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Queen & Country

A Hew Cullan Mystery

Written by Shirley McKay

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Queen & Country

A Hew Cullan Mystery



Shirley McKay

Polygon

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Prologue

St Andrews, November 1586

The pedlar came to Scotland once or twice a year: in springtime when the leaves were opening in their buds, and sometimes when they fell, before the way was bared and bound in winter frost. In the year of the plague – a bad year that was – he did not come at all. In the course of a good year he crossed from his home in the midlands of England its length and its breadth, and then up north and down again. He brought his haberdashery to manor, fair and farm. He was welcomed in the houses landward of the towns, for his toys and baubles and his scraps of news, where news was slow to reach. In the burgh markets, he was made less welcome, and those he came to only for the annual fairs, when he would pitch his stall, and voice, among the rest.

This year, it was not until September that he crossed the Scottish border, to return to his old ground on the well-worn cadgers' paths. Here, he was assured to find a rousing cheer, comfort, meat and drink. He knew that his customers, after months of plague, would be glad to see him. The pack upon his back was as heavy as himself, lumbered with delights, when he first set off.

And yet, and yet, he did not find a welcome there, but a shifting silence that he could not comprehend. Wherever he went he was met with mistrust. Coming to each town, where he was turned out, he expected the good wives to follow him in droves and cry to see his wares; that did not happen now. And when he wandered landward to the little cots, expecting warmth and cheer, he found their doors were closed to him. In vain, he waved his paper proving

he was hale, and free from pestilence. He could not understand it. Starved as they had been, had their hopes and wants withered in the plague?

For once, he was behindhand with the news. The news had swept before him, like a line of fire that shrivelled to a husk all in its path, so that his trudge was through desolate landscapes, all solace closed to him. The news had gone before, closing every port, and darkening every brow that once had offered friendship. And no one thought to tell the pedlar what it was.

He came at last, at the end of November, to the South Street of St Andrews, for the last of the fairs before winter came, St Andrew's Day itself. The people here he knew would be flocking to its stalls, *flocking* for the first time in a full year since the plague, looking to stock up not simply on commodities, but on a mirth and lightness now in short supply. And if the crowds were depleted, and a little more subdued, than the last time he was here, the pedlar's spirits still were high that he would find a market for his buttons and his beads, his crudely painted soldiers and babies wrought of lead, his rattles and his pins. There were people enough, craftsmen and labourers mellow in drink, students and schoolboys truant from schools, good wives and masters in holiday clothes. There were scholars also, from the university, who wanted books and paper, sealing wax and ink. The pedlar would have liked to purchase those things too, to carry back down south, but until he offloaded the goods he had brought, he had no hope of that. The merchants had forestalled, picking off the cream that came from overseas before it left the ships. He saw the town apothecary, filling up a sack with spice and painters' colours, long before the man who brought them from the Orient had opened up his stall.

Yet he was not deterred, for in a restless horde, that hankered after novelty, there was room for all; and if he could not hope to have a prime spot for his stand, he had the advantage that he could slip among the crowd, nimble as a pick-purse, to ply his stock-in-trade.

The town drummer and piper had set up their roll, and the

swelling of a crowd, with ale in their bellies and money in their pockets, encouraged the pedlar to stake out his claim in a little corner not far from the kirk. He opened up his pack and began to cry his wares, with a perennial favourite. ‘Coventry. Coventry thread. Ye will not find a finer, nor a purer blue. For your caps and your cuff work. Your linens your embroideries. Will not run. Will not stain. No blue more true. No counterfeit stuff. Finer than gold. Mistresses, come buy. None is more true blue than Coventry blue.’

He was gratified to find that he had drawn an audience. Not, it was true, so many of the good wives who made up his target group, but several likely lads around the age of twenty, who had sweethearts, doubtless, targets of their own. ‘True blue,’ he appealed to them, ‘to win a leman’s love.’

One of the young men stepped forward. ‘Well met, billie boy,’ he said. ‘Coventry, ye say? What kind a place is that?’ The pedlar could smell the sour ale on his breath.

