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Opening Extract from...

The Soldier, the Gaolor, the Spy and Her Lover

Written by Simon Parke

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the
Soldier
the
Gaoler
the
Spy
and her
Lover

SIMON PARKE



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This work is dedicated to Clive Williams

This is a true story in the fiction section.

The characters and events are real, as is some of the dialogue.

The oddest scenes are those most likely to be true; the past is hugely unpredictable.

The story charts the final eighteen months in the life of Charles I, mostly spent in captivity of one sort or another.

During this time he ate well, lied well, caused a war, tried to escape (endlessly), had an affair with one of his most tireless and inventive subjects . . . and died magnificently.

He is the only English king to have been executed, when few in the country wished him dead, including his nemesis Cromwell, whose wife Elizabeth was a fervent royalist.

But history is forged by personality, and here they are – the convinced, the conniving and the confused – wrestling with themselves and each other to create an impossible killing.

And here is a nation stumbling on the rocky question: ‘What now?’

Main characters

Oliver Cromwell	From gentry farmer stock, more recently soldier and politician
Robert Hammond	Former soldier and king's gaoler at Carisbrooke
Jane Whorwood	Organizer of royal support network and king's mistress
Charles I	King of England, recently defeated in (un)civil war
Elizabeth Cromwell	Daughter of merchant, wife of Oliver Cromwell
Henrietta Maria	Queen and French wife of Charles I
Henry Ireton	Political ally and son-in-law of Oliver Cromwell
William Lilly	Astrologer, poor boy made good
Anthony Wood	Intelligencer
Henry Firebrace	King's servant, lively
Abraham Dowcett	King's servant, depressed
Cornet Joyce	Son of a tailor, the soldier who took Charles from Holdenby
Brome Whorwood	Husband of Jane Whorwood
Edmund Ludlow	Republican, lawyer, cushion-thrower, ex-Baptist minister
Ruth Hammond	Mother of Robert Hammond
Major Edmund Rolphe	Former shoemaker and Hammond's deputy at Carisbrooke

November 1647

I make my way through the London crowd and in some haste.

I'm always in haste, I know – it's how I live, there's so much to do, and people always in my way, holding me up, which is most tiresome. To be stuck behind another is torture, so I do push a little, particularly the loiterers or the infirm who so slow me down – but politely, I hope, I push politely, wishing only that they step aside and leave my path clear.

'Less haste, ginger lady,' says a man with a barrel, whose ankle I touch with my shoe. He looks at me as if I have done him wrong, but really, what does he expect, holding everyone up like that? I do not have the time or will to argue. I ignore the man, and then I look up . . . and Lilly's house appears before me: the Corner House on the Strand.

It is a grand affair – his wife's money, but that's another story. Fine beams and large windows, opposite the Strand Bridge; and a dwelling much visited in these troubled times. Even good Christians seek the opinion of the stars these days – though what I believe, or expect from the wizard, I'm far from sure.

I know a little of Mr Lilly. I'm warned he is more of the parliamentary persuasion. I do not care. As if I care! My belief is that the stars do not have favourites, so neither can an astrologer – or else he's a fraud. And perhaps he is a fraud, I know not. And what truth ever came from the mouth of a parliamentarian anyway?

But the king needs help; it's really most pressing, with escape from the palace uppermost in his mind. We need him away from Hampton Court, and he mentions the Scots as a safe haven – but I do wonder. Did they not sell him to the English in February as if he were an old shirt? They could sell him again, they're like that. I know them, believe me.

Charles does not encourage this visit of mine; he makes that quietly clear. He doesn't like the stars, they offend his religion . . .

though his religion does stretch its permission in other areas; he likes it enough when I suck his royal treasure. And in this matter, I care not what he says anyway. The plain truth is, he needs the instruction of the stars, so I will bring it to him.

And I'm now knocking on Lilly's door; and I'm knocking hard for he seems to take an age to answer. And I call out, 'Mr Lilly, Mr Lilly!' It's a name known well by those with dilemmas to settle. He seems quite the fashion among those with the money to worry; and his new book *Christian Astrology* is much purchased, I hear. Perhaps I should become a writer! The money seems easy enough. And I'm told the rogue adds 'Christian' to the title to find more readers, since the Presbyterians declare astrology to be of the devil. But it makes no odds to me. I would dance with Satan if it helped the king's cause and I will not pretend otherwise.

