

ACE OF SPIES

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For Me

Fie!

*I HERE DO swear to ruinate
That Church of Rome
That hatcheth up such bloody practices;
And here protest eternal love to thee,
And to the Queen of England specially,
Whom God hath bless'd for hating papistry.*

- CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE, MASSACRE AT PARIS

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JULY 1588 - AMSTERDAM CORN PORT

If at first thou hast not overcome, persevere thrice and thrice again. For then the world will lay at thy mercy, thy will stand on the shoulders of giants and The Lord will smile down upon thou and cast thou in His celestial glow.

Or something like that.

I think an Englishman wrote it. The English write just about everything of note in these heady days. But I care not a damn thrice and thrice again, because it is due to that insipid race that I am in my present predicament.

Yes, the *English*. Who were, but two score years past, a nation of little repute but for being a sickly and asinine bunch. A nation whose King defied The Pope so he could dip his scabby royal wick in a bit of strange (he went through six wives before it dropped off, I hear). A nation of bog-trotting, sheep-bumping, foul-mouthed criminals who decried their role as inhabitants of the squirt hole of all civilisation by claiming that they were the cultural centre of the earth. That they, the in-bred mongrel descendants of those few Saxon and Norman simpletons mad enough to invade their piss-soaked island, could lead all of Europe into a new age, a renaissance.

Worse still, they are now trying to achieve just that.

Worse for me because they decided to pick a fight with the Spanish, bringing the whole of Northern Europe into a vicious, unsightly squabble lurching towards war. Worse for me because the beautiful and peaceful land I call home, The Kingdom of The Netherlands, is now overrun with every type of reject, vicemonger, religious maniac, whoremaster and depraved felon from the four corners of the old world. Jews, Portuguese, Tartars, Russians, Germans, Turks, Italians, Moors, Quakers, Puritans, Jesuits. Fanatics and degenerates cast out from every godfearing nation to our pleasant land, all because THE ENGLISH could not keep their greedy snouts out of Europe.

Alas, the worst of all for me is that I owe THE ENGLISH a hundred and twenty sovereigns in unpaid levies, accrued during their protectorship of the new city of Amsterdam - and now they want payment or punishment.

You see, I was going about my common business but a few hours past, a difficult task given all the foreign rabble littering the streets these days. My business, amongst a variety of employs, consists of arranging elegant courtesans to accompany and entertain visiting gentry. A worthy, honest trade. The base of this enterprise is the Bartolotti Huis, the quayside taverna and seraglio on the Damrak purchased from monies donated by the estate of my late, lamented sire Count Bogaade Van Caveat of Antwerp (to assuage the terrible infamy to his dear family of a ne'er do well bastard offspring (I, forsooth) by gifting me a large cash payment for my silence five years past). Yes.

Well since my inheritance, I have invested shrewdly in the pleasure business, and have built a considerable reputation. Hence, I regularly consort with members of every royal court and aristocratic retinue passing through this realm - and as we are presently the hub of the New World corn trade and the fastest growing, most enlightened realm in all of Europe,

that constitutes a worthy list. I cater for all tastes, I provide clean wenches, fresh boys, entertainment and gaming of all variety. I have been feted at the court of Henry III at Versailles, Tsar Ivan in St Petersburg (terrible by reputation, but actually a rather pleasant fellow at leisure) and King Phillip of Spain, and I was on personal terms with our own redeemer and advocate in this kingdom, William of the House of Orange, until some deranged scoundrel murdered him.

Now, mine is a hard-earned status of mercantile repute, civic rank and notoriety to which, through a tough life of a score and ten worth threefold, I assert as a man of prudence and good breeding. What right do these Saxon harnies have to make claims of taxation against me? What makes them think I will give them a copper bit of their ridiculous levy?

Because right now they have me in thick, rusty irons, below decks in the festering bowels of one of their schooners moored a short distance off-shore. This bugging, burly, wart hog of a boatswain stands over me, brandishing a rapier that could slice the hide off a raging bull in one flash. He unnerves me with his menacing glances, I fair think he would like to rape me. The foul odour of rotting fish and old piss cloyes my airways and cajoles me to wretch, but then the filthy English aren't noted for their ablutions. I will just have to tolerate it.

'My man, kindly point that thing away from me, would you?' I tell the brute boatswain, as soberly as possible.

'You want me to slit that pretty gizzard, Dandy boy?' he grunts.

'Hand me a sword and I'll give you the opportunity. This is an illegal arrest!'

'Tell that to the commander. Don't hold much for your chances, sonny.'

'Don't you sonny me! I am the rightful heir to the Duchy of Antwerp!'

He coughs up a mighty lump of gristle and spits at me.

'Oh *begging* your pardon your Lordship!' he says.

The foul, yellow bolus dribbles down my fine, Neapolitan tunic, a garment worth a small fortune that I collected from my Italian tailor this very morning.

'You oaf! I'll see you run through!'

He draws his sword, waving it beneath my neck.

'Want me to cut out your tongue, maggot?'

What a charming fellow he is.

'Listen, peasant, I will speak to your captain NOW!'

'Put a stopper in that mouth of yours, Dutchman. You darenst make me tell you again.'

He waves his sabre around my throat. Perhaps one should keep one's counsel until some authority arrives. Laws, I can only ponder how I came to be in this terrible mess...

~

Well, earlier at the Bartolotti, I was indulging in an hour of merriment with my fine friend Duke Lionel De Courcey Beauchamp, a portly merchant from Versailles with the face of a spoilt child. Beauchamp had bought his title and had not long taken up with that strange lot in Paris, the Huguenots. One could scarcely imagine this fellow as anything less than a pure seeker of earthly pleasures as opposed to the typical Huguenot. Yes, debating the verisimilitude of transubstantiation between bouts of self-flagellation and gospel reading was ne'er the stout fellow's oyster. More that the Protestants typically would advocate less taxes to overlords from merchants in this new, vast world of trade and barter, and a move away from the *ancien regime* of Papism would rather benefit the likes of Beauchamp. Hence, like many other merchants he took up the Huguenot standard out of simple greed rather than any call of piety, despite his proclamations. Whilst travelling the continent in conduct of his shipping business, Beauchamp would always prefer to

spread his doctrine in whorehouses and tavernas than in public squares and churches, and no place more so than during his frequent visits to the famous Bartolotti on the Damrak. Stout man, in girth and spirit.

Trade was slack at the time of evening, given that several boats were not due in port until later in the week. Sensibly, I had opted to close the establishment and give most of the trollops a well-earned break from their duties, being the kindly taskmaster that I am. Behind closed doors, Beauchamp and I cracked open a bottle of port and toasted the days when not a soul cared about religion enough to fight over it, days that have never existed, of course, but in the imagination of fools.

Beauchamp, as is his wont, was typically outspoken on the subject.

'Damned Catholics!' he spat, glugging down thick wine in the same breath, 'Think they can go round burning women and children at the stake, inflicting terror and penury on simple folk in the name of their holy holy Pope Innocent the Fifth, innocent like black death stinks more like...'

'You truly have a grasp of the issues, Beauchamp...' said I, belching like a toad.

'I say, fill that cup, Gus! Don't scrimp, sir!'

'Certainly... pray continue...'

'WELL, let me remind you of the massacre of St Bartholomew's Eve...'

And we drank and we talked. He talked.

'...and the same ones, the Inquisitors and Jesuits, are seen loading themselves from the tits to the eyeballs with tinctures of mandrake from the apothecaries. Committing grievous acts of sodomy on each other with sacred impunity behind the walls of their monasteries while the real Godfearing people suffer and suffer, their hard earned coin filched by the Roman Catholic church... My, mad this makes me, sir, I say sir...'

Beauchamp was easily moved to tears and anger after a sup. As a sometime agent for hire and natural bon-viveur I have learned to hold my drink in any manner of company - one discovers *all* kinds that way.

'Indeed, an awful crime...' I admit.

Beneath Beauchamp's rotund, powder-spattered face, a quixotic crimson glows.

'A crime! A crime sir! Theft is a crime, for which the removal of a hand and several years' hard labour might suffice. But this, sir, is more than a crime, it is a sin against the word of God! We must spread the word of the Protestant faith. We must prevail over Papist dogs before we all suffer the eternal black! Their taxation is *evil*, Caveat! Evil! We must...'

Beauchamp does go on somewhat, but I like the chap, I do. For all his sermons, his proclamations, he verily enjoys a quaff. One can never trust a man who permanently refrains from drinking. I am in that singular bracket of being both a devout servant of the Holy Roman Empire and a vociferous advocate of the Protestant church, whichever the occasion favours. At heart, I believe and know that neither faith is right. Perchance the Jews are, perchance the Musselman Moors, but these days the only causes Christians are ever united in are vitriol and dogma. All that matters to me is how it might profit my house, and since I have lost money to every denomination on the gaming tables, I was presently a fiery Huguenot whose closest confidant and ally was none-other than the fellow Beauchamp, a chap possessed of far more filthy lucre than simple reason.

'Worthy Beauchamp... You inspire hope in me, sir! I will drink to your health and your progress!'

Beauchamp released a throaty belch.

'I have friends, sir... friends in great places. There are plans being hatched to rid this land and every other land where

man stands of the Papist evil once and forever, sir...'

I have heard of these plans time and time again from Beauchamp, and whenever he came to town on one of his little jaunts I would listen intently - the intent being to support his rant with my own indignant platitudes, curry his approval and bonhomie, then tap him for a bit of gold. Unchristian perhaps, immoral perchance, but in my present woeful predicament of hardship, very necessary.

'Tell me, Beauchamp... Does this faith of yours preclude a slight indulgence in the pleasures of the female form?'

Beauchamp's bloodshot, carp eyes gleamed.

'Laws no! Think me a Jesuit?'

'Good good, sir.'

'Why sir, what might you have in mind?'

'Alessandra. A Sicilian lady. New in my employ. Skin like a Mediterranean pearl, rear quarters like a ripe, golden pumpkin...'

'Oooh...' he grunted.

'And hot like a burning Jesuit!'

Beauchamp coughed and spluttered, I daresay ready to keel, howling with laughter.

'You are a fine man, Gus! No-one is so good to me as when I visit you...'

'Very kind sir... very kind...'

He examined me with his neck craned.

'Shall I give her a spoonful of oats, then? I say shall I? Where's the wench?'

Hooked like a pike on a sprat. I hung my head.

'Pray tell, sir! What is the matter?' he said.

'Tis nothing. She waits upstairs.'

At this juncture, the Frenchman had a sackful of lusty energy, he couldn't wait to get up there for a dollop of sauce. I had him just where I wanted.

'Do tell me, kind friend, come now...' said he.

I shuffled in my seat, fidgeting, staring at my lap, choking back tears.

'All is lost with this place, I fear...' said I.

'What? Nay!'

'Aye sir, aye. Taxation owed to governors...'

'Oh tish! I have numerous connexions with revenue collectors, Gus. I can help...'

'Tis no good, alas. The Spanish have foreclosed on these premises. They say it is a den of iniquity, a house of heresy, a...'

'The SPANISH!! Those filthy Papist harnies! How dare they! Foul, moneygrabbing swines!'

'Aye. It is but no use, sir...' I said, in the meekest of tones by the frailest of widows.

'NAY! It shall not be done, sir! This is the finest establishment in the old world and better than anything in the new, sir! I cannot see my good friend and noble Duke Van Caveat a pauper...'

'Worse still, should I not pay forsooth...'

I ran a finger across my neck, a glib tear in my eye. Dear Lord, I should have joined one of those thespian troops.

'YOU...' exclaimed Beauchamp, ready to burst with indignation.

'Aye sir... unless I pay by the end of the week.'

'NAY! Zounds!'

I got to my feet warily and pointed the way to the courtesan chambers.

'Aye, but fie, mention it not, sir. Alessandra is in number six, Beauchamp. You know the way.'

Beauchamp slammed his fist on the table.

'This shall NOT happen I say! Not to a good man like Caveat!'

'Please sir, enough. 'Tis my issue and mine alone...'

'Nay, Caveat! 'Tis MY issue now! I can assure you of that!'

Beauchamp reached in the pocket of his satin tunic, a larger sized version of mine and purchased at thrice the list price from my faithful Italian tailor, for which I received my garment gratis. He pulled out a fist-sized clump of papers sporting his family crest.

'Silver or gold, good sir?'

'Beauchamp, I cannot accept your kindness yet again. It is a common trait to live off charity like some pauper..'

'Do me the favour of plugging that Dutch hole of yours, Gus...'

He stared at me with hard eyes. Perhaps not to overdo the sentiment then.

'Gold?' I croaked.

'Naturally. Gold it is, sir.'

He pumped a quill and scratched out his signature, handing the paper over.

'One shalt not see one's bestest friend in debt to some rotten quinny of a Spaniard, eh? Take this to my treasurer in the morning. And I'll hear no more of it.'

'Oh thank you, sir! Thank you...'

Beauchamp clapped me on the shoulder, nearly knocking me asunder. It felt good to be his bestest friend.

'Right Caveat, where did you say that strumpet was?'

~

Beauchamp grabbed another bottle of port and was up those narrow stairs like a rat up a shitpipe. I'd never seen the chubby fellow move so fast. The likelihood was that he'd be gone for hours, and with Alessandra attending to him, I'd never have begrudged him.

Head spinning a little from my efforts, I pocketed Lionel's note, grabbed a pale ale and settled on a divan, fully intent on nodding away for forty winks before Beauchamp returned from his stresses and bid me adieu for another year.

All in all, it had been a profitable day. Beauchamp was

hard work I grant, but the goose was fattened and contented suffice to lay a golden egg in my palm. I quaffed the remainder of my coup, settled into a doze and vowed to myself once again that I should remain away from the gaming tables at all costs, lest I should desire to pleasure visiting Turks in dark alleys for the remainder of my natural born ruin.

Blessed sleep enshrouded me, welcomed to my bosom by thoughts of a new life... a farm in the lowlands, a manor house and a pretty young maiden wife nursing an angelic babe. Alas, a dream, sweet as it seemed.

The heavy oak door to the Bartolotti crashed open, hinges buckling. A harsh, briny breeze wafted in my face, the sea-storm ushering the protagonist of this heinous intrusion into my taverna.

I pulled out a heavy cudgel.

‘What swine dares enter my premises... oh...’

Three Spaniards and a Neapolitan; two soldiers clutching a battering ram, a goatish, sallow monk in the sackcloth of a Jesuit Inquisitor and a face I know only too well...

His Grace, Alexander Farnese, Duke of Palma and Supreme Governor of The Spanish Netherlands.

‘Why... Buenas noches, sir.’

~

‘History,’ said Farnese, goblet in hand, feet up on a table like he owned the place, ‘tells us how one’s country was once foreign itself to ones own ancestors, for we all are wanderers. Spain, mighty Spain, surely the greatest Empire since the Visigoths sacked Rome, was once a land of heathens, idiots and peasants. Was it not so, Quadra?’

Quadra nodded, the wrinkly old monk, piss yellow skin, dark circles beneath his eyes, a feisty reek of tabernacle wine and old cheese about him.

Farnese’s swagger had returned since I took him for a

sumptuous ransom at cards the other week. Then he was alone, astray from his retinue and cruising the tavernas for some boy sport and gaming. I reckoned not on him being so bold as to turn up at the Bartolotti again since his thrashing but then, he is King Phillip of Spain's favourite nephew, so perchance he thought he could do anything he wanted. Perchance he was right.

'... 'tis a wonder then, how such an uncivilised, godless land could rise to discover a New World, to be the protector and enforcer of his Holyness in Rome. Do you not think so, Caveat?'

Laws, the world is ever ran by pompous idiots! Like his Uncle Phillip, Farnese speaks with a snivelling, camp, squeaky lisp, no doubt put on as a sacrifice to the fashions of his preening courtier contemporaries. One wonders how such limp maggots could ever rise to such power.

'Well, Caveat?'

'Yes,' said I, 'it is a wonder I would suppose.'

The Duke pulled out a dagger and two sets of burly arms jammed my head down on the table. The tip of his blade must have been but a flea away from my eyeball.

'No Caveat, 'tis NOT! We are a superior race to you Northern mongrels. Our ancestors came from the south and sought out the most pleasant lands in Europe to settle, Holy Roman blood, the purest of breeds...'

'When the vikings were conquering the Northern seas, your ancestors were mincing about in the Moroccan desert on camels, Farnese. Now what do you want?'

Farnese broke into a laugh, Quadra staring down at me with those bulging, baggy, bloodshot eyes. The Duke jammed his dagger into the table and the grip on me eased.

'I thought you were a sportsman, Duke?' said I.

'I am a fine enough sportsman,' said he.

'Then why do you raid and plunder a honourable

establishment so? Alas, 'twas a fair game when I took your money, a truly sporting man would have no argument.'

Farnese attempted to stop himself from sneering, then smiled, espying the rustic interior of the Bartolotti.

'Those fittings, they are new. English oak are they not?'

Ah, now he was getting to it.

'English oak is a fine wood. This is a fine establishment,' said I, 'What of it?'

'How did you come to acquire English oak, Caveat? Through one of your ah, *Puritan* connexions?' said Farnese. From the corner of my eye Quadra was poking the embers of my fire with an iron.

'What do you want?' I said.

'I am a sportsman, Caveat. Swords, racquets, joust, and I am fair at gaming, certainly. You were lucky that night you fleeced me. Never again.'

Farnese could not be less than a hand shorter than me. I would have loved to have had a moment alone with him right then, how *that* would have been sport. My blood boiled black.

'You have no business here...,' said I. Quadra held the iron near my face, dripping white hot brimstone. Farnese smiled, his eyes darkened to a heavier shade of black.

'Bishop Fernando Alvarez Quadra De Avila... late of the Inquisition. I hear you have met?'

The Bishop Quadra held his deathly cool, twisting the glowing iron.

'Why do you Spaniards all have such long names?' I said, directly to Quadra.

Quadra scorched my cheekbone with a thrust. I rushed at the impish fiend, but a blow in the guts from one of the guards brought me to my knees. Sharp agony, sizzling flesh.

'I do not come on account of mine own business,' said Farnese, 'but on the business of His Majesty King Phillip. On

account of the lewd and vile house you keep here...'

'Tish Farnese! You have partaken of the boys here yourself!' I protested.

Another shot in the guts, retching agony.

'AND on account of payment of levies to His Majesty due forthwith...'

Both English and Spaniards claiming taxes from me! Fie bastards, the lot of 'em!

'But sir, I have not the means to pay you right now. Perchance in a week after we get some Portuguese ships in again...'

Farnese leant over me, his breath laden with wine and boy sauce.

'We are at a most needy time, Caveat. A week is a life, more than that.'

And that was *just* what I wanted Farnese to say. Damn him, I held up my trump card.

'Oh yes! Of course. For your invasion of England? An attack from Calais was it not?'

The smile slipped off Farnese's face like piss down a sewer.

'Who told you that?' he snapped.

'Just let us say, dear fellow, that your secret will be safe,' I said, 'provided you leave this house be and no more offence is given to my person by the insipid padre here...'

A pause, the contents of that thin, bearded skull working away. He got to his feet and approached Quadra. The two yabbered in each other's ears like young girls, looking over at me. I felt sure my audacity would be rewarded.

Farnese nodded to the guards, who seized me with punches and kicks, dragging me to the floor.

'Who,' he said, his voice dry and grave, lisp gone, 'told YOU that?'

The guards flipped me over and yanked down my breeches.

'You're making a hellish mistake, Farnese!'

Quadra stroked the iron across my buttocks, the agony was quite terrible but rather exquisite at the same time.

'Speak, heretic!' rasped Farnese.

The stakes were too high for this game, my gambit was broken, it seemed I was lost to a cruel death, whether I told or not...

'JESUITS!!'

A voice, scalding hot with anger and blessedly familiar...
Beauchamp!

'Who's this maggot?' grunted Farnese, 'cut off his balls!'

A guard raced up the stairs to confront Beauchamp, who already had his sword drawn.

Alessandra, the hussy I'd given Beauchamp for the night, pulled a dagger out on him. Lousy wench, her loyalty was as diseased as her quinny.

'Lionel! Your back!' I yelled.

Lionel span round just as she was swinging at him and as luck would have it, the oafish Spanish guard missed his target and ran her through instead. She squealed like a fucked pig and dropped. Beauchamp kicked the guard in the guts and he plunged down the stairs, his neck snapping against my English oak banister.

'Foul papists! I'll smite yer all!' Beauchamp yelled, his generous girth stomping down the stairs towards the meatier second guard.

Farnese had disappeared behind the bar, no stomach for it, the weasel. Quadra looked down at me and I shrugged. He dropped his iron and leapt behind the bar with his Duke.

Now at this juncture I could have picked up the iron and ran to my friend's assistance as he engaged the guard with clumsy power, though as the guard was no slouch with a sabre himself I thought better of it. In such a situation, 'tis far better for one's long term health if one runs before one thinks.

Yes.

~

And run I did, straight out into the cool night as Beauchamp set about his sworn enemies, those damned Papists, but then old Lionel always did enjoy a good brawl, bless him.

Away into the night, I could seek haven in a nearby alehouse and return in the morning before some lawless scallywag tried to muscle my prized courtesans into his employ. At least I'd gotten away with life and limb. Perchance I should have taken prudence when mentioning the invasion in front of Farnese, though it is actually common knowledge about the backstreets of the Dam, talk is rife in every drinking hole. Checking that no one was following me, I rounded a dark corner away from the quayside, thinking about making a dash for The Golden Tulip where I could rest without fear of being accosted by any creditor or blaggard. Alas, this night nothing would bode in my favour.

There must have been ten of them, it was difficult to tell in the dark. How long they'd been watching the Bartolotti was anyone's guess, but they'd hunted their man with stealth and discretion. Several blades stuck at my neck and chest, I was reduced by a gang of silhouettes into a cul-de-sac with no hope of flight. Shadows and English whispers...

'Gentlemen, I have no money!'

'Your name Caveat?' said the chief bruiser, my surly boatswain.

'No! Who is he? I say unhand me now or I'll have yer arrested, yer dirty jackdaw!'

The moon shone over his shoulders as his men grabbed me from behind.

'Whatever payment you are getting on this bounty I shall double, my man...' said I.

His shank of a fist piled into my guts and I collapsed,

breath destroyed, my poor innards bleeding from another punch in the windbag.

'Get him to the boat, before any spics show up,' he ordered.

His retinue hauled me off my feet as I vomited, bile, port and pale ale spurting from my nose and gullet. My senses dulled and I passed out only with the knowledge that I had landed in as much trouble as I was with Farnese and probably even more, alas.

~

And here I sit, needing to piss and that leering mongrel boatswain but feet away.

'Stop staring at me!' I grunt as he reaches in his breeches and rubs his harnies, sniffing his fingers. Animal. What kind of sport he desires I know not, but I'll die fighting him.

He approaches, hovering over me as I lie in chains. His clothes are black, probably as he never changes them, his face pock-marked by some ancient lurgy and he has but one front tooth remaining. He grabs my fine mane and pulls me towards him.

'Who's a pretty boy, then?'

The door swings open, a fellow in Naval colours enters, the stature of a boy of no older than thirteen though possessed of an ugly pug that would befit a knurled and seasoned seaman thrice that age. The bruiser boatswain, about twice the officer's height, leaps to attention.

'Dismissed, Butler,' says the freakish wee fellow, in the tone of an admiral.

'Aye sir!'

Butler, that foul-mannered great mound of dung, leaves us. Perchance this lad at least speaks the same tongue as me.

'Mr Caveat,' he says, 'You seem to be in quite some demand.'

'I *demand* to know why I have been kidnapped,' says I. The

fellow chuckles.

'From where I stand, I think you are not in a position to demand a broken biscuit. What a curious article you are, Mr Caveat.'

~

I had tried to explain to that freakish imp, Commander Humphrey, that I am the rightful heir to the Duchy of Antwerp and as such I am a noble. Therefore the most punitive of consequences would await this snit should he not divulge the identity of the author of this outrage. Humphrey merely espied me as one would espy a curious tropical beast one had never seen before.

Pah, the English fleet are no better than pirates, raiding the treasure laden Spanish galleons for loot in the Atlantic. 'Tis one reason amongst legion why King Phillip wants to invade them, though his conquistadors themselves loot and massacre the natives of the New World with impunity I hear, so neither bunch is nobler. Another reason for old *Rey Phillippe's* ire is that, but two years past, Elizabeth had her half-sister and his pet Catholic Mary Queen of Scots chopped after a papist agent named Babington tried to get rid of Regina and install Mary upon the throne. I would suppose though that, for all the ado, the Spanish do simply not find the English to their taste. They are boisterous, ambitious and they have designs on not just Spanish loot, but perchance seizing wholesale dominance of New World trade. *Far* too ambitious.

At the mercy of the dwarf Humphrey, I cited my relationship with the lamented sea beggar William of Orange, a famous ally of the English who attempted to put the Spanish out of Holland forever. Humphrey quipped that since William was long dead, how could he confirm my reference? Quite sure that I still faced prison or death aboard this stinking hulk, Humphrey left me in my chains and in the creaking, wet dark, a smug grin etched on his face. What was

he privy to?

Mercifully, a few hours past, I was led up to the deck and permitted to perform my ablutions in Plymouth sound as we waited for a berth. 'Tis a warm, sunny day and the water was sheer manna from heaven, great on the balls. Rinsed and refreshed, the vessel proceeded into dock as another ship embarked yonder to the high seas, probably to knock-off more Spanish gold.

Plymouth has indeed grown since my last visit here, when on rumour of some heavy celebrations by the crew and benefactors of The Golden Hind returned from its trip around the globe, I'd brought my famous travelling retinue of courtesans to entertain and delight them. Drake had made me most welcome, paying a handsome share of my purse and then taking it back twice at games. Any sailor plays a good hand of cards, beware them.

Alas, this time I have more than gaming on my mind. A boy approaches us as we step off the boat, Humphrey whispering into his ear. I am forced to bid for his attention.

'I say! What is to become of me? I have no money on my person! I cannot afford your cruel levy!'

A lie, good Beauchamp's note is safely secreted in my tunic. Any worthy pawnshop will make good its value, but the English taxmen shall not get their filthy hands upon it.

Humphrey submits me a withering look. A meaty palm grabs my shoulder, that oaf boatswain.

'Want to go back on the ship, sonny jim?' he says, 'it's off to the Antilles next. You can work on a sugar plant. I'll whip yer good.'

'Will you now?'

I am unshackled and crack him in the guts with an elbow. This reduces him and I butt him on the bridge of his nose, crimson spurting everywhere. He collapses to the ground like a dollop of cack. I make to flee...

'You will come with me, Caveat.'

The short blade jabs right into the small of my back. It would not take much strength to run me through there and then, and laws Commander Humphrey knows it.

'Just teaching him some manners, Mr Humphrey. There's a good fellow.'

~

The carriage takes us away from the bustling walks of the quayside, through the small town that grows upwards in terraces of dirty, wooden buildings that look fair likely to topple they are stacked so unevenly. The residents of the town are a hotch potch, as is any port. Pilgrims pontificating from prayer books, child beggars, lenders, borrowers, watchmen, peasant mothers nursing peasant babes, their husbands gone with the navy, seamen crawling around drunk as cheap and poxy crone whores demand copper bits for services rendered...

'Yee pramissed to take me away, Johnny! Yee pramissed!'

'Away ya foul hen ya!'

'Then gi' me whatcha owe me!'

'Away and shit, ya durty whooar! All ya gave me was crabs!'

...past the old Catholic church, now a whorehouse, merchant premises, an apothecary, the gaol and court, some vagabond collapsed in stocks, covered in all manner of pests and slurry, the gibbet on the town green, from which a freshly dead wrong 'un dangles like a marionette, right next to an alehouse where the wretch must have been given his last drink. Then a great waft of the sickly sweet stench of effluence and dead flesh strong in the close and cumbersome heat of the afternoon. A nasty squall is on its way, I reckon.

Perchance this place has grown since my last visit, for the quays bustle with an urgency of business I have never witnessed in an English port. Schooners, frigates, vessels of

all sizes, moored and preparing. Waiting.

Ready for the mighty Armada.

'Welcome back to England, Caveat...' says Humphrey, as if sensing my distemper.

I would have sworn he was but a young boy when I met him, but now I am not so sure. There is a steely look that one only gathers through years of active service, and he is proven as crafty with his blade. Who pulls Humphrey's strings then? Why have I been taken here?

~

By the time we reached our stop, darkness has descended and with it a chill seaside air. Humphrey had continued to threaten me with his blade, perchance to give him something to do as we travelled. The imp seems to enjoy a little power, especially over one so evidently his superior. We alighted the carriage at a spit and sawdust taverna overlooking the river Plym, my hopes raised at the prospect of a hot meal and a warm cot for the night, but Humphrey was not in the mood for any kind of charity. I get the stable.

'And lest you try to abscond, Dutchman...'

He bolts the door, leaving me in the dark, shivering with a reek of manure about the place and some farting old nags for company. I search in around for bails of straw not covered in piss or slurry, then make a clearing so that I might rest my head. A warm bed it is not, but a blessed comfort it is after the last few days. A blessed mercy, forsooth!

And, weary, the woes of the day evaporate under a tide of sleep, sleep...

Sleep...

~

Footsteps outside, in the yard. An hour, perchance two, have gone by. I can hear drunken mariners wenching inside the taverna as a door opens, the footsteps halt.

'What's ye doin' there, ragamuffin?' one voice, inebriated

and uncouth, a sailor doubtless, 'You worryin' them 'orses?'

Another voice; gravelly, common, dishevelled, old.

'No, sire! I only be checking on me master's steed, sire!'

'Aye, well bother my nag and I'll cut yer another arsehole to go wi' tha' one on yer face!'

'No sire, I be not sire! Laws no! By your grace, sire!'

The door to the taverna slams shut and the revelry diminishes. I hear shuffling, then the bolt sliding back...

I pick up a rock. This is it, my chance to get away and off this infernal island. Steal a horse and then bolt for it, yes. The door slides open and torchlight fills the stable. A knurled figure hobbles inside, coughing. Probably a beggar rustling horses. Alas, I will have to smite him, else he will bear witness to Humphrey and whoever it is who plotted to bring me to these shores.

'Put it down, Caveat,' says the beggar in clipped, excellent English. The accent of an educated man, a noble man, a *powerful* man.

'My Lord? It cannot be,' says I.

'Step out of the shadows, man. Show me the whites of your eyes.'

I do as he tells me. Even at close inspection, his disguise is remarkable, all sackcloth and muck, but anyone who knows this man, and one would be most accursed if one did, would receive a shudder of recognition upon hearing that voice. The voice of the most feared hence most powerful man in England, spymaster and arch-Calvinist, Sir Francis Walsingham, Secretary of State to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

What does he want from me this time?

~

His black, moorish eyes run the rule over me, hawkish, looking for any idiosyncrasies and clues to foul play. He spies a blank space, as if there is another person in here with

us.

'Yes sir?' I ask.

Walsingham sucks in his breath through gritted teeth.

'There is a Papist conspiracy all around us. Here in Plymouth, Roman infiltrators comb the taverns looking for men with loose tongues. They train their spies in special colleges in Rheims. You say yes sir. Funded from endless coffers of Spanish New World gold in Phillip's chancery. They are bent on destroying us from without and within, but YES SIR, WE ARE BETTER! We are prepared! My Sergeant here knows all about them, and our traps are being set for these rats, one by one. Yes sir, yes sir, yes sir. Three bags fucking full sir...'

There is no Sergeant sat with us, except perchance in his fevered psyche. Walsingham is quick to judge and execute, at once sick of mind yet sharp like a bloodied ean on London Bridge, dangerously insane. He has become worse since I last met him. He pulls apart straw with his hands, aged, skeletal but powerful. This man has spent his entire family fortune protecting Elizabeth from plots and intrigue, he has agents under his employ from Ireland to the Ottoman Empire. But why me? Why now?

'Yes, sir...'

He examines me, nodding in spasm.

'I detest fornication and gaming, Caveat. Mark my oath, upon our day of victory over the Papists I will endeavour to smite those evils too. What will you do then to entertain yourself? Be a good Christian will you not?'

Walsingham is in his mid fifties and impersonates death well - I should lay good money on that day never happening. Please God...

'Yes, sir.'

'YES SIR YES SIR YES SIR! Think yourself a charmer do you, a rakish and courtly fop! You are nothing Caveat, but

that you serve me. Remember.'

'Yes, sir...'

'YES SIR! First item of business now. I am told of your debt to the crown. Accrued by levy to your immoral earnings?'

'Ah well sir, I had wondered if I might settle the account another day...'

Walsingham thrusts a palm out. Penury and ignominy fall upon my brow. I am paying for the privilege to work for Walsingham! I produce Beauchamp's note and hand it to him, my last lifeline gone. My palms have clammed up, my shoulders tensed.

'Sir, might you let me know why I have been brought to England in such a clandestine manner, if it pleases you...'

A rye smile crosses Walsingham's face, for a moment he seems almost normal. He pulls out a letter from beneath his rags and hands it over. The missive bears Elizabeth's personal seal. He bids me to sit with him on a bail of hay.

'She is ever making trouble for herself, Caveat,' he says. The seal has been broken, a treasonable offence to most men, a trifle to Walsingham, 'And that means she is ever making trouble for those that would protect her.'

I open and read it.

Gussy,

I urge you to come to Windsor poste haste. An awful matter burdens my breast, such that only you can help.

All will be explained.

Bessy

Walsingham seizes my hand.

'You will do as she requests. But make no claim to have encountered us along the way, Caveat. On pain of death. You received this note and travelled to England of your own volition.'

'Sir, what does she want of me? What do you want of me?'

'That will become clear, Dutchman. Just know that we will be watching you. And Caveat, remember whose side you are on.'

What could be so awful that Bessy would keep from her protector? For sure, Walsingham wants to find out, such is an all-seeing-eye's fear of being blinded.

Walsingham shakes his head, 'Why does that hen serially embrace such rakish buffoons as you to her bosom? Sentiment is the only weakness of a great and glorious Queen. Do you not think so, Sergeant?'

His imaginary cohort seems to agree. Laws, all this for a short note!

'Sir..'

'Behave as would a visiting nobleman, Caveat, if it is in your bastard breeding to do so.'

'But I am penniless, sir. Surely you might advance a small amount...'

'Why do you not ask your friend Bessy?' says Walsingham.

Humphrey appears astride a pony, the reins to Walsingham's steed in his hands.

'Flee the country, you will die...'

'Yes, sir.'

'Breathe a word of what you know to a soul on this earth, you will die. Slowly.'

'Yes sir.'

Walsingham rubs the neck of his horse. The animal brays at me.

'Let us away, Humphrey. We have real work to do. Come now, Sergeant,' he orders his imaginary minion.

'Good morrow!' says I, 'And good morrow Sergeant.'

Humphrey eyes me with contempt. Walsingham spits and kicks his horse. The black beast races away, shoeing up a chunk of wet manure right into my face. Humphrey rides

alongside his cadaverous master, struggling to keep up...

Leaving me there like an unwanted prick in an orgy,
humiliated, unhinged, unwashed, starving, thirsty, penniless.

And wondering just how I am going to get out of this
town.

Alas, there was but one thing I could do in such a predicament.

I waited outside the Plymouth tavern until I was sure Walsingham had gone, then knocked over a drunken sailor for a few copper bits as he was making his way home. Daresay the fellow didn't notice a bop on the head, state he was in. The thought had occurred to me, for a small second, to damn Walsingham's eyes and make for Amsterdam, but Holland would be the last place any vessel would be going now and any trip across the Channel would involve a significant amount of danger in the current climate. Then there was the chance that the all seeing eye of Walsingham's network might espy me and he would live true his promises. No.

Feeling the snots coming on in the unseasonably stormy weather, I visited a cosy townhouse further down the quayside and enjoyed a bath, a hot meal and a fat wench for the night, trusted that as a warmed and rested gentleman I would pay the proprietor a handsome fee in the morning. I rose at dawn to sneak away from the publican. Yes, evading a levy is a despicable act and under normal circumstances deserves a week in the stocks - I know as a proprietor myself - but desperate times require desperate means and the

establishment didn't look like it was short of trade, as few establishments of that kind ever are in a bustling port. One thing men like Walsingham or Drake do not countenance about me: I am a gentleman, perchance I play the dandy at times, but I can apply the virtues of a shithouse rat if it means survival.

And anon to London, where any man who has his wits can scrape a few bits and tidy himself up. For if I was going to visit Good Queen Bess' court, I would have to look the part first.

~

The trip was no better than hellish, but one expects that will never change with coach travel. I survived on biscuits and a quart of cheap apothecary rum, cramped up in a tiny cab with five commoners. The old yeoman next to me shat himself as we left Plymouth and I had to tolerate the stench for another day, until he died in his sleep at Exeter. I beseeched the driver to drop him at the roadside and continue our journey but the sturdy yokel insisted that we call in a chaplain and perform a pauper's burial, lest we endanger his immortal soul. Religious claptrap, fie! My sympathy might have been aroused if I hadn't been in such discomfort, having to share this journey with dead peasants and riff-raff. The rightful heir to the Duchy of Antwerp should not have to suffer such things.

Mercifully, we embarked again, days later meeting the Thames at Henley and following it anon towards The Great Wen. The boredom and tiredness of the journey evaporated as the city fell upon us at St Giles, great steaming, stinking wooden tenements rising and falling in lanes, criss-crossed in no particular order, gentlefolk sharing the same streets as peasants... butchers, bakers, beggars, wives, whores, wanderers, clergymen, yeomen, watchmen scrambling the dirty thoroughfares, all looking like they had to be

somewhere and they were late. Well, they do have to be somewhere, because today is Saturday, and Saturday is hanging fair day in old London town, a treat not to be missed.

Through Holborn now and into the beating heart of the city, it is difficult to understand how anyone could put up with living here, with all the muck and bustle, all the disease and ill-physic. There is the variety of show and sport, I suppose... bull and bear baiting and cock fighting are such savage draws. How Londoners enjoy watching animals being ripped apart alive. Bess herself is quite the bloodsport fanatic, and pens where wagers can be made and poor beasts slain are being set up on every corner it seems. Not my thing.

I alight the carriage at Cheapside with the intention of meeting the hanging procession on its way west to Tyburn. Of all aforementioned entertainments, this is surely the most popular, a grand day out for every Londoner followed by, if one has a few spare coins, a trip o'er The Bridge to a Southwark playhouse in the evening. Nothing like a bit of death and the theatre to bring common people together.

~

I venture into The Cock Pit, an alehouse with a fighting ring out in the back, rancid rough place off Newgate, spitting distance from the infamous clink. In my frequent visits to London I had ne'er enjoyed coming here, only 'twas ever a necessary evil to conduct business, arrange engagements and attract custom from the richer ranks of public servants, typically wardens, judges and executioners, *especially* executioners. Here the two hour trip west would begin and indeed would the revelry, as the condemned would spend their last pathetic hours quaffing like a free person, provided that they were merely criminal and neither witch nor plotter, of course.

The first thing one notices in a place like this is the smell.

Body smells, distilling hops combined with sour piss (I am beginning to think England itself smells of piss) and frankincense, a sure sign there is clergy about, but then they are never usually far from an alehouse unless they are out telling people to stay away from them. True to form, a Reverend of serious countenance (seriously drunk) approaches the main table and attempts to sit on the bench, missing it and collapsing on the floor. The few titters in the crowd are quickly extinguished, as 'tis ill-advised to mock any man of the cloth, even a drunken one. Comely young fillies bring out pewter jugs of warm ale and mulled wine, serving them to the gaol party and the privileged throng escorting them close at hand.

A meaty palm grabs my shoulder.

'Oi, you're not supposed to be in here. Out.'

A strapping bastard of a watchman, bullnecked, head to toe in black uniform.

'Could we not arrange something my good fellow? Eh?'

I slip my last copper bit into his tunic. That was going to buy me supper and lodgings tonight.

'That all you got?' he grunts.

'I could always find another hanging,' says I.

'Aye, suppose you'll pass.'

The condemned's parting cup is in progress at the far end of the room. Above, pickpockets and vagabonds roam the gallery where paying ordinary folk leer down at the gathering to catch a glimpse of the one about to get frummagemmed at The Tree. Many would have travelled far to see the show.

'I say,' I ask the watchman, 'who's the malefactor today good sir?'

'Tis John Cunningham.'

He stands surly, impassive, comfortably dumb.

'And his wrong?'

'Petty theft.'

'Theft? Surely such would not merit a public show, sir?'

The watchman turns to me. He has my same height but twice the breadth.

'Theft of church property. He made loot of Canterbury's cell at Westminster Abbey, stole gold, jewel and ornament. He worked there as a manservant, 'til his discovery. They'll rip him asunder.'

'Aye, doubtless. So which one is he?'

'The one wearing chains,' he mutters, 'Yer dullard.'

'Oh, yes, huh, chains. Of course.'

'Will you stop making pester, or will I forget your coin and pitch yer out?' he says. I make past him, clapping him on the shoulder jovially.

'Certainly, gentle horse. Good show.'

I leave the watchman to his watching and push my way through to the main table and focus of everyone's attention. There I find who and what I am looking for.

The head executioner of Tyburn, Bull his name is, though I am not sure whether that is Frederick or Harold. Perchance neither, perchance just Bull. Bull sits in his thick leathers, his shaven head pocked and shaped like a pumpkin, pasty gin-blotched face, his large, dirty hands tossing dice against the wall. What happens here is that the executioner is paid by either the family of the condemned or the condemned themselves to make the last hours as painless as possible. Prior to Tyburn, the hangman and his apprentices would share the booty and make good their promise by taking the malefactor to an alehouse and getting him drunk. Then later, he will garrotte or snap the neck of the condemned before they are strung up and, in Cunningham's unfortunate case, quartered. A worthy executioner will know how to do this without ruining the spectacle for the baying throng, and Bull is indeed among the best, famed for his jammings.

Now, the reason I am here is that one is always guaranteed the finest game in town on such a day, since the executioner and his apprentices are loaded with ill-gotten gains from the soon-to-be-deceased and have had plenty of ale themselves. Bull likes his quaff as much as the next man, a fact to which I aim to make my advantage.

'Oooh, I win again Saville,' says Bull in rough cock-sparrow.

Saville, a sulky, spotty young butcher, picks some copper bits from a bag and hands it over to his superior.

'Dunno how you do it, master!'

I do. Bull cheats, using weighted dice. But I know which way they fall and my judgement is not impaired with gin.

'Cooper, your turn,' says Bull. Cooper, the shorter, older, uglier of the two apprentices, picks up the dice, blows on them for chance and throws.

Cunningham sits, pale, covered in bruises, scalp shaved, bleeding and flayed. He has passed out in his chains, either through drink or pain. I notice his fingernails have been pulled out, poor wretch. A lesson, I suppose. Dally not with the Church.

'Hey! Bad luck,' says Bull, scooping in more coins from Cooper. I choose this moment to join him.

'Hello there, Bull. Nice day?'

Bull counts his money, not even looking up.

'Twas ere you arrived, Dutchman.'

'Fancy a game?' I ask.

'Go hang, Caveat. Not after last time.'

Zounds! I'd forgotten, hadn't I? Took him for every bean of his fee two years past. 'Twas a good score too, he'd just chopped up Babington at The Tower. That was some gig. Laws, how could I forget.

'Then you would surely make haste to recoup your loss, old boy? G'waan!' says I.

Bull stares at me, his squinting eyes a sure sign of an inbred. He picks an old piece of human gristle from his leather chest plate and flicks it to his dog. His breath smells of sewage.

'On your way, Caveat. Before I take two men to Tyburn.'

'Ah, I have made no crime alas,' says I.

'Mistakes happen. Easily.'

'Come on Bully! Where's yer will to be maverick, eh? Let's have a quaff and a game!'

Bull nods to the watchman, who comes stomping over.

'Bye, Caveat.'

'Bully! Come now! Eh!' I am grabbed betwixt the armpits, 'Oi! Unhand me!'

~

I fly through the door and into a puddle of rainwater in the road. Passing common folk titter at my state.

'Come back and I'll crack yer teeth! Bloody tourists,' grunts the watchman before disappearing back into the throng.

Oh hairy arses. Now I am sodden from head to toe, my Neapolitan tunic is *completely* ruined and I look like a beggar. Pah. Fashion *is* status in this day and age. If one turned up at Windsor looking like this, one would not even get past the yeomen at the gates. One is what one wears, and one *is* a vagabond and a buffoon at the moment. What am I to do now, alas?

~

Thankfully the rainy weather has cleared and a lemony sun dashes about the place. Tyburn was quite a trek, but I managed to get there just ahead of the procession and obtain a good spec, near the paddock where gentry would stand. My only hope now is to spot a friendly, familiar face to whom I might relay my tale of woe and cadge some money and clothes. The alternative is to steal again, and the townsfolk are generally far cuter to base robbery in London than they

are in Plymouth. Should I be collared I risk stocks, the birch, the pillory, gaol, even the rope - and if I made protest that I was a gentlemen I would certainly be branded on the palm with an "I" for imbecile and thrown to a slow death in the nuthouse. Woe is me, I need to wash and change.

Alas, I could pass time thinking of my hatred for Walsingham and his obedient runt Humphrey for putting me through this, but such takes energy which one cannot afford right now. So to work, must find friends.

By the edge of the scaffold, a pair of clowns warm up the growing crowd, decked out in harlequins and greasepaint.

'I say, what is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright or the carpenter?' says one, hammy and theatrical.

'Why, the gallows maker, for that frame outlives a thousand tenants!' replies the other. A few half-arsed giggles ripple through an impatient throng as they pass round a collection bowl.

'You two, beat it! Shalt not tell yers anon!' grunts a watchman. Bastard, they were only plying an honest trade. The clowns slip away, making signs behind the watchman's head. Droll. The watchman pulls out a crude sap and chases them, catching the slower of the two to give him a thrashing. This gets everyone laughing far more than their standard act. I take this opportunity to secret myself into the paddock.

~

Inside the enclosure stares affix me from all around, but I suppose this must be how one is regarded by gentry when one is a pauper. I attempt to hold my gentleman's deportment, but the stink and dirt of my person sends everyone I pass, particularly the ladies, into recoils of disgust. I narrowly avoid a few clouts as I move through the crowd, which has grown in the past few moments as they file out from the hospitality area in anticipation of the killing. How I

must strive to remove myself from this ignominy, I fear I have ne'er suffered so, alas. Sorry, Cunningham.

Then a fanfare, the procession has arrived. The peasant mass across the fence lob rotten food at the condemned as he passes on a cart, sat propped astride his own coffin with Bull and Cooper either side, Saville driving the horse. Cunningham looks haggard and doped with strong wine, but though he is regarded with the usual contempt by the crowd, I have seen worse, especially in showpiece hangings here and abroad of near yesteryears. That day I fleeced Bull, Babington was almost dragged from the cart by the frenzied mob, only that the Queen's Guard impaled a couple of fanatics so the job could be done on the gibbet. Aye, executions make sport, and the sport today is but fair-to-middling since Cunningham's infamy is not substantial news.

