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The Firemaster's Mistress

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Among the many books I read while doing my research, I would like to call attention to *The Gunpowder Plot* by Antonia Fraser, in which she argues that there are few unambiguous facts about the episode. I am particularly grateful to her detailed, combative and deliciously readable examination of alternative historical possibilities that allowed me to confirm the interstices into which I have imagined my story. (Needless to say, she bears no responsibility for any of my possible misinterpretations of her work.)

For readers interested in both the historical details and the gaps, there are notes and a chronology of The Gunpowder Plot at the back.

THE MAJOR CHARACTERS

Real

Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, the English Secretary of State
Sir Francis Bacon, cousin of Robert Cecil
Father Gerard, the Jesuit Superior of English Catholics
Mary Frith, a cross-dressing, pipe-smoking pimp and fence (mythologized by Dekker and Middleton as 'Moll Cutpurse'). I have slightly adjusted her likely age.

The Gunpowder Treason Plotters

Robert Catesby
Thomas Percy
Tom Wintour
Rob Wintour
Kit Wright
Jack Wright
John Grant
Robert Keyes
Thomas Bates (retainer to Robert Catesby)
Guy Fawkes (Yorkshireman, mercenary soldier, converted to Catholicism)
Sir Everard Digby
Sir Ambrose Rookwood

The English Royal Family

King James I of England & VI of Scotland, succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603, crowned in London in May 1604
Anne of Bohemia, Queen to James, a Catholic convert
Henry, Prince of Wales, aged 14 years
Princess Elizabeth, aged 11 years
Charles, Duke of York, aged 5 years, Later Charles I
Princess Mary, infant, the first of the royal children to be born in England.

Invented (perhaps)

Kate Peach, the only surviving member of a Catholic artisan family
Francis Quoynt, a firemaster, the last in a long dynasty of military firemasters and siege engineers
Boomer Quoynt, Francis's father, also a firemaster
Hugh Traylor, a London merchant and speculator
Robert Stuart
Father Jerome, Jesuit priest
Hammick, gentleman and neighbour to the Quoynts

Places

Most of the places in *The Firemaster's Mistress* are real, or based on real places. Brighthelmstone is the old name for Brighton, for example. For more details, please see notes at end of the book.

N.B. If I show people as I conclude them to have been as a result of my research, it does not mean that I always agree with them. Part of the imaginative struggle in writing about an historical period is dealing with the distortion caused by the filter of our own modern sensibilities.

On the other hand, I find that the seventeenth century hovers on the barely conscious edge of our own experience. While the medieval mentality feels utterly foreign to me, I suspect that most of us could get through a day in the early seventeenth century and feel that we pretty much understood the people around us. We could make some sense of their lives. We would recognize and share both their pleasures and their terrors. I fear that we would also find much to recognize in their politics.

PART ONE

FLINT AND STEEL

'But men must know, that in this theatre of man's life it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on.'

Francis Bacon, Advancement of Learning *(1605)*

PROLOGUE

Brighthelmstone, Sussex. March 1605

His hair stood on end as the wave washed in over him. As the wave sank back, his hair flattened against his head like dark seaweed on a rock, glistening and dripping in the morning sun. The next wave lifted him a little higher onto the rough shingle beach. He was a young man lying face down in the water, with the red weathered neck, strong arms and callused hands of a fisherman. The honey-coloured pebbles had scraped away the skin of his face.

A village dog found him. Another fisherman, pulling up his traps, rowed in to see what the dog was barking at.

'He would go out alone!' cried his eighteen-year-old, pregnant wife, trembling with the rage so often flung after the dead by those they have left behind. 'Why did he go out alone?'

'Yes, that's Shelvy,' said the fisherman Peter Mawes, when shown the body of his elder son. Mawes had already lost his wife and did not speak again for two days.

Peter's younger son, Jem, knew that his brother had not been fishing on the night he drowned, but he kept his mouth firmly shut for a number of reasons. Instead, Jem wept alone on the beach at night, on the stretch of shingle where his brother's body was found.

If only I had stayed . . . He sucked in air between clenched teeth and pounded his thigh with his fist in helpless fury.

'Jem Mawes?' Pale hair moved in the darkness.

'Sir! Master Quoynt!' Jem scrambled to his feet.