Where is Mr Lilly? Does the wizard sicken?

*

The door was opened with reluctance. A face peered through the crack to gaze on a tall, well-fashioned woman, with a round visage, a little scarred by small pox. And while ginger hair was not best for marriage, a truth well known, it seemed to suit her well. Such things could be seen before words began.

'William Lilly?' asked Jane, looking on a boyish man, easy on the eye and hair with the edge of grey.

'I would suggest another day, madam. I am indisposed.'

He pushed the door closed and Jane pushed it open again.

'I have travelled a distance and will be heard.'

'If it's a consultation about a relationship that you seek—'

'I wrote to you.'

'I receive many letters, many requests—'

'About the king's private matter.'

A pause.

'Jane Whorwood?'

'Whorwood.'

'Whorwood.'

'It doesn't matter who I am.'

‘It matters to me; the nature of the visitor becomes the nature of my work.’

‘I do not come about myself, as you well know.’

‘But you bring yourself, so you are part of the story.’

Why doesn’t he just open the door? she wondered. She had pressing concerns and he was wasting her time. She did not like her time wasted.

‘This is a most urgent matter,’ she said.

‘I appreciate your haste, but another day would be best, Mrs Whorwood.’

‘I do not have another day, Mr Lilly.’ As if she was leaving here now! ‘But I do have the payment we agreed.’

Money usually spoke well; yet the door on the Strand remained closed.

‘I should warn you,’ he said through the crack, ‘that I have just buried a maidservant, taken by the plague.’

‘I do not fear the plague, sir – though maybe the pox.’

‘We are clear of that, I believe.’

A forward lady, he noted, and one not to be eased from his entrance.

‘Then let me enter your house,’ she said.

The door on the Strand was opened, and Mr Lilly, nimble of foot, was climbing the small stairs, dark and creaking, to his consulting room. Jane followed him up, glad to be free from the bustle outside.

‘They say you are for parliament,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry?’

He stopped on the stairs and as she continued up; they collided.

‘They say you are for parliament.’

‘And you a Scot, perhaps?’

He continued upstairs.

‘My father is a Scot. Why do you ask? Do you have feelings about the Scots?’

‘Your fiery hair betrays you, that is all.’

‘I hardly think it a betrayal. Scots rule the country, do they not?’

‘Ah, so your hair is power.’

‘Does it have power over you, Mr Lilly?’

Lilly smiled politely. They were standing in a low-hung space, with a drawing table, parchments, almanacs in tottering piles, the dry smell of chalk and strange instruments of metal; she recognized a sextant. It reminded her of the captain's quarters on a ship she'd once had cause to visit in the London docks. The captain had been eager to show her his quarters – too eager, as it transpired. His intentions were most clear, after many days at sea, when she'd wished only to see his cargo of gold, destined for the king. And here in the Strand were the same bare boards, the restrained sunlight, the decanter of port and the male desire to find order and meaning. She picked up the sextant.

'The trinketry of your trade?'

'Jacob's staff.'

'How do you mean?'

'It is what we call the instrument you hold.'

She put it down, looking now at a chart for the twelve months of the year.

'An ephemeris,' he said. 'It gives the positions of the astrological aspects as they're found today. Is that why you've come – to learn my trade?'

It was popular knowledge that during the civil war Lilly had been consulted by both sides.

'Well, are you for parliament?' she asked.

'Remind me why I should tell you such private things.'

'It shall become plain.'

'Then I am for the wisdom of the heavens, Mrs Whorwood.'

He was for truth; but also for business.

'Fine enough,' said Jane, keen to move matters along.

'And I ask ten gold pieces for its discovery.'

'We have agreed the sum.'

'I just remind you.'

'There is no need. I am not forgetful of numbers and have good credit.' The London merchants provided that.

'I received your letter concerning the king's . . . predicament,' said Lilly.

'And I hope it is now burnt?'

