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Edward Trencom's Nose

A Novel of History, Dark Intrigue and Cheese

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Extract

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PROLOGUE



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When Edward finally stirred from his sleep, he found himself in a room that he thought he recognized. He rolled over; opened one eye. Yes, yes, just as he had hoped. Satisfied that he was indeed in familiar territory, he pulled up the blanket and allowed himself to drift gently back into the world of sleep.

He was caught in that blissful state of non-being that lies somewhere between slumber and wakefulness. He was aware of his legs, but only as weights. He could feel his hands but only their warmth. Yet his nose was alert to the fact that something in the here and now – in this very bedroom – was causing him a most agreeable, most delectable sensation. Yes, indeed. His nose was twitching and tingling as it detected a smell – a smell of cheese that was pleasantly familiar.

For more than two months, Edward had lain in a palsied state in his bedroom at Number 22, Sunnyhill Road. He remembered nothing of being brought back to England. The boat journey to Italy, the plane trip home – the details were

cloudy and intangible, as if they belonged to the world of dreams. Although he had been wide awake throughout the trip, his glazed expression had reflected the absolute vacancy of his inner head. The monks of Mount Athos had at first thought that he had suffered from some sort of stroke – that he was beyond redemption. A few of them said that he was afflicted by delusion and pride – that sins had gripped his mind in much the same way as demons can possess men's souls.

Edward had still been delirious when Elizabeth brought him back to Streatham and tucked him up in the comfort of his own bed. He did not seem to recognize his wife. He had not even known he was home. He didn't speak; he spent much of his time asleep. It was as if his very lifeblood had been plunged into a hibernant state and that nothing but the warmth of summer would rouse him from his slumbers.

The doctors diagnosed that he was suffering from the severe aftershock that (they said) often followed a trauma. Their only prescription was sleep and rest. Complete relaxation – that was what Edward Trencom most needed.

Now, seven weeks after being helped into the marital bed, Edward's slowly ticking brain was stirred by a smell that he was sure he recognized. 'Yes!' Sniff, sniff. 'Yes – yes!' He could feel his nasal passages clearing themselves. There was a tingle in his olfactory bulb. His head seemed filled with the thick scent of goats, milk-sheds and wild smilax. 'Oh – mmn – yes!' And then, quite without warning (and preceded by a long loud yawn), a single word popped out of Edward's mouth: 'touloumotyri'. And as he said this, his nose twitched for a

second time, his eyes sprang open and he found himself sitting bolt upright in his own bedroom with his wife sitting next to him. She was once again holding a thick slice of touloumotyri under his nose, in the hope that some flicker of recognition – something deep in the recesses of his memory – would shake him out of his slumber.

Without saying another word, Edward took the cheese from Elizabeth's fingers and sniffed it again. It seemed to cast a spell over his body, like a wilting flower that is put into a vase of fresh, cold water. It was as if the cheese itself was reinvigorating him – clawing him back into the world. He could feel saliva welling in his mouth. He found himself having to swallow. And his belly, of which he had not been aware for weeks, was suddenly shot through with pangs of hunger. He could feel the cavernous emptiness within.

He popped the cheese onto his tongue and savoured the ripe tang. And then, unable to control himself any longer, he squashed the creamy cheese against the back of his front teeth, forcing it through the gaps with his tongue.

'Ah, yes,' he said in a low voice. 'That's touloumotyri all right. It's one of Teodoro's – and it's a September cheese, definitely a September cheese.'

He savoured the taste for a moment longer, detecting the subtle aftertaste of the fiery tsipouro that Teodoro used to wash the rind. And then – suddenly – Edward became consciously aware of Elizabeth's presence. Until now, he had been so lost in his world that he hadn't even noticed the fact that she was sitting on the bed, less than two feet away.

He looked her up and down in a detached sort of way, as if

he was still not sure if he really was awake. But, as it gradually dawned on him that he was, and that Elizabeth was indeed sitting on the bed, his eyes began to focus on something unexpected.

'What's happened to you?' he said abruptly. 'You've changed – you look different.'