‘A fine place, my master, where is spun the finest thread.’

‘Aye? Is that a fact? In England, is that place?’ the young man answered, pleasantly.

‘Why, yes sir. At its heart. The very life and heartbeat of that brave green land.’

‘An’ wid ye be, yourself, fae *Cuventrie*, my friend?’

‘From Warwickshire, sirs. From a place that is not far from it. And I can vouch, upon my life, that you will not find a blue thread of a finer quality.’

The young man grinned at that, turning to his friends. ‘*Ur-pon his loife*, he says.’

The pedlar, appealing, held out his thread. ‘True blue,’ he tried again. ‘The ladies like it, sirs. An ever welcome gift, and the lady will be yours. I have ribands, too.’

‘Did I hear that right?’ the young man asked his friends. He was not smiling now, but a keen glint in his eye sent a signal to the pedlar something might be wrong. He took a small step back.

‘Did that rusty bully call my lass a whore?’

‘No, as I assure you, sir,’ the pedlar stammered now. ‘I did not say that.’

‘I doubt he did he say that. I heard him quite distinctly, Tam,’ came back the young man’s friend.

‘I heard the limmar too.’

‘Good masters, what I meant . . .’

But what was meant, or not, was stopped by the flowering of a fist, that burst out into blossom in the pedlar’s mouth.

Above the outer entrance to the St Andrews tolbuith a single glove was pinned. This signified the session of the Court of Dustifute – the pie-powder court, which ruled upon transgressions at the fair, the common law suspended for the day. Convened to that court were the stewards and the bailies appointed to the task, who took their role there seriously. They were chosen from the burgesses and merchants in the town, and chief among them, who spoke now, was a leading beacon in the baxters’ gild.

‘Ye are charged wi’ disturbing the peace of the fair. What do you say?’

The pedlar peered through an eye that was bulbous and closed. His face had swollen up, to a shiny sullen purple, tight as a plum. His answer was muffled by the swelling of a lip, blubber to the touch of his shy protruding tongue. He swallowed on a tooth, a gobbet of slick blood, his answer indistinct.

‘Whit dae ye *say*?’

‘He says, it was not he that started the affray. That he was set upon.’ The pedlar had a man to speak for him. It was only right and proper that a stranger at the fair should have a countryman of his own to take his part; that was the point of a dustifute court, that none should find himself thrown upon the mercy of a foreign law, without a friend to speak for him. The friend was hard to find. At last, they had pressed into the service a cadger from the south, who had been quick to point out he had not witnessed the assault. He had come reluctantly to support his countryman. Was that not like the English, after all, the baxter sniffed. Cowards, every one.

‘He says that he was set upon. Well then, was he robbed?’

The pedlar had not been robbed. He had still, and plain for all to see, his same pack full of its cheap tricks and toys, his ribands and his laces and his true blue thread. His purse kept the pittance it held when he came with it.

‘This court concludes,’ the baxter said, ‘that ye are guilty of affray, and of disturbing the peace of the fair, and of slander and provokement of a guid man of this place, in that that ye cried his lass a whore, and assaulted him, when he tuik offence at it.’

The pedlar replied to this, in some sort of speech, that the thickness of his accent and the thickness of his lip slobbered to a slur.

‘He says,’ his friend reported, ‘that was not how it was, at all.’

‘Aye, but ye see,’ the baxter leaned across the desk, and looked earnestly into the pedlar’s eye, the one good remaining one, yellow and red, ‘there are fifteen witnesses that swear that it was so, besides those lusty fellows in the vault below; and ye, as I believe, have not one witness that will swear the contrary. Wherefore, you must see, the case is found and proved.’

The pedlar mumbled again, and the baxter found himself irritated by his smoothly stubborn face, bulging like a haemorrhoid. What business did he have in persisting in his obstinacy?

The countryman interpreted, sulking and reluctant, and the baxter found that he was prickled too by the southern cadger’s whining English voice. Why did they think they were never in the wrong?

