

## THE ESCAPE OF PETER GENTLE

On the night that he escaped, the voice of the sentencing Judge echoed through Peter Gentle's mind, as it had done for the previous six months.

Every word was seared into his memory; he rehearsed them many times a day, and always last thing at night.

'Peter Gentle,' the sharp faced old man with a clipped voice had said, 'you have been found guilty of larceny inasmuch as you stole four forpets of oats from Messrs Grieve and Begbie on the thirteenth day of January of this year of our Lord, Seventeen hundred and eighty seven.'

Peter Gentle nodded in agreement, as he had done when the judge addressed him.

'You know that the punishment to be meted out to you must reflect the gravity of your crime.'

He nodded again.

'Accordingly, I hereby sentence you to be transported beyond the seas for a period of seven years, before any parole or return to these shores may be considered. Do you understand?'

Again he nodded to himself. He understood alright, he was lucky, others had been hanged for lesser offences. He also understood that in the morning he would be taken from the prison, shackled in the coach with two other felons and make the long journey south to the River Thames where the fleet of prison ships were gathered before making the journey to Australia.

Australia? He'd heard of it over the last few weeks of his fifty years. Said with a strange mix of fear and bravado, the two words "transportation" and "Australia" were muttered by fellow inmates who would join him on the interminable daily circular procession around the tiny exercise yard. The following morning they had gone. It was as if they'd never existed, he thought. It was to be his turn next and only a few hours remained before he would be bundled away and forgotten.

Except he had no intention of being there when they came for him in the morning. He smiled to himself as he recalled the dull wobble of the ill-fitting manhole cover in the exercise yard when he'd stepped on it over the past few days. He'd wondered then if it could be lifted, and if so where it would lead to.

'Nothing ventured' he muttered that evening as the exercise yard plunged into darkness. It had been easy getting there. The guard had said: 'Yes, but don't be too long about it,' when Peter Gentle had told him he needed a bit more exercise to help him sleep and wear off the effects of the stodgy supper.

'Stupid bastard' he said to himself as he knelt and lifted the cover. The sound of running water echoed in the darkness below. Resting the cover on his head he lowered himself rung by rung until he heard it thud into position.

No one knew where he was. He had disappeared and would soon be free. He smiled as he reached the bottom rung and bent double as his feet splashed into the water and the tunnel's low roof and damp sides snagged at his coarse clothing. The darkness stank and scuttling sounds and squeaks let him know that rats were there in plentiful supply.

He shuffled forwards and in the cramped darkness felt a salty breeze blow against his sweating face. The tunnel passed a wide ledge before dipping downwards until, in the running water around his feet, he saw the silver-grey light of the rising moon and it wasn't long before he grabbed the rusty seaweed-festooned iron bars at the end of the tunnel.

He lifted his head as high as the tunnel would allow, his hands clenched the cold iron and the walls clamped him hard in a wet grip. With increasing alarm he realised that he couldn't move; he couldn't turn round and he couldn't go forwards. Maybe he could call for help, and if he was heard and found that would bring additional punishment on him to say nothing of the shame of his reception by the other inmates.

The Judge's words echoed again in his mind: 'You know that the punishment to be meted out to you must reflect the gravity of your crime.'

The moonlit water slid by as the incoming tide relentlessly covered the rocks and lapped towards his feet.

He sank to his knees, the knowledge that his life would close in a slow, cold way and that he would fight for his last breath before the sea water drowned him, filled his mind and thoughts.

He had been so sure of himself and his clever ruse to escape the prison. Now he saw nothing but a lingering death. Tears started to his eyes and for the first time in his life he found himself praying for a miracle.

But the sounds he heard as he prayed were nothing like the voice of a gentle Saviour; they were of grunting, swearing voices and of heavy items thumping over rocks.

'God Almighty! There's someone 'ere,' and he looked up at half a dozen weather beaten faces.

'Quick, get 'im out. Let's see who it is.'

The grating groaned as they pulled it open and he fell over as his only support creaked to one side.