Elizabeth smiled and smoothed her blouse over her tummy. 'Yes,' she said, feeling a prickle of excitement course over her body. 'Edward, darling – I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby – and you – you're going to be a father.'

There was a long pause as Edward's brain continued to process the several unexpected facts that had occurred in the last minute. So it was true, then. He *was* awake. He really *was* sitting in his own bedroom – and his wife, Elizabeth . . .

There was a break in his thoughts as he was sidetracked into examining the altered shape of his wife. Hmm – she looks rather good. Yes, and I've always liked her in that blouse and – how strange! Did she just say that she's pregnant?

'But how?' he asked with a look of complete stupefaction. 'When? Why didn't you tell me before?'

'Ssh!' soothed Elizabeth. 'Don't think too much. Lie back on the bed. You're still very weak.'

'But . . .' Edward settled into the soft pillows and pondered. His mind led him back to the last scene that he could remember with any clarity. It seemed so vivid, so absolutely real. And yet, well, it also seemed so very far away. It was almost as if he had been awoken with a start and his mind had not

yet shaken off the images of his slumber. He suddenly recalled Father Seraphim's words – how the abbot had told Edward that it was time for him to rally to the cause. He pulled himself up again and looked at Elizabeth.

'They were all there, Elizabeth, *all* of them. I saw them laid out in their coffins. I was shown their skeletons. And then—'

'Don't worry yourself about that now,' said Elizabeth. 'There were many people who helped us home – we both had a very lucky escape. I think the demons are in the past.'

Edward leaned over his wife in order to cut himself another slice of cheese. He felt desperately hungry.

'And here's the strangest thing,' he said. 'My nose is back on form. It's back to normal – in tip-top condition. I can smell everything. And not just the touloumotyri.'

'So where do we go from here?' asked Elizabeth. 'What happens now?'

'I must reopen Trencoms,' said Edward. 'That's a certainty. And we shall have a party – in honour of dear Mr George. Where would we be without Mr George? We'll invite everyone we know – except for Monsieur d'Autun – and we'll feast on your gratin dauphinois. But before we do any of that, Mrs Cheese, I think that we have some catching up to do. You know, it's been a long, long time . . .'

Elizabeth smiled and lay back on the bed. 'Come here, Mr Cheese,' she said playfully. 'Let me have a look at you.'

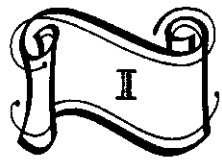
And at exactly the moment when she planted her first proper kiss on the lips of her newly restored husband, Mrs

Hanson at Number 47 peered into their bedroom from her house across the street.

'Good gracious,' she said as she twitched back the curtain. 'It looks as if Mr Trencom is at long last on the mend.'

PART ONE





3 SEPTEMBER 1666

Humphrey Trencom rolled over and sniffed at the air. He was caught in that blissful state of non-being that lies somewhere between slumber and wakefulness. He was aware of his legs but only as weights. He could feel his hands but only their warmth. Yet his vigilant nose was already alert to the fact that something in the here and now – in this very chamber – was not quite right.

In the time it took to trigger an alarm in his somnolent brain, Humphrey allowed his thoughts to drift back to the world of sleep. He had been dreaming of roasted capons and honeyed parsnips, of succulent woodcock and jellied eels. His sleepy reverie had transported him to the great banqueting hall of Whitehall Palace, where he was the seating partner of King Charles II. His brain had failed to register that this was as unlikely as it was improbable. Instead, it was once again focusing itself upon the long oak trestle that seemed to stretch to the furthest end of the room.

In the dream-filled orbit of Humphrey's head, the tabletop

was laden with partridge pies, pomegranate pastries and quince conserves. There were castors of pepper and gallipots of oils, pitchers of chocolate and posnets of sauce. At the centrepiece of this display was a great tower of English cheeses – more than twenty different varieties that were stacked up on a decorative pewter platter. Humphrey himself had supplied all the cheeses for this morphean banquet and he was about to proffer his expert advice to the monarch, who was currently seated on his right.

'And which,' asked the king with uncommon familiarity, 'do you particularly recommend we try?'