‘He says that there was a boy, a student from the college, came to wipe his face when he was lying on the ground. A boy with black hair. And, he thinks if enquiries were made in the colleges, that boy might be found, to tell the truth of it.’

‘Absolutely not,’ the baxter said. ‘That maun be a lie, else he was dreaming on the ground. There was no student there. For the very guid reason that, the masters at the colleges prohibit them the fair.’

The last thing he would sanction, in his court, was the risk of an appeal to the university. The collegers he knew would argue black was white. His gild had wrangled hard enough, in troubles in the

past, with the man Hew Cullan. And while *that man* no longer troubled them at large, Giles Locke was as bad. The scholars had no business with the powder court, and the powder court would have none with them.

‘This court finds the charge against you to be proved. And ye will spend the rest of the day, and the night, in the goif stok,’ he said.

The cadger asked, wearily, what that might mean.

‘The pillorie or joughs, whichever one is free,’ a bailie spelled it out.

The southerner shrugged. ‘Then, you will have his death on your hands.’

‘Come, I will not hae that,’ the baxter remonstrated. ‘You will not tell me, cannot tell me, that a man who is fit to tramp the length an’ breadth of Scotland is not fit enough to last a few hours in the goifs or joughs.’ Lily-livered loun, he thought. ‘What age is he, then?’ he considered at last. With a man that was so weathered, it was difficult to tell. Fifty, perhaps? Three score and ten? The man had been a dustifute no doubt for thirty years. And that leathered a man, and made him impervious. Perhaps, after all, a night in the goif stok was not punishment enough, for such a kind of man.

‘How should I know? I do not know him.’ The cadger was surlier now. His part in the process was done. ‘But you can surely see that if you put him in the stocks your bangster bullies’ stones will kill him in an hour. You might as well tie the beggar to the butts, and have them shoot their bows at him.’

There was truth in that. The baxter looked for answer to the other bailies, scratching at his head. They had locked the hot youths in the strong room for a while, to let them cool off. But it was plain that no charge would be levelled against them.

‘We could keep them there, until he serves his time,’ one of them suggested. The baxter disagreed. ‘We cannot do that. Sin they have done no wrong, there would be a riot, see?’

Injustice of that kind would wreak havoc in the town. The powder jurisdiction would vanish in a puff, and its failures would be tested in a higher court. The baxter chose instead a more expedient course.

‘Then he shall pay a fine, and be whipped out from the fair. You shall gang an’ a.’

‘What have I done?’ the cadger whinnied then. A snivelling sort of man. His kind were all alike.

‘You provoke us, by coming at an unpropitious time, when any decent man would have had the judgement to have kept away. Go, sir. We have been guid to you. Ye shall have an hour, to set upon your path, before we loose the men whom you have so offended, they bay for your blood. Go, and thank us, now.’

The cadger saw his cause was lost, and he was himself complicit in offending them, by no more certain cause than his sorry Englishness.

‘Show up your purse,’ the pedlar was told. And he drew it out, wordless, from under his cloak.

A handful of coins, not amounting to much, that were Scots, and a single English one. The baxter scooped this up. The Scots pennies he tipped back in the purse, and handed it back to the pedlar. ‘Now, on your way.’

He was not a cruel man. And he would not send a pedlar out into a world that was hard on him enough, without the means to prove that he was not a vagabond.

The bailie beside him suspected his softness. ‘Why did ye dae that?’

‘Because we do not want the death of a stranger, here, on our hands. If he will die, let him dae it in a parish far from here.’ His kindness, his softness, must not be suspected. The man could not help it that he was an Englishman. Though he could, and should, have helped his coming here.

‘That is not what I meant. Why did you take the coin that has the English whore on it? That bastard Jezebel?’

The baxter turned over the bright coin in his hand and scrutinised the portrait of the English queen Elizabeth. He was a pragmatist at heart, which made him the perfect judge for the powder court. He was surprised that his friend had to ask. ‘D’ye not ken? Their money is worth more than ours.’

