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THE GOLDEN CAGE

T O M P U G H

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PUBLISHING

A NOTE ON THE PERIOD

At the dawn of the fifteenth century, life in western Europe – while often short and unpredictable – was underpinned by a belief system unchanged in a thousand years; a state of affairs which had persisted since Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire and set about the systematic destruction of works by pre-Christian writers.

The Church's long monopoly on knowledge was only broken in the first half of the fifteenth century, when the works of Lucretius and Plato were rediscovered (in 1417 and 1438 respectively). The ideas contained in the works of these two authors played a major role in unleashing the astonishing wave of new thinking known as the renaissance (or 're-birth'), leading ultimately to the collapse of the worldview promoted and refined by the Christian Church over the previous millennium.

In *The Devil's Library*, Longstaff, Aurélie and Durant attempt to discover the location of a long-forgotten collection of thousands of the works of antiquity at a time when the first rush of excitement brought about by the (re)discovery of Plato and Lucretius was already congealing – what had briefly been a battle between people who believed in the supremacy of revelation (God's word) versus people who believed in the supremacy of reason (Man's intelligence) had now descended into a battle between two competing interpretations of God's word; the 'Catholic' Christian Church against the various Lutheran or 'Reformed' Christian Churches. The window opened by Plato and Lucretius was being firmly closed by a series of temporal and religious leaders willing to take increasingly violent measures against any threat to their authority.

A brief description of 'the Massacre of Wassy' will help to clarify this: under King Henri II, followers of the reformist church in France (known as Huguenots) faced persecution. After Henri's death, his widow (Catherine de Medici) attempted

to end this persecution and create the conditions for peaceful co-existence. The uneasy truce she brokered was torn apart on 1 March 1562 by Francois, Duke of Guise, when he came upon a large congregation of Huguenots in the town of Wassy. Exactly what happened next is disputed but ended in Francois ordering his men to lock a barn which the Huguenots had been using as their church and burn it down, resulting in the deaths of 63 unarmed men, women and children. From this point on, in France at least, there was no longer any room for compromise between the competing versions of Christianity.

Events related in *The Golden Cage* take place in 1565, three years after the Massacre of Wassy and seven after Elizabeth I was crowned Queen of England.

Initially, Catholic Europe appears to have been unconcerned by the sudden appearance of a Protestant monarch on England's throne. Perhaps this was because neither of Elizabeth's two siblings had lasted more than a few years, and even if Elizabeth did prove more resilient than either Edward or Mary, she was still regarded as a mere woman. It was assumed that events would quickly see her cowed, coaxed or married into the true faith.

As months turned into years, however, the rulers of Catholic Europe grew impatient. Singly and together, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, King Philip of Spain, the pope, and the powerful Guise family in France were all increasingly inclined to play an active role in Elizabeth's downfall. This was only partly for reasons of religion; Elizabeth's England was a threat to Spanish shipping in the Atlantic and a thorn in Philip's side as he sought to put down rebellion in the low countries, while for the Guise family, led by Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, the prize was potentially even greater; his niece – Mary, Queen of Scots – was next in line to the English throne.

Plotters on the continent would also have been encouraged by divisions within the English court. The country had seen four different monarchs in eleven years, during which time

the state religion had changed from something of Henry VIII's own invention to something close to Lutheranism under his son Edward VI, then back to Catholicism under 'Bloody' Mary, before Elizabeth picked up where her father had left off with a bespoke form of Protestantism. The short reigns of Edward and Mary meant that these changes had taken place with bewildering speed, with the result that every English man and woman of note had been forced to deny their true beliefs – everyone was a liar, in other words, either now or in the recent past.

In such an environment, it should be no surprise that Elizabeth's court reeked of fear and suspicion. The two principal factions (made up of many smaller cliques) were led by Robert Dudley – the Earl of Leicester and a childhood friend of Elizabeth's who had nonetheless spent his youth soldiering for King Philip of Spain in an attempt to prove his loyalty to her older sister – and William Cecil and Nicholas Bacon – new men and committed Protestants who had nonetheless bent the knee to Mary while many of their co-religionists had gone into self-imposed exile on the continent.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Matthew and Aurélie Longstaff, *husband and wife, living at Martlesham in Suffolk*

Gaetan and Laure Durant, *father and daughter, living in Paris*

In England

Sir Nicholas Bacon, *Lord Chancellor of England*

Anne Bacon, *his wife and translator of John Jewel's Apologie of the Anglican Church*

Anthony and Francis Bacon, *their children*

Francis Walsingham, *Member of Parliament for Lyme Regis in Dorset (subsequently principal secretary to Elizabeth I)*

William Cecil (later Lord Burghley), *Elizabeth I's Secretary of State and chief advisor*

Thomas Howard, *Duke of Norfolk*

Robert Dudley, *Earl of Leicester*

John Dee, *mathematician, astrologer and philosopher, suspected of necromancy*

In France

Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, *English ambassador to the French court*

Horatio Palavicino, *English merchant, based in Bordeaux*

Catherine de Medici, *widow of Henri II, French Regent until her son, Charles IX, declared his majority in 1563*

Michel de Nostredame, *physician, astrologer, France's most famous prophet*

The Guise

Charles, *Cardinal of Lorraine*

Francois, *Duke of Guise (deceased)*

Henri (16), *his son and successor to the title*

Mary, *Queen of Scots, Henri's cousin and next in line to the English throne*

The Dowager Duchess of Guise, *born Antoinette de Bourbon, widow of Claude, mother of Francois and Charles*

Chapter 1

Paris, France. January 6th, 1565

In the tavern, no one flinched at the distant crack of musket fire. The sound had become so common, Paris might have been a city in the borderlands between Christendom and the Muselman Empire.

