

Death of a Radical

- Rebecca Jenkins -

CHAPTER ONE

Snow had come early to the moors that year. It came on an aching east wind that welded the moderate falls into a thing of torment. As February prepared to give way to March, the winds dropped leaving curdles of snow in the hollows. Amid the brittle ochre straw new life grew pale green, pliant and vital. Jonas Farr was in good spirits. Thanks to a couple of days' work in the last town, he had a full stomach and his mind was at ease with itself. He was a young man - not yet twenty years old - with a strong, compact body and an open face. He strode over the rough ground, swinging out his staff.

Jonas caught movement against the dull colours of the damp moor. Some way off two boys appeared to be crouching on the edge of an overhang. One stretched up an arm, etching a vicious shape against the white sky. The arm snapped down. The boy's companion scabbled to gather up more missiles.

The assailants were too preoccupied with their game to notice Farr's approach.

'What's this then?' he demanded, laying a hand on the collar of the nearest wretch. He looked down into a pinched, feral face and glanced over to see what the boys had caught.

Down below, a slight gentleman was cornered on a path running some ten feet beneath the overhang. Eyes peered up between the brim of a low-crowned hat and a mud-spattered scarf held close by a gloved hand.

With an explosion of energy that caught him unawares, the second boy was up and off. His companion twisted out of Jonas's grasp, delivering a painful kick as he rolled away to race after his accomplice. Cursing, Jonas loped a few paces, then stopped. It would be foolish to leave his pack and staff, and encumbered as he was, there was little chance of catching them.

'You are not hurt, sir?' he called out to the man below. But the man had not stayed. His receding figure was hurrying across the moor towards the horizon.

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Perhaps the poor daisy had been too ashamed to tarry. Held at bay by a couple of young ones hurling muck!

Jonas surveyed the landscape about him. He was a stranger to these moors and the gentleman might have reassured him that he was travelling on the right road.

His best option seemed to be the narrow causeway below.

Climbing down to the road he heard the tinkle of a harness bell. A chapman came into sight, trudging towards the overhang with a string of pack-horses, his lumpy outline mimicking his lead pony's swaying gait.

'Good-day!' Jonas called out.

The chapman cocked his head in acknowledgement of the greeting without slacking the rhythm of his pace.

A man with property had reason to be cautious of strangers met on the moor. Jonas stepped back to give him room.

'Say, good-man, is there a place hereabout a journeyman might shelter the night?'

For a moment he thought the man would pass without answering him, but as he drew abreast their eyes met.

With a jingling of harness and bells, and some shoving between beasts and man, the pack-train came to a halt.

The chapman planted his weight comfortably.

'Not from round here, then?' he asked.

'No.'

Jonas fondled the nose of the nearest pony, inspecting the line. There were half a dozen little Galloways, shaggyhaired and stoic, each loaded with sacks. The pony pushed its rough head against his chest amicably as he scratched its forehead under the straggling mane.

'Yon pack's shifted,' he commented. 'This jagger's back'll be good for nowt.'

The peddler came round to look.

'I've had nought but trouble with this poxy crook!'

Shaking his head the chapman lifted the heavy sack to reveal a pad stuffed with heather fastened to crosspieces of wood. A binding on one of the cross-pieces had frayed, allowing the pad to slip.

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'Make do for another trip yet, Enoch, she says. I'll make do her!' the chapman pronounced. 'Told her it was buggered, didn't I? Women!'

He jerked his head in Jonas's direction. The young man stepped forward to take the weight of the sack. Muttering to himself, the chapman pulled a couple of strips of leather from inside his sleeve and proceeded to make a rough repair.

'Thanking you,' said the chapman, his good humour restored. 'How do you know nags then?'

'Me auntie Annie's of your trade - carries cloth out Saddleworth way. Spent a summer with her once as a lad.'

'You're never kin to Jagger Annie!'

'You don't know Annie!'

'I do! By heck she's got a tongue on her has Jagger Annie.' The peddler eyed the young man with fresh interest. 'What brings you this way?'

Farr indicated the pack he had put aside on the ground and the shoe last that hung from it.

'Shoe making's my trade. Had a fair place, but these times . . . The master couldn't keep his family let alone a journeyman - work's so pitiful scarce.'

'Bad times,' agreed the peddler. He fixed the young man with a mournful look and shook his head. 'Desperate times,' he repeated gloomily. Jonas met his eyes.

'As bad as they've ever been.'

The weather was closing in, charging the air with a fine, freezing drizzle. The chapman fiddled with a buckle, adjusting his leader's harness.

'Militia's out Yorkshire side,' he said.

'Oh aye?'

'Aye. Getting ready for the fairs, I reckon. Haven't the heart to go far - it's bitter this time of year.' The peddler added a contemptuous snort.

'Easter Fairs? Hiring fairs, are they? Where about these parts?' Farr asked.

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‘Woolbridge, in a few weeks’ time;’ the older man jerked his head, ‘mile or two that-a-ways, down on the river. Well now,’ he gave his pony’s cheek a final pat. ‘Best be off. Yon track there, that’ll lead you to Grateley Manor. Cook there likes company and they’ve a couple of barns that aren’t overlooked.’