Part I

Chapter 1

The Queen's Highway

Tout commencement est difficile

[French proverb, written in the glass at Buxton Hall:
Every beginning is hard]

London, July 1586

The house had a stillness Hew mistook for quietude, its inner life in shadow at the close of day. The windows were shut fast against the hum of flies, the vapours of the river bed, swollen after months of rain, swilling to the surface of a heavy heat. He expected, at this hour, to find the family freshened from their evening walk, coming from the cooling air to settle down at cards, the green baize in the parlour cleared of supper things. But the boiled beef platter had been left untouched, the wheaten loaf uncut, the primrose pat of butter melting in its dish. The cards were closed up in their box, the lute lay in its corner, soundless. The Phillips family sat reflective, silent and apart.

'Mary has miscarried her child,' Frances said, her slight voice a brittle and strained note of brightness, resonant still in the gloom. Frances had wrapped in a white muslin square a translucent-skinned boy, whose whole she could hold in the palm of her hand, light as a leaf and as perfectly formed, while Mary had turned her small face to the wall, and drawn up her shoulders, narrow and hard.

‘The midwife says she will not have a living child, that there is a fault, deep inside her womb. It cannot be helped,’ Frances said.

Joan Phillips clicked her tongue, distant in the haze like the strumming of a grasshopper. She was vexed at the midwife, at Thomas, her son, who confounded her hopes, at Mary most of all, her fault gaping wide like a cleft in a rock. They had been married for less than a year.

Joan’s husband William looked up from the chiselled oak settle, where he sat brooding and hunched. ‘Thomas must be told. Indeed, he must be told.’

The loss of a grandchild was vexing to him, though Thomas was a boy he found difficult to fathom, secretive and staid. He set himself apart, spelling out his surname in the manner of the French. That *Phelippes* was a person William did not trust, whose purpose was obscure to him, a sad thing in a son. Children were a blessing, and indeed, a trial, for his daughters were more loving and expansive than his sons, yet their chitter-chat and prattle sometimes frayed his nerves. They had cost him dear enough, in frippery of gowns. If there was one among them, closest to his heart, then it must be Frances, his dead brother’s girl. And that was like his perverseness, Joan would have said. He had brought Frances up to attend to his accounts, and in the careful rows of reckoning that lined his record books, in a neat, narrow hand, lay all that William Phillips wished for in a child. Yet he knew what was right, and proper to be done. The woman upstairs, with her face to the wall, had troubled his conscience. Her fault was a grief to him, in his old age.

Phelippes was at Chartley, on business of the state. And Hew had his suspicions what that business was. ‘How does Mary now?’ he asked.

Frances said, ‘She takes the loss hard, but will not for the world have us send for Tom.’

‘Thomas does important work, and must not be disturbed,’ said Joan. ‘The child will be dead, still, whenever he returns.’

William Phillips shrank from the starkness of this confidence.

‘Though that may be true, he should be informed. We look to Tom Cassie, his servant, to take to him a letter, but that idle friar-fly is nowhere to be found.’

Tom Cassie could be traced within the hour, if he were still in London. Had word been sent to Walsingham?

‘No, indeed,’ sniffed Joan, who held the Master Secretary in a high esteem.

Hew sensed the warming up of an earlier argument, left to stew and simmer through the afternoon. William Phillips shifted, troubled, in his chair. ‘We did not think it right, to cumber such a man with so small a thing.’

Frances asked, quietly, ‘Should we have done?’

Hew was in no doubt. It was well-advised to put the case to Walsingham, who would take the trouble of it safely from their hands. Instead, he chose to offer, ‘I can go myself, if Cassie is not found.’ He told himself he saw, and understood the consequence. Frances smiled at him. And William Phillips leapt upon it, reckless in relief.

‘You are an honest friend, Hew. Have I not said so before? It is proper that Thomas should hear this from someone he knows and loves well. Take the grey gelding. Set out at once. Or stay, twere better to hold fast until the break of day, for little shall be won by riding in the night, of safety or of speed. You shall have a purse, and a letter for my son, and whatever else you will that shall expedite your going, and relieve our burden here.’