As the prisoner is taken to the scaffold and propped up in his stupor by Cooper and Saville, the landed folk keep a more dignified countenance in their observation, but I sense their morbid curiosity and anticipation of the event is no less. This is not just about the hanging itself, 'tis the build up, the procession to Tyburn, the ritual, the day out. The bloodletting is merely the denouement to a whole day of leisure and sport in the city, from commoner to yeoman to noble shared.

And that bastard watchman has spotted me and is heading through the crowd with a couple of his fellow thugs. Fie shite. Will I ever get any luck this day?

I make haste to lose them, but receive bops and digs in the ribs from the gentry. Mind, I would probably make blows myself if some vagabond bumped me. A wooden cordon rings the paddock to keep the unsightlies out, or in my case, in. I must abandon this plan and away into the woodland to lose them, lest a night in the clink beckons, perchance worse. I step into a sprint as a watchman gets on my heels and make to hurdle the fence before he can catch me, but a tall fellow

steps into my path and trips me asunder, sending me crashing to the ground.

'Here he is, the egg!' he says. I look up at him, the foul harney.

But no, 'tis no foul harney. 'Tis the friend I've been looking for.

'By laws! 'Tis a miracle! Kit fucking Marlowe!' I exclaim.

A steady smile of recognition creeps across Marlowe's face and he helps me to my feet.

'By Gad! What on earth happened to you, Dutch? You do not look yourself. Nearly gave you a beating.'

'Alas sir...' I begin, but a scrum of watchmen pile into me and begin to club me. I manage to punch one of them on the snout but the other two strike me with their baton. I am weakened and succumb.

'Just unhand him, awful cunts,' says Marlowe, his rapier drawn to two throats.

'But sir, this vagrant... aaargh!'

Marlowe gives the watchman a scar to remember on his cheek.

'Now regard me. Fie, do either of you know who this is? Do you, forsooth?' he says, theatrical to suit.

The maggots shake their heads, sheepish. They unhand me.

'This is the heir to the Duchy of Amsterdam. Is that not right, Caveat?'

'Aye... well, 'tis Antwerp but close enough...' I mumble.

The cut watchman makes fighting eyes. Marlowe brandishes his blade before his nose and he backs off like a wounded hound.

'Now away, yer pair o' shaven bumholes. Before I report yers,' orders Marlowe.

The watchmen sneer and leave us. Marlowe replaces his sword and a cheer goes up amongst the gentry. He laps it.

'I thank you! I thank you!' he says, 'No really, 'tis nothing. I thank you!'

Christopher Marlowe, friend, playwright, saviour of the day, bloody show-off.

~

'I am here making promotion of my new playbill,' he says, as the Mayor rambles on in his speech up on the scaffold.

'How do you get the time to write? A new effort?' I ask.

'Aye. "Tamburlaine The Great", chronicling the rise of a lowly shepherd to King of Persia, crafted with the ideas of the thinker Machiavelli.'

'Sounds wonderful indeed,' I say, begging his approval.

'Well, 'tis only a single night performance at The Rose, to my protest,' he grunts, lip curling, 'and I must drum up custom for this evening lest Burbage, the theatre owner know you?'

'I have heard the name,' I lie.

'Yes well, lest Burbage will cancel my contract. I need the money alas and...' he stops, his blue eyes narrow, his fine, pointy beard twitching, 'Look Caveat, Thomas Kyd and Richard Baines...'

'Yes, I see 'em.'

Two mincy fellows observe us, dressed to the nines in Italian silks, cattily whispering in each other's lugholes. Baines I recognise, another spy though a notoriously Puritanical zealot in contrast to Marlowe, who I would say is the most fervently irreligious man I have e'er met. Kyd I have not seen, but his limp gait and sharp countenance suggest the theatrical type. Marlowe at a glance might seem less bookish with his fine build and chiselled looks that demurest women make cream for, but I know he is thricefold the talent of every other playwright in this city combined. He has my ear.

'They are promoting their own wares, to be performed by Leicester's Men in double bill at The Theatre Shoreditch, also

owned by Burbage. Can you credit that! Burbage pitting my play against theirs on the same night. Foul shitcase knows nothing of drama. He does it from spite.'

Kit spits.

'Quite so Kit, quite so,' mews I.

A chorus of hush descends o'er the gentry as the Mayor wraps his soliloquy up and steps down.

'Here we go,' says Marlowe, 'another ghastly show. They love this even more than theatre.'

'So why do you come?'

'If you're not seen in this town, you're as dead as that poor sap.'

I watch the gentry watching the scaffold, all of them hooked on the action and ready to foam at the mouth.

'John Cunningham!' announces the portly Reverend from earlier, his loud, fire and brimstone tone slurred with ale, 'You have been tried and convicted of gross theft from His Grace the Archbishop of Westminster and since you were... hic... under his direct employ, you have also been convicted of petty treason with a special recommendation that you should suffer quarterment at this tree.'

'Oh do get on with it, man,' says Marlowe beneath his breath, 'before the poor sod wakes up.'

Cunningham probably knows not what day 'tis. A small grace.

'...have you a speech to mark your passing, sir?' asks the Reverend, rolling from foot to foot as if on the deck of a schooner.

Bull, long black hood adorned, cups his massive hand around Cunningham's chin and pulls back his head. Out cold. A few whistles and jeers from the crowd, who like their slayings defiant, loud and agonising. Cunningham must have paid Bull well, he seems still goosed with ale.

Bull shakes his head. It will be said that Cunningham did

not die well.

'Very well,' says the Reverend, 'In this year of Our Lord fifteen hundred and eighty-eight, I do solemnly... hic... I do solemnly... hic...'

'Oh Christ! Get on with it!' mutters Marlowe. The good fellow has obviously been here too many times before.

'...erm... May God have mercy on your soul, in nomini patris et spiriti sancti, amen... hic! String him up! Thieving maggot!'

The Reverend shuts his prayer book and stumbles down the steps, caught by a pair of watchmen.

The apprentices Cooper and Saville display their array of instruments as Bull places the hemp around Cunningham's neck. Many would probably not have even known what he has been convicted for until the drunken Reverend proclaimed it, but even more would not care. They want their spectacle and laws they are about to get it.

Cooper affixes tethers to Cunningham's hands as he sits on a stool and Bull tightens the ligature. Perchance Cunningham is too much of a man to have his neck snapped easily, so Bull's option is to render his airways shut. Yet as he does this I notice 'tis too late, as Cunningham has returned to a stream of consciousness, albeit dizzy and listless, humming an indiscernible tune to himself. As he begins to choke and fight against the stranglehold, more whistles emanate from the crowd. 'Tis far less of a spectacle to see a man garrotted, and the onlookers at Tyburn will ever spot this executioner's trick if it is not performed quickly and subtly. I sense dissatisfaction.

Bull lets go his grip, takes a step back and shakes his head. Alas, Cunningham will have to suffer after all. Saville heats the tools in a brazier of hot coals while his superior checks the rope. Cooper is now in the front seat of the cart, ready for the order.

'Let me away!' cries Cunningham, fighting against his tethers, suddenly animated.

Alas, I should not regard this spectacle, but that which is sick and animal inside me compels me, as it does the rest of the audience.

Bull nods and Cooper thrashes the reins across the back of the nag. The rope whips high in the air like under a strong mistral, then hits tension. Cunningham gasps all the way to the top of the gibbet. The excited hush gives way to shrill cries in the throng, many akin to cries of passion.

'Slit the animal down!' yells a fop's mistress.

'He must dangle for a moment,' advises the fop, his eyes salacious, 'It adds to it Annie, it really does.'

Foul creatures, though I myself cannot help but watch the purple-faced Cunningham, strutting and wriggling in mid-air, dancing that hempen jig. He was not even offered the dignity of a sackcloth over his head. From the corner of an eye I notice Marlowe handing out bills for tonight's performance to the awestruck crowd, himself uninterested. But my gaze returns to Cunningham, I can but espy this spectacle and be drawn into it. I do so hate this place.

~

For an almighty minute Cunningham dangles and fights the rope, no doubt sober now in his dying battle. Then he weakens, as if to pass out. The crowd jeer at the show of meat puppetry, as if their sport is ruined as he is dead. I would hope he is, but know that few but the old and infirm die so quickly by this manner of hanging.

Cunningham is lowered to the scaffold and the rope removed from his crushed neck. His wind is probably beyond recovery now but it matters not. Cooper and Saville strip him of his rags and lay him on a trestle-table, to be naked dead as he was born. He coughs a great spurt of blood and his bowels give loose uncontrollably. Then Bull approaches, clutching a

long knife and a hook, pinkish with heat...

I must not see this again, but still I watch...

Saville approaches and grabs his head, Cunningham shrieking and writhing in the agony of agonies as Bull rips into his innards, pulling them out and snipping them like steaming sausages. Annie, the bitch in front of me, rubs herself against her fop, his fingers subtly placed in region of her quanny. I notice a tiny blade in Saville's hand, to which he attends Cunningham's neck swiftly, as if just bracing his head down. Other watchers seem too wrapped in the evisceration to notice the mercy killing.

Cunningham lies twitching as Bull finishes pulling out his steaming, purple guts, the crowd now in unison regardless of rank or earlier demeanour, whoops and roars rising to the heavens. He is joined on the scaffold by Cooper, now one of the celebrated band, craftsmen in the art of human butchery. Cooper is holding a heavy axe, the height of an average woman, and he caresses it as such, handing it to Bull, his barrel chest heaving up and down. Cunningham in position on the trestle, Bull swings the axe down, connecting with the chump of his neck with a sickening crack. Job not yet done, he swings again. The head bounces up and off the scaffold and down the steps like a stray squash, to great hilarity and applause.

Marlowe takes up my side.

'Are we yet animals, Kit?' I say, a little sick pooling in my gullet.

'Animals are not capable of this,' says Marlowe casually, still passing around his bills. Cunningham's head, top lip still gently twitching, is set upon an ean and displayed to the loudest cheer of the day. I turn my back on the gore.

'Kit, I need your help, friend,' says I.

'I notice,' says Marlowe, blocking the path of that bitch Annie as she attempts to get a better view, 'You smell worse

than a dog's arse.'

'Why, Mr Marlowe!' Annie says, all powder betwixt cavernous wrinkles, chalky face and black, wooden teeth.

'Call me Kit, milady,' says Marlowe, big grin on him, 'and I trust you and your gentleman friend will be attending my revue this evening? At The Rose, seven and quarter of the clock?'

'Ah, alas Mr Kyd has already asked us,' she mews, one eye still on the action.

'That bore? Ah milady, you should be entertained not barracked with soft wit and platitudes! And your beauty would grace the name of the Rose Theatre as would a real rose.'

She falls for his charm, gullible old trollop.

'Well,' she giggles coyly, taking a bill, 'come then I might indeed, ah ha! Tish Davenport, keep yer frigging paws off me.'

Davenport the fop backs away, furious. Marlowe kisses her hand.

'I would beseech you ma'am.'

I smile at her, thinking myself dashing again for a moment. Perchance I should play along.

'Why Kit,' I say, 'she is quite a lady.'

Davenport steps in and sneers at me.

'What are you doing in this enclosure you peasant arse! Get back o'er yonder with all the other shitty little piggies, I say! Away!'

'Why you...'

Marlowe blocks my advance with his hand, Davenport has his sword drawn.

'I apologise for the behaviour of my fool, ma'am,' he says, cuffing me o'er the back of my head, 'He shall be disciplined later.'

'I would think so,' grunts Davenport.

'You may pass as complimentary this eve, ma'am,' says Marlowe, stroking her back.

Annie giggles and gets back to the action, her foppish lapdog Davenport follows her to the front of the crowd as she gets a better view of the bloodbath, sneering back at me all the way.

'Did you have to do that, Kit?' I say, rubbing my head. Laws, my silken locks are caked in dirt!

'For your own protection. Alas, 'tis twice I have saved your Dutch derriere this hour.'

'Aye... I suppose.'

'And I need to fill that theatre tonight.'

'Marlowe, you must be desperate. She can't be any more than a Squire's widow. An old slut at that.' I say.

Marlowe hands me a clump of parchment bills.

'Do me a great service Dutch and hand some of these around would you? Just give them to people who look like they have money, any money. You are a darling.'

'Aye Kit.'

'Good good.'

Marlowe saunters off amongst the gentry passing out his bills, forced smile on his face, targeting the women. For get the ladies to come and their men will follow. Back on the scaffold, a gore-spattered Bull holds aloft a section of Cunningham's torso, some ribs and an arm, dripping hunks of flesh, bone and blood. 'Tis barely recognisable as something that was part of a living man but moments past. I tear my eyes away.

Perchance I should get to work for Marlowe now.

~

A fanfare, the entrance of the players, the famous Admiral's Men who have performed across this realm and for the courts of Europe, with esteemed actor Edward Alleyn at the lead, gin flushed and corseted peacock.

Marlowe sits, chin in palm, biting at his nails, poor fellow.

'It will be fine, Kit,' I say, 'You have the support of a lively crowd, and good players.'

'Tis theatre,' says Marlowe, still vexed, 'Anything can happen.'

'Oh tish Marlowe, tish!'

In spite of my concern for him, I feel in high spirits. At last I am in the company of civilised people, washed and clipped of beard, wearing baggy theatrical garments that, if a tad out of date, suffice not to bring ridicule upon my person. And I had a belly full of actor's fare backstage with the players earlier: pig's trotters with tripe and onion gravy.

The Rose is a new establishment on the South Bank and the most fashionable theatre in town, another reason why Marlowe should not be vexed by the competition of the likes of Kyd and Baines. An impressive auditorium, made from thatch, timber and plaster and shaped in an octagon for the best viewing possible. A few stars can be seen beneath the sheath of a darkening, azure August sky and 'tis a warm, sultry eve, perfect for theatre.

Ah, 'tis indeed remarkable what a wash, a feed and a change of garments can do for a man's stature and countenance. We are seated in the Royal Gallery overlooking the pit where they let yeomen, the less common of the commoners, watch the performance. Up here I have spotted several acquaintances past and perhaps a few new as I hold the eyes of one or two well-to-do fillies. An irony, even that trollop Annie casts her glance o'er me, not recognising the creature from Tyburn I'd venture but a handsome Dutch buck. Tish, how shallow and vainglorious some are!

Regardless, it promises to be a fine evening for both myself and my friend Marlowe, for there are few parties better than those held after a successful opening night at a theatre, and successful I know it will be, it bodes all well this eve, I feel it

in my bones.

Alleyn, dressed in shepherd's rags and blackened up to look like a Turk, assumes centre stage, a hush descends over the stalls... all's well that ends well then...

'STOP THE PERFORMANCE!' cries a voice from behind us. Marlowe buries his head in his hands.

'I knew it so... the portents, the portents...'

'Tis a Herald baring the Mayor's coat. A few candid boos rise up from the pit, he reads from a scroll.

'Great news from the high seas, my Lords and Ladies. The Spanish fleet have been scattered about the northern waters after making to invade upon England, the Queen has declared a celebration across London town! Victory! Victory!'

'Oh, that is just peachy,' rasps Marlowe, forehead in his palms.

Loud hurrahs and huzzahs, the excited audience pile out of the theatre, jubilant to a man. Alleyn is left on the stage, he looks up to Marlowe, then to old Burbage perched a few rows behind us, purple with indignation. Alleyn shrugs and disappears into the wings. A musty, lone yeoman remains left in the pit, he looks up to us.

'And the show?' he says.

'Away, yer dirty snit!' grunts Marlowe, engulfed by fury. He stomps off towards backstage and I follow.

'I only wanted me money's worth! Oi!' I hear the fellow whine. Marlowe spits and hisses.

~

I have witnessed more gaiety at the funeral of a loved one than backstage at The Rose on this eve. Players mope around, glugging jugs of cheap grog and mead, still in their costumes. The real tragic hero on display this evening is Christopher Marlowe, head still in his hands as we sit on a barrel in the rose garden outside that inspired the theatre's name.

'Oh come now, Kit,' says I, with a thought to venture

onwards back across the river and try my hand amidst the revelry, 'You must not despair! England is safe, a great and famous victory won.'

Marlowe looks up at me, his eyes bloodshot and venomous.

'One that nobody knew or cared about til this night. You care not who has won, Caveat. Only how it may feather your nest.'

'Aye sir, but at least we are on the right side, are we not? How would one like to be aboard a galleon right now, um?'

Marlowe sighs and nods, taking a swig from his jug and passing it to me.

'I suppose the news will have not yet reached Shoreditch,' he says, 'Kyd and Baines will be laughing their arses off, after their ovation. This'll ruin me. I had no more chances left.'

'But Kit.'

'No, Caveat. I have done things you would not have dreamt upon in defence of this realm! I have entered the colleges at Rheims and discovered how Babington was set to kill Elizabeth.'

'Oh tish!' I scoff, 'Your scribe's imagination gets the better of you. Or is it the mead?'

Marlowe grabs me by the ruff and pulls my face to his.

'Doubt me not Dutchman, for better I am your friend than foe.'

'Kit. Behave.'

I feel his breath, he releases me.

'How I wish I'd never let that foul hun demon Walsingham take me out of my studies of Ovid at Cambridge. How I wish I had stuck to my scribing and stayed away from that foul game, for now it returns to haunt me like some malevolent banshee. *Politics, politics, politics*. The omens for this hovered thick and foul in my stars, Christopher Marlowe shall never attain the renown he deserves! Alas Caveat!'

In tears, he hugs me, then kisses me. I push him away.

'Marlowe, I love you as a brother, but do that again and I will...'

Marlowe seizes the jug and hurls it to the wall, mead dribbling to the ground.

'You know what it is I must do to survive these days, Caveat? Know you?'

Laws, the man is really crazed!

'Marlowe...'

'Know you? EH! No, make course that you would not, aye! I must slave to create my best work and make sale of it to an upstart, an actor kid from Stratford who has the backing of the Stanley family, aye. He has all the best scribes in England doing it, printing out reams of perfect blank verse, stories torn from the heart and etched in blood, sweat and tears on a page, so that he might put *his* name to them. He will open a theatre of his own soon I hear, and he will take acclaim for each work as *his* property...'

'Marlowe, I do not understand you, man... you are surely delirious! Marlowe!'

'So delirious, I am clearer than any man alive! I have saved some of my works as mine, Tamburlaine being my opus, so that I might make success and get out of this wretched life of spying and writing as if a ghost for some spoilt arse who has ne'er had to graft a penny! But, dear Caveat, I am destined not to achieve as others, the Walsinghams, the Shakespeares, those who usurp me and drain me of all my will to continue...'

Marlowe's head falls upon my shoulder. 'Tis indeed a shock to see my fine, sharp-witted friend but hours ago reduced to this blubbing mess. Surely the mead has sullied him this far, for I understand not a word he babbles!

'Kit... I have something to ask of you...'

Marlowe weeps into my tunic.

'Kit... Would you... would you make loan to me of a couple of pieces, so that I might journey to Windsor? Kit?'

Marlowe holds me closer. Dandy I might be but swing *that* way I do not.

'Leave me not, Gus! Please leave me not in this sad hour!' he weeps, burying his tormented face into my tunic, 'I'll give you everything I have.'

~

I plied Marlowe with more drink, whereupon he made repeated attempts to mount and fondle me, each rebuffed. Mercifully, he later passed out into a snoring heap and I filched two pieces of silver from his tunic, which surely he would not deny to his friend. I thought long and hard to stay by his side, but alas, I had to move on else Kit might try to marry me next and have me bear his offspring.

Perchance again I was cruel, and one should ne'er be cruel to a friend. Unless one desires not to return to the gutter, for the gutter in this city is crueller than anything, anywhere.

So away to Windsor and happy morrow sad Marlowe, we shall meet again and I shall return your good favour.

Well, of at least the former I am certain.

3

The journey west from Southwark to Windsor passed without incident, which is a rare blessing in a city such as London. I bribed a stable lad outside the theatre to turn a blind eye while I made off with one of the better nags, that infernal arse Davenport's as it happens. Riding through London as the torches began to add illumination to the bruised purple twilight sky, the opportunity for all manner of sport was rife. The news of England's victory was only just spreading, and the fetes and revelry on the streets would continue all night I would venture. Even the heads spiked about London Bridge did not look so wan and ghastly, alas I venture that was just my high-spirited countenance making play with me. I did look for Cunningham about the rotten row but could not find him, but then he was probably reserved for Canterbury's private collection at The Abbey.

'Twas not long before I got on the open track, taking my usual route via Harrow Hill, whereupon I stopped for a swift sup and bite at The King's Head, then through Ickenham Wood as a curtain of darkness fell. Quickening my steed, I vaulted fence and styal via field and patch to get to Windsor at a respectable hour. The thought had crossed my brow to stop at Harrow for the night, but boarding costs money, and why should I so when I could reside at the finest house in the

land? My journey here had been long, rough and at times near deadly, so why indeed.

Beyond a stretch of woodland and field and the quaint old village of Windsor, the silhouettes of splendid towers and the grounds to that magnificent edifice made me drive my horse still faster. Torchlit, one can see why this building is spoken of in awe across many a land. In its five hundred years of existence, Windsor Castle has been a gaol and a bastion as well as frequent home to the incumbent English monarch. It is far enough away from London to avoid plague epidemics and civic unrest, but close enough so that Regina can pull the reigns on parliament whenever she makes need to, and these days such is frequent.

Naturally, making entrance to the residence of a Queen uninvited is quite a task, even for one so damned dashing and charming as I am. Perchance I should have made an effort to procure a change of suit from this stagewear, but time was against me. A small fortification greets me at the gates to the grounds, the centre of a perimeter wall surrounding the estate snaking through briar patches, woodland and over the canal. It is patrolled day and night by keen-eyed yeomen of the guard that possess expert marksmanship with long bows and unparalleled short swordsmanship. One has learnt through experience never to dally with these fellows.

Two guards stand statuesque, blocking my path through the knurled, golden gates. They sport the unmistakable crest of Elizabeth Tudor across their breastplates and they are iron-jawed and expressionless. As is the custom, I alight my horse and approach as if to walk through them. They cross my chest with their pikes.

‘Who goes there?’ they say, as if perfect twins.

‘Good eve to you, Sergeant. I have travelled to meet here with Mrs Dingham, wife of Her Majesty’s coachman? Might I

gain entrance?’

‘Mrs Dingham is not in residence, sir. You may not.’

‘Zounds,’ says I, doing one’s best to sound earnest, ‘then a wasted journey ’tis. Good morrow, gentlemen.’

I spin to leave and they resume guard, then I spin back and they bar my way again. Perfect discipline.

‘Who goes there?’

‘How about Edmund Spenser? Is the gay old dog still musing upon Her Majesty with his sonnets?’

‘Sir Edmund is not in residence, sir.’

‘Ah,’ says I, thwarted again. Know I of anyone who might be here tonight? Of course, I could ask after the Queen herself, but then the yeomen would have to find the Captain at Arms, who would ask the maid of the house, who would then ask Elizabeth’s immediate lady in waiting, who would then ask The Queen herself, and the reply would return via that chain. And what if she had retired? I might be stood here until morn.

‘Is your business here finished?’ asks the minor yeoman, ‘If so, you would leave sir.’

It takes not much to arouse their suspicion.

‘Fine guards, fine and loyal.’

‘Go about your business, sir,’ he orders, inching his pike towards me.

‘Then the Mistress, Margaret Radcliffe. Surely she is about? Tell her Caveat is here.’

The yeoman sniffs to his Sergeant, the first sign of any emotion. This will mean he will have to make pains to get a relief guard and run to the house.

‘Aye sir.’

‘Chop chop then, sonny!’ says I, nodding to the Sergeant. The Sergeant makes affirmation and the yeoman trots off towards the castle, an equally droll and statuesque guard filling his position after a short moment.

~

Twenty minutes I am stood looking into the whites of their eyes. The guards barely stop to blink, lest they miss some slight of hand on my part. 'Tis awfully tedious.

'Gussy! My favourite horse!'

Ah, at last, Maggie! She is wearing a long coat against the cool night air, though not much underneath I daresay. She plants a kiss on my lips, no doubt to the outrage and disgust of the guards who would make distain at public shows of affection. Her blonde hair falls about her ample bosom freely, silken tresses that, at close inspection, smell of summer fruits and honey. My, there is a healthy stirring about my loins!

'This man, you will vouch for him, my lady?' asks the Sergeant.

'This man is Duke Angus Van Caveat of Antwerp, I will vouch for him,' says Maggie, tipping me a saucy wink.

'Good good,' says I.

The minor yeoman pats my person looking for weapons, though I have remained unarmed since I set foot in this realm at Plymouth.

'You may pass, my Lord,' says the Sergeant.

My *Lord*? Ha, I could get used to that indeed!

'Do take care of my steed,' says I.

Maggie links me and we enter the grounds, proving the old adage about life that it is *who* one associates with, not what one makes associations to, that makes all the difference.

The guards behind us, I nibble at Maggie's ear and she giggles.

'When do you suppose they go for a piss, milady? Or do they fill their boots where they stand?'

'Oh Gussy! Ha!'

'I had inkling that they smelled funny,' says I.

Yes, this promises to be a highly entertaining eve indeed.

'So Gussy, what happened to you at Plymouth then? Pray

tell, my Lord?’

~

I saw no advantage in recalling my embarrassment before Drake, or my encounters with Walsingham and Humphrey - fair to say, Walsingham’s words have so spooked me I would even suspect sweet Maggie of being in his employ. Stranger events have passed o’er the past weeks.

As we walked towards the castle, I gave her a potted history, more swash and buckle than the truth, and significant to impress her. Then I plied her for information about the defeat of the Spaniards. Whilst Maggie Radcliffe might appear to be all tits and no brains, nothing could be further from the truth - the lady keeps her finger on all acts of state. But then, I would not expect Elizabeth R to surround herself with nincompoops.

Drake had not only beaten the Armada, as it seems the Spanish fleet shall now be known, he had mauled them fatally. The Spaniards’ plan was to unite the forces of their Commander Medina Sidonia, a renowned idiot of legendary repute, and the Duke of Palma’s ships in The Netherlands. Rumour is that two of Sidonia’s best ships came a cropper by misfortune and were lost, but that hardly gives credit to Drake’s guile and gamesmanship. Sending unmanned ships into their path ablaze had proved a formidable tactic, breaking up their formation in the Channel so that English frigates could isolate and chase them from their waters, or pick them off with cannon and cutlass. By lighting fires at stations along the coastline, Drake kept a tight command of the seaboard defence, so much so that at no time was this land at threat from a desperate enemy incursion. The latest is that few Spanish vessels made it back into the Bay of Biscay and homewards, rather that the majority of the fleet was chased into the North Sea by Drake humbled and broken, and that the surviving vessels would now have to make

negotiations of the treacherous Scottish coastline if they were to stand any chance of returning to Spain. It seems Walsingham had got what he wanted too, a devastating moral blow over the pompous Spanish. Perchance things really would never be the same again.

Maggie, the bright young filly, surprised me with how much she knew. She had visited Drake's party as emissary of Bess herself, with instruction to keep her ear to the ground for the Queen. Indeed, 'twas fortunate I had caught her in residence, since she has only herself returned from the coast this very day.

I made pains to ask her if she knew about the particular fate of Farnese, even if she knew of him at all. My whole livelihood at the Bartolotti would depend on his whereabouts, that is if he hadn't razed the place after I left A'dam. Maggie laughed and told me of a report she'd heard. A frigate, The Devonshire, had grazed the hull of a galleon heading away from the battle and its last known mark was sailing North, taking on water via a damaged side. The vessel bore the markings of Farnese's boat and the tale had become a source of quite some amusement amongst Drake's peers at Hoe. The Duke of Palma had panicked and fled, seeing his countrymen getting thrashed, against the orders of Sidonia to stand fast and wait for the rendezvous. Irony 'twas, Farnese was no better off than many other Spanish vessels now, limping North, his route back to either Holland or Spain barred by Drake's voracious sealions. I can just see him, freezing his dandy Italian balls off in a feisty North Sea squall as his ship lists ever steeper into the big blue. Ha.

'My Lord is most amused,' says Maggie as we leave the grounds and make entrance towards the Round Tower on the Upper Ward.

'My Lady tells a wonderful tale,' says I, giving her a good slap across her peachy, round botty. She squeals with delight.

Aye, I've always liked Maggie.

Silken tapestries, heraldic armour, old battle standards and portraits line the passage into the Round Tower, one can almost smell ancient and far away wars, echoes of clashing swords and the thunk of arrows hitting flesh and bone targets. From behind a pair of giant oaken doors I eavesdrop the sound of lute, string and chatter, a court in revelry. There's bound to be a game here tonight, perchance I can win enough to secure passage home and pick up the pieces of my business... If I can keep my lusty hands off Miss Maggie for long enough, that is. Time to wash away the wiles and torments of recent past, time to make things right again. Yes, forsooth.

~

Three hours solid at this game and things could not have gone more to plan! Maggie has fallen asleep on a chaise longue, which is quite amazing given the frissant that has developed. The rest of the court is transfixed in our game, chewing on mutton chops, guzzling the best wine from The Queen's cellars, watching a master at work. Yes, Caveat, the handsome swine, regaling his crowd with rapier quips and thrashing the breaches off the opposition.

And what sublime opposition! It could not have been more apt! Just as it seemed that there was no one remaining who had the gusto to play me, the grand doors swung open and who should stumble in but a drunken, furious Davenport. Aye, ha! It seemed his precious Annie must have ditched him for better sport and when he'd returned to The Rose to pick up his steed he discovered some swine had ridden off on her! Zounds, 'twas dashed *bad* luck that! Having taken a carriage to Windsor, Davenport crashed into this grand room in search of a gullible old maid with plenty of lucre and a game or two. In one avenue at least, he has come to the right place.

They say that a fool and his money are easily parted, well a

drunkard and his money separate with as much verisimilitude. The bastard fop still does not make recognition of me as the man he so terribly maligned at Tyburn earlier this very day, but I will make sure he knows just how I felt ere the night becomes morn, zounds yes.

'Gussy...' mews a sleepy Maggie, 'shall we retire?'

'But one or two more hands, sweet lady,' I say, eyes nailed to the state of play. She collapses asleep. Doubt me not, I cannot wait to give the filly a good rattle, but two rather more important issues are at hand right now. My honour and my money.

Davenport, down to his remaining few pieces, sweats and makes oaths continuously, his second-hand wig slipping periodically to reveal a dirty, shorn ginger pate. If he wants to play Caveat's game, he has to be a country mile better than this, alas.

He examines his hand. Plain as the nose on his face I can tell what he has. He picks up his remaining silver, then unhooks a diamond-encrusted medallion from around his foot wide ruff (which, in spite of the tension and body heat of the room, he refuses to open! What vanity!).

'Now sir, how much will you give me for this?' he says.

I examine the piece. Mid-Henrician, certainly not Davenport's originally, more likely looted from some horny, blind widow's dowry.

'Four pieces, 'tis worth,' I proclaim, 'Perchance five.'

'Five! Nay!' he protests, "'tis worth at least fifteen! Look at the metalwork! The fine gems!'

'If sir would like to end the match here...' I begin. He seizes the bait.

'No matter, sir! I will win out regardless!'

I nod and match the sum. He displays his hand proudly...

Yes, 'twas so simple to tell merely by his countenance. If he had possessed a freakishly good hand, he would not have

chattered so, but if he was making to bluff he would not have had as much pomp about his person. I knew my hand to be excellent, and if I was wrong I could have born the expense and tried anon.

But wrong I was not. The beauty spot on his white, powdered cheek runs into his beard, his face drops and his soul screams. Now that is what I call a victory.

I redeem the monies and clap him on the shoulder. That should more than suffice for one evening.

'Maggie, to bed with us,' I say, looking forward to a rumpitious reward.

'T-t-t-t...' he grunts. The court chatters between themselves and they begin to file away. Daresay Davenport will have quite an issue finding a gullible old hen to bail him out so late in the eve. He eyes me with clumsy contempt.

'Have comment for me, do you sir?' says I, still sprightly on my feet.

'Tis a sham! You cheat!' he says, drunken, pocked face red with anger.

Really now, he shall wish he did not say that.

'What do you accuse me of, boy?' says I. Maggie holds on to an arm.

'Let us retire, Gussy...'

'One moment, sweet Mags. This man has sullied my repute for a second time this day! I will hear apology!'

'YOU will get none!' says Davenport, making square and reaching for his sword - only that the yeomen of the guard would have confiscated it. Fool.

'You remember not, boy, Tyburn today? No? You made insult to a gentleman? I was in the company of Mr Marlowe, disguised as a vagabond on Her Majesty's business? Duh?'

A swish of recognition. Davenport giggles.

'You! You sir! Zounds!'

I push him back with a sturdy finger in the chest.

'Well, know you this Davenport,' says I, releasing all pains to my ego of the past long weeks, 'I have taken your money, your pride, even your horse, yes. The nag sits out in the stables, I rode her lame to get here. Think again before you dally with a gentleman, you *peasant arse!*'

Davenport explodes, making a clumsy surge for me. I sidestep the oaf and he falls to the ground. A pair of yeomen appear and the entire court laughs at the stricken fop, wig hanging off, unable to climb to his feet with his excess drink and that ridiculous cartwheel of a ruff.

'Swords! I shall have my honour!' he whines, slipping on his arse.

'You couldn't duel with your shadow, idiot. Now go discover your stone and return thence under!' says I.

The yeomen grab Davenport and cart him away, his feeble limbs struggle in vain.

'I shall have my honour!' he blurts.

'His horse is out back,' I tell the yeomen, 'Do make sure Mr Davenport is away promptly. Lest the timorous chappie makes more damage to himself.'

More laughs. Laws, I really know how to play a court.

They drag Davenport out whining and spitting. I rub my hands as members of the court make to retire. I ponder my newly acquired fortune, of whence I should take time to count it, of whether it might be wise after all to visit with Bessy tomorrow (rather that I should just go home perchance) and also of how many portions it will take to satisfy the comely Lady Maggie til this morn...

Alas, and is not life but full of such *difficult* tasks! Away, away, away, a-ha...

~

Maggie, for one so tired earlier, was everything she promised to be until the sun peeped over the horizon and betwixt the cracks in the curtains, we collapsed bare-arsed in

the midst of our sweaty coitus, limbs intertwined and gazing into each other's eyes. Zounds, 'twas like riding a shire horse cross-country and I needed a cold tub to cool down thereafter. At least she dressed her scratches about my hindquarters with soothing ointments, the wanton hussy. Laws, that Maggie Radcliffe, what a fine figure of a woman!

'Twas therefore to my consternation when the next day she suggested a ride through the grounds. For one thing, my balls and arse felt too tender for any seat, ne'er mind a rough hunting saddle. For another, I wanted away to Amsterdam immediately, for heaven knows what has become of the Bartolotti and indeed my prized collection of strumpets. But how could I refuse one so fair in body and kind in spirit?

After a sumptuous afternoon luncheon and snooze, we undertook a gentle trot about the verdant, pleasant grounds in the bright summer's evening. Perchance, in a different world, romance would blossom betwixt myself and sweet Maggie. We are kindred in spirit and attitude, but that idyll of my dreams, the country manor, the cute child and the fair maiden, well, that is certainly not Maggie, since Maggie is already wed. 'Tis natural, alas. Such ignominy it would be for a woman of eight and twenty not to have yet betrothed. Aye, she cavorts well, but in society guards her reputation as would any lady.

After wincing through the first half hour at a canter, my hindquarters toughened and I became boisterous, taking the Irish steed over some jumps, leaping a brook, showing off a little. Maggie told me that the court had stirred considerably at my new dress... "Is that the latest fashion from Piedmont, perchance?" they asked. I agreed that 'tis, and smiled to myself at the jape. 'Tis not the clothes but the fellow wearing them.

Aye, 'tis good to feel normal again.

Maggie is well trussed and formal, her waist corseted so

tightly I would say she is fair ready to crack a rib. She rides side-saddle stiffly, but she is a wondrous sight and fair to make any man proud to have her on his arm, neat sporty ruff around a swan neck, starched maroon dress, leather gloves, riding boots and immaculate hair, pinned back and netted in silk. The vixen in the bedchamber, biting a pillow and demanding a fifth dollop of sauce is quite a lifetime away, the only remaining testament being that I still ache from neck to foot. A sweet pain, though.

‘Let us try the hunting grounds,’ she says.

‘I regret Maggie, I really must away soon,’ I protest. She fixes me with a harsh stare.

‘Now you have what you came for?’ she says, with a twist of acid.

‘No!’

‘Race me!’ she mews, her countenance wicked again.

She changes saddle to orthodox and clear vaults a fence. Her Majesty is quite the equestrian and it seems her retinue follows suit. I take up the chase.

Maggie reaches quite a gallop across the flat, and ‘tis my conceit that I demand everything from my steed to catch her up. We espy stag and quail, plus the obligatory peacock about the grounds, then we head towards a small falconry tournament going on near the perimeter wall. A sizable tent has been set up and many of the court will have joined the locals and practitioners of this early evening sport. I still want to make away, but I’ve an inkling that there will be some lively gaming happening here and later. I am on a rich vein, and indeed the Bartolotti will doubtless need renovation and repair after those Spanish mongrels laid waste to it. That granted ‘tis still there.

With all the quaffing and so forth, why, I could double my money, perchance make treble. Hmm...

‘I say Maggie. Why do we not alight and loiter a while?’

She grins, raising an eyebrow.

'Did not My Lord want to away?'

'Alas, anything for sweet Maggie,' says I.

~

How is it so! Nay!

Alas! I had a king's ransom in the palm of my hand but two hours past! Blocks of gold and silver pieces, a free charter to a ship, even signed commitments to tracts of lands in Normandy! My dreams were before me!

Only for one fact, that which I always do, like an evil spirit had possessed me.

I did not know when to stop.

The game occurred in the grand tent. Indeed, it seemed there were more fellows and ladies in there than watching the sport outside, but any excuse for gaming. Still alas, Elizabeth had not appeared, and even through she permitted, nay encouraged, revelry on her estate after the defeat of the Spanish, she herself would not partake. Still mourning the passing of Dudley, I'll vouch.

A great pity, not so much for Dudley as he is dead and will not care, but for me. If Bess had shown I would have tempered my gaming. As it is, I have but one silver bit left... Less than what I came here with. Oh woe!

~

We returned to the castle for supper. I was quite willing to take up Maggie's offer of room and board this eve, though I would say she'll leave me a wreck if we have another night like the one past and I would find it difficult to summon my humours from the pit of despair suffice to service her manfully. And I am still weak from my travails in London, bruised and weary from all the manhandlings and the treks. Woe becomes Caveat.

Inside her chamber, I lie on her bed as she prepares her ablutions. A curative nap is in order.

'Maggie?'

'Yes my Lord?'

'Would it trouble you perchance if you made a small loan to me? Some silver maybe? You see, I fear I have rather overspent today and it would be an awful inconvenience to summon more funds from the Netherlands...'

'Fie my darling,' she says, 'I would love to please you so. But my husband is away as Her Majesty's envoy to the Ottomans and will not return for months anon...'

'Oh?' says I.

'I am only permitted to withdraw monies for my own use, and he has forbidden me from gaming.'

'Why, what an outrageous man!'

'I would think we are the outrageous ones, Gussy. Help me with this a moment,' she asks. I strain to rise and assist the removal of her corset.

'Perchance just one silver bit, then? For my passage? I am not a poor man, I will make good for it, on my honour.'

'Oh Gussy, I cannot I'm afraid. My husband is a jealous man. He will examine the accounts thoroughly upon his return. Any mystery he is bound to ponder.'

'Aye, ma'am,' says I.

She kisses my nose.

'I must bathe,' she says, 'I have not for a week.'

For an Englishwoman, she attends her wash most regularly. Servants have prepared a hot tub for her by the hearth in her parlour rooms. Maggie exeunts, I collapse on her bed. Alas, there is nothing to do but play with my remaining coin and ponder whether I should return to the Round Tower and chance my arm anon.

But what if I lost? Who would I go to then?

I cannot risk being crippled by lack of monies again. I am running out of faithful allies.

Glancing out of the window and over the turrets of a

magnificent castle, one could easily feel like a king, yet one verges on poverty. King for a day, fool for a lifetime.

I need sleep.

An old maid enters unannounced and draws shut the curtain.

'I say, woman! I say! Do you not knock?'

She spins to face me.

Zounds!

That mischievous, oval face. Those bright, sharp eyes. That witty, strong countenance one would not credit for a lady over fifty years. My breath is quite taken by her sudden and clandestine appearance. A lady indeed...

'Why, Majesty... this is a surprise!'

~

Bessy is not amused by my recent antics. She is perchance the sharpest woman (or man, for that matter) I have ever met. She reads people like people read parchments, and knows more of my recent adventures than I would like for a particularly rapacious head of state.

'...and all this Gussy, and you never sought my help?' she says, hands clasped, sat on the stool as if a meek little gentlewoman like a hundred in her service. Bessy likes to make disguise, it gives her, how does she put it... *perspective*.

'I humbly apologise, ma'am.'

'Oh don't do that!' she grunts.

'Do what, ma'am?'

'Talk to me as if I am a Queen.'

'But you are a Queen.'

'I am a woman. I am your friend. Am I not?'

Sweet Bessy. Those who do not love her think her frigid and stubborn, perchance even cold and ruthless, but that is her public face. This Bessy is altogether different.

'Of course, Bessy.'

'Bessy, I like that. Less of this ma'am. Now,' she says,

tapping her slender, tiny fingers against the window sill, 'Margaret informs me that you are short of funds?'

I curl my top lip. Penury is not a good reputation to foster.

'I will persevere, ma'am,' says I, 'I have plenty back in Holland.'

'Tish! Poppycock! You males and your blasted egos!'

'Well ma'am I...'

'Fie, I am surrounded by men of dubious motivation, men seeking power at any cost, even all their money. Take my Lord and Protector Walsingham...'

She says his name through clenched teeth.

'He has protected you for decades, Majesty...' says I, a little too timorously.

'He has protected the regime, he only thinks me a meddler. He would have me stay here as if it were my dungeon was he to have his way. Nay, anyway, he is broke and the chancery is cleaned from paying for this infernal war against papism. If I had *my* way, I would knock their swollen heads together and we would get on with life...'

'Ma'am I...'

'At least you are honest in one way, Gussy. You do not pretend to be anything more than a lovable scoundrel...'

'Thank you Bess. I think...'

'But you should always come to your favourite Queen when you need help. I heard about your little trip to Tyburn yesterday...'

'Who told you...'

'And of your issue of taxation owed to the treasury. Fie, we could have made arrangements! I do have some power you know.'

'Well Bessy, you have been engaged in many issues, I did not want to trouble you. What with Dudley and...'

'Gussy, Robert's death is precisely why I would make even greater pains to help you. If Dudley was the husband I never

had then perchance you are the son. I am fond of you, I know not why since you come here and pluck all my gentlewomen and make gaming and drink all my best wine with relish, you cad! But one part of you is good and such is rare in this age of intrigue and betrayal upon betrayal.'

'Very kind of you to say so, ma'am.'

'Tish, 'tis the truth! I have seen every type of scum pass into my realm o'er the past thirty years, of which there are many. But there is only one manner of good, and you can become a force for it, if you do right by yourself.'

My real mother was a nanny to the Duke of Antwerp's brats before he plucked her and sired me. She gave me up to her brother Edwin, a bordello owner, and herself died in penury when I was but a tot. The loving way Bessy gazes upon me opens up a softness in my soul I have not felt in an age, perchance a lifetime...

But fie, less of this nonsense, I must away at the first opportunity!

'Would it be a great imposition,' says I, 'If the treasury was to grant me some fare home? 'Tis all I ask, no more.'

Elizabeth smiles gracefully, a wicked glint in her eye.

'Perchance,' she says.

'Perchance? All I ask is a small coin. I will pay you back.'

'Caveat, shut up,' she says.

'Yes ma'am.'

She leans forward, as if about to impart something profound.

'Listen, how would the *rightful* heir to the Duchy of Antwerp like to earn himself his first honest penny? Zounds no, not a penny, a legitimate small fortune.'

'A job?' I say. *Small fortune* rings a loud bell.

'In my personal employ. A singular task, requiring your singular skills, sweet Gussy.'

I ponder this. I am broke and have no guarantee that my

monies or property will exist when I return home anon. But I am sick and tired of this damned realm and the manipulations of its officers, not least Walsingham, whom I expect to see waving his hook and blade every time I look o'er my shoulder.

'Not for me ma'am, I will beg your small coin again and return anon. Please, ma'am.'

'But do you not want to know what the task is, Gussy?' she says.

Laws, she is not used to refusal in any manner. I am beginning to regret my trip to Windsor. Everywhere I go in this damned country I am met with some manner of calamity!

'I am sure 'tis noble, ma'am, alas I regret...'

'Don't call me ma'am...'

'Alas ma'am, I have a business to run...'

She stands, a tallish woman of fine deportment, and more than able to strike her weight.

'Alas, alas, alas! Caveat, do you want to be running whores and frittering what little money you have at cards lest the day you drop? That is a waste, sweet boy, that I will not countenance. Do you understand?'

'Please, Majesty... I cannot I'm afraid...'

'You cannot perchance you *are* afraid! Afraid to change, to become the man you can be, a great man...'

'I am not, or ever will be, a great man, Bessy.'

She smiles kindly and strokes my face. Lord knows why this woman never bore a child, she would have made a fine mother. Perchance men have always let her down, right from her father to her suitors and lieutenants, which is why I am perplexed that she would show a scoundrel like me such kindness.

'I need your help, Gussy,' she says, 'As a dear friend to help another dear friend in a desperate situation. I know not how many days I have on this mortal coil, but while I remain

fit and govern I shall be damned if I lose another friend to this infernal crusade of Walsingham's. Nay. And only *you* can do this for me, only *you* I can trust.'

Elizabeth R makes an oath! Ne'er thought I would see that day.

'Ma'am...'

'Your pay will be very handsome...'

'Ma'am I still have to refuse...'

She hisses fury. That was a mistake, her temper is rare but legendary.

'I am the Queen of this realm, Caveat!'

'You said you were just a woman.'

'I am whatever suits me and it will bode fair for you to remember it!'

Those emerald eyes, a fierce intelligence and passion.

'Would you tell me then? I make no promise mind,' says I.

No one would countenance speaking to Her Majesty like this, perchance only Walsingham. But few get as close to her as I do, which is as much a curse as a blessing at this precise moment. Her face softens, she knows that she has me where she wants me.

She rings the servant's bell.

'Let's have some apple juice and I will tell you,' she says, 'And you will hear all my great pains, sweet Gussy.'

~

The truth is, I know not what to fathom of this one.

Bessy has a childhood friend in some backwater in the North, Little Chingle I think she called it, some coastal village. His name is Lord Richard Chingle and they were tutored together in their infancy by the learned Roger Ascham at Henry's court, separated in their early teens when Richard returned North. In Henry's zeal to reform the English church he did not take kindly to the youngest of his progeny consorting with Catholic nobles, at whatever age.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth made it her business to maintain contact with Richard through clandestine letters, and so they have remained in touch for decade upon decade, ne'er seeing each other, only writing. A peculiar relationship, but it has fair stood the test of time, even the difference of faiths.

