

The Double Dealer

Benjamin Weaver

by David Liss, 1966–

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I'm old and like to die soon, and no one will care when I do, and that's the truth. But I've a story to tell before I go, and I've paid this here gaunt scholar fellow with a face of a rotten apple to write it down. I aim to make him read it back, too, as I don't trust him and I'll not pay a penny until I like what I hear.

It ain't often I like what I hear. Them newspapers are full three, four, maybe five times a year of the great deeds of that worthless Jew, Benjamin Weaver—that great man, what done this favor for the ministry, or that for the mighty Duke or Arse-Wipe or good Squire Milksop. Old as he is, he's still at it. They forget, they do,

but old Fisher don't forget. I recollect it all, as I crossed with him when we was both young and he was no better than me—maybe worse, for his being a Jew withal.

It ain't no secret, but not oft spoke of neither, that time was this hero, a „thief-taker,” claims to make streets safe for the likes of what calls themselves ordinary man. No better than one of my number, a prig and one of the highway, and he'd have been at ease with the shitten likes of any blackguard cutpurse.

The world remembers that he was once a pugilist, and lived by his fists. They know him now as some kind of do-gooder, but there was a time between that, when his fighting days was done, and he ain't yet figured out this thief-taking lay. I know all about it, and I aim to make it public.

So, I begin with a piss-rainy autumn day, maybe 1717 or '18—maybe '19 or '20. Can't say as I quite recall, being as I said old and having blood come out both me lungs and me arse. But that ain't your concern. Yours is that when I was young I come 'pon a handsomely dressed spark finishing his business with a mighty fine-looking equipage—lonely all of them, on a nice, ripe deserted stretch of highway. He had in his hands a sack full of coins and jewels and mighty pretty things, and then said his farewells to a pair of ugly bitches, past thirty, and so good for nothing. He charmed them, though, as he called himself Gentleman Ben, and they blushed and bat their eyelashes like he were a spark at a dance and not the man what bound up their coachman and took their precious dainties. His partner, a fellow called Thomas Lane, were some twenty feet down the road, keeping his eye sharp for trouble.

These two were like brothers, never thinking to do a lay, one without the other. They even looked alike, with their dark hair, tall stature and wide backs, both. And that's the thing, ain't it?

You don't want to mess with these sorts of prigs, these coves what are never one without the other, these sparks what come to be like blood, for you do wrong by the one, you must surely face the other.

So it was that I rode close to Thomas Lane (though I didn't hear his name 'til later). The other one, what I learned was Weaver, was at the equipage, making pretty talk to the ladies. The sun, peeking through them clouds, were before me, and I couldn't see Lane's face all clear, but I could see it crumpled well enough and I knew he'd had enough and more of Weaver's frip-peries with these hags. He were looking back 'pon Weaver and not forward to me, so that he never heard me nor saw me neither, and I rode real quiet, as I trained my horse to do, and snuck up to him all silent like and pummeled him hard in his head. He fell over but not down, and so I struck him in the head again, and once again in that very same pate to make certain he stayed quiet, and this plan worked well enough, for this last blow, I later heard, quite killed him, but I didn't think so then. All I knowed was that he made not a sound more, and that contented me.

I had no plan to kill him. He weren't no friend of mine, but he was a brother prig, and I meant no more but his silence. Still, once it were done, there could be no helping it. No tears will squeeze the breath back into him, will it?

Now, coming from the other way were my friend and partner in these affairs, a spark called Ruddy Dick. There were some three or four fellows I regularly engaged with for my adventures, but none were more trusted by me than old Dick, an aged

fellow, as I thought then, though some twenty years my junior to where I am now. So, I catch old Dick's eye, and we know at once the lay, for we were longtime friends, like I said.

This Weaver might have not been keeping his wits about him, but those what he robbed were, and they saw the freaks I played 'pon Thomas Lane. They pointed and cried out, as though these two highwaymen were friends and I the enemy. Never once did they presume I come to save them, but that's the curse of this here face, even more terrible when I was young, if you'll credit that.