Frances whispered, ‘Thank you. For surely, she will want him. She cannot be unfeeling, as my aunt Joan thinks.’

Whatever Mary felt, her answer went unheard. The old man laboured at his letter, sorrowful and ponderous, and Hew made preparations to ride out to Staffordshire. He had time enough to call at Seething Lane, and lay the business bare, time enough to search out Francis Mylles, to call up Phelippes’ servant from the pits and shadows where he knew he lurked. However, he did not.

Hew was thankful to escape the soup of that great city, before the dust and throng began to stir and stream into the morning sun. He liked the waking hour, when tousle-trousered prentice boys unlocked the shuttered workshops, when the clear-skinned milkmaids clattered through the streets, and the country market sellers filled the air with flowers. He bought bread from the baker, still warm, and set north to the Bishopsgate, and the Berwick road. He would follow the highway to Grantham, over the course of three or four days, resting for a while at Ware, and at the Crown in Caxton. At Grantham, he would find a guide to ride with him to Staffordshire. And if the grey horse flagged, he would hire another. Grey Gelding was accustomed to him, and the path ahead; he could fall back in the saddle and rely upon the horse to follow in the footsteps of the royal post boys, whose hollow hooves and horn blasts sounded out the way. In the warming sunlight, he allowed his thoughts to drift.

Three years had passed since he had travelled for the first time on that stretch of road; then, he had been bearing south, and borne against his will, kenned nothing of the highway that had swept him southwards but the stony brack of rubble rattling through the carriage to the marrow of his bones.

It had baffled him to see, when he was set on foot to walk upon the path, how broad and flat and fair it was, burnished by the dust of a thousand years of horses, kicking up their hooves. For all that, he had found that he could neither walk nor stand – like a shipwrecked seaman, falling on his feet, his limbs had lurched and floundered, thrown him to the ground.

He was kept there in that coach for breathless hours on end, hidden from the ranks of Walsingham's own party, let loose at night for sake of nature's easement, washing in the rain that had puddled in the stable yard and shaking loose his limbs. His body had been bowed and buckled, crueller than the rack.

'I assure you, not,' Walsingham had said, with a mirthless smile, when that case was put to him. Walsingham had suffered too. It had sorely pained the man to have to share his cart. From Berwick, he

had ridden with his men on horseback, while his strength allowed. When his strength gave out – for he was far from well – he had come banked in a thick raft of furs, sniffed at a nosegay, closing his eyes, repelling all offer of comment or question. Once, he had vomited, discreet and disdainful, into a cloth-covered bowl.

It had taken Hew a while to come to understanding it, and to his proper self. He came upon it helpless as a newborn child. He had been stolen from the guards who had taken him from prison, on his way to trial, and forced to undertake a bruising, jagged journey, that had ended here in London, at the house in Seething Lane. There, he had been placed inside a panelled room, left with bread and blanket, lying in the dark, to make sense of the turmoil swilling in his mind, through what pleading or prayers could keep him from madness. He had fallen to a fever, caught upon the road, and had come to his beginning there exhausted and discomfited. The house in Seething Lane appeared a soothing sanctuary, following the deprivations of the coach.

Later, there were books, paper, pens and ink. In those first few days, he was not allowed to write, and struggled to make sense and shape of what he found. His impressions of London, first formed in that place, were muted and confused. Gradually, he saw the house at Seething Lane become the opening to a world, of which, in that beginning, he had known nothing at all.

In Walsingham's house, he had never heard the raising of a voice, nor seen a sharp blade glimmer, from the safety of its sheath. Yet within its vaults, and quiet trance of doors, where keys turned smooth and soundlessly, he felt a deep unease; the locking of those doors came after in his dreams, and woke him in a sweat. The house saw constant traffic, quiet and enduring as the sluggish Thames, the oil slick revolution of its smooth machinery, turning through the night. When he was shown its heart, and saw its inner works, he was astonished to find out how fallible it was, how much of it depended on a line of human frailty, a balancing of aspirations, promises and fears.