Gaetan Durant looked round at the sorry collection of drinkers – petty criminals, beggars, whores – flotsam and jetsam of this monstrous city. The same faces he saw each time he visited *La Tête du Sarrasin*, but so oddly still tonight they might have been ghosts. It was the sixth of January, twin ceremony of the Twelfth Night and the Feast of Fools. This time last year, soon after Durant had arrived in the capital, there'd been a bonfire at Les Halles, a maypole at Braque's Chapel, a mystery play at the Palais de Justice, all trumpeted by the Provost's soldiers in their suits of fine mauve camlet. This year, the same men were dressed in blood-soaked leather, horns exchanged for swords as they fought to stem the violence. Decent folk huddled beneath their beds, chairs and tables piled against the door, while a few of the indecent, those unwilling to pick a side, huddled together in this tavern.

Durant gestured at the deck of cards, face down on the scarred and pitted table-top. The hilt of a short poniard scraped his ribs beneath the black doublet.

"Where were we, gentlemen?"

Lecornu, to his right, was a thin man with lank hair and a pointed nose, the handkerchief round his neck puffed into some slight approximation of a ruff. His voice was a needling whine.

"The king should be in Paris. He'd know as much, if his father hadn't whelped him on a foreign witch."

Conversation died at the nearest tables. Lecornu looked delighted, as if it were his daring which kept him safe and not the fact of his association with the powerful Guise family. Durant poured himself more wine. The tavern stank worse than a midden. It was freezing outside and roasting in here. The landlord had nailed boards across the narrow windows to keep the firelight from performing its treacherous dance in the windows. Beads of sweat ran down the patrons' necks and the walls were slick beneath the sagging ceiling.

Durant felt an urge to stand, pluck the night cloak from his chair and bid his companions goodnight, an urge which died when he thought of home. Cooped up these last few days, his daughter Laure would not be in a welcoming mood. Durant closed his eyes. He was a trained physician, though he'd never sat for the Doctor's Cap. Already a year in the capital, he had comfortable consulting rooms, reasonable fees – and yet here he sat, partnering with a butcher to make ends meet as a card-sharp.

Durant flicked the cheap, block-printed cards back and forth in his long fingers, making them jump and dance. Manu snorted. There was something that seemed so honest about the butcher's thick beard and leather jerkin, spotted with the blood of his trade. The two of them rarely spoke, an observer would have thought they were rivals. Durant tapped the cards into a tidy pile and dealt. The mark, Lecornu, surveyed his hand with apparent satisfaction. He was a miserable gambler, betting the minimum unless he drew unbeatable cards. Durant and Manu had been working him for an hour already with nothing to show for their efforts but a few shaved coppers. Manu tapped his jaw – time to let the Guise informant win a hand. Not too much; they wanted Lecornu to regret his native caution.

He called after a single round of betting, before he'd even made good on his previous losses. Still, the informer raked the small pile of winnings into his lap with a satisfied smirk.

Durant dealt again. A serving girl walked past their table, face painted to mask a cleft-lip. Lecornu grabbed her by the wrist.

“Your establishment has all the charm of a morgue,” he raised his voice, “I thought this was supposed to be a place of entertainment.”

The serving girl was only a year or two younger than Durant’s daughter. She looked towards the counter. The landlord shrugged, arms folded across his broad chest.

“You heard the man.”

She hung her head, face hidden behind long hair as she climbed onto their table. Manu rescued the cards from beneath her feet, Lecornu began a slow clap, the beat taken up at half a dozen tables. The girl lifted her thin arms. The crowd gave a roar of drunken approval when her hips began to move. She started to spin, faster and faster, firelight shone on her bare shoulders, on the un-pleated bodice. Her slender legs flashed beneath the billowing skirts. Her black hair spun in time, eyes closed, the point of her tongue just visible beneath the cleft-lip.

Durant could hear her breathe, hear the scrape of her soft shoes on the table-top, his stomach turned by the scent of lechery. Only the landlord seemed immune, leaning on a cheap bust of St. Giron – his standard perch, from where he told the story of his grandfather several times removed, who’d returned from the Crusades with a severed head, exchanged for the freehold on this tavern.

But Parisians no longer went to war against the Turks. These days, in the dark streets outside, it was Christian against Christian. Rival mobs had been terrorising the provinces for years, killing, looting, raping. Catholic militias devising new tortures for the Calvinist Huguenots, who took their revenge on priests, monks and nuns. The boy-king Charles IX had set off on a two-year tour of the country with his mother Catherine de Medici. They wanted to heal wounds, but the people simply gaped, grumbled at the expense and returned to killing once the Royal Progress had moved on. And the same cancer which

had infected the provinces crept slowly through the streets of the capital.

The dancer's feet came together. She threw back her head, dark eyes blazing with pride and defiance.