Then again, 'tis old news at her court that Elizabeth herself has ne'er held the view that papism is evil, or that all Catholics are natural conspirators and potential inquisitors. The extreme elements of both faiths have always caused her more vexation, and on this I would agree that they are all too damned similar. Nevertheless lately, the parliamentarians have tightened the laws against Catholicism in this country even further. Recusancy, an offence in which a Catholic will refuse to practise the Church of England service, is punishable by harsh levies imposed by Protestant governors. Now, certain parts of this land suffer more than others. The North West, to which I am not so familiar but to know that the weather is even wetter and shittier than the South, is a hotbed of the Roman faith, verily an open sore. Whilst being a Catholic is not an offence, practising Catholic mass has been brought under the acts of treason and ringleaders might even visit the gibbet à la Mr Cunningham. Yes.

Well, in that province the zealous, Puritan vultures have steadily begun to circle. A strong community of traders and merchants in larger towns such as Preston and Lancaster have embraced the Calvinist denomination, a particularly zealous Protestant movement. Such has grown exponentially in recent years and now they sit at loggerheads with the traditional, stoical pockets of Lancastrian Catholicism in the more isolated, rural areas. Papist nobles, even minor landholders such as country squires, will influence their tenants like a good Queen might her subjects. But they are being targeted and squeezed by greater authorities, county sheriffs and so forth, shaken down for recusancy levies,

bullied into changing faith. The dichotomy is, they are expected to pay complete loyalty to their Queen as their highest authority before God, but to them the Pope is higher on earth, so no matter how great their loyalty to the English throne is, they remain traitors in the eyes of the law. Yes, poppycock 'tis, but the issue troubles Elizabeth so, aye.

Her friend in Little Chingle, a loyal and true subject, is now being persecuted and cajoled into changing faiths. Many others have capitulated (the sensible ones I'd venture), but a few have stood firm, even withstanding wholesale confiscation of lands and monies. In the case of Richard Chingle, the only thing stopping his Protestant neighbours overrunning his land is his well-publicised friendship with Bessy. Yes, her ire is well known even in the outer reaches of her realm and even higher nobility will ne'er dally. Alas, there is one, fundamental problem...

'Richard is dying,' says Bessy, not a tear in her eye but a wan countenance that indicates she would cry should she not be in company.

I know of her pain over Dudley. Perchance this is a shock too many for her.

'I am truly sorry for you, ma'am,' says I.

She decants more juice and passes me a coup.

'Drink this, 'tis good for you. Not like that ale you pickle yourself in,' she says, and in the same breath, 'I have known of my friend's condition for some months, and I am prepared. As much as one can be.'

'Tis still rough, ma'am, ne'ertheless.'

'Aye. Well, this is not about my vexation or grief, 'tis about what I can do for Richard, or mores the point, what *you* can do, Gussy.'

I had wondered when we would get to this. If there was any chance of backing out of this before, that chance has certainly now passed, zounds.

'Pray continue, ma'am?'

'Gussy, when Richard dies his legacy will be under threat anon. He refuses to convert to the Protestant faith, something I blame him not for, but in this climate I would venture that he should, for his family's sake.'

'And what does his family consist of?'

'Alas, that is all too simple. He has a daughter, childless and widowed and possessed of quite a bellicose temperament if Richard's letters are to be believed. She is perchance even more fervent a Catholic than her father, and I have had to send personal orders in the past to bail the girl out of her scrapes with authority, even though I know her not.'

'A troublemaker, eh?'

'A woman with a conscience, aye,' says Elizabeth. I am not sure whether she indeed partly admires such bravado and defiance, or she craves that this dowager recants. Perchance both.

'And her name?' says I.

'Lady Sarah Chingle. Her husband was mortally wounded at the Battle of Cadiz, where he skippered a ship, on the *Spanish* side. She carries that pain with her and will not bend when she inherits the estate, I am almost sure...'

'Almost, ma'am?'

That smile crosses her lips again, she winks at me. I know what she is about to say.

'You can charm any woman, Gussy. A simple Northern maiden should not present a problem for you.'

'I see.'

'Turn her around, make her aware of the realities of present day events. You're a well-travelled man of the world, she has ne'er left Lancashire. Alas, my poor Richard's heart aches with his dilemma. Because of laws that say that he should swear allegiance to a Queen he does not regard as prime ruler on earth...'

'And you, his oldest friend, happen to be that Queen.'

'Yes, you understand. Few would. But we must be practical here.'

'Can you not repeal the law yourself?' says I. She glares at me. 'Oh, a quip... in poor taste ma'am!'

"'Twas indeed,' she says, 'But I'll forgive you this once.'

'Sorry ma'am.'

Elizabeth waves away the comment.

'Nay shush. Tomorrow, take the finest horse from my stables, arm yourself, ride post haste to Little Chingle. Laws Gussy, I would not have known what to do had you not arrived at court yesterday. Only God might make such timing.'

Yes, the same God that delivered me at Plymouth and Tyburn.

'Aye, ma'am.'

'You will keep me informed of events via special letter. Your task is true and simple, get the Chingles to convert before 'tis too late. I owe that to my friend, even though he might resist.'

'I will endeavour, ma'am.'

'And Gussy?'

'Yes ma'am?'

'Do stop calling me ma'am.'

~

'Twas fair Maggie that led me to the Captain at Arms the next morn. We rose early, neither of us able to sleep. My countenance was stern and shunned her advances in the night. I have been duped again, not by some arch-spy-master or a web of political intrigue, but by a fair maiden I had called my friend. On my arrival here, Maggie had taken the yeoman messenger directly to Elizabeth and informed her of my presence on the estate, the rest was a matter of leading me, unknowingly, onto a road I do not desire but now feel duty-

bound to take. Pah.

Well, 'twas all too difficult to stay angry with Mags and we shared a tender kiss upon my departure. I know this, on our next encounter I will not trust her again and she will ne'er get as close as she did this time. For a brief moment a day past, my heart strings had tweaked for her too, but ne'er again, and Caveat has a long memory. A pity.

Anon then, kitted out as an envoy agent on a prized mission of great importance to Her Majesty. Well, I must make the best of it, whatever *it* might come to represent.

Bed this dowager Sarah, give her a poking she'll ne'er forget and get her to switch sides. Aye, simple.

Indeed.

4

When embarking on a journey such as this, o'er two hundred miles across land one has ne'er espied before, one must be adequately prepared. I arrived at the King's Head on Harrow Hill at mid morn and stopped for a pie and a sup, breaking into my last silver piece. Her gracious Majesty has deemed that I should travel North on the minimum of funds, lest temptation break me and I take flight home. Hell perish the thought! However, upon my arrival there, I am promised the Chingles will make the kindest accommodation of me. Yes, a great comfort I doubt not. Pah.

Still indignant in spirit, I espy a game of dice taking place in a narrow snug of the inn, to which two young yeomen, farmer tenants I would say, are gaily attending with drunken tarts sat upon their knees. This year's harvest must be rich forsooth, as they are happily throwing coins back and forth as one defeats the other and back again, with little skill or guile. I sense a killing here if ever I saw one. I step in.

'I say, stout fellows, would you permit a flutter by a noble stranger? I daresay 'tis a fascinating game, how does one play it?'

~

Pah, pah, pah and pah anon!

Bastards saw me coming! Gaming should be banned from

every taverna betwixt here and Constantinople, I say! Pah!

I have nothing, not even a copper bit so that I might feed and shelter myself on a hazardous journey. The yeomen bastards laugh at me as I damn their eyes and step out of the establishment, a whitewashed mott and bailey house overlooking the Chiltern peaks and a school for boys. I check my nag, a sturdy thoroughbred French filly named Daphne originally but which I have renamed Maggie. Then my collection of arms, a short dagger and a fine broadsword with a tulip pommel and copper grip, forged by Pedro Caino of Milan. I wonder if there is a pawnbrokers nearby, so that I might trade the item and return to the tavern to get my money back off those two bastards...

'I will have my honour!' A voice, dishevelled but livid, unmistakable, right behind my person.

'Davenport?'

I spin in the nick of time, just as the oaf makes a surge, and fend the blow with my new blade. 'Tis heavier than his, so I must keep him at a distance.

Davenport is ungamely and has now lost both his wig and his ruff, not too dissimilar to myself at Tyburn.

'I have tracked you on my lame horse, you shithouse! Cheat!' he whines.

'I merely made jest at Court, Davenport. There is no need to fight.'

'Oh there is, sir! My honour, sir!'

Honour kills more men than pox, I'd daresay. Zounds, I could do without this. I fence another lunge, he falls to his knees and scampers up again.

'Davenport, you may have heard this before from other men but, well, I am a very good swordsman, trained at fencing in the court of William of Orange...'

He lunges, I strike him on his skull with the heavy handle and he flails. I do so detest duelling.

'I care not! You will die and I will have my silver!' he moans.

'Go hang, Davenport!' I say, fencing him easily, 'Heard you not what I said? We don't we put a stop to this, eh? Look, I have lost all my money at the tables, perchance we could salvage a jug of wine together in the King's Head?'

'You want to drink with me?' he says, seeming to mellow.

'Aye. Why not? Let's be civil, good fellow. Only, might you have tuppence handy for the drink? I can pay you back.'

A savage scowl crosses his brow and he flies at me with all his might, I can only dodge his attack with my sword this time and it slips through his belly like he is made of sweetmeat...

'Oh Davenport, you clumsy fool you...'

~

It has been a long time since I have killed a man in a duel. Since there is always a chance I might meet my match, I try to avoid them, either through sharp wit or by fleeing my adversary, who is usually some jealous noble who has caught me with his wife. I have ne'er duelled with another courtier, since courtiers are invariably merry folk at heart who easily forget a wrong or a hardship when a drink or a game is on offer.

But not this time.

No-one espied our fight, so I thought it best to sling Davenport's body o'er Maggie's back so that I might bury him without any questions being posed by magistrates. Dead, he was a fair weight, 'twas a blessing that Maggie bore him easily as the equine equivalent of her sturdy human namesake.

I laid him to rest in a shallow grave in Ickenham Wood and said a little prayer for him, else both of us might be damned if he was a believer and I was wrong about God. The lad was no more than a chancer, like myself but five or ten years past.

It could be that something of me died when I ran him through, it could be that I could have fended him away, have brought him to his senses, the fool.

It could be that Elizabeth is wrong about me. It could be that I am as weak and as selfish and as evil as the rest of them, and that the slaying of Davenport has quickened me into that dark realm. Aye, it could be that God does exist and I really am now damned.

'Hell's teeth!' I grunt and thrash Maggie's reigns. We gallop out of the wood and onto the trail that leads to a Roman road and hence North, leaving Davenport and perchance my last slice of innocence behind for all eternity, for I have just killed what I once was, and whether it happened in hot or cold blood matters not an iota. Only that it weighs heavy upon my well laden soul.

And anon to this little town, where my future could wait for me, if I could remain long enough to give it the chance.

Coulds, alas the world is full of 'em...

I returned the two hundred miles with surprising ease. Might have been my solemnity having despatched the boy Davenport so, or my eagerness to get the task done and flee this wretched realm once and for all, or the Roman roads. Perchance all, perchance a thousand perchances, but Maggie was sturdy and rode fast even after only short breaks. We would make camps in barns and hay lofts, or even in the open air if the weather was sufficiently clement. I would scrump apples and poach a pheasant and we would feed well. And anon.

We have just arrived at the North West coast, at the curious little port of Liverpool within the hundred of West Derby and I daresay there are few men who could better my record of a mere four days of travel here. Good nag is Maggie, almost as good as I am a horseman.

It would be a stretch to say that Liverpool is a city port, like A'dam or London, but it does have some of the trappings. Built on hilly, marshy land, it has a tower, a customs house and a fair sized quay, squares and lodgings, bakehouses and a fairly imposing castle, in which I would suppose they throw their local rabble. It seems to survive on fishing and a brisk trade with Wales and Ireland, and judging by the number of Gaelic voices one hears here, one would venture the place

could masquerade as part of either kingdom.

I feel leaner and wittier than I have for a long time this morn, perchance 'tis the sea air, the absence of ale and a simple diet. Still, could do with a sup after my efforts. I climb up a lane called Water Street, towards a splendid steeple, then alight Maggie and lead her on foot. Aye, she will need a smithy soon. Yes, when I find these Chingles, for I anticipate getting this job done briskly in order to make a quick return to Holland.

The people here seem quite docile and friendly, which is what one would expect in a small place such as Liverpool. I make my way through a little square, whereupon the day's market is being held. I am tempted to lift a shank of ham hooked above a butcher's stall, but regard the malefactors littered about the square. A woman of middle age wears an iron brank on her head, a punishment for loose talk where the tongue is spiked if she attempts to speak, drink or eat. Ouch. Then stocks, a pillory, a whipping post, a ducking stool ready to wheel to the riverside, a vagabond wearing nothing but a barrel and moaning...

'Will yer let me out of this, sir? Will yer?'

...to the butcher, as I eye up the tasty shank. The butcher is probably a lower bailiff of some sort.

'Gercha! It'll learn yer to lay off the ale, yer pissy sot!' grunts the hefty fellow. He rewards the vagabond with a kick and he upends and rolls away down the hill, powerless to stop. If such is a punishment for drunkenness, I would darenst think what they would do to a thief, perchance remove an eye or a hand? This is a strange town and I must be on my guard.

I do know of the governors of this region, but by word of mouth rather than personal connexion. Bessy did fill me in on some of the details, the main issue being to avoid them if possible. Indeed, 'tis the Stanleys who own the lieutenancy of

Lancashire, a family of which I have heard plenty, the Earl of Derby at their head. They are an offshoot of the Tudors by descent from Henry's sister Mary, and some have vouched worthy contenders for Elizabeth's crown upon her eventual demise. Overtly Protestant, they are ever increasing their landholdings at the expense of recusant Catholic squires, fair to say then that they are the power in this neck of the woods.

'I say, my man?' I ask a passing pasty looking yeoman, with his pasty looking wife and his pasty looking children.

'Aye?' he grunts.

'Would you know of a worthy taverna near?'

I could ask him directly about Little Chingle, but I could do with a short quaff as reward for my journey and surely any fellow publican would not begrudge me so. Besides, he does not look too bright and might send me out of my way.

'There's The Crack. Take a walk up t' hill, make right at tower.'

'Aye, thank you, my man.'

'Aye. Good morrow.'

Good good. Onwards to The Crack, then.

~

Ye Olde Crack in The Wall. And old it certainly is. A stone outside the decrepit little housey hole denotes that Liverpool was declared a city in 1207 by royal charter of King John. Zounds, I would say that this establishment has been around even longer than that, as too has its ancient publican. The fellow would make Methuselah look like a spring chicken. He has more jowls than a pregnant sow, and more bristles about his chin than a porcupine.

'I say, sir! Good morrow, good morrow! I am a fellow publican travelled from The Netherlands and I am interested in sampling your finest ales? Perchance to buy the recipe?'

The old buzzard gurns and holds a cone up to his ear, picking a crow's beak from his nose and eating it, unabashed.

'Y'wha?' he rasps, phlegmy, moronic.

'I said... ah never mind. A flagon of grog, if you will.'

'Penny,' he says, all gums, holding a withered paw out. My, he must have had harsh dealings with some nasty pox earlier in life.

'Zounds! You know, my coins are in my saddle. I shall pay you later, good man.'

He pushes the brew at me and meanders off to brush the filthy floor, chittering to himself, nonsensical. Laws, I will have to run when he demands payment. But I am thirsty.

'Good good,' says I, laying aside the goblet and drinking directly from the flagon. 'Tis rough stuff, tastes like a cross betwixt mead, wine and ale slops, perchance 'tis but since my palate does not grumble too much I can tell 'tis drinkable. But then I might drink piss from a leper's boot at this moment and deem it so.

Now, might I be able to talk my way into a game?

Alas, the taverna is deserted, not a surprise, so perchance I might content myself with a quaff and a nap before the day is older and I need to think about moving to this Little Chingle place. Aye, 'tis always better to arrive at a destination later in the day and suitably oiled.

I position myself at an open window, from where I can espy faithful Maggie in case anyone tries to make off with her. The thought had occurred to me to pawn the dagger or the sword, which is still coated in Davenport's dried blood. Indeed, I can barely stand to look at the damned thing, but then one does not know if one will encounter another Davenport on one's travels. Nay, I shall opt to keep hold of them for now.

'Read your zodiac might I, master?'

A boy, no older than sixteen years. Black, curly hair, cocoa skin as if estranged from some lost Moorish tribe, lanky as a streak of piss and bold as bulrush.

'Away with you, boy,' says I.

'I master five magics!'

I peruse the young fellow. Odd sort.

'Good for you. I master five shites,' says I, 'Now piss off with yers!'

He sits opposite. I fear I might have to thrash the lad.

'Is there nothing I can help you with, sire? For a small fee?'

'Vagrancy is punishable with a week in the stocks in most places, son. Or would yer prefer that castle, um?' says I, impressed with the boy's enterprise but still mindful of valuable drinking time. Perchance he is trying to sell himself. 'Son, I have no desire to buy anything off you, certainly not your skinny little arse, if that is your game. Now away with yer, yer scampen scallywag, before you make me cross.'

The lad scowls and hops to his feet. He hovers around the bar, drinking up any remaining slops from abandoned coups. Dirty though he is, vagabond he is not. His clothes and boots are hand-made in some rural house but of acceptable quality for a lad. And he is reasonably well spoken, for a commoner.

Perchance I might get some sense out of him about this Chingle lot.

'Lad! I say, lad! Over here,' I say.

The boy hops back over and reclaims his seat.

'Aye sire, for ha'penny I can tell your zodiac!'

'No thank you, son. I require rather more earthly information...'

'Sire?'

'Well... Little Chingle, know you of this place?'

The boy's face drops and he ceases to fidget.

'Aye sire. And what of it?'

'Where can I find it?'

He frowns, as if I have just asked him why the sky is blue.

'Tis but an hour's ride, sire. North, follow the coastal road and look for the spire of Sefton church. You will pass through

Chingle.'

'Splendid, boy.'

He continues to stare at me.

'Why go you there, sire? Not much to see there ain't in Little Chingle.'

'Know the place, do you son?' says I. Whenever I am asked a leading question, I try to reply with one twice as leading.

'Aye,' he chuckles, 'I live there.'

'Do you now?'

'Be you a Frenchman?' says he.

'Tell me, rapsallion, how is the family there? What is the name...'

'The Chingles,' he says, 'of Little Chingle.'

'Aye, huh, of course.'

'The master is gravely poorly. Lady Sarah dotes on him with every day,' he says.

'And she still attends the papist mass and prays for his recovery?' says I. From the mouths of babes many a truth is spoken. I need to confirm what Bessy told me, perchance find a weakness I might later exploit in their make-up. The boy has gone wan with fear. Good.

'Kn-know not I, sire...'

'Oh heh heh, boy! You master five magics, you should not be scared of man nor beast!'

'I am NOT scared of you!' he grunts.

'Then tell me, boy, tell me.'

'Who are you?' says the boy, a shade too timorous. I grip his arm.

'I'm the man who asks the questions.'

The boy fidgets, head bowed.

'No mass is said now. 'Tis forbidden, everyone knows that,' he mumbles, 'Now, a ha'penny, for the information, sire?'

'For that? I could have discovered such from that old blimp

behind the bar! Go hang, boy!

I release my grip and he bolts for the door.

'Rotten French faggot!' says he, trying to goad me. I pull out the dagger from my waistbelt and pick out bits of old apple and pheasant from betwixt my teeth.

'Good morrow then, boy...' says I.

'Faggot!' he yells, back to his impudent self. I take another long gulp of grog as he sprints away from The Crack, then replace my knife with a long chuckle. What a peculiar boy, indeed!

~

I snoozed a while, then drained the flagon and released a rasping, satisfying fart. I could do with a meal, perchance I should try another taverna first though, as I could not trust any fare handled by that old fellow. He looks the type who ne'er washes his hands, even after he has wiped his arse. I rise to leave.

Getting to the doorway, I feel a tap on my shoulder and spin round.

'Penny?' says the keeper, paw held out. Laws, his face looks like it has been beaten with bushes of poison ivy.

'Beg pardon, sir?' says I.

'Penny,' he grunts.

'What?'

'Penny!'

'What can you mean by PENNY, good sir? Do elucidate!'

'Penny!'

'What? I paid you earlier!'

'Penny!!!'

He shuffles on his feet, head like a misshapen spud, a cord of spittle about his crooked mouth.

'Now listen here, my man... Are you casting aspersions on my good character? I am the rightful heir to the Duchy of Antwerp, doncha know! Yes, a far more gracious and

enlightened land than this shit-smelling backwater...'

'Penny!'

'Oh, put a cork in it!' I say, mounting Maggie. Silly old arse, shouldn't be left in charge of a taverna anyway.

'Penny!' he grunts, grabbing at Maggie's bridle. I issue a swift kick to his ugly grid and he falls to the ground. Pah, blithering, one-eyed cretin!

Now, anon, anon, anon...

~

It has gone midday and the ride through town is less than easy, given I have the rush of the market to negotiate and a head full of grog. My friend the drunkard still rolls about in his barrel, unable to mount upon his feet. The enticing smells of the various food stalls fair make me want to quicken to Little Chingle for a hot meal at the manor, prior to unbreeching the local Lady Mutton. Moreover, 'tis a further conceit that I do not recall Bessy saying anything about stinging them for a bit of loot...

'Hold your horse, sir!'

A sturdy, Irish voice, from behind. Two yeomen, regimental cavalry, doubtless members of Derby's personal army given the crest they adorn.

'What is this?' says I.

A bailiff steps out in front of Maggie, sword drawn, the Moorish brat from The Crack hiding in the tails of his cloak.

'Is this him, Crispin?' says the bailiff, a thickset, shaven headed man with a V-shaped duelling scar on his cheek. The boy Crispin nods, a hard glint in his timid eyes.

'What is your business?' I ask.

'We want a word with you,' says the bailiff.

'Why does this not surprise me?' says I, tiredly. Pah, can I not scratch my balls in this country without getting arrested! The bailiff looks puzzled, as if the wit escapes him, but then he wants to have worn my boots these weeks past.

'This way, *sir,*' he says.

Pah, cretins and religious maniacs, the lot of them...

~

They chained me up in this damned cell a few hours past, somewhere in the belly of their carbuncle of a castle. When I'd arrived in this town I had scarcely imagined making a visit to this shitpit, but then I always like to see the seamier side of a place, don't I? Pah...

'Tis darker than hell in here, I can hear muffled, shallow breathing, either in this cell or the next, as I cannot see a thing to tell. I sense this is a tiny room, though I can only lie horizontal since my chains do not permit me to move further than knee height. The bailiff was quite unceremonial about throwing me in here, he asked about my connexions with the Chingles and I duly produced Bessy's royal seal. Unimpressed, he told me I would be remanded awaiting trial for petty theft from one Mr Morgan, keeper of Ye Olde Crack in The Wall. Pah, all this for a flagon of fetid goat's piss! Should have known better...

My protests have been met with no response. Is this a foreign realm to Elizabeth's? Does not her seal carry weight around here? All I can hear is dripping water and the coughing and wheezing of some poor crone nearby. Perchance I might end up like that? Zounds, the thought occurs to me, people have been thrown in such places for the remainder of their natural born days. Oh no!

A merciful rattle of keys and the door to my cell swings open. The surly bailiff snaps his fingers and a guard unchains me. Torchlight reveals that there are three others in the cell with me, although it would be a stretch to call the wizened creatures human.

'About damned time, too!'

The bailiff emits a thin smile.

'This way, *sir,*' he says.

~

He leads me on a trek up a narrow flight of stairs, up inside one of the towers. I don't like this. Where are they taking me? Up to some drop room for summary judgement and execution? Perchance several years hard labour if I'm lucky.

'I say sir, do you not know who I am? I am the rightful heir...'

The bailiff stops at a doorway, pressing a finger to his lips. He knocks.

'Enter,' rasps a noble voice from within. The bailiff opens the door.

'After you, Mr Caveat,' he says.

'Tis a richly furnished room, walls panelled with Spanish leather and gold trimmings, a grand oaken table and a hearth, above which is a portrait of a slender man in hunting brogues, clutching a dead fox. The fellow sat behind the table on his throne is an older version of the subject, perchance turned forty, sharp featured, florid and bearded, as pompous an aristo twit as one could countenance. His identity is unmistakable, 'tis the Earl of Derby, Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange to his closest associates. The reputation has travelled farther than the man.

'Lordship...' I mutter, bowing before him as if at court.

A steady grin traverses that thin, pale face. Has to be in-breeding there. He holds up the royal seal.

'How much will it cost me to make this go away, sir?' he says.

'Sir?'

'Well, I am sure Her Majesty means well, but she knows not the ways of simple Northern folk, sir. You are her agent, are you not, sir?'

'Well yes...'

'Then you are charged with a great responsibility, sir. One that you cannot possibly fulfil, sir. Aye sir. The Chingles are as

stubborn as all hell, sir. They will not bend, sir. I have been trying myself to convince them to change sides for years, sir.'

'Sir?'

'YES sir! Now then, I can see but one valid option, sir. I pay you monies for your inconvenience and you toddle off back to Saxony or wherever it is you come from, sir. How much, sir? Name your price, sir.'

I should snap his hand off at the offer. This is my last great opportunity to return to Holland with a healthy float of cash to resurrect my business. I must surely accept.

'Alas... I am afraid I must refuse and persist, my Lord.'

Did I really just say that? Did the words come from *my* mouth? At the back of my mind is Good Queen Bess, smiling that motherly smile at me. I should be thrown in the nuthouse! Alas, for all and everything, I have come too far not to investigate this task, and the Queen's wrath will not spare me if she discovers I have taken Strange's money and ran. Alas, alas, alas.

Strange bangs his sword against the floor. He is not a happy Lord.

'Zounds... Very well,' he says, 'You have the royal seal and I shall not argue further. For now.'

He strokes his beard, probably debating with himself whether to throw me back in the cells or arrange an accident for me.

'Sir,' says I, 'Would you take me to these people? The Chingles?'

He bites his lip, sighs and nods.

'I hear you like a drink, Caveat. Is that true?'

'Well yes but...'

Strange snaps his fingers.

'Fetch us a couple of bottles of that red to go would you, Murphy? And none of that Spanish piss, the good stuff.'

Murphy, the bailiff, scampers out of the room.

'That's very kind of you, my Lord.'

'Call me Strange, everyone else does,' he says, 'Every gentleman that is, what what what!'

He finds his own quip amusing. I laugh along. 'Now, do you have lodgings arranged, Caveat?'

'I was told to stay with the Chingles.'

'Nay!' he says, leaning towards me, 'Betwixt you, I, and these four walls, they are not the most accommodating lot. They live like monks you know. Praying for their Pope Innocent ten times a day and eating gruel and vinegar to clean out their sins. Fie, they must all shit like horses! Ha! Nay, you'll want some comfort, if you insist on staying.' He grabs his cloak, 'Let us take you to The Birkey, my favourite knocking shop on the edge of Chingle. A last bastion of sanity I assure you. You seem like a sport, so it will be my privilege to pick up the charge. We can sup the wine on our way and get to the other side smiling, my man.'

'Yes sir.'

'Call me Strange, Mr Caveat. Call me Strange.'

~

Strange allowed me to check on Maggie before we embarked. Indeed they have shoed and fed her, fair to say I've ne'er seen such a contented nag. We climbed aboard his fine carriage, Murphy and the Earl's guard leading my horse. On the thoroughfares of Liverpool everything would stop as we passed, commoners bowing to Strange with reverence. He obviously keeps a tight reign on them, but there is nothing wrong with that. Peasants and yeomen are only useful when they are obedient and they should know their place, after all.

We cracked open his burgundy and supped, Strange giving me a potted local history to which I listened with half-interest. More striking is the handsome bay, from where one can see the peaks of the Welsh mountains in the distance against a backdrop of a glorious red and yellow soup of a

sunset stretching o'er the western sea. Rather splendid.

Aye, perchance I am going to enjoy this after all. I certainly mistook Strange with my first impression. Yes, he put me through a spell in the cells, but that was to make pains to confirm my identity, one can never be too careful these days. Strange is like me, a pragmatist, he is frustrated by the same things as I am: bickering zealots, taxation and the self-righteous. Likes his bit of quinnny too by the sound of things. Aye, I think I am going to get on just fine with my new friend.

And his wine is rather good indeed.

'You'll meet the Chingles in good time, Caveat. But you have journeyed long and hard and you need some relaxation, sir.'

'You are a fine fellow, Strange.'

'So to what plot do you hold an heirship? Antwerp y'say? How many acres?'

~

The carriage grinds down a country path, towards a fine looking coaching inn beyond a large bank of grassy sand. In the distance there is not much to see but field upon field and the coastline, though from the high ground I espy a perimeter wall and a tall spire. Must be the church that odd boy Crispin was prattling on about. The inn looks far more accommodating.

'That is The Birkey,' says Strange, 'Your home anon, perchance eternity, for I'll lay a ransom on my balls that you will not talk the Chingles around. Beyond it is Chingle land, all Chingle...'

Strange looks a little perturbed whenever he says the word *Chingle*. What kind of bunch are these people? He belches and hands me a bottle to drain. Fine wine indeed.

'Aye Strange...'

The humour returns to Strange's countenance.

'Now Caveat, let's have a bit of sport, what what what!'

~

The hussy has putrid breath and a rather mushy quiny, but I rumped her for measure. More than that, my tired body was very grateful for a comfortable bed. The truth is, I am not fatigued with the ride much, more a night in the company of Lord Strange involving flagons of mariner's rum, a meal of stodge, a nip of mandrake and gaming to the early hours. Strange gave me a float of some gold and I roundly trounced the locals, though his Lordship was a worthy adversary. I retired far enough ahead to feel contented and give the filly a sturdy ten minutes of sauce before rolling over exhausted.

An overcast early midday light peeks through the curtains and I can smell the brine in the air even in this chamber. 'Tis plain but comfortable in here. I think about rising for the day's business but Maud, the hussy with the bad breath, cups my balls in her palm and starts to jiggle them. Well rested, I have awoken with a hard beam of morning pride. Perchance I should give her a good wallop, to set me up for breakfast.

I part her legs and slip a couple of fingers into her moist goo, rubbing her fleshly button as she gets juicier...

'Ooh... me Lord!' she sighs. I flip the hussy over and she coos as I slip it up her to the hilt. My chamber in Amsterdam has a mirror above the bed where I can espy my athletic thrusts and steed-like grace, but I content myself with making her howl in the most primal of manners, loud enough to wake a corpse, balls slapping against her sumptuous arse...

A knock.

'Pah, zounds and shit!' I grunt, pulling out of the strumpet. Just when I was beginning to enjoy myself! 'Who is that? I say!'

No reply. Another knock. Fie! Maud climbs out of bed and puts on a robe.

'I shall answer, sire.'

She opens up and comes over suddenly subservient,

bowing and curtsying in a ridiculous manner given her loose garment.

‘Oh who is it, woman? Is it Strange?’

‘Sire, my lady Sarah...’

‘Who? Oh shit...’

Sarah Chingle, *here*? Pah, this was not the impression I was seeking to make!

Maud whispers to the doorway and nods, blushing and curtsying. The floorboards creak outside and she shuts the door.

‘My lady begs your presence in the yard, sire?’

My head is beginning to thump from last night’s exuberances.

‘Yes Maud, had best be up, I suppose.’

~

‘Tis a grey noon, as if all colour has suddenly drained from the place. I had a quick scrub, shaved and trimmed my beard and pulled on my gear, which has survived the week’s adventure and still looks rather fetching, if a little baggy. The *Piedmont* look, aye.

Maud leads me downstairs, where watchmen in the service of Strange practise their off-duty quaff. It seems The Birkey is a dusk til dawn establishment, much like my beloved Bartolotti. How I yearn to be returned there at this very moment, alas!

The yard is a typically agrarian affair, a few pigs snouting about the place, horseshit and spent barrels. A modest pony and trap awaits me, whereupon sits a delicate, slim woman of eight and twenty, honey blonde hair tied tight to her scalp, ice blue eyes and fair, smooth Nordic skin, her modest black dress denoting a widow of serious countenance indeed.

‘Why, fair Lady Sarah, is it?’ says I, making my charming best.

‘Ferdinando said you have been sent to see my father,’ she

says, her tone clipped, avoiding any eye contact.

'Aye ma'am, as much as I have been sent to see you.'

'I cannot see why you would need to see *me*, Mr?'

'Caveat, ma'am, Angus Van Caveat. The rightful heir to...'

I move to kiss her hand, she snatches it away.

'Do not touch me, sir! You hear! Never!' she snaps. Zounds!

'I must apologise, ma'am. I am not familiar with your ways, alas.'

She sniffs, regaining her stiff composure.

'You will know that I am a chaste woman, Mr Caveat. That is the way of God.'

'Aye ma'am.'

She eyes me briefly with contempt, up and down.

'Will you board, sir?'

'I have a horse, ma'am.'

'Then ride with me,' she orders. Quite the madam, indeed.

I mount Maggie and we ride onto a sandy coastal path and across the demarcation betwixt Chingle land and the vast Stanley estates. The lady makes no acknowledgement of my presence or attempt to communicate, which is highly unusual. Also unusual is that she travels by her own means without a guard or retinue. I expected some dumb wench whom I could have eating from the palm of my hand, but then 'twas not the most auspicious introduction anyway. Perchance I should start again. I attempt light conversation.

'That Birkey, 'tis a fine house,' says I. The Lady sniffs.

''Tis a hell pit and no more,' she says, 'And typical of Ferdinando to build it so close to our land. At night, drunks and prostitutes often wonder over, you know. They harass our folk with their antics. There are many family tenants here, noble godly folk. That place is an outpost of Sodom.'

'Oh, I don't know, fair lady. 'Tis not that good, you know.'

She pulls the reigns of her horse, agitated.

'What kind of man are you, Mr Caveat?'

'Why, a Dutchman, ma'am,' says I, hoping she will respond to my pithy nature.

'You fornicate beyond the sanctity of marriage while valiant, honest men fight for what they believe in, their families, their homes, their faith. You are bound for damnation unless you change your ways, sir.'

I am beginning already to see what Strange meant.

'I am neither valiant nor honest, ma'am. As for what I believe in, then that is surely not worth fighting for. And as for damnation, well ma'am, if I am damned then why should I not get my kicks before the whole shithouse falls in, eh?'

She scowls. I have incurred her scorn verily. A good start, for a strong reaction from a woman always bodes better than no reaction. She prompts her horse.

'Doubtless you are a Protestant then, sir,' she says. We ride anon and she clams up again.

This may take longer than first thought, but I will prevail. Yes.

~

They are modest grounds, set within a stone wall perimeter. Nothing ostentatious, the boggy land provides peat for the fires of tenant farmers, crops and fodder for their livestock, the woods give raw materials for building and a physical barrier from the outside world. Neat little cottages house the commoners, though it seems there is no pecking order as all abodes are well kept and similar in size and land allotment. The only unpleasantness about the place is the stink of raw silage, human and animal, though I'd venture London smells worse even on a good day. I daresay this Little Chingle has not changed much in a hundred years, perchance a thousand.

What they call a squire's hall, most squires might give to their bailiff, if not even to a senior yeoman. None of the heraldic pomp one will see in any peer's house exists here.

No suits of armour, no tapestries depicting vainglorious ancestors running through Frenchmen, no coats of arms, no turrets or towers parading the dominance of the squire over the peasantry. Just an austere, comfortable house.

She makes no acknowledgement, just expects me to follow. The only trace of flesh she reveals is on her very face and hands, and it is difficult to discern the quality of her petite figure beneath black, hemming garments that must cut into her flesh. Perchance if her face wasn't so stern all the time she might be pretty, who knows? Only her husband, and he lies at the bottom of the Bay of Cadiz.

A few carvings and family portraits line the hallway, though 'tis mainly bare woodblock. I fear I might have run into a Quaker compound by accident and that I will soon be forced to beat myself bloody with a bush for my sins. Lady Sarah strides through the servants quarters - though I see no servants today - through a dining room and up a flight of stairs to a short landing. There I am somewhat startled by a huge, grand image of a young Elizabeth painted in the Italian style, fair in the blossom of youth, perchance even some colour in that face. Bessy has joked that she would rather be depicted dead than smile for a portrait, but this impression I have ne'er seen. 'Tis a different Bess, the corner of a smile on her lips, bright, loving eyes. 'Tis more the Bess I know.

'Awful woman,' says Lady Sarah.

'You have not met her.'

'I know enough, sir.'

'She is still your Queen.'

She bites her lip.

'That's just what Papa always says. Now keep quiet, he may be resting.'

We enter the bed chamber, which itself is no better than modest. The windows are open to the air, from which I can see across the estate and over woodland towards a beach.

An apothecary attends Lord Richard Chingle, a man of tall frame but no more than skin, hair and bone on a bed. He looks up at me and smiles knowingly, then a little blood seeps from his mouth.

'Lord Chingle, I am an emissary from Her Majesty Queen Eliz...' I begin.

'When did he start bleeding, Mr Billington?' says Lady Sarah.

'Shortly after you left, ma'am,' says Billington the apothecary, a studious and gentle fellow of forty, 'He'll be fine, he just needs a little sleep.'

She takes his hand and rubs it, old Richard's eyes gaze upon her lovingly.

'I am sorry Papa. I will bring him back another day,' she says.

'Laws, I did not know how frightful this ague was,' I tell Billington aside.

'Tis not an ague, sir,' he says, 'tis worse than any ague. His abdomen and back are riddled with lumpen growths deep beneath the skin, rooted to his innards. I can only help his pain with mandrake, and even that is devilish hard.'

'I see.'

Lady Sarah grabs my elbow in an iron grip, perturbed at the sight of her father.

'He is too ill for you to meet now,' she says, 'You must return to the inn. Laws, I wish you would return to London, sir. You have no place here.'

She is upset, I will humour her.

'I understand. It is only my mandate for the Queen that I must uphold...'

She pushes me out of the door.

'You know the way back. We will send for you when the time is right.'

Grabbing her rosary beads, she slams the door in my face.

* * *

Well, that is a welcome I'll certainly remember.

~

'Tis a small relief that the Lady discharged me for a while, since I find it as difficult to watch a man dying slowly as I would see him beheaded. The Lady's sullen countenance is perchance understandable and I should show more patience. However, I do not have an endless resource of the stuff, nay.

I mount Maggie and quicken her across a field, stopping at a brook to give the beast a drink. Perchance should I get that Maud to warm the bed tonight, or another hussy? Might as well try everything the house has to offer, laws I might take one back to Amsterdam if she matches my approval, as I am always looking for new talent. Since room and board are on the sporting fellow Strange, I see no risk in indulging in a spot of gaming this eve with my winnings from last night. Laws, there is nothing else to do around here but mount fillies and scratch one's arse...

'Zounds! What swine...'

A pebble struck me on the back of my head. I spin to search for the foul culprit, drawing my blade. From a clump of bushes there is a rustle, I spot a pair of boots and approach, jabbing the bush with my sword.

'Aaaagh!' squeals a young voice.

'Come out here, yer little maggot! I say.

Crispin, the Moorish scallywag, scurries out of the bush. I prang his neck with my blade and seize his ear.

'French cunt!' he spits.

'Who taught you language like that, boy?'

'Master Williams'll pound out of you if you harm me.'

That's it, I'll drown the impudent little oik!

'And just who is Mr Williams?'

A deep, booming voice behind me. I feel a pitchfork jab my buttocks.

'The boy's guardian.'

I spin and fence the fork, but am taken aback by the sheer size and bulk of the fellow, a man of forty built like a haystack, an equally ugly Irish wolfhound at his side, snarling.

'Point that thing away from me! Do you know who I am?' says I. The dog strains on his leash.

'Jasper likes you,' he says, menacing, jabbing my guard.

'I must warn you,' says I, 'I was trained in the art of fencing at the court of William of Orange...'

'Oh aye? Well fence this!'

Williams boots me hard in the pills, the whole world is set spinning... then he cracks me in the jaw with the handle of his fork. I collapse in utter agony. The lad spits on me...

Williams slaps him over the back of his head.

'Mind, we'll have none of that, son! He got his deserts and no more!'

'Sorry Master Williams!'

'You two... common bastards... I'll oooooo... I'll have you flogged!' I grunt, tears in my eyes, clutching my bits. Why, that could ruin my career! Hellish agony! 'I'll have you flogged!'

'You hears that Crispin? We're in trouble now!' says Williams, prodding my belly with his fork.

~

'Alas, there is nothing I can do,' says Strange, 'Perchance you could take it up with Sarah, but good luck. Williams is her favourite peasant you see. Bet you a stack of crowns he rumps her silly on the quiet.'

'Aye,' says I, holding a wet compress to cool my jewels. No whoring for me tonight.

Williams let me go after I cursed him enough, laughing at me as I raced away on Maggie, my plumbs throbbing angrily with every gallop. Zounds, I'll see him whipped!

'If it had happened on my land,' says Strange, 'I would have got the fellow lashed publicly. Laws, I would love that. I'd thrash him a myself then give you the whip handle. Self-righteous papist thug! But we can do nothing as it stands. And I would advise you not to challenge him again.'

'No danger of that, Strange,' says I.

'The Dutchman is right though. That Williams is trouble, milord,' says Murphy, 'Thinks he is tough, but I would give him a hiding to regret he was born, sire.'

'He IS tough, Murphy,' says Strange, 'I say, go and fetch us a couple of brews from the bar, there's a good man.'

'Tis surprising to see Strange's goon pipe up on my side. Perchance he is not such a bad fellow either. I need as many allies as I can get at the moment. Strange twitches his waxy moustache, tapping the table with gloved hand while Murphy procures more free drinks for his Lordship. Not a bad little racket he has going here at The Birkey.

'Good man is Murphy,' says Strange, 'Not too sharp though. Now, how are the old plumbs, eh? I have dallied with books of physic, may I take a look?' he says.

I pull down my breeches.

'Zounds! Is it like that naturally or is that the swelling?'

'Tis natural,' says I.

'Very good, Caveat! Though I think I do see a bruise. Pah, bastard Williams!' he says.

Suddenly conscious that most of the taverna are staring at my harnies, I pull up my garments. They get back to their quaffing.

'Vex not yourself further with it. You will recover,' says Strange, 'Just that it proves my point, sir. The Chingles live in a different world to the rest of us. They encourage their peasants to answer back to their superiors, aye. They *even* show them how to read scripture, can you fathom that?'

'No Strange,' says I, wincing and aching, 'tis difficult to sit

comfortably, 'I cannot.'

'I mean, imagine the state of this realm if commoners were all educated! Laws, who would shovel the shit then?'

'Aye,' I chuckle, but it hurts to laugh. Strange claps me on the shoulder.

'You are a fine fellow Caveat. And you are always welcome on my lands as my guest. But I do not want you here on this task. The Queen should not bother herself with trifles when there are more important matters at hand. Will you not reconsider my offer, sir?'

'Lady Sarah wants me to go too,' says I.

'Well sir, that is all you need! They will not bend, you have tried and failed. Not a soul need know I paid you. Not even Murphy.'

Strange has a way of making an offer very enticing. But why does he want me away from here so?

'Nay sir, I regret,' says I, 'For Bess can smell a rat from here to Windsor, and I daresay my balls are in a bad enough state as they are.'

Strange chuckles and drains his ale, wiping the suds off his mouth with a crumpled sleeve.

'Let us forget all talk of Chingle and enjoy the eve anon, sir. Tomorrow Murphy will deliver you to Liverpool to purchase any supply you fancy, I will pay.'

'Aye, Strange. Thank you.'

'You are my guest, Caveat.'

Murphy arrives with fresh coups.

'Strange?' I ask.

'Yes my man?'

'Would one fancy a short game tonight?'

~

I lost at cards, but 'twas not of any great import. A bruise the size of a pumpkin has spread across my loins, and I fear I might have been put out of action for good. Restless and in

some discomfort, I arose from my bed and set to work by candlelight on my first missive to Bessy, just to take my mind off the pain.

It reads as follows:

Dear B

I am happy to report that I have arrived here safely and without vexation. Your noble servant the Earl of Derby has seen fit to take me under his wing and assist my negotiations with the Chingles.

It is my sad duty to report that Lord Chingle is indeed gravely ill, though his daughter informs me that I will get my chance to beseech your case. I will endeavour anon to obtain a satisfactory resolution for you, ma'am.

Ever yours

A∞C

A postscript ~ would you inform Maggie that I bear her no grudge and hope to see her again soon? I would not trouble you so ma'am, but she is a friend.

Aye, a friend and a great rump. I pop the seal of *ER* on the parchment. 'Tis not much, I'd agree, but I know Elizabeth will get edgy if she does not hear regular news.

And anon to bed, but I fear I will not sleep much with this heavy ache and the sultry night that imposes the sweats upon my whole body. A thunderstorm appears over the lands outside, flashes giving an ethereal glow to the night. Horses stir below in the stables and a huge clap thuds against something big nearby, a tree, perchance that giant bastard Williams with luck. Rain rattles against my window in great torrents and the noise of revelry downstairs dulls down for

the night. I rise and check my door is secure and bolted, then my sword in its hilt. I settle down again and ponder all these things I have seen these days past.

Aye, there are more storms coming this way, I sense.

6

Coolish, dewy day for August. There was quite a chatter amongst the regulars at The Birkey, about lightning last night striking a grand oak clean in two halves out in the Chingle lands, a product of witchcraft they say.

Nay, witchcraft is merely another excuse for persecution when heresy fails, and the guards and watchmen that frequent these borders will say anything to keep themselves from boredom. The same faces are here every day, I am beginning to think that Strange has set up an encampment at this place.

Aye, waiting for *something* to happen...

But my host has shown me kindness and hospitality, I must grace him with a little trust. Murphy arrived early with the carriage and took me into Liverpool on Strange's orders to buy some decent clothes, leathers and silks from a little quayside stall. My bits still ached, but the swelling had reduced suffice to try new breeches and a rather fetching codpiece to keep everything in place. Now I was looking the part again, which is indeed half the battle. I shall impress the pantaloons off that widow yet!

In the back of the carriage, I felt quite the aristo travelling through the town. 'Tis always wise to make noble connexions wherever one goes, for if one associates with class on an

equal footing, one *becomes* class. Yes.

And anon, through the town and to the Stanley hunting grounds and estates at Toxteth. 'Tis no surprise that Strange likes his hunt, he has to find something to do to pass the time bar issue decrees, whoring, gaming and quaffing ales. What does surprise me is that he has a family, a wife Alice and three small daughters. Strange didn't seem like the family type, more the dandy dilettante, alas what do I know about families? His children watch on, fascinated as he guts a deer, kicking off the steaming innards and an unborn calf for the crows to scavenge. Murphy and his men load the carcass aboard a cart, no doubt for preparations of a feast this eve.

'Caveat!' says Strange, approaching, still out of breath from the hunt, 'Splendid to have you in this neck of woods, my man!'

I shake hands with him, crimson about his palms.