Walsingham himself he did not see for months. He had gone to

court, reporting to his queen what little grace and kindness he had found in Scotland, and how the earl of Arran, insolent and proud, insinuated sly hooks round the Scottish king, whose tender youth bent easily to his insistent snares. He had gone to Barn Elms, his mansion at Richmond, to recover from the hurt to his pride and to his health that the Scottish trip had dealt him, and attend to some affairs, arising from his daughter's recent marriage, his private life as fraught, and pressing in its purpose, as affairs of state. Else he was at Whitehall to confer with Robert Beale, or with Burghley and his councillors, on what had taken place while he was abroad; and in this dizzy trail, he had no time for Hew, nor, it seemed, a purpose for him. Yet he was not forgotten. Walsingham had marked him as a note of interest, a postscript to a letter, to be answered still.

At Bishopsgate, the parched bones of the priests had fallen from their posts; their skulls, long since picked clean, made footballs in the dust. Here Grey Gelding slowed, pushed back by the traffic crowding at the wall. To the mouth of the city came a surge and swell of melancholy sheep. A foot post passed them by, blowing on his horn, and crying to the wind, 'Mind, make way, for life!' In moments, he had disappeared, deep into the current of the waking city, to the river, or the court, or the house at Seething Lane, where the flow of letters did not ever cease, but endlessly revolved.

Seething Lane was aptly named, for the still of human life that boiled and bubbled quietly, the fervent undercurrent, coursing through its vaults. So it seemed to Hew. Laurence had corrected him, in his patient way: it was former *Sieuthienstrate*, named for those who lived there. Laurence Tomson was a scholar, of the purest sort. He was Walsingham's own secretary, and the first true friend that Hew had found in London, loved and trusted still. It was Laurence who had taken him in charge, in those bewildered days, who had brought him from the darkness to a place of wonder, to begin again, who taught to him his alphabet, and showed him how to read.

To Laurence fell the task of filtering the flood of letters and despatches which were sent to Walsingham, or which were intercepted, copied and sent on. There were others in that office to assist him with the load, but Laurence was the only one who did not leave his desk to go into the field. His life was lapped in paper banked up by the ream, a far returning tide which threatened to engulf, but which he called to order there and quietly controlled. Daylight hours brought letters, in a thousand hands, from footmen, knights and courtiers, beggar boys and clerks, dressed in silk or rags, and every paper passed through Laurence, under his command. Those letters that were written in the hearts of men were ushered in by night, to be opened secretly in pockets of the house that Hew had never seen. Their bearers had been brought up, blinking, from their beds. Some left wearily by morning, of their own free will. Others were escorted out, to Newgate or the Tower.

Laurence had the patience of the mildest Puritan, gentle in his inquisitions, thoughtful and exact. He was interested to hear what Hew could report of Andrew Melville and his nephew James, whose teaching he admired. Laurence had made translations of Beza's New Testament and of Calvin's lectures, which he gave to Hew. And though Hew understood it was a kind of test, that Walsingham had primed him for the quiet purpose of finding out Hew's faith, he was touched at the gift, and had accepted gratefully. 'I had a friend, Nicholas Colp, who looked after my books. He would have liked to have had these.' But when Laurence had answered, 'Perhaps one day, he shall,' Hew had shaken his head, 'Not in this life. For, he is dead,' and had turned to escape from an unwanted kindness, that brought to him too poignantly the tenor of his loss, and what was left behind.

He had been set to work, at first upon the letters from the Netherlands and France, in English or in French, which he had supposed to be the simplest sort. Laurence had explained to him that this was not the case.

'You may think that a cipher is more difficult to read. And that may be so. But a message set in cipher is more often unequivocal,

when you have the key to it. We shall come to those. Here we have despatches from ambassadors abroad. You will find them filled with matter, news of every kind. It takes a little practice to discern their worth. These others, from their wives to their friends and families back home, increase that worth tenfold, if you have the patience to look between the lines.

