

Hearth and Home
A Dan Foster Mystery

By
Lucienne Boyce

Dan Foster, Principal Officer of Bow Street Magistrates' Court, shifted his parcels under one arm and opened the door of the public office. He was greeted by a shrill, quavering and unmistakably drunken voice.

*You Christmas keepers of dah di dah,
When you go to the barrel,
Bring up a cup that's fine and tum te,
For her that sings this carol;
I must declare I'm very dry,
I find my spirits sinking,
But they revive immediately,
The moment I am drinking."*

The old woman's song rose to a slurred crescendo, then she slumped sideways on the wooden bench and started to snore. Patrolman Palmer stood in front of the desk where the clerk sat with his pen poised over the ledger ready to take down the details of her arrest.

The clerk winked at Dan. "Someone's had her share of Christmas cheer already!"

"What's she in for?" asked Dan.

"Picking a fight with a stallholder in the market, sir," Palmer answered.

"Has she got somewhere to live?"

"Says she lives with her daughter."

"Then leave her to sleep it off till morning, give her some breakfast, and let her go."

"But sir—" Palmer began.

"Or spend Christmas on the paperwork instead of at home with your family," Dan said.

Palmer smiled. "Very good, sir."

“Ah, that’s right,” the clerk said cheerfully, putting down his pen. “Hearth and home, that’s what Christmas is all about, isn’t it?”

Dan thought it an odd sentiment from the clerk, considering that his home was a couple of rooms at the top of the building, and his Christmas dinner would probably consist, as on most days, of pig’s trotters and a pint of porter.

The clerk nodded at Dan’s parcels. “Presents for your little lad, Mr Foster?”

Before Dan could answer, the street door banged open and a breathless boy hurtled inside. Hopping from one leg to the other, he gabbled, “River has murdered Doctor Harper and there’s a mob after him!”

Palmer looked at the boy in dismay. A murder on Christmas Eve, just as he was planning to get off home!

“Get the details while I get rid of these parcels,” Dan ordered the patrolman.

He hurried to the desk in the general office where Inky Tom was sorting out a pile of reports to go in the police office’s criminal intelligence files. This was a collection of information gathered from informers; descriptions of felons; conviction records; and details of cases. It was an invaluable resource for the Officers, and immaculately kept by Tom. The same could not be said of the clerk himself. As well as the usual ink spatters that had earned him his nickname, he had a large black thumb mark on his forehead which no one had told him about.

Dan dropped the parcels on Tom’s desk. “Look after these for me, Tom. I’ve got to go out.”

The streets were crowded with Christmas shoppers and bright with the lights from taverns, shops and traders’ stalls. Dan and Palmer pushed their way through the market square and a few minutes later they were in Henrietta Street. Here the three storey houses were a mixture of private residences and shops, with one or two of them displaying brass plates advertising an artist’s studio or a surgeon’s consulting rooms. The mob turned out to be a dozen of the local tradesmen or their clerks and assistants standing in a semi-circle around a man they had cornered against a wall. He cringed against the brickwork, his hands over his head in a vain attempt to ward off their blows.

“Dan Foster, Bow Street!” Dan cried. “Stand away, or I’ll have the lot of you in Newgate.”

They retreated sullenly. Dan moved over to the cowering figure and crouched beside him. Though he was hatless and what Dan could see of his clothes was dishevelled and dusty, he was respectably dressed. The hair that showed through his trembling fingers was dark, and

he was of slender build. When he was finally persuaded to uncover his face it was revealed as a handsome, boyish one. It was also a confused one, the fine brown eyes swimming with bewildered tears.

“River, I suppose?” said Dan, helping him to his feet. “Come on, let’s get you inside.”

He surprised Dan by murmuring in well-bred tones that did not match his modest outfit, “I am very much obliged to you.”

Dan and Palmer helped him limp the short distance to Doctor Harper’s house, where a plump servant held the door open for them. An even plumper woman stood in the hall behind him.

“I’m Mr Buckstone, the doctor’s valet,” the servant said. “This is my wife, who’s cook and housekeeper. And that” – he nodded contemptuously at the young man – “is River. Least, that’s what the doctor called him, him having no recollection of his own.”

“And the doctor?”

“In the parlour. This way.”

