

Prologue

A large man, broad-shouldered and grim-faced beneath his cowl, leads his horse on a long rein through the streets in the northern edges of London town. His woollen cloak is heavy and sodden from rain that began as a drizzle in the village of Edgware and gathers spite with each new stride. His purpose is all-consuming, and his eyes stare ahead with a dark intensity that signal his determination. He mutters constantly and from time to time lifts his head and blares loud into the spitting grey skies as though to reinforce his resolution. Those he passes on his journey, recoil and step aside, lest the possession of this madman should infect them. He arrives at a crossing to the River Fleet and, for the first time since his departure from the county of Warwick, hesitates. Quiet and still, he looks this way and that, considering his next move with care. He is close to his objective, and the enormity of his plan wheedles its way into his thoughts, bringing a thread of uncertainty. Scattered whispers advise caution. A rough shake of the head and warning growl dispels them. He must be bold and see this through to the end. The horse steps through a dark sloop and nuzzles his back, unaware of his master's scheming. Taking this as a sign of encouragement and shared resolution, he moves forward and crosses the narrow bridge with an exclamation of, 'Onward to justice and death.' His spirits are roused once more with focus and is too constricted to see those who cringe and cling to the sides allowing him uninterrupted passage. There is another, unnoticed, who follows at a safe distance, shadowing every move of his fearsome and raving progress.

It is late in the afternoon, and the blackening skies hold no promise of relief. There is an inn on Long Lane; an inn like many

others he has passed, but this one beckons him inside to take refuge and warmth; to take stock and renew his resolve. He hands his horse to a stable lad, hefts a leather bag and enters the inn. There, he pauses for a moment to take in the flickering lights; the chatter and hum; the mingling of faces. He strides towards an open fire, drops his bag, removes his cloak and stamps his muddy boots on the straw. His clothes mark him as a man of status and wealth. A leather jerkin is trimmed with fur around the neck and his black doublet embroidered with silver thread. But it is the heavy pistol slung around his shoulder, and the long sword with dagger sheathed at his waist that catches the eye of those closest to him. Their conversation is stilled as they gape at this soldierly figure and wonder at his intentions. He turns his head quickly, senses pricked by the sudden quiet at his back.

‘What is it?’ he challenges.

There is no answer. The quiet spreads, and those further away strain to see the cause of this interruption to the commonplace babble. A serving maid swivels away from groping hands and steps forward.

‘What is your pleasure... sir?’

He looks at her, gazes around the unfamiliar faces, unhooks the pistol from his shoulder, places it on a stool and replies, ‘A pot of ale.’ Then as an afterthought adds, ‘and bring me bread and cheese to this table by the hearth.’

Conversation returns, but slowly and in subdued tones. The stranger stretches, flexes his shoulders and stands in front of the fire until he feels the chill lift from his bones. With his belt unbuckled, he rests his weapons on the table with extravagant care and takes a seat. He has the table to himself now. Others who rested there have taken up their ale and moved to more discreet corners. He adjusts his position to gain a better view of

the interior and surveys the scene before him. There are about fifty persons in the inn: tradesmen; artisans; working men; and a handful of maids or doxies. A grunt and loosening of his limbs suggest he is satisfied, there is nothing unusual or out of place in his view. He meets the eye of an old man staring at him with open mouth, gestures with both hands and says, 'Wet,' by way of explaining his presence.

The maid brings his refreshment, places it on the table, bobs her head and before she can retreat, a raised hand bids her wait. He takes the pot of ale, drains it quickly and passes it back for another. A rough tearing of the bread and hurried devouring of food tells of his hunger. The unease in the air melts by degrees, and the inn returns to its former level of activity as though watchers are satisfied he is no monster, but a man of flesh and blood with normal appetites.

Muttering returns with more ale. His head is bowed with narrow focus as he struggles to remain absorbed and single-minded. There is no room for creeping doubt. Whenever he senses the sly fingers of logic draw him back, or pauses at the prospect of danger, he utters fierce words to dispel black thoughts.

The cup is empty. He lifts his head, appearing surprised to find he is not alone and unsure how long he has rested in this place. The inn has filled, and one man has joined his table. He narrows his eyes and considers this intruder into his private space. The face before him is framed with a short, dark beard and black velvet cap. Dress and bearing indicate a man of some consequence. Does he know him? There is a familiarity in his features, but faint and too far off to grasp any form of recognition.