'Pity about the calf,' says I. Butchery for sport has ne'er been my oyster. Perchance I haven't the stomach for it.

'Aye well, it would have made a fine stag to hunt one day. But one never knows what one will get on a day's sport. How are the balls, sir?'

I glance askew at his wife, a plump, short lady who keeps winking at me.

'Erm, I shall live, milord.'

'Good good good, what what what!'

'Strange, I do not wish to eschew your hospitality but I am expecting to be called back to Chingle at any time.'

'To see the poorly old man, eh?'

'Aye.'

'Alice?' says Strange, 'Is it not time for the girls to see their tutor? Do take them back to the grange, would you. Mr Caveat and I have *business* to discuss.'

'Nice to make your acquaintance, Mr Caveat,' she says, outwardly flirting with me. Strange does not seem to mind.

'And you, milady,' I say, making a bow.

Alice giggles. She takes her children and heads back towards the grange, a retinue of ladies in waiting trailing her. The grange is more like Windsor Castle than the Chingle's hall. Aye, the two families might be neighbours, but they are oceans away in outlook.

'You can pluck Alice, if you wish,' says Strange with a disturbing level of nonchalance, 'I mind not. Indeed, I would quite like to watch, to see how another man rumps her. She's a fair rattle, you know.'

Even I am quite taken aback by this.

'My Lord?'

Strange smiles a strange smile.

'No pressure, Caveat, no pressure. Come, let us stroll.'

I walk with Strange, suspecting that he is going to offer me even more money to leave the region and that I will have to bite my lip yet again.

'I have happened upon an idea,' says Strange, 'Something which might appeal to you. Something which might satisfy all parties.'

'Pray continue, milord.'

'I make no secret that I covet the Chingle lands. But why? It is only a small tract, the farming is good but that is unremarkable. The tenants are boisterous and unruly, as you have seen to your pains, sir. Why should I want that trouble? Well, to begin, I might not look further than you, Mr Caveat.'

'Strange?'

'Your mere presence here suggests that certain *powers that be* think that I cannot keep my own house in order. Forget not, that while the Chingle lands are a separate estate, I am still their lieutenant, their protector...'

'I do not quite follow, Strange?'

'Well, I would not expect you to, sir.'

'The Queen did not say this had anything to do with

usurping your power, rather everything to do with saving the Chingles from Puritan zealots.'

Strange claps a hand on my shoulder. He has a strong grip for a thin fellow.

'Caveat, do I *look* like a Puritan zealot? Then you want the same as I do, indeedy do, sir! Why do we not come to an arrangement then, a gentleman's agreement if you will?'

'I am listening?' says I.

A pregnant pause. The Earl stares me in the eye but through me.

'Marry the dowager,' he says.

'What?'

'Convert to Catholicism, marry the dowager, then recant. She will then be powerless to disobey you.'

'And what would I stand to gain?' I ask.

'Simple. You keep the dowry. Should amount to a hefty sum, as her husband was a Molyneux, arch-papists, notorious hoarders of their tenants' levies for the Church of Rome. They have a fortune stashed away and it would be all yours. Thereafter, you could stay, you could leave, your choice. But you agree now to hand over the lands to me, for a nominal price, upon marrying the wench.'

'You are a good man, Strange, but I see a shortcoming in this arrangement,' says I, 'Why do I need your say-so when I have a royal seal?'

Strange nods, we continue walking.

'Elizabeth has no direct heir, and it will not be long before the issue of primogeniture to the crown is raised, perchance a *Lancastrian Earl* will rise to the throne once again. Um? Perchance. Ere that day, I am still the most powerful man in these parts, sir. I can make life very, very comfortable for you here, a vast site more so than even already. *Or sir...*'

His eyes darken, as if he does not want to say it. I save him the trouble.

'I gather, milord, I gather. But charming the woman is one issue, marrying her...'

'Do you not see, Caveat? That *is* the issue! You are a foreigner, allied to no-one, but with the backing of the Queen herself, no higher authority in this land and childhood friend of old Richard. The connexions are perfect, society would bless it. You have noble blood...'

'Well Strange, the Duchy of Antwerp is under dispute at the moment but...'

'YOU have no vested interest but your role as emissary. Sarah, on the other hand, is a devout Catholic. She naively believes in the human soul, in truth before God, in chastity before marriage. Only serious commitments will impress her. What could be more serious than conversion to her faith, in these dangerous times for papism? What, Caveat, could be more serious than to woo her and pledge your loyalty to her until death? Tell me that, Caveat!'

'The woman has only met me once and already she proves that she hates me,' says I.

Strange grins a strange grin.

'She hates you because you have my association, Caveat. Pure and simple. Should we have a very public falling out, she might look upon you differently. Yes.'

I can see Strange's mind working in front of me, only the detail of his ultimate intention I miss. For instance, how would I know this is not a ruse to get me removed? An excuse to despatch me? I like Strange, but I trust no-one that much. Alas, I darenst say that to his face, lest it would offend him.

'But Strange, could I not just pluck her? Then bend her to my will?'

'Why have hemp when you could have silk, Caveat? And besides, the Lady of Chingle is ne'er *plucked*, sir. I have been trying for years and have nearly had my eyes scratched from

their sockets, sir.'

Aye, but Strange is no Caveat in the avenues of charm and deportment, however much he might think that he is. Still, 'tis a cunning offer.

'Suppose sir...' says I, 'Suppose I succeed. I am left with a zealot of a wife, a millstone verily!'

'Wives can be controlled, Caveat,' says Strange, 'Much more than dowagers. How old are you? Score and five?'

'A score and ten.'

'It is high time you took a wife. And you'll not meet a decent one in The Birkey, that is certain...'

'I know not, Strange. This is a dark covenant, whatever way you paint it,' says I.

Strange leans against a tree and licks the blood from his palms.

'I want those lands, you want a title,' he says, 'the Queen wants to stop any bloodshed. Accept my offer, Caveat. You will not get a better one in all your born days.'

~

We strolled back to the estate, Strange outlining his plan to prove to Lady Sarah that we have fallen out, nay *hate* each other now. The chap has read Nicolo Machiavelli's work *The Prince*, I am sure he has, which makes my nerves jangle. For I have read it too, and know that I could become a disposable pawn. Strange might be one of the idle rich, but he is powerful, and men only stay powerful by staying sharp.

But what choice do I have? If I lose favour with Strange for rejecting his offer he might make my life hell! He would drop the façade of friendship as quickly as he adopted it and I might find myself dead in a ditch after he has set his dog Murphy on me. That is the worst scenario, for I would hope he is the sporting fellow he appears, and that I can take him at his word. That is not a fate I should tempt, however. I can only apply Machiavelli myself, ergo play Strange's game and

wait for my own opportunity.

We shook hands on our pact and shared a jovial wine in his gardens, then Murphy was summoned to take me back to The Birkey on Strange's splendid little carriage. On board, I remind myself of the rewards here, perchance things that I have always aspired to... A fortune, a manor, the title (for I have always *deserved* one), the wife, the babe...

Alas, the wife!

But first I should make my opening gambit, playing by Strange's rules...

For now.

My loins still twitched sharply for days thereafter, but at least that meant that temptation did not hinder me as much in my great task. Aye, the last thing I want is for Sarah Chingle to espy me with another whore, for I should remember that like Saul on the road to Damascus, an epiphany awaits me. Unlike Saul though, I know this one is coming.

Each night now I dine alone and return to my room with a bible procured for me by that trollop Maud, who was quite mystified as to why I should want to read such a book when I could be giving her a portion. Naturally, the employees of a seraglio would not keep the good book about them in numbers, for I would venture that few of them ever worship. Unlike the tenants of Chingle, being under the Earl of Derby's direct employ would mean they are never fined for failing to attend service, a whore being far more acceptable to the Protestant state than a Catholic. Of course, Strange's trollops attend a different kind of service tenfold a day. How hypocrisy works in strange and magnificent patterns sometimes.

Ne'ertheless, Maud was assiduous in her efforts to assist. First she rooted out an old common book of prayer, which being of Anglican origin was no use to me. Then an English translation, a Tyndale edition of a New Testament, which a

good Catholic would sooner spit on as heretical evil as even look at. I prudently despatched her to find an authentic, Roman Catholic text and eventually she came good. One of the girls, Emily, used to practise as a nun over in Ireland, until she fell pregnant and shipped herself and her disgraceful bastard child over the water and entered her new occupation. It fascinates me how anyone would still remain loyal to such a faith that had cruelly cast them away, but the former nun graciously agreed to lend me her book on condition that I return it to her when I am done with it.

Quite a sturdy young thing too is Emily. Might have to visit her discretely one quiet eve, indeed.

But, eyes back on the prize, I set to studying the Latin text with the vigour of a Priest bidding for ordination, burning midnight wax, sleeping by day, shutting out every sound and temptation towards the revelry downstairs. Conquering Latin again, a dead tongue that I was once tutored in briefly as a child by a scholarly Aunt, proved the greatest difficulty, but as a strict and logical language I soon got used to the vernacular and began to discover the hidden meanings in the chapters and verses and the unwinding tale of Christ as told by his many heralds. 'Tis a good enough story alright, and as one reads it, one becomes more fascinated by its proclivities to be vague enough for any swine to twist its meanings. Still, 'tis hard to believe that wars have been fought and crusades undertaken over this book, or at least in the name of its protagonist. If Christ was once a man, I doubt He would sanction all this lunacy that happens today in His name, as would any prophet from any faith.

Alas, but who am I to preach? I am happily immoral and soulless, which is exactly why I have undertaken this venture in the first place. Inwardly, I do not pretend to be anything less than a hypocrite, but at least I am honest enough not to try to fool myself.

Days have passed by, and still no word from Chingle. Strange's order is to wait for their invitation, then begin the elaborate ruse and stage our little *contre temps*, but I am beginning to wonder whether the old fellow Richard has croaked and no-one has cared to tell me, or Lady Sarah has chosen to ignore me in the hope I will go away. Or both.

~

I arose at four of the morn this day, as would a monk for morning mass. The discipline is not the difficult part once one gets used to it, 'tis only the temptation, for everything is now back in its full working order and I am forced to abuse myself like a poor ginger peasant boy with the pox. Alas, I must not stray from the path of righteousness, for I am convinced that Lady Sarah has her spies, even about this place. At least, I would hope so, for they will see a clean, frugal, noble fellow studying the scriptures day and night. Maud, whom I think I can trust, secreted a jug of mead into my room in the dead of night a few eves past and I gave her a fast, hard plucking, but that has been my only dalliance.

I have read The Book so many times now that I fair imagine I could reel off any vague quote to suit any occasion. Zounds, that Church of Rome really does operate a foolproof racket, no wonder the Protestants fancied a slice of the pie. Nevertheless, as I sit here this morn combing through it yet another time, I feel the Grand Inquisition itself would be impressed with my pious knowledge of the Holy Roman Bible. The only problem is, Lady Sarah is not here to see it!

A knock on my door. 'Tis probably Maud but I make pains to remain sat on my hard stool, fumbling with a rosary and muttering papist scripture.

'Enter...'

Maud does enter, followed by Lady Sarah. I do not look up to her, merely carry on.

'My lady requires your company, sir,' says Maud.

'Leave please, my child,' says I, sober, priestly. Maud raises her eyebrows, incredulous, then leaves, 'My lady, 'tis not proper for you to be in the bed chamber of a gentleman, I would ask you to wait downstairs until I finish my morning prayers.'

'I was not aware that you are a Catholic, Mr Caveat?' says Sarah. Like a pike on a sprat!

'I am that ma'am. But then 'tis not prudent to make that common knowledge, a sentiment you would understand, ma'am.'

From the corner of my eye, she is frowning.

'You think us country fools, do you not, Caveat? You are no more Catholic than I am the Queen of Sheba!'

I turn to her, unable to resist my own charm.

'And why not indeed, for you are as beautiful ma'am. If I may be so bold.'

'No, you may not, sir!'

I remember the script. *She will ne'er be just plucked...*

'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' says I, 'Does not The Book say that? Nevertheless, your faith in me might be diminished, but I am strong in my own convictions and have nothing to prove, ma'am. To the world I am a Protestant, but to my own soul I worship the Holy Church of Rome and no heresy!'

For the first time, I see the lady looking almost amused. I can scarcely believe my own eyes.

'Where did that mad old Tudor slut get you from, eh?' she says.

I spout up my most fiery indignation.

'What! That is a slur, ma'am! A damned slur!'

'Yes Caveat,' she says tiredly, 'That was why I said it. Now, will you tear yourself from your scriptures so that my father might see you? Or would you risk *excommunication*, sir?'

'Fie, you are a cynical woman!' I protest, 'And I deeply

resent your treatment! Ask any member of this house of my behaviour this week past! Ask them!

'I already have, Caveat,' she says, 'Now, shall we go?'

I clap my good book shut.

'I will saddle up.'

'Good good...' she says, opening the door, 'And... Caveat?'

'Ma'am?' says I, with a suitably pious and impatient wrath.

'That Bible of yours. Don't they give that version only to Ursuline nuns?'

'I beg your pardon?' says I.

A bright, genuine smile, as if a rose blooming from a stone.

'See you outside, Mr Caveat.'

She exeunts, leaving me red-faced. The rear of the bible bears a crest, I hadn't born it much attention, but it appears to be the insignia of the Ursuline order. Zounds, I have picked this item up a thousand times and I did not notice! Pah!

Sarah does indeed have a spy in this camp, that Irish tart.

I shall have to think upon this indeed.

~

Lady Sarah's mood is indeed different this time, if not what I had expected or hoped. As we ride, she keeps glancing over at me and giggling. Not, I must add, in that coy, girlish way that would have me pluck her, but rather in a curious manner, as if she considers me oafish and false. Persistence is the key here though, and the longer I keep up this charade the more convincing I will become, and the more convinced Lady Sarah. That, at least, is Strange's plan.

Alas, Bessy wants results before the Chingle land is overran, so I need to work swiftly.

Old Richard is propped up in his bed, attended by Billington. He looks marginally better than last time, but then I have seen healthier looking corpses than that occasion. Bessy trusted me with a second seal on this quest, one on which I made an oath not to break, a personal missive from

her to Richard. Upon producing it, the croaky old fruit hails me as if a long lost son-in-law.

'Molyneux my boy! How was Cadiz?' he says.

'Papa,' says Sarah, 'This is Mr Van Caveat from The Netherlands. He brings news from your *friend*.'

'Wha'?' Richard squints at me, then at the scroll in my hand.

'Aye my Lord,' says I, 'Our *mutual friend*.'

Richard takes the scroll, moves for his opener, then stops.

'Sarah, Billington, leave us,' he says.

Lady Sarah eyes me firmly.

'We shall be right outside, father.'

They exeunt. Lord Chingle examines the scroll.

'This seal bares marks of steam from a pot, boy, yet I can see it was bound only for my hands to break. What say you?'

For a dying man, he is still capable of a sharp countenance.

'Upon my word as a gentleman, sir! I have not seen its contents,' I lie.

'Pah,' grunts Richard, 'Impudent young 'un.' He squints at the writing and holds the parchment out to me, 'Read it for me, would you? My eyes are failing.'

I take the scroll and read it aloud.

'My darling dearest Richie...

How it breaks my heart so to hear of your poor health. I beseech God every night to send us a miracle in your recovery and pray for your spirits to restore you. How I ache to see you one more time, but for this state that I am chained to, nay married to, I would have made that good many years past...

Very trite for a monarch of her stature, but this is Bessy as a friend rather than a Queen.

I am very lucky to have met and loved some dear people in my

years, and you Richie are among my fondest and certainly my most private. All I can do is send you this missive so that you can hear what is in my heart, in the hope that you will at last listen to what your head must tell you rather than your heart.

Your tenants, even one of your family, have been making bold gestures of defiance against the reformation. I cannot and will not tell you what faith you should practise, but I must beg you to make your people safe from persecution and recant Catholicism in these dangerous times. They are chasing papist plotters with more veracity in this day than they chase witches, and many innocent lives are being caught up. I beseech you to see this terrible but plain wisdom, before the inheritors of your estate follow to suffer the consequences...

'Pah, Lizzy!' grunts Richard, then pausing, 'Well boy? Cat got your tongue? Continue, lad!'

I have sent the young man before you to assist in carrying out this duty as a physical representative of my interests, so that your family may be protected from immediate threat from the puritanical Sheriffs of Bolton and Preston and the Duchy of Lancaster, whom I know your minions have long spoken out against and to whom you refuse to pay levies (which I still must pay for you to keep the peace, but that matters not a jot). Caveat is a sharp lad, but I fear his protection and my seal will not hold long lest you take the decision to save your people from themselves.

Protestants and Catholics have lived in peace together before, and they will surely again, but while the forces of Puritanism and Calvinism seek out insurgents with such relish I urge you to tell your people to keep a low profile and weather the storm, lest I cannot begin to describe the consequences...

* * *

Richard is sullen, but nods to me.

'Continue, son.'

I remember the years before I stepped up to this throne, years when to be a Queen was never in my mind, years when everything was so simple and the world was there to discover. Years, dear Richie, when as a young Squire you pestered me to come live in your village and marry you! Aye, I still read those old letters from time to time and I still have moments of rue that I declined your offer. That is God's truth.

The old man chuckles, a rattle in his throat.

A lifetime has passed since we last met, but in our correspondence I have always sought and achieved solace with you, dear Richie. You were ne'er the court, or parliament, or counsel. You ne'er bade me any more grace than you would any friend, and for that sanity and clarity alone I am eternally yours.

Now I will return your kindness. I will do all in my power to stop everything you hold dear being destroyed in the maelstrom of politics and ambition that has become England. I beseech you to take up my offer, before it is too late.

Sweet Richard, let my envoy help you. Not as my subject, or my countryman, but as my beloved friend.

Eternally and forever,

ER

Lord Chingle sits bolt still, staring into space. For a short second I fair think he has snuffed it, but then he blinks, issues a rattling cough and espies me, holding out his hand.

'Give me that, boy,' he orders. I pass him the parchment.

'Is my Lord not feeling well?' I say, biting my tongue as the words pass my lips.

'What does it look like, boy?' says Chingle.

'I am sorry, my Lord.'

Chingle's countenance slips from sullen into a deep, croaky chuckle.

'A lesson for you, my lad. When all else fails in life, laugh at it, right in its mean old face. Aye! Because 'tis all absurd, and nothing will matter when you come to meet your maker.'

'You're not quite there yet, my Lord.'

'Not quite,' he says, a smile remaining across his yellow, leathery face, 'But 'tis a luxury to know when one is almost spent. At least one gets a chance to say goodbye.'

'Aye, sir.'

'I will not write to Lizzy. You might read it, and I am too weak. But you can give her a message from me.'

'Certainly, my Lord.'

Chingle beckons me down to his level to hear his profundity.

'She was the best shag I ever had. We only did it once, in a field of cauliflowers when we eloped to Sussex one weekend. Her guardians were furious, they wanted my balls on a stick... Fie, huh... That was the last time I ever saw her face. Tell her lad... tell her I will never stop loving her, and I will see her in heaven. That is all boy...'

"Virgin Queen" indeed!

'I promise my Lord.'

'Good good. You can get them back in here now.'

'Ah, but there is one more thing, my Lord.'

Chingle rolls his eyes.

'I thought as much. Spit it out.'

'I am a Catholic myself, sir, but I am also a realist. I have been told I cannot leave here until I have secured your safety.'

Please do as Her Majesty beseeches you. Persuade your tenants to...'

'Recant? Oh lad... what did you say your name is?'

'Caveat, sir.'

'Well Cabbyart, even in my stronger days I could not have achieved that even if I had wanted to.'

'But sir, they are your peasants, they do as you bid.'

Chingle sniffs.

'They do as they bid themselves, Cabbyart. I am not the ruler of their souls. One day perchance this nation, perchance the world will come to see things that way. When I am long dead...'

'But surely sir, you must have some sway...'

'Cabbyart, how well do you know my daughter?'

'Well, she is a fine lady, sir...'

'No lad, how well do you *know* her, um? She is pin sharp, and I am proud that she is blessed so, but she is also stubborn and driven and a menace to her own well being, for which I am accursed with a worry that I will take to my grave. But there is nothing I, you or the Queen of England can do to change Sarah Chingle. She believes in her cause more than you can ever imagine, she lost a husband to it, and it pains me that she would sacrifice herself to it anon and anon...'

He exhales deeply and settles back into his pillow. I can tell this tires him but I must persist, since I am not sure I will get another chance to speak to him alone.

'But sir, she can still practise what she believes in. Secretly, until the dust settles...'

'Do you not see, boy? She remains a Catholic in mind, body and soul. To hide one's beliefs is to recant them. Nay!'

'Lord Chingle, can you not at least say something to her...'

Chingle starts coughing uncontrollably, retching up crimson phlegm.

'Lad...'

he splutters, 'Get the apothecary, so he might

balance... my humours...'

Before I can fetch Billington he has returned with Sarah, whose veneer of cheer has now evaporated.

'What did you say to upset him?' she says, ice blue eyes seething.

'Nothing my Lady, I...'

'Get out.'

'But Lady Sarah I...'

'Get out! Piss off back to your whore den! Before I fetch Williams to give you another lesson.'

'That was *you*!'

'Yes Caveat. And it will happen again and again! Why? Because you are a Protestant rat, like all the rest of them...'

'Ma'am I am a devout Catholic...'

She pushes me out of the room, Chingle has gone purple with the fits.

'Out! And take your lies to hell with you!

The door slams in my face, striking me hard on the bridge of my nose and knocking me flat on my back.

I am beginning to get a trifle annoyed at this situation. We should endeavour to enact Strange's plan *poste haste*, before Lady Sarah sends Williams out to kill me.

~

I was rather drunk as I returned to my chamber. Strange does keep a fine cellar in this tavern, I must say. Good fellow, fine fellow. I made effort to grab the best bottles and guzzle them with Maud, emptying one over my harnies and instructing her to lick up the residue. 'Twas a last act of abandon before dedicating myself to the performance of Strange's plan.

Maud washed me down, put fresh sheets on my bed and I bade her goodnight with a hard slap of the rump. Will not be getting much of that for a while...

A clear night sky outside reveals a blanket of stars and a

crystalline moon. I listen to the waves beat across the rocks
and the gulls squawk out to the briny blue. I go through
Strange's plan one last time in my head. 'Tis a fine idea, 'tis
bound to work, bound to...

For who would not trust such an upstanding
fellow?

The original scheme was to perform the trick directly in front of Sarah herself, but 'tis difficult enough getting an audience with her, ne'er mind seizing her attention. Better perchance, and certainly more canny, is that we fool the Irish tart Emily, so that she will tell her Ladyship all about it.

I have been working on her these past days. At first, I arrived at her room to find her naked. She opened her legs and invited me to set to it, all on Lord Strange's bill naturally. 'Twas difficult to refuse, as for all of the trollops at The Birkey, Emily has easily the finest body. One would not imagine that she has recently given birth, such are the tight lines of her petite twenty one year old frame, perky little breasts and a fine boyish arse on her. Fie, she's a flame-haired temptress, but to convince an ex-nun of the purity of my soul I would need to behave impeccably, meaning of course no rumpy pumpy for Caveat. I ordered her to cover up and cursed her for selling her body in such a way. I neglected to say that I could sell her body far better, for with the right instruction she would make a fine courtesan.

And so to business. Night after night we read scripture together and said prayers for an hour, before I would let her get back to work. At first she was suspicious, but then the Hibernian hussy expects men to hump her, not offer spiritual

enlightenment and salvation. I made pains to call her “my child” and asked her how she came to be in this dreadful predicament. She replied that the Monsignor back in Roscommon had planted his seed in her and when she told him the news he tried to fry her at the stake, trumping up charges of witchcraft. She fled to Liverpool with her unborn child and ran straight into Murphy, as would any out-of-towner sooner or later. Murphy sent her here, where she has worked since on her back.

Upon this I was tempted to launch into my pet diatribe about the infernal hypocrisy of religion and the clergy, but I managed to hold my tongue and comment that it was the Monsignor who should be damned and not this sweet child. From there, I think I managed to glean her trust, having bitten the temptation to perform *the laying on of hands* ritual with her.

Tonight, I joined her at ten in the evening, our usual time, and conducted our usual session. Pity the poor girl, she is beginning to make doe eyes at me, as if she thinks she has found a faithful, godfearing father for her bastard. Aye, sometimes I am so dastardly I disgust myself! Perchance Sarah was right, I am a rat. But at least I am not a Protestant.

Emily reads aloud from The Second Book of The Kings, her Latin flawless, her curly red locks falling about a heaving white cleavage. My thoughts wander... perchance she is feeding her child by now. I wonder what the milk tastes like? Fie, 'tis a marvel I have managed to tie a knot in it this long!

The door crashes open and there, as expected, stand Strange and Murphy. Emily squeals in panic and cowers behind me.

‘What is this!’ says I, ‘Strange, I demand to know the reason for this foul intrusion!’

Murphy stomps over and punches me hard in the face, the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth, ‘Steady on, Murphy...’

I mutter.

The bailiff throws me to the ground. Strange seizes Emily by the hair and drags her onto the bed.

'I put a roof over your head, I feed and clothe you and your bastard and this is how you reward me! Foul papist whore!'

'Sir I...'

'Unhand her, Strange!' says I, pushing past Murphy, 'She is only a child herself!'

Strange picks up the bible and the rosary.

'A child that is capable of worshiping the evil Church of Rome! And you Caveat! A papist conspirator! I will have yer flogged immediately, the both of yers!'

This is a fine performance from Strange, but I would hope he doesn't take it that far.

'Mercy!' wails Emily, 'Mercy, my Lord!'

'Tis me and me alone, Strange! The girl is innocent of any crime,' says I. Oh how chivalrous indeed, 'I implore you Strange! I implore you!'

Strange pulls her hair tighter. I do wish he would stop that, but he seems to be enjoying himself.

'This bitch told us she wanted nothing to do with Catholicism, 'twas a condition of her employment. Papist worship and gathering is an offence punishable by death!'

I fall on my knees and beg Strange.

'We were only making prayers, sir! To the same God as yours surely! Be merciful!'

Murphy cuffs me hard on the back of the head. Was that really necessary?

'I will not have conspirators on my land,' says Strange. The Irish tart is wound up to a froth, I think we have got her, verily.

'Be merciful on the girl, sire,' says I, 'She has a baby...'

Strange seethes for a moment, then pushes her away. Emily

sobs, collapsed.

'Pah... I am a soft fool!' he says.

'What are we going to do about this *Catholic?*' says Murphy, raising me to the feet by the ruff.

Strange ponders a second.

'Take him to the castle...' he says.

'No...' sobs Emily.

'...and burn the skin from his feet. Then might he learn how the Inquisition spread the word of their Pope.'

'No!' cries Emily, Murphy carts me away, a *noble* martyr.

'Be brave my child! God is with you!' says I, making the sign of the cross.

'You,' says Strange to the girl, 'will get back to work now. Won't you?'

She nods, scared half to death, tears rolling down her pretty face. Murphy drags me out into the narrow corridor, where the customers and their trollops observe the commotion.

'Was that too much?' I whisper to Murphy, as he hauls me along in a choke-hold.

'Nay Mr Caveat,' he says, "'Twas just perfect.'

Now back to that castle. And this time I would hope the accommodation is better...

~

Going to ground is never easy, even if one has the best hospitality an Earl can muster. Murphy made a rather obvious affair of my imprisonment, chaining me up and dragging me through Liverpool as he rode Maggie, I've still got the bruises a week later.

Thankfully, upon my arrival at the castle and away from any prying eyes the Chingles might use, I was led up to Strange's personal chamber where Maud awaited me. All this biblical nonsense was still in my head, and I was quite giddy with the effort I had put into the charade. Strange assures me

'tis foolproof, good enough to melt the stone heart of any Catholic out of guilt and sympathy for their martyr brethren. All I had to do was lie low for a week and let Strange's agents spread rumours of the terrible agonies I was suffering at the hands of the Protestant dogs. Good good.

Alas, boredom overtook me after a couple of days, since I could not leave the chamber until a convincing period of imprisonment had elapsed. Maud was accommodating me as well as usual, but I could tell she was getting a little weary of the incarceration, so I let her return to The Birkey, good fellow that I am. I contented myself with reading some of Strange's books; playscripts (*Massacre At Paris*, an original by Marlowe of all people), Socrates and, secreted at the back of his cabinet and reprinted on an old Gutenberg, that calculating Florentine swine Machiavelli. Surprise, surprise. I was special guest in Strange's innermost cave, the place where he goes to read and read and plot and plot. King of England he might be one day, unless he runs into someone just as conniving... and this realm is ever teaming with such types.

'Twas an odd feeling, being locked up at one's own will. I had a dry thirst for news, my questions alas unanswered. Did Emily take the bait? It seemed so. Did she tell Lady Sarah? One could only guess, but it was likely. And the prize question, would Sarah herself creed the story? Or is she too sharp by half?

Well, I think I have just had my answer.

~

'After what he has been through, and he thinks of his horse,' says Sarah.

I am collapsed in the back of her cart. Sarah sits up front, tiny next to the massive Williams. I fake delirium, muttering about Maggie and various nonsense. My concern for Maggie is genuine, I have grown fond of the nag, and feel vulnerable whenever we are separated.

'Aye, the *poor* fella,' says Williams, firing a sharp glance back in my direction. He suspects a ruse, but then Williams perchance is the type who is always suspecting something.

Sarah had gone to Strange personally and demanded my emancipation. I am Elizabeth's personal envoy to the Chingles, he is meddling in affairs which are not of his concern. Well, Strange *reluctantly* signed the release and Sarah travelled to Liverpool Castle, where I was already preparing myself by rolling about in muck and hay out in the yard to get that dishevelled look. Fie, I am still a handsome beast even when I am scruffy.

Feigning weakness, Williams picked me up, slung me over a shoulder and carried me to Sarah waiting in a cart. A look of guilty concern was etched across her pretty face, that taut countenance now all but gone. Emily had rushed to her at the first opportunity and sang like a nightingale. My hard work had got its reward, now perchance to worm my way into her affections...

'Worry not, Mr Caveat. We will take good care of you. Will we not, George?' she says.

'Aye ma'am,' he grunts, offering over another sly glance, 'Very good *care* ma'am...'

~

We returned to Chingle Hall, where I was washed down by Sarah's maid and placed in a clean, comfortable bed. I thrashed about in delirium for a few minutes to be convincing, then settled to a snooze, content that I could foster Lady Sarah's compassion without having to even get out of bed. A twinge of guilt crosses my brow occasionally, for I am playing on the emotions of a chaste and vulnerable, if truculent woman. Her heart must ache with her father's slow demise, and for all her oaken tough exterior she has proved to me that an ice maiden she is not.

Indeed, anyone but Caveat might melt at her pains, but to

achieve one's ends 'tis sometimes unavoidable crossing one's own lines of morality. I have a task at hand, and it will be achieved, whatever the burden.

'Tis a real advantage not believing in God sometimes.

~

At times I sensed her watching me, only for a few minutes, even seconds. She might peak her head around the door and I would mumble as if in a fever. Then she brought Billington in, who dissected one of my stools and tasted some of my piss. He concluded that I was suffering from an ague caught in prison and that I should be regularly bled to restore the balance of the four humours. Zounds, what an astute fellow Billington is!

No wonder old Richard is in such pain, ignorant bloody quack!

So I was cut and bled every night. 'Twas too much after a couple of days, thus I began my miraculous recovery early, hoping that Sarah would remain unsuspecting.

'It gives me hope,' she says. We kneel on the hard floor at the foot of my bed and pray, 'Would that the same angel that restored your health bring back papa, alas...'

'Aye ma'am,' says I, trussed up in a set of old Dickie's hunting brogues, "'Tis the power of Christ. Like Lazarus turning water into wine in the temple...'

She shoots me a puzzled glance, then softens again.

'Mr Caveat, now you are well I have a question for you.'

'My Lady?'

'You are evidently a Catholic...'

'A Jesuit ma'am, in every way but the sack cloth.'

'Yes, but how is it that you fornicate with that Maud girl?'

I choke with shock. How does she know about Maud? Zounds, is Maud on her side too?

Then I recall, our first meeting at The Birkey, of course.

'I have prayed for His forgiveness ma'am. I might say

'twas a weakness of spirit, a moment of lust, only that would be a falsehood too. Maud is in high favour with Ferdinando Stanley, ma'am. I regret such actions, but I am a trained spy. I had to convince His Lordship Derby that I was on his side, so that he would not interfere with my mission...'

'So you bedded her? Sounds convoluted, Mr Caveat. But you are a man, and every man is weak. And how is it that you attempt to make us recant yet you are yourself a Catholic? Why are you loyal to the greatest heretic of them all, sir?'

'Alas, that is a great falsehood ma'am,' says I.

'No Mr Caveat, that is fact.'

'Lady Sarah, look upon your father's relationship with Elizabeth. Look upon that love. Yet still your father brought you up in *his* faith. The Queen does not despise Catholics, despite all the popular literature. 'Tis the men around her that plot and persecute on both sides that should make you weary. That is also why she urges you to be less bold in your criticisms of the Protestants, simply to save your necks.'

'I find that hard to credit, sir,' she says, closing her eyes and pressing her hands together.

An irony that she finds my only truism the hardest of all to believe. Perchance she dislikes Bessy so because she remains a rival with her mother for Richard's heart. Best not to mention that, alas. At least I feel there is at last an element of trust betwixt us, lest I would not be kneeling beside her but still waiting back in that castle.

'Do as I do ma'am. Practise your faith in private, until the storm has passed,' says I.

'A faith which is solely private is no faith at all,' she says.

'But ma'am, you do not understand...'

'Quiet, Mr Caveat. Let us pray.'

~

Making reports to Strange would have to be performed in

the dead of night, for an absence of the frail and weak Mr Caveat from the immediate grounds of the hall would be viewed with acute alarm and suspicion. Moreover, it would be a blessed relief to get away from the place for an hour, as I feel I am being continually watched.

Perchance I am, which is why I am careful.

Gone two of the morn, the house has long since retired. I pack my bedclothes with pillows, so that at first glance in the dark room it would appear that the bed is occupied. I have excuses prepared to explain my absence, but I would prefer that it would not come to that. After working to remove a large pane, I climb out of my chamber window and shunt myself down a strong oak beam to the gardens, then espying the lands about me, trot stealthily over to a wall to scale over into Sniggery Woods, which runs all the way to the sand hills and the boundary of the Chingle lands.

No sound but for the rustle of trees in the wind, spindly branches to-ing and fro-ing like great witches' fingers. That the sycamores are bathed in the strong light of a full moon is a mixed blessing, for while I might plot my route well, it also means that I am easier to spot. Ne'ertheless, there cannot be anyone out in the woods tonight, 'tis a foggy, coolish soup of an eve, not comfortable for man nor beast, though I was sure I could hear a pack of wolves a few moments ago. I desire to get this over with quickly.

I run through the woods, but the old man's shoes are slightly small on me and I stub my toes. Keeping a look out for all things natural and preternatural about me, I make it to the designated spot, an unmissable landmark, the shattered oak. 'Twas once a magnificent tree, perchance a thousand years old judging by the many concentric circles in the wood. Must have been an almighty bolt that felled it, like some Norse god had awoken from a eon of slumber and brought his mighty axe down, for the two halves were split almost

equally through the middle from top to root.

I perch on the trunk, nervous without my sword. Then footsteps, I crouch down, anticipating the bailiff.

But 'tis not Murphy, nay. 'Tis that impudent Moorish weird breed Crispin, dragging a heavy sack. He stops by a sycamore, then counts his paces five times to the base of the neighbouring tree. Taking a quick look about him, he brushes away some dead leaves and lifts up a crude wooden lid to a ditch. He then removes an article from the sack, a fine silver casket, and places it carefully into the ground, reseats the lid, brushes back the leaves and spirits himself away with the agility of youth.

What is this? A curiosity indeed. Crispin is gone, I am tempted to take a peek, but then Murphy will appear at any moment, and the less who know about this, the better. Yes.

A twig crunches underfoot, but a few paces behind me.

'Murphy you arse, you startled me!' says I.

'Who else were you expecting, Caveat? The grim reaper?'

I do not like this commoner's familiar tone with me. So typical of the yeoman watchman type, far above his station.

'Let us not meet here again,' says I, for more reasons than Murphy would know, "'Tis too exposed.'

'Less chatter Dutchman. I've had a long ride on that nag of yours.'

'I would like her returned, Murphy.'

'She is well taken care of,' says the curt fellow, 'Now, your report?'

'Aye, well you can tell His Lordship 'tis all good, all very good...'

~

I know not if Murphy was expecting miracles, but he did not seem very impressed with my work thus far. Perchance I had warmed to the dour chap prematurely, for there is ever a hint of threat in his voice. I would say he enjoyed giving me

that beating last week, and whenever he is away from the auspices of his master he is even more surly.

Alas, wouldn't like to take the fellow on though...

He rode off on my horse with the news that I had been well received by Lady Sarah since she collected me from The Birkey. No, I have not asked for her hand in marriage, no I have not plucked her, yet. But who is Murphy but a thug who asks stupid questions? Some things take time, for one does not meet ladies like Sarah Chingle every day. A very singular game must be played with her, and I am still learning the rules.

Aye, she's a rare 'un for sure.

I could opt to take the long route through the woods back to the hall, but my bed calls out for me and they tend to arise awfully early around here. Aware that Williams nearly emasculated me last time I trod on his ground, I am particularly vigilant this time around. Scaling the brook with a fast leap, I take a short cut across his fields, using a long briar patch to give me a little cover in the event that anyone is patrolling the area at this ungodly hour. The thought crosses my mind, there is no one who would like to catch me more skulking around the lands at this time of night than Williams, but perchance that is my over-active imagination.

Aye, there is nothing out here but trees and squirrels...

A massive dog jumps on me, sending me flying back into the brook, biting at my tunic. In reflex I grab the beast's balls and twist them, it yelps and races away into the woods, tail trapped betwixt its hind legs. That'll teach the brazen mutt!

Though I recognised that creature, 'tis Williams' dog I think. Yes, Jasper...

Why would it be out of its kennel in this darkness? Or is that because its master is out too? Fie, I knew this to be a bad idea.

The animal races into the woods, which could mean

Williams is about there somewhere. Or he could be in the farmhouse, where he would be asleep. Or he could be ten paces away.

I continue through the field, wet and cold now thanks to that blasted hound.

Past a hayloft, I espy a farmhouse, faint candle light glowing from inside. Looks like someone is up...

‘¿Allí está la casa, padre?’

A chill prong of ice slithers up my spine. Footsteps on the other side of the briar, several men by the sound of it.

‘Where’s that idiot dog?’ Williams’ voice. Oh Christ! ‘Crispin lad, go and find Jasper for us will yers.’

‘Aw...’

‘Go on lad, he’ll not be far.’

‘Aye, master...’

I hold my breath. The Spanish voices continue to babble. After a few seconds I peek betwixt some brambles, espying the cottage again. Four cloaked figures accompany Williams, one wearing the robe of a Jesuit monk. A *Spanish* Jesuit monk in reformation England.

‘Oh Sarah,’ I say to myself, ‘What are you doing?’

Williams looks about, then pulls open a hatch at the foundation of his house, inside a pig sty. The men descend, as if entering the bowels of hell...

A twig snaps behind me, a dog growls...

I spin to see Crispin, the dog sees me and cowers. If he alerts Williams and I am caught then I am a dead man...

‘You would be wise to keep this to yourself, my boy,’ I whisper, running a finger across my neck, ‘Make not an enemy of me. Or Lord Strange.’

For a moment I think he is going to sound the alarm, but my warning seems to have struck the lad mute.

‘Beat it, lad,’ I say, and he obeys.

Now I must run. For a stubbed toe is better than a caved

head.

~

The next week I spent in a cold sweat, fearing that Crispin had squealed to Williams everything, unable to sleep for fear of a knife at my throat. In fact, the tiredness helped my ruse further, for it gave the impression that I was still recovering. Moreover, I need not have worried about the young Moor, as it seemed that he had one or two secrets of his own to keep indeed.

A couple of nights ago I was lying awake, staring at the ceiling and chasing all the events and potential outcomes through my head for the umpteenth time. Then I heard the creak of footsteps outside my door and anon down the passageway towards the master chamber. I climbed out of my window, onto a ledge and followed the path of the steps. Perchance someone was trying to get to old Richard, perchance 'twas Sarah or the apothecary checking on him, 'twas worth investigating anyway.

Peeking through the glass, I could see Crispin loading up a sack with various precious items, silverware and jewels. Old Richard was quite awake and seemed to be directing the lad from his bed, candle in his hand.

So *that* was his game? The boy was burying old Dickie's loot so that the wrong people would not get their hands on it after his death. The wrong people being the Sheriff of Lancaster, the Earl of Derby or, well, me. Canny old buzzard! It surprised me how he could trust Crispin, the tricky streak of piss, but if anyone else knew about it I would be surprised. This horde is enough to keep the family solvent in the event they should have to leave very quickly, that is my best guess. And in matters of money I am seldom wrong, unless that is my own we are concerned with.

I returned to my chamber and took up my pen and parchment, for a bee has been about my bonnet for long days

now and it is time I put my mind as ease. I set about the task of preparing two missives which, by the Grace of God or whatever masquerades as He, I hope will never have to send. Perchance my imagination fired too much, for my position seems to have strengthened, but I have learned to my cost in the past to prepare as best one can for *every* eventuality...

And so to work, and when I was done verily I slept better that night.

Dearest B,

The sad news arrived at last today, and 'tis with a heavy heart that I must tell you of your beloved friend Lord Chingle passing on peacefully in his sleep this morn, his faithful daughter and loyal tenants at his side.

Amidst your vexation and bereavement, I can tell you that my relationship with Lady Sarah has improved somewhat from the last time of writing. The poor girl is terribly upset herself by her father's demise, but she is strong and valiant, not unlike a certain someone else? I feel progress is only around the next corner.

I beg your further leave to continue my mission, since time is of the essence now. The Earl of Derby, your loyal servant, is a wonderful help and a distinct ally in this affair, but I fear the imminent arrival of Puritan inspectors from the North will make this a hot spot for the Chingles, in spite of his protection. Nevertheless, I am working hard to get Sarah's capitulation, you can be assured.

And anon ma'am, my deepest condolences,

Your friend,

* * *

A∞C

They held a funeral out in the grounds, specially consecrated for the occasion by the Stanleys' personal chaplain. I thought perchance 'twas a rare concession to the Protestants, as even Strange appeared to pay his respects, but the true nature of this peculiar lot reared itself again later. In the dead of night, hearing a faint Gregorian chant, I espied another coffin interred in the rose garden, beneath a plain, unmarked cross.

I took a discreet note from Murphy at the funeral, written in Strange's hand. News of Chingle's death has already spread far and wide, as far as a certain Thomas Preston, the incumbent Sheriff of Lancaster, who is well influenced and armed by the nascent but wealthy Calvinist merchant community of Bolton. Strictly, Preston should be Strange's obedient servant but he is far more prone to listening to his paymasters than his Lord, an issue which makes rancour with Strange nearly as much as the Chingles' continual refusal to sell their land. Nearly perchance, but not quite I'd suspect. It seems that Strange is not the only one trying to build a fiefdom, as I try to warn Sarah...

'Preston is not a nobleman. Nor does he have any jurisdiction over Chingle. This is our land, Mr Caveat.'

'My Lady, all they see is that Elizabeth's special protectorship has been weakened by your father's death. You are running out of options, if I may speak plainly. Who can protect you now? That lug Williams with his pitchfork?'

'I was under the impression that *you* were charged with our protection, Mr Caveat?'

Fie! What will it take to get through to this woman?!

'Perchance if you did not speak out against the Calvinists so, then I might be able to help,' says I, 'Perchance if you did not protect foreign conspirators...'

'What?'

'Aye ma'am! Deny it not, for lying is sin,' says I.

This is the way to nail a Catholic, hit them where it hurts: guilt.

Lady Sarah tuts and fans herself down. Her beauty is even stronger when she gets in a tizz, her eyes bluer, the tension in her countenance ready to explode verily...

We are in her chamber. She called me here for a reason I have yet to discover, lest 'twas merely to chew the fat. She is turned away from me, I sense she is crying, but desperate not to let me observe her. Not even at her father's funeral did she shed a tear, but everyone has their breaking point.

I place my hand upon her shoulder, she collapses into my arms, sobbing into my chest. I stroke her silken hair, guilty at the erection developing in my loins...

'There there, my Lady,' I whisper into her ear, 'I will take care of you...'

She tenses suddenly, pushing me away angrily.

'I know what you want, Caveat!'

'My Lady...'

'I thought you a good man, perchance a little loose, but this...'

'If you would explain?'

'Fornication, Mr Caveat! Evil, unrepressed fornication! Yes, I know all about *you*, sir...'

'Ma'am, whatever can you mean...'

'A spider's web of whores across Europe, a taverna in Amsterdam, a lifetime of gaming, of deceit, of immorality. You are no man of God! YOU are the worst kind of heretic, the kind that comes with an olive branch beneath which is a dagger...'

'But who told you...'

'And you come here, a wolf in sheep's clothing, saying that you can protect us, when all you do is plot against my family,

endeavour to take everything away from us!

'No, my Lady!'

'Yes Mr Caveat, YES! Your friend Strange is taking you for a greedy imbecile, and he is right! You made a covenant, to woo me, take my hand in marriage and then loot the estate. Pah, only would *you* woo *me* in *your* dreams! Strange himself told me, as they were putting that coffin into the ground. That wanton little bitch Emily is working for him, can you countenance that?'

'But I know she works for him. What has that to do with...'

It dawns on me. She *works* for him! Emily was tricking both Sarah and myself! Zounds! Strange never intended this plan to work from the word go, rather 'twas an effective and cheap way to get rid of me.

Pah, I am a fool!

'Now you see Mr Caveat. They are laughing at both of us. But at least I have now the measure of you, sir.'

'Sarah, please don't do this...'

'We will fight alone, Mr Caveat. That is the way it has always been and shall be anon until we are no more. That is why I would count a noble, fine man like George Williams as my equal and a hundred fold your superior, for every tenant on this land has stood shoulder to shoulder with us since this whole damned reformation began! We will not pay that foul woman's taxes, we will not stand up in her courts, we will not tolerate *her* spies, Mr Caveat!'

Her door falls open, Williams enters.

'Lady Sarah, you must permit me to explain! I am not the serpent you paint me as...'

Williams grabs me by the throat.

'Take him home to his whorehouse,' she says, back turned upon me again, 'I never want to see him again on Chingle land.'

~

'Call me a lug, would yer!'

'If I die, you'll hang Williams!'

'Where's your *friend* Stanley when you need him, eh? Eh!'

Williams ducks my head in the brook again, I chew gravel, water shooting up my nostrils and into my lungs... He pulls my sodden head up by my long tresses.

'Thou shalt cuh cuh cuh... thou shalt not kill, Williams... Thou shalt not...'

Williams kicks me in the guts, I collapse on the bank, water, blood and bile shooting from my nose and mouth. Crispin stands behind him, subdued and agog. He places his hand on Williams' shoulder. I can tell by his countenance that he has not yet shared his little secret with Williams, perchance old Dickie had given him instructions...

