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A Cruel Necessity

Written by L. C. Tyler

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A Cruel Necessity

L. C. Tyler

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Night, June 1657

It was the small things that kept you alive in this curious world of espionage. Spotting the shadow ahead of you in the alleyway. Noticing that a once-closed door was now open just a crack. Noticing that the wine was slightly cloudy when it should be clear. You developed an instinct for it. That's how he knew something was very wrong tonight.

The woman who had brought him here had been pleasant enough and well spoken. It was just that – how could he put it? – she had seemed in her careless chatter to be playing a part that she had rehearsed. In the same way there was, at first sight, nothing wrong with the place. It was ideally suited, one might say, to a clandestine meeting of a Royalist agent with some good-hearted gentlemen still loyal to a long-exiled king. But was it a little more private than it needed to be? Wouldn't a chamber at the inn have been safe enough?

He listened carefully for approaching footsteps, but as yet there

was no sound. The fact that he had been asked to arrive first and await the others was not necessarily to his detriment. Arriving first meant that he could look around, see how the land lay, work out which way he would need to go if he had to leave in a hurry. He had the advantage that he would be able to watch them come and observe the clumsily concealed weapons beneath an unneeded cloak. He himself was armed only with his gully knife, but his preference was to kill with no weapon at all where possible. Or to bluster and threaten his way out. That was good too.

There were, of course, days when he wondered whether it was all so much wasted skulking and duplicity. Ten years had passed since the old king had been executed and six since his son had even dared to set his foot on English soil. Lord Protector Cromwell's grasp on power was as firm as ever. Soon the English Republic would peacefully enter its second decade. Espionage as a trade was dying on its feet. No doubt about that. Perhaps it was time to slip away and quietly become somebody else.

He eased a small gold signet ring from his finger and dropped it into his breeches pocket, where it rested snugly. For a moment he massaged his hand, as if to obliterate any faint mark it might have left. So, then, what was this obvious thing that he had missed?

He held up the lantern that the woman had left him. The single candle cast a dim light from behind the horn panes, reflecting dully on the rough wooden walls and the straw-covered floor. He could see clearly enough from here to the only doorway. Still nothing stirred. Well, let them come whenever they wished. Friend or foe, he was ready for them.

It was only when a strong arm seized him from behind that he realised that he had not, after all, been the first to arrive. He felt something lightly brush his throat, then a warm dampness spread quickly over the front of his shirt.

'So sharp, I almost didn't feel it,' he thought.

It was his last thought before the darkness closed in. It was, in fact, the last thought he ever had.

A Little Earlier

I raise my wide arms to the stars. They are my friends.

I am here, at the crossroads of the village. I am here because I am no longer at the inn. And I am no longer at the inn because, because . . .

Have patience, and very soon I shall explain to you why I am no longer at the inn. In the meantime, let us both breathe in the cool night air, which speaks to us of everything that is in this village to which I have just returned – the sweet white roses over the door of that beshitten cottage, the damp-leaf smell of the green orchard beyond and the rich, many-coloured stink of the cowshed. And above all – because you too are my friend – let me share with you this wonderful silence. Cambridge was never completely quiet, even at this strange hour, though the inns were friendlier.

But I am no longer at the inn. Why? I frown, not because I don't like you but because frowning may help me remember.

The stars above me turn slowly, drifting across the black sky. I hear the sound of a horseman approaching. As the stars complete another circuit, he comes into view. Perhaps he too is my friend.

'You, boy – are you drunk? Or is your strange posture some new Anabaptist form of prayer?'

I lower my arms to my sides. I consider this question carefully from all points of view. Have I inadvertently become an Anabaptist? Or *am I drunk*? At the inn I argued that I was not – argued most forcefully and persuasively that I was not. Argued long and manfully that I was not.

'It is not some new form of prayer,' I say.

'Then stop turning round and round like a heathen dervish and answer a question for me. 'Od's teeth, boy! Are you *completely* drunk?'

I lower my arms again and consider this question carefully from all points of view. If I had been permitted to stay at the inn, I would have quaffed another tankard of ale. Then I would have been drunker than I am now. Therefore, I am not as drunk as I might have been. Therefore, I cannot now be completely drunk. I feel that my tutor would have been impressed with this logic if only he were here now rather than snoring in noisy, friendly Cambridge. But it is some time since I said anything, and the horseman is growing impatient for a reply.

'I am not *completely* drunk,' I say. I speak slowly and carefully as evidence of this, though saying 'completely' is, I find, not as easy as I thought it would be.

'Then, my partly drunk friend, can you tell me if Ben Bowman still keeps the inn?' He pats his horse, which seems to think we have all been kept here too long. The animal shakes its head, rattling bit and bradoon.

I look at the rider curiously. He is tall as well as impatient, and he is dressed in dark clothing, though in the moonlight, black, grey and dark blue are all as one. His boots are new and glossy. His horse is grey and muddied from a long journey. His broad-brimmed hat is pulled low over his face. His voice is muffled, *and I know why*. I think all of these things, but wisely I do not say any of them.