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

‘But is it burnt?’ He had not answered the question.

‘Ashes to ashes, as I say.’

‘The letter is in ashes?’

‘As one day we shall all be, Mrs Whorwood.’

Jane put down her bag and took a stool. Lilly did not wish his visitors to stay long; though often they did, pouring out their hearts and the difficulties of their lives.

‘Mr Wood has not approached you?’ she asked casually, as Lilly disappeared into a dusty room full of more books. Jane had never seen so many. It was a rabbit warren, one door leading to another, one room to another – and all full of parchment.

‘Mr Wood?’

‘He keeps a kestrel’s watch over royal letters; he likes to snoop and swoop. You know of him?’

‘I know of no Mr Wood.’ How did she know about Mr Wood?

He returned to the room with a large tome, opened it on the table and began to set up his equipment. Jane watched.

‘You are certain of your craft?’

Jane had money, but expected good return on her investment. Which businesswoman didn’t?

‘The wise men followed the star, did they not?’ said Lilly. He was glad of the Christmas story and told it throughout the year.

‘Astrology is an ancient gift but disreputable now – that’s what some say.’

Lilly smiled wearily at Jane’s assault. ‘Until they *need* me, Mrs Whorwood – and then they cease from their sniping. This I have noticed. Indeed, they beg me . . . as you do today.’

‘So how do you come by this knowledge?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Who taught you this knowledge of the stars?’ She remembered the king’s warnings in this matter.

‘A Welshman called John Evans of Gunpowder Alley, if you’re interested – formerly a clergyman in Staffordshire. He was my first tutor.’

‘But also a rascal.’

‘Who says so?’

‘The king says so,’ said Jane firmly and Lilly was surprised at this royal interest. ‘He was forced to flee to London when his occult activities attracted the attention of the church authorities.’

‘He did experience some awkwardness with the authorities, as have many good men, the king included. But he taught me the rudiments of astrology well enough.’

‘And he was caught giving false astrological judgements to please a paying client! That was the same Mr Evans, was it not? I am aware of these things, you see.’

Lilly took a deep breath. ‘Then you will also be aware that I dissociated myself from him as soon as his dissembling was discovered.’

‘I imagine you did; but perhaps the deceiving disease was passed on?’

‘I have no interest in deception, Mrs Whorwood. But if you would like to leave, I will quite understand.’

He did not need her business, for gold coins came and went these days. And while he was familiar with suspicion in his clients, and happy to calm it, this woman would not be calmed . . . and began to irritate, if he was honest.

‘I will not be leaving,’ she said.

‘Then shall we to business?’

But Jane had further questions. ‘They call it a parlour game,’ she said.

‘They call what a parlour game?’

‘This!’ She indicated his tools spread out before her. Lilly’s eyebrows declared disbelief at this woman. ‘I’m not saying so myself,’ added Jane. ‘Just reporting what people say.’

Lilly felt that there was something vulnerable about her – and something desperate. His irritation calmed.

‘The horary astrology, in the hands of a master, is no parlour game,’ he said firmly. Jane thought she might have angered him a little, though discerning another’s mood was not her gift. ‘It is demanding and precise, combining science and art.’

He pointed at the chart he’d prepared, laid out on the table before her. She could see he had not been careless in the matter.

‘Properly used,’ he added with a sniff, ‘it will give answer to any well-defined question.’

‘And mine is this: Where should the king seek refuge?’

Jane could hold back no longer. She needed to believe . . . and became a convert to the stars in that moment.

‘He has refuge at Hampton Court,’ said Lilly. ‘A good refuge, I’m told. He is imprisoned there, but well served and lacking cause for distress.’

Jane would ignore the idea that an imprisoned king might lack cause for distress; they must proceed. ‘But if he were to seek another refuge?’ she asked.

‘Another refuge?’ Lilly’s face could not hide surprise.

‘Where would he go? That’s my question. Do the stars suggest a better home for the king?’

Lilly nodded slowly, and pondered the heavens laid out before him, a grid of twelve squares. He drew some lines and looked puzzled.

‘It is Jane Whorwood?’

‘Yes.’