Footsteps thundered in the street outside, hard enough to shake the timbers. The drinkers fell silent, stared at their cups as boot leather cracked on the frozen cobbles. Who was out there? Lackeys loyal to the Duke of Guise? A mob in service to Montmorency? Would it be *Vive la messe* or *Vive l'Admiral*? Catholic beasts or Huguenot animals?

Five seconds passed. Durant saw Manu bite his lower lip, then raise an eyebrow. There was a knock at the tavern door. Three taps. A pause. Two more. The landlord disappeared behind the curtain, returning with a man in a dun-coloured jerkin.

"The Guise have fled the city!"

Durant glanced at Lecornu. The informant did not seem concerned that his paymasters had given way before their rivals. His beady eyes shifted from man to man, taking careful note of their reactions.

Durant took a long draft of wine, before adding another two coins to the pile. "Lecornu?"

"The Medici witch is to blame." The informant produced a silver coin.

"She's not even in Paris."

Lecornu nodded, as if Durant had proved his point. "This whole Royal Progress is nothing but an excuse for her to go and prostrate herself before her pet sorcerer..."

"For the love of God, Lecornu," interrupted the butcher, "don't get him started on Nostredame again!"

Durant smiled. "I've said it before, Michel de Nostredame is just a harmless old man..."

"Who worships death." Lecornu looked sideways at Durant, before adding one more silver coin to the pile.

Durant raised. He'd seen Manu's signal – Lecornu had taken advantage of the girl's dance to improve his hand with the addition of a card from his sleeve. Two could play at that game.

"So do half the nuns in France."

Lecornu's eyes grew wide. He crossed himself before raising again.

"They say he's constructing a tomb for himself down there. That's what Catherine went to see."

"Gutter-gossip."

"Nostredame did predict the last king's death," Manu attempted to broker a peace; Lecornu was contemptible, but not a man to cross – not with his connections. "I can still remember the words of his prophecy: *The young lion will overcome the older one, On the field of combat in a single battle; He will pierce his eyes through a golden cage, Two wounds made one, then he dies a cruel death.*"

"Overwrought and overwritten," said Durant. "Just an old man desperate to believe he can see the future. Michel has no special powers – trust me, I know the man."

Lecornu gave him a strange look. "So you've said, but Henry was killed in a jousting match against a younger man."

"Pierced in the eye," added Manu, "through the slit of his golden helmet. It took him eleven days to die."

"And both men wore lions on the shields," replied Durant with heavy sarcasm. He looked at Manu with unfeigned disgust. "Not you, too?"

"Nostredame is in league with the Devil," Lecornu stabbed the table-top with a forefinger.

"He's a charlatan," said Durant. "The old are always supplanted by the young and every death is cruel. *I* could write his poems; there's not a man, woman or child in France who'd know the difference."

He placed his cards face up on the table, eyes fixed on Lecornu. The informant stared in disbelief. Durant knew at once he'd been reckless, but the chance had been too good to

miss – and Laure would be pleased. He gathered the winnings into his purse and rose, the legs of his chair scraping two straight lines in the saw-dust.

“You’re leaving?” said Manu, “with the streets as they are...”

Durant flicked his dark cloak into place. “You heard the man; the Guise have fled.” He gestured for the landlord to release him into the cool night air.

“Mind how you go, doctor.”

Durant shivered in the icy street. *Mind how you go, doctor.* The simple phrase had long since acquired a bitter edge. The riots had sent a few patients his way – army-surgeon work; a steady stream of labourers and small tradesmen with burns and breaks, stab wounds and dislocated joints – not enough to build the respectable life he’d promised Laure.

Durant pulled the cloak close to hide the collar of his shirt. The street seemed quiet – no heavy tramp of feet or shouted oaths – but still he walked softly, tried to muffle his footsteps. It had taken weeks to learn his way around this labyrinth of alleyways, intersections and cul-de-sacs, like a skein of ravelled thread. Reluctant to head straight home, Durant made for an old tower in what remained of Philip-Augustus’s wall, ducked beneath the wooden boards at the entrance and climbed the narrow staircase. He was sweating by the time he reached the top, the sleeping city spread before him, a monstrous giant of chimneys, bridges, squares, spires and bell-towers.

He closed his eyes and remembered the fire which had consumed so many thousands of books, hidden in the forgotten library beneath Naples. Hard to believe only two and half years had passed since he’d fled the smouldering remains with Matthew Longstaff and Aurélie. He smiled at the thought of his two friends; the exiled English soldier and the young Florentine woman who’d been raised and educated by Giacomo Vescosi, regarded by many as Europe’s pre-eminent humanist scholar. The three of them had formed a formidable team, defeating the Master of the Sacred Palace and his so-called Hounds of

God, preserving at least one text from the burning library – *On Freedom*, by the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Longstaff and Aurélie had passed it on to their patron, the English Lord Chancellor Sir Nicholas Bacon. Durant had heard nothing of it since, but still remembered the strange sensation of hope which the opening words had inspired in him:

What a creature is man. Incomparable in reason, infinite in faculties. What need has he of angels, who can move and feel as angels do? What need of God, who has it within himself to penetrate the deepest mysteries? How perfect he is, the beauty of the world; how short-lived and fearful, the terror of his fellows. Man is dust, made of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, and animated by the fifth, the quintessence...