‘A man will tell you what was done, by whom and when, and why. His wife will tell you *how*. She will notice more, and write it to her friends. Imagine that you see a flock of birds, rising from the ground and flying to the trees. A superstitious man would take it for a sign. But you and I will know they sense the coming of the hawk, long before our own ears have become attuned to it.’

The letters, with their flow of tattle, gossip and complaint, ‘is pleased to welcome Master John’ . . . ‘has suffered from a distillation since he had your last’ . . . ‘is presently in Paris’ . . . ‘fallen from his horse’ . . . ‘did not eat the plums’ . . . ‘a skein of dark red silk’, gave up little at the start. But gradually, Hew learned to sift, and find small specks of gold. Sometimes, it was buried in a mutual understanding, of the sort that goes unspoken, has no want of words. The signs the writers chose were close among themselves. But when Hew had their measure, through the slips and streams of a longer correspondence, he could work them out. It was more than language, he had come to see. It was holding up a mirror to the secrets of their hearts, which secrets might be hidden, even from themselves.

Others chose to write obliquely, concealing of their true intent, knowing they were overlooked: ‘Our hope and trust’, ‘your honest friend’. The key was hard to find. By careful inquisition, sometimes it was wrung out from the man himself, who brought it to their door. There were lists of such words – *nomenclators* – for the use of Walsingham’s men.

Once, he had found a letter for the queen of Scots. Laurence, in a heartbeat, had stolen it from sight. ‘You are inquisitive, my friend, and that is what we want. But not quite yet. It is too soon.’

On the road to Staffordshire, Hew shook his head. Three long years, adrift. He had been an outlaw, exiled from his home. Now, he had licence and the freedom to return. What was it that kept him here? In part, it was the fear of what Phelippes did at Chartley, and the hope of finding out.

English Catholics, he had learned, were in a state of flux, of conflict, fraught and perilous. They fought among themselves. 'It is impossible for them to be true to their country and to their religion. Wherefore they are lost,' Laurence Tomson said. 'It is the fault of the Pope, who when he excommunicated our sovereign lady Queen Elizabeth, made it lawful in their eyes to seek for her destruction. Elizabeth is a queen beloved of her people, who will not rise against her, and she is the true defender of the faith. There are good Catholic families who honour and respect her, and young Catholic nobles welcome still at court, for their grace and wit. Yet though their only trespass were to pray for her conversion, that were treason in itself. Some are English to the bone, and would rather die than see these green lands fall to foreigners. Some see no other course but to sacrifice their country to protect their faith. The younger sons of gentle folk are easily allured and tempted into plots, by those who would latch upon small discontents, and stir them to rebellion, who are reckless, fierce and hot, who in their youth's confusion do not know themselves, or know where they belong.'

'For that, they might be pitied,' Hew had said.

'Not pitied. Stopped.'

He had been moved to confess, 'My father resisted reform to his faith. He was what you call now, here in this place, *recusant*.'

'We are aware of that.'

'Yet he had me brought up as a Protestant, grounded in a faith that he did not embrace. It was a bone of contention between us.'

Laurence had corrected him. 'It was an act of love.'

Threat came from all sides: uprising from within; invasion in collusion with the Spanish or the French; the captive insurrection of the queen of Scots, whom traitors hoped to set upon the English

throne. 'Do not underestimate that woman's reach and influence. She is the devil's handmaid, hunkered in our midst.'

The Jesuits, and those who were in league with them, came cloaked in secret garb and wrote their dark intentions down in secret inks, of alum or onion juice, in ciphers and false script. The riddle they had made of it hid their living hearts, and made their deaths a game. The first cipher Hew had solved had come with its own alphabet. It took him several minutes to discover it was French, and less than half an hour to make a perfect copy of it, which he had presented to Laurence with a grin. 'Child's play.'

'And very fine it is. Now turn it into English.'

'What do you think it is?' Hew had objected.

'I should have said, Scots.'

It was a shrewd enough rebuke, from one who spoke twelve languages, and Hew took more care with the rest of his work.