With the hags crying out and then taking shelter in their coach, I turn to this gentleman bandit, and I shout to him. I say,

„Ho, my spark, I'm afeard I've quite bludgeoned your fellow, and I'm afeard you're next.”

Weaver—though, as I says, I knew not yet his name—turns to me and stares not with surprise or horror or sadness, but with a rage burning in those dark eyes, clear enough through the misty rain. In the time it takes between you cut yourself and the blood starts its flowing, he understood all. He observed the scene, observed what I intended, and I knew then that I'd made an enemy.

That were the bad news, as they say. The good news were that I didn't expect he'd live long, not with Ruddy Dick coming down 'pon him hard. He'd spurred his horse to a good gallop and drew his blade, ready to take off the distracted Jew's head as though it were the foreskin 'pon a privy portion.

Now, there's Weaver, staring at me with those hateful eyes, and there's me, holding his gaze, keeping him distracted while Dick rides hard. It's but a tick of the clock, or less even, before this angry fellow is a headless angry fellow, but all at once, like he's got eyes peeking through them locks behind him, he turns. He drops his sack of goodies, and in an instant his blade is out and swinging, and it's at Dick before Dick's blade is on him. Nothing quite so colorful as a beheading, but the blade swings and opens Dick's throat, and the blood's all ruddy fountainish. That was it, then. The death of Dick.

Right tragic it was, a good friend such as he, who I shared my victuals and coin and whores with. Still, life must march forward, and Weaver weren't the only one who could see all clear and easy in the blink of a rat's eye. I spurred my horse, and make like I'm like to take a swipe at Weaver, all revenge-ish, but instead I reach down, grab the sack of plunder as was dropped, and I speed away, leaving behind me a pair of corpses with their puddles of blood.

It was but a matter of weeks before I learned that the one I pummeled never lived after. The other one, the cove yet alive, I now heard were called Benjamin Weaver, and that he had vowed to be revenged for what I done. So a month or two I stays on my guard, but nothing transpired. I heard no discussion of Weaver nor of his exploits, and I began to wonder if he might be dead or gone into hiding. That, I told myself, were the end of it. But it weren't the end, and though I talked a mouthful and been through two pints, it ain't but the beginning of this tale.

So, a year or more later, I'm on a fresh lay. I wished I could hole up as men was being nabbed all regular like, sent to the gal-lows like chickens to the butcher. I planned my lays careful, and didn't like to do many and take the chance of being 'peached.

This one was no more than a month since the last because the last ain't quite worked as intended. I'd been led to believe that a particular coach would contain a great fortune, and for what I knew it did, but all were contained within a strongbox. This particular box was made by some German named Domal, said to be the cleverest maker of such things in the world. It were too strong for breaking, and too intricate for picking. All that work had brought wealth, but wealth I could not reach. I still had it hidden away, in my secret spot in my secret rooms—for I told no one where I lived, not even my closest friends, for it's best to trust no one, in particular your friends.

Instead of this box, which I can't open, I now set my eyes 'pon a coach to return Londonward for the season from the summer in Yorkshire. These things are ordered just so, and there would be trunks and ladies and jewels—silver buckles and fine hand-kerchiefs, and linens and all manner of goods. It's somewhat dispiriting, as a prig can take three or four hundred pounds of swag, and not get more than three or four pounds from the fence, but there it is. Now, these rich folks, they would never have been so foolish as to travel the roads without escort, and an escort they could trust, too. But what signifies that? They were to have two, and a manly, strapping, all burly coachman besides.

This coachman was a handsome fellow named Phillip, what name means „lover of horses.” I tell you that only so you understand I'm a scholar on top of all else.

This Phillip showed himself a liking for a kitchen girl, a pretty little thing, slim of form but fiery in humor. Maggie, she was called, and she loved me hot and mighty well, which was how I entered into this lay. I convinced her to shine her favors on poor Phillip, and so she done. Maggie worked her wicked charms, and he come up so gasping for breath, so clouded with the stink of love, he would do anything she might ask. So it were he con-sented to aid us for a share of the treasure and a share of pretty Maggie, too. So he thought, but I'd taken to myself the role of the double dealer.