Time for home and bed. Heading back down the stairs, Durant smoothed the front of his black doublet, a fine piece of clothing made from Dutch cloth but threadbare at the collar and cuffs. Laure would have to apply another layer of boot-black. Hopefully, she'd have turned in already. A good night's sleep for them both and tomorrow he'd try to make peace once more. How could he not, after eight years of searching and then the miracle of finding her again?

Durant spun at a sound in the darkness. Pain blossomed – a blood-red rose – a stone against the side of his head. He just had time to see an arm disappearing into shadow, white knuckles, dirt beneath the crooked nails. The image fading as his bones turned to water. His body struck the ground with a muffled thud, his awareness carried off through cracks in the worn flagstones.

Chapter 2

Suffolk, England. February 13th, 1565.

A scream raced through the naked trees. Matthew Longstaff changed direction without thinking, no longer running for the joy of hearing his heart beat after a winter cooped inside. Sparrow ran at his heels. The dog's dark coat was streaked with white these days, but she was still strong, still swift over short distances.

Breath quickening, blood coursing as they sprinted through the beechwood. Longstaff grew angry as he ran, drawn by the cries of pain and fear. This was *his* land, reclaimed after thirty years of exile. A weak sun marked his passage beneath the leafless canopy. He was dressed for comfort and carried no weapon but the short knife in his belt. Leaving his wife asleep beneath the warm covers, he'd risen early to run in the dawn light. And now this.

The screaming stopped. Longstaff crashed into a small clearing, sweat beading in his straw-coloured hair, elbows pumping beneath the heavy shoulders. An eight-point stag lay sprawled in the centre. A man knelt above the beast with a bloody knife in one hand, hacking for the easiest cuts of meat. It was always the same with these bastards: take what they want and leave the rest for scavengers. The man was old, gaunt cheeks hidden beneath a grey beard. The penalty for poaching was death. Sparrow hunkered down at Longstaff's side, teeth bared in a ferocious snarl.

"Get out of here. Go on."

A boy stood perched in a silvery beech, legs planted where a branch forked – the arrow knocked on his bow was pointed at Longstaff's heart.

That arrow – it was a perfect match for the one buried in the stag’s throat. Longstaff cursed. He should have known there would be two.

“Get out,” the boy’s voice was high and clear.

Longstaff raised his hands: “Put the weapon down.”

Soon, the lad’s thin arms would tire. And then what? Kill a man or let himself be taken? *The penalty for poaching was death.*

Longstaff thought of Aurélie, waiting for him at home. He removed his knife and threw it in the dirt. “Climb down and be on your way. I won’t stop you.”

A look of contempt twisted the boy’s half-formed features.

“Mind, it’s only your lives I’m offering.” Longstaff’s blue eyes were hard and chill as they met the boy’s. “The stag belongs to me.”

“You’re William Longstaff’s son?” interrupted the old poacher. He puffed his sunken chest. “I served your father half my life. You’re the very spit.”

I served your father. Amazing how few of Longstaff’s neighbours were willing to make this same admission, even now. Longstaff stared at the poacher’s face, lined with the passage of years. It struck no bell of recognition, but that meant nothing – he’d been eight when the king’s men took him away from here and sent him into exile. He gestured at the stag.

“My father didn’t employ men who’d treat an animal like this.”

“My eyes have grown weak,” protested the poacher, “and we don’t have the luxury of time, the boy and I.”

Kneeling beside the stag, Longstaff poured water from his skin, used his palms to sluice the blood away. “Tell the lad to climb down.”

The poacher looked up. “Do as he says, Wilf.”

The boy took his time lowering the bow. He leapt from branch to branch like a squirrel.

“Where are his parents?”

“Dead.”

“I’ll warrant you’ve a rope?”

The poacher unwound a length from his waist.

“What’ll you do with us?”

Wilf kept his distance, picking dried sap from his fingertips in a brave show of indifference.

“You didn’t see me coming?” said Longstaff.

The boy coloured. “Can’t look everywhere at once.”

Longstaff nodded. *Too lazy to do his job properly.* “The elm would have given you a better line of sight.”

“The branches grow wrong.”

“Better than a pine. For climbing.”

Wilf rubbed the back of his head. He was younger than Longstaff had thought.

“Pine’s all right.”

“Wait until you’re a stone heavier. Never trust a pine, they keep their deadwood too long.” Longstaff suppressed a smile. “Find me a branch, Wilf.”

“What for?”

“Twice the stag’s length, thick enough to bear his weight.”

Longstaff trussed the dead animal with the poacher’s rope. When the boy dragged a fallen branch into the clearing, he broke off the crown and ran it between the stag’s legs.

“I won’t have poachers here, so you’ve a choice. Clear off these lands or hoist up that animal and come with me.”

They stared at him. Two sullen faces, one young and one old.

“To what purpose?”

“You were one of my father’s woodsmen?”

“Head Woodsman, until he was took away.”

“I could use you. The boy, too, despite his wildness. Three square meals a day and a roof over your heads.”

What else could he do? See them hanged? Let a man who’d served his father spend his final years living rough? Aurélie would never speak to him again.

Winter had been slow releasing its grip. Only a few days earlier, great drifts of snow had still pressed against the thick, stone walls of the house. Now, as Longstaff led the estate's two newest workers, he felt the sun's warmth on his back, the unmistakable promise of spring. The boy would bring some life to the Martlesham estate and the greybeard must know these lands as well as anyone alive. Aurélie always enjoyed hearing the old folk tales and Longstaff was trying to learn more about the local flora and fauna – both doing what they could to make the place feel like a home. It was harder for Aurélie, born and raised in the Italian city of Florence.