Humphrey's favourite had long been the smoked Norfolk tynwood. Gingerly and with great care, he eased it from the base of the tower, causing the pile to wobble slightly. Then, after showing it to the king, he sliced a thick wedge from the tynwood round. He noticed that the pock-marked rind was coated in a thin film of ash that imparted an oaky softness to the lemony flesh of the cheese. Humphrey put it to his nose and inhaled deeply. Ah, yes – there was a tangible richness to the scent. The smell of bonfires and woodsmoke was working its way deep into his consciousness, causing his still-sleeping mouth to dribble with saliva.

It was at exactly this point in the dream that his conscious nose flashed a message of alarm to his not-quite-conscious brain. And just a second or two later, an abruptly awoken Humphrey realized that not everything was quite as it should be on this hot late-summer's morning.

The smell of smoke had not come from the slice of Norfolk tynwood; rather, it was drifting in through the casement

window – invisible to the eye but altogether present in the sensitive nostrils of Humphrey Trencom.

'Mercy!' he said to himself as he sat bolt upright in bed. 'Something is most certainly amiss.' He straightened his nightcap, which had slipped over his eyes, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. As he did so, he noticed that the room was infused with a dull orange glow. With a growing sense of alarm, he climbed the four steps up to the high leaded window that had a view over much of the city.

The sight that greeted his eyes was so shocking and unexpected that he had to clutch at the woodwork to stop himself from reeling. 'Oh, Lord,' he said. 'Oh, my good Lord.' As far as he could see, from St Giles's in the north to Thames Street in the west, the entire city of London was aflame. Canning Street was a sheet of fire; the Exchange was a mass of burning timber. Botolph's Wharf was ablaze. Even some of the dwellings on London Bridge appeared to be smouldering from within.

It took Humphrey approximately three seconds to comprehend the scale of the disaster and a further two seconds to realize that his own life was quite possibly in grave danger. The parish of St Agatha, less than a hundred yards from his home, was consumed by fire. The Golden Cocke was sending out a funnel of sparks; the Fox and Grapes was a smoking ruin. Humphrey peered through the pall of smoke and realized that the pitched leaded roof of old St Paul's, which he could just make out, seemed to be a molten torrent. Liquid metal was pouring from the gargoyles and splashing onto the ground below.

He raced down the back stairs and out onto the lane. The air was a soupy mixture of acrid smoke – much stronger and more pungent than it had been in his own chamber. Humphrey could smell pitch and tar and burning brimstone.

Foster Lane was crowded with people – women, squealing babies, maids and soldiers. Broken furniture lay strewn across the cobbles. Carts and wagons were blocking the street.

'What in the devil's name is happening?' roared Humphrey to a passing soldier. 'Where should we go?'

'The whole city is afire,' came the reply. 'Get yourself down to the riverside.'

As soon as he realized that escape was still open to him, and that his own life was therefore not in imminent danger, Humphrey's thoughts became desperately focused on his shop.

'My cheeses,' he thought. 'What shall I do with my cheeses?'

Several options flashed through his mind. He could load them onto a wagon. He could pay people to carry them to the waterfront. He could try hauling them down into the cellars. But when he stared down the lane and saw it choked with people, he realized that none of these was realistic. London was on fire and no one would help to save his cheese.

The flames were growing dangerously close. The very air had been heated to a furnace and flames and squibs were dropping from the heavens. King Street and Milk Street were now ablaze and several dwellings on Lothbury were burning fiercely. It was only a matter of time before the wall of fire would reach Trencoms.

When the flames did arrive, they came in a relentless wave. They latched themselves onto the corner shop – Mr George's, the vintner – grasping at the woodwork before tearing off the roof. Humphrey watched, horrified yet fascinated, as the gable end detached itself from the building and crashed to the ground in an explosion of flame. The Olde Bear was the next to be consumed; the flames – fuelled by tuns of brandy in the cellars – made short shrift of the wattle walls. They then tore through Number 12 and the Olde Supply Store before sniffing hungrily at the parch-dry facade of Trencoms cheese shop.