That's how we begun, me with my partner by my side, for as I said, I had not come so far and done so much without a few good fellows to aid. Here was a spark called Farting Dan, and aptly named he was. But beyond his farting, he was one of them thinkers, which was the good of him. The bad was his stench.

Many's the time I thought the men in pursuit should find us by his fragrance, for it weren't any ordinary farts he offered, but the kind to make your eyes water and your head feel strange. For all that, Dan earned his keep, he did, stench be damned. Not quite so daring or adventuresome as old Ruddy Dick, but a dependable man, who knowed more about pistols than any other spark I'd encountered. With his aid, I could be as certain as ever a man could hope, that my pistols should not misfire. Besides, once we divvied up the spoils and went looking for our fun, never once did the choicest ladies prefer him to me, even with my face being what it is.

So the day comes, and we wait among a copse of trees until our mark passed us, a fine equipage 'twas, all turquoise and gold, with black trim. It looked to me like money bags pulled by two stout horses. Before it rode one tough, and behind it another, and both these fellows burdened by the tedium, which was how I liked them.

Farting Dan begins it, riding hard up to the rear guardian and unloading a pistol directly into his chest. There's a burst of powder and flame, and this fellow slumps over onto his horse.

This were by no means the way I was accustomed to do business. No need to kill a spark who might as well be knocked down. Still, best never to fret, and I go to take care of my guardian to the front, but Farting Dan is on it before me, galloping hard and now firing a second pistol right into this fellow's back.

I'm close now, and for an instant I'm blinded by the flash, but when it clears I see the horse with no rider, and a body 'pon the ground.

I give him a look, and he shrugs in answer. Fair enough, I think to myself.

Screams and cries now filled the air, for the sorts of folk in the equipage were by no means prepared for such bloodshed as now was unleashed. In truth, these dandy highwaymen had made our job easier, for the ladies were inclined to believe that being robbed should be the most romantical of experiences, so when they saw it up close, with its blood and gore and the stench of death and shite they were all the more like to obey our commands.

Farting Dan let loose with one of those stenches for which he was known and rode hard to the coach. I'm behind him, making ready with a pistol, wiping at the stink-full air, for the equipage must be stopped. Phillip were supposed to make a good show of attempting to outrun us, and he's making wild with the reins and the horses are at full gallop, maybe a fuller gallop than I'd like, and by all appearance, the two dead toughs inclined Phillip to feel all mistrustful and switch allegiance.

The way we'd planned it, I'd be the one who made as though I was dealing with Phillip, but that Farting Dan had another scheme, and like a trick rider at Bartholmew Fair, he's on the back of his horse, and then leaping in the air. Always thinking, that Farting Dan, and now he thinks to come down 'pon that coachman Phillip, the very one what's supposed to aid us. Farting Dan knowed that well, but he showed no sign of caring, for I look over and see he's got a pistol out and he's using it as a club. He swings it and swings it again. A third time and a fourth. I hear grunts and moans, but the struggle is out of my view. When I come again into the view, the coach is still, the coachman is slumped over, the ruins of his skull are bathed in blood. Farting Dan has that terrible redness all over his hands, splattered upon his shirt, sprinkled upon his face. He grins at me something terrible and then licks the blood off his lips.

I ride now up to the still coach. A quarter mile down the road are two bodies and two horses. I don't like to leave a trail such as that, but the road is not so traveled that we can't presume a quarter hour's isolation. Most like we'd have an hour, but I don't care for presuming. A man remains cautious or he gets nabbed.

Nothing simpler.

Farting Dan jumps down, letting loose with an arsey trumpet blast. I breathe through my mouth and dismount. Now's the time to conduct the business.