Longstaff walked ahead to the brow of a low hill – his favourite view of the house, nestled among fields just shedding their winter coats of grey frost. During the long decades of exile, he'd imagined it razed to the ground. No other fate had seemed possible. It had taken him twenty-seven years to return and discover the house still stood, and that had only come about by a stroke of good fortune. Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England, had sent him south to recover the contents of an ancient library, buried for centuries in secret vaults beneath the city of Naples. Longstaff had failed. The pope's chief censor and spymaster had set the precious scrolls alight, destroying the accumulated knowledge of the Persians, Greeks and Romans in a huge conflagration. Longstaff and Aurélie had only managed to preserve a single manuscript, but that had been enough – just – to persuade Sir Nicholas to keep his part of the bargain. The Lord Chancellor had used his power to erase the stain on Longstaff's name and return the family estate to his possession.

Longstaff moved on, leading the two poachers past wattle and daub outbuildings and Martlesham's small collection of animals. The household would be living on venison for the next few weeks. Longstaff pointed to a shed which doubled as a slaughterhouse.

“My father taught me that every scrap of meat on a stag’s body, every ounce of fat, every bone and every hair can be put to good use. I’ll be back to check on your work in an hour.”

He searched the windows for a glimpse of Aurélie as he approached the house. She’d grown quieter during the winter, less quick to share her thoughts. Of course, she was nothing like the wives of his neighbours. Longstaff had known that when they married – a short ceremony at a church on Thames Street, two days after landing in England. He pushed through the front door, full of the story he was about to tell – threatened by a juvenile in the woods, a chance encounter with a former retainer of his father’s...

Aurélie stood waiting at the foot of the stairs. As always, the breath caught in Longstaff’s throat; at twenty-five, she was eleven years his junior and the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. She held a letter in one raised hand. Her cheeks were flushed and the bright blue eyes shone with restless energy.

“It’s from Durant’s daughter. She says he’s disappeared.”

Wordlessly, she handed him the letter. When Durant wrote, it was always in Italian, a language the three of them spoke fluently. The daughter preferred French, apparently. It took Longstaff several minutes to decipher her crabbed hand.

Monsieur Longstaff,

We have never met. When my father found me, you and Aurélie had already crossed La Manche and arrived in England.

He described you both as his greatest friends, on other occasions as his only friends. He wrote to you often. You must know that relations between us are strained, despite our joy at being reunited after so many years. So perhaps you won’t think it out of character that he has vanished without warning. You are aware, I’m sure, that he freed me from an ill-chosen husband and arranged for the two of us to move to Paris, where we have attempted to make a home together.

I last saw my father two weeks ago tomorrow. The capital is not without its dangers, but I do not believe he is the kind of man who might fall prey to common thieves. Nor, for all

his faults, do I believe he is the kind of man to abandon his daughter in straightened circumstances.

He once told me, if anything happened to him, that I should contact you. I am not writing for myself. I fear that something terrible has befallen him. I hope you will not think it forward of me to share these tidings.

*Yours in God,
Laure Durant.*

A single sheet of paper. Longstaff stared at Aurélie in confusion. “Relations between them are strained? Durant never said.”

He barely registered that his wife was packing.

“Perhaps it’s a forgery – some kind of trap? We have enemies on the continent. Easier to murder us in France than England.”

“Everyone who knew about the Devil’s Library is dead, Matthew.”

“As far as we know. And there’s still a price on my head in Muscovy. This letter seems strange.”

“All the more reason to believe it’s genuine. A boy arrived from the village at first light. They all know how generously you tip when it’s something from France. He left a few minutes ago with a letter for Sir Nicholas.”

Longstaff stared at her. “You’ve written to Bacon already?”

“Who else can provide us with passports?”

“Aurélie...”

“What?”

He gestured helplessly. The room, the house. The fields and forests. He was the master of meadows, pastures, barns. Finally home, a wealthy man with a pantry full of meat and wine. He thought of Wilf and the old poacher, hard at work in the slaughterhouse.

“Who’s to say he hasn’t just wandered off?”

“Durant? A man who spent eight years searching Europe for his daughter?”

“And eight before that ignoring her! Have you forgotten they’re murdering each other in France?”

She knew. She read Durant's letters just as keenly as he did. A vicious civil war was tearing the country apart, while an adolescent king strove to hold the centre. Longstaff held the letter in his fingertips. It seemed a flimsy reason to turn their lives upside down. "What do you think we can achieve?"

"Comfort Durant's daughter. Find out what's happened. What's wrong with you, Matthew?"

He left the room without a word. There were at least a dozen people he'd have to see. "Tomorrow, Aurélie," he shouted back at her. "We're not going anywhere until I've put things in order."

Longstaff sulked for an hour, surrounded by the neat rows of ledgers in his small office. The story of a modest Suffolk estate; records of harvest, rainfall, and livestock, contracts with tenant farmers going back three and four generations. He knew he should make a list of people he needed to talk to, starting with the two he'd employed that morning, but what was the point? Martlesham had survived twenty-seven years without him; it would survive another few weeks while he and Aurélie begged favours from Sir Nicholas Bacon. No doubt, she'd want them to stay there as well.