The voice and hair belonged to the owner of Powder Mote, an estate northwest of Brighthelmstone. Boomer Quoynt, tall, broad-shouldered and lean, in his early fifties, with silver hair and eyes that were light blue when they could be seen. Coming off his clothes, and blown towards Jem on the sea breeze to prod at the back of his throat, drifted the reason the Quoynts were feared locally as something between wizards and hangmen. The smell of gunpowder.

Of course, both Jem and his brother had disobeyed strict orders from their parents to stay away from Powder Mote. Like all the other village children, they spied on the Quoynts and their dangerous work. Shelvy even became a companion in crime of Boomer's son Francis for several years before their fathers called them, respectively, to fishing and war. Jem, nine years younger than his brother, remained in awe of both father and son.

Even so, he quite liked Boomer Quoynt. The man was surprisingly easy company, given his age, fearsome reputation and somewhat military air of authority. Jem was certain that the men under Boomer's command must have liked him.

On the beach, Boomer Quoynt offered all the appropriate condolences. Then he startled Jem with an unexpected question.

'May I see your brother's body?'

The young fisherman was laid out on the table in his father's cottage. While Shelvy's silent father and astonished brother watched, Boomer's fingers explored behind the bandage that held Shelvy's mouth shut.

The next day, Boomer went back to stare at the sleek waves rolling smoothly onto the beach where the body was found.

The wide-beamed hoggies of Brighthelmstone were beached on the day the little fishing village buried Shelvy Mawes. There was no inquiry.

Fishermen drowned. It was a brutal fact of a hard way of life. Only Boomer Quoynt questioned how Shelvy died, but he kept his doubts to himself. It occurred to no one, not even to Boomer, that Shelvy might be the first victim of a plot to kill, in a single terrible blow, the King, his heir, ministers, lords, and most of the Members of Parliament – all the most powerful men in England. As well as any of the powerless who happened to get in the way.

1

Kate Peach worked hard to keep her life under control. This morning, she was feeling a cautious sense of success. Her small lodgings were immaculately clean. She had orders for seven pairs of gloves, at seven shillings each, from four local Southwark whores and three innkeepers' wives, not counting the unfinished hawking glove on her lap.

Although the glove would be worn by a mere smith to fly a common kestrel, its silver embroidery and twisted fringe were rich enough for a gentleman's falcon or nobleman's eagle. Kate did not see why only fine ladies and gentlemen should enjoy the small luxuries that let you pretend for a moment or two that life was better than you knew it to be.

Furthermore, unlike fine ladies, the whores didn't ask whether she was a member of the Glovers' Guild. Unlike many fine ladies, they also paid on delivery, just as they themselves expected to be paid.

As she did every morning, Kate sat on a stool at the window with her father's thick leather apron over her long thighs, her broad elegant shoulders curved tenderly above her work. With her awl, she punched holes in the edge of the gauntlet and lined these up with the holes in the edge of the wrist.

The two pieces of thick leather slipped. Her needle stuck.

When she pushed it with the hard leather pad she wore in her palm, the needle snapped.

Her peace of mind felt suddenly fragile.

It's only a broken needle, she told herself.

She turned to the window to look at the Thames. She could spend hours staring blankly at the changing colours and patterns of the water. Today the surface was choppy. The sun struck bright sparks on the crests of the slate-green ripples.

Slate-green like his eyes. The thought slipped through her guard like a dagger thrust.

'Kate!'

Gratefully, she set aside the glove and pushed open her window.

'Broken meats again this morning, duck?' called Peg the Pie from the street below. 'Still warm from the oven . . . Hot pies!' she bellowed to a passer-by.

Kate tied her purse to her girdle and ran down the narrow stairs of the tenements above The Little Rose. The stink of piss in the staircase still made it hard for her to think the best of her present life, even after more than a year, but she no longer noticed the smell of stale beer rising from the inn at street level.

In the street, she handed over her ha'penny. As always, Peg gave her all the broken pies. Then, instead of climbing back up to her lodgings, Kate went to stand beside the Thames while her tongue savoured the warm succulence of minced mutton spiced with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. The breeze played with a loose curl of her dark hair.