Whimpers come from the guts of the equipage, but I could see nothing with the curtains drawn, as though they might hide behind their flippery. Still, a man is wisest to exercise caution, so I wave my pistol and point at the door. „Out, you

bitches!” I shout. „Nice and slow, with your hands high and not near nothing. Any man what don’t do as I say gets himself shot, his privy removed, and placed in the mouth of the nearest lady.”

You shock ’em to their core. None of this pleasantry crap. *My, what a pretty string of jewels. Would you mind ever so much placing it ’pon my hand?* I’d as soon swive a barnyard pig as say such shite. I’ve done one in my time and not the other, and I shan’t tell you which.

The door then opens a crack, and then all at once, and a great man with a great belly, dressed in a suit of sky-blue cloth, all lace and gold thread about him, stumbles out. His wig is askew, no doubt knocked about from his terrible trembling, and his face is slick with perspiration, despite the chill in the air. Hard by fifty years of age, and there are tears in his eyes; he’s crying like an infant what been ripped from its mother’s teat and hurled against the wall.

„Please,” he says, all snotty weepful. „We’ll do as you say. Don’t hurt anyone.”

„Don’t hurt anyone?” I bark. „Why, look about you, my blubberer. Your guardians are dead, your coachman smote. Mean you that I should not hurt anyone above the station of a servant?”

I think to add more, but time is of the most importance, and a man of the highway ought not to comport himself as though he were a comedian. „Out of the coach, the rest of you,” I says.

„There’s no one in there but my wife,” the weeping fat man tells me.

„Out with her, or there shall be no one in there but your widow,” I answer. Mighty clever, I was in those days.

Out she comes, as pretty a thing as I’ve ever seen. Not more than eighteen, with white skin, a swan’s neck, eyes so green they’re like the brightest leaves on the sunniest day of the clear-est summer. She’s got one of those fancy gowns on, and the bodice makes visible a fair portion of her massive bobbies. She has her eyes cast downward, and, like her husband, her lips are all atremble, but these lips are red and moist and waiting to be kissed.

Farting Dan gives a right lascivious look, and neither the woman nor the husband can guess if he means to blow a hole through her or to make use of the ones she’s already got.

I toss the fat man a sack. „Start filling it. Your coins, your notes, your jewels, aught of import. I plan a search before we go, and I mean to cut off one of your fingers for everything I find that you ain’t included.”

I’ve still got my pistol trained on them when Farting Dan says, „I believe we must tarry a few minutes longer than planned.”

He’s looking at the wife, so there is no mistaking his mind, but I wish to make it clear that this ain’t the time for frolicks. „Spend your share with the whores,” I say. „I’ll not take chances here.”

„I’ll wager you will.” He gets onto his horse so as say he’s no concern for my preferences.

The sods, meanwhile, are putting into the bag what I ask. The fat man has put in his purse and is taking the buckles off his shoes. The lady is taking off her rings and her necklace.

I send the husband up top to throw down the trunks what's stationed up top, a pair of fat ones they've got. They crack open egglike when they hit the dirt, and out spills a mass of clothing and trinkets. I make the pretty lady collect the trinkets, and put them in the bag, and as she pushes things this way and that, I see something bright and shiny, all glistening in the sun. It can't help but draw my attention.

It's a lock box, very like the one I have back in my rooms, the one I schemed to get, the one containing a fortune which might as well not exist since I can't get at it. It's the same sort, with the very same filigree design on the steel of it. This one is a great bit smaller, about twice the size of my fist, but the lock seems to be exactly the same size, looking unusual large on this piece. So now there's something on my mind more important than the pretty wife.

„What's in the box?” I ask the husband.

„Banknotes,” he tells me. He clearly don't want to, but he does it anyway. Good fellow. Deserves a pat on the arse, he does.

„Give me here the key,” I order.

He only shakes his head, and tells me, „I don't have it.”

„Where is it?” I demand.

„There isn't one. The notes inside are too valuable, so I destroyed the key.”

„Then how the deuce do you get them out?” I roared, for it was a mighty reasonable question, and worthy of being asked loudly.