‘Do I know you, sir?’ His words are more forceful than he intended, so he compensates it with a tilt of the head and a forced smile.

The man he addresses is slow to react and chooses not to answer the question. ‘You appear troubled, with strong words suggesting a disturbance in your affairs.’

‘Words?’ He pauses, surprised by the directness of the response. ‘No... no, it is a simple matter of the heart I contemplate. Forgive me if my muddled discourse offended. I was not aware of your near presence.’

‘Ah yes, the affections of a lady can lead to a fevered mind.’ He moves closer, rests his elbows on the table and steeples his fingers. ‘Yet, the words, “Majesty” and “Death” were clearly spoken by you on more than one occasion.’

He recoils, offended by the manner of this accusation. His mouth is open, ready to offer denial when both his arms are grabbed from behind and his head wrenched back by a brutal tug of hair. Cold steel is at his throat. He is undone. But how? Who are they and how many? He cannot fight them; tied fast by strong hands with ropes. He twists and strains against cords that pain his arms which are pinned behind in unnatural positions.

At last, he is secured. He stares wild-eyed at his captors with breathing quick and shallow. Four men surround him - hard, pitiless men who display grim satisfaction at the ease with which they have surprised and taken their prey. The man at his table sits unmoved, gazing at his victim with an expression that mixes pleasure and disdain. He lets these moments linger, seeming to delight at the way his victim has been stunned into silence then says, ‘You are John Somerville from the county of Warwick?’

The captured man swallows and nods his head slowly with eyes fixed on his questioner. ‘Who... who are...’

‘I am Sir Peter Gibbyn with a royal warrant for your arrest and examination.’ He picks up a paper between thumb and forefinger, then lets it fall to the table. ‘You have spread evil words and spilt bile against Her Majesty throughout your journey to this place. Your boasting and swagger condemn you as a follower of Rome and conspirator to bring mortal harm to our sovereign. I rejoice in your arraignment and the prospect of the cruel and bloody death that awaits you.’

‘No... no, it is not as you say. You misunderstand my...’

‘There can be no misunderstanding, and your mouth must be stopped before it can spout more filth.’

Gibbyn delves into a bag, brings out a device and places it on the table. It is an odd contraption with a hinged iron framework and leather straps; not unlike a horse’s bridle with a severe bit, but smaller. He is bewildered for a few moments; then his body sags as he recognises an apparatus used against witches and gossips. They mean to clamp his head and prick his tongue so he cannot talk. His torture has begun.

One

November 1583

Robert twitches and shivers as I help pull his undershirt over his head. The remaining grey linen smock hangs loose, but cannot hide the bony steeples of his upper spine. I suggest we move closer to the fire for his comfort. He edges to the side, keeping his face to the frosted window and his back to my view. I recall my first visit here in the summer of 'eighty-two when he would not remove this covering. I was obliged to rely on close questioning and tentative pokes at the lumpy contours beneath the smock. He is more at ease now, but still he hesitates before shuffling off this final cover to lay bare his disfigurement. His weakness is exposed, and his body stiffens as he waits for me to apply a soothing salve of comfrey and elder. This routine is well-practised: a small shudder at first touch will settle to a gradual relaxation, and our initial attempts at stilted conversation will take an easier turn in due course. His naked back is an ugly thing. The spine has an unnatural curve from the middle, giving a lumpen, raised left shoulder and a drooping right. He is a man of twenty years, yet he is a head and a half shorter than my six-foot, and his thin, spindly arms could belong to a street urchin. I dip my fingers into the salve and apply gently to the shoulders, before moving to the raw areas under his armpits.

‘I have added extra soft padding to your brace, Robert. I trust that this will relieve the rubbing and chafing.’

‘I am grateful, William. My breathing is improved, but will admit to periods of discomfort late in the day.’

