

STATE OF TREASON
A William Constable Spy Thriller

Paul Walker

One

November 1578.

The captain stands and waits square-footed before me. He presents a formidable figure in my hallway; tall with broad shoulders and well-muscled legs. A handsome face in the half-light disappoints when the candles draw near and show the deep scarring of pox on his cheeks. I cannot refuse or delay his invitation.

‘I will be with you presently, Captain. I must attend to my mother’s needs before we depart.’ He has an air of impatience, but nods his assent.

‘Walsingham’, – a name to catch in one’s breath, rouse the senses and scratch the surface of forgotten or hidden misdeeds, even in those who praise our Queen and worship in the proscribed manner. At this late hour and with a company of armed men, a summons to his presence settles a deep unease on my spirits. What could Mister Secretary want of me; a scholar of no great reputation and only moderate wealth? My thoughts drift back some ten years to my only other visit to the Palace of Whitehall when I assisted Doctor Dee in his mathematical presentations to the Privy Council for the better navigation of our ships. For me, that was an unhappy experience. I was fired with youthful ambition and an eagerness to display my scholarship. My manner was lively, exuberant and naïve, resulting in eventual admonishment by some members of that Council for not treating their inquiries with sufficient respect. The Duke of Norfolk was particular in his damning of my supposed lack of civility and deference to my betters. I recall my guilty pleasure when he met his end with the axeman some five years past. That occasion with the Privy Council was also the

start of my disagreements with Doctor Dee and I am thankful I have been spared another call to that place – until now.

‘Mistress Hilliard.’ I beckon to the shadowy figure of my housekeeper waiting by the inner doorway. ‘Please have Gregory ready my horse. We will be away within the quarter-hour.’

Captain Askham declines my offers of refreshment and seating, reinforcing his sense of urgency. I take my leave of him, lock the library and make for my mother’s room meeting her maid, Rose, on the stairs. She’s carrying a chamber pot in both hands with great care.

‘How is she, Rose?’

‘Restful now, sir. She had some pain, but took your preparation well and managed some broth. Will you wish to examine her piss, sir?’ She offers me the pot.

‘Not now, Rose. If mother wakes and asks for me, then please counsel her that I have important business at the Palace of Whitehall, but expect to return before daybreak.’

She gapes at my news, then shakes her head, clamps her mouth tightly and continues down the stairs and along the corridor to the privy. My training is in mathematics and astrology, but I have also taken on the mantle of a physician acquiring many patients in recent years, mostly from the Mercers Guild. My first love is the subtle mathematics of the heavenly bodies, but have set this aside in favour of the clamour for healing. A reading of the stars is undoubtedly beneficial to treatments, and I possess sufficient vanity to suppose that my ministrations will be more effective than many other physicians I know.

I open the door to Mother’s chamber and see that she is sleeping. Breathing snags in her throat and her face wears a puzzled frown, which has become a fixture of this particular confinement to her bed. I am fearful that her end is near,

although she is not yet fifty and has so much to offer life and those near to her – most especially me.

I meet with Captain Askham at the front door and we step out into a clear, cold evening together. We are of similar age and height, with trim, dark beards, but his width of shoulder and soldierly bearing give me a sense of softness and vulnerability at his side. The moon is full and the next few hours would present a perfect time for an examination of the heavens. I will be denied this pleasure tonight. Askham and his four soldiers mount up and their horses clatter, stamp and snort their steam as they wait impatiently for Gregory to bring out my mount. Cassius is a bay gelding of nineteen years; I have had him since I was a youth of ten and he was a yearling. He is not an imposing horse and could be considered too small now for my length of leg, but he is sturdy and faithful. I will admit to harbouring occasional temptations to replace him with a younger, more dashing animal, but such thoughts are soon overcome by feelings of guilt at my infidelity.