„I have the one man in the world who can pick a Domal lock,” he says. Thus it is that he points to the crumpled heap of Phillip the coachman, bloody, glistening in the sun almost so much as the metal box.

This is what they call an irony. Farting Dan has bashed the brains out of the one man who could help me get into this box, and the one I got hidden in my rooms, too. I stare at the heap, and then something happens that don't look like it should.

Phillip, like as if on cue in a stage play, twitches.

With the pistols still on the happy couple, I take a closer look at him. There's blood all matted in his hair, but his skull ain't bashed in at all. For all his wild swinging, it don't seem that Farting Dan done very much damage.

What I need to do is get Phillip back to my rooms and tend to him until I can ask him to get my box open. That's as much as anyone would conclude.

Farting Dan's been gone for a bit longer than perhaps he ought to've been, so I glance about, and see nothing. Then, with pistols held steady, I take a fleeting look behind me. If those two had been of a mind to overpower me, they could have done then, for I gazed at the scene longer than a wise prig ought.

What was it that so caught my attention? It was Farting Dan.

He was behind me, all right. Behind me, and tied to a tree. His eyes were open, his mouth was open. And though I was a good hundred feet away, it looked to me for all the world like his throat was open, for it was much streaked with blood, as was his shirt and jacket.

Such cruelty. Such malice. Anyone casting his eyes to it would see that this weren't meant to hurt Farting Dan, though it appeared to have done that plenty, but to put the scare into those gazing 'pon it. It felt a whole lot like someone

getting even, and in that moment I knew full well that there could only be one man behind it all. Benjamin Weaver, and he meant to even things up.

„Why didn't you open your gob?" I demanded the fat man.

„I didn't see it," he whimpered. „I was too busy collecting the articles for you."

„Then you'll die for it," I said, for this was the sort of outrage that demanded someone die, even if it were not the person what done it. My hand was calmed, however, by a voice.

„Leave him be, Fisher," I heard. „Face me like a man, if you dare."

I turned and there he was, astride a horse, about halfway between Farting Dan's body and myself. I was far away, and it had been more than a year, but I recognized the face all the same. Sure 'nough, 'twas Weaver, the man what had struck down Ruddy Dick.

He held pistols in both hands, and they was trained upon me.

At that distance the guns should be entirely worthless, so he prods his horse forward. „It's time for you to pay for what you did to Thomas Lane," he says.

I was determined to show no fear, though I was fearful plenty.

„What about Farting Dan there? He didn't have nothing to do with your precious pretty fellow."

„I see the damage you've done," he answered, arrogant as a lord. „He deserved to die, and so do you."

He had his pistols trained on me, and I had mine on him. He had two, and I had one, but mine had been tended to and loaded by the great and deceased Farting Dan, and that gave the advantage to me. I would be able to fire before he dared, and lucky shot would do the business.

He was about five feet short of what he must have considered being in range when I fired my pistol. He fired his in almost instant response, but my shot had been true, his false.

Not so true as a man in my state should have liked, for it only hit his shoulder, but he lurched backward, and his pistols fired upward.

Weaver tumbled backward off his horse, and this, I knew, was my moment. „You!" I shouted at the fat man. „Get him on my horse." I gestured with a fresh pistol toward the still, slumped body of Phillip.

The fat man obliged, and in less than thirty seconds, I had him on the horse, and myself besides. Weaver was still struggling to get to his feet. He clutched at his shoulder, and there appeared to be a great deal of blood. It seemed I had hit him in his blood tubes, a wound that would make my escape all but certain, but I would take no chances.

I passed him quickly on my horse, emptied a pistol shot into him and rode on, my still prisoner balanced on the horse like a big bloody sack of shite.