'Christ's bones, boy! It's not that difficult a question. Does he or doesn't he still keep the inn? You must recall who was serving you.'

'Ben Bowman was certainly serving *other* people,' I say.

The rider laughs. I fancy I may have said something clever.

'Then my thanks, and please take this . . . friend . . . for your trouble!'

His right hand holds the bridle, and, with his left hand, he tosses something that makes a graceful silver arc in the moonlight. A star perhaps? Or a dream? I reach for it, fumbling with both left and right, but it falls on the ground. Its light goes out.

The rider seems minded to go on his way; then he pauses. 'What's your name, boy?'

'John Grey,' I say.

'John Grey?' asks the rider, which is odd because I have just said precisely that. Perhaps he is hard of hearing. I repeat it. It has, in my view, a pleasant ring to it.

He too is silent for a moment. Then he says softly: 'Go home, John. Go home to your mother.' He looks me up and down. He seems sad. Then he kicks the tired horse into a walk. I listen to the slow, uneven sound of the horse's hooves. The horse is lame. I should have noticed that before. The clop of hooves on road grows quieter. Then it stops.

Silence.

I breathe in the cool night air, which speaks to me of everything that is in this village to which I have just returned – the sweet honeysuckle in the hedgerow; the bright stars overhead; the fine aroma of horse that has lingered in the rider's wake. And the silence.

So, what would you have me do? Shall I return in this fragile, starlit silence to my mother's house – the thing that both Ben Bowman *and* the rider have proposed that I should do? I would not wish to awaken my mother, as I fear I might if I tried, for example, to open the front door or walk up the stairs – both activities that cannot be accomplished, as you well know, without a great deal of falling, stamping and swearing. Opening the front door might be better done in the clear light of day, though preferably while my mother and Martha are still asleep – if Martha ever does sleep. But Martha is my friend and will not tell tales.

Very well then. Since you propose no other course of action, I shall rest here against the cottage wall, safe and dry under the overhanging thatch, where the logs would be if it were not June, and enjoy the sweet scent of the white roses. But before I do so, I raise my wide arms once more to the stars. They are my friends.

Dawn

'There is,' says Ifnot Davies, 'no justice in this world.'

'Seemingly not,' I say cheerfully.

'Thy head should ache like God's wrath on Judgement Day, considering the ale thou didst consume last night.'

I wince, not because my head resembles God's wrath in any way, but because I have been thou'd twice in one sentence – and that before the day has properly begun.

'God is merciful,' I say. I wink and am not immediately struck down by a divine thunderbolt for my levity.

'God is merciful to the young, John Grey,' says Ifnot. His gaze, though compassionate, suggests that he knows the state of my conscience and the secrets of my soul. I do hope he doesn't. 'Try that in ten years' time,' Ifnot adds, 'and see what God's views on strong drink are then. Try it in twenty years' time, and see what God's views are on catching rheumatics if you sleep out of doors. Thou hast

spent the night there, under the eaves of Harry Hardy's cottage?'

'Thou' again. But, now I look around me, I am indeed under the eaves of Harry Hardy's modest home. When did that happen?

I stand up and dust off my hat, on which my head has rested for the night. I try punching it back into shape, but it has lost the will to be anything other than a pillow. Ah well, who needs a hat on a morning like this one? The sun is but a hand's breadth above the horizon. The whole green world's bedazzled now with dew. And the voice of the cuckoo is heard in the land. Five o'clock, as near as any man might judge, on a fine summer's morning. It already promises fair for a hot day, but Ifnot is dressed in a thick leather jerkin. If your normal place is beside a blacksmith's furnace, the rest of the world must feel cold.

'You're up betimes yourself, Ifnot,' I say, giving the brim of my pillow another tweak. 'Or didn't you go to bed either?'

'I need more charcoal for the forge, John Grey,' he says vaguely. 'There are half a dozen horses to shoe this morning. Apparently.'

His smile has faded a little, probably because he doesn't like being called Ifnot. It's what we all call him though. He gets his revenge, in a way, by addressing everybody as 'thou'. He's a Quaker obviously.

'The stranger's horse seemed a bit lame,' I say as we stroll back to the crossroads. 'Maybe he's one of your customers.'

'Stranger? What stranger?'

'A rider – last night. I saw him here, just where we're standing now. He asked for directions to the inn. You must have still been there when he arrived.'

'I didn't see no stranger,' says Ifnot. 'But maybe I left soon after thou didst.'

'Maybe thou . . . you didst . . . did. Well, you'll see him later, like as not,' I say. 'He'd had a long journey, I think, and may sleep away some of the morning.'

Ifnot is about to reply but then bends suddenly and picks something up. 'A shilling,' he says as if he has never seen one before. In this village shillings stay safe in purses; they rarely lie long in the road. 'And one with the head of our late and unlamented King Charles upon it.'

'That must be what the stranger threw me last night,' I say.