Humphrey moved as close as he dared to the flames, observing with detached horror the impending ruination of his life. The heat was intense – a pulsing, scalding blast – yet he seemed incapable of fleeing until he had witnessed with his own eyes the destruction of his livelihood.

The flames licked at the wooden timbers as if they wished to sniff and taste the cheeses before taking their first big lunge. The ancient beams, which had been set into the ground more than two centuries earlier, were as dry as an old corpse. London had not seen rain for more than three months and the parched surface of the timber was charred in seconds. Then, all at once, the entire front of the shop burst spectacularly into flame.

The little windowpanes held out valiantly against the rush of heat, but only for a few more seconds. Humphrey could not tell which melted first – the lead or the glass – but he noticed that the famous Trencoms shopfront, bought at a cost of more than twenty guineas, fell from its casement in a dramatic

molten collapse. Moments later, the darting tops of the flames began filtering inside the ground floor of the building, sniffing out anything that might be combustible.

Humphrey was standing dangerously close to the fire – he was less than thirty yards from the shop. In spite of the heat, which was roasting his cheeses, he remained rooted to the spot, watching in detached horror as the flames located their first victim. A large pile of prize Suffolk gilden was displayed on a tabletop close to the window. For the previous few minutes, it had been shielded from the worst of the heat by the thin, leaded window. Now, with that gone, it bore the full force of the flames.

Its surface turned shiny as it began to melt. Then, ever so slowly, its innards started to liquefy. The pile shrank slightly as its solid structure softened. The top cheese oozed into the one below and that, in turn, melted into the large round at the bottom.

Small bubbles appeared on the surface. It began to blister and splutter. And then, all at once, its gooey underbelly began to drip to the floor. The hard rinds still held out defiantly against the fearsome heat. But, deprived of their inner organs, the cheeses soon puckered and collapsed in on themselves. Humphrey's gildens were transformed into a runny puddle.

The flames were encouraged by the ease of their success and pushed themselves deeper inside the building. As the heat intensified, more and more cheeses began subsiding into waxy lumps. They lost their rigidity. Their edges softened. And then – finally – they were slowly unclotted by the flames.

The charworths leached into the bridgeworths; the stiltons mingled with the blues.

In the midst of this oozy catastrophe, the noble parmesan alone held its shape and form. For more than five minutes it stood proud against the relentless onslaught of fire and flame. But, seemingly disheartened by the surrounding doom, its rotund belly began to shrink and buckle.

For more than two months, this 50 lb drum had brought pleasure and delight to Trencoms' regulars. Now, its rheumy innards were drip-drip-dripping to the floor.

Humphrey knew that when the inside of the shop reached a certain temperature, all of the surviving cheeses would spontaneously combust. He only had to wait a few seconds longer before this sorry moment came to pass. As the bells of St Mary's knelled the seventh hour – the last time they would ever ring – Trencoms cheese shop exploded into a fireball.

Humphrey watched in a mixture of awe and horror. He had already resigned himself to the loss of his shop and had also grasped that this spelled the end of his livelihood. And yet, amid this scene of utter devastation, he took pride in the fact that his cheeses were putting on a far more ostentatious display than all the other burning buildings. The tavern had disappeared in a squib of flame. The Olde Supply Store had burned long and slow. But his cheeses were proving theatrical to the last. Molten, dripping and turned to liquid oil, they now transformed the shop into a spectacular furnace of fire.

It was as Humphrey watched this operatic finale that his nose once again started to twitch. This time, his brain responded in seconds. Ah, yes! His cheeses – his beloved family

of cheeses – were giving him one final burst of pleasure. Amid the stench of burning timber, pitch, dust and ash, there was the all-pervasive aroma of molten cheese. Humphrey could identify no one variety in the pungent concoction of smells. Instead, his nose was infused with a powerful miscellany of scents – one quite unlike anything he had smelled before.

He looked around him and was suddenly gripped by panic. He realized that he was now entirely alone and almost encircled by a wall of flame. He had been so enrapt in watching the cheese-fuelled flames that he had quite failed to notice that the fire had spread southwards and eastwards, tearing its way along the length of Lawrence Lane. The air was heated almost to roasting point and Humphrey could feel his wedding ring burning his skin.