It was a hard three-hour ride to my rooms in London. I could have not have planned this better had I tried, for it was full dark by the time I arrived, though not so dark that my presence on the street should draw attention from. And London, though it has many faults, at least enjoys the marvelous trait of being a city where no one will wonder why you ride about with a slumped man over your horse. There were, after all, too many other distractions. The cries of women

selling shrimp and oysters, the pie men, the whores and traders in nefarious goods. Fools ran their coaches down the narrow streets too fast, farmers led their pigs this way and that. The streets were full of emptied chamber pots and kennel and dead horses carved up by beggars for their dinner. The skies in London were full of smoke and coal, the people rushed and angry and afraid. I may as well have been a buzzing fly for aught anyone gazed upon me.

I kept my rooms in Hockley in the Hole, and in that maze of makeshift buildings without addresses, sometimes without streets, no one could find me who was not led there by myself.

And my landlord, who observed me dragging Phillip upstairs—he would say nothing. I paid him for his silence. He even helped get Phillip to my rooms, where we dropped him on the floor. To best make sure all went as it should, I gave the landlord a coin and sent him on his way.

I didn't live richly in my home, for it were only a place to rest; I lived in taverns and bagnios and with the ladies of the streets.

Here I had my poor bed, a few furnishings upon which to sit and rest my food when there I ate. I hung nothing on the walls, covered the splintering floor with no rugs, put no dressings 'pon the cracked windows.

On our journey home, I had observed that this Phillip's head was no longer bleeding, and his breathing appeared to me fairly normal, all of which gave me hope. I lit a few oil lamps to allow me as much light as I needed. Then I took a bucket of water, what I used for washing that morning, and threw it upon Phillip. He stirred at once. He groaned and coughed and sputtered. He opened his eyes.

I trained a pistol on him. „Sit up.”

He done it and put a hand to his head and then drew it away sharply.

„I hears you can open a Domal box.”

He nodded, and it looked to me like the effort almost made him tumble over, and for all the world it seemed like it should take a miracle for this hurt bastard to open the box tonight.

With some difficulty, for I was very tired, I pushed aside a large and uncommon heavy chair I kept by the wall, and then opened the secret compartment in which I stored my most precious valuables. Included among these, and indeed almost alone among these, for I had little of value at the moment, was the box.

Unlike the one I had in my loot bag, this one was near the size of a man's torso, and heavy, though from its frame or contents I knew not.

I set it down on the floor next to him, and he gazed 'pon it groggily.

„Open it,” I told him.

„No,” he said in a voice surprisingly steady.

I trained my pistol on him. „Do it.”

„Killing me won't get it open,” he said.

„True,” I agreed. „But lead in your leg might encourage some cooperation.”

Then he did something most unlike a man with a bashed head. He pushed himself to his feet and stood facing me, gazing at me with unclouded eyes, standing steadily and strong. His injuries were perhaps not so severe as they appeared, not so severe as he'd led me to believe.

Not ten feet from him, however, with a loaded pistol, I was the master, and if he would not believe it, I would be forced to explain it in terms he could not ignore.

„Open it,” I told him, „or you will regret it.”

He smiled at me, and it was a smile full of confidence and, yes, pleasure. Here was a man enjoying himself not a little.

„I don't know how,” he said.

„Then I will remind you,” I answered, and fired the pistol directly at his knee. An injury of that nature might cause him so much pain that he would be unable to do his business, but I have observed, and more than once, that a man with one knee shot will go to great lengths to avoid having the other served with the same sauce.

Through the smell of powder and cloud of smoke, I noted that a man who ought to have collapsed remained still standing.

From so little a distance, I could not have missed. There were no marks upon the floor, yet he remained unscathed, and had not even flinched during the firing.

„Your pistol is spent,” he said. „Mine, however, is not.” From his pocket he withdrew an imposing piece, which he aimed at my chest. „Sit.” He gestured to my great and heavy chair.

Make no mistake, I had my wits about me. I saw no reason to lose heart, but with no choice but to obey, I sat. From his pockets he then withdrew a length of thick rope.

„Tie yourself to the chair,” he said. „And no deception, if you please. I have my eye 'pon you, and I know a fine knot from a poor.”

My hands fumbled with the rope. „Look here, Phillip. I have a great deal of money about me, and rather than be enemies, let's come to what they call an understanding.”