'Master, Lady Sarah said not to kill him...'

'How... gracious of Lady Sarah...' I grunt, doubled up.

Williams administers another kick to my midriff, I feel a rib buckle. He grabs me by the tunic and tosses me into the stream head first. I crawl to the other side, wet, winded and out of sorts.

'Make your own way back!' yells Williams, 'And come near my Lady again and you shall suffer, *Mister Caveat!*'

I crawl off towards the sand hills, desperate to get away from him...

And more than anything, my spirit is now in tatters. For a scoundrel is most regretful when he has been discovered, and especially when he has been discovered because another scoundrel has outwitted him.

'You rotten shit, Strange...'

I clamber up an incline, sand on my face, body and shoes, a bloodied, dirty mess. Away, away from this damned place! I should have listened to the voice in my head that said take Strange's money and go, for this is a hornets' nest I have wandered into, and there is no court, no Marlowe, no Maggie

Radcliffe to save me now.

I am completely alone, and must survive on my bare wits.

~

Perchance I might have *one* ally left in these parts, but I will need to play it canny. 'Tis a chilly, early September night. I wait by a sand hill, watching comings and goings from The Birkey. I have pondered returning to Liverpool, cadging a meal and stealing a horse, but Murphy or one of his henchmen might collar me. Since I have outstayed my welcome in these parts, another beating might be on the cards. Perchance worse, perchance a residency in the market square stocks.

Night falls and the place quietens. I creep into the bar, which remains open to serve dregs to Stanley tenants and off duty watchmen. I am mindful to steer clear of that evil little strumpet Emily, tempted as I am to teach her a lesson. Making my way to the chambers upstairs, I hear all kinds of frolics, creaking beds, moaning, cooing, grunting, giggling. Then I come to Maud's room.

Espying through the keyhole, she is busy with a man. I pray that he has not the money to stay the night and I camp myself in a window recess, behind a curtain. Tiredness is overcoming my body and I begin to nod off...

'...and don't come back until yer can afford it, yer bloody halfwit! Next time I shall fetch the guard I shall!'

A farm boy stumbles out of Maud's room and she slams the door in his face. He walks away, pulling up his breeches, kicking sawdust, hands in his pockets.

Here's my chance.

I knock lightly on Maud's door. She opens.

'Change'd yer mind have ye... Sire!'

I push my way in and lock the door behind me.

'Maud, have you heard what has passed?' says I.

'Why... what happens to you, sire?'

'Never mind that, woman. Do you have any money? I need to away, I have important business...'

She heads for the door.

'Well I be sure my Lord Strange would help, but I be busy...'

'No!' says I, blocking her way, 'Maud, you are going to have to trust me. Your master and I have, erm, had a disagreement. I am a little short of funds, though I can guarantee that I will return every penny you give me in good faith. Nay I will return it double...'

A sly, coy grin crosses her plumpish face.

'Maud, I have not much time. I need to away.'

'How much you need?' she says.

'Enough for a horse, nay a pony'll do...'

'Thrippence be enough, sire? That is half a week's pay.'

I inhale deeply.

'Yes, yes, thrippence will be, just...'

She approaches me, sliding her tongue down my throat. I recoil in shock.

'Does sire not like that? Ah, that *is* a pity forsooth so 'tis!'

'What are you doing, you peasant tart? I have no time for this!'

Maud seizes my balls and gropes my arse.

'I would says, for three whole pence, you should have time for *anythings*, sire...'

I could protest, I could flee, but I am beginning to get the picture now.

Yes, survival is the name of the game...

~

My arse is raw and scratched, the tawdry harlot demanded more than just a single dollop, I must have had my face in her muff for a damned hour, and zounds it smells foul down there, like bad onions, ugh. Laws, then she demanded the first of several hearty rumpings, I barely had time to recover

betwixt each one.

I roll over, exhausted.

If she wants any more I will have to steal the money from her. Laws, I feel used!

'You are the finest man ever to lay in my bed. And I have had a few, huh huh...'

A few? Dear Christ!

'Miss Maud,' says I, as respectfully as I can muster, 'Might you see fit to getting the money for me now? I beseech you, I *must* away!'

~

Three measly pence in my pocket, I bid Maud goodbye for what I hope is the very last time and head down the stairs. The bar is empty now, but still open by the looks of things, even though I see no publican. Pah, I should be leaving, but I will get at least one more quaff from the pocket of Strange, damn his eyes!

I find an empty flagon, leap over the bar and pour myself some ale from a barrel. Fie, I'll drink this, sleep with the sky as my blanket and leave in the morning with my head held high, for I am done with this damned place.

My mood is foul, I feel as if the whole world has cheated me.

Perchance I have cheated myself.

But less of that, I will bury myself in a quaff!

~

I sit on a rise, looking across the beach and out to the sea, which tonight is as smooth as a silken pond. Belching, I toss the empty flagon aside. I am not as drunk as I would like to be and consider procuring a blade, taking myself back to that infernal pit The Birkey, slitting the gizzard of that foul tart Emily and boiling her baby for measure. Then buying another flagon so that I might drown in it.

Alas, I could not be so cruel, and even if I could I would

not be capable. Perchance the beer has had more of an effect on me than first thought.

'I want to go home...' I tell the stars, 'Home!'

I am stood with my arms up to the heavens, then I collapse into the soft sand. I feel no longer the injuries inflicted by Williams, or the layers of caked blood and grime about my person. The pains upon my ego have numbed too, and I am bellicose enough to take on any bastard, should any bastard come along, fie!

And what is that? Am I hearing things? The clunk of hooves upon the path, voices, heavy boots treading the ground...

I stand up to espy a troop of men, several on horses, some twenty on foot, all armed to the teeth, carrying torches and the battle standard of one Ferdinando Stanley, 5th Earl of Derby. At the head of the troop rides Murphy, astride a fine black mare, *my* fine black mare!

'Oi Murphy! You horrible Irish pigfucker! Eh!'

Murphy halts the brigade.

'Caveat? Is that my valiant Dutch friend?'

Guffaws from his contingent. A little voice at the back of my head suggests this might not be a wise thing to do. Pah!

'Foul peasant!' I yell, 'Wait 'til I tell your Queen about you and your master! She shall string you both up by the balls at Tyburn! Ha!'

'*Will* she indeed?' scoffs Murphy, 'And where is your mighty Queen now, dandy boy? Does she give you thrippence for a shag? Or might you get a shilling?'

That foul bitch Maud told him! They are laughing at me! I stumble over to them, that interior voice still ranting its warnings at me. Pah!

'You have my horse! I'll run you through!'

'With what? A streak of piss?'

I seize the bridle, but feel the cold steel of a blade against

my throat... *My blade!*

'You... you...'

'Dutch prick! If yer weren't a bloody waste of space I'd slice yer up! Now piss off!'

He boots me in the chest and I am sent tumbling in the sand...

The brigade continues on its path, guffaws and hawhaws as I lie face down, wishing Murphy had run me through, wishing I was dead...

I step back on to the chariot of my only friend Bacchus and ride away into the night... WOE!

~

A bright, low sun brings me out of my morning stupor. The skin about my face is cracked and bruised, and my body is wracked with aches and strains as I rise to my feet, blinking in the harsh light. On any other day this would be a lovely clear morn, a fine day for a stroll prior to some elevenses and a leisurely wagger and quaff at the Bartolotti. But that is a far away dream, for all I have is Maud's thrippence and a head full of rue to count for all my experiences on this awful adventure.

One sense that is not impaired is my smell, however. What burns about here?

I climb awkwardly to a high spot, where I can espy the Chingle lands. Smoke rises from several points in the distance, one of which is the Williams' farm. Well well well then, how justice quickens itself around here.

Murphy and his gang of thugs from The Birkey must have raided Chingle last night, and there was not a damned thing Lady Sarah or her bullnecked bailiff could do to stop them. Perchance Williams is dead now, the Spanish prized catches to be torn apart for public leisure. Foolhardy bunch! Why did she not listen to me?

'Pah!' I say to no-one but myself.

For a moment I revel in their misery, as if it is the Chingles who are responsible for everything that has happened to me. Alas they just are innocents, perchance too innocent for their own good. I know that I trusted entirely the wrong lot, 'twas my mistake, not Sarah's.

How morning ever delivers such cold clarity.

I examine the coins in my palm again. Thrippence will get me nowhere but some temporal relief in an alehouse. I will have to hustle my way to the South coast and pray I don't run into any hostility on the way, then I will have to risk being pressed into some bugging barnacle of a buccaneer's crew by stowing away on a vessel I hope might be bound for Calais. Aye, peril and suffering all the way. The only thing that might improve my chances is a large and immediate influx of wealth.

And I know just *where* to find it.

Laws, I am to be damned!

~

The Williams house was gutted last night. A few carcasses littered the place, though no humans, only his pigs, sheep and poor Jasper, now blackened and sizzling, as if Armageddon had passed through and vouched to stay for the night. Williams, the boy Crispin or the Spanish were nowhere to be seen, though I should suspect that they are all being carted off to rot in some dungeon right now, Sarah standing at the front like Joan of Arc but missing the fame. Alas, so beautiful, but so stubborn!

I left the smouldering house behind and made for Sniggery Woods, heading for the shattered oak. It seems someone has got here before me...

'Good morrow Crispin,' says I. The boy yelps in shock, dropping his haul back into the breech, 'Looks like I got here in time, eh?'

'Master Caveat!' he grunts, backing off.

'Oh, *Master Caveat* is it now, eh? One has changed one's tune has one not, eh? Since one's great wild boar of a guardian has been bagged, eh?'

'Master Caveat, we are all in grave danger...'

'I would say 'tis a little late to worry over such, lad. Now, help me with this loot and I might give you a couple of pieces and not thrash you for trying to thieve it.'

Crispin jumps in my path.

'That is Master Richard's legacy sir!'

I shove him out of the way.

'Well, he won't be needing it now, will he?'

'Sir, I implore you! My Lady Sarah has sent me here to collect funds for the bail of Master George. They are taking him to Lancaster Castle, sir!'

I stop in my tracks.

'Sarah?'

'Aye sir. Please, they are my family!'

The boy pants, desperation in his eyes. I cannot see any trickery but...

'Sarah was not arrested?'

'They wanted to, the men from Lancaster. But Master Murphy decreed she should stay to consult with His Lordship Derby. Sir, I beg you sir...'

'Yes Crispin you can stop whining now and let me think.'

Strange always said he'd wanted to get his hands on Sarah. Perchance that is her most heady attraction, that she is pure and unavailable. Now he wants to make her his mistress and control her and her lands...

'Sir...' says Crispin.

'And what of the Spanish?'

Crispin jitters, far less the cocky young scamp of a few weeks past.

'Sir...'

'Oh don't be an idiot, son! You remember, I saw Williams

escorting them to the farmhouse! Now tell me, have they been discovered?’

‘They are safe, master.’

‘Safe where, son?’

Safe with Lady Sarah, I will vouch.

‘Master George would not reveal such upon his death.’

‘I would imagine he might be put to the test there, boy.’

A look of abject horror and fear crosses Crispin’s face. The level of Strange’s awful trickery is only just beginning to sink into my countenance. I was but a small part in his plan, perchance a minor hindrance. Strange lusts after land, land meaning power, power meaning he is ever closer to the panacea of the throne. A papist community in his lieutenancy is one thing, for there are many across Lancashire who pay levies and recusancy fines to him, but a papist community that openly cocks a snoot at his authority is a thorn in the side and a challenge to that power.

And why should I believe that story about Sheriff Preston and his roaming hordes of inspectors? Strange would not take *any* challenge to his authority from here to Cumbria, I’ll wager. Even the seal of Regina only bothered him when Richard was alive, for though Strange could not dispute Chingle elder’s legitimacy, the feisty dowager daughter whose dead spouse was a known conspirator is a different proposition. Foul bully of women! Fie, all these Sheriffs and Bailiffs work for Strange, and this little town has stood up to his fiefdom for years anon.

Only now it hits me, only now can I see their pain. But I must find something in all of this that benefits Caveat, lest I would end up rotting in a ditch, dogs pissing on my corpse. There’s an opportunity here, and that shitpot Strange has maddened me enough to attempt it.

‘Lad?’

‘Sir?’

'Go back to Chingle hall, find my chamber and gather a sealed parchment from beneath the back floorboard by the dresser. Then bring it hither.'

'Aye Master Caveat. I can do that.'

'You're a good lad. And get us a pair of horses and saddle up some of that loot, three bags of gold will suffice. We have riding to do.'

The boy frowns.

'What will you do while I am off, master?'

I am tempted to cuff the scamp.

'I say, think me idle, boy? I am a fugitive, remember?'

'Aye sir,' he says, eyes cynical, 'I were thinking you may leave with Lord Richard's money.'

Trust is less abundant than gold in Little Chingle at present. This is a sad day.

'Son, do you want my help or not? Off you pop, lad!'

The idiot boy could only find himself a lame yearling and for myself a cranky old grey that does not take well to hard riding. I had suggested that he take our horses from the Chingles' personal stables, but he informed me that Lady Sarah does not keep stables.

What kind of landed family does not keep stables? My mind is boggled by these people!

All along our journey o'er dale, fen and marsh, I had to put up with nearly being thrown by my bucking beast or, if I did manage a gallop, having to wait while Crispin's knacker limped to catch up, neither was conducive to a pleasant ride. With all this gold, the temptation is always to make away. *Yes*. Indeed, I continue to doubt my sanity of riding across country without stopover to save the skin of some bastard who has twice nearly brained me, pah.

Alas there is only one way to put this right, and I owe this much to the Chingles, or Chingle, as 'tis now.

I even eschewed the overnight stop, in spite of the need for fresh horses and the chance to visit many fine looking hostelries on the way. Fie, with three fat bags of gold I could choose the one I fancied and be waited upon hand and foot to die an old man. Perchance I would throw in a coin to get young Crispin his first oats, alas all that must wait for another

day.

For as we cross the choppy estuary that leads out past the ancient county town of Lancaster and into the open sea, I must concoct a way fair or foul to somehow get the freedom of Williams, for young Crispin is dreaming if he thinks even a king's ransom would get him bail.

But there might just be another way to use the treasure to good effect...

~

The castle at Liverpool is miniscule in comparison to this granite bastion, perchance because Lancaster has always held a strategic importance as a midpoint betwixt four kingdoms. 'Tis not far from the borders of Scotland, where hundreds of tribes ascended from Celts and Picts brawl with each other as their primary daily leisure. Occasionally they enjoy a good fight with the English too, but who would blame them for that?

We have camped beneath the battlements in a sewer, for though the smell may cloy the nostrils it seems we are well sheltered from both the elements and any guards that might happen upon us. It is there that I take some moments to contemplate my next move and decide upon whether to send the letters Crispin fetched for me, letters that will surely count as my death warrant about this entire county, and bring a price on my head across Europe.

Pah, Strange would have had me killed anyway, if time would have bothered him. But after these papers find their destinations it *will* bother him, I owe the rotten Machiavellian shit so forsooth! Aye, this is what I wrote that night, the eve of good Lord Chingle's death. This is the missive that I have dreaded I would only send lest Doomsday came upon us. Painful it is but prudent too that one should countenance the betrayal of an ally when the stakes are high.

* * *

Dearest B

If you receive this letter then 'tis a sure sign that I have lost control of the issue in Chingle and disaster looms.

I beg you not to be angry with me, but a few weeks past The Earl of Derby and I hatched a plan to save his Lordship's daughter and his tenants from ruin. In short, the plan was that I should woo then marry the dowager, then by law of the land and even by Papist doctrine, I would gain power over the House of Chingle and divert them from their path to ruin.

Alas, that you are reading this suggests that the plan was a foul ruse. I had suspected the Earl's motivations, but also thought him to be a wise and trustworthy fellow, and in my dilemma chose to pursue his course of action. That I send this letter now proves that he is far from trustworthy, and I beseech you to despatch your personal guard to Chingle poste haste, lest there will be grave consequences. For Sarah, for the whole village.

If Lord Richard is now dead, as he must be if I am writing this, then I offer heartfelt apologies for heaping even more misery upon you with this news. For there is a matter that makes this issue interminable, a matter that you and you alone might gather to understand.

The Chingles harbour a band of Spanish troops and monks. They are housed beneath the house of Mr Williams, the bailiff, a surly bear of a fellow who has twice thrashed me. How many of them, I know not, their exact origin or identity, I know not. But if discovered, and they surely will be if Chingle Hall is overrun, then nothing I can do will stop Lady Sarah herself going to the gibbet for treason.

For any happenstance, a force of reckoning is needed in Chingle to

quell local zealots eager to seize Lady Sarah's birthright. And if I am writing this, the Earl of Derby will be chief among them.

Hoping I will never have to send this article,

Your friend,

AoC

I kiss the scroll and place it with its copy. Two missives, one bound for Windsor with Regina's personal seal (so that no one would dare tamper with it lest they are hanged for treason), the other for the personal attention of a certain Earl of Derby, omitting the details of the Spanish hideaways, naturally. A tumult of exhilaration courses through my veins, not unlike the feeling one gets when one has been particularly bold at cards. Alas, if life has taught me one great lesson, if one wins a fortune today, one loses the equal tomorrow, lest one be prudent and wise - that which I seldom have ever been.

This time must be different, for too much depends upon it.

'Master, it stinks down here...'

'You truly are a sharp boy, Crispin,' says I.

Crispin points at my letters, clutched tightly, one in each hand.

'What do you plan to do with those, master?'

Why, he is the inquisitive one, is he not?

'Watch and learn, son. Watch and learn.'

I wait to espy some Heralds, a procession of guards carrying important articles for distribution across the county, across the land, even abroad should it be merited. Ideal for my purposes, if I can just bribe one of them. Perchance I will be here all of the day, but Lancaster is known far and wide as an important court and bastion, the need for regular

exchange of documents and packages to and fro should be quite frequent.

~

It has taken only an hour for the Herald to appear, a camp fellow astride a big Arabian nag, all silk stockings and courtly lisp. Fie, the fellow must think he is far more than just a messenger boy, and just because he serves a few landed houses.

‘Stay sharp, lad,’ I tell Crispin, ‘This will not take long.’

~

After I flashed some gold at the fellow’s guards, I was permitted to approach the Herald and discuss business. I slipped him some pieces for his pains and explained that the royal seal meant the Windsor parchment had to go directly to Elizabeth, on pain of death. The same was true for the Earl of Derby. The fellow did not need telling twice.

Now for the toothsome part, alas.

We approach the castle directly at the keep. As expected, we are greeted by a pair of stout yeomen and asked about our business. I adopt my thickest Dutch accent.

‘I am Melvin Van Bogaade of Vollandam, this is my manservant Edgar. I have arranged to see your constable here?’

The yeomen look puzzled.

‘What is your business, sir?’ I am asked.

‘We have been in communicat with your constable. We are interested in your methods of imprisoning and punishment...’

‘Wait here.’

His equally surly friend stays to watch us while the yeoman toddles off to find his superior. A familiar routine.

~

The yeoman returned and led us through the keep and into the bowels of the castle. Such a place has more layers than an

onion skin, fortification after fortification built over the centuries to repel ever more sophisticated attacks from outside and escapes from within. Hence, the closer to the centre of the building one ventures, the older it gets.

These walls and floors even smell ancient, that dank, rich, musty aroma all about the narrow, well-beaten corridors. Even young Crispin has to crane his neck the ceilings are so low. I espy battle standards and heraldic armour from centuries past, campaigns in France, Ireland and Scotland, the War of The Roses, that seminal bloody event that began the whole Tudor dynasty by marriage betwixt the two warring counties. Aye, one cannot even ponder the shortest period of English history without mentioning war repeatedly.

We pass through a rather cramped courtroom, equipped with its very own dock and trap door leading south into God knows what rooms of punishment, then through to the constable's chambers. I am bolstered by bravado in my own audacity, faith in the power of greed and nothing else, for if this fails we could well find ourselves joining Williams and friends, perchance downstairs in that black hole.

The yeoman enters a small cell and we follow. Looking about us, this seems to be a holding cell, and I fear for a second that we are to be locked away. After a few moments a large, florid man with a great scruffy red beard joins us. From five paces away, I can smell rum on his breath. My type of fellow.

'And what is your business, sir?' he says, irritable, as if he has been just roused from a quaff.

'I am Melvin Van Bogaade of Vollendam, gaol keeper for the Duke of Antwerp and all his lands in the Kingdom of The Netherlands, this is my manservant Edgar.'

'Good for you, now what do you want?' he grunts.

'Did you not receive my communicat?'

'Communiwhat? You do talk peculiar sir! Where did you

say you were from? Germany?’

‘I have sent many letters to you, sir. Your castle is known all over Europe as the best in this kingdom for justice and punishment of wrongdoers and malfactors, sir.’

‘Is that so? You hear that, Spicer?’ says the constable to his sergeant, our friendly yeoman. Spicer nods curtly, eyeing us.

‘Aye Master Woodcock,’ he says.

‘And why should I believe a pansy like you then?’ says Woodcock, ‘Are you wasting my valuable time, sir? I do hope you’re not.’

I snap my fingers and Crispin passes me a bag of gold. Just hope

his nerve keeps, for I am relying on the boy here.

‘My Master, the Duke of Antwerp, has many problems with fiends infesting the streets of our beautiful towns and cities with their nasty criminal ways. I have been sent to learn techniques in the famous Duchy of Lancaster. My Lord has provided ample payment for your time, of course.’

I display the bag of sovereigns to Woodcock. Fie, the gleam of gold has a way of dazzling even prudent and cautious men... And I can tell that Woodcock is neither. He shoves Spicer out of the room.

‘Back to your post, Sergeant, go on with you now! Ah-ha! How *now*, sir! How can I be of service to you?’

The root of all evil indeed. Now Woodcock is clay in my hands.

~

For a youngish lad, Crispin can fair take his ale like a man. I recall him going through the slops at Ye Olde Crack in The Wall that time, the day I first ran into the rapsCALLION. When Woodcock gave the boy a coup I nearly lost my nerve and dropped the pretence, for a drunken Crispin is the last thing I need at the moment. Fortunately alas, he remains perfectly sober.

It seems Woodcock is quite taken with the boy, a fact borne out by his next line of questioning...

'So Bogaade,' he says, even more sozzled than before, 'None of that money is yours?'

'Every piece is accounted for by my master, sir. I will ne'er dupe him, I am a loyal servant of the rightful Duke of Antwerp.'

'I am sure you are,' he says, filling my coup, 'But tell me... Would you like to make a sovereign back?'

'How so sir?' says I.

Woodcock licks his bristly lips, bits of old meals stuck in that great beard of his, eyes dark, wide and lascivious.

'For the black boy's arse?'

Crispin coughs ale across the floor. I expect Woodcock to start laughing, but he is quite serious, as if buying a hunk of bacon. The thought crosses my mind that I still owe the scallywag recompense for his betrayal of my person to Murphy, but now is not the time to dwell on petty scores, much as I hate to pass up such a delicious opportunity.

'I am afraid he is property of my master the Duke,' says I, to Crispin's obvious relief, 'Alas Mr Woodcock...'

Woodcock shrugs.

'Not to worry. More ale?'

'I had wondered sir, if it would be possible to tour the castle?' I ask.

'What? Tonight?'

I push another stack of sovereigns at him.

'Well?' says I.

'Aye. Certainly me fine Dutch fella-me-friend! Certainly!'

As Woodcock struggles to his feet, Crispin eyes the keys about his belt. I shake my head and he withdraws. *Not yet son.*

~

And we get the full tour, from the inside out. He introduces

us to every senior guard, Mr Spicer, Mr Morton, Mr Winstanley, Mr Gough, Mr Pritchard, Mr Dooley, Mr Mitchell, Mr Taggart. I line each man's palm with one of old Dickie's coins. I gift the stableman and the armourer too on our travels, probably half a year's wages in one stroke. Alas, I am the master of improvisation and marvelled at their fairly mediocre collection of nags and swords, buying seven blades and three horses at ten times their real value and ordering them kept at the keep of the castle for collection upon my departure. What a way to fritter away a mint, for surely old Dickie did not have this in mind for his fortune.

To the outer walls of the bastion, where Woodcock was keen to boast of the coastal defences here at Lancaster, put into place by Good King Henry himself for fear of raids from Ireland. I was shown Big Betty, a huge hunk of an iron cannon atop the highest of the towers, capable of sinking a man-o-war from a full quarter mile. Zounds. Then I am taken into the pit beneath the courts and shown the cells, ten bodies to rooms five paces by five paces, their supper a foul soup of tainted pig lungs, guts and brains. Disease must be rife down here, but Mr Woodcock seems quite proud of the establishment. It occurs to me that any one of the prisoners could be one of the Chingle seven, so I ply him for clues.

'What crimes have these souls committed?'

'Some are in for debts, some for slander.'

'That's a relief,' says I, my accent slipping. Woodcock eyes me, 'Do you lash their arses? In The Netherlands we lash arses all the time.'

'We only whip 'em if they be found guilty in court. Whippin's and hangin's take place in the town, by the Golden Lion. 'Tis a good day's entertainment, you get a nice quaff and a bit of free sport to the bargain...'

Verily, Woodcock looks the type who would enjoy Tyburn.

'So sir, what about your *other* prisoners? Where are they

kept?’

The constable smiles, like he is saving the best for last.

‘That be Hadrian’s Tower, sir. Follow me.’

~

‘Counts of witchery and treason only. Fie sir, yer have to be famous to get in here,’ says Woodcock.

‘Tis difficult to conceal my excitement at the moment, for I am right now looking into the surprised eyes of one gagged and chained George Williams.

‘Indeed sir,’ says I.

Woodcock takes a swig of ale and belches, shoving his coup at Crispin and ruffling his hair.

‘Look at this one,’ he says, approaching Williams, ‘Holy bastard papist! I don’t mind the quiet ones, some of my best friends are Catholics, fie. But him, he’s the worst sort, stubborn as squirrel shite, thinks us all heretics fit to burn in hell. He’s goin’ down for petty treason y’know, against his Lordship the Earl of Derby. Ye’ve heard of the Earl of Derby?’

‘I know of him.’

Woodcock slams Williams in his ribs with his fist. Williams takes the blow, sneering back at the constable. He is chained to a pillory and bears bleeding wounds all over his body. I almost feel sorry for him.

‘Go hang, papist traitor yer! Yer goin’ to the gibbet, y’hear! Overgrown mound of shite yer!’ growls Woodcock, I nod to Crispin and he deftly removes the keys from Woodcock’s belt, ‘We set about this one for hours, he didn’t crack, nay! If we were allowed to use proper torture it might be different, but they banned it to get confessions didn’t they? Pah, this country’s gone soft it has!’

‘Yes, Mr Woodcock.’

‘Bloody wet arseholes down in London... They want to know about crime and punishment, they should come visit Harry Woodcock in Lancaster, they should.’

'You are giving me some fine ideas,' says I. I wink at Crispin.

'Master!' says Crispin, crossing his legs.

'What is it boy?' says I, 'Cannot you see we have business?'

'Master, is there a privy near?' he says.

'You can shit on the floor if you like, son,' says Woodcock, unabashed, 'They won't mind in here. Go on, we won't watch.'

'He was brought up in the Duke's household,' says I, thinking quickly, 'I'm afraid he is not used to such conditions.'

'What?' says Woodcock, 'Bloody pansy! Oh well, if yer must lad. There's a privy on the roof. Don't go thievin' anything, mind.'

'Edgar's a good boy,' says I, winking at the lad. Crispin sneers at me and exeunts. Now to distract Woodcock sufficiently, 'Well sir, I think I have seen enough to make my report...'

'But there's the sheriff's office, and the lower assizes...'
says Woodcock, doubtless trying to separate more coins from my bag.

'Perchance I will return tomorrow. How about a quick sup, Mr Woodcock? Before we leave?'

'Aye! But will the boy find us?' he says, perchance not given up on Crispin's arse yet.

'He's a smart lad,' says I, 'He will know his way around.'

'We'll crack open a rum,' he says, buoyed by the prospect of a refill.

'Fine show Mr Woodcock, fine show.'

~

Now, the lad had argued that he would have the most difficult job here. Upon finding Williams, which we have, I would distract the constable and Crispin would return to their cell alone and release them, secreting them out of the

castle via the sewer ducts, which we examined fully prior to entering the castle. The only difficult part would be to slip past the guard to Hadrian's Tower and get the prisoners out unnoticed.

I, on the other hand, have to suffer thricefold. I sit in this Lion's Den, Woodcock's chamber, sweating upon the outcome of Crispin's efforts and listening to the endless drivel coming from the constable's enormous, malodourous, crooked, ginger mouth, gobbets of spittle flying out into my face with every stupid word. At least, for the moment, I am in the fellow's good books, for whether I succeed or fail I will surely not be come dawn.

'...this be the finest gaol in the land, not one escape in ten years, and never on my watch,' he says. I take a stiff gulp of his rum.

'That is quite a record, Mr Woodcock.'

Woodcock slaps me on the back, then inspects one of the gold coins.

'You Dutchies could learn a thing or two from us, I tell yers. Your master's money is well spent. Tell me though, why are these English mint sovereigns, not Dutch?'

I hadn't thought of that. The most basic aspect...

A knock on the door, a rapier of fear driven into my guts.

'I really must be going, Mr Woodcock...'

'Nay!' says Woodcock, belching.

Spicer enters, serious countenance on him. I am doomed, they have caught Crispin.

'Any chance of a quaff, Harry?' he says.

'You've not finished your shift, Tom,' says Woodcock, 'And 'tis "sir" in front of guests...'

'That's quite alright,' says I, the blood rushing back into my head, 'Back in Holland we use first names off duty.'

Woodcock nods.

'Come in, then. But not a peep about this to the Sheriff,

lads. Else we're all buggered.'

Spicer and his yeomen friends troop into the room, clutching flagons, coups and bottles. I even spot the guard to Hadrian's Tower.

'But who is watching the castle?' I ask awkwardly.

Woodcock laughs, Spicer laughs, they all laugh. Woodcock slaps me on the back.

'Don't worry Mr Bogaade, you'll be safe with us. Remember, no-one makes flight from this gaol. The walls here have eyes.'

'Oh yes,' I say with a maleable smile, 'Of course.'

~

I have seldom had a harder quaff than this, to the extent that I am reduced to emptying ale down the cracks between the wooden boards beneath my feet to keep my wits. The gaolers are a tough old bunch, regaling me with bits of advice on how to screw money from prisoners' relatives, or how to use a branding iron to cause the maximum amount of pain to a malfactor. Then the cards made an appearance, and though a familiar temptation almost overcame me, I insisted upon being just an observer. Fie, the way they shifted gold around and by their clumsy appraisal of the game, I fair could have scooped back most of the loot I gave them.

I have tried to make a polite exit twice, aware that, as the alarm has not been raised in this past hour, I would venture Crispin has succeeded in getting his master free. Either that or he has panicked and taken flight. This time I must resort to sharing what is left of the gold, so that I might leave gracefully.

'I am absolutely indebted to you fine gentlemen,' says I, 'But I regret I must away...'

'Most kind, sir,' says Mr Dooley, throwing his coin straight back into the pot.

'Most kind,' agrees Mr Winstanley, performing likewise.

'Fie, stay awhile my friend! The eve is young!' protests Woodcock.

'You are welcome in The Netherlands any time, sirs,' says I, almost convincing myself with the platitude, 'Most welcome.'

Woodcock stands and, as if bidding farewell to a brother, gives me a rib crushing bear hug. I wince with all the old wounds of past months.

'Aye,' said the constable, charging his coup, 'To Bogaade.'

Various ayes and hear-hears ripple across the room, I am by the door.

A knock.

I recoil back to my seat. Mr Spicer grabs my shoulder.

'Fie, you look like someone has walked o'er your grave, Mr Bogaade. And tell me, what has happened to your boy? *Edward* is it?'

Spicer is the only one who does not share his friends' enthusiasm for their guest, in spite of including him in my generosity.

'He is... attending to my items...' says I, pretending to watch the game.

Another knock.

'Who in confounded shite is this?' grunts Woodcock, shuffling cards, 'Enter!'

A young guard appears. Mr heart is in my mouth.

'Master, the Earl of Derby's bailiff wishes to see you sire.'

'What?' grunts Woodcock.

'Regarding the trial and sentence arrangements for the Chingle tenants.'

'Oh... tell him to wait until the morning, zounds,' says Woodcock, 'And bother me not again this eve lad, I have urgent business...'

'Aye master,' says the guard, shutting the door behind him.

If Murphy is out there, I am going nowhere.

'You know what, Woodcock?' says I, 'Why do I not stay for one more?'

Woodcock's eyes light up. He fills my coup.

'Zounds, a fine sport you are, Bogaade!'

Spicer continues to eye me as I join in another toast.

~

Another hour has past, and the gaolers of Lancaster are even louder, even more uncouth and even more clumsy. Spicer has fallen asleep and Woodcock is so engaged in trying to recoup massive losses at cards that he has scarcely noticed me for a good while now. Alas, the longer I remain here, the more likely the trick will be discovered. I must take my chances that Murphy is not about and get away.

I grunt something about going to piss, then slip out of the cell. The drink has made me woozy, and for a moment I panic to recall the way out of this place.

'Can I help you, Mr Bogaade?'

Zounds! Spicer! He followed me...

'I regret... hic... I must away sir,' says I, acting more drunk than I am.

'Why sir, let me show you the way,' says Spicer.

Spicer guides me to the keep, past the unseen horrors beyond that terrible trap door in that terrible dock in that terrible courtroom. In spite of drinking himself, his pin sharp face betrays no sign of insobriety. I will have to improvise here.

'Thank you, Spicer. Good man, that will be all.'

I reach for my gold, then recall that I have given it all away.

'Please, Mr Bogaade, you have been generous enough.'

Spicer orders the keep lowered. Great chains moan, wood creaks, he stares through me.

'You say the boy is attending to your items?'

'Aye, Mr Spicer.'

'Then why is he not here?'

The keep is open, but no-one is on the other side. I choke with abject fear.

'Edgar! Where are you, lad? Edgar!' I yell, 'He is probably attending to the horses...'

'Who *are* you, Mr Bogaade? You're no gaoler, I would say more *gaoled* than gaoler.'

'My dear fellow,' says I, peeking outside about the formidable castle walls, 'What do you mean?'

'I *mean*, Mr Bogaade...'

'Sir!'

Crispin, with one of the horses purchased here. I breathe again. I approach the lad and give him a thick ear, babbling at him in Dutch, then I pump Spicer's hand warmly.

'Do thank your master on my behalf, good Spicer. It has been a pleasure.'

'Certainly,' says Spicer. I clap him on the shoulder, 'A pleasure.'

Crispin rubs his ear, scowling. I mount the horse.

'C'mon then boy!' says I.

I wave to Spicer, he offers a curt nod in reply.

Away, away from this hellhole now!

We move slowly away from Lancaster Castle, keen to not appear rushed. My heart pounds in my chest like an iron fist, for I know that I have just crossed a giant barrier and 'tis impossible to turn back. Aye, I have just committed a grave offence against this state, for which there is only one person who can come to my aid. Now I can only pray to any God that might listen that she will hear my call, for right now I can say verily that I have ne'er been so damned petrified in all my born days...

~

In spite of being singled out for special treatment by Murphy, Williams still looks the stronger of the bunch, though his attitude towards me has barely improved to a few

grunts of acknowledgment. Perchance he thinks that it was his God who rode across fifty miles of cowshit into a pit of asps to save him, then? Or perchance he is disappointed that I have taken away his opportunity to become a martyr? Aye, his type of Catholic is peculiar like that. Laws, what will it take to prove to these people that I have their best interests at heart? Fie!

I gave Williams the cantankerous grey that he shares with Crispin, the others riding two to a horse with myself on the pick of the steeds, though this nag is certainly not up to Maggie's standard. To my chagrin, Williams manages to keep up with me on the beast, and I surmise that the grey must be his horse anyway, for it offers him no resistance. Fie, they say some horses become like their masters after time.

We have put at least fifteen miles betwixt us and the bastion, avoiding any settlements where we might draw the attention of a curious local bailiff. Our horses could have been faster, but the other Chingle men are quite beyond going hell for leather, for each has received a severe beating from either Woodcock or one of his men, and none have the strength or will of Williams. This makes me nervous, since it cannot be long before they discover our absence and give chase to us, perchance they have already.

Alas, we had a head start on them, and there are many trails to comb betwixt Lancaster and Chingle. The thought crosses my mind what will happen once we get back, but I would hope that Strange has received his letter by now, else I might lose faith of there being a Chingle left when we return. I am chilled by the thought of that wretched, conniving bubonic rat taking Sarah against her will...

We stop for a swift drink at a waterfall and I banish such ideas from my head. Sarah is a strong woman, she will fight Strange's advances with all the guile she can muster. Nevertheless, there is a peculiar sensation in the pit of my

belly whenever I ponder her face, those dreamy, deep blue eyes, that delicate alabaster skin...

'Look!' cries Crispin, espying over the edge of the plateau. Down below, at the point where the torrent falls into a pool, a troop of men bearing the Earl of Derby's crest, waiting astride horses on the bank. Zounds!

'Murphy,' grunts Williams.

'They are waiting to fish out yer corpse, *Caveat*,' says that Irish voice, 'Perchance then we might mount your head on a pike and despatch it to the pious Lady Sarah? D'yer think she would approve, now?'

Murphy slashes his way through some bushes. Spicer comes through the other side, Taggart and Winstanley accompanying him. I draw a sword and toss it over to Crispin, hoping the lad can handle himself, for I am not sure who else can...

'Irish pigfucker, you are no match for my blade!' I say.

'Perchance,' says Murphy, 'But *he* is.'

Spicer approaches, limbering up with a rapier that could take a man's head clean off.

'Mr *Caveat*, is it? I have learned much about you, sir. You're a good liar, certainly.'

We circle each other, keeping several paces apart as would any adept swordsmen. From the corner of my eye I espy Murphy and Williams fighting hand to hand, the others fending off Spicer's minions.

'And you are a sharp fellow, Spicer.'

'So sharp you will feel it, sir. Cold metal in yer belly, sir.'

He lunges, I fence the blow, wrenching my arm, Spicer returns to position.

'I am easily your match, Spicer,' I lie, 'Run for it, whilst you can!'

Spicer lunges again, nicking a rib. I wince, retreating ever closer to the edge of the waterfall.

'Perchance I would be the one to say that, Mr Caveat...'

'Master Caveat! Your back!' cries Crispin, but 'tis too late, Murphy slams me in the kidneys, Williams lying bloodied in shallow water.

'Finish him off, Spicer,' he grunts.

Spicer waves his sword, my blade feet away. Alas I am powerless to move, Murphy's boot jamming my jaw against a rock. Spicer emits a demonic grin and thrusts his blade at me, but Crispin fends his blow...

'What? You little...'

The lad aims a hard kick in Spicer's guts and he slips back, falling over the edge and into the pool below. Suddenly, Murphy's boot is dislodged, I make it to my feet to espy Winstanley twitch in his death throes, Taggart fleeing into the trees. Williams sets about Murphy's face, pummelling his nose until it looks like a crushed tomato.

'I did not know you could fight so well, Mr Crispin,' says I to the boy.

'I master many magics. There is much you do not know about me, sir,' he replies.

'Hide not your light beneath a bushel, young sir,' says I.

'Do you think Master George needs help?'

Williams lands a punch on Murphy's jaw with a sickening crack. Murphy falls to the ground, eyeballs glazed, the whites turning red, the pupils black. I think Williams has killed him with his bare hands.

'I would think not,' I reply.

Williams holds out a paw.

'Mr Caveat, your sword.'

'Oh...' says I, 'Here you are.'

Williams runs Murphy through his sternum, the blade puncturing the heart with an audible pop. He leaves my sword inside the bailiff and crosses himself.

'Lord forgive me.'

I espy the mess Crispin and his master have made, the torrent running crimson. Below, guards fish Spicer out of the pool, his body limp.

'He was a good swordsman,' says I.

'Let us go, Mr Caveat,' says Williams, 'There will be more of them around.'

'Williams?'

'Let us go, Mr Caveat...'

'Why did you not fight like that in Chingle?'

Williams smiles, for the first time in my presence.

'Because Lady Sarah was watching.'

I take a long, deep breath.

'Yes Williams,' I say, 'Perchance we should be going.'

~

'Twas heaven sent, Crispin found Maggie tied to a tree, stood waiting for that pigfucker Murphy. She chatters her teeth excitedly upon my return, bucking and hopping. I pull a pear down from a tree and feed her.

'Did he hurt you, girl?' says I, stroking her fine black coat. She neighs softly, brushing her head against mine. Aye, perchance they do become a little like their owners, but animals trust and love in a way that few humans can.

'Mr Caveat?' says Williams, ever mindful of time. He has reinstated himself as leader of this little pack, but that is fine with me.

'C'mon girl,' I say to sweet Maggie, 'Let us ride...'

The journey back was mercifully swift, even the men who were approaching collapse ere the ambush were re-invigorated suffice to gallop. How a brush with death ever quickens the senses.

Williams' attitude towards Crispin was puzzling. He continually admonished the boy for leaving his post besides Lady Sarah, in spite of the fact that 'twas Sarah who beseeched Crispin to go to Lancaster. After all of Crispin's efforts, I vouched, Williams could show the boy more grace. Williams sneered at my comment, and I fair thought he was going to take another swot at me. He protested that, through mine and Crispin's actions, the lands of Chingle might be doomed. Williams, as I'd expected, had wanted to be the sacrificial lamb.

I could have disputed him. I could have told him about the letters, I could have argued that only his God might be impressed by his martyrdom, for the likes of Strange would march into Chingle without a thought or a pang for moral justice. Indeed, I could even have told him that, on *this* mortal coil at least, 'tis the cunning man who survives long enough to lament the passing hero, the cunning man who remains alive to enjoy the fruits of the hero's sacrifice, while the hero himself swings from a tree.

It pains me to understand how otherwise intelligent people would want to sacrifice themselves in the name of a dubious faith, but then Williams is made of different material to I, and I still twitch from that pounding he gave me last time. At least the fellow did not object to my return to Chingle, a small but vital mercy.

~

Chingle is, to my immense relief and Williams' surprise, exactly as 'twas when I left it. We head directly for the hall, all of us eager to ensure that Lady Sarah had been neither murdered nor pillaged by those *Calvinist devils* as the giant fellow subtly refers to Strange and his minions.

'Tis a crisp dawn, and the exhaustion is beginning to take its toll on all of us, the stoic Williams apart. My personal yearning is for the reward of a hot bath and, in the absence of some girly sport, a nice, warm cot in which to lay my head, but first I have business to attend to, that which is my long overdue mandate to discover:

The identity of these Spaniards.

We pass a lookout on the way, who fires up a beacon to denote our return, another fire lighting soon after in the distance, inland beyond the sandhills. As we near the hall, the gates to the perimeter wall swing open and we enter the estate, the last of the fires burning brightly in the cool morning air. I would hope that my welcome this time is better than my last departure, but I have long since stopped taking anything for granted in Chingle.

Approaching the hall, I espy Lady Sarah, her tenants and ladies, waiting for us in the rose garden. A motherly concern is etched upon her face, transforming to delight when she espies Williams. For a reason I cannot explain, my heart sinks. I am convinced these two are lovers...

Why should I let this vex me so? Why? Pah, I have pressing business forsooth!

Williams climbs stiffly from his grey, Sarah hustles to him, embracing him. That feeling washes over me again, odd and distinctly uncomfortable...

'Sweet George, how I prayed that you were not dead!'

'How I thought we would only meet again in heaven, my Lady,' says Williams.

'You are my rock, George Williams. After losing papa I could not bear to see you go.'

'Death does not frighten me, ma'am. Only the consequences for you and my brothers and sisters in Chingle.'

I dismount Maggie and stretch. What trite nonsense they speak!

Sarah kisses the boy's cheek.

'And sweet Crispin, my angel! How you have become a man!'

Williams tugs the lad back.

'The boy is full of vainglory, I should thrash him.'

'You will NOT George!' says Sarah.

Methinks I spot a little tension perchance? Good.

'He foolishly left your side to enter this crusade. I shall not countenance any more folly, my Lady,' says Williams.

'This is the son you never had, George. He loves you, he risked his life to save you...'

'Then he is an imbecile, my Lady. Now, if I could take your leave, there are fortifications to inspect. Forces will come anon now because of these actions, you are aware of that?'

'Rather that we all die together, George,' she says. Williams grunts, leading his horse away, poor Crispin in his wake.

'I am beginning to understand why the boy turned out so, ma'am,' I say.

Sarah eyes me with the same old contempt at first, then she bites her lip and sighs.

'One of Murphy's girls came over to our side some years

past, frightened young thing with a young boy she could keep as she was taking flight...'

'I take it that she'd been frightened by an Arab, my Lady?' says I. Sarah is unimpressed.

'George got the boy christened and we adopted him. He's an odd sort of lad, reads zodiacs and strays about Liverpool, but his heart is good.'

'Aye, that I would agree.'

Sarah turns to me. I am aware that we are now the only two left in the garden. She grips my hand and looks into my eyes.

'I know not why you did it, Mr Caveat, but I thank you nevertheless.'

'You need Williams, ma'am,' I say, revelling in those wonderful pools of blue that make up the windows of her soul, 'And you might make pains to admit it, but you need me.'

She lets go of my hand and turns her back.

'We owe you more than Elizabeth can ever pay you, Mr Caveat. But you must leave now.'

My heart sinks again. I step in front of her, driven by the most peculiar sensation.

'Not a chance, Sarah...'

'How dare you be so bold as to call me Sarah...'

'Take me to the Spaniards.'

'What?'

'You heard what I said, your Ladyship.'

A heartbeat, she shakes her head.

'Absolutely not.'

I grab her roughly, her eyes darken.

'Just listen Sarah. No more lies, this is how we should play this game from now on. I fetched your pet Williams and his merry men from that Lancaster hole for one reason and one reason alone. You. Yes, it strikes me as odd too, for since I

arrived here you have treated me no better than something that would drop out of my faithful steed's arse. You have refused to listen to a word I have to say, you have shunned my presence for weeks on end, you have had me beaten, twice, when I incurred your sizable wrath. But damn your eyes if you will not listen now!

Sarah is shocked by my outburst, though quite pacified at the same time. I myself did not think I could be so candid...

'Unhand me then, and I will listen.'

I release her.

'Ma'am, a pious and noble woman you are, and I sincerely believe that. Terrible swine I can be, but my only excuse is a good excuse, aye. I have not been able to grow up in a state of splendid ignorance about the world around me, for the world came right to me from the moment I was born. The *real* world. Perchance I was a little like the boy Crispin there, aye. I have had to use guile and wit to attain anything in this life, even the right to continue walking this earth without some foul pigfucker like Murphy trying to end me.