‘And are you married?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘It is a holy estate, Mrs Whorwood.’

‘That depends on who you marry.’

‘I was fortunate enough to marry well,’ he said. ‘I merely wondered if it were so for you, as there is some confusion in the stars—’

‘What sort of confusion?’

‘Perhaps too strong a word. A slight mist, possibly . . .’

He now regretted this path; he did not enjoy talk of feelings and sensed their approach.

‘My marriage would confuse anyone,’ said Jane. ‘Well, anyone who looked for love and kindness, for both have been absent.’ She looked him plain in the face.

‘I see.’

‘Can the stars understand that sometimes marriage resembles a lodging in hell, Mr Lilly? The priests struggle with that.’

‘It was just a thought,’ he said, easing back. ‘There was some resistance among the planets . . . it need not detain us.’

‘I don’t mind being detained. For if we are to speak of marriage, Mr Lilly, where to start?’ She seemed keen to begin.

‘I understand if you do not wish to speak of it,’ said Lilly kindly – and in hope. But Jane was eager, for she could speak of it nowhere else.

‘Matters did not begin well,’ she said, getting up off her stool. ‘My father-in-law dropped dead on the morning of my wedding. Can you believe such a thing?’

Lilly put down his pencil. ‘Unfortunate.’

‘I think it was deliberate.’

‘An inauspicious start, I grant you.’ And, Lilly wished to add, rather selfish.

‘One might say so, sir.’

‘I did see some tension in the stars—’

‘My tension was much nearer home.’

‘His death must have dampened the gaiety of the day somewhat.’

‘There was an atmosphere after the news spread, which lingered a little. But life must go on, Mr Lilly, this is what I said to the priest – and Brome didn’t care a great deal. His father lacked warmth, and whatever pain there was during the service, was later drowned in wine, which sadly made many to vomit.’

‘An inspiring story,’ said Lilly, deploying irony to hide his shock.

‘Though had I known what awaited me,’ said Jane, ‘I too would have chosen death that day.’

She returned to her stool and Lilly to his charts. Enough had been said . . . though not for Jane.

‘And then the authorities fined Brome – who was below consenting age – for consummating the marriage without his father’s consent.’

‘Ah.’

‘Or indeed mine, for that matter . . . but that was not the crime, in law, at least.’ This was not territory he wished to explore. ‘A ghastly night. And the matter is still with the courts.’

William took no pleasure in gossip, and desired a return to the stars – more wholesome company.

‘Then during the civil war, Mr Lilly, my dear husband left us all and fled to Holland. He felt he was safer there.’

This man did appear to lack grace.

‘And you?’

‘I stayed – with my two surviving children.’

‘There had been loss?’

‘Two others died young.’

‘I am sorry for your grief.’

‘No, they were the lucky ones, believe me.’

Jane felt some discomfort. She had not been a good mother to her children Brome and Diana – or not in the conventional sense, not in the sense that she loved them. She couldn’t say she loved them. Her strongest feelings were always the feelings to leave the family home, and she’d done that often enough. Children might please from a distance; they played in the street beneath her now and looked charming. But she had not liked her own too close or dependent, had not warmed to responsibility – too much restraint on her life. They gave her headaches and tension in her neck. She had not liked them as people, and this didn’t help. So all in all, she’d been an appalling mother, and Lady Ursula, her mother-in-law, had removed her from the will in disgust.

‘You were never a mother to your children!’ she’d railed.

‘And unfortunately you *were* a mother to yours!’ screamed Jane in reply. ‘Your footprint is heavy on all your offspring – and I had the misfortune to marry one of them!’

Lady Ursula was without obvious virtue, and she and Jane did not get on, nor pretend to. Some said Jane shouldn’t burn her bridges with the woman who held the family purse strings – but that was a bridge that would have to be built before it could be burnt.

Jane’s husband – the hag’s son – was a waster and woman-worrier; she knew this now. He’d bullied and abused her for years. No, worse, he’d humiliated and ignored her, chasing the servant girls and catching them in the most intimate of ways – and all well known in the area. Thin wainscoting, noisy beds, wooden partitions, creaking stairs, ill-fitted planks, large keyholes and the servants’ hungry eyes and ears – these things removed the privacy of a home and trumpeted Brome’s behaviour widely. So the guilt should not be hers alone.