With a brief nod and a medley of ‘hie!’s and clicking noises, the chapman hauled his train back into motion.

The track climbed up steps of land to a wind-swept expanse where hardy trees stood within a high, stone wall. Drawing near, Jonas saw that beyond the wall a sunken track led into a milking yard. Towering over the yard, with the air of an ancient strong-place, was an old farm house, its deep-pitched roof carried on walls studded with few windows.

A thin gentlewoman of middle age stood at the kitchen door. Straight-backed and arms crossed, she cut an odd figure in an old-fashioned jacket and plain cloth riding skirt. She had a long, narrow face, her pale skin accentuated by the springy black curls of her cropped hair.

Her figure radiated indignation. A path curved round to the public side of the house where dirt and pebbles gave way to cobbles. The gentlewoman’s attention was fixed on a group that was passing through the white-washed gateway and down the hill. A man pushed a handcart of belongings, trailing a woman with a baby in her arms.

The woman spoke sharply and Jonas caught a glimpse of a sullen boy beyond the cart. Farr’s staff struck stone with a sharp tap and the gentle woman spun to face him.

‘What do you do here?’ she demanded.

‘Beg pardon mistress. I’m a journeyman. Shoe-making’s my trade - but I’ve a fair hand for carpentry and the like if you’ve a broken chair, or some other job.’

Jonas braced himself for an abrupt dismissal.

The gentlewoman glanced back into the shadows behind her.

‘He can feed in the back-kitchen, cook, but he’ll sleep in the barn.’ The hot eyes snapped back to Jonas. ‘Your name?’

‘Jonas Farr, mistress.’

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‘And have you come far?’

‘Served my apprenticeship in Leeds, mistress.’

‘You can have shelter tonight and in the morning there’s a pair of slippers and a chair need attention.’ The passionate energy welled up again. ‘No fires or tricks, mind. I keep my pistols by me and I do not scruple to use them!’ With that, she turned on her heel and stalked into the house.

Jonas Farr found himself facing the substantial figure of a woman who eyed him with the moist gaze of a friendly bovine. She ushered him into the kitchen with a wave of plump, floured fingers.

‘Arethusa,’ she said. ‘That’s me given name but Miss Lippett she calls me cook. I’m cook and I don’t know what else for I’ve scarce help about the place – all but none since Betty Tully’s been sent off along with her Ben.’ She set out bread and cheese on the table and pulled out a chair. ‘Take a cup of ale? It’s warmed and spiced – just the thing against the cold.’

Arethusa settled herself in a wide country chair by the kitchen range. Resting her trotters comfortably on the grate, she snuggled a pot of warm ale to her pillowy chest and fixed Jonas with the full force of her curiosity.

‘Such a day! Dismissed Ben Tully and his family, just like that! And not a chance of hiring until the Easter Fairs – not way out here.’

‘Fairs come round soon enough,’ Jonas responded, his eyes on his plate. He had never seen cheese like it. It was an anaemic cream colour, sweaty and crumbly. He laid a fragment on the corner of a piece of bread and took a cautious bite.

‘And who’s to do the outside jobs?’ Arethusa demanded, ignoring him. ‘Never mind what Betty did about the house – and even that no good boy of theirs. Miss Lippett, she bowls in all in a fury, pays Tully his wages and turns him out. Wife and bairns along with him. There’s no telling what that’s all about.’ The cook gazed at Jonas as if he might have an explanation of the mystery.

‘She has a temper, then, your mistress?’ asked Jonas, warming the tip of his nose in the fragrant steam that rose from his mug. Arethusa gave her head a good scratch.

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'They all have their faults, don't they? The quality. And she is quality - whatever they might say,' she stated. 'I say she's got no harm to her. As often as not she keeps herself to herself and her books.' Arethusa drew out the last word with a humorous emphasis to underline the strangeness of such a preoccupation. 'She's put up with Ben Tully for more than a twelve month. Why choose this day to turn him out? Eeah! That's a mystery. May-hap her boo-ooks carry the answer!'

'I have a taste for books myself,' said Jonas. The cheese had a soft tang about it that was not entirely unpleasant. He cut a thicker slice.

'You canna read!'

'I can.'

'Well now!' exclaimed Arethusa, rolling her shoulders to giggle coquettishly over her plumped up breasts. 'I'd never take you for a reading lad. So you's looking to settle, then?' Jonas took note of the softening look in the cook's eye. He pushed back his empty plate.

'Looking for work. So these fairs - it's not just wool then?'

'Nay. Leather and sheep and horned cattle too. They come from all over. Second day, mistress gives us the day off. So will you be staying?' Jonas stood up.

'That was grand. Thanking you, cook. Now, if you'll point me to this barn your mistress spoke of, I'll turn in.'

Arethusa led him to the barn. She was inclined to linger until a girl came with a message that the mistress was waiting on her and Jonas was finally left in peace.