He was going to bloody kill Durant – assuming the bastard was still alive.

Finally, Longstaff let his eyes fall on the large chest standing in a corner of the room. He muttered a curse before throwing back the lid. For the last two and a half years, his weapons and old travelling clothes had lain abandoned, the long cavalryman's coat, patched and repaired but still serviceable, the padded jerkin – he felt the weight of several small medallions in the silk lining; campaign medals from Metz and Marciano, as well as tokens of friendship and remembrance from fallen comrades. Then his musket, oiled and wrapped in cloth, and the old katzbalger sword. The worn hilt fitted his hand like a glove.

Chapter 3

Longstaff slept badly that night, uncomfortably aware of Aurélie's restless excitement as she lay beside him in the darkness. He wasn't surprised to find himself alone in bed when he woke at dawn.

She'd already packed their breakfast. They could eat on the road, apparently. Longstaff did not comment on her outfit – tight-fitting hose and a tunic which fell to her knees. Nor did he acknowledge her broad grin when she saw him in the cavalryman's coat, Sparrow trotting eagerly at his heels.

“Just like old times.”

Their fastest route to the London Road led through the village, blessedly quiet at this time on a Sunday morning. At least they were being spared the weekly trip to church, thought Longstaff, as they rode beneath the tall spire – slender monument to the riches of this land, where chalky clay yielded generous harvests of grain and supported large flocks of sheep.

Longstaff sank lower in the saddle. It wasn't religious sensibility which made him reluctant to worship in the old parish church – in his opinion, one confession was much the same as another when a man needed to pray – but nostalgia. Here, more than anywhere, he missed the sounds and smells of his childhood. The stained-glass windows he remembered had been destroyed, the reliquary smashed, the gleaming chapel plate long since melted down and the frescos replaced with bible verses drawn in thick black paint.

“You're looking forward to being in London again.” He had not intended it to sound like an accusation.

“I'm looking forward to seeing Anne and Sir Nicholas. And the boys; Anthony must be nine already, Francis five.”

“They're not our friends, Aurélie.”

She stared at him. “Anne is the best friend I have in this country. Sir Nicholas would be yours, if you’d let him.”

“He forced me to serve him. I could have been killed...”

“He gave you a fair reward. God’s teeth, Matthew, we haven’t left Suffolk in two years.”

They entered a long avenue of elm trees, hundreds of feet high. It would be magnificent in another month with the sun shining down on a canopy of new leaves. Now, thanks to the elm’s odd habit of throwing out a strong-side branch, the naked trees seemed oppressive. It was this habit, Longstaff remembered, which made the elm such a popular gallows tree.

Aurélié shivered. “I hate them.”

“Magnificent timbering wood.”

She laughed at him.

“I’m serious.”

“I know.”

Longstaff managed a smile.

“Look up,” continued Aurélié, “one of the first bright days of the year.”

She was right. Even the few travellers they saw on the London Road seemed in good heart – merchants banded together for safety, a group of students and clerics. They passed a stone-cutter and carpenter who’d stopped to exchange rumours of work. The two men stared at Aurélié with frank admiration.

Longstaff warned them off with a look.

“We could cut across country here,” he said, “re-join the road further south?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

They galloped at an angle to the road. Longstaff heard Aurélié laugh as he followed over meadows spotted with the first small flowers of spring. He edged alongside, they rode knee to knee for nearly an hour until the open meadows gave way to woods.

“Like old times,” smiled Aurélié. “You and I riding together.”

“You and I,” agreed Longstaff, “Durant and Vescosi.”

He bit his lip. Bad enough to mention Durant; what had possessed him to remind her of Giacomo Vescosi? The man who'd raised her and shaped her extraordinary mind lay dead among the ruins of the Devil's Library.

“Do you remember teaching me to shoot?” she said. “That village where I helped the washerwomen?”

“Helped?” he smiled, “that's not how I...”

“Look!” Aurélie pointed at a circle of beech trees on the summit of a distant hill. “Can we camp there tonight?”

Longstaff bowed from the saddle. “As my Lady commands.”

The going was hard. Longstaff dismounted, walking Sparrow through the tangle of hazel and hawthorn. The circle at the summit was perfect, except where one of the great trees had been toppled by a storm. Aurélie built a fire where moss had grown across the upper rim of roots to create a natural roof. Longstaff produced bread and cheese from his saddle-bag. They ate side by side, enjoying the sunset with Sparrow dozing nearby in the soft, rabbit-cropped grass.

“The people who planted these tree circles intended them to act as gateways to the next world,” said Aurélie.

Longstaff smiled. Out here it was easier to understand her need to learn what she could about her new home. He thought of winter evenings they'd spent in the parlour at Martlesham; the way Aurélie would look up from a book, on the point of sharing some stray thought with him, then check herself and silently return to her reading.

Now, she spoke in the darkness.

“Before Christ came to England, the people here worshipped a god called Woden.” Her voice took on a sing-song lilt, weaving through the low crackle of flames, “Woden was hung from a tree, he was pierced with a spear, he was killed and rose again, and when the priests arrived they claimed he was a Devil.”

She reached for Longstaff in the darkness, her fingertips slowly tracing the line of his jaw. He sighed, a soft murmur of happiness, as she drew him into her embrace.