Hands pulled at his coarse clothing, dragging him into the night air. 'Hang on, this man, I know 'im,' a face peered at his. 'Peter Gentle isn't it?'

He nodded.

'Can't mistake a black, pock-marked face like that,' the man laughed. 'I heard you were going to be transported, ain't that right?'

He nodded again. 'Decided to escape,' he mumbled.

'Yes, we know. There's a reward out for you Mr Gentle, all over the place are posters about you.'

Another voice chimed in. 'What d'you say lads, shall we trade 'im in for a few guineas?'

'They'd hang 'im sure enough if we did,' said another. 'Wouldn't want that on my conscience.'

'A bunch of guineas though, we could a lot do with that.'

'But not before he'd told them about us – then we'd all be for the gallows.'

'S'right, we'd better keep 'im 'ere.'

Peter looked at the circle of ruffians, and the boxes and crates they'd dragged with them. Smugglers.

'I won't tell anyone,' he said hoping his promise would carry the day. 'Too right you won't; we'll make hanging seem like a treat if you do.' He was pushed to one side and he felt the cold circle of a musket barrel against his throat.

One by one the boxes were moved into the tunnel by the smallest members and he heard them splash their way up; a few moments later they came splashing back and moved the next load.

Peter relived his failed escape. Where could they be going? He only recalled one place where the tunnel widened and he was in a hurry and in no mood to explore.

'That's the last,' said the one who'd recognised him earlier. He detailed three of the group to take the donkeys back and wait for them near the docks. 'The usual place. Be very careful, the Revenue's about and the Castle Guard will be looking for our friend here' He pushed the musket harder against Peter's throat.

'You're coming with us,' and Peter was shoved back into the tunnel and the grating was pulled shut. One pulled at his collar and the other pushed at his bent back. They stopped after a few minutes. 'Get up 'ere,' and Peter stumbled up some slimy steps knocking his shins against the boxes that had been carried in earlier.

'Right Mr Gentle, this is where you forget everything that's happened and you'd better forget everything that's about to happen. If you don't, well my friend here is very good with a long sharp knife. You won't even feel it slicing between your ribs but you'll die very quickly. Understand what I'm saying?'

Peter understood alright.

'Right, get on up there,' and he was bundled further up the steps onto a wide terrace. The gang leader pushed against a metal braced, heavy wooden door which scraped across a flag-stoned floor. A weak oil lamp burned in a corner.

Peter could just make out neatly stacked boxes and barrels, trunks and cases. The shadows of the men flickered and lurched across the walls. 'Close the door tightly,' a new voice spoke from the shadows opposite the lamp. Peter thought he'd heard that voice before.

'We've got a guest,' said the leader.

'Are you mad? What d'you mean?' The voice was louder, much more authoritative. 'Found 'im in the tunnel, so we did. Stuck at the gate. Couldn't do away with him.' 'Why not?'

'Too many risks; guards and Revenue everywhere. This one'll be all right – he knows what'll happen if he doesn't do as he's told.'

Another voice. Peter had heard its precise and clipped tones before. 'Have you made a good delivery today?'

'Plenty of good stuff Sir – you'll do well from it.' 'And I'll make sure you'll do well too.'

'You always do Sir,'

'Yes, well..... this 'guest' bring him here.'

Peter was pulled away from the light and faced a dark corner in which he could just make out the edge of a table and two figures behind it. He was forced to his knees.

'What's your name?' said the first voice. 'Gentle Sir, Peter Gentle.'

'What?' The voice was incredulous. 'Where did you say you found him?' 'Kneeling behind the grating Sir. He couldn't get out. Locked from the outside.'

The figures came from behind the table and stood in front of Peter. One reached down and grabbed his hair pulling his head upwards. 'It looks like you've found a missing prisoner. There's a good reward for this one. Why didn't you go for that?'

'He knew too much by then Sir. Better that we kept him.' 'Bring another light here,' said the clipped tones of the second. And Peter suddenly recognised the voices.

An oil lamp flared and in its guttering light Peter looked into the faces of the Judge who'd sentenced him and the Prison Governor.

Tim Binder