'But somehow, my Lady, I manage to survive, again and again, anon. Why? Is that the divine providence of your God or mine own judgement and fortune? Such judgement is vital when a great black threat hangs o'er all of us. Yes, *all* of us Sarah, for if I leave now then I decry my own soul, if I have one. I deny myself the chance for some kind of redemption, though perchance I do not understand what that word really means, but I am trying, very hard. If I go, I deny myself the hope that I might achieve something in this world beyond a taverna, a few gold pieces, even managing to stay out of the gutter long enough to make myself sober. Alas if I leave you, Sarah Chingle, I deny myself the chance to look upon the very face of my salvation, the one eternal spring of innocence that I never had... You.'

A heartbeat. She nods.

'Is that all, Mr Caveat?'

She credits me not.

'You need me here, Lady Sarah, more than you can ever imagine. The day will be won not by prayer and martyrdom, but by outwitting those who covet this land for their own. And covet you, sweet Sarah, you...'

My head is spinning, my lips are numb, my belly knots. For a sweet second I spot something in her eyes, a fragility, an earnest belief in my words. For I believe these words myself, though it has taken a lifetime to lay bare a soul I did not know I had until but a few seconds past. Perchance it will last, or like any whimsical melancholy, perchance it will not.

She shakes her head, slowly.

'I will take you to see our guests then, Mr Caveat.'

~

I am guided by Sarah through the garden to a decrepit summer house. 'Tis simple to tell that the Chingles have had much more to ponder than leisure these years past, as the precious glass has been removed from the panes and the masonry is overgrown with weeds.

'Help me with this, would you,' she says, pushing back a bench to the wall. She lights a candle and pulls up a piece of sackcloth, revealing a heavy, oaken trap door. I obliged her by pulling the door up, then she descends downwards on an old ladder. I follow.

'Tis damp and narrow down here, and I feel the creeping nausea given by a closed space. Sarah it bothers not as she guides me through a catacomb of some age. She embarks on an impromptu history lesson, proud of her roots.

'The original Chingle house was built on the ruins of an old settlement. These tunnels have been here a very long time, some say as a horde to protect from Viking marauders, others that it was built by the Vikings themselves, to protect them from impuned natives.'

'Knowing the locals, that tarries, my Lady.'

'Are you making comment upon my tenants, Mr Caveat?'

'I beg your pardon, my Lady.'

'This way, sir.'

Sarah has brought the shutters of sensibility down, and once again I am faced with a stern barrier betwixt myself and her soul, which I sense to be sweeter than light but know is tougher than a cast iron chastity belt to break open. She takes me through a twisting maze of passages and tiny chambers. I smell salt petre down here, the active ingredient of gunpowder. Then I espy lances, crude slings, body armour, longbows and shortbows, rapiers and cutlasses. They seem to have their last stand planned better than I would have ever imagined.

Then we come to a door made of new wood, as if recently built, Sarah gives three, steady knocks. It opens...

'Lo siento mucho, padre pío. ¿Quisiera ver el Duque ahora, sí es posible?' says Sarah, in broken but passable Spanish. She wants to see the *Duke*?

The Spanish priest has long, scraggly hair and an overgrown beard, as do all of his compadres. They must have been here a fair few months, as 'tis difficult to separate one from the other...

'Caveat!'

A knife appears at my throat, my hand rests on the hilt of my sword. Sarah takes hold of the aggressor's arm, lowering it gently.

'¡Por favor, Capitan! Es nuestro amigo...'

The dim candlelight reveals a small chamber in which several makeshift beds have been erected. The room is littered with Roman Catholic symbols, the most striking of which is a huge, golden crucifix, taller than a man. From behind the cross steps a chillingly familiar fellow dressed in sackcloth, the last person I would have expected to see

washed up on these shores.

‘He is no friend of ours, Lady Sarah,’ says Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Palma.

~

Farnese looks awful, the pomposity of his demeanour destroyed by the issue of the great humiliation suffered by the Spanish, and a disastrous attempt to flee that resulted in an epic voyage around the coast of Scotland before his battered, leaking vessel was finally scuppered nearby in an Irish Sea squall. His escape from the vessel was predictably ignominious, as most of the crew bar the senior officers, two priests, Farnese himself and my favourite Bishop Quadra fled for the shore on a small boat. I can just see Quadra stabbing the desperate fingers of drowning crewmen as they try to hold on to the side for dear life.

They landed a few miles off the coast and made contact with the Chingles soon after. Such was their good luck to find a friendly host in a hostile land, or rather such was the Chingles’ bad luck that they were deigned by God to help a troop of murderous Spanish thieves and cutthroats.

The Duke’s beard is unkempt, and I would say he has not washed in a good deal of time. He could not look more unlike the dandy that pranced into the Bartolotti that time if he was a completely different fellow. Quadra remains as impassive and quiet as ever, as if we have ne’er met. I am desperate to pull Sarah aside and acquaint her with the facts about these criminals and terror-mongers she has taken into sanctuary, but first I will gather the whole picture, from the horse’s mouth.

‘Why have you not left yet?’ I bark at Farnese. It feels good to be in control, if distasteful to be in such rotten company.

‘We await a galleon, to collect us at the point we were wrecked and return us anon,’ says Farnese tiredly.

The dagger-wielding captain, typical Spanish pointy-nosed

admiralty, is distinctly more boisterous.

'Why should we tell him? He is a heretic spy. Better to kill him.'

'There will be no bloodshed between you,' says Sarah.

'Do put a cork in that horse's arse of yours, Captain,' says I.

He draws his knife closer, but this time I am equal to him, the tip of my blade at his throat.

'Mr Caveat, put the sword away,' says Sarah, 'I shall not tell you again.'

Farnese waves a hand.

'Capitan, sientate, sientate...' his Captain obeys, 'Caveat, God knows how you found yourself here, perchance by the same order of queer fate that brought us to this shore, but we are all damned tired, tired enough to be damned. Tell me now, will you help us return home? Or will you betray us to the English dogs?'

I dislike even looking at the fellow, a murderer and a coward hiding behind a cloak of self-righteousness. How can he ask for my help after what he has done to my country?

'When will your galleon arrive?' says I.

'Perchance a week, perchance a month... Then we will leave immediately, on my honour...'

Honour? What honour?

'A week may be too long, Farnese. And even if you make it home, there is no guarantee that you will not get strung up for treason.'

'I will take my chances, sir.'

Sarah grabs my arm.

'Now Mr Caveat, have you not seen enough?'

'One more question for the noble Duke, ma'am,' says I, bitterness rising.

'One more question,' she says.

'Is the Bartolotti still there?'

Farnese, tired and infirm as he is, shares a cruel, conspiratorial glance with Quadra.

'You had better ask your French friend, Mr Caveat,' he says.

'Swine, I say! What did you do?'

'Go home,' says Farnese, 'See for yourself.'

I move to smite him with my fist, but two of the officers put themselves betwixt us.

'Mr Caveat!' says Sarah, much abashed, 'I did not bring you down here to attack my quarry! Mr Caveat!'

I desist, stepping through the door.

'I will tell you *all* about this quarry of yours, Lady Sarah.'

~

I have known many Spaniards, some good, most bad. I once knew a bishop from Burgos who deliberately kept clear from all the nastiness of the Grand Inquisition all his life, a jolly and kind fellow who made the best wine in all of his realm. Why could it not have been *him*? No, it just had to be that insipid arse Farnese, the wart on the rump of King Phillip's Empire. Pah.

Lady Sarah would not listen to me, but then I would say she is rather confused at the moment. Yes, first I confess my undying love to her, then I tell her that the holy representatives of the Spanish Empire residing in her cellars once tried to mug me over unpaid taxes from my Dutch whorehouse. Yet my Lady Sarah does not understand that I am a trifle bowled over by the presence of Farnese myself, and I would sniff out something much more sinister than a shipwreck if it was not for the fact that Farnese does not know how to successfully run away from a fight, never mind start one.

I seek Williams out by the perimeter wall and get the usual frosty reception. At least this man is always what he seems, embittered and aggressive as he is.

'I have work to do, Mr Caveat. Do not make me have to chase you.'

'How is the boy?' I say.

'Sent to hell for going against God's will, perchance. Now leave me to my work.'

'Do you not ever rest, Williams? For pity's sake man, you are a battered and bruised man. What else is there to do here but keep watch?'

Williams eyes me.

'Let me show you something, Mr Caveat, so you would understand this issue once and for all.'

He grabs the sleeve of my tunic and takes me to a ladder against the high wall, prompting me to climb. At the top, I espy what I had dreaded all these days past...

Strange's men, assembled in a camp in the distance, just beyond Chingle lands.

'The hour is upon us,' says Williams, 'Think upon the consequences of your actions, sir.'

'George, they will not attack. 'Tis a ruse, to scare Lady Sarah. We must keep our nerve.'

'A ruse!' scoffs Williams, testing a longbow, 'You do not know the Earl of Derby as well as I do, Caveat.'

'Perchance so, perchance not,' says I, 'but I would say I know his type very well. And how to deal with it.'

I espy the growing encampment one more time before climbing down.

Yes, I know Lord Strange very well indeed.

I hope...

Two weeks is a terribly long time when one is isolated so and surrounded by an army of assassins. Verily a lifetime.

I endeavoured to keep watch with Williams on the perimeter wall as much as possible, though I can see that it still pains him to tolerate my presence. Strange's forces have grown to the size of a small army, and despite there being several skilled bowmen among Sarah's tenants, should they endeavour to strike at us, defeat will be swift and savage. The fact that they have not, as yet, suggests that my letter has put Strange in a quandary. For all his bravado and power, he would not risk incurring the direct wrath of the Queen should her forces arrive to witness Chingle destroyed. Hence, for now, he is trying to starve us out, hoping that Elizabeth will choose to ignore my plea.

And why should she not? Sending her personal guard two hundred miles north to usurp the power of the legitimate *protestant* lieutenant in favour of a *catholic* band would be tantamount to treason against herself, a ridiculous and impossible scenario. I begin to contemplate that I have asked too much for Regina to deliver, as a Queen or as a friend. I begin to imagine Strange sharpening his sword, preparing to administer the fatal chop personally with the glee of a wildcat upon a stricken dove.

The longer this stand off is, the more likely that will become reality, alas.

And while those Spaniard peacocks eat their way through valuable stocks, our food is diminishing rapidly with several tenant families to feed under the protection of these walls. Sarah gave them the option to leave, but every manjack stayed, women, children et al. That caddish voice in my head has prompted me to fetch Maggie and flee in the dead of night, but this time I know that this act will need to play out, for better or worse. No other option.

And then there is brave Sarah, still set in her convictions, prepared to die for what she believes in. She would not blame me if I left, but alas I could not live with myself. Fie, where did this damned conscience of mine come from and how might I bury it, before it kills me?

I told her of the letters, but it did nothing to reassure her, bar provoke sneers of contempt for her Queen. Making openly treasonable comments ne'er bothers this woman, for even the mention of Regina's name will cause Sarah to curse in a most unladylike fashion.

'We are agents of Rome, papist traitors. Why should that foul bitch help us?'

She sits in the rear courtyard of the hall, fashioning arrows for the bowmen with a blunt knife. Her fingers are raw. This is the umpteenth time we have discussed this issue.

'Perchance she might not, alas, but...'

'Then my point is proven. You have succeeded only in delaying the inevitable, Mr Caveat.'

'I have succeeded in giving us a little hope, Sarah.'

She picks at the wood frantically.

'Nay, the only hope we have is given to us by the Almighty. That we might be redeemed in this world, or the next.'

'Now you sound like Williams. Almost like you want to die. Like you were born to be a martyr.'

'Better dead than protestant, Mr Caveat...'

'So ma'am, you shall see young children put to the sword for such principles? That is not a decision which yours to make!'

Sarah is quite shocked and hurt, her cheeks reddening, her hands carving faster and faster...

'How dare YOU presume to make judgements upon me, Caveat! How dare... Ow!'

She has caught her finger on a splinter. I attend her, pulling out the wood from her cut and dressing it with a little cloth. I smell her natural odour, 'tis sweet and intoxicating. As I attend the cut, I realise that she is looking at me. I hesitate to return her eyes, then look up...

There I see no longer the hard, cross woman but a frightened babe, her beautiful eyes welled with tears.

'What are we to do, Mr Caveat...'

I seize the moment and kiss her soft lips, and for those seconds the turmoil and shadows of the world are gone, replaced by sheer, perfect joy.

She pulls away from me abruptly and gets back to work on the arrow, her delicate hands aquiver.

'Please see if George and the men would like any refreshments, would you Mr Caveat?'

'Aye, my Lady,' says I, still dizzied, 'That I will.'

She eschews my glance, as if it will sting her.

That was most unexpected.

~

Why is it that one can separate the breeches from any lady of the land with pomp and ease, and yet when one meets the one that one so desperately desires, one is vexed like a lovesick adolescent after just one little smooch? Why, why, why alas? Aye, one should ever be careful of what one wishes for in this world, lest one gets it.

And even though a cruel fate looms, I cannot get her from

my mind. She let me kiss her, she kissed me back, but then she scampered back into her warren of denial like a startled bunny. Does that make *me* the predator, closing in for the kill? Is that how she sees me? Am I fooling myself? Perchance all I really want is to pluck her, to achieve the impossible of loosening the most frigid woman in the land?

Nay, this is not about my virility or collecting sexual trophies, this is the real thing, something that I have always poured scorn upon as the creation of the pathetic soporific romantic. This, I fear, is love. And I have picked a *wonderful* time to admit that to myself.

I endeavour to throw myself into the task of helping the tenants somehow survive this terrible siege, for I might go weak at the knees if I see Sarah again today. This is a peculiar malady, for it lends the sweats and turmoil of the belly to what should be a sober, calculating countenance. The only thing that does make me sober is the thought of Strange laying waste to the Chingle lands and committing unspeakable acts on Sarah. We cannot lose this issue, we must not lose this issue. But I am beginning to think that we will lose this issue.

I join Williams on the wall as the eve closes in again, the sun melting into the sea on the horizon like a big and beautiful blood orange. Strange's men have lit a huge bonfire, and if one strains one's ears one can hear the sounds of lute, pipe and revelry.

'Want to join them, Mr Caveat?' says Williams.

'Are you ever not bitter, George?'

'Their's is the life you prefer, is it not?'

'Then what am I doing here?'

Williams tests the tension on his bow.

'Perchance you can tell me, Mr Caveat.'

A great whoop of cheers resounds from the soldiers as an effigy of a woman is placed on the fire. *They know we are*

watching.

'I remain here for one reason and one reason alone, Williams. To stop that from coming true.'

I leave Williams to his bitterness and his watching. Perchance I will endeavour to see Sarah again this eve, for one can never know what tomorrow may bring.

~

She said nothing, just took my hand and led me into her bed chamber where I espied her tender nakedness for the first time. My tongue probed slowly over her body, savouring her womanhood and soothing her agony, her grief, her desperation with the gentlest of passions. The heart of Sarah Chingle is blessed with a rare courage, but she fears like any woman, she feels pain like any woman. What faces her chills me to the bone, perchance that is the only reason that she has taken me as her lover, that she may receive respite from contemplating the hell that awaits us...

For now I am sure that Elizabeth will not answer my call.

And if I am sure, then Strange is sure, surely.

The angel sleeps in my arms, cooing gently. What does she dream of? Freedom? Love? Or darker things...

I shall not sleep myself this eve, for I am only content to watch her, to stroke her flaxen locks and hope against hope that all is not lost.

~

The knock came at dawn, just as tiredness was beginning to overcome me. 'Twas Williams himself, and I could see a silent fury stir in his face upon seeing me in his Lady's bed chamber. Good, perchance he will fight even harder for his jealousy.

Against her wishes, we took Sarah below to the catacombs with the other women and children, and I saw Farnese vow that he would personally fight to the death to save her. Somehow I doubt that, judging by his bitch cowering that

time in the Bartolotti when Beauchamp appeared. It irks me indeed that his might be the last face Sarah sees alive, for she has my dagger, she knows what to do when Strange's men descend upon her, and she is twice the man Farnese will ever be.

Up on the wall, which Williams has turned into a rampart of sorts, we can see that Strange's men have indeed made a storm formation, battering ram in place. Aye, this is no bluff, he has made his mind up to attack, verily, verily, verily.

That voice, the one I to which I always used to listen, screams at me now. It screams to climb down the ladder when Williams attention is diverted, to somehow find a way out of here and ride for dear life. I have performed my jollies with Sarah, there is nothing left here for me now...

But I know 'tis quite the opposite, *everything* is in here, *nothing* is out there, beyond that fiendish legion and anon.

'Where is Crispin?' I ask Williams.

'Why should I care? This is his fault.'

'George, how can you blame the boy so? Do you think that Strange would desist from attack merely because he saw you strung up? The lad did the right thing, he saved your life.'

Williams prepares an arrow with a sardonic chuckle.

'It may have escaped your attention, Mr Caveat, but right now I would not say my life is worth much, would you?'

I shake my head and grab a longbow. Seasoned bowman I am not, but I have fired a few in my idle youth, when I would go poaching in Prussia.

'Life is cheap in war, Mr Williams.'

A fanfare. Strange's men rouse themselves.

'Perchance I got you wrong, Caveat,' says Williams.

I espy horses scraping their hooves against dirt, awaiting the command of a hundred fearsome masters.

'Aye sir, perchance I got me wrong too...' says I.

They beginning the charge. A hail of arrows sails over our

heads and into the greenery behind us from their bowmen. Williams orders our archers to take aim, at least our targets are out in the open.

‘See that one at the side, covered in mail?’ he says.

The fellow gallops alongside the first wave, sword in hand, wearing the crest of the Duchy of Lancaster, trussed up in armour from head to toe, pompous as a prize pudding.

‘Aye,’ says I, ‘I see him.’

‘That was Thomas Preston, Sheriff of Lancaster,’ says Williams.

Williams’ arrow strafes towards its target, striking Preston square in the mouthpiece and clean through his head, sending him flying from his horse as if hit by an avalanche. A few of his men break ranks in shock.

‘That’s some bowmanship Williams! Where would Strange be?’

‘Alas, hidden and well out of range. He is not the type for battle.’

Now I can see the whites of their eyes. We pick them off quite well, felling several of the advancing horde, I even manage to wing one of the swine myself, but there are simply too many of them...

‘Did I miss anything?’

Sarah, clutching a sword almost bigger than her...

‘Christ, Sarah, get back down there!’ I grunt...

‘My Lady, you must retreat! Go! Go!’ says Williams.

The ram slams against the gates, wood buckles.

‘I would say ‘tis rather too late now, gentlemen! Why should you have all of the fun?’

I was right about the comparison with Joan of Arc...

She throws a rock at the men attending the ram, it bounces off a head. She crosses herself. Dear God, these people are all maniacs, and I have chosen to die with them. This is like the oddest of dreams!

Her concussed victim is replaced and the ram piles into the gates, taking one of them clean off its hinges. Perchance this will become real now, when I am forced to fight for my own life...

I close my eyes and say a prayer, then turn to Sarah.

'Marry me, Lady Sarah,' says I. Her eyes smile with surprise, the Sarah I knew all along to exist finally appearing to the surface. I know her answer.

'You are such a hopeless romantic, Gus.'

I take up her side and jump off the wall to engage the enemy. Williams emits a bear-like growl and wades into them, slashing and punching all the way...

'Let us finish this,' I say, swinging my rapier...

The men around Williams back off. At first, it seems because of the ferocity of his fighting, but then I notice all of them are retreating, nay, *running* from the scene of battle! What is this, now?

The few men left on the wall point to something in their view. I climb up and espy a sight that almost moves me to tears when I was fair ready to fill my breeches but seconds ago.

A large regiment, at least the size of Strange's own forces, cutting a swathe through the stalled attack, bearing the crest of Regina, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. I have never claimed to be a devout man, but this is the closest thing I will e'er see to a true miracle.

Sarah takes up my side. Strange's men continue their retreat, now subdued as if fearing the wrath of a mightier force.

'Now Mr Caveat,' she says, linking my arm, 'Might that offer of yours still stand?'

Strange's encampment disappeared quicker than it arrived and a great celebration was held to welcome the Queen's Guard. I scribbled out an invite and paged it over to Strange's estate via the last of his men to leave. Doubtless the message got to him in time, alas methinks his Lordship was otherwise engaged last night.

Even Williams was seen to partake of a small quaff and a jig, though he remains weary and warned me against opening my trap about the Chingle *guests* down below. He must think me stupid! In spite of the crass insinuation, I verily merily joined in with the spirit of glee about Chingle and the free exchange of bonhomie. We all were radiant in our reprieve and revelled until the early hours, the officers enjoying our gratitude and hospitality. I retired with Sarah to some rather more boisterous and clumsy lovemaking... Laws, my Lady is quite a lioness in bed after some wine has passed her lips.

I slept long and dreamless, awaking with a strange realisation that I now feel part of them, the shared experience to what seemed certain death bringing all of us together, the days of miscommunication and poisoned trust long gone. I hope, forever.

~

Sarah has already arisen. I bathe and set to searching for her, as I want to share all of this wonderful day with my bride-to-be. Was that a dream? Did she really agree to marry me?

A pinch and I do not wake, so it must be true. What a joy.

Dressed and ready for the day I make my way outside, expecting to find her back on her chores. Then I discover her in the rose garden, talking to a boy from the Queen's guard. She smiles and beckons me over. The small trooper turns to address me... That is no boy!

'Angus!' says Sarah, 'You did not tell me that your mother was expected?'

Mother?

'Well, my love,' says I, dumbfounded at the sight of the woman, "'Tis a surprise for me too.'

I kneel and kiss her hand. Bessy strokes my face.

'I rode in with the second brigade,' she says, patting her steed, 'Her Majesty keeps fine horses.'

'She does indeed, *ma-mah*,' says I.

'I hear good things about you Angus,' says Sarah, 'That you are not quite the cad others make you out to be.'

'I have my better days, Sarah.'

Elizabeth smiles.

'Sarah gave me the happy news. Would you let your old mother stay to give you her blessing? Would you?'

Bessy is wallowing in her role, as if 'tis a great relief from playing the Queen.

'That would be wonderful, ma'am... erm, mother...'

'Would you like to see the dress?' says Sarah, excitedly, "'Twas worn by my own mother on her wedding day.'

'I would be delighted to, my child,' say Bess.

The pair are getting along swimmingly. 'Tis a good thing that Sarah does not know who *mother* really is...

'Angus, show my Lady Elizabeth around the hall. Tell her

our story, if you will,' Sarah says.

'Aye, I will tell her alright. Verily.'

Sarah disappears into the hall. Elizabeth's eyes probe me.

For I have much explaining to do.

~

We stand at Lord Chingle's modest grave. Elizabeth shed a rye tear as I told her of his final days, and of how death came to him as a blessed release from his suffering. Bessy picks a single red rose and plants it lovingly on the earth next to the simple cross.

'His words were that he will never stop loving you, and that he will see you in Heaven,' I whisper, as if not to disturb her countenance. The glow in her face belies her years, and I believe that for this short moment I am gazing upon Elizabeth before she was ever Queen. She speaks as if I am not here, as if only to her sweetheart...

'Would that I could have seen you one more time, my love. To have told you how I felt, for you to have seen in my eyes what my heart has cried to say all of these years...'

One feels that this is as much a very personal pilgrimage for Bessy as a mercy mission for Richard's offspring. Perchance...

'Ma'am, I can give you some minutes alone if you desire...'

Bessy clutches my hand.

'If I were not married to the state, if he was not committed to his family duty... Alas, who is to know now...'

'Aye, Bessy.'

She turns to me, her face happy again. I had expected a fair old rollicking upon seeing her, since my mission on her behalf has hardly gone according to plan.

'I am some matchmaker, am I not? Huh... Would that Richard could see through my eyes indeed, to see his daughter safe and contented.'

'She is contented, ma'am,' says I, 'Safe is another issue.'

'Ah, you mean...'

'Yes ma'am, the Spaniards.'

'They must leave, Gussy. I cannot risk keeping my guard here for more than another three days, for my absence from Windsor will be noticed. The Queen protecting a Catholic enclave of agitators would provoke an awful puff and bluster in Parliament, dear. I am getting too old to fight with them, and as for what would happen if the news got out about Spaniards... Tish, Gussy, tish!'

She might well be getting on a little, but not so much as to stop her riding two hundred miles at a gallop. Bessy can be twice as formidable as her reputation, and twice as witty as she paints herself.

'They do not understand the kind of people they are protecting, ma'am, only follow their dogma.'

'Evil is ever protected from God's justice by good people oppressed,' she says. Would that Sarah might listen to this sage woman in her real guise.

'Ma'am, they shall leave soon, upon my word. Even if I have to drive them out myself.'

Bessy pinches my cheek.

'Good boy.'

Sarah and her ladies emerge from the house with the dress. To think, but days ago I would not have dreamt that I would ever be able to walk from this estate alive, never mind have the Queen of England here to give her personal blessing to my marriage, albeit in disguise as an English Catholic version of my dead mother! Nevertheless, the happiness in Sarah's eyes is heaven to behold, and after what we have just been through, nothing is insurmountable now.

Not anything, and certainly not a gang of Inquisitors and their tyrant leader, nay. Nay!

~

We shall retire early this eve, for tomorrow I will marry fair

Sarah here in Chingle. After discussing who should attend, we decided, or rather I begged Sarah, to undertake the task of telling Williams (better her, for I risk obtaining a divot in my head should I tell him).

We three ascend the stairs after a nip of wine, a warm feeling of contentment about my person, knowing that the only two people I trust and love on this earth are by my side.

'You should be most comfortable in your chamber, ma'am,' says Sarah, neglecting to mention that Bessy will sleep in her father's bed tonight. If only either of them knew that irony...

'I thank you, my child,' says Bessy, who stops in her tracks along the corridor, her breath taken by the portrait of a young Elizabeth.

'A fine likeness, would you not agree *mother?*' says I.

'Aye,' she says, that tinge of melancholy about her again.

'You have met her?' asks Sarah. Bessy nods slowly.

'Yes, alas. More than a few times over the years.'

Elizabeth smiles, and for a second I cringe, for 'tis *exactly* the same smile as depicted in the portrait. Even her plain dress and blonde wig would surely not disguise her.

Sarah does not make the association, but she is ready to spit.

'She is a wicked and heretical woman. I hope she will burn in hell.'

'Sarah!' I protest, but Elizabeth chuckles.

'Many would agree with you, my child, many.'

'See?' says Sarah, prodding me in the chest, 'Listen to your mother, Caveat. She speaks sense!'

'Aye...' says I, dazed.

Bessy continues to stare at the likeness. I would wager there are none similar, even in the Royal Palaces.

'Yes Sarah,' she says, 'History will be her judge... And God, of course.'

'Right,' says I, clapping my hands together, 'To bed anon!'

Sarah kisses Bessy on both cheeks.

'Good night, my Lord,' she says, tipping me a cheeky wink.

She skips past me into her chamber, locking the door behind her.

'Some traditions cross all faiths,' says Elizabeth, still gazing at the picture.

'Alas, ma'am, alas. I suppose I should retire.'

She spins to face me.

'So Gussy, how does it feel to know that you are about to become a true English aristocrat?'

It feels good, it feels very, very good...

I was permitted to plunder old Dickie's wardrobe in order to find some suitable clothing for tonight's occasion. The fellow had quite some taste in his day and his outfits fit rather unerringly well, even if they are a throw back of some thirty years of fashion. Perchance if I was to walk into the court at Windsor or Versailles I would be feted for yet another great step in *haute couture*, and men would start wearing narrow ruffs, winkle picker shoes, tight breeches and baggy tunics again. Yes, what a dandy groom I shall make!

I plumped for a dashing pair of red breeches, white silk stockings with a black tunic and feathered cap of purple muslin, simple but oh-so fetching. The ceremony takes place in the hall itself, in the servants' chambers at night, so the curiosity of Elizabeth's guards would not be aroused. Bessy, my good *Catholic* mother, is entrusted by Sarah to keep the occasion a secret, my bride-to-be reminding her of the fact that performing a Papist ceremony still represents a treasonable offence in this realm.

But here I am sure the Queen of England could make one small exception.

Bearing in mind also the identity of our chaplain this eve, as I attend at the makeshift altar, I am given some moments to

ponder this deliciously ripe irony, the fact that two people will take this to their graves making it even more delectable. Bessy looks like no more than a modest lady in waiting, but Her Majesty's smile is indeed that of a great and golden lady, a lady who would now make representation here as my only kin in the absence of my dear departed mother, a woman I remember not.

And the revelation that Williams is an ordained priest, charged by his Almighty Catholic God with bestowing the sacrament of marriage upon a man he would have gladly killed with his bare hands if the order had been given but a month ago...

Delicious, savoury irony!

There is no musical accompaniment, only the gasps of the few guests permitted here, tenants, servants and so forth, when Sarah glides into the room in her silken white dress. Yes, we are wearing the gowns that her departed parents used in their prime, 'tis a quiet, clandestine ceremony with danger still lurking everywhere in this corner of Elizabeth's kingdom, but if St Paul's in London had opened its grand doors for us this eve, Sarah would refuse, and fie, so would I.

Williams sniffs and begins a Latin prayer. Sarah's smile is only for me, and mine for her.

For she is perfect, the sight I ne'er thought I would behold, and yet here she is, a dream I would count folly to believe foretold.

And yet here she is, sweet Sarah, my bride, bright, beautiful and bold...

~

Sarah had not forgotten her departed husband Molyneux in all of this, she just endeavoured not to share her melancholy with me. At the close of our wedding night, I arose to run downstairs with the intention of grabbing a bottle for our nightcap. Thinking myself clumsy, I

remembered that my beloved has a preference for light ale, the variety of which I could not recall. As I was about to return I espied her through the crack in the doorway, on her knees, praying out loud for his soul, and that he would forgive her when next they meet in heaven for marrying again.

Forgive her in heaven? Would she not take my side there, not his? Pah...

Alas, why should I be jealous of a ghost?

I then reminded myself that I still do not believe such poppycock, and that heaven and hell are the inventions of clerics who use belief systems to control ordinary folk. Neither myself nor sweet Sarah are ordinary, and whilst I will patronise her faith for the greater good, I will ne'er embrace it, lest kingdom come and God forces me to. Nay, heaven is a long way off for both of us, for this is my home now, and a quiet life we shall have.

Aye, as soon as those damned Spaniards are ridden of...

~

We fell asleep in each others' arms that night, our wedded bliss quite complete. 'Twas a quiet event, but my heart sang all day. I cannot believe my fortune.

The October morn was bright and crisp, a few hardy owls and pheasants tweet and coo among the sycamores. Elizabeth has ordered an early start for home, and as I arose and dressed her troop was decamped and ready to ride upon her captain's orders.

I joined the brigades on Maggie, aware that I should not pass up the rare opportunity Bessy had presented to me. Sarah readily approved that I should do this, while Williams disagreed, as is his wont, but when one has an army at one's disposal, why not take full advantage? Quite so.

Bessy rode side-saddle to Liverpool, for though she much prefers to hoof it with the men we wanted to give the right

impression. Strange was not in residence, but with our strength in numbers and armoury, we demonstrated to his forces that the Queen shall ne'er be dallied with.

And so onwards to his estate at Toxteth, where we discover him taking out his wrath on some poor beasts. The Earl of Derby on his own land is quite humbled by our arrival, and I make sure that I sit at the head of the brigade, firearm slung over my shoulder for effect, though I know not how to use one of the gadgets. Bessy accompanies me, in a new role herself. Strange orders his wife and children and retinue away and we accompany him back into his grand hall. Fie, his tail has disappeared so far up his arse I fair thought I saw the fellow spit hairs a moment ago!

Good. Very good.

~

Strange sits at his bureau, finery about him, no doubt looted from his various nefarious ventures. Myself, Bessy and her captain sit opposite as he examines Elizabeth's seal closely. The contents of the letter are personal to Strange and they warn him abruptly that no other incursion upon the Chingle lands shall be attempted in Her Majesty's or anyone else's name.

Laws, the fellow has gone quite pale.

'How can I be sure this is genuine?' he says.

'And the five hundred troops outside are not?'

'I would vouch none have them have read this, *Mister* Caveat. Who verifies it?'

'I do,' says Bessy.

'And you are, ma'am?'

For a pretender to the throne, I am quite surprised that Strange has ne'er met the Queen. Perchance he has never taken the woman so seriously as right now, the foul rat.

'Margaret Radcliffe,' says Bessy, 'Her Majesty's trusted envoy.'

'A female envoy?' scoffs Strange, 'Next we'll have 'em in Parliament!'

'And a damned better job they will do!' says Bessy. Strange is cut to the quick.

'How... how dare you speak to me like that... I... I should have yer flogged!'

'Try it!' grunts Bessy. Strange backs down, lynx eyes staring over me.

'I believe congratulations are in order, Mr Caveat?' he grunts like a forest boar.

'I succeeded in my end of the bargain, Strange.'

'You murdered an officer of the county and aided the escape of an enemy of the state. You should be strung up!'

Bessy leans forward, smiling at Strange.

'Tell me, Strange... did not Her Majesty's father once decree against private armies? You know, I think he did. Fie, the penalties for breaking that one must be most punitive indeed.'

'Most punitive,' I agree. I could not have dreamt of such sweet satisfaction as this.

'My brigades serve only the Queen, as I do,' says Strange, 'I am a good Protestant.'

'A likely story,' says Bessy.

I have ne'er seen Strange so flummoxed by man nor beast. He squirms in his grand chair, which is more like King Phillip of Spain's throne, padded and lined with fine gold trims.

'Very well. The decree is duly noted. I will comply henceforth.'

'Yes,' says Bessy, 'you will.'

Strange scratches out his signature on the paper.

'Caveat, you have no more gained the wife you think you have than inherited a life of misery from that idiot Molyneux. At least he had the sense to escape to Spain and get himself killed.'

'Are you offering me some bait?' says I, towering over him, 'Would you like to duel, sir?'

Strange simpers.

'Not at all, my good fellow. 'Tis merely a friendly warning, sir. She'll use you, sir. Like she uses all her men.'

I move to swing at him, but Bessy's captain pulls me back.

'You rat! Elizabeth knows the type of person you are, the kind that carries a plague of bad deeds! Fight me, I say!'

'Speak not like that to me, commoner!' says Strange, 'I have many friends in high places.'

Bessy rises to her feet, pointing a finger at him.

'None higher than mine, you impotent fool. See to it that you stay away from Chingle, Derby. Remember, the eyes and ears of Regina are everywhere. Now, you understand this conversation never happened, nor did the events of the past week?' she says.

Strange sinks into a half sneer, then smiles as graciously as he can manage, which is not very graciously at all.

'Duly noted, Ms Radcliffe. Now would you leave?'

'With pleasure, sir!'

Eyeing Strange as we make exit, his face has gone a wonderful shade of puce. If the signed and sealed covenant of the Queen does not put paid to his games, then nothing will.

'Gussy?' says Bessy, as we rejoin our horses outside.

'Ma'am?'

'I would rather a Catholic succeeded the throne than that piece of dog foul.'

'Yes, ma'am. Indeed...'

~

We ride together as far as Chester, whereupon I think it prudent that I should make for home so I can return whilst there is still some daylight. Bessy's countenance has been stern since meeting Strange, as if disturbed, perchance

wondering whether she should have dealt with him more severely.

'What vexes you, ma'am?' I ask. We are stopped at a coaching house to refresh the beasts.

Bessy grabs my hand.

'Only that you are happy, my child,' she says, 'And that you honour me with another visit soon, lest I grow senile, or you grow too goody goody for your favourite Queen.'

'Aye ma'am.'

I crouch to my knee, bowing to kiss her fair hand. Some locals look bemused at my behaviour to a mere gentlewoman.

'Keep alert, my Lord,' she says, 'And remember, I am only a week's ride away.'

'The postmaster shall ne'er be so exhausted, ma'am.'

I mount Maggie.

'Do stop calling me ma'am, Gussy. Adieu anon.'

'Adieu!'

I thrash the reins and am away at a gallop, safe in the knowledge that no foe will dare spike my happiness again. And so anon, back to the idyll...

'Rise and shine, my Lord!'

The strong, low morning sun pierces my eyes like hot knives as Sarah yanks the curtains asunder. I moan, having fallen halfway out of bed in abject shock. What on earth is she doing? What time could it ever be?

Last eve, I had returned at dusk and dined heartily on the local delicacy of lobsouse stew, washed down with a sup of mead. Then I retired to give sweet Sarah a lusty rump and spent a few hours pondering the stars via the cracks betwixt the curtains as she slept, her head upon my chest...

'What is it now? Can it not wait?' says I, slapping her pert little arse as she dresses.

'All hands to the pump, my Lord. Half the village is still a wreck and we needed to recover before winter, lest we all starve. You, me, everybody. You must set an example, 'tis the Chingle way.'

'Tis not the damned way anywhere else in Christendom!' I proclaim. My head is sore...

'Do not curse so! Come on, up!' she yells. Fie, I did have too much mead last night...

She pushes me out of bed. 'Tis an awfully chilly morn.

'Fie, the Lord of the land should not have to muck in with commoners! Sarah, I am sure they know what to do. I am a

city fellow, I do not know country ways, how to direct peasants...'

Sarah laughs.

'Who said you would be directing? Working my Lord, *working!*'

'What? NAY!!'

'Aye, my Lord, aye! Now let us see if we can find you some sturdy boots, a day's work in those court shoes will cut your feet to pieces.'

This cannot be happening!

~

'Put your back into it Caveat!' orders Williams.

We have cleared the debris from his shelled out home, now we have begun work on repairing his roof, carrying back-breaking bails of thatch from his cart.

'Could not you have got a tradesman to do this?' I enquire, 'Is there not a thatcher about the village?'

'There is,' says Williams, grabbing a bail and tossing it in place, as if 'tis made from feathers, 'But he is working on his own home. Strange's men torched it, along with everything his family owned. Livestock, the lot.'

'I cannot credit you people!' says I, 'Where's the chain of command? Do they not know the pecking order? Order the impudent arse to fix your house first! You are still the bailiff, are you not?'

'Caveat, if you put as much energy into getting this thatch shifted as you did into your whining, we would make a proper job of this. Now move, yer pillock!'

A rougher clergyman than Williams I have ne'er met. The skin on my hands is crossed with blisters and already I ache, even though 'tis barely mid-morning. How much more will I have to tolerate of this!

'Oi! Put your back into it, man!'

~

'Twas mid afternoon before Williams stopped to break. Shattered and sweaty, in spite of the chilly air, I took my leave and began my return to the hall, only to encounter sweet Sarah on the way back. She was carrying a basket of forest fruits and we headed into Sniggery Woods to enjoy a picnic, on the condition that I promised to return to Williams' aid promptly on an hour.

We are down by the shattered oak, my head in her lap, chewing on sweet apples picked this morn by Sarah. She strokes my hair, I carve our initials into the wood, so that future generations may see evidence of our great love.

'Mrs Caveat?' says I.

'My Lord?

'Do you trust me?'

She shifts slightly.

"'Tis an odd question! Of course I do, I married you did I not?'

'Aye...'

I do not know why I even asked her that, but it has perturbed her a little.

'Why did you ask?' she says.

'No reason...'

She grabs my knife and holds it to my throat.

'Tell me, you egg!'

I take it from Sarah and tickle her. We share a long kiss.

'Just something that rat Strange said. Think not upon it...'

She backs away from me.

'Oh? And what else did he say?'

'Think not upon it! The man is a weasel...'

She curls her lip for a moment, then a soft smile spreads across her mouth.

'I thought you said he was a rat?'

'Why Lady Sarah, he is both! The breeding of a weasel and a rat!'

She chuckles and we kiss again. She gets to her feet.

'Time you returned to work, my Lord!'

I try to pull her down to me but she skips out of my range.

'What! Come now Mrs Caveat, why don't we have a bit of *al fresco*, um?'

'Work! Now!' she giggles.

Then I spot him, twenty paces away, hiding behind a tree, watching us.

I leap over the sycamore and sprint for the oaf. He is quite fast himself but trips on some dead wood, hitting the ground hard. I pounce upon him, the fellow weedy and smaller than I...

'What are you doing? Hoping to catch an eyeful, eh?' says I, pinning him down and slapping him across the face.

'Get off us, yer Dutch goon yer!'

Sometimes one has to inflict a little pain to get results. I grab his balls hard and he squeals.

'Angus!' yells Sarah, 'Unhand him!'

'Leave this to me, my Lady...'

'Angus, get off him now!'

I can only assume Sarah knows something I do not. I let the oaf to his feet.

'Raspail!' she says, 'Did not your master get the message? Stay away from us!'

'I were only scrumping for apples, ma'am,' he bleats.

'Then he should be thrashed!' says I. Sarah steps between us.

'Raspail, you tell Lord Strange to keep his spies away from our land. We will not warn him again!'

A scornful grin passes the idiot shrimp's lips.

'What are you going to do, then?'

I grab his throat, but Sarah pulls me back.

'Just you tell him, Raspail.'

There it is again, that toothless grin. I step forwards to

clout him, Raspail runs away into the wood.

'Will he never give up?' says I.

'You should know Strange by now. By hook or by crook...'

'Probably by crook. Sarah, the Spanish must leave. If he discovers them, we are defenceless. Not even Elizabeth will come to our aid.'

She raises her chin.

'We do not need that woman.'

'*Au contraire*, dear Lady! Where would we be if her troop had not arrived in time? Slaughtered and dead?' She bites her lip, 'You owe this to your tenants, Sarah. *We* owe this. 'Tis not just the gunpowder you keep down there that is explosive...'

'You have a history with them, do you not?'

'Yes, Sarah. And I am as ashamed of my own past as I am of my association with such thugs. These men hide behind their sackcloth and their beads, ma'am. Torquemada himself was no more ruthless an Inquisitor than Bishop Quadra, and Farnese is a tyrant bent on nothing but power and destruction of good folk.'

She sniffs, a hint of the old, cagey Sarah resounding.

'We cannot justify pitching them out because you do not like them, sir. This is about our duty to God!'

'This is about your duty to the Catholic Church, is it not?'

'Well yes, that too but...'

'And where do you suppose their church is now, Sarah? This rescue frigate that they sent for, where would you countenance that is? Farnese is a traitor to the Kingdom of Spain, he deserted their cause, they will not save him. Now he pleads for your mercy, yet he is no less a rat than Strange is, and no less ruthless. He will bring us down, and if you will not take action, as the master of this house, I will.'

Sarah is agape. But then, she ought to know who is wearing the breeches here, fie!

'We cannot do this, Angus...'

'How many more moles like Raspail will burrow into our lands, sniffing for weaknesses, um? Sarah, we have no choice, lest Strange will crush us.'

She is fuming.

'We cannot forsake them.'

I pull her about and stare into her eyes. Aye, I am too charming for her to resist.

'We will and we must, Sarah.'

She steps away from me and begins to clear away our picnic.

'George will be expecting you back, dear. Let us not disappoint him now.'

Now November is upon us, 'twas with welcome relief that Sarah finally acceded to my wishes, after making as much pester as I could muster at her in recent weeks. The Spaniards will leave today, on a fair sized fishing vessel procured by Williams at considerable expense from some wastrel of a sea dog on the Liverpool quayside. The boat scarcely looks like it would make it to Ireland, let alone Northern Spain, but that is not our issue. At least this way Farnese's death will not be on Sarah's conscience, though personally I would have preferred to have shopped the evil goat to the authorities and claimed the loot. It would have put us Chingles back in favour with the English status quo and made all of our lives easier. It also would have seen this scum disposed of permanently, for one never knows when the likes of Farnese will appear over one's shoulder again, Quadra ready to cut out one's liver in the name of *El Rey Felipe*. Fie...

I have joined Williams and Sarah underground, helping them load up the ill-gotten collection of loot that Farnese calls his family fortune for shipment to his new exile. Would that some poor leaf-chewing native from the Indies have had that luxury before the Duke of Palma's merchant friends raided and murdered him for this very same gold! Pah...

Farnese was permitted to wash and shave before his departure, and as he supervises his crewmen in the moving of the goods, that familiar pomp has returned, the fine silken dandy attire, even his courtly lisp. Fie, I should smite the self-righteous Spaniard arse here and now!

'I see you still smart at my presence here, my Lord Caveat.'

"'Tis Lord Chingle,' I hiss.

'But of course it is, how ignorant I am! And as we are on the same side now, the side of Holy Rome,' he says, casting a glance in Sarah's direction, "'tis a pity that you would not extend a little more hospitality for just a few days until we are collected by a seaworthy vessel, good sir?'

I turn to Farnese, still aggrieved by his actions in Amsterdam, wondering yet whether I should seek swift recompense...

But Williams eyes me, shaking his head.

'The ship will suffice to get you to Ireland,' says I.

'I would rather take my chances in a coracle!' grunts Farnese, aside to Quadra.

'Then why do you not, sir? Forsooth I can arrange for you to swim there! Or float, face down.'

Williams lays a foreboding, meaty palm across my chest.

'Oh do worry not, Mr Williams,' says Farnese, 'Your master is an earnest fellow, verily I have no quarrel with him. I thank him for his grace and patience.'

Quadra creeps behind us, bandy as a fucked ferret, making the grim reaper look like Adonis. Why cannot Sarah and Williams see what foul scum these criminals are?

'You have been given a sporting chance,' I tell Farnese, 'Which is more than you granted me but a few shorts months past. You should thank these kind people, not me.'

A thin smile and a bow from the Neapolitan. He glances around the seedy cave, the Spaniards' home since the defeat of their Armada sent them scrambling around the coast of

Britain like drowning dogs.

‘Verily I thank you all for your *generous* hospitality,’ he says.

Sarah approaches.

‘The loading is complete, your Grace. We will head for the shore now to catch the eventide.’

Farnese accompanies Sarah to the surface with Quadra in his wake. I follow suit, for why should I not be present to bid farewell to an old friend?

~

The boat would not hold all of Farnese’s gold without stooping dangerously on its keel, so half of the load was lowered back into carts and returned to the hall for safekeeping. Farnese was less than happy, in spite of Sarah’s proclamation that he would return to an England liberated from heretics one day to reclaim his metal. Zounds, his face resembled that of a naughty child after his toffee apple had been confiscated!

Aye, sometimes one has to accept the little compensations in life...

The skeleton crew of Farnese, Quadra and the various clergy and officers, some thirty fellows, floated away to the South-West packed aboard a hoy sloop not meant to carry more than fifteen men at the most, and that with a cargo of fish rather than gold. Moreover, the sloop’s mainsail was a ripped, square-rigged gaff, which would surely cause them awful difficulty maintaining a regular course. Fie, if that bucket makes it to Ireland it will take a greater leap of faith than Columbus finding the Indies to the North. Alas, good riddance to the bastard of Palma, for he can take his pomp and his gold with him to a watery grave, forsooth!

~

Williams’ house is thrice better now than ’twas ere Strange’s men almost razed it, and not least due to my

personal toil of the weeks past. He has replenished his livestock, his roof, his cellars and plot from the Chingle purse, as have all other tenants here. Zounds, I am beginning to wonder whether that hole in the ground dug and filled by the erstwhile errant Crispin is bottomless, or whether our coffers are soon to be broke. Then what? Levies on the land must be paid to the lieutenancy of Lancashire, for *protection* from the Earl of Derby. Strange will show no clemency if we accrue a bad debt, and I would have no doubt that he would lobby parliament to seize our assets and have us turfed out of our own land!