The lantern Arethusa had provided burned with a steady light. Outside the wind buffeted the stone walls of the barn. It had been near a year since he had completed his apprenticeship and left his grandfather's house in Leeds. It was the only home he could remember with any clarity. He had been nothing but a youngster at the time of his father's death, when his mother had returned to her kin. In his mind's eye he could see his grandfather - neatly dressed and strong-looking for all he was over sixty - sitting in his ladder-

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backed chair reading in the firelight. His calm eyes were looking at him, magnified by the round glass of his wire-rimmed spectacles.

‘All men are equal when they can read, Jonas lad. In books a man may find the wisdom of the best of his fellows – living and dead. A reading man’s never alone for he has the company of philosophers, poets and other great men.’

Smiling, Jonas rolled himself in his blanket, pulled a leather-bound book from his pack and, stretching out by the lantern, began to read.

The barn door dragged on the floor and a gust of icy air invaded his sanctuary. Miss Lippett entered, windtossed and holding up a lantern.

‘Did I not tell you no fires, sirrah!’ Jonas scrambled to his feet. ‘Beg pardon mistress but the lantern’s safe. See. I’ve cleared a space – and there’s water should there be some accident.’

Miss Lippett strode up. In the pool of light that illuminated the floor Jonas noticed that she was wearing a man’s riding boots. Her fierce gaze swept his corner. Every wisp of hay had been cleared from a neat circle about the lantern and a bucket of water stood within arm’s reach. She saw the crumpled blanket and the book.

‘Do you read, journeyman? Far be it from me to stop a man reading his Bible.’

Jonas bent down to pick up the precious book.

‘In honesty mistress, this is not the Holy Book.’

‘It is not? What does a shoe-maker read, then?’ Her thin hand snatched the book from him. ‘Mr Gibbon’s Decline and Fall!’ She stared at him round-eyed. ‘What matter can a journeyman take from the history of the Roman Empire?’

‘The same matter that any man may, mistress.’

She half-smiled then suspicion flooded up.

‘Did you steal this? Do you mean to sell it me? You have heard I am a scholar no doubt.’

‘No ma’am!’ He saw her draw herself up. ‘I mean, no, I did not steal the book, mistress – your cook’s told me you’re a learned

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lady. The book's mine - it was given to me by my mother's master. A reverend gentleman who's shown me great kindness.'

'Well,' she tossed the book back to him. 'It is but an odd volume of a broken set.'

'So it is, mistress. But to me it's also a precious companion.' A faint longing softened Miss Lippett's expression. She reached out and tapped the book lightly.

'Indeed, some books are precious companions.' She stepped back abruptly, her back ramrod straight. 'Some fool is forever telling me that a woman's wit is too paltry to benefit from book learning. Who am I, then, to say a shoe-maker may not improve himself so?'

'It was my own mother who first taught me to read, mistress. She's a great reader and a fine woman.'

It may have been the wind chapping her cheeks, but Miss Lippett looked quite pink in the lantern light.

'Well. You mind that lantern. If you suit me, I may have a day or two's work for you here. I happen to be short a man and do not find it convenient to search me out a new hireling this week.'

It was just before ten o'clock on the night of the twentyseventh of February when Mrs Watson heard the dog barking in Powcher's Lane. She unlatched her window and smelt smoke. She glimpsed a glow through the stripped winter branches of the Bedfords' orchard and raised the alarm. By good fortune, Robert Mouncey, the saddler at the top of the lane and a couple of his neighbours, weavers laying by stock for the upcoming fairs, were also up late. The response was swift. The Bedfords' home was the one house of substance in the working quarter of Woolbridge. (Mr Bedford - despite his wife's objections - insisted that he reside within sight of his mill.) Had the fire jumped the stable wall it might have ripped through the crowded lanes and caught the better part of the neighbourhood sleeping. As it was, the fire was put out before the stable block was properly alight.

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Amid the remnants of a straw mattress the fire fighters found the scorched remains of Michael White, the Bedfords' coachman. He lay stretched out, a brandy bottle by him and an overturned lamp. He had been a solitary drinker and a foreigner, not known in the Dale. Mr Bedford had hired him in Leeds. It was said that White had taken the brandy from his employer's cellar. It had not been the first such transgression. The sinner, it seemed, had suffered the consequences of his sins.

Neighbours remarked on the charity of Mr Bedford who, despite the damage and the inconvenience caused by the careless manner of his servant's demise, nonetheless paid for the burial and a stone marker in the churchyard.

Michael White had no family. No one claimed him as a friend. His few belongings were fire damaged and disposed of. Saul, Mrs Watson's youngest, a sturdy, useful lad of eight, was the one person who retained a memento of his passing. While assisting the carpenter summoned to repair the loft, the boy discovered a sooty button with a curious raised cable border. He rubbed it on his sleeve, thinking it silver. He showed it to his master, who advised he throw it away, for what use was a scorched button?

Saul, however, kept it. He called it the Burned Man's button and on occasion he would display it to other boys, his particular friends, and thereby gained considerable credit among his circle.

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