They all traipsed into the candle-lit parlour. A stout man sat in an armchair by a cheerful fire. Every amenity a gentleman could want for his after-dinner comfort was conveniently to hand on a small table at his elbow: books, a glass of port, a clay pipe, a bag of tobacco. But the doctor was past feeling comfort or discomfort. His head was flung against the back of the chair, which was covered with a spreading stain of blood.

Buckstone shuddered. “Crept up and hit him from behind, the devil. I knew it would happen sooner or later. The doctor should have left him where they found him, dead in the river.”

“What do you mean, dead?” asked Dan.

“The doctor was in one of those humane societies who rescue those who drown. Nothing humane about bringing a corpse back to life, if you ask me. The doctor was studying River. He wanted to know if his memory would come back.”

“He made notes in a book,” volunteered Mrs Buckstone, anxious to appear helpful in spite of her husband’s warning glare. “He came with nothing but the rags he had on, and his artful airs and graces. The doctor took him into his home, and we had to wait on him, a ragamuffin! And this foul play is how he repays him.”

“When a young gentleman is dragged out of the river in rags and nothing in his pockets, there’s certainly been foul play somewhere,” Dan said.



A man pulled out of the water.

He leaned over the doctor and went through his pockets. Palmer made a note of the contents as Dan laid them on the table: a silver watch and chain, a notebook, a clinking purse containing a few shillings and some small change, a handkerchief.

“So, River,” he said, turning away from the armchair, “did you kill Doctor Harper?”

“I – I don’t know. I suppose I must have.”

“There!” cried Buckstone. “From his own lips!”

“And why would you do that, River?”

River dropped his head into his hands and moaned. “I don’t know.”

“His sort don’t need a reason,” Buckstone said. “Should have been locked up in Bedlam when they fished him out the river.”

“Mmm,” said Dan. “Where did Doctor Harper keep his notebook?”

“In the top right-hand drawer of his desk in the library,” Buckstone answered without any hesitation.

Dan picked up a lamp and led the way. They were all glad to leave the parlour and the horror it contained. Dan put the lamp on the desk and signalled to Palmer to stand by the library door. He opened the drawer Buckstone had indicated. “Was anything else kept in here?”

“No,” said Buckstone.

Dan opened the other drawers and scanned the papers, letters, and writing paraphernalia. “And there’s nothing missing from the desk?”

“No, nothing,” said Buckstone.

Dan took out the notebook. Mrs Buckstone flounced into an armchair, folded her arms, and looked in every direction but the desk, as if none of this had anything to do with her. River crept tremblingly to a hard chair near the window. Buckstone remained standing, watching Dan as he read.

The first entry, dated 19 September 1799, confirmed the Buckstones' story. River had been near death when the river police hooked him out of the Thames. He had no recollection of how he ended up in the water, nor could he remember his own name or where he lived. His pockets were empty, his clothes ragged, yet as Dan had observed, he was well-spoken and had the manners of a gentleman. The doctor had noted that he had every confidence River's memory would gradually return.

Dan beckoned to Palmer and turning away so that, strain as he might, Buckstone could not hear him, said, "Go to the office and ask Inky Tom to check the intelligence files for any young men reported missing around the middle of September. And see if you can bring back a couple more men."

By the time Palmer returned accompanied by Inky Tom and another patrolman, who Dan stationed in the hall, Dan had had a good look through the desk and poked around the library, his every move followed by Buckstone. Tom, who seemed to think attending a murder something of a Christmas treat, showed Dan the report he had brought with him. Dan read and returned it. He crossed the room and laid his hand on River's shoulder.

"William Farley!"

River, who had been gazing miserably through the window, started and looked up at him. "Me? Is that me?" He puckered his brow, struggling to remember. "William Farley. It is. I think. That is, it seems right, but I don't know." He covered his face with his hands. "But it's the name of a murderer."

"No, it isn't," Dan said. "Because the murderer's name is Buckstone and my guess is he killed the doctor because there was money in that desk drawer."

"River killed him!" cried the valet. "River stole the money."

"River doesn't know what day it is, let alone how to manage a plot to kill and rob a man," Dan retorted. "And you're very quick to lay the blame for a robbery you just claimed didn't happen."

"Well – I – you said there was money. I don't know anything about it."

