

Pelham on Parole



Carl Plummer

The First Pelham Hardimann Adventure

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by

Carl Plummer

DREAMING BIG PUBLICATIONS

Failure is unthinkable. Failure is unforgivable.

Failure is not an option. Failure is highly likely.

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CHAPTER 1

Greta

“This stuff is dynamite.”

“That good, is it?”

“No, Hardy, it’s dynamite.”

Dan unrolled the newspaper wrapping; I think it was the *Daily Mirror*, a parcel not unlike one keeping warm a hearty serving of haddock and chips with extra malt vinegar, and bits.

I croaked, “Dynamite?”

He selected an explosive tube, complete with fuse, as his eyebrows squeezed in to touch. I waited for him to growl. He growled. “It ain’t sticks of bleedin’ Blackpool rock, is it?”

“Dan,” I continued in what I hoped was a mollifying tone, “all you’ll be able to do is blow the cell door off. The window is not an option...” I wavered a moment before continuing. My cow-pie-eater of a cell mate commanded a certain amount of verbal tiptoeing. “We’re four floors up. Only blowing the doors off isn’t going to do it. After this door, there are many others.”

He tickled his chin with the fuse. “Got more of ‘em, loads of ‘em, well, six sticks. An old mate worked in a quarry.”

I formed a small-talk type of question as I envisaged my limbs and organs plastering the grey and cream painted bricks of our little cell. “Worked or laboured?” I inquired. “What I mean is, whistle and flute, a Peckham Rye and a pencil behind the ear, or the arrowed pyjamas and pickaxe

in hand?”

Dan leant against the steel door, covering the spy hole with a broad shoulder, and a very broad shoulder it was indeed. My cell mate had the physique and aura that, if down by a Rocky Mountain stream, would persuade a grizzly bear to hand over the prize salmon and slink off into the woods, happy to fish and feed another day. “He was my mate. Done ten years, done his time. Now he’s ‘elping me be a free man, an’ I am gonna be a free man. Don’t you wanna be free?”

“Not so many months stretching ahead of me, old chap,” I said. “I’ve got less than a year left to do...keeping my nose clean...being a first timer and all that...I’m nearly done.”

He pointed with the stick of dynamite. “I gotta see ‘er.”

I turned to view, for the thousandth time since my incarceration in the summer of 1938, the curly-cornered photograph above Dan’s bunk. There, in black and white, with sultry eyes shadowed by glossy blonde hair was the

woman from *The Kiss*. I faced him once more, feeling my heart sink. I'm sure you'll agree, there's nothing worse than trying to reason with the lovelorn; it is an endless highway of listening and nodding until you wish the poor blighter would gallop off to Beachy Head and finish it all: once and for all.

That said, I am prone to lend a keen ear to a man in need. I tried once more. "Dan," I implored, "you arrived with that photograph nearly ten years ago. You've only another five to do. Don't go and spoil it. Tot up your years of good behaviour and...you know she wants to be alone."

"I must see her, now, and if I can't see 'er..."

"Come on, Dan," I said, still venturing with my mollification of his ire and hunger for freedom. "All this for a woman who doesn't know you, won't want to see you, doesn't want to see anybody?"

"That's as maybe, Hardy," he said with another wave of the dangerous sticks. "I've waited long enough. I'll get to see her if it's the last thing I do, that's after I've seen..."

“Your dear, grey-haired old mother?”

Dan stiffened. His eyes narrowed as his fist tightened its grip on the dynamite. “No, not my grey-haired...she hasn’t got grey hair. Not the last time I saw her, anyway.”

“Oh,” I said. An ‘Oh’ in these situations is not much to say, I’ll admit. Dear reader, and welcome to you, let me explain. As you get to know your hero – Pelham Hardimann – you will understand my keenness to keep emotions at bay. Best to avoid such things, be they filial, maternal, or worse, the going gloopy and weak at the knees over a set of high cheekbones, dainty ankles, and a slim waist. You won’t find such fault with me. Back to the matter in hand...in Dan’s hand. “I know,” I said. “You were diddled, stitched-up by your gang members. They ran off with all the loot?”

“No, it wasn’t them what stitched me up. It was Quill?”

I am rarely one to take a step back, but I took a step back.

“Quill? Detective Inspector Quill?”

“Yeah, Quill. He got me banged up for something I

didn't do."

"Really?" I was tempted to lift an eyebrow of irony or incredulity or some such thing. "Dan, you robbed a Royal Mail train. His Majesty, God bless him, does not take kindly to his subjects messing about with the postal service. From post box to letter box, all mail is property of The Crown."

"He had me up before the beak for robbing a bank. I never robbed a bank. I robbed a train. He had me down for something I didn't do."

"That sounds like Quill," I said.

"So, you know him?"

"You could say that," I said.

"He got you for bank robbing?"

"No, nothing as adventurous. Breaking and entering, with a bit of theft post breaking in."

"Lucky for you he didn't pin bank robbing on you," said Dan. "I mean, you send people to prison for something they've done, something they is guilty of, not something

they ain't done. That's how the law works."