He said nothing until I had secured myself tight to the chair. I meant to create a loose knot, but his eyes never left me. I must now operate under the belief that he could not kill me in cold blood—and that I could buy my freedom with the promise of silver.

Once I was bound, he smiled at me, a devilish sort of smile.

„My name is not Phillip,” he said to me. „I presume you did not see my face when you knocked me down a year and a half ago, and so it is you who do not recognize me today.”

A sort of stillness overtook the room. It was the stillness that came over the theater when a great revelation was made. Even the rabble of the pits would pause in their nonsense to look up and see what secrets were being said. Here it was, in my life, such a moment. A moment of the theater as things that had been hidden revealed themselves.

„Thomas Lane,” I said. „I thought you was dead.”

„No, Thomas did not die, though I am not he. You mistook the one for the other, as you were meant. I am Benjamin Weaver.”

„Then, the man I knocked down...” I began.

„That was me who you mistook for Thomas Lane during our last encounter. Thomas had some unfortunate bounties upon him, and he thought it useful to let the world believe he died by your hand. It was therefore spread about that you had killed him, and to give the story the credibility Thomas required, it was also spread that I sought revenge for a death that never was.”

I began to sputter, for now this story was all confusion. „If I did not kill Lane, why all the trouble to take revenge upon me?”

He smiled again. „It is not revenge, Fisher. It is a matter of business, as I have found a better way to earn my bread. I am no longer a man of the highway, but a thief-taker. The owner of this box employed me to retrieve it. As you would tell no one, not your closest confederates, where you kept your goods, I had no choice but to encourage you to bring me to it of your own free will. Your attempt to rob us 'pon the highway was my scheme. I permitted you to believe you manipulated me, when I was the one who manipulated you.”

„You're nothing but a double dealer, and a more ruthless bastard than ever I was,” I told him. „You let all those people die so that you could retrieve this box?”

He laughed. „No one has died. No one has been hurt. Did you not wonder how you missed me when you fired 'pon me? Your companion neglected to include balls in the pistols. We deceived you with empty firearms and false blood from the stage.”

It was then, over the stench from the discharged pistol, that I began to smell something else. A stench like rotted eggs—and rotted meat and rotted teeth. Then, into the room walks Farting Dan, Thomas Lane by his side.

„I knew you had the box in your rooms,” Farting Dan announces, „but as you would tell no one where your rooms were, I could not sell that information. I knew the way you'd have to pass, though, so Thomas and I rode ahead of you and waited for you to glide by. You were so intent in getting home, so certain you were now safe, you did not notice us behind you.”

„You've betrayed me,” I shouted at Farting Dan. „Why?”

„For money,” he said with a shrug.

„It's a good reason,” I answered, „and I'll not fault you for it.”

„Now,” Dan says to Weaver, „take the box and be off with ye. That was our bargain, and I expect you'll honor it.”

Weaver nodded. „I should like to bring you to justice, Fisher, but I will honor my word. You'd be wise not to cross my path in the future, however.”

And so it was that he lifted the box in his arms, and he and his companion left my rooms.

In silence we waited as we heard their heavy steps down the stairs, then the slam of the front door. Farting Dan went to the window and watched for some minutes, and I watched him.

Then at last he turned to me and broke the silence. „Not too tight, I hope, them ropes?”

„I done it myself,” I says.

„You comfortable?” he asks.

„Shut your gob and untie me,” I says. „You get the last payment?”

He cut through the ropes with his knife. „Ten more guineas, as promised.”

With my hands free, I stood and rubbed my wrists. „A lot of nonsense for twenty guineas,” I says. „Particularly since the contents of that box must be worth a hundred times that.”

„Twenty guineas is better than nothing, which is what the box was worth to us if we couldn't get it open. And we got it without fear of a hanging, or having to do business with a fence. Not bad in my thinking.”

He was right, too. That Farting Dan was a practical fellow, and a clever one. I'd have never thought of this plan on my own. But that was Dan. Always thinking. And always farting.

