Thomas Gage

James Fleming

Chapter 1

THE MONEY was newly warm against his ribs. Swinging his cane, his feet turned out like a dancing-master, humming and hatless, he strolled down St Martin's Lane and into Trafalgar Square. His hair, which seemed to burst out of his head and was the first thing anyone noticed about him, rippled in the summery breeze. A woman of a comfortable age came walking towards him, a wicker basket on the crook of her arm. She drew level, and he made her a smiling bow, because he'd done what had been asked of him, the day was glorious and life his to command.

He'd been obstinate, had stood out for every last penny. The sum had been disputed, ledgers unsnapped and entanglements placed in his way