The jagged outline of the Palace of Whitehall shows sharply against the moonlight as we approach our destination. Its sprawl is impressive and it is said that over five thousand souls live there in service to our Queen; a contained and functioning town. We enter by a gate into an area that Askham tells me is a new addition to the Palace. We are no more than two hours from midnight, but the courtyard is alive with soldiers, women, doxies, hawkers and cart men selling hot chestnuts, mutton pies, codlings and ale. The burning beacons placed around the courtyard throw a festive aspect on the scene and this, together with the mouth-watering odours of spiced food and drink, help to raise my spirits. Before I have time to frame a question, I am informed by one of the soldiers that this is a celebration furnished by Mister Secretary Walsingham, as

acknowledgement and thanks for their role in detaining a Jesuit priest and two accomplices last week. They were at the core of a plot of treason and bloody murder. I suppose I should rejoice at this success, but my imagining of the tortured fate of those three unfortunates has a depressing effect on my humor, which returns to its former state of dread and wonderment.

We turn a corner to be confronted by a strange and grisly sight. The bloody carcasses of three scalded and slit pigs are hanging on a scaffold. As we draw near my gut cramps and I close my mouth tight to stop bile in my throat rising. These are not pigs. They were men, with naked white flesh laid open by gaping slashes to their bellies. Black holes between their legs and patterns of dried blood on their thighs evidence more terrible cuts. The genitals are roughly stuffed in the mouth and tied with cord on one of the men. Soldiers mutter ‘wicked sodomites’, ‘windfuckers’ and ‘papist turds’ before Askham turns and quiets them with a stare. The torture and brutal ending of these men will be the cause of tonight’s celebrations.

The nearest cadaver sways on the rope and turns an accusing face as we pass. I should look away, but cannot. Do I know him? There is a familiarity in the face, but it is disfigured... It is... It cannot be, but the white streak in his hair by the left temple is unmistakable. Godfrey Baskin, what have you done to deserve such a fate? We shared lodgings in Cambridge, travelled to Geneva and shared many pleasant hours together in younger times. It is some years since we last met, but to my knowledge he is no papist. I heard that he married well and had a child. Did a wife with forceful mind change him? This surely cannot be the reason I have been brought here. But, what other reason? Was my name uttered by Godfrey in his agony? I look quickly at Askham, but his view is directly ahead and his expression tells me nothing.

We leave our horses with the soldiers and Askham leads me deeper into the precincts where activity and the senses subside. We arrive at a large arched doorway where two pikemen stand guard. One of them takes my dagger from me, we climb the stairs and I am ushered into a plain anteroom where Askham bids me farewell and departs. The room has only one small window for natural light and one candle. It is dark, quiet and I am alone. I cannot rid myself of the image of poor Godfrey, no matter how I try. There is a bench and small table along one wall and a tapestry hanging opposite, but the light is too poor to make out the scene portrayed. I wonder how long I will be kept waiting. I would make a better impression if I stood foursquare in the middle of the room to receive my call to Walsingham's presence, but my time here is unlikely to be short as my status is undeserving of such courtesy. I sit on the bench resigned to a protracted and apprehensive delay.

The echoes of the midnight bell are fading when the door opens and a small weasel-faced man in black gown and skull cap approaches me with hands clasped together as in preparation for prayer. He introduces himself as Stephen Padget, scribe to Secretary Walsingham, and bids me follow him into the adjoining room. I steel myself for an introduction to the most feared man in the land. I'm surprised and almost disappointed to find myself in yet another small anteroom, although somewhat lighter and better furnished than the one I have left. Padget opens the next door, peers inside and beckons me to follow him. Finally, I enter what is clearly Walsingham's room of business in Whitehall. It is a large room with high ceilings, brightly lit and decorated to impress. The gold leaf pressed on wall carvings catches the dancing light from a large roaring fire and the walls are covered with paintings, velvet tasselled hangings, several maps and various schematics. Walsingham, for it must be him,

is seated at an extravagantly large table which is strewn with papers and posted either side by two imposing silver candlesticks. The man himself sits and watches me carefully as I approach. He is a handsome man of more than forty years, with short dark hair and neat beard. He is dressed entirely in black, save for subtle white and silver trimmings around his shoulders. His gaze is steady and unflinching. I stop and bow before him with a respectful doffing of my hat.

‘Mister Secretary, thank you for this honour.’

‘Doctor Constable, forgive the lateness of this meeting. I regret that my affairs often spill into unsocial hours.’