'Then, 'tis thine, John Grey,' says Ifnot, holding out the coin in his left hand. That's Quakers for you – they may have strange ideas about personal pronouns, but they're honest. It's what comes of having God watching you the whole time. In Cambridge we got God's attention half an hour a day at the most.

'Keep it,' I say. 'I did nothing that I can recall to merit payment.'

He places the small silver coin firmly in my hand and his vast blacksmith's paw closes over it. I couldn't open my hand again if I wanted to.

'I render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's,' he says, giving my fist another agonising squeeze. The sharp edges of the shilling dig into my palm. 'And unto God that which is God's. As I hope thou doest. Welcome home, by the way, and please give my respects to thy good mother.'

I agree that I shall do this, and in return he consents to let go of my hand. He continues on his way, taking the road south, while I prepare to go north, towards the family home and my hopefully slumbering family.

Others are slumbering too. Behind the shuttered windows of the decaying lime-washed cottages, under each untidy mass of grey thatch, they and their fleas sleep soundly – four or five human souls to a bed. Soon the village will be scratching itself, sniffing its armpits and pulling on its breeches. But for now the road lies empty, the air is sweet and, in the fields hard by the village, birds peck unhurriedly where the ripening corn casts long shadows.

From here I can see almost the entire village. Four dusty tracks approximate to the four points of the compass, taking their respective and equally leisurely paths to Royston, Cambridge, Saffron Walden and – more distantly – London. The road to London has always seemed, to my eyes, a little wider and a little grander than the other three, but each thoroughfare is lined with rows of timbered cottages in various states of disrepair, some pressing into the roadway, others set back behind vegetable gardens. Facing me, the high walls of the park belonging to the Big House present their blank brick visage for half a mile or more, running out into the countryside way beyond the last cottage. The wall is well maintained. (When it comes to keeping people out of things, you can't be too careful.) Ancient elms and oaks rise green above the soft red brickwork, hinting at a lost paradise that lies beyond. Which, in a sense, it does. But I have admired the view for longer than four streets of one very ordinary village deserve. I am bound for my mother's modest dwelling, currently just out of sight on the Cambridge road.

At the stream I stop briefly to splash its water, clear and cold after the cloudless summer night, over my face and hair. Then I press on apace, skipping lightly over the stepping stones, in the sure knowledge that my mother was ever the

early riser – though I am still torn between claiming that I have been asleep in my bed since midnight and, arguing in the alternative, that I met Dickon Grice and spent the night at his house. Neither is creditable in the sense that I had undertaken to be home by ten of the clock, but both are probably better than admitting that I was thrown out of the inn and proved too drunk to walk very slowly from one side of the village to the other. Of course, my mother may get to hear the truth very soon anyway, because I fear there is no longer enough silver in my purse to buy the silence of everyone who witnessed last night's events.

But there are always those who are less fortunate than you. As I pass the village dung heap, I see a pair of feet sticking out from behind it. I at least had the good sense to find the shelter of a cottage wall. I wonder which of my drinking companions could have come to this pass. He is lying facedown, and I do not recognise his back or the soles of his shoes, which are all he has chosen to present to me. He cannot be comfortable in that position – kinder, then, to wake him before he gets a stiff neck. I kneel down and give him a friendly pat on his dew-covered shoulder.

Then I see what I should have seen long before. He will certainly never have the misfortune to awake with a stiff neck. His throat has been cut clear across from side to bloody side. I lift him slightly, and he grins at me through a gaping, wine-coloured gash.

Perhaps you secretly hope, as Ifnot probably would, that God is finally about to punish me for a hard night's drinking and that I will now spew my guts over the dung heap. But I have seen death before in its many colourful forms. And indeed, this was a good death – a kind and considerate one.

Whoever this is – and he is a stranger to me – died quickly, his blood spilling out and the darkness closing in almost before he would have known what was happening to him.

I crouch beside the body, any thoughts of my mother's reproaches deferred, and examine the wound more closely. A clean cut with a very sharp knife – probably made with a single, skilful movement of the arm. The killer would have approached him from behind, seized him, pulling his head back, and cut quickly from right to left. The cut is deeper on the right, where the knife entered the flesh. I re-enact the deed in my mind and frown. He would have been held firmly by a strong man, unless . . . I check the dead man's wrists. No, there is no sign of chafing from a rope. So he would have died suddenly and probably much to his wonder. But he died in another place, not here. I look around to see if I can tell where he died, but I cannot, which is passing strange. Passing strange indeed, my masters. He has travelled some way since he breathed his last.

I place my hand under one shoulder and lift him a little to peer at the ground beneath him. The man's head twists slightly as I do so, as if he is reluctant to look me in the eye. He guards his secrets still. But I know one more thing about him – the ground is wet underneath the body, so he must have arrived here after dewfall.

While I am pondering all this, Ben Bowman appears from the direction of the inn on some early-morning errand of his own. He smiles as if to chide me for enriching him last night. Then he sees the corpse, and he stops and shakes his head.

'So, the silly fool got his throat cut, did he? Well, that's not much of a surprise, is it now?'