'Great God!' he thought. 'Where's everyone gone? I must get out – I must get myself to the river.'

He allowed himself one final glance at the still-burning corpse of what had only recently been Trencoms cheese shop before turning on his heels and fleeing down the lane, stumbling over charred timbers and mounds of fallen masonry.

His mind was focused absolutely on saving his own skin and it was not until he at last reached the waterfront that he began to assess his predicament with a degree of clarity. As he did so, his thoughts performed several somersaults before turning in a most unexpected direction. He began to ask himself if the fire was the sign that his mother, in her characteristically cryptic fashion, had told him to one day expect. She had always insisted that the Trencom family was await-

ing some sort of signal from the heavens and that when it came he would not fail but to notice it.

'Watch out for it, Humphrey,' she had said to him when he was still a young boy, 'and seize the moment. The sign will mark your destiny and it will also mark the destiny of the Trencoms. Yes, it will betoken good tidings for our family for generation upon generation.'

As a small boy, Humphrey had often asked his mother to tell him more, but she would only ever offer him one of her customary monologues. 'All the noble courts of Europe once sought our blood,' she would say with a vigorous nod of her head. 'Oh, yes. And we could have married into some of the very greatest dynasties. Tsar Ivan the Terrible proposed to Irene, your great-great-great-grandmother. And King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden offered one of your aunts the city of Lutzen in Saxony as her dowry.'

The youthful Humphrey had listened entranced to his mother's litany of royal names and houses. He had heard these stories so many times that he knew, almost to the word, what was coming next.

'Here it comes – here it comes,' he would think to himself, mimicking in his head his mother's strange accent. 'And *I* could have married Prince Christian IV of Denmark, Norway and the Lofoten Islands.'

'And *I*,' she said right on cue, 'could have married the Holy Roman Emperor himself – yes, indeed – Ferdinand III. But I didn't like the cut of his moustache.'

Humphrey had involuntarily gulped when he realized that

the well-worn script had suddenly acquired a new and most illustrious personality.

'*Really*, mother?' he had said. 'Are you sure it wasn't Prince Christian IV – of Denmark, Norway and the Lofoten Islands?'

'Aye,' had been her answer as she spat in the dust. 'Him as well. I could have married them all. But I – we – didn't want to mix our blood with such *inferiors*.'

'Then why,' Humphrey had asked tentatively, 'did you marry my father?'

There was a long pause as his mother, Zoe, looked dreamily at the cob and timber dwelling that had been her home for the last ten years.

'I fell in love,' she had replied, wiping her eyes on her kirtle. 'And I knew that together we could produce the son who would reclaim our patrimony. That's you, Humphrey. And when I saw your nose – when I saw that you had inherited *my* nose – I felt sure that it was only a question of time. We had left our homeland in a welter of fire and flame – and a welter of fire and flame would surely send us back there again.'

What exactly had his mother meant by these words? Humphrey had never known for certain, but now, as he turned his head towards the burning skyline, he quickly convinced himself that the fire was the mysterious portent of which she had spoken. To his way of thinking, the flames that had destroyed his shop heralded something of the utmost importance.

'Why, of course,' he thought, with a tingling sense of excitement. ''Tis certainly the sign of which she spoke. This

must be the sign. It has at long last come to pass, just as she promised it would.'

No sooner had Humphrey concluded that the fire was a message from on high than he found a rush of ideas swift-footing themselves through the overheated chambers of his brain. Within a very short space of time, and in absolute disregard of either practicality or logic, he decided upon a dramatic and quite unexpected course of action.

'I shall go to Constantinople,' he said to himself with a vigorous nod of his head. 'Yes, indeed. That's surely what my mother wanted me to do. I shall put these charred ruins into the capable hands of brother John and seek my destiny in Constantinople.'

And so he would. But little did he know that in following the sign and making his voyage, Humphrey was to spark a most catastrophic train of events – one that would not reach its nemesis until the spring of 1969, precisely 303 years and nine generations after his hasty and unexpected departure. It would fall to a certain Edward Trencom, a direct descendant of the precipitate Humphrey, to deal with the terrible consequences of his decision.