

One

Devonshire, England – June 1579

The three men circle warily. Rough and soldierly in appearance, two have daggers and the other a short sword. A fourth stands up the wooded bank holding our horses with my killed companion at his feet. I edge carefully back into the stream. The water is chill and fast-flowing. I must take care not to stumble. Will it be quick, or will I endure agonies from terrible wounds while they have sport with their victim and prolong their moment of victory? I have height on all of them, but they are thickset, dark and grim-faced in their determination.

This cannot be my end. Yet, it seems my time on earth is finished – and in this small place. I should be pricked with fear, wild and alert for a means of escape. Instead, I am curiously resigned with an overwhelming sense of loss and injustice that my passing from this world will be slight and unremarked. There is no sanctuary in this quiet, wooded valley; no sign of any help. We are too remote. And what of Helen? Gone is the promise of our sweet closeness in the marriage bed and cozied comfort in our fading years.

I cup my hands and shout, ‘Edward, Henry, to me.’

They stop and the two with daggers look at the man with sword. He is their leader.

Again, but louder, ‘Edward, Henry. Murder. Thieves. Here.’

Their leader bares his teeth and replies, ‘Ha, there is no one. Those words are worthless shit - your threat holds naught.’ He is right. There is no Edward or Henry; names I plucked from the ether.

‘You will soon learn of your error. They are near.’ I must stay resolute and firm. To show fear will hasten my end.

‘Come,’ he says, ‘this need not lead to more harm. Your horse, coin and value about your person is all we seek. Throw your boots, cloak and trinkets at our feet and we will leave you to your dabbling and splashing in the water. We would keep our hose dry.’

They are no more than twenty paces from me. If I show doubt, or move in a way that accedes to his words, then I am done, and quickly. I try again, ‘Edward, to me. Now.’

He chuckles deep in his throat and takes a pace forward. The others follow. I grip the handle of my dagger. A low noise escapes my clamped mouth as I prepare for what is to come. I stamp and splash a foot to stop a trembling in my leg. Helen, I am sorry. Fear is in me now, but also indignation. Surely...

The tautness in the air is broken by a cawing of crows and clattering in the trees. Another sound follows – is it a voice, distant and high?

They have stopped.

Someone answers my call. I try to shout but can only croak. I clear my throat, fill my lungs and roar, ‘Here. Foul murder. The stream.’

They are uncertain. The man with sword is closing. He growls. The others are still. Do my senses play tricks? Again, there is a distant hailing. Unmistakeable this time, and a little closer. A man’s voice shouts, ‘Ho there,’ and other words I do not recognise. There is no alarm in his calling. He will think we are making merry at our gathering. Once more, with as much urgency as I can muster, I bellow, ‘Foul murder!’

The leader curses and swipes his sword in a wide arc. He hesitates, jerks his head at the others. They turn and make their way back up the hill towards the horses. He continues to close with me, but I sense that his resolve is weakened.

I point my dagger behind him. 'You are too late, they are here.' There is no sign, but I must convince, so take a step forward.

He raises his sword; glances over his shoulder; returns to face me. A cry from one of his men. There is movement on the hill; a flash of colour in the trees; a glint of steel. He stretches his sword to me and raises the other hand behind him; makes a half-turn. More cries from the hill. A yell. The image of a horse flickers at the edge of sight - perhaps two mounted horses. The sword man takes a step back; then another. Our eyes meet. He stares, opens his mouth, but naught comes. Turning slowly, he leaves his sword pointing at my chest. There is action up there; a blur of movement. He lurches away, lowers his sword arm and starts up the slope. I am fixed for a long moment, then follow him. I forget I am encumbered by water and too slow. On the bank, I am near him, but trip on a rock and stagger. He sees me falling and readies to strike. I make a despairing lunge. My dagger punches through flesh and strikes something hard. There is a crack. He yells. My dagger is broken. I meet the ground with a thump; taste the earth; smell foul breath as he rolls over me. I am on him, stabbing at his throat with my broken dagger. It will not do; will not cut easily. An eye. I jab the dagger as hard as I can into the eye. Four times; ten; more. I am frantic; must take his life force quickly or I am lost. Suddenly, he is still. I see the blood; hear a gurgling in his throat... and more. It is me. I am grunting, sobbing, panting... pounding my useless weapon into his head... I must... stop.

Have I done this? The head beneath me is a grotesque misshape of cut flesh, white bone and blood; my hands slick with gore. I drop the dagger and move my eyes slowly to the scene amongst the trees on the hill. Two new men stand with swords in hand gazing at me. Where are the other attackers? I push myself up on the shape under me and try to stand. My legs give

way and I am back on my knees straddling the body. One of the new men sheaths his sword and walks towards me. I watch as he approaches, but do not see clearly; my vision is fixed elsewhere.

‘William, William Constable, is it you?’

I lift my head and see a face I know, framed with flowing yellow hair.

‘Who?’

‘William, it is Charles. I bless the good fortune of this meeting.’

‘Indeed, no more than...’ I close my eyes tight and open again to make certain this is no dream. ‘Charles Wicken, is it you who has saved me?’

‘What has happened here, William?’

I allow myself a few moments to calm my breathing and gather my thoughts before replying. I rise slowly and move away from the body at my feet. ‘I... I was here with George Duckham. We stopped; Duckham to relieve himself in the trees, while I rested by the stream.’ My mind is fuddled and it takes an effort to arrange events, so recent, but which feel far-off and faint. ‘I heard naught, except a rustling in the trees. My senses were spiked and when I looked back, Duckham was fallen and four men had me ready to be killed and robbed at their leisure.’

‘Duckham is dead; his throat slit.’

‘It is as I feared. I pity the poor man. He accompanied me on the orders of Captain General Hawkins.’