"That's how it's supposed to work, Dan, yes. I'll see you right on that one."

"Bet he tried something...good for his clean-up rate and getting promotion."

"Well, I think he made sure another couple of months was added, for my smacking him in the mouth."

"You should've strangled the bastard."

"A bit much, don't you think?"

"Not for me, Hardy." He poked the sticks of dynamite at me. "Strangling his scrawny neck is the first thing I'm gonna do. Then I'm on a boat to America." Another poke with the dynamite. "First things first, eh? We blow down this wall and escape."

"You'll blow us to smithereens," I said, wondering if his torso would offer me enough shelter from the blast.

"I'll be free. Is you in or is you ain't?"

"Well, I'm in and I can't get out, so I suppose I'm..."

"In." He pressed a paw against my chest. "My bunk."

“Your bunk?” I asked, considering the idea that sharing a prison cell and slop bucket for such a short time was no basis for a relationship.

“Get under it.” He dug into his overalls and pulled out a box of England’s Glory, jammed a finger into the box and selected a match. “Cover yer lug ‘oles.”

Resigned to the fact that all remonstrations were over, I turned to nod goodbye to Greta, went down on my hands and knees then wormed and wriggled my way under Dan’s bunk, my nostrils catching the burn of cheap floor cleaner and the mossy waft of damp bed linen. I flattened palms against ears, closed my eyes and said a silent farewell to a friend who had impossible yearnings for a better place.

After the shuddering, the smack of compressed air and the boom making light work of my improvised ear muffs, I opened my eyes and turned my head to see blustering dust and the snowing of paint flakes laying a gentle cover over the supine and serene mass of my once desperate

friend.

It was perhaps a minute or so before the polished boots and sharply creased shins of a warder arrived. One boot kicked against a flank to test for death, unconsciousness, or heavy sleep.

“Still breathing.” Some silence followed. “5271, you in here?”

I edged sideways, stuck my head out from beneath the bunk, jamming an elbow against a boot. “Just about, Mr. Kay,” I chirruped, catching the light from the gaping doorway as it glinted against the warder’s necklace of keys.

“Get out of there.”

“If you could just...”

“Come on, 5271, up you get,” came the reply as the boots inched back to leave me the minimum of space in which to slither out and render the back of my head a nasty smack from the rusted frame of Dan’s bunk.

It was about thirty seconds before I could stand up

straight and peer into the eyes of Mr. Kay, a man who had that pinched face of a fellow suffering a shard of peanut cutting into a gum.

“I couldn’t stop him, Mr. Kay. He was determined.”

The warder looked down to the slumbering figure at his feet. “You should have stopped him, should have called for assistance, 5271. Bloody fool.”

I thought the accusation a little stern. “I spent some time talking him out of it...”

“Bloody talking is all you’re bloody good for, 5271.”

“But...”

“Wouldn’t surprise me if you put him up to it. Just the sort of thing a chinless, smooth-talking upper-class twit and twister like you would...this poor old dimwit...”

“Steady on,” I exclaimed. I felt judgement on my cell mate a little premature and unfair; he was in no position to defend himself, or me for that matter. As for the upper-class twit thing, well, it has always been somewhat of a contradiction in terms as far as I’m concerned. After all,

were the ruling classes to be such twits, power would swiftly slip through their well-manicured fingers. It hasn't yet. I was keen to put this dialectic across to Mr. Kay, but I thought better of it.

He gave Dan another groan-prompting kick before taking a step towards me, to squint, a hand twirling his keys, somewhat akin to a miffed gunfighter with the sun in his eyes. "I am on the horns of a dilemma, 5271."

"A dilemma?" I asked.

"I would be happy...no, I would be delirious with joy to see you suffering another five years for your part in this..."

"My part?"

"Shut it."

"But..."

"Quiet, 5271. I am in no position to question my superiors and *you* do not question *me*. You are out of here."

"Out?"

"Shower."

"Of here?"

“Get cleaned up. Use plenty of soap. Your clothes will be brought here. Say farewell to Dan. Then pick up your belongings...and I do not wish to see you...”

“What about the delirious with joy...?”

“5271. Shut up before I call my superiors and explain your need to be held in the infirmary for a week.”

“I’m on parole?”

“Something like that, not that I’d ever trust a word of yours.”

“I’m free?”

Mr. Kay was in no hurry to answer. After another cursory check of Dan, he clanked his way across the flattened door of my cell and planted himself on the landing of my wing before doing a smart about turn to offer me a finale of a scowl. “I don’t know what this country is coming to, 5271, I really don’t.”

I was ready to concur, to give one of my hell-in-a-handcart lines. “Well...” I was not allowed to continue.

He sucked in dust-free air. “Just consider this on the

outside, 5271. You've let your country down, you've let this prison down, you've let your cell mate down, and perhaps most important of all...you're a blithering idiot!" He marched away with a "*Gawd 'elp us all.*"

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

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