead. He didn't look like he'd been robbed or done in, so maybe it were his heart that had packed up. He'd seen that sort of thing before had Fistie, blokes keeling over for no other reason than their heart had decided enough were enough. But still, this were not good as far as the escape plan went; he could see himself getting re-caught and put up before the local magistrate post-haste.

"Well, it were like this, Your Honour; yes, I did escape, but I didn't kill no one. The man were dead when I got to the quarry. No, he weren't dead cos I killed him. I reckon he must've died on his own, like. No, I ain't no doctor, Your Honour, but I knows a dead body when I sees one. Have I seen very many dead bodies? Yes, Your Honour, I served my country as a lad in the Opium War. I seen plenty of dead bodies in that one, mostly Chinamen, but a dead body is a dead body, Your Honour."

Fistie allowed himself a little smile, then slowly stretched his arms and clicked his back; the chill of the Dartmoor night had crept into his bones. He pulled out and opened a cigarette packet; there were three, no, three and a half cigarettes left. He took out and lit the half-one and inhaled, immediately coughing and spluttering. Fistie nodded his head at the dead body.

"Ta for these; I found 'em in that leather satchel o' yours, with another packet, a note book, and a map that I'll look at later. There was some sandwiches an' all, which by-the-by was stale. Beggars can't be choosers, tho', eh? I will say this: you could have at least gotten yourself some decent salmon an' trout. Huh? Nah, I ain't meaning fish; you knows or maybe don't: Cockney slang, London East End talk; salmon an' trout, you know, snout."

Fistie tutted.

"Cigarettes, you bloody cork-bark! Snout is cigarettes! These tastes like they was swept up from the tobacco house floor. Ain't no wonder you up an' died."

Fistie finished the half-cigarette, then used it to light a new one, flicking the stub into the fire ashes.

"Mind you's, I s'pose I ought to be more respectful an' not call you a cork-bark, given how I got some Irish in me somewhere. Long ago, though. I only really got the surname now by way of connection an' that were handed down. You was proper Irish, tho' I don't doubt. Heart like a shamrock; believe in the cause an' everythin', did you? That were like my Mary; she were your full cream Irish, right enough. Aye, but then she up an' left us. Me gettin' banged up for trying to shunt off the Queen were the last straw. Well, that ain't exactly true. It were more me completely failing to shunt off the Queen. You know what I means, don't thee? Aye, you got it, that's right, assassinate the Queen. Then I gets caught; that's what did it really. Them two things. She said to me, and I can still hear her voice as plain as day.

"Fistie, you are a rogue, and even though I have love enough for you, I will not wait around."

Course she had to say that; at the time I were in a holding cell with a crowd of flat foos, you know, police, lookin' on. Gotta laugh—that were the same week she sold off me pawn shop. Lock, stock, and bloody barrel. Wrote an' told me she did. Blimey, imagine if we'd been proper married, would've taken me soul an' all! She were worth every penny, tho'. Right then, let's get this smoked, have a good cough, an' get you sorted out. I wants to be far away from here.

Fistie finished the cigarette, flicked the butt away, then bent over and, with his hands on his knees, coughed until he had hocked up enough phlegm to spit out a satisfying gob. Pleased with himself, he set about his next task, dragging the cold, stiff body away from the wall and stripping its clothes.

“Quite opportune, as they says, that we are of the same height. But I must say, you have been dining a lot better than me. And it's good of you to agree to this clothes swap—not that you got much choice, of course. Just hoping I can get me prison clobber on you, mate.”

Twenty minutes later, having succeeded in the clothes swap, Fistie dragged the now prison-uniformed corpse out of the ruined building and a short distance along a narrow path that ran above the quarry.

“Right me Irish, matey, I needs you to help out Fistie here a bit more. As you can sees, you is wearing me prison clobber. Now that in itself ain't going to be enough. So, I am going to push you down into the quarry. With a bit o' luck, even tho' it only be what, a fifteen-foot drop, maybe a touch more, you'll land face down, an' from up here all anyone will see is a dead prisoner. Clever, eh? Now, that should delay things a bit. But,” Fistie smiled at the corpse, “you knew there were a 'but' coming, didn't thee. I needs as much time as I can get.”

Fistie picked up a heavy rock. “Don't thee worry, it ain't going to hurt cos you already be dead. S'pose I ought to say sommat first. Erm, Mother, Mary of Joseph. No, that don't sound right; Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, is that it? Shite, who knows. Fistie, thanks you for your dedication to the cause.”

With that, Fistie dropped the heavy rock onto the face of the corpse—once, then twice. The corpse's face was smashed in, more so on one side than the other, and to all intents and purposes, it was now unrecognisable.

“With any luck, they'll think you is me and that I took a stumble in the dark, then had a nasty tumble over the side here, down into the quarry, an' got me face all messed up. That should call off the search, cos they is goin' to think old Fistie is dead. Whereas in truth, I am a goner, as in gone from here.”

Fistie stepped back, tossed the rock away, then dropped to his knees and rolled the corpse over the edge and down into the quarry. He didn't bother to see how the corpse landed; instead, he pulled out a small, hand-drawn map he'd found earlier in his newly acquired satchel.

“Another bloody, home-drawn map. Instead o' fightin' for the cause, you should have just opened yourselves a map shop; could've done a right roaring trade making pixie maps.

Right, let's get our marching shoes on and make haste." He squinted at the name on the map.

"We needs to head for... Peter Tavy? Is that a fella? If it be, he got himself a sister by the name o' Mary Tavy, cos her name's here as well. Perhaps it means if Peter Tavy ain't around when I gets there, I needs to go on a bit and find his sister, Mary. Mind you, Tavy don't sound much like an Irish name. I ain't bothered who it be tho', long as there be a train station with a train to get me away and maybe a bite of sommat."

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