*

London's population had doubled twice over in the last fifty years. The very landscape seemed to flow towards the city so that Longstaff felt certain they could have found it blindfold.

It appeared first as a black smudge on the horizon from the hill at Nelly's Hole. The road was bordered by green fields for some time afterwards, but then, by some trick of the light and long before they reached the ancient walls, they found themselves in a labyrinth of tenements, shops, slaughterhouses, churches. Three years earlier these streets had been common ground where old women sold herbs from their tumbledown sheds.

The smell was overwhelming. The horses grew skittish, forcing Longstaff and Aurélie to dismount and lead them through the crowds – preachers and merchants, constables and beggars, lawyers in fur tippets, courtesans with hair piled high. White-chested kites rooted through the piles of refuse in every street. Another two hours passed before Longstaff caught a glimpse of the Thames, looking down the thoroughfare from the market at Leadenhall.

Aurélie's face split into a broad grin when they reached the booksellers' quarter by St. Paul's Cathedral. If the religious wars in Europe were a topic of conversation in Suffolk, they were a visceral reality here. Longstaff heard French, Flemish, Dutch, German and Italian. Men and women who were seen by some as skilled workers and welcome guests, by others as a threat and a cancer; most were refugees from the violence carried out in their homelands by the King of Spain or the Guise in France, by the pope and his Holy Roman Emperor.

Longstaff shook his head. What would his neighbours in Suffolk make of this modern Babel? He could imagine their objections perfectly: *Who are these people? Does anyone know? Under what license do they trade? They might be spies, assassins, crooks, thieves!*

They could say what they liked. Elizabeth was queen in England and she refused to turn her co-religionists away, however much her subjects muttered that the trickle of refugees would soon become a flood.

Aurélie had disappeared into the maze of stalls, leaving Longstaff with Sparrow and the horses. He knew it would be at least an hour before he saw her again. Pushing his way through the jostling crowds of men swapping news and gossip from the continent, he noticed cheaply bound copies of Michel de Nostredame's most recent prognostications. Another trestle had been piled with translations of Petrarch and Marco Polo – it appeared that tales of far off lands were popular among the English dreamers who spent their money here. For a moment, as Longstaff found a place to wait beneath the great pulpit where preachers gave sermons and heralds read proclamations, he felt as if he were at the centre of an enormous, sprawling web of information.

The feeling passed, replaced by a nagging sense that he was being watched. Had he spent too long in the countryside? No one appeared to take more than cursory interest in him. The feeling remained, however, powerful enough that Longstaff greeted Aurélie impatiently when she emerged from the maze of stalls. It was still a long walk to York House on the Strand. They continued west, past the lawyers' Inns around Chancery Lane, then south towards the river. Aurélie quickened her pace, more eager than Longstaff to renew her acquaintance with the Bacons. It was she who knocked at the imposing door, she who gave their names to the servant while Longstaff fussed with the horses.

Sir Nicholas's wife appeared a moment later and wrapped Aurélie in a fierce embrace.

"You must have travelled with the wind," said Anne, "your letter arrived less than an hour ago."

She offered Longstaff her hand. Awkwardly, he inclined his head.

"I'm sorry we gave you so little warning..."

"If you must apologise, do so for having stayed away too long. Your timing is perfect; Nicholas needs cheering up."

"We were sorry to hear he'd fallen from the queen's favour..." murmured Aurélie.

Anne threw up her hands. "He got himself caught between a fool and a rogue. The whole world is obsessed with seeing our queen married – if Elizabeth has a brain in her head, which she assuredly does, she'll avoid the state of matrimony like the plague. Nicholas was denied her presence for a time, but the worst is passed. Not that you'd guess it from the way he carries on."

More servants appeared. They'd taken the bags from the horses and stood awaiting instructions from their mistress. Anne raised her hands in mock horror.

"Tell me you have more baggage, Aurélie! You're to find me as soon as you're settled. We'll see if we can't find you something suitable to wear. Matthew..." she looked him up and down, then shook her head, "you'll just have to stay in your own clothes; Nicholas gets fatter by the day. Well, what are you waiting for? You know the way."

Longstaff was laughing as he followed Aurélie up the stairs. York House was huge; he would have been happy with a simple room, but the Bacons invariably treated their guests to an entire suite. First, a small antechamber hung with yellow damask, then a receiving room with hangings of blue velvet, finally a bedroom – heavy curtains of rose-coloured satin – with adjoining dressing room.

He remained in the receiving room, peering through the windows at Sparrow in the courtyard.

“You didn’t tell me Sir Nicholas was in disgrace.”

“He isn’t anymore,” replied Aurélie from the bedroom. He could hear her pouring water into a basin on the dressing table.

“Robert Dudley, your new Earl of Leicester, wants to marry Elizabeth. Sir Nicholas does not regard this as a good idea and hatched a plan to have Dudley married off to Mary Queen of Scots. Dudley found out and went to the queen...”

“Enough,” protested Longstaff. “They’re mad, all of them!”

Aurélie appeared in the doorway. “Sleep, if you want. I’m going to find Anne; I still haven’t congratulated her on her most recent work.”

“Remind me?”

“Her translation of John Jewel’s *Apologie of the Anglican Church*. I told you.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll see you at supper.”