Aye!

Sarah is more optimistic. Today we will tour the land and visit each tenant, so that I might see with my own eyes the progress that has been made in such a short time.

'When will you ever stop worrying about Strange?' she says, as we dress for the day.

'When I am kicking dirt upon his coffin, Sarah,' I grunt.

'How very unlike you to be dramatic, my Lord.'

'Tis the morning after we removed the Spaniards, but other thoughts have already begun to enter my head regarding the management of the estates. For the first time in my life I am responsible for persons other than myself, and I can use every drop of experience I have gained in the courts of Europe to aid my new brethren. Principally, this means staying one step ahead of the foul fellow beyond the sand hills, secondly it is protecting them from their own stubborn Catholic guilt and belief that God will save them whatever happens.

'How can we be sure that the tenants will produce enough to sell, Sarah? We need to recoup our losses soon, lest we will not be able to pay the piper.'

She smiles and kisses me softly.

'You really have changed, my Lord.'

'Sarah, this is a serious issue forsooth.'

‘Strange does not know us. We are stronger than he thinks, we will work with the Holy Spirit in our hearts to pay his damned heretic taxes again and anon. We will ne’er cower before the beast with the forked tongue.’

‘That resilience, that strength of purpose! What a woman I have married!’

Aye, what a woman.

I curse myself for thinking it, but I must keep my eye on her.

~

The Clarks, the Hollingtons, the Roberts, the Robertsons, the Gradwells, the Colwells, the Woods, the Randles, the Merricks and Fenwicks, the Blakes and Billingtons. All fine, godfearing Catholic folk, the same that stood at my shoulder, ready to die as Strange’s horde descended upon us. More pious than the Pope in Rome, but that is not difficult, since Popes have been breaking their own proclamations since Popes began making proclamations. Yes.

Before we had arrived at the first house, that of good Mr Clark the smith and his kindly wife who tutors herself in physic (which would be quite to the horror of the strictly male Royal Society of Barbers forsooth), I had ventured that we should use some of Farnese’s gold to get us through the winter. Aye, embezzle it through some exchequer into regular currency, then make payment. Simple. Holy of holies Sarah, of course, would *never* resort to theft, for it breaks a commandment and would weigh heavily as a sin upon all our souls. Pah.

And so she guided me through every house to meet upon the progress of our tenants, to show me how one could redeem anything through hard work and faith, rather than sin. Never in my experience, but I followed her with good grace, Sarah being my beloved wife. All places were simple, clean and immaculate, all contributing before our very eyes to

the common good of the village. Even their sewage is neatly distributed about the land to keep it fertile for the winter months, so the stink one normally associates with lower sorts does not linger so heavily about the houses of Little Chingle. Of course, after the land is covered sufficiently with shit, their pigs feed on the remainder. No waste.

Alas, there is more to our worthy tenants, for none depend on the earth alone to survive. Merrick the cooper sells his barrels in Liverpool and Preston, fashioned from local wood. Billington, our old friend the apothecary, sells his tinctures and herbs in the towns when he is not about the village nursing ailments or labouring at his vegetable patch. Then there are seamstresses, cobblers and bakers, all traders and farmers, all focused upon the common good. There is no whorehouse, no petty crime, no market and no stocks, just a simple existence where villagers come together only for worship and then are back at work for all the hours that God sends them, lest someone in the village might go hungry.

Well, that there are not many folk in Chingle is a blessing, for if this experiment were to be applied in a town or a country, even with the best of intentions it would surely fail. Human nature dictates that one takes care of one's own, perchance even oneself, before one helps anyone else. Or more bluntly, if your neighbour wants something for nothing out of you, you tell him to go hang, for he would to you. Unless, of course, by happenstance you live in Chingle.

But how can they get any fun out of life?

The only place we did not call upon our little tour was the Williams house, for Sarah rightly surmised that after several long hours of traipsing about the acres of this manor I would not glean anything more by visiting the old goat just to watch him sneer at me for interrupting his pigfucking and bible bashing. Well, might as might be in not quite as many words, but that was the gist of what she meant.

Perchance she did convince me a little that the village would survive the winter. Perchance the investment of the dwindling Chingle funds was worthy after all. Perchance produce from the land and trade from crafts will be abundant enough to create some modest prosperity, enough to keep the taxman off our backs at least. There is a rather sickeningly righteous air to these folk, fie I have known it since I first set foot here, but now 'tis stronger than ever. Perchance that is what fuels their passion to survive here, what keeps Merrick from taking his family to Chester to sell his barrels, where surely he would make an easier living for himself. The same would apply to every other family, for they are all able artisans in some shape or form. Perchance alas, that is what Sarah means by the Chingle way, the way it has always been here.

And perchance after years of seeing human nature from a fisheyed perspective of greed and fortune, it will yet take some time to become used to these people, but I will endeavour anon, because I myself must take the righteous path now, if I am to be accepted by all and sundry.

Well...

~

The riddance of the Spaniards and the restoration of the village gladdens me, for now I know that our enemy will have enough rope to hang himself should he try any more tricks. Williams caught another of Strange's spies about his land a few eves past and he was birched for his antics and roughly despatched back from whence he came with ten strokes across his arse to remember us by. It seems that, at last, we have begun to get on top of life here in Chingle, for it has even entered my countenance that perchance we should begin producing some heirs.

Aye, so that pipe dream of mine would be complete.

Alas, Sarah has not warmed to the idea, for now. There is

the bleakness of winter to tackle ere we should consider a family, and our first together is bound to be the toughest. Perchance in spring then, I would venture. And so anon, I must spit my humour of life into the sealed slither of a sheep innard when we make love, but how so I want to impregnate her, what bonnie babies we would make!

My daily tasks have settled to about the land. Still Williams requires my aid, slaughtering a bull or harvesting cabbages, but I have desisted from complaining in spite of my status. 'Tis the Chingle way, for the common good, aye. Though from time to time I daydream about the Bartolotti, about what cad must be sitting in my shoes now, or whether indeed the place still exists. There is a wave of Puritanism sweeping Europe, 'tis dangerous to the taverna and seraglio business.

But then, I am no longer in the taverna and seraglio business, so why should I care?

By day, when I am not at work or loving Sarah, I take Maggie out for rides wearing a thick cloak as an aid to disguise and to keep out the chill, coastal breeze. I meander perchance north or south twenty miles, but no farther a flight than that I will consider, for now I know where my home is I will not stray far. Needless to say I avoid Strange's favourite spots, preferring rugged open spaces and hill land to exercise my nag, until I am entertained suffice.

And always I return before evening, perchance having bagged a salmon or two from some stream for our pot. And Sarah will kiss me and prepare a meal, and she will ply me with wine and we will sit in front of a warm hearth watching the flames dance until she falls asleep and I carry her up to bed...

And another day is gone, anon, anon...

'Anon...' I grunt, gently stirring from my dream.

'Tis still black night outside. I roll over to find Sarah, but she is not there.

An awful chill permeates the bed chamber, the kind of cold one would not desire to remove oneself from bed to address unless it is altogether necessary.

'Sarah? My Lady Sarah my sweet?'

Ah, perchance she is attending the privy in the yard. Why would she not use the chamber pot though? 'Tis an awful frost outside for one to perform turds.

I stand out of bed and shiver, pulling on a sheepskin gown. Immediately I notice a faint glow behind the curtains. I take a peek and see that it is torchlight coming from beyond the wall in the direction of the woods, Williams' patch. Probably nothing, probably Williams up at an insane hour to work his land before praying to his Almighty...

More lights... four... five... six. Perchance a cart is being dragged from behind one of the sand hills, as I can just make out the silhouette of a horse against the back wall of the farmhouse.

Why should Williams be out working and not have asked me? Even this is too early for him...

And where is Sarah?

'Have you not learned to trust her yet, you egg?' I tell myself.

But that is in vain, for my curiosity conquers even the cold now. I begin to dress.

~

I scaled the grounds on foot, careful not to rouse any horses or tenants about the hall. Fie, there is a biting, bitter cold about this night! Why would anyone be out in the open?

Because no one else is, perchance.

Nay! Nothing would happen about this land without my knowledge. For all their peculiar ways, I am now Lord Chingle...

Then what is this?

I have assumed a position beside my favourite briar patch,

by the brook that meanders by the Williams farmhouse. This reminds me of a much warmer night months past, when I first espied the Spaniards being huddled into his cellar...

And as the cart comes into view, I am filled with an all too familiar dread. The gold crucifix of Farnese, that which I espied when Sarah first took me to the catacomb, is now being loaded back into Williams' house.

Perchance they are moving the article? But no, Farnese insisted that he took that cross with him, which can only mean one thing...

Farnese is back!

Fie, *perchance he never left!*

Nay!

~

What on earth are they doing? Zounds!

I am sat atop a sand hill now, watching the people of Chingle, *my* people, with great sadness. The decrepit sloop sits moored off the sands, a procession of familiar faces carrying the filthy Neapolitan's articles back ashore, wading knee deep in this freezing, foggy weather.

Has some swine slipped mandrake in my bedtime sup? Perchance this is another dream? To countenance the betrayal of one that you trusted is bad suffice, an entire community is simply unfathomable!

Sarah cannot be involved with all of this...

She *must* not!

I am in shock forsooth. I need to sit and ponder it all, out of this bone-chilling wind.

Sand coursing through my boots, I make my way up a path of weed and long grass leading betwixt the hills, thinking to return without any fellow noticing. Alas I halt behind a short mound and crouch, footsteps approaching, two voices, a lantern...

Sarah...

...With Farnese...

'Florita...' he says, clutching her body, '¿Para el milésimo tiempo, cuando mi buque llega, vas conmigo? Te quiero, quiero, quiero...'

They kiss! A foul sight! Might I pluck out my eyes alas!

'Pero no puedo abandonar mi gente, Alessito, no puedo nunca nunca nunca...' she says. She cannot leave her people, how very noble! What about her husband?

He runs a finger along her cheek.

'Our ship really will be here soon, you have but a few days left to change your mind...'

'But you will return, Alessito. You will help me set England free.'

'Claro qué si, Florita, claro qué si...'

She links *Alessito* Farnese and they head anon to rejoin the procession. I scramble over the hill, my heart ripped to shreds. How could she? How could she?

~

Crestfallen, heartbroken, downtrodden...

Fie, fie, fie and fie again, I have changed my entire life for her, for *them*. I have joined a path of righteousness and frugal behaviour, I have eschewed everything I once took for granted as normal, as if I would be cursed for neglecting my responsibilities to these good folk. But *good* folk they are not. Behind their purity and abstinence slithers a serpent of deceit, and it exists in no person more than in my wife Sarah. Foul, lying harridan!

In the dark I am sat up in bed, swigging from a flagon of gin left to ferment in our cellar. The grog was made for sale at market, and as I can chew the pickled skins of juniper berries, 'tis perchance not fully settled yet, but it does the trick. I cannot feel the lips it passes and it frees my pain verily!

The door creaks open to our chamber and I catch her familiar scent. The woman who has made me a cuckold

enters, clutching a candle.

'Did you complete your task, my Lady?'

Sarah nearly jumps out of her skin.

She sees my face, she sees the pain, and for the first time I can tell she is frightened, for I know not what kind of enraged beast I must resemble, only one that God might take pity upon!

~

I was right about the Neapolitan. The vessel had merely sailed around the bay with a plan to return later that night. However, it had become stuck on a sand bank across the water and Farnese was brought back on a rowing boat. Sarah's tour of the tenancies was sufficient to distract me from Williams' house, where the Spaniards were setting up residence again in cellars I helped to restore. Three days later a strong tide lifted their vessel from the silt and it was returned to the Chingle shore for despatch of Farnese's goods.

'I should have stayed in and kept you distracted, fie. I hoped that you would have slept through it all, with the wine I gave you,' she says.

'Would to you that I'd have slept and ne'er woken!'

'Angus, I only wanted to spare you the pain, I...'

'I am sure it is all a real rigmarole for you, my Lady,' says I.

'You have every right to be upset, Angus...'

'Upset? That foul shit Farnese plucks you! Did he have you on our wedding night too, um?'

'I did NEVER to bed with him! Only a kiss and a misbegotten promise to make him want to help us! I did it for my people, Angus...'

I throw the flagon at the wall, it shatters like my heart.

'Did you do *me* for your people, Ladyship?'

Tears in her eyes, tears of a vixen in a hen coop.

'If you would let me explain!'

'I should thrash you to death. Like any man would do with a wife of such wicked deeds.'

'We both know you are not that kind, Caveat.'

Sarah affixes me with that steely look.

'What right do you have to eye me, dear Lady? I have discovered myself cuckolded and betrayed in one night! Lies, Sarah, lies!'

Sarah shakes her head and sits next to me on the bed.

'George was right, you will never understand our cause. 'Twas madness to marry you, even in love.'

'Now you say, Sarah! Tell me, was that game with the boat all for my benefit?'

'There was no other way. You were ready to have them taken by Strange!'

'Yes! For YOUR protection! But I can see which you prefer now...'

She grabs my arm, a shadow of the demure, chaste lady I once knew.

'The Duke of Palma has powerful allies! He will return with arms, so that we might fight the heretics! There is an army of ten thousand ready to rise in Lancashire! I had to do it! You are my only beloved!'

I push her on the bed, tears stream down the face of the only woman I have ever loved. A woman who has fallen for the basest of tricks from the basest of men. Little wonder Farnese was strutting around in his finery that day...

He *loved* every moment of it.

'Pah!'

And her image in my soul cracked, forever tarnished...

But I will have my satisfaction!

I seize my sword, she recoils.

'Made by an Italian to kill an Italian,' says I, a fury I have ne'er felt coursing about my blood.

'Caveat, no!'

~

If any man should get in my path, I shall run him through hard and fast. *Any* man!

I stride out of the hall, spitting white vitriol and waving about my rapier, for I will cut this Neapolitan coward down and take his bloody Bishop Quadra to hell with him!

Finding Maggie to rouse, I jump astride her and quicken the beast towards the wall and through the gates. Sarah will be behind, frantically trying to raise the alarm, but by the time she gets there it will be too late. She will find her beloved Neapolitan waiting with a glazed death stare.

Believe her, do I, that she would fall into the arms of Farnese on whim of an empty promise? I know not what to believe, for once again disorder has bloomed from order in Chingle. Aye, these are turbulent times, and the charm of a man once the darling of Phillip's court *El Escorial* and a favoured patron of the Roman Catholic church might have proved too much for Sarah. She is desperate to find a way out of this suppression her people suffer, but at the expense of my betrayal? How could she do such to a man she claimed to have loved so?

Because, unlike the passion plays, the callous and evil man wins such battles everyday.

But not *this* day!

I almost make Maggie lame by vaulting the brook, but my faithful filly stays true and sturdy. I dismount, making no attempt to disguise my presence.

Williams duly stomps out of his farmhouse.

'My Lord, you are not supposed to be here...'

The giant is felled with one almighty blow with the hilt of my sword, the power of which 'tis preternatural to be mine. I approach the trap entrance to his cellars, pull the door open and drop down there.

For a moment, I am left kicking in the dark, looking for

their hidden door. From outside I can hear Williams grunting oaths, but the bastard does not vex me, not in the business of my foul fury tonight...

Then I hear it, muffled shuffling behind a corner. A great oaken cabinet sits there, impossible for me to shift alone. Has to be an easier way...

'Mr Caveat, you better remove yourself from down there promptly, sir! Promptly I say!' says Williams, outside.

I pull away one of the panels to the cabinet, behind which a torchlit passage.

'¡Puta!' cries a shocked voice on the other side. A Spaniard in a sackcloth gown races out of the hole to attack, but I use the dark to my favour and sidestep the brute, tripping him and cracking the fellow on the back of his head for his sins.

Jumping into the breach, I race down a long, narrow strip to find more catacombs still. Perchance there are miles of them down here, but if I can find one foul Spaniard, the others will not be far...

Gregorian chant, coming from the right hand fork in the tunnel. A Papist signature.

'Caveat, get back here!' rants Williams, not far behind.

'Go hang!' I return, then race towards the sound of the ceremony.

I come to a door, boot it open and burst inside. There are no guards, only monks, a few locals and Farnese, all worshipping at the golden crucifix that their sins might be cleansed. Before any person can block me, I dive at the Neapolitan and whip my blade across his face. He collapses to the ground in a whimper, my rapier is at his throat.

'Any dying words, your Grace?'

'Th-they'll hang you!' he whines. I stomp on his guts and withdraw my sword, ready for the blow...

'Not very good, Farnese. Even for you, forsooth.'

'Caveat no!'

The glint of candlelight against gold washes across my blade, time slows down...

Then I hear it...

A baby crying, atop a makeshift altar. Water seeps from Quadra's hands, as if he has just cleansed a stigmata. All eyes in the room are upon me, bar Farnese himself, curled up in a ball...

My wrath solidifies into something colder, harder, nastier...

Sarah is here, her pretty, oval face tracked with tears. Words fail me, as they do her.

Chill tempest there might be tonight, but 'tis a summer breeze compared to what happens within me.

I must leave Chingle now.

Maggie sensed my pain, I am sure, for she rode faster and harder than ever before. She did not refuse a jump or buckle in her stride once. I would fair say she could compete well in equestrian sports, would that she did not have a morose, broken cuckold astride her beautiful, strong back.

Still in a daze, I search Liverpool for an establishment that might be open at this time in the morning, for I need drink, drink and more drink, aye! The only place open is that which on any other day I would have avoided, but to hell with reservations, this is an emergency. This morn, the Crack in The Wall has but a few patrons littered about the place, fishermen and foreign sailors, added to the usual collection of chancers and ne'erdowells that one would only expect to find propping up a bar at half past dawn. I slam a few coins down. That wizened fellow who once tried to get me banged up spins round and eyes me with derision. He recognises me instantly.

Evidently not as stupid as he looks, which would be difficult, alas. He approaches another barfly, crusty fellow that looks like a younger, pirate version of himself, then whispers into his ear. The fellow grunts and toddles off, perchance to get me arrested, but I care not.

'Mr Morgan, I have come to settle my long standing debt

and to partake in your finest hooch,' says I, pushing the coins towards him, 'There's plenty more where that came from, forsooth. Now will yer serve me, sir?'

He gurns and picks up a coin, gumming it to check its authenticity. Then he grunts something unintelligible and fills me a coup of mead. I quaff it in a single gulp and belch, slamming the coup down.

'Again,' says I. The brew is foul and strong, but will taste better the second time I am sure.

Morgan indulges me. I quaff it back even harder, fie the liquid does not touch my lips it disappears so quickly.

'Again!'

And anon...

'Again!'

And anon...

'Again!'

And...

'May I read your zodiac, sir?'

The voice of a boy, nay, now a handsome young man I would vouch. Morgan fills my coup and serves another customer. I spin to see Crispin, his eyes keen and sharp, watching every person in the house to see if they are watching us.

'My boy! Good morrow! What on earth has happened with you lately, eh? Joined the circus, eh? Good lad! Fancy taking a quaff do you? The booze may taste like dogpiss, but fie it does the trick sonny!'

'No thank you, Master Caveat,' he says, his glance still edgy.

'What shit has that Williams been teaching you? You must learn how to...hic... hold a drink down, young fellow. 'Tis a must in society.'

'Might we go somewhere else, sir? I must speak with you...'

His countenance is verging on desperate.

'Well well well, this sounds like serious business indeed.'

'Master Caveat...'

I neck the foul hooch and belch again.

'Lead on! To our latest adventure!'

I fall off my stool, cracking my head. Crispin helps me to my feet.

'This way, sir...'

~

At any other time, self-preservation would have inspired me to doubt the lad's motive by leading me here, for since he has already once had me arrested about Liverpool, why would the scamp not repeat this form? Well, if that is his game, 'tis his lucky day, for self-preservation trickled from my soul the moment I espied that foul Italian tonguing my immortal beloved, aye.

'Tis a blessing I have my lookouts, Master Caveat,' he says.

'What are you wittering on about, lad?' I grunt. Crispin presses a finger to his lips.

'Sir, if you might keep your voice down. 'Twas Mr Morgan who alerted me to your presence.'

'How now Crispin! You are a veritable spymaster are you not! Very impressive, lad, but you are keeping me from a good quaff...'

We are about the castle, squeezed into in a recess by the portcullis. 'Tis a nice spec to espy all the comings and goings, though I still know not why I have been brought here.

'There is no time for drinking, master. Disaster looms,' says Crispin.

'What?'

'Shush!'

'Do not shush me, lad!'

'Observe, sir...' he points down to the muddy yard. Two

score of men equipping their horses, armed to the teeth.

'Yes, and what?' says I, moving away, 'Bother me not, Crispin. I have supping to do.'

I make to stand but the rapsallion has grown strong over the past months, he pushes me back.

'Caveat, look at their crests!'

'What?'

I espy their black vestments. I am beginning to tire of this game.

'They have no insignia. So what, boy?'

'Think you that is not suspicious?' says Crispin.

'Boy, you speak in strange gypsy tongues. Perchance your exile from the village has made you a trifle mad. If you would permit me, I might realign your preposterity by pouring some ale down your neck and getting us the two most wanton hussies in town...'

'Caveat!' he grunts, eyes intense, 'I am not exiled from Chingle! I am still loyal to Lady Sarah, more than you can ever imagine.'

'Then what, lad, are you doing here?'

A hint of a smile.

'Strange has his spies, we have ours.'

I cannot help but scoff at the kid. Aye, he has proved himself handy with a sword, but I cannot credit that he has been charged with the task of spying on the Earl of Derby!

'Fie, yer mad young nut yer! Spying is a man's job!'

'Even if no-one would pay heed to an idiot Moorish orphan boy?'

Well, Crispin might have an issue there.

'You have my attention, lad. What do you want?'

'No one has seen Strange for a week now about the castle.'

'And that is unusual?' says I.

'Aye, sir. He spends more time here than anywhere else, he is ever making plots...'

Zounds, I'll vouch this boy is quite the snoop!
'That tarries,' says I, 'But what of these men?'
'Outsiders, sir. No-one about town has heard of them, but there has been talk...'

'Talk?'

'Rife chatter, sir. Of another raid on Chingle.'

A rather unpleasant shiver of sobriety courses up my spine.

'Nay, son! Nay!'

'I have my sources.'

'Young Crispin, while 'tis ever wise to keep one's ear to the ground, one should also discern between facts and plain gossip.'

'Observe sir, their vestments,' he says.

At a closer look, I can still see no markings.

'Why do you harp on so with this shaggy dog's tale, lad?'

'Master Caveat, can you not see that a foul plot is afoot?'

'Oh tish, boy! Tish, pish, fie and zounds!'

'Sir, please keep your voice down...'

'Crispin... You are a good boy. Perchance I misjudged you. Your loyalty makes me proud, but while I might remain Lord of Chingle in title, my heart has relinquished the role. There is nothing I can do for your people, even if what you say rings true...'

Crispin tugs at my sleeve.

'They leave, master. We must follow them. Come, come...'

~

Crispin had already sent word ahead to Williams of the impending assault. Alas, I was wrong about the boy's snoopsmanship, verily. I have stopped the act of a drunken sot who could not hear over the groaning voices of self-pity in his head, for as we tail the band through the sand hills I can see why the boy has cause for alarm. Aye, my senses are back as they should be now. Worse luck...

But why such a small troop? Why not Strange behind a procession of two hundred men, gloating and preening that victory will this time be inevitable and swift? Perchance one of his snoops espied the Spaniards and his evidence was complete, but that I doubt, for Strange has been none the wiser of their existence since they arrived in Chingle. Indeed, they were secreted under even my nose for a good while, and I had not a clue until I espied them by accident.

Then why this? Why now? And why the stealth?

I verily hope that Williams heeds the warning and battens down the hatches, for this bunch do not look the soft touches that Strange's men were, nay. Perchance I do have the sniff of something, *someone*... aye.

And if one has crossed this person before, his scent is as unmistakable as a festering corpse, and no more appealing.

But why here? Why now?

Why *Walsingham*?

~

Much as the time of the last seige, Williams has raised a bastion upon the wall. No more than a token defence, but I can tell that this band are far too cute to send men galloping into the range of Chingle's bowmen. Thankfully Crispin knows these sand hills as well as any local, and we are able to keep sight of them while avoiding detection, but that is the only mercy.

For the men are not heading directly for the hall, they are bound for the catacombs, battering their way into Williams' cellar. Williams will be watching this, powerless to stop them lest he spreads his meagre forces too thin and allows direct entrance to the hall. The mysterious band must have received exact information about the hideaway, at which point a terrible thought crosses my brow...

That perchance, albeit inadvertantly, *I* told them.

My spite and rage towards Sarah has subsided, for I can

see here and now that my poor folk are already beaten and not even brave Mr Williams can do a thing about it. Yes, Farnese will swing, but he will take the whole of Chingle with him.

'Fie Walsingham,' I mutter beneath my breath, 'Your hangman will soon coin a king's ransom.'

'That he will, Mr Caveat!'

Both myself and Crispin spin around in an instant, swords drawn. Walsingham is astride his satanic steed, Humphrey at his side... along with a guard of five men wearing those same crestless vestments. Each points long barreled guns at us. Crispin shifts to make a dart, I pull him back.

'For pity's sake son, you move another step and they'll take your head off where you stand!'

'Quite right, Caveat,' says Humphrey, 'And perchance even if he does not.'

'Spare him, he is only an idiot orphan boy,' says I.

'He holds his sword like a gentleman,' says Walsingham.

'But they only have sticks!' says Crispin.

Walsingham breaks into a smirk, then a belly laugh. Humphrey eyes me slyly.

Fie, poor Crispin has ne'er seen a gun before, of course he would think so! But his ignorance may have saved his life.

'You are right, Caveat,' says Walsingham, 'He is a dumb boy.'

'Drop your sword,' I order Crispin.

'But...'

'Do it!'

Fortunately, he obeys me. Zounds, on top of everything, I cannot have the death of this boy on my conscience. Though chance might bother me, for I might well be dead soon myself.

'Well then, Lord Chingle,' says Walsingham, eyeing the territory, 'Why not take me on a tour of your new manor,

um?'

~

I have ne'er seen the spymaster so jocular as this, but then he has just been handed one of his greatest coups on a plate... The Duke of Palma and one of Europe's most notorious Papist Inquisitors, two of the fattest rats of King Phillip's court captured. He is quite tickled.

'Forsooth, you are quite the genius,' he says, still on horseback, 'Is he not, Mr Humphrey?'

'Quite, my Lord. Quite.'

We are in the rose garden, the townsfolk are lined up in single file at the back of the hall, each on their knees, from the eldest crone down to the youngest child clutching at the breast of its terrified mother, the same child I saw baptised a Catholic but hours ago. Williams is there, Sarah is there, the Spaniards are already bound in chains and loaded on carts. We are watching the execution of the faithful cooper Daniel Merrick, who but moments ago was caught attempting to ignite his twenty barrels of gunpowder down below so that they might all become instant martyrs in a blast from the bowels of hell.

I close my eyes as the axes falls, then espy Mr Merrick's widow wailing into the dirt, his young son watching as his father's body twitches out the last of its life.

'You devil, Walsingham.'

Humphrey raises his sword to my throat. I am still armed and consider becoming a martyr myself, making one last act to prove to these people at last that I am their loyal and noble squire. Alas, to prove to Sarah how much I love her...

'Leave him, Humphrey. He is my favourite agent. Caveat, the ace of spies, forsooth!'

'What?' I grunt.

I look up at Walsingham on his horse, the smiling devil.

'Fie Mr Caveat, modesty does not become the man! You

have done a wonderful job in Her Majesty's service! I would call you a true Englishman from now on, that you would be knighted! You have cracked a great and foul conspiracy, aye. Your job is done, you are a hero, verily.'

A hero...

I can only see Sarah's eyes, her sweet heart bleeding with knowledge of a deception that runs a thousand times deeper than any dalliance she had with Farnese. For 'tis plausible that she did that for her people whilst still loving me, but my cause would only be pure wickedness in her eyes.

Walsingham appreciates this, nay, he soaks it up gleefully, for it is a knife into my very soul. He did not have to trick them into believing that I was working for him all along, but he did anyway for the vicarious pleasure derived. Aye, 'tis the nature of the beast, and beast he is, not man. Then Walsingham will claim to the world that I was in his service, and thus he will receive every plaudit for another grand victory over papism. Fie!

'Would that we may speak alone, my Lord?' says I, tongue bitten.

Walsingham looks puzzled, but nods.

'I say Humphrey, do take some men into their kitchens and see if a table can be arranged. And...' he eyes Crispin, 'Throw that Moorish half-wit to The Earl of Derby with my compliments. We might as well give him something to brag about.'

'Aye, sir,' says Humphrey. He claps his baby hands together and some men attend. Crispin struggles, receiving a hard bop over his head for his pains. Fie, I fear for the lad, as Strange is as cruel a fellow as anyone could meet. Anyone, that is, bar a certain Francis Walsingham...

He dismounts.

'Now, Mr Caveat. Why do you not lead the way inside good sir?'

~

'Mistress Radcliffe speaks warmly of you,' says Walsingham, finishing a mutton chop, he eats like a starved wolf, 'Mmm, your Lady keeps a fine larder.'

'Why, Maggie?' I mutter to myself.

'Well Caveat, think not that females are inferior agents. Forsooth, a skilled woman is thrice the spy a man can ever be. A Lady is ever fairer, ever more trustworthy, and trust is the greatest weapon in the war against papism. Would you not agree?'

A rifle musket is pressed into the back of my head. Five guards surround the dining table. Fair to say we've had more welcome guests in this pantry.

'Go hang, Walsingham. I'd rather die out there with the rest of them.'

Walsingham's eyebrows spritz about his brow.

'Curious. The Caveat I know would lick the muck from a bull's balls to save his skin.'

'That Caveat is long gone,' says I, 'So how did you discover us? What did Maggie do for you?'

'Suffice to say that I know about all of Her Majesty's letters,' he says.

'That is treason, Walsingham. You should be locked in your own tower.'

The Secretary of State shrugs.

'I won't tell if you do not. Or your friend there...'

What friend? Walsingham is seeing things again, people who are not there.

'Even you would not be so bold as to intercept the royal mail,' I say. He is quite amused by my brash demeanour.

'My simpleton boy,' he says, "'Twas not my eyes that read them, but your friend Maggie's. She is trusted with handling all Her Majesty's missives. And fie, Elizabeth counts trust as highly as a virtue as I do as a weapon. Now Caveat, is that all

you wanted to remove from your brow or is there something else? I do have a hefty load of conspirators to convict, you know. And so little time.'

'You will rot in hell, Walsingham.'

Walsingham chuckles. Perchance not quite agitated then...

'Quite a statement coming from a fellow atheist.'

'If you are an atheist then why do you hate papists so?' says I.

The thin smile drops, his eyes blacken.

'You know, there was once a prince of Hungary who punished Turkish infidels by sitting them atop a long pike and allowing their own weight to run them through. Death would sometimes take a week. Curious how some practices go out of fashion.'

'Do what you like, Walsingham.'

'Yes sir, I always do, sir! But what I would like this time is not to give you that death that might release you, for you are living proof of a great victory! Nay! A spike up your arse would end the greatest of talents I have in my employ...'

'I am *not* in your employ, Walsingham!' I screech.

'You are *always* and forever in my employ, lad. Whether you are aware of it or not, huh.'

'And if I take my own life? You could do nothing!'

Walsingham scoffs. He hands me a dagger.

'Go on then. Jab it upwards at an angle through the belly, stops the heart quicker.'

I shake my head and toss the blade away.

'Go to hell, Walsingham.'

'You have not changed that much, son. Fie, your friend does not say much, does he? Are you a mute, sir?'

He addresses thin air. That voice of desperation creeps up my throat and I am suddenly urged to try to reason with the madman.

'Spare them, sir. You have the Spaniards, the rest are just

simple villagers...'

'You think I do this for my own gratification, Caveat? Fie, that is a worse insult than being called a devil, but again I will relent. I like this new, passionate style of yours, we could work on it together. A convincing act.'

'Sir, 'tis no act. They are practically my kin. Let them go and I will do anything... *anything*...'

'Truly heroic forsooth! Is your name really Caveat? What spirit possesses you? Where is that insipid coward I once knew? Very good, Caveat, very good. Almost convinces even me.'

He shakes his head, mocking me with his fascination.

'My Lord, please, I beg...'

'Alas, the Chingle folk are charged with high treason, the most serious of offences in this realm. They must all be punished as such verily and swiftly. Caveat, do you know how many Catholics there are about Lancashire? Do you know how many love the thought of rising against the crown, if only given the opportunity? Well, they stay quiet in their plots, and ever will they once Sarah Chingle has felt the executioner's hook at Lancaster. The report of this will chill the spine of every damned papist in this land, ere the day that there are none left at all to aid foreign conspirators. *None*, Mr Caveat. *NONE!*'

'Then I am myself a conspirator surely!' says I.

'You could not conspire to take a shit, sonny. Would that you might be dangerous if you possessed a bean of wit. Alas, I am harsh upon you, though. I offer some advice: if there is any function to your mind, you will be rid of your compassion like you would a dose of crabs, for compassion will crush a man such as you. It fits not with your nature.'

He plays with the stripped bone of the joint and picks his teeth, eyes not dropping, smile ever present.

'Have you never loved, Walsingham?' I croak. His face

drops to the sallow, humourless fellow I know and hate - the raw version of Walsingham so many have not lived to describe.

'I have loved only England. I have loved only my Queen...' he mutters.

'But your Queen would not have you murder these people!'

Walsingham slams his hand down on the table. Even his guards jump.

'Sometimes, Dutchman, *my* Queen does not know what is GOOD for her! Sending her troop all the way up here! Damn and tish, what folly! Now, do you know what is good for you?'

'Just kill me, Walsingham...'

I could make a dart for him, that would do it. A packet of shot in the back of the head would come after, but he is right, I have not the courage to entertain certain death, in any circumstance.

Walsingham stands, his guards open the door for him.

'You have a strong horse, and no doubt you have grabbed your share of Richard Chingle's money, eh? Well lad, I have some more advice for you, and your fine friend there. Go home, aye. Go home and this time pay your taxes, lest you enjoy infamy and misadventure, for that is all you will ever get in this realm.'

I am choked by my own lack of power, for I cannot even persuade the most notorious butcher in this realm to have me killed, so that I would not have to live with the shame of survival...

The door slams shut behind Walsingham as he leaves. I hear the bolt as it is drawn.

And alone, in the dark, misery embraces its bedevilled new company...

~

Is it all too much to countenance? Might I lose my mind like Walsingham and begin to address imaginary persons and consider foul deeds in the name of lunatic ideas? The dark revels about me, a complete and intense black that courses through my flesh and blood to dehumanise my being. I wish I could take my own life, but Walsingham is right that such a function is not part of my make-up, so I must dwell in this damned misery anon.

Perchance they will never come to open the door, but that will bother me not, for I am more than ready to sit it out here with grandfather time, to simply die in my own shit and starvation. If I had any will to live remaining, Walsingham destroyed it with the words *Caveat, ace of spies*, for then I knew that I had lost Sarah once and for all, with no chance to say my piece. Fie, I envy those who believe that there is a God, for He might grant that all mistakes and lies are undone in heaven. Alas, I think differently, that human nature is all falsehood, that even righteousness is rooted in selfish earth.

Only one thing has Walsingham granted me by locking me up, and that is being denied seeing Sarah's eyes as she is carted away. But that does not suffice as even cold comfort, for surely as eggs are eggs I can imagine her once proud countenance shattered by the betrayal of a man she might have loved. And then I am torn to think that I wish she has never loved me at all, so that my betrayal is lessened and her overburdened spirit not so greatly pained. Sometimes 'tis better indeed never to have loved than to lose love, forsooth.

The bolt is released and a dim light floods the room. The shape of a tiny man is magnified into a huge shadow over me.

'Time for us to leave, Mr Caveat,' says Commander Humphrey.

~

I had expected a grim sight about the manor, bodies of

slain townsfolk strewn, but the Black Vests were quite meticulous about clearing up their carnage after themselves. But that, of course, is always the way Walsingham likes to conduct his business. The tales of battles and massacres, of intrigue and wanton culture that will ne'er be told because Walsingham, though an atheist, is aware that the only form of an afterlife that exists for certain is one's own image in human memory. Crazy as he is, no man who has e'er reached that level of power would fail to keep at least that vanity, so the stories told are only the few that he would want us to hear, which is why this demon amongst men remains the true ace of spies. Walsingham has waged war in many places, and no man has lived to recall it.

So here it is, Chingle Hall, every farmhouse, every cellar cleared, some forty souls vanished. Only ghosts remain of those past and those soon to pass. 'Tis wise not to speculate what might become of this land now, but my old friend Humphrey has the answer for me regardless as we ride together for the high ground.

'Explosives fascinate me. The sound, the shock, the damage they make. You will ne'er observe a bang of this proportion, Caveat.'

'Why is it that you short fellows always like to make the loudest noise, Humphrey?'

Humphrey signals to his troop and a torch is raised. Two men in the distance light a trail of Spanish gunpowder running beneath the Williams cellar and through the catacombs. Canny as they were, the Vikings could not have anticipated such a dastardly invention as salt petre, all made from a concoction of soil, shit and piss. Fie, the world will come to regret this horrible creation. Humphrey's men set alight to Williams' house and gallop back towards us.

'Is that a tear in your eye, Mr Caveat? Why, these friends of yours were planning to use this powder against loyal subjects

of the Queen! I have no sympathy for merchants of papist terror, neither should you!

'Humphrey, I swear, if you do not shut that mouth of yours I will ram every bit of you up a horse's arse!'

A great flash and a huge bang, the ground tremors for a second. Debris is flying from the roof of Chingle Hall, smoke billowing from every window. Another explosion, I cannot bring myself to watch it...

'Blame not me for this, Caveat. This is your doing, your whinging to *Bessy*. Think upon where those people would be if you had not have entered their lives. Fie, they would be conspiring to run over all of Lancashire with those awful dagos at their side! We owe you a debt indeed, sir.'

He tries to slap me on the back, I whip his hand away. Guns are pointed at me, Maggie stirs.

'Bastard dwarf! I will see the death of you Humphrey!'

'The light will fail soon. I would get moving if I was you. Find an inn, a quaff, a game of cards and a nice whore to warm your bed. You should never have changed, Caveat. Time to go back from whence you came, to what you were. Time to go home.'

I pull back the reins and turn Maggie around, affixing him with a final glare.

'Perchance I will see you again on my travels, Commander.'

'Not before I see you first, Dutchman.'

I thrash the reins and giddy up Maggie into a fast gallop through the trees, away from that terrible sight and towards the destiny of a punished soul. Cannot look back, for there lies the burning ruin of what my life might have been, a place to which I fancy I will ne'er return except in my daydreams and my nightmares...

~

A cold sweat, I awake suddenly. I am in a strange bed,

where am I forsooth?

Yes, I know now...

As yesterday drew dark, I meandered to a coaching inn past Liverpool, in the heart of the Earl of Derby's lands at Aigburth. Vexed and beat, I retired to sleep, the last remaining casket of coins liberated from Crispin's bunker in the woods and held tight in my arms. This is all I have to show for my loss, some damned money. Fie, it has taken that awful event in Chingle to make me realise how some things are more important than wealth. I relive it even in my sleep, each time hoping that reality will change, that Walsingham's arrival was a figment of my imagination, that I might return to Chingle, take Sarah in my arms and tell her how much I love her.

But the result never changes, and I remain here in this limbo, this pernicious purgatory.

Perchance Humphrey was right, perchance I should return to being that same old Caveat, rise from my bed and seek a game and a tart. For an army to rescue Sarah this small box of silver will ne'er buy...

Nay...

...but wait! WAIT!

I sit bolt upright, a great tingle of energy ripples up my spine. Perchance this is what one might call an epiphany, if one was religious.

'Damn you Caveat, you might just have hit upon an idea...'

I am on my feet. Zounds, there is no time to waste! I must turn back again, I must fight this until I am dead, for there is one shimmering speckle of hope in this canvas of black, to which I must raise hell and highwater to seize upon!

And damn my enemies eyes one final time...

Perchance this is madness, but when one has already lost everything one holds dear in life, then the stakes are made paltry. Riding along the dark trail with a bright full moon to light my path, I am dashing back towards that scene of my despair, to where I had thought but an hour past that I would never return.

But then I had not considered this lunatic idea then.

A pinch of sleet swits across my face as I get to the beach. Fie, I sense a savage storm brewing. Grand beacons of tangerine fire like from some apocalypse glow in the night, razing the farmhouses built and rebuilt with the labour of my good tenants and their ancestors, and the hall is almost gone now. Not a soul stirs, not one survivor from all the villagers to bolster my wit, to rally once more to the cause. Yet at least what I have returned here for remains in tact, after a fashion. The sloop sits jammed against a sand bank, the tide out for the night. Aye, I am indeed mad, for there are more cracks in its hull than about that mean old codger Morgan's face.

Still, I can persuade myself that if one is going to die, one is going to die trying.

Persuading Maggie up the gangplank is a different matter. It pains me to do this with such a beautiful and faithful creature, but I slap a stick across her rump and she bolts. With

all the fallow fields about here, she is more than equipped to survive in the wild, perchance more than I am, and my hope is that some kind person might discover and adopt her. Either way, I cannot subject an innocent animal to what I am about to put myself through. I board the vessel as the sleet descends in heavy flow, climbing into the hold that still reeks of rotting fish. All I can do is sit and wait for the tide to lend me some buoyancy, that I might cast off and begin this hare-brained scheme before I come to my senses and return home to Holland.

Zounds, 'tis a cold hell of a night!

~

Two hours past, the backwash of the morning tide hit the stern for the first time and I ascended to the deck, groggy through lack of sleep. Having spent a fair amount of my youth aboard boats of varying size, I have had many a chance to observe the mariner in action at close quarters. Fie, they are ever sturdy fellows with a disturbing streak of bold madness about them, and as I position the gaffsail I begin to gather just why that is the case. It took all of my labours to get the sloop properly afloat, such is the viscosity of the sands about these parts, and as the tide is quite choppy this day I fear the boat might lurch too far to either side and capsize. Recalling that it was purchased only to make a fool out of me, perchance a thousand and one calamities might befall me, but anon.

Thankfully I am away now, sailing due north along the coast. At least if the boat scuppers or sinks I can swim for the shore, though I do not hold much for my chances in these freezing waters, nay. The winds are southerly, quite favourable, and I am soon skipping along at three or four knots, in spite of the ripped sail. It occurs to me that I should have grabbed some supplies before embarking for sustenance, alas too late, but likely I will drown before I die of starvation. Still, the briny air and fizzle and spittle of surf

flecking my face lends some invigoration. I attend to survey the northern horizon, hoping against hope for a miracle...

Hoping that King Phillip really does still hold his favourite nephew in some regard.

~

Passed out on the deck, awoken when a huge wave crashed against the side and saturated me. Zounds, I am soaked sodden and freezing, bound to catch my death of cold. This was a heinous mistake, Mr Caveat! Pah! I scramble to my feet, a-slipping and a-sliding about, grabbing the wheel so that I might navigate. The mid-morning sky is now as black as a widow's shawl with thunder clouds. I can see no coast, just angry wave after angry wave.

Perchance I should throw myself overboard and dispense with the energies. Fie, if there is a God, might He wonder why I eschew Him so? Well this is his damned answer! Why is it ever simpler to lead the life of a scoundrel? Rain lashes the deck, I am cold to the point of numb now, beyond shivering. Forks of lightning crack the sky in the distance, hitting what must be the blasted heath of the Lancashire coast, but that is my best guess in this foul tempest for we could be sailing west, south or north. Fie, I might be able to call upon Phillip myself at this rate! I curse myself for the poor attempt at humour as the boat abruptly starts to list. Crawling into the hold, I espy that a sizable gash has opened in one of the cracks and the water fills to waist length. Pah, impossible to breach! I return to the deck, not to attempt to gain any control over this vessel but to try desperately to espy some coast that I might swim for, but that idea is as ridiculous as was boarding this bucket in the first place, and equally as fatal I fear. It lurches further starboard, bound to capsize any moment. Now I can barely see anything, for the single sail has split asunder and crashes back to the deck, missing me by half a pace at the most...

'Why God?' I scream to the heavens, 'Why?'

Then the boat hits something solid...

Solid *gold* that is, for before my eyes I can see it floating above me, a grand buttress in the wind, and it is magnificent! MAGNIFICENT!

I dash to the starboard side and climb aboard the galleon and up into the rigging. 'Tis my contention that they would not have noticed the sloop from a piece of driftwood in this awful squal, for I did not notice them until we collided. Perchance it is a ghost ship and I am dead and bound for the bowels of hell, but it seems that for phantoms they are rather too keen to keep their own vessel afloat in this mighty torrent. They certainly stand a better chance than mine. From the corner of an eye I espy the sloop capsize and dunk into the water, bobbing and thrashing in the storm before upending at the aft and sinking into the murky depths...

'Tis then that I feel the jab of a blade against my spine.

'¡Oyé puta! ¿Quién es?'

Aye, I have found what I am looking for!

~

The Spanish maggot, squat type, jabbed and manhandled me about the deck to his master as his shipmates battled against the elements. *El Capitan* eyed me with the expected mixture of surprise and derision, then muttered something about stowaways in between rattling out orders in Castillian. I was then taken below decks and shackled to a bench in the officers' quarters.

Fie, the cuffs dig verily into my wrists and ankles, but I would readily exchange this discomfort for drowning in that deathly cold soup outside. All I can hear is yells and clangs from above as I watch the sea smash against the aft boltholes of this boat, named the *San Pedro* judging by the fine tapestry lining the walls of this grand berth. How the Spanish excel in pomp and self-glorification, as if God's own chosen race! The

rest of the crew would have to share a space half the size of this room, and doubtless enjoy far less salubrious leisure. There are four bunks, one of which has a curtain drawn over it...

'¡Qué horrible! Me repugnan los galeones...' A female voice, I can hear the splash of vomit, 'Uhhh... horrible...'

'Can I help you, ma'am?'

'¿Uh?'

The curtain is pulled back to reveal a plump latina in a nightie. She coughs and spits into a bedpan, which I see to my abject disgust she has already filled with a fat turd. Uh indeed!

'My Lady, 'tis my advice to concentrate on a fixed point, thereby assuaging the affect of seasickness. 'Tis caused by an imbalance in the middle ear.'

'¿Qué es esto? ¿Quién es? ¿Tu es inglés?'

'No ma'am, I am a Dutchman, and proud of it!'

The rotund, moustachioed tart eyes me up and down and wipes her lips, her malady quite overcome by lust. The rocking of the ship eases quite suddenly, perchance we have found the eye of the storm.

'¿Habla usted ingles?' says I.

She climbs out of her bed and approaches me, scratching her harnies. Fie, I cannot move anywhere with these shackles!

She presses her breasts together, jiggling them about like two great udders, like she is suffocating a cat.

'Ma'am, I have urgent news for your captain about the Duke of Palma! I beseech you!'