‘But why – why are you here in this quiet place? I had thought you were safely lodged in Plymouth educating our ships’ masters in the use of your instrument of navigation.’

‘I was. I confess our delays have stretched my patience with confinement in that town and I sought a period of retreat from its noise and commotion. I had promised a friend, Doctor John Foxe, that I would visit the ancient church of St Loda. He holds

fond memories of the church, which was founded before the first King William.'

'It seems that your prayers were well-received. Good fortune is a meagre way to describe the happenstance of hearing your calls.'

'Forgive me, I have not thanked you properly, Charles. I owe... my life...' I embrace him strongly and he pats me on the back with reassuring 'coos' and 'tushes' as though soothing a babe. I break quickly and must hope that my face does not redden with the discomfort I feel. His age is only one year in advance of my twenty-six and we are the same height, but his bearing and manner make me feel callow and soft. My body is unsteady and I am hesitant in my next words. 'The church... had a holy air, although my prayers were for... others and not my safekeeping here.'

'Ha, put yourself at ease, William. I see that you need some time to recover from this cruel disruption to your peace. It is God you should thank for his careful watch over you.'

'Nevertheless, I am deep in your debt.' I pause to catch my breath. 'How... how are you here, Charles?'

'I am returning from Dartmouth with my man, Stack, up there. I have been to survey the state of repair of our other ships in that harbour, and to pass a message to Sir Humphrey from Captain General Hawkins.'

'This would not be your usual path back to Plymouth?'

'No, we took the Ivybridge road to Dartmouth, but I had a fancy to investigate this lower way through Loddiswell on our return, lest it offer more discretion and speed in our correspondence between the towns.'

'I am thankful that you did.'

His eyes narrow. 'Those men up there we have killed; I have seen them in the inns at Plymouth. They will have waited for an

opportunity to follow a likely prey into a quiet place such as this. Duckham was a sturdy fellow and handy with his sword, but you should have taken more men to guard your person.'

He mentions killing the attackers as though it was a small, everyday matter. I should be grateful that my rescuer is so proficient at soldiering. His fierce reputation is well-earned. Yet, he is also scholarly and I have come to welcome our discussions on politicking, mathematics of the stars and lighter diversions over the past few weeks. It is an unusual mix of attributes in a man I have come to regard as a friend.

I say, 'We must take Duckham's body back.'

'Yes, and the fuckwits who attacked you we will leave for scavengers to have their little picks. We will report this foul murder to the Justice in Plymouth and someone will recover their remains in the coming days.'

I bow my head in agreement and start to make my way back up the slope. I feel a hand on my shoulder and stop. Have I forgotten something?

'William.'

'Yes, what is it?'

'You cannot return to Plymouth in your present state. Children will take fright and hide behind their mothers' skirts. Even grown men will quail at the appearance of a devil on their streets.' He laughs and claps me on the back. 'You are covered in blood and soft, black earth, with the appearance of a monster escaped through the gates of hell. You must wash in the stream while we examine the bodies for any trifles and marks to bring us their names.'

Back at my lodgings in Plymouth town, I have had bowls of water and cloths brought to my chambers so that I can rinse away all remaining traces of the attack from my body. Mistress Gredley stared open-mouthed at my appearance at her door and I was obliged to offer a brief account of the incident. She will hear soon enough, in any event. Her concern for my person soon transformed into much ‘tutting’ and head-shaking over the trouble it will take to wash my soiled dress. She is a good woman who keeps a tidy household, and I fear I was abrupt in my ending to our conversation. I will make amends when my disposition returns to its normal state.

My head is full of thoughts of Helen. I wrote her a letter only two days past but will set myself to another. I must be circumspect and dance around the details of today’s misadventure, but the writing may help to free up a tangle of thoughts about my unexpected reprieve from a sudden and violent end to life on this earth.

Finally, it is finished. Helen may wonder at the frequency of my communications and I hope that she will take this as a mark of my devotion or a filling of idle time as we wait for the sailing of our great adventure to the New Lands.

My Dearest

I trust this latest note finds you and your household in good health.

Tomorrow will be the ninetieth day since our parting and I hold tight to the memory of our last embrace. I took heart from your most recent letter in which you fancied your father was softening his position and may, after all, allow you to accompany him to this town to mark the despatch of our fleet. My motives are selfish. I know the journey from London is long and arduous, but Sir George will ensure your party is well-

guarded and will secure whatever small comforts he can for you, if his decision falls in our favour.

There are further delays here due to ship repairs and disputes over ownership of cargoes. The patience of all our number is stretched and Captain General Hawkins has had to make examples of ship men and soldiers as drunken brawls become more frequent. I know some of the townspeople will be glad when we sail as our nuisance bears down on their profits. Yet, I am told that the town will quieten as the time for our departure draws near and thoughts of our task ahead settles a calmness on the men.

Today, I visited the church of St Loda. You will remember I promised John I would call there while I am lodged in the West Country. It is a holy place with a quiet air holding memories of older and simpler times. I confess my thoughts and prayers were coloured with images of you, rather than John and his kindly, but austere, manner.

I happened upon Charles Wicken on my return journey. He is a fine man – hard and much admired for his braveness, but with good learning and a gentler side. In these short weeks, I have come to consider him as a friend and, together with Oliver Tewkes, I find pleasure in our conversations, which help to enliven the days of inactivity.

This next day, I will meet with Captain General Hawkins and other notables when we will learn more of the readiness of our ships and expected date for sailing. I am impatient, not for the adventure itself, but for its ending, so that we may state our vows before God and begin our lives together.

Do not delay in your reply. I am eager for your written words, so that I may dream of our closeness to come.

With fondest love

William