I have modified the design of this device of leather, metal and cloth. It cannot hide the hunchback altogether but straightens his

posture a little and assists with the passage of air to his lungs. We refer to the device as his 'correcting brace', although I fear it is too late in his development to offer much in the way of correction. Away from his company, I have been known to lapse into naming it as a harness. It is, after all, manufactured by a saddler. He must bear considerable expenses as the brace is renewed each month due to wear and stretching in the leather. But expense matters little to Robert Cecil, son of the Lord High Treasurer. We have formed a sort of friendship, Robert and I. Once defensiveness about his stature was overcome, we settled into an easy familiarity. He is conscious of his position as the son of a great man, and his manner can be self-important from time to time, but he has a good mind. I have found him to be a sympathetic and engaging companion.

I am done with the ointment and take hold of the brace. I am pleased with this new model. I was fortunate to find a craftsman who was intrigued by my unusual request and showed patience with my frequent fussing and alterations. The leather is supple, edged with fine linen and padded with duck down in sensitive areas. I present it for his inspection before the lengthy process of hoisting, strapping and fastening begins. He bows his head in approval, and I slip his arms into the contraption and let it rest on his shoulders.

'Do not stint on the tightening, William. I can bear it.'

I murmur an agreement but dare not accede too readily. I know he despises his frailty and craves a more erect bearing, but an extreme and hasty adjustment may cause further damage.

I say, 'I trust work progresses well on your house at Theobalds.'

'The house is near done. My lord father is much occupied with attention to the gardens now. He has employed a man named Gerard as superintendent of the landscape.'

‘I have heard the house is much admired.’

‘It is a fine house.’ He winces as I adjust the first vertical strap. ‘Though I am not a countryman. I prefer to pass my time in London with all its imperfections.’

‘I am with you on that, Robert. I am a town-dweller by nature. Yet, there is advantage in a retreat to clean country air from time-to-time.’

He grunts in a manner that could be construed as a reluctant agreement. I have learned that an exchange of pleasantries during the fitting makes the process more bearable for both of us. There are a dozen straps; each must be fastened in turn, then tightened little by little and in the correct sequence three more times before it is finished.

The last strap is tied. I lift his arms and inspect the brace to ensure there is no uneven tension or pinching of the skin.

‘How is it, Robert?’

He rolls his shoulders and flexes his arms. ‘Yes... yes, it is snug and secure. There is no discomfort for the present, and I have a renewed sense of strength. I think it is an improvement.’

‘Good, I will commend Master Vernay for his fine manufacture.’

‘And you, William. I am thankful to have found a physician with the attributes of diligence and invention.’ I hold his doublet ready while he adjusts his shirt and ruff. ‘Let us take a cup of Brandywine in my work chamber when we are done here?’

A servant waits outside the door and is sent to arrange our refreshment. This is a large, rambling house on The Strand and, although I have been in various rooms, I have not been invited to his private chamber before. He opens the door on to a well-lit space with a welcoming fire and rich decoration. A large carpeted table in the middle is set with neat piles of books and papers. Two wall hangings feature a plan of English counties

and a scene at the court of the last King Henry. I am invited to take a chair by the table while Robert takes his place in a high-backed seat opposite. This large chair has the unfortunate effect of making him appear even smaller. He sighs, then closes his eyes and bows his head as though giving thanks in silent prayer for a happy conclusion to his ordeal with the new brace. We inhabit a relaxed, quiet place for a few moments, interrupted only by warming crackles from the fire. My gaze is drawn to a small, coloured schematic pinned to a board near to his chair. I wait for his eyes to open before making my enquiry.

‘I see you have a fine drawing of the stars following the design prescribed by Copernicus. I was not aware that you had an interest in astronomy.’

‘Ah yes, it was a gift to my lord father from the state of Denmark. I forget that you are a mathematical astronomer as well as a physician, William. I confess that my interests lie firmly in the mundane actions of men on this earth rather than the mysteries of the skies. It serves this chamber as mere decoration and is not for my instruction.’

‘My days are filled with healing these last two years. Nevertheless, I maintain a fascination with motion in the stars and will turn my mind to those matters when I can free some space in my affairs.’ The image has served as a reminder of how much I miss my study of the stars and their complex mathematics.

A servant enters with a jug and two glasses on a silver platter. Robert gestures with his hand, and the man pours two precise measures into our glasses, bows stiffly and departs. Robert takes a careful sip, while I let a more generous measure linger on my palate before swallowing. It is a good Brandywine, with strength, flavour and a smoother edge than cheaper distillations.