She pulls back suddenly, her countenance suddenly grave.

'¿Mi Alessito? ¿Qué? What do you know of my husband? Is he alive?'

Zounds, she does speak English then...

~

Know the lady myself I do not, but a name ever carries far

more weight across the courts of Europe than a face, and this name I have no trouble recalling from whisperings I have heard on my many visits to the Escorial Palace in Madrid. The woman has quite an appetite for life as well as for stuffing her face, and 'tis only by fluke that I have ne'er encountered her before, but she matches her repute indeed.

Maria Conchita Elena De Orellana De Chaves Farnese, Duchess of Palma, wife of that insipid runt at the bottom of all my vexations. The good lady has been searching for her husband since news came of the disaster in the Channel at the hands of Drake. Well, perchance not searching as she protests, perchance more likely squandering her husband's fortune about Madrid, sapping young male courtesans dry and crying on her illustrious sire's shoulders for sympathy. For her less than legitimate father is nonother then *El Rey Felipe* himself, and perchance the only reason he is motivated to save his son-in-law *and* nephew's bacon after what amounts to flagrant cowardly treason in *Alessito's* failure to join the Armada in battle is that Maria pestered King Phillip so. Fie, and they call it *breeding* forsooth!

Nevertheless, quite an amiable hen. All very well since I might otherwise be keelhauled without her voice as an ally. Captain Alonso has joined us, along with his maggot of a First Officer, my friend who pulled me from the rigging. Alonso looks as if the weight of the world has been placed upon his shoulders on this crusade. He is a sturdy fellow of the sea, no doubt veteran of a few scrapes with English privateers over the years, and I would vouch far more comfortable navigating Hispanola than these awful, cold Northern climes. Having earlier relayed all the details of the misadventure to Doña Maria, including the arrest of her husband and his cohorts, she then fired them out to Alonso at double speed in her colourful, irascible Spanish.

Alonso seems a thoughtful type of fellow, not prone to

snap judgements I would hope.

'Why do I think you are playing some foul game with me, Mr...'

'LORD Angus Van Caveat of Chingle,' says I, 'And rightful heir to the Duchy of...'

'Yes, yes, yes...' grunts Alonso, waving a gloved hand at me.

His number one babbles something into his ear, eyeing me with disdain.

'Gomez here says he knows of you. A legendary pimp and chancer about the courts.'

I am quite pleased with the 'legendary' tag, though I can tell that Alonso is not after making flattery.

'Doña Maria,' says I, 'Do not my observations of your husband ring true?'

Alonso draws his blade to my throat.

'I am captain of this ship. You address *me!*'

Maria cuffs Alonso about the back of his head.

'¡Cretino! ¡Este es nuestro amigo, un caballero gran y noble del Duque! ¡Mas decoro ahora, cabron! ¡Mas decoro!'

Alonso lowers his blade. I would venture the poor fellow has been harassed so all the way across the Bay of Biscay. Maria winks at me.

Fie, these Spanish ladies are ne'er backwards in going forwards. Mia Infanta.

'My good captain, I have nearly drowned in my endeavours to find you. Right now the man YOU have been charged with returning safely to Spain, one of your greatest Generals, is being locked up awaiting trial in Lancaster castle, sir. They will not dally in convicting and executing him for public show, and the people who harboured him. *My people.*'

Alonso's thin beard twitches.

'Then they are already dead,' he says tersely.

Maria allows the translation to sink in, then she huffs and

puffs, belting Alonso again.

'¡Cretino!'

'You are wrong, Captain. We might die trying, but there is a way,' says I, emboldened with the support of my new ally.

Alonso rolls his eyes. He certainly does not want to be here right now, alas perchance the truth begins to sink in. He eyes Gomez for support, who can only shrug.

'No lo sé, Capitan.'

Gomez is the type who follows orders rather than thinks of them, little wonder he has not a clue. Alonso bites his lip.

'Tienen nuestras ordenes. We have our orders. I will listen.'

And hence, I proceed to tell my Captain what I have in mind and damn him if he thinks me insane. Even if I am quite sure that he would be right.

~

Alonso insisted, in spite of my strongest protests, that we headed south to confirm my tale about the fate of Chingle. Producing a rather curious and magical device called an eyeglass, he espied the smouldering wrecks of the hall and the village, not one house left standing. Whether by his own intelligence or by the chiding of Doña Maria, he then ordered the *San Pedro* about and North anon, the storm slowly abating in our path. Aye, perchance now he believes me?

For I will ne'er get another chance...

The typical crew of a Spanish galleon is around two hundred men, allowing for forty paying passengers. I have heard many a story of what it is like to voyage upon one of these vessels to the New World, fewer of danger from piracy and more of discomfort and scurvy, of foul pests to the humours, of cheapened life and frequent death crossing the big blue. And that is just the wealthy passengers.

Yet, in its use as a Man-O-War, the galleon has no equal. It is sleek about the water with a top speed of eight knots and heavily armed with guns on two decks, archer nests and blades on the mainsail designed to rip asunder an enemy vessel at the mast, should the enemy be bold or stupid enough to approach near. Perchance 'tis inclined to pitch and roll rather, hence Doña Maria's earlier *mal-de-mer*, but I can see that Farnese was quite right to insist upon the protection of such a fine ship to return him to Spain. Fie, 'tis testament to the genius of Drake, the pomposity of the Spanish Admiralty and the unpredictability of the waters surrounding these isles that the English were not routed last August, and if it were not for the fate of blessed Bessy I would have wished so, for I would not be in this predicament forsooth.

The *San Pedro* came with a motley band of troops forty strong, hardened from campaigns in Asia Minor against the

Turks I am told. They are kept well regimented by the stout fellow Gomez, who ne'er misses an opportunity to eyeball me whenever I issue my curiosity. Fie, a man has to know what cards he has left to play with though, and King Phillip has indeed sent some of the best men to Farnese's aid. Most of them speak in that most indiscernible of tongues Basque, a good sign as that region breeds some of the meanest fighters in Europe.

Late afternoon, and I have climbed to the poop deck to join Captain Alonso. We have passed Preston, the milky grey sky revealing the coastline now that the storm has dissolved into a wet mist. Maria watches me lustily as I explain to the Captain the design of our target, and where we might attack from under cover of night. Fie, I am ever grateful for Woodcock's tour of the Lancaster bastion, having committed all of the details to memory. Would that they will be put to good use, alas.

Gomez rants at his troops in his clipped dialect, interspersing French, Castillian and Basque. Alonso has a determination about him, a steely absence of pomp that would well serve the higher ranks of the Spanish navy. Alas, England in her hour of need put aside heraldic tradition and recruited a yeoman in Drake because he is a fine mariner and astute in battle, the weakness of the Spanish is their refusal to elevate the likes of Captain Alonso. Aye, I have seen enough of so-called generals and admirals on one side and the genuine article of the seasoned warrior on the other to be able to separate the wool from the chaff, and it gives me some comfort to discover I have an able seaman indeed on my side.

He lowers his eyeglass and nods to himself.

Not far until we lie off Lancaster, and then to wait until nightfall...

~

Myself, Alonso, Gomez and three of his troop took a

rowing boat out to view the bastion. Military strategy is not my strong point, but I could tell with my grasp of colloquial Spanish that they were agreeing a point of entry. Meanwhile this is where I alight, that I might find a way into this terrifying edifice and discover Sarah alive and unhurt, for she would still have to await trial even if such amounted to no more than a sham ritual. Yes, hope springs yet, but my gut feeling is that the summary justice has already begun.

The plan is hatched and I away, armed by Gomez with a cutlass sharp enough to gut a lion in all of its savagery. On my last visit here the custodians of the bastion were stupefied with drink and self-assurance, this time I would not vouch so. Each guard will be keen-eyed with the special guests they have, and I will have to tread carefully until I get the first signal... a full broadside from the *San Pedro*.

Still I must convince myself that this is not certain death, for if my life had not purpose then I would not have been able to progress thus far. Yes, that might sounds right, but as I climb back down into that awful sewer running beneath the bastion, any logic of that sort is swept aside by the cold stench of reality. Perchance this method of entry is a risk, for the Constable of the Castle (and 'tis surely not that insufferable ginger oaf Woodcock after last time) should have surmised that the last escape was made via the drains. Zounds though, it looks like no person has been down here in an eon, nevermind Williams and Crispin. I risk a torch, for drowning in a giant pool of piss is not the way I would like to go and there are drops and turns everywhere here in the belly of this beast.

The hint of moonlight at the entrance drops out of sight. I last went this far on reconnaissance with Crispin and I am working from inspiration and memory, though 'tis damned hard to consider anything else but the foul smell. Then I espy what I am seeking, a short flight of stairs leading up from the

quagmire to an iron door. This was Williams and Crispin's method of escape last time, for on the other side of this door is the duct. I try the handle, locked. Fie, they *have* made alterations. The only way through now is underwater and in complete darkness...

Zounds, I was ne'er prepared for this! Alas, no-one is here to listen to my protests, 'tis fight or flight... And I seem to recall opting for the former the moment I stepped aboard that damned sloop.

I take a deep breath and jump into the hole of silage and water, making a determined but futile effort to prevent any of the foulness entering my passages. Choking with distemper, I rise to the surface, wondering yet again why I am putting myself through this for a woman who cuckolded me...

Because I love her, and something in my soul says that she loves me. And even if that fails as a truth, it is the right thing to do.

I am insane!

Another deep breath, this time I manage to get all of my body into the breach. There is a dim light on the other side, as if a kind of antechamber, but I am halted by some infernal grid, placed there recently no doubt. I gag some of the water back and return to the surface, swallowing some of the insipid liquid...

'Whhhoooougggghhhh!'

I retch over the narrow path, bringing up yellow bile. Fie, if I return down there I will surely drown! Nay!

But I must try and try anon!

Deep breath, back into the breach, my lungs protesting mightily. This time I pull out Gomez's cutlass and dig into the masonry surrounding the grid. Perchance 'tis new, and therefore will not have set well underwater. I manage some give, holding back a choke with all my might, scraping furiously into the stone until I manage to get a jemmy betwixt

the grid, the cutlass and the masonry. I am taking in yet more water now but have decided that I will drown if I do not succeed, which is well because the grid gives way suddenly and falls asunder with an dull clunk. I swim into the gap and through another tunnel towards the light, my strength failing and failing until the ceiling rises and I bob to the surface, taking in huge gulps of the foul air as if I am at some idyllic mountain spring. Then my senses return black reality and I heave up what I just took in, coughing like a crone coughing her last.

'Fie... cuh cuh cuh...' I say to myself, 'Thank the stars for shoddy workmanship.'

~

The first place I consider is Hadrian's Tower... *Fie sir, yer have to be famous to get in here.* I scale the passages in bare feet, my soles icy and wet against the chill stone. The place is rather too well lit, so I move with caution and stealth, aware that a guided tour is out of the question this time.

Footsteps, one of the yeomen, the Duke of Lancaster's crest about his chest, eating a chop. I pull back into a recess and prepare my cutlass. The yeoman passes and rounds the corner, I exhale again.

'Uhhh... clemency sir, clemency...'

The dull moan came from behind me. I realise 'tis a doorway to a cell.

'Sarah? Williams? Who is that?'

'John Small of Chorley,' croaks the voice.

'Oh. Sorry.'

'What? Wait, sir!'

I head away from the cells towards the winding staircase that I recall leads to the Tower. The place has an eerie quality in the torchlight, one can sense how many wretched souls have passed through here, both gaolers and prisoners alas. Perchance 'tis indeed true that the walls themselves bleed in a

place like this...

'Fie Caveat, superstition...' I whisper.

A guard steps out in front of me, sword drawn. Though prepared for an assault I still recoil a few steps and without preamble he is upon me. He lunges at me with a pike, there is no room to stepstep so I fence his blow as best I can, grab his sleeve, duck and pull him down over my back. He falls down the staircase and lies prone, either dead or dazed, I have not the time to care. Only that there is one guard, a godsend forsooth.

Up into the narrow passage that leads to the Tower and through a door...

The Spaniards, neatly chained together. Fie, they haven't even been beaten!

'Buenas noches,' says I.

Farnese's eyes light up, for I represent not an old foe, but a reprieve to a condemned man.

'Caveat! A blessed and divine mercy that you are here! Quick! Get these chains off me!'

'Where's Sarah? And the villagers?'

'What? I know not! Quick I say! More men attend this Tower, they are about to change guard!'

I pull out my cutlass and hold it to his throat. He recoils at my stink, his brethren babble and curse, straining at their chains to get at me. Except for Quadra, mute, sedate and sinister as ever.

'I shall ask you again, my Lord. WHERE is Sarah?'

'They separated us from the English when we got here... Caveat, get these chains off me, man!'

I pat Farnese on the face. Perchance he does know, but is so desperate to get out of this hellhole that he would rather sacrifice them first.

'Goodbye, *Alessito*. Maria sends her love,' says I, walking from the chamber.

Farnese's chains rattle.

'What? They are here...'

'WHERE is she?'

'Down below... I cannot recall, that dark place...'

The *dark place*? Aye, I know where he speaks of.

'Thank you, Farnese. Most helpful.'

'Wait! Caveat!'

I head from the chamber.

As an afterthought, I grab the guard and shift him back upstairs, returning to the Spaniards.

'Caveat! 'Tis no time for jokes...' says Farnese.

I dump the guard on the biggest and surliest of the Spaniards.

'Keep an eye on him for me, would you? If he moves, choke him to death. Good man.'

Then I away.

'Caveat! Caveat!'

'Do stop bleating, Farnese. 'Tis not a good time to rouse the whole castle.'

~

It might have been prudent to have released the Spaniards and used them as allies to find the Chingle folk. But Farnese would have been out of here like a rat out of a trap, and he would have trodden over my corpse in doing so if necessary. His fate is in the hands of his countrymen now, for my task is to get to that dark place and hope that Alonso fulfils his promise to act.

It might not have seemed so, but the bastion is crawling with guards. Fie, we must have passed like ships in the night. I bound down the staircase and into the Drop Room, so called because of the private hangings that take place here from time to time, usually reserved for lesser crimes or for those who can afford to spare themselves the humiliation of dying before a slaving crowd. Then I hear voices, idle chatter,

several yeomen clutching food and ale on their way back to the Tower. Hiding behind the riser of the gallows, it occurs to me how lucky I was to have entered the Tower between shifts, for if I had run into this lot I would have been hacked down where I stood and my balls paraded to the constable on a stick. Perchance someone really is watching over me, alas.

I wait 'til they have idled past, then make for the courtroom. It will not take long for them to get to the Tower and raise the alarm, and then every moment will become crucial.

Zounds, another guard, standing right over the trap door to the dock. Should I address him, or wait until he is distracted? What if he is a better swordsman than I?

Fie, I must take this bit and chomp!

Just as I move to confront him, the fellow pulls up his breeches, sniffs and walks out from the dock, oblivious to my presence in the shadows. He heads from the courtroom and out. I sneak into the dock to see that the foul maggot has pissed all over the seats where the accused might stand, though at least the smell cannot offend me in my current state. I unbolt the latch and draw up the trap door...

A steep flight of stairs descending into absolute dark. I grab a torch and lower myself down, pondering how many have been sent down here never to return to the surface?

But *not* my people, *not* my Sarah!

And then I espy what it would have taken the limits of my imagination to prepose, a great dungeon containing devices long since outlawed for the extremes of pain they have inflicted upon folk. Cages, toe-crushing pillories, branding branks for male and female harnies, implements of torture that would take the cruellest of minds to dream about here... Then the dreaded iron maiden, a large metal case atop a platform in which the victim would slowly suffer spikes about the entire body, left for hours impaled before being

quartered alive to death.

Aye, England, an enlightened realm indeed!

My thought had been that they had banned such horrors under Bessy, but some counties obviously like to keep hold of their more barbaric traditions. The room is empty and dark apart from my torch. Perchance they like to keep this place for only the select few, perchance such as some of their present inmates.

I feel around for a door, finding a passageway barely wide enough to accommodate a grown man. The passage widens so that I can stand tall again, but I am suddenly aware of faint chatter, laughing, abject screams of agony... and the smell of burning flesh...

I push the door slightly ajar and observe the ritual: Mr Billington spread-eagled on a rack, his villagefolk sat in chains, mesmerised and muzzled as my acquaintance Spicer and a hooded fellow administer the pain. His apprentice chucks a pail of water over their subject, he stirs.

'You are no mere apothecary,' says Spicer, lapping it up, 'Why should we believe that? You make incantations to save your holy papist brethren and curse us as heretics. What are you Billington, the town witch or something? Perchance you are ALL witches, eh? Then we might have our sport tonight!'

The hooded fellow cranks the wheel, as Spicer rams a poker into his side. Billington issues a feral cry of agony.

Damn this, I cannot wait any longer. I enter the fray, cutlass in hand.

Spicer has his back to me, his friend squeals in surprise, backing off. I spot Sarah on the ground, a little girl pressing against her breast. I could get lost in those I eyes, if I did not have urgent business...

Spicer spins to address me, his apprentice removes his hood to reveal himself: Woodcock.

'Mr Bogaade?' he says.

'His name's Caveat, simpleton,' grunts Spicer, humour wiped from his mug.

'Tell me Sergeant,' says I, 'Are you enjoying your evening's sport?'

I can smell grog about the pair of them. Foul swines, would that Spicer had died at the waterfall, but his manner of scum has a way of clinging on to the surface of the earth. Spicer draws his blade, Woodcock dashes from the chamber, belly wobbling.

"Tis *Constable* Spicer now. And all the gold in the New World won't buy their lives this time... or yours.'

I hear boots clanking through the floors about me. I am discovered now, perchance the game is drawing to a close.

Spicer slashes at me, catching thin air. 'Tis difficult to fence well with a cutlass, for it is better at close quarters. With a swordsman as skilled as Spicer, I fear I will not get the opportunity to get within a pace before he runs me through...

But sometimes one is impelled to gamble, whatever the odds. For certain, if I die in front of Sarah she will finally know that Walsingham was lying.

A bunch of keys dangle enticingly from Spicer's belt. Williams strains against his shackles with all his might, if only I could release him!

Another lunge, I fence Spicer's bolt but he catches my upper thigh on the downstroke, perilously close to the fleshly jewels, *too* close...

'By chivalry or stupidity, how would you care to be remembered?' says Spicer, 'But I forget, none of these people will be here to remember you anyway come the last day of the trials.'

I swipe the cutlass, emboldened as it misses his nose by a whisper, putting him on the back foot.

'And you would kill babies?' says I.

A rapid combination by Spicer, backing me to the wall. Fie,

this blade is beginning to weigh like lead!

'Today's babies are tomorrow's traitors, Caveat. These people harbour the worst kind of criminal!'

'These people are more innocent than you or I!' I protest, but Spicer attacks again, sweeping away my cutlass to the ground, leaving me open...

'Now that,' says Spicer with a thin smile, 'I would readily agree sir.'

He lunges, I dodge at the final opportunity, letting him prang the wall. The cutlass lies across the chamber, I dance into the open space.

'Sir!'

A voice, that of the guard I felled earlier.

'Boyd, cannot you see that I am rather engaged at the moment?' says Spicer, eyes still on me.

He lunges, I fence him, slashing my hand open. Spicer grins.

'Sir, you really should know...'

'Be with you in a moment, lad...'

He dashes at me and kicks me to the ground. I am exhausted.

'But Sir, there are Spanish troops raiding us!'

Spicer stops in his tracks. I reach for the cutlass with my good hand, seizing it in the second of his distraction.

'What? Spanish! Here? Don't be a fool lad...'

I ram the cutlass betwixt his legs, up through the cavity of the groin, ripping into the abdomen. Spicer's face is still etched incredulous at the news from his minion, then he espies the sudden blow in the most vulnerable of spots, drops his sabre, and raises an eyebrow.

'Halfwits. They employ halfwits...'

I pull the cutlass from him and blood spurts across the room. Spicer's eyes roll to the back of his head and I move away before his weight can fall upon me. I am on my feet and

doubly bold now. His men keep their distance, cowed by the fact they have just seen their master slain. This time I feel none of the guilt of Davenport's death, for the tiredness has suddenly gone and the sword feels strong in these hands.

'Now then boys, who will be first?'

They move forward en masse, swords and daggers drawn. Shit.

Pride ever comes before a fall...

A huge impact rocks the outer wall of the castle, shaking these foundations. Then a distant cry:

'Spaniards! The invasion is here! Spaniards!'

Another broadside. The guards glance between themselves, then at me. My eyes widen and I emit my most blood-curdling scream, waving the cutlass and running at them...

'Te puuuuuta madrerrreeeee!'

They remove themselves from the chamber in horror, the last of them locking the door behind them. As I wince from Spicer's wound on my leg, Billington groans awake on the rack.

'I have a great remedy for that,' he mumbles, half dead himself, then passes out again.

Williams grunts at me from beneath his muzzle. I hobble over to Spicer's twitching corpse and seize the keys, releasing Sarah first. The warmth in her teary eyes liberates every spot of pain from my body. I remove her muzzle and make to kiss her.

'You smell awful!' she says, her smile rye. I snake an arm round her waste.

'Anything for you, Mrs Caveat.'

She pushes me back.

'Do you not think we should all get out of here first, my Lord?'

Williams grunts again, eyes livid.

I move on to free the next villager, Mary Hollington.
'Aye my Lady Sarah, as ever you are right.'

~

Williams had no trouble getting through the door. Perchance he has saved every last drop of his considerable wrath, for the man is more formidable than ever and it came clean off its hinges.

A mercy anon that we are on the same side!

He carries the delirious Billington over his shoulder as we take our flight through the courtroom. The sounds of fighting permeate the whole place, the firing of shot and the clash of sword, a sleepy bastion taken by absolute surprise. If Spicer's men were anything to go by, those hardened Basques will take them apart, outnumbered or not.

'What did you say back there?' asks Sarah as we run, 'To the gaolers? That is no Spanish I have ever heard.'

'A rum Castillian phrase, my Lady. You would ne'er have heard it because it is not for a lady's ears!'

'You would be surprised, my good husband.'

That smile, that glint in her eye.

We reach the flight of stairs leading down into the sewer duct. From here 'tis not a great challenge to find the way out, merely follow one's nose...

Three troops appear in the courtroom, espying us with their plain, black vestments.

Walsingham's men!

Then a group of Spaniards, Gomez included.

Williams pushes me down the stairwell after the others, dropping Billington upon my shoulders.

'I shall handle this,' he says, cracking his knuckles, 'Wait for me down there.'

'They'll kill you, Father,' says Sarah, addressing him in his ecclesiastical title for the first time.

'Go!' yells Williams, so loud the children amongst us break

into tears, then he turns to me, 'Guard them for me, Caveat. You will not go out there without me at your side.'

The two sides clash, Williams takes my cutlass.

I shepherd them down the steps and into the antechamber. I left the door open earlier, which spares them the foul indignity I suffered, and we file out into the tunnel. Sarah stops in her tracks.

'Keep moving my Lady!' I say.

'George is still up there. We cannot leave without him, without his...'

She muzzles herself.

'No Sarah, you were going to say it, eh? Protection?'

Sarah bites her lip.

'You hear that fighting? We shall all be ripped asunder! We *need* him, Angus.'

Billington stirs and wriggles on my shoulder. I am covered in his blood.

'No Sarah,' says I, looking into her eyes, 'You *need* to start trusting me.'

~

She complied, perchance at last beaten by the suffering of her people, desperate to away at any cost. And as we make our way from the tunnel and into the open it occurs to me that I have missed a single, devastating fact. Bar the unfortunate Mr Billington and Williams, every single grown man from the village has gone. And no pleas have been issued for *their* rescue...

Fie, the hell inflicted on one's fellow men for the sake of a cause!

I could question Sarah about this, but that time will come.

The galleon issues another broadside, debris flying from the battlements. For all the hefty firepower about this bastion, that which Woodcock so idly boasted is itself left idle and the castle defenceless. A surprise attack indeed. We waded into the

river as the fighting continues about the bastion, and I can see now how the Basques made their entrance, the keep lies in ruins from the mighty guns of the *San Pedro*. As the vessel heads back towards the mouth of the river, Sarah's hand grabs my sleeve...

The Spaniards aboard two boats, a shattered Farnese with his head in his hands.

'Fie Sarah, I have never been so glad to see that bastard's face.'

We approach the vessels and the Neapolitan springs into life. A hooded figure sits next to him, her face coming into view. The villagers begin to board the boats to the chagrin of the Spaniards.

'Doña Maria, may I introduce my wife Lady Sarah Chingle. Sarah, this is Maria, Duchess of Palma.'

Sarah shoots me a knowing glance, then curtsies before Maria. Pleasantries about a battlefield, how very English.

'Mucho encantado,' says Sarah.

'If it pleases you all,' says Farnese, 'Might we leave now? Um?'

Maria winks at me. Perchance this is why he held his head in his hands.

'What about George...' says Sarah.

Standing on the shore, I push the boat out.

'I will bring him to you.'

'I will come with you,' says Sarah, attempting to get to her feet. Farnese pulls her down.

'No my Lady,' he says, 'It is too dangerous!'

'I agree with you, *Alesito*,' says I, then wink at Maria. For if I should not make it back to the ship, she is the only thing stopping him from taking my bride...

...Since I know only too well myself that a merry widow Lady Sarah Molyneux-Caveat of Chingle does not make...

~

Why should I do this? The eternal question it seems, burning throughout this quest. I have saved Sarah, I have saved the lives of thirty women and children, perchance Billington might pull through even. Then why tempt fate and ride my luck one more time? Why enter back into the skirmish from hell when I was nearly home free having already achieved a clear miracle? Why not leave that stubborn bastard Williams to fight it out, and die if he would? Why?

Because he would do that for *us*, he would do that for *me*. And I must see this played out.

Back through the tunnel, this time feeling my way through the shit and slurry, though the advantage to my senses is that I can at least hear something now, fighting from above. Is Williams dead? Is this in vain?

The Spaniards will fight at his side, but Walsingham's Black Vests are their match in guile and stealth if not in battle, that has already been proven. But then I think of Chingle, of what they have done to my home, of how they have tortured and slaughtered noble men before the eyes of their wives and children, scaring them witless before they themselves are brought to stand trial as traitors. I think of that rat Strange and of his refusal to let these people live in peace. I think of a state that suppresses peoples because of their faith, and how they might be driven to harbour evil men who offer redemption from this suppression, even though those very men will lead them to nothing but death and misery.

And now I know, finally, what drives the people of that small, extinct place called Chingle. A place wiped from the face of the earth because it was caught betwixt two tyrannies and their extreme doctrines of religious mania. Fie, now I know why Williams stands and fights.

And why I must fight with him.

~

I ascend the steps again and peek through into the courtroom. The three Basques lie dead, Gomez amongst them. I give in to my compulsion to cross myself, then spot a movement from the corner of my eye and dive into the dock. Another broadside rocks the castle as a little man comes into view accompanied by a plethora of Black Vests, heading for the outer walls. Humphrey...

The guns, of course!

I wait for a few heartbeats as the last man flies upstairs, then follow at a pace. The wall is several feet thick and takes the pounding, but the real issue is the ruck going on inside for control of the big guns, principally the behemoth, *Big Betty*. Two of the Lancaster guards are loading it, but are seized upon by the fight. Basques and blacks vests lie everywhere, dead and wounded. I pick up a loose sabre, intending to enter the fray and skewer that foul midget, but a giant hand seizes me by the mouth from behind and drags me back into the staircase. I struggle in his grip and he releases me.

'Williams, thank God you're alive!' I say, joy washing over me.

'Where are they, Caveat?'

'Safe, my friend. They have returned to the Spaniards' rescue ship with the Duke. Now, shall we really die together, or would you prefer to get out of here?'

Williams shakes his head gravely.

'They are no more safe with Farnese than they are here, you fool!'

'What are you saying?'

Williams shakes his head.

'I have tried and tried anon to keep that Dutch snout of yours out of this! Fie and you never stop, do you!'

There is fury in Williams eyes! I cannot countenance this! I came back to make his aid!

Five Black Vests storm up the staircase and push us apart. I am embroiled in the scrum and fall to my face, feet trampling upon me. They engage the remaining Basques head on as I come to my senses... Williams is nowhere to be seen.

'How now, Caveat!' I spin for my sword but Humphrey already has it at my throat, glee etched across his face, 'How I have waited to savour this moment so!'

'You shall be waiting at the gates of hell, Commander,' says I, booting the fellow in the kneecap. He upends on his back, squealing like a fat girl with the bumps.

'Agggghh! Caveat!'

And to think how this little swine used to intimidate me so! I pick him up by his feet and carry him over towards Big Betty. Humphrey wriggles like a salmon. I consider throwing him out of the sizable gap allowed for the giant nozzle of cannon, but from here I can see right down the impressive, huge barrel. Woodcock was indeed right about this awesome weapon. Fie one could fit a small child down there...

'Unhand me, you foul half-breed! I will slit you from the gizzard to the balls!'

'You are braver than your master then,' says I, stuffing him into the barrel so he is trapped, 'Where is he this night? No stomach for it, perchance? A wise fellow indeed is Walsingham, knows when to stay away from trouble, forsooth.'

Humphrey is foaming at the mouth.

'Cavvvvveeeeeaaaaaat!'

'Now, how does one use this thing? Any clues, little fellow?'

'I will raze your Amsterdam to the ground!' he spits, 'Our eyes and our ears are everywhere!'

'Fie Humphrey, why is it always the short ones you have to watch?'

His face has turned purple.

'I will KILL you Caveat!'

'Alas, 'tis not because you are a short fellow, nay. Little shits come in all shapes and sizes!'

I push Betty to aim for the sea, light the fuse and run...

'CAAAAAAVVVVVEEEEEAAAAAAT!'

An almighty bang, the cannon is blown backwards, knocking over the warring troops like skittles. The barrel has been blown off its hinges, my sabotage has worked well. Ears ringing, I do not remain to see if justice prevailed over Humphrey, for in the distance the *San Pedro* is pulling out of the river mouth...

I run down the steps and back into the courtroom.

No sign of Williams.

Into the middle of the castle, towards the Constable's chambers. No fighting about here but whimpering, coming from Woodcock's chamber...

I kick the door open to find Woodcock hauling bags of coins and valuables into a sack. He drops the item in fright, his ginger beard quivering, a shadow of the daunting fellow I first espied.

'D-do not kill me, Mr Bogaade sir! I have money!'

'Tis Caveat, you egg! Woodcock, have you see a massive fellow, bigger than even you, about this place? Think man!'

His eyes light up.

'You will not kill me?'

'You have seen him!' says I, 'Speak man!'

'I saw a man like that leave by the keep on my way up here. Fie, terrified me he did.'

I prod his fat belly with my rapier.

'Not half as terrified as you will be if I find you are lying, Woodcock!'

Woodcock spits upon his hand.

'Mr Bogaade! Upon my mother's life!'

I breathe deeply. My only option is to credit him, for there

is no time left.

'Fie, you'd sell your mother for less than one of those coins.'

'I speak the truth sir.'

'Goodbye, Woodcock.'

And I am away...

~

...Through the keep, I join a band of Basques scrambling out to a boat, their job well done. The bastion has been set alight, and 'tis all the occupants can do to control the fire, though we are still chased by Black Vests. Arrows fly over our heads from bowmen in the *San Pedro*, taking down the hardy souls daring to follow us into the water. One of the maggots makes it to my side as I jump aboard, but is felled by a swift headbutt. Fie, I do not enjoy troubles of this kind, but they enjoy me!

The *San Pedro* moves into the open sea and each manjack paddles frantically to catch her, leaving that awful place towering angrily behind us. The occasional stray arrow hits the water nearby, but the English are too preoccupied with the aftermath of the surprise raid to mount any organised rearguard. Close enough to the aft of the galleon, we are thrown a rope and towed out into the bay as the mainsail is released, catching the fresh squal. I espy over the edge of the boat two figures waving, Sarah with a blanket about her shoulders and Father George Williams. Then tiredness washes over me, giving not the chance for realisation of what has just happened to take hold...

I awoke on Maria's bunk aboard the *San Pedro*, clean bathed with my wounds dressed. Perchance I had passed out from sheer exhaustion, perchance from some ague caught about that filthy bastion, but for a full day and a night I had muttered only delirium that I cannot recall and Sarah had feared that I might succumb and die with the shits and the sweats. Alas, something kept me alive, perchance the same which has guided me through the past long year.

The nausea remains about me a little, though I summoned the stomach to take in some chillied soup of seafood prepared by good Doña Maria, the hot taste cleansing my countenance even further. I arose to the deck a little wobbly at first, 'tis a crisp, wintry kind of afternoon but sunny. Two bad for Mr Billington, who suffered too much from his wounds and passed as I lay in my stupor. They said mass and released his body to the sea, would that I shall not have to countenance the weeping widow and child again from this disembodied people.

Sarah kept at my side at all times, Williams helped with the running of the vessel, such as his wont for hard labour, Farnese kept his distance and allowed himself to be petted by Maria, though I vouch that from the corner of an eye I can see him watching my Sarah. Perchance though my fever might

linger a little, and I worry out of kind.

"Tierra!" pipes up a crewman from the crow's nest.

The South Coast of Ireland, a traditional hideaway of the fugitive from the English realm, noted for being remote and for consistent hostility towards the English nobility. Quite appropriate, for any Lancastrian title possessed by myself and Sarah has now become defunct, and she would strain to describe herself as English now. Would that I could get word to Bessy of our safety, but I could not trust any missive that passes through that foul and devious tart Maggie Radcliffe.

We approach a small fishing port by the name of Cork, where Captain Alonso assures us of a warm welcome.

'Sarah, why not Holland? There is land near Antwerp where we can start again, all of us. Perchance I could squeeze a little more money out of the Duchy of Antwerp to get us started?'

Sarah kisses me on the cheek as we espy that beautiful, rugged, emerald coastline.

'There are many places where we can start again, my Lord,' she says.

And anon, to Ireland...

~

We were given the luxury of mooring right up to the land and were met with no great surprise by the townsfolk, who bid us all welcome. A kindly people, they lent all their aid to our infirm, though I was more inclined to accept a quaff at the quayside taverna over the charms of the local apothecary and was joined by the Captain and crew of the *San Pedro*, Doña Maria and my beautiful wife, whom at last seems free from all of her inhibitions, if still melancholic for the heavy loss of life and her ancestral home...

'But homes are ever about the people who live there,' I say, 'And land will see many souls come and go, for are we not all wanderers in spirit?'

She smiles and kisses me as we sit next to a warmth hearth. The tavern has the usual collection of roughnecks, but we have commandeered a corner and indeed the Spanish are treated as noble guests by even the toughest looking barflies. And as they sit at one end, the sound of pipes and skin drum and smooth gaelic song lilting about the place, I am reminded of where I now belong...

Forever at Sarah's side.

She leans over and her warmth breath fills my ear...

'I am carrying your child, Mr Caveat.'

~

I am yet numb to appreciate the revelation and required a few stiff measures of the local moonshine to kick my senses back into place. Sarah has made no fuss over her statement, indeed I would vouch I was hearing things and that my dementia has not yet fully passed...

With the need for fresh air, I leave her with Doña Maria and get some fresh air about the quayside. There is little sign of English occupation here, all voices speak in soft Gaelic, perchance the occasional Norman French or Portuguese, but the majority are locals plying a simple trade through sale of their fish stocks about a thriving market. The town rises from the dock, and begins to wind down as the eve draws in. Watching the majestic ocean rise and fall and crash and squal, I consider the past, I consider the future.

Williams is manfully helping to load supplies aboard the galleon, though surely 'tis not beyond his remit as a clergyman to join us for a short celebration? Perchance then we could give him the news, would that it might soften his brow.

Sarah links me as I watch over the sea, returning the citric glances cast by Williams.

'Why is he so surly?' says I.

'Because he has lost so much, like the rest of us.'

'He has his life, Sarah. We have ours...' I stroke her belly, 'And new life anon...'

She smiles.

'Aye. He will come round, Angus. George might be a pious and serious fellow as you will meet, but in ways you have more in common than you might think.'

I turn to her, holding her in my arms. Fie, she takes on the exact look of that damsel in my dreams, flaxen hair and glow about her face, eyes at once contented and sad, the mystery that shall always lure me.

'Why do we not dance a jig with those Spaniards and you can tell me all about *Father Williams*, my Lady?'

'I would be delighted to, my Lord!'

~

I was awoken by vigorous humping coming from Farnese's bunk, Maria cooing and scratching, squeezing her weedy husband of every last drop. Sarah is herself awake and dressed, staring at me.

'George wants to speak to us in his cabin,' she says.

'Uh, cannot it wait 'til morning?'

'He has something on his mind, it will not.'

'Give me a moment then, sweetness.'

~

The berth is tiny, reserved for one of those paying passengers that would brave the trip to the New World. Williams is on the bunk reading from his Bible as we enter, almost so massive that he has to stoop even when he is sat down. It is now the dead of night and the vessel has left Cork bound for Cadiz. We are sailing swift beyond the reaches of the English fleet now, almost home dry, wherever home is bound to be.

Williams closes his book and eyes us standing over him. We sit next to him on the bunk.

'I am told you are to be a father,' he says.

'I thank you, George,' says I.

'We want you to baptise the child,' says Sarah, 'Being that it arrives fit and well...'

Williams nods, not sharing eye contact, his face pale and grave...

Something is wrong here.

'Being that it would...' he says.

Sarah turns her face to me, confusion across her countenance. She grabs my hand.

'Sarah, whatever can be the matter? Sarah!'

My eye falls upon a blade wedged in her side, Williams' hand upon it.

'You are responsible for this, Caveat. You...'

'Nay!'

His hand grips my throat, squeezing the breath from me. Sarah, my sweet bride, falls to the floor asunder, I gag for air but none comes...

'Did she tell you Caveat? Did she tell of the priest that arrived in Chingle three years past, under sentence of death from treason and exiled from his rightful home by Calvinist dogs, um? Trusting, kindly people are the Chingles, quick to take in any stranger, fie! But you, Mr Caveat, you're a man of the world, spy and bon-viveur as you make drunken claim to. You should have spotted one of your own ilk months past, would then it would not have come to this...'

I am beginning to pass out. He eases the choke so that I might breathe a second, then grips harder than ever.

'My master sent me to keep an eye on the Earl of Derby of all people, how do you like that? Happenstance then those Spaniards arrived, a far more juicy catch. But you had to interfere with your precious royal seal, didn't you? And that dullard Strange rattling his sabre from behind his chaise longue...'

He seizes me by the scruff and pulls me to the floor, I look

right into Sarah's eyes as she breathes her last, sorrow and fright engulfing me.

'Only that I loved her, Caveat. Only that I pleaded with Walsingham in missive after missive to spare her, even her precious village if that made her happy. Alas, again, you had to get involved, nay, more than that. You took her away from me, Caveat. Though I am no priest, you were never married.

'I was going to be the sacrificial lamb the first time around, but in her name you saved me from a fate I would ne'er have suffered anyway. I would have returned months later to Chingle, Walsingham would have had his Spaniards, as the hero I would have made pains to woo her back to me. Then Strange made his raid, that which Walsingham would have stopped himself but for knowledge that the Queen's troops were on their way! Thanks to YOU Caveat! YOU THE HERO! Foul idiot of chance! Foul interfering Dutch heretic! But listen fast Dutchman before you die, for if I cannot have her, then YOU will never!'

'Williams!'

A hard blow to the jaw, I am dizzy... spinning... out... out...

Out.

~

The brine in the air and the thumping rain brings me awake. My head smacks against Williams' back as he carries me up to the decks. Across his back I espy sweet Sarah, her eyes glazed in death. No, not Sarah, the vessel which once held her. Williams tosses me up on deck like a child would a doll, then lays her down delicately, as if she might still breathe. I cannot move my jaw, and would not be able to make a louder sound than a grunt, useless to rouse the men on the upper decks above the sound of the mighty sea.

We are next to the landing craft. I try to move, but Williams places a massive boot upon my chest. He picks up Sarah and

rests her body against the side, then kneels upon me.

‘Thirty miles to Cornwall, and I will be home! Get in the boat, Caveat. Your next stop is Tyburn, and Sir Francis wants a prize! If not these foul preening Spaniards, then you will have to suffice!’

He picks me up and throws me in the small vessel. Then he takes up Sarah, rain lashing his crazed face as he gazes upon her lovingly, closing her eyes forever. I am impelled to move, but he places her down in the craft and begins to push it overboard, a quite predatory smirk across his wide face...

Then he stops, his countenance suddenly confused. I lean forward and seize the tow rope before it slips completely and takes us below, every sinew in my chest and arms straining, straining...

And Williams reeling about the deck. The motion of the boat takes him to the floor and I espy a cutlass buried firmly in his back. I crawl back over to the deck and face Williams, still reeling and swaying...

Clasping two hands together, I swing at him, cracking his jaw with all my might.

‘How dare you blame me! To hell with YOU, Williams!’

I boot him square in the balls and the reflex brings him crashing to his knees, blood spurting from his mouth. Picking up a paddle, I swot him in the face and he falls back, rolling towards the edge. With my last ounce of strength I grab his legs and upend them over the side, pushing his massive weight over, but then he clutches on like a limpet...

I take up the paddle at smash it against his jaw, Williams loses his grip and plunges into the deep, fighting in vain against the stream of an ocean.

I collapse, filled with every kind of pain and woe...

After a moment, perchance a second, perchance a lifetime, I sense a figure hovering over me. ‘Tis Quadra, his countenance not changed, bar the tiniest of smiles.

'Heretic,' he pronounces to the ocean. Then he returns below.

And I am left forsaken. And perchance the world is at its end...

~

Andelucia is a land with many wonders and treasures, the most precious of all I buried here today in the yard of a beautiful whitewashed church of a tiny village in the hills slightly north of Cadiz, amongst the orange groves and the windmills and the graves of this place named San Pedro. Sarah never knew this town in life, much as she would never have known the places I would have taken her, the great adventures we would have had together, or rather the quiet idyll we would have made our own. Phoenicians, Celts, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, all have settled and died here to keep her company, and now I leave a piece of myself with her forever anon. For whatever remains that beats in my chest, 'tis not my heart, verily.

With a bag of silver gleaned from old Phillip for my troubles, pulled from him by the kind persuasions of Doña Maria, I can perchance make my return to the Netherlands and start a manner of life anew. The nature of which? I know not, for the corporeal or material pale against that which I have lost, that which is eternally irreplaceable.

And as I make for a long Roman dirt track away from San Pedro and betwixt hill and grove, only the bittersweet memory of my great love drives me anon and anon.

Only for the memory of sweet Sarah...

Dearest Gussy,

My woe is complete! How can I begin to offer my own grief when your own weighs more than the world?

I have endeavoured to bring that foul Walsingham to book over the events of the past months. Had I an inkling of his role in this issue I would have put a stop to it. Alas, he has made claim to me that George Williams was a lunatic, a loose cannon that began under his employ to help supplant Strange's hegemony in the North West, and then bring the Spaniards to the rope when the opportunity arose thereafter. My Secretary of State claims that Williams slipped from his control as his state of mind erred, and that he began to believe in the role he was playing rather too earnestly.

Perchance, lies and truth constitute the same issue with the Secretary of State and it is only that which gleans the most progress in his plots which he will adopt. Ergo, he is untouchable, but by the hand of providence. I did manage to gain Walsingham's admittance that Margaret Radcliffe played no part in stealing your letters, and indeed that Walsingham has been reading every missive I have received and sent since I came to the throne. The man's effrontery knows no bounds!

* * *

Alas, I hope that it is at least a meagre comfort to you that I have made him read this missive out aloud in my chambers at Windsor, not to glean any penance from the foul rat but to assure you that he will be first in line to be accused should you befall any sudden accidents or fatal maladies in the near future. Blessed that you will not have to look over your shoulder and can indeed start afresh. Only that the awful memory of what has happened might leave your conscience and only that thoughts of sweet Sarah will remain. Alas, as far as all official records are deemed, the town of Chingle never even existed. But you know how that works.

Finally, it has been confirmed to me that Williams was indeed never ordained as a Catholic priest, only trained as such when acting as a double agent at the college of Rheims. In the light of this, may this letter constitute my Royal approval of your wedding to Sarah, and that henceforth you shall be known as Lord Chingle when about these shores.

I can only hope that you can bring yourself to forgive my role in this and find it in your heart to believe that there really is a heaven, sweet Gussy. And there all wrongs on this earth are made right.

For I hope so too.

With love,

ER

~

AUGUST 1592 - AMSTERDAM CORN PORT

A fine summer this is indeed. With the noble assistance of my stout friend and financier Duke Lionel De Courcey Beauchamp, at last we raised sufficient funds to develop

upon the plot where once the celebrated Bartolotti had stood. Now Beauchamp had lamented the loss of a damned good whorehouse, but I steadfastly refused to return to the trade. How could a man of Beauchamp's piety endorse such filth? Fie, this confused the fellow alright, but his eyes verily lit up when I made presentation of my latest venture to him:

THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY

Traders and exporters of rare objects and spices from the orient! Aye!

And how might we achieve such a bold new venture amidst the hundreds of privateers and trading posts about here and the rest of Europe? Well, on this centenary of Columbus' great discovery, we aim to succeed where the renowned Italian failed forsooth! To find the East Indies and reap the trade!

It happened several months past while I was schmoozing about the House of Orange, pleased with myself having fleeced every manjack and his mother at cards and still left them smiling. A nervous youth by the name of Jodocus Honduis approached me outside the court and, seeing that I was a man of wealth and influence, pleaded with me that I might buy him a coup in exchange for perusing his maps of the Indies, maps that he claimed few had e'er laid eyes upon, and even fewer would credit but ne'ertheless are absolutely true.

Well, Caveat is e'er game for any sport so I took up the young fellow's request. And lo, subsequent research by myself has yielded that which is enough to startle the breeches from every man of trade and science. This young cartographer has indeed made discovery of a route to the farthest point of the Orient via Newfoundland, such that no one would have to sail east again! Fie, I will be rich anon!

And here I stand on the famous Damrak with Beauchamp and Honduis, beholding *my* creation, albeit with use of

Beauchamp's money, but he has more of that than sense, forsooth. Aye, a fine new trading house, fit for Amsterdam, fit for any place! Tall and magnificent, a bastion of future fortune. A proud moment indeed, for at last perchance an ignominious past has become buried...

'Read your zodiac, sire?'

A sonorous voice from behind me. I spin to espy a huge Moorish fellow astride a jet-black steed...

'Why Caveat, you have gone quite pale forsooth!' says Beauchamp, 'Is it this fellow here? I say shoo, shoo! This is private property lad!'

Maggie, my lovely steed, she sniffs around me and neighs softly. The dashing Moor jumps from her back and embraces me.

'Master Caveat, I have a matter of the utmost urgency we must attend anon!' he says, 'The throne of England rests upon it!'

I glance back up at our magnificent edifice, our wonderful creation. Honduis and Beauchamp frown over at me, as if requiring an explanation for this bold interruption.

But the only answer I have is one to myself, that perchance the past should never be dismissed as ignominious or buried, and particularly not a past like mine...

Zounds.

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