"But you knew exactly where the doctor kept his notebook. In which, by the way, there's no mention of lunacy, so your claim that River killed the doctor because he's a maniac doesn't hold up. You knew what was in the desk, and you know there's been a

robbery committed. Of course, I can't be sure of that, so I think the best thing is for my men to search the house and see what money they can find, and more to the point where they find it. They can start with your rooms."

"You've no right!" cried Buckstone. "You can't—"

By now Mrs Buckstone had completely distanced herself from her floundering husband. "Oh, Buckstone," she wailed, "how could you treat our dear master so?"

"Why, you damned bitch! You were in on it with me!" he yelled.

Dan nodded at Palmer. He started towards Buckstone, reaching into his pocket for his handcuffs. Buckstone ducked and wriggled out of his range and raced out of the room, straight in to the arms of the patrolman in the hall.

Dan left the patrolman and Tom to escort the Buckstones to Bow Street, with orders to set in motion a search for the doctor's relatives, and arrange for someone to come and lay out the body. He, Palmer and River took a cab to the address given in Inky Tom's notes. They stopped outside one of the fashionable town houses in Grosvenor Square.

A liveried footman opened the door. "Good eve – stars and garters! It's master Farley!"

"Do you know me?" stammered River.

"Know you, sir! Why, bless you, of course I do."

River gazed around the opulent hall in astonishment. "Is this my home?"

"Is Mr Farley here?" Dan asked.

The footman, who could not take his eyes off River, said, "There's only his widow and the young ladies, sir."

"Then show us in at once."

Mrs Farley sat beside the fire watching her two pretty daughters dancing while an unctuously smiling man at the piano provided the music. It was a festive scene, yet there was something forced about the women's gaiety. The mother's face was shadowed with anxiety, the daughters' smiles strained.

The pianist was the first to notice the three men. The music ended discordantly and he sprang to his feet, his face as white as if he had just seen River's lifeless body emerge from the dark waters of the Thames. The women followed his appalled stare. For a moment nobody moved, then the youngest girl flew across the room and flung her arms around the baffled youth.

"William! It's William, Mother! He's home!"



A resuscitated man.

Dan left them to their weeping and laughing and hugging and kissing and turned his attention to the musician. Having got his nerves under control, he had come out from behind the piano and stood looking on at the reunited family with his hands clasped in front of his silk waistcoat and his eyes turned to heaven. “A miracle! A miracle!”

“One you weren’t expecting,” Dan said. “Who are you?”

“I am Mr Quantrall, and I have the honour to be the family’s legal and financial advisor.”

“And I’m thinking you never thought to see William Farley again, not after you’d had him knocked on the head, disguised in rags, and thrown in the river. The crime was written all over your face the minute you saw him.”

“A scandalous assertion! I shall lodge a complaint with the Chief Magistrate forthwith.”

“We’ll see about that when I’ve asked Mrs Farley’s banker to cast an eye over her accounts.”

“You have no right to meddle in the Farley family business.”

“I have when there’s a crime committed.”

Quantrall blustered on, but he had already given himself away. Faced with a living, breathing William, he finally admitted his plot to gain control of the family’s money by disposing of the young man before he came of age.

It was late before the many shocks and surprises had all been gone through. Dan and Palmer escorted a half fainting Quantrall to the waiting cab, leaving William sitting on the

sofa in front of the fire, his mother and sisters clustered around him, their Christmas hearth and home complete.

When Dan finally emerged from the Bow Street police office with his parcels under his arm, the church bells were ringing. It was Christmas morning. The fighting and thieving, cheating and sharpening would not stop, but for today Dan would turn his back on them. He paused and sniffed the cold air, tainted with the smoke of thousands of chimneys. It was going to snow. He turned up his collar and set off for home.

THE END

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Historical Note

The real Royal Humane Society was founded by two doctors in 1774 as the Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned, to rescue and resuscitate people who by accident or design had ended up in the water. The Society's first "receiving house" for the nearly-drowned was in Hyde Park near the Serpentine.

Picture Credits

'A man being brought in by boat apparently drowned, his wife and family grieve on the shore.' Engraving by R Pollard, 1787, after R Smirke, Wellcome Collection, Public Domain.

'A man recuperating in bed at a receiving-house of the Royal Humane Society, after resuscitation by W Hawes and J C Lettsom from near drowning.' Watercolour by R Smirke (1752-1845); Wellcome Collection, Public Domain.



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