‘He should never have wed you,’ was the mother-in-law’s chant, like a dull choir in a cathedral – endless. Jane could not disagree;

it would have been a fortunate escape had he not. She was nineteen when they married and Brome fifteen, with barely a bristle on his chin.

‘But with land enough to make up for the years,’ her grasping father told her.

The land was his best feature, there was no doubt of that; but you do not share a bed with the land.

William Lilly smoothed out his charts. He looked forward to returning to the stars.

‘So I do not know if that is a holy estate or not,’ concluded Jane.

‘There’s much we do not know.’

‘But much that we’d like to, Mr Lilly. I’m sure your marriage is quite perfect.’

William had married rather well, in the world’s eyes. A penniless employee of Gilbert Wright, William had married his widow Ellen on the old man’s death – after she had declared herself in favour of a different way. She was quite clear that having twice married for money, she now looked for love, regardless of either status or income.

‘I am finished with these things, Master William!’ she said. ‘Quite finished!’

‘So what is it that you seek, ma’am?’ he asked. ‘It is sometimes an easier calling to declare what one does not want than what one does.’

‘I seek a man who will love me, Master William!’

‘I see.’

‘I want love.’

‘And that will be no great test for any man of substance, ma’am, for you are full of kindness.’

‘But not in the first flush of youth.’ This was true. She was in her stately fifties and could not pretend or look other. And then suddenly it had all appeared plain to William.

‘Would you consider my young hand in marriage, ma’am?’

‘You, William?’ she said, laughing, for he was a country boy without family, prospects or income. The idea was ridiculous ... though eventually she agreed and they were married in secret at

St George's church in Southwark, telling neither family nor friends for two years.

'And I was content with her,' he journalled, 'content in marriage for six years, when, upon her death, she left all monies and considerable property to me – near to the value of one thousand pounds,' which enabled this bumpkin to buy a share in thirteen houses in the Strand and to lease the Corner House for himself – which is where he now sat with Jane Whorwood and the king's matter.

Was the king really planning to escape?

'I am pleased to say my marriage has been a fortunate affair,' he said, with tightness in his throat. He did not like to speak of himself on these occasions; while Jane decided not to mention Sir Thomas Bendish, her recent lover. She didn't wish to confuse the stars with her lovers, though they probably already knew. And if they didn't know, where was the value in telling them?

*

William Lilly, who had other matters to attend to this morning, offered Jane a planetary reflection. It concerned the movement of Mercury 'lately separated from the sextile of Jupiter and the Moon by a quadrate'. She heard the words but not the meaning. And then suddenly, from the claptrap and gobbledygook, Jane discerned a line of significance.

'Twenty miles from London there is a place of safety.'

'For the king?' she asked and he nodded. 'Twenty miles from London?'

'Twenty miles, or thereabouts. This is what the planets suggest by their leanings.'

'Anything else?'

'This place of safety lies in Essex.'

'Essex?!' She could not help the exclamation; almost a squeal. The county of Essex was already in her plans; before she had stepped through his door, she had thought of Essex – and now it was confirmed by the stars. Perhaps she could have saved her gold pieces; she did think this. But then again, the bigger picture had been revealed: the stars and Jane agreed, and she knew what she

must do. She knew a house there, about twenty miles from London, and suitable for the king and his hiding, while other plans were made. He could sail to France from Harwich . . . there was no need for her to stay now.

‘Thank you for your time,’ she said, gathering her effects and crossing the room. She placed the bag of coins on the table. ‘It is a matter of some urgency.’ She then turned to him with her darting eyes. ‘I can assume your confidence in these endeavours? I would not wish this news to spill.’

Lilly’s smile said that such instructions were quite unnecessary as he guided her down the dark stairs and out into the street. Brief goodbyes followed, the door closed and Jane was back in the bustling Strand, from where she made her way down to the river. Her boatman would take her to Hampton Court, for both she and the stars knew what the king must do.

He would be safe in Essex; and then it started to rain.