Longstaff kicked off his boots and stretched full-length on the bed. He thought of Durant. Not for the first time, he wished Laure had included more information in her letter. What had the Frenchman been doing on the day he vanished? What efforts had she made to track him down? Lying in the lap of luxury at York House, Longstaff found it hard to believe that his friend was in any real danger.

He remembered how affectionately Durant had treated Aurélie when the three of them travelled together. In his letters since, the Frenchman always mentioned Laure – she sent her greetings, she was in good health – but rarely revealed anything of substance.

It was dusk when the bell rang for dinner. Longstaff changed in the fading light – he *had* thought to pack a fresh shirt – ran a brush through his straw-coloured hair. There were new candles on the mantel but he left them unlit, reluctant to accept more of Sir Nicholas’s hospitality than necessary. A

servant led him squinting into the dining room, blinded by the candlelight reflected in a dozen silver plates.

“Matthew!” Sir Nicholas clasped his hand. The Lord Chancellor looked heavier and more careworn than Longstaff remembered, but his smile seemed genuine.

“You remember the boys? Anthony and Francis.”

The older boy stood and shook Longstaff’s hand, the younger stared at him from between two chairs.

Aurélie came in with Anne through a door in the far wall. Anne and Sir Nicholas took seats at either end of the table. Longstaff sat beside his hostess, opposite Francis and alongside Anthony. Aurélie, diagonally across from him, winked when she caught his eye. The youngest member of the party, in a specially raised chair, made an early attempt to lead the conversation, laying siege to Aurélie with a barrage of terrifyingly precocious questions. Anne was distracted, trying to curb her son’s wilder inclinations, so Longstaff turned to Anthony. The boy blushed, breaking eye contact with obvious relief when servants reached between the high-backed chairs to serve an antipasto of meat. Longstaff saw salted anchovies with a sauce of stewed raisins.

“Anne,” exclaimed Aurélie with obvious delight, “how thoughtful!”

“We all miss the food of our youth.”

Longstaff smiled, only half following the conversation. Sir Nicholas was unusually quiet at his end of the table. On their previous visit, the man had taken obvious pride in making his guests feel at home. Perhaps he was still preoccupied with his recent fall from grace, although Longstaff thought that was unlikely. Sir Nicholas had overcome numerous setbacks on his long rise from ‘son of a humble sheep-reeve’ to Lord Chancellor of England, leader of the queen’s Star Chamber, her spokesman in the House of Lords and chief adviser in affairs of law and order – all posts he continued to fulfil.

Aurélie broke into a peal of laughter. Anthony had said or done something amusing. The boy, on a chair upholstered

with extra stuffing, turned pink with pleasure. Longstaff looked over at Francis, already on his second course of roasted meat and vegetables, using a fork after the new continental fashion. Unlike his parents, he held the cutlery in closed fists, sawing at the meat with fierce determination, lifting morsels of food to his mouth as if in mortal fear that a sliver might slip and spoil the table-cloth.

When he and Aurélie were blessed with children, Longstaff hoped they would eat together like this. Aurélie claimed that Anne and Sir Nicholas were so informal at home because they were a widow and widower, both raising children for the second time.

“Lady Anne,” said Longstaff, “allow me to compliment your children on their table manners.”

She burst out laughing. “We have you to thank for that.”

Longstaff smiled in confusion.

“My fault,” put in Sir Nicholas, “I told the boys they could eat with us as long as they behaved. It’s not often a man of your reputation sits at our table; they’re both desperate to hear something of your exploits.”

The boys stared at him, eyes wide as saucers, hardly noticing as servants served a final course of cheese, figs and pomegranate. Longstaff didn’t want to disappoint, but it was many years since he’d spoken of war in terms of fame and glory.

“Do you two know the soldier’s greatest enemy?”

“The French,” yelled Francis, drawing a burst of laughter from his father.

Longstaff looked at Anthony, who sat straight as a ramrod, napkin neatly on his lap. He could almost see the wheels turning behind the boy’s dark eyes, assessing the likely candidates one by one. Anthony looked up, speaking slowly and carefully.

“I would think, a poor or inexperienced commander?”

“A truly excellent answer.”

The boy looked disappointed. “But wrong.”

Longstaff laughed. “Right and wrong are luxuries which rarely trouble a common soldier.”

“What were *you* going to say,” demanded Anthony.

“Lice.” Longstaff assumed a solemn expression. “I’ve fought against the French and I’ve fought alongside them, too. And soldiers quickly learn what to do with a poor commander, but lice are pitiless – they never tire, give no quarter and resist all blandishment. Away from camp on foraging missions, a wise soldier won’t remove his cuirass – not even for a second. Lice are the price we pay for our prudence. Listen closely when you’re with soldiers, in the small hours of the night, and you’ll hear the rustle of ramrods being pulled from their muskets and slipped beneath plate armour, as men desperately try and scrape the little devils from their fodder.”

Both boys had started scratching by the time Longstaff finished. The parents laughed. A moment of levity which Aurélie brought to a swift and savage conclusion.

“You know, don’t you,” she demanded of Sir Nicholas, “you already know that Durant has disappeared – and you know why.”

There was heat in her voice. Longstaff had no idea what she’d seen in Sir Nicholas that he’d missed, but their host’s reaction left him in no doubt that she was right.