The simplest of the ciphers were based on substitutions, and could be worked out on the basis of their frequencies. Hew had shown some skill in sounding out their secrets, and it brought him satisfaction. Confinement gave his mind the quietness to work, and the ciphers had distracted him from other, darker thoughts. He took a simple pleasure in the spaces filled, clear and unequivocal, and if the end and purpose of it was to hang a man, he did not think of that.

Sometimes, in those early days, Laurence took him out with him to explore the streets and stairways to the Thames. The walks took place at dusk, the flagstones in the market places bared to bone and blood, or at the breaking dawn, the milky vapours of the river rising in each whisper of their frozen breath, where Hew could see the waking city, stripped down to its flesh, before the pink-tipped sunlight warmed it back to life. They travelled from the Tower, by boat, to London Bridge, or wandered by St Pauls, to browse among the bookstalls at the close of day, where Laurence once bought a psalter and the Book of Common Prayer, which he gave to Hew. 'They are not the same, as those you may be used to. You should know the difference.' And Hew had thanked him, touched, and

grateful for the gifts. They had walked among the houses of the potent and the great, by Fleet Street and the Strand, while Laurence gave accounts of those who worked and lived there. Once upon a dusk, they had turned into a quiet little street, and stopped before a door that was plain and unremarkable, like many others tucked behind the highway of fair mansions, as a good man walks in shadow of the grand. 'Whose house is this?' Hew had asked, and Laurence had answered, it was his own.

He had taken Hew inside, to a white-washed chamber stark in its simplicity, with nothing to adorn it but some cloths of black work and a shelf of books. Hew had shared a supper there with Laurence and his wife, and a little daughter, who had thrown herself at Laurence, squealing in delight, 'Daddie, Oh, my Daddie!'

'She is generally asleep, by the time he is home,' her mother Jane had said, while Laurence had lifted her to settle in his lap. 'This is my friend, Hew Cullan. He is far from home, and he has no little girl, so we must be kind to him.'

One trouble had disturbed him in those early days, and robbed him of the pleasure he had found in the deciphering. Among the siege of letters that he dealt with day by day, he had had no word of Giles and Meg. He had asked whether he might write to his family, to tell them he was safe. Laurence had refused.

'But they will think that I am dead.'

Laurence had answered, 'Better that way. Then their own lives are not drawn into danger. What they do not know, they cannot hide. They are in the care of Sir Andrew Wood, the coroner. He will have to work to extricate himself, and your family too, from any implication in your escape. It will take him some time to build up credit with the king.'

'Better, for the while, if you are counted dead, until your family has been cleared of all possible suspicion, and the king no longer frets upon these strange events. Your escape must not be linked to Master Secretary Walsingham. Play dead for the while. When it is safe to write, be assured that we shall tell you.'

‘But why should Andrew Wood have risked so much for me, in bringing me to Walsingham? To stop me speaking of his dealings to the king? It were simpler, surely, to have had me killed.’

‘Now that I cannot say. I do not know the man. Perhaps he has a liking for you,’ Laurence had replied.

The question of what force had moved the crownar’s mind came back to Hew, and troubled still. Sometimes, in the night, it would not let him rest.

For all that, he took solace in the work to which he had been set, and the friendship he was shown, at the house in Seething Lane. A day had come at last when he was sent alone, with a letter to be taken to the French Ambassador, to his house at Salisbury Court. That packet, he was certain now, had been of little worth. But the value of it lay in the introduction; the understanding that he was deserving of that trust, in Laurence Tomson’s eyes, was lifting to his heart. He was ready to go out, to be tested in the world.

The first command is patience, Laurence had instructed him. Patience was prerequisite in any kind of spy. But it was not the kind of patience that suffers and endures. It was an endless restlessness, tempered and alert, pricked to wait and watch, alert to any sign. The patience of the cat that fixed upon the mouse-hole watches it for hours, each twitching hair and sinew taut and tightly poised. That kind of patience Phelippes had, that left no pause for doubt.