I incline my head and smile to indicate that the hour is of no matter. His eyes do not leave mine and I wonder whether my expression betrays an understanding that his consultations at this hour are designed to impose a sense of fear and loosen tongues more easily. He leans back a little and says, ‘I have seen you before, William Constable, in a room no more than one hundred paces from here.’

I hesitate a moment before answering. ‘That would be for the mathematical exposition with Doctor Dee, I assume. I regret that my memory does not serve me well enough to recall a conversation with you at that time, Mister Secretary.’

‘We did not converse. I simply observed. The presentation was well-received as I recollect. Doctor Dee made several others of a similar nature to expound his theories, but you were not in attendance for those that followed.’

His observation invites a response, but I am unsure how to frame this as I don’t know whether Doctor Dee continues to enjoy the Council’s favour. ‘It... it was some ten years past and as I remember, Doctor Dee decided that he no longer required my assistance after our first exposition.’

Walsingham pushes back his chair and rises. He signals to Padget to leave the room. We are alone. He extends his arm and says, 'Come William, take a seat and let us be free in our exchanges. It will make this meeting easier and there are soft beds eager for our company.'

I wait for Walsingham to regain his chair before taking mine. I hope that he does not wish me to give evidence against the Doctor, for although he is no friend to me, I should not wish to feel responsible for his maltreatment.

'If I remember well,' he continues, 'your descriptions of the mathematics of navigation were better received than those of Doctor Dee. Yours were generally well-understood, while the promulgations of the Doctor were wrapped in terms which could have been devised to confuse. Perhaps Doctor Dee has a jealous nature and did not wish you to obtain preferment at his expense?'

'I am flattered that you thought well of my exposition. My memory of that event is somewhat different and I believe I upset some members of the Council with my forthright views and expressions.'

He smiles and replies, 'You were direct and you did make an impression. You should not concern yourself with such small offences which will have been long forgotten.' He pauses for a few seconds while he picks at a troublesome tooth with a short, pointed wooden stick. 'And the Doctor?'

'The Doctor has a scholarly learning and understanding of many matters in addition to mathematics. His library is extensive and the breadth and depth of his knowledge far outweighs mine.'

'You may be correct in your assessment, but the Doctor's interests and inclinations often touch the edge of what may be termed proper and spiritual.' He clears his throat and adds, 'Besides, Doctor Dee is currently in the Low Countries and unable to offer an opinion. Hence your presence here.'

‘You wish for my opinion, Sir Francis?’

He ignores my question. ‘You assisted Doctor Dee in the examination of an unusual gemstone once, I believe?’

‘Yes, that was at the Doctor’s house in the year of ‘sixty-six, in the company of an Italian gentleman named Gerolamo Cardano.’

‘Tell me about your examination and considerations.’

‘It was a large piece of polished quartz rock, soft burgundy in colour and about the size of a man’s hand. It was brought to London by Signor Cardano.’

‘I understand it was thought to have magical properties?’

‘It was an attractive stone, no more. Doctor Dee and Signor Cardano considered it may have some purpose as the tool of a scryer, but...’

‘But what?’

I hesitate before answering trying to weigh responses which may satisfy without being too definite one way or the other. ‘I have no belief in scrying. The idea that glimpses of the future may be seen in the reflections of a polished stone are fanciful to my mind.’

‘It had no religious or magical connection?’

‘None.’

‘It is reported that Doctor Dee was entranced by the gem, so his conclusions did not accord with yours.’

‘Doctor Dee and I disagreed. His approach was more... mystical in nature, whereas my considerations were practical. Our views diverged on this and other questions. I have not worked with him for more than nine years.’

‘I am also a practical man; in life, politics and religion. The practicalities of worship in Her Majesty’s realm requires a gentleman to be seen in church, but I am told that you attend rarely. In this aspect, you would seem to be less than practical.’

‘I am a Protestant, Mister Secretary, but see no reason to parade my belief in public. I worship at St Giles in Cripplegate, but much of my communication with Christ is in private.’

He waves his hand dismissively as though all this is known to him already. The reason for my summons is no clearer than it was when Askham came to my door. ‘I beg your indulgence, but would not our discourse have more profit if I understood the purpose behind my summons?’ I am made too bold by the absence of any mention of Godfrey. The question is out before I have chance to consider whether my tone may offend.

‘In good time. I am a careful man and this is an affair of some delicacy.’ He clasps his hands together and leans forward on the table, moving a collection of papers aside. ‘It is known that you are proficient in mathematics, astrology and physik. I understand that you also have a facility with languages?’

‘Yes, I speak and write the languages of Latin, Greek, French, Italian and I understand some of the tongues spoken in the Low Countries, but I am no expert.’

‘Do you have a familiarity with Aramaic and the Canaanite language of the Hebrews?’

‘That was only a passing fancy during my studies in Louvain. A few friends and I sought to explore the language of the original gospels. It was a very short and inexact examination.’

‘And a dangerous one.’

‘We were younger and did not fully comprehend the sensitive nature of our enquiry. We were warned and we desisted.’ I suppress my surprise at the detail of his intelligence on these small, historical matters and I am thankful to recall that Godfrey was not in my company at Louvain.

He makes a signal with his left hand and in a few short moments a man appears noiselessly with a silver tray. He pours two glasses of wine and seems to glide across the floor until he

disappears behind a curtained area. I wait for Walsingham, then follow suit and take a glass. It is good wine – very good, or am I deceived by my eagerness to slake a dry mouth?

‘William Constable...’ He pauses as if he has mislaid his next word. ‘Our acquaintance is brief and the notes from my intelligencers on you are hurried and partial... yet, I think I must trust you. I know you to be a scholar of some note and your learning appears to be complemented with balanced humors and a steady heart. For my part, I look favourably on your separation from Doctor Dee who is too fanciful in his strivings with Hermetic Philosophy and magic. Her Majesty retains a fondness for Doctor Dee and he has often been our choice to advise on certain special matters which require the utmost secrecy. As I have said, the Doctor is too distant to be of urgent service, and so I turn to you.’

My thoughts run too quickly to form any logical deductions from what is being said. What advice can I possibly offer on high affairs of state to such a man as Walsingham? I can think of no phrases to fill this heavy and confusing period of silence, so I sit and wait to hear more.

‘An object has come into my possession,’ he says finally. ‘An unusual and perplexing object, both in itself and in the nature of its presentation.’ I incline my head and he fixes me with an expression of directness before continuing. ‘Our affairs in France have reached a heightened state of activity. Recently, a courier was intercepted; a man named Brouillard who we know to have strong connections to Rome. The prosecution was bloody and Brouillard suffered a mortal wound before his intentions were uncovered. The nature of his death and our part in it were disguised by setting a fire to his lodgings and the quieting of a witness.’

He pauses to let the weight and nature of this news take its hold. The acts of murder, arson and a 'quieting' are spoken without any hint of regret, while an air of satisfaction underlies this deception as common misfortune.

'Brouillard was carrying an object,' says Walsingham. 'This was safeguarded and transported here for our appraisal.'

'May I know the nature of this article?' I enquire.

'You will know soon enough, but not tonight.' He stifles a yawn and presses his body against the back of his chair. 'I would have you accompany me to my house at Barn Elms tomorrow and there you will learn more.' He stands and I am obliged to follow his example. 'There is a truckle bed in the adjoining room which has been prepared for you with other small comforts. Rest now and we will talk again tomorrow.'

I beg his indulgence and request that he sends word to my house in West Cheap that I am detained, and that my time here is no cause for alarm. There is a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth as he readily agrees to arrange this in the morning. Encouraged, I mention that I am attending my sick mother and should not wish to be absent from her bedside for more than a day or two. His expression shows a fleeting and genuine concern before he offers a gruff assurance that he does not expect a protracted delay at Barn Elms.

As he turns, two men scurry from their hidden places and usher me towards the door from which I entered. The anteroom has been transformed. A truckle is made and ready with a spray of dried lavender on the pillow. A plate of bread and mutton and a jug of ale are placed on a small table. I have seen terrible sights and heard a strange story this night. I am intrigued that Walsingham should seek my advice, but my overwhelming sense is one of relief that my waking hours will end with no harm and an unexpected show of hospitality.