Compared to that of many others on Bankside, her life was quite tolerable. But only as a passing-through life. Though she had enough to eat and was blessed with lodgings on the top floor, with a window that opened onto the river instead of a narrow, foetid alley, she meant to leave

Southwark as soon as possible. The price she paid for her tolerable life was becoming intolerable.

'Wainfleet oysters,' cried a woman with a basket over her arm. 'Oysters!'

'Buy fine apples,' called another. 'Morning, Kate.'

Kate waved at the apple-seller, then licked her fingers, smelling the stink of tanned leather on her skin under the mutton.

With half a dozen slightly bruised apples and the rest of the pie fragments in her apron, Kate set off as she did every day, down Bankside, past the water mill on the river at Bank End and into Clink Street.

Men looked at her as she walked past, tall and moving with deer-like precision, her skirt snapping like a flag. She was not beautiful in the pale, plucked fashion of the day, but handsome, like a lovely youth, with a long straight nose and large watchful black eyes. The skin of her hands and face was faintly touched with copper, as she no longer bothered to wear a hat in the sun.

She refused to trouble herself any longer about a great many things. Why waste time fending off small disasters like freckles when the worst you can imagine has already happened?

At the Clink prison, she stooped to pass the apples and broken pies down through the bars to the reaching hands of the debtors locked in the underground cells. They were given no food but what they could pay for, or was brought by their families or by well-wishers like Kate. Some of them starved to death.

'Bless you, mistress. God bless you and keep you out of our company.'

'Amen,' she murmured. She stood up and shook the last crumbs from her apron through the bars. She did not speak to the prisoners.

Others brought food to the prisoners as an act of charity. For Kate, the gift was a preventative charm. As long as she could still give, she felt she had not yet fallen into total ruin.

She was not hard-hearted. On the contrary, her heart felt fragile, always close to tearing. It would hold, so long as she did not wear it out further with everyday use.

Being so close to the Bridge, Kate decided to cross to the City to buy another needle. Her heartbeat quickened. She disliked London Bridge. Going onto it was like entering a deep chasm. She always felt that she must cross quickly before something could happen.

She pushed through the crowds that jammed the narrow roadway. The noise was deafening. On either side, buildings three- or four-storeys high trapped and magnified the racket. In places, these buildings spanned the road entirely, with bridges called *hautpas* creating murky, echoing tunnels beneath. Vendors shouted from the open fronts of their shops. '*What d'you lack? What d'you lack?*' Dogs barked. Buyers haggled. Cattle lowed plaintively as they were driven across to the knives of Smithfield. Their herders bellowed. The hoofs of horses drummed.

Even so, Kate could hear the rush of the falls below her. The tide had just turned. High water was trying to escape downriver through the narrow arches of the bridge, made even narrower by the boat-shaped starlings on which the arches stood.

She wondered if she were the only person in this jostling crowd to feel the wild crashing and tossing beneath their feet. They pretended that the Bridge was an ordinary market street, while under them everything slipped away, out of control.

'*What d'you lack? What d'you lack?*'

She paused at a mercer's shop to turn over hanks of silver wire and golden threads on the narrow counter that hung out into the road. While the crowds pushed past her, she

fingered the hanging stranded silks that framed the shop's open front with rich ochres, blues and reds. But she hadn't brought a sample to match for the right shade of blue silk she needed. She would have to go back and get it.

With relief, she turned to leave, but when a gap between the houses allowed an open view of the river, she forced herself to the wooden rail to look straight down at the turbulent slide of the water into the teeth of the Bridge.

Boatmen, for a wager, sometimes tried to run these falls, ten feet at high water. More often than not, the river split the hulls of their boats then spat up the broken men into the Pool of London as it spat up dead cats and unwanted babes.

A faint sweet stench drifted down from the butchered limbs and severed heads displayed on spikes on the roof of the Great Stone Gate. Upstream, the wakes of hundreds of wherries scratched the smooth, glinting, muscular surface of the Thames before it curved out of sight around the Lambeth marshes. Through her feet, Kate felt the current crashing and tossing below her.

Having tested herself enough for today, she left the rail and walked quickly back towards Southwark and The Bank. She was still in the dark, crowded tunnel beneath the Great Stone Gate when the roadway quivered under her feet. She felt a thud, as if someone had clubbed her.