He twirls his glass and says, ‘Perhaps you will have followed the progress of Doctor Bruno since his arrival here from Paris? He is said to hold provocative opinions on natural philosophy and astronomy.’

‘I know the man by reputation only.’

‘The somewhat dubious reputation of a defrocked Dominican Friar who finds refuge in France and here amongst those who find entertainment in his company.’

‘I hear he is thought to have formidable intellect and has made pronouncements on the nature of man’s place in the universe that offends followers of Rome. You would not hold his flight from Italy and excommunication against him?’

‘Indeed no, that much I would hold in his favour. I have not met Signor Bruno and rely on reports from my lord father and Sir Francis Walsingham.’

‘He moves in exalted company for a poor friar seeking refuge from his pursuers.’

‘He has been introduced to Her Majesty and accompanied Sir Philip Sidney to Oxford, where he held disputations with the senior scholars at the university. I hear there were diverse opinions on his orations. There were those who condemned him for heresy and others, including Sidney, who delighted in his controversial views.’

‘You follow Doctor Bruno’s movements with a keen eye, but surely he is not someone your father or Sir Francis would consider as a threat to our state’s security?’

‘Bruno himself, no - it is more the company he keeps that stirs Walsingham’s attention. He lodges at the French embassy in Salisbury Court.’

‘From your reports, he would make a stimulating companion, but I doubt if our paths will converge.’

I take the last mouthful of Brandywine from my glass, Robert reaches for the jug and then stops as raised voices are heard outside his door. He has already risen from his chair when the door opens and his father, Lord Burghley, enters shrugging off the train of his cloak and stamping his boots. A middle-sized man clothed almost entirely in black; his shoulders are bent, appearing to struggle under the heavy gold chain of his office. He stops, looks at Robert, then fixes his stare on me. I rise from my chair in a haste and bow deeply. He does not acknowledge either of us, moves to the hearth, throws his cloak and cap on the floor and sits heavily on a stool. His breathing is quick and rasping as though his journey here has been hurried and taxed his ageing body. Robert is stood still by his chair, seeming to wonder at this entrance and, like me, waiting for a cue on how to react. After a few more moments of indecision, Burghley lifts his head, turns his face to me and raises a leg. What? What does he... I go to him grasp his boot and lever it off with some difficulty. The process is repeated with his other boot. He sighs with contentment and says, 'Doctor Constable, it is a pleasure to meet with you again. You will excuse my interruption and poor humor; my feet and bones complain loud in this cold and wet weather. Thank you for your assistance, and please instruct the man at the door to bring my soft slippers.'

I do as requested and return to find he has settled in my chair and Robert has moved the stool for him to rest his legs. We stand either side of him waiting for what is to come from Her Majesty's chief adviser. He takes a cloth from inside his doublet and wipes his long, grey beard until satisfied he has removed most of the damp. He hands it to Robert, who throws it on the fire. I pour Brandywine into my glass and hand it to him. He takes a sip, sits back in his seat and clears his throat.

‘Doctor, we are grateful for your care of my son. It is a relief to find a physician that he trusts to tend to his needs.’ A man enters and kneels to place slippers on his feet. Burghley mutters thanks and waves a hand in dismissal. ‘I trust your mother Amy is well and your fair wife...’

‘Helen. Yes, they are both in good health, my lord.’

‘Good, your service to Sir Francis a few years past is well-remembered, so I do not doubt your discretion in the matter I will now relate to my son.’ He shifts in his seat to address Robert. ‘I have received news of another threat against Her Majesty. Leicester’s men have arrested a man at an inn in Long Lane. It is said he was in his cups and boasting of the extreme harm he planned for our queen. He has been taken to the Tower for strong questioning with Leicester and Gibbyn in attendance. You will accompany me there, Robert. We must ensure that Leicester is not reckless in his probing and stretching to the point of death, leaving a deeper conspiracy uncovered.’

‘Very well, father. Do we go now?’

‘I am tired and will take a short nap here after supping this wine. Make ready the wherry for our departure in one hour.’

I understand the signal for my withdrawal and take my leave, grateful to be well away from any further talk of conspiracy. But even with Cecil House behind me, the mention of ‘strong questioning’ scratches at my thoughts. Images of the dreadful tortures to be endured by the suspect in the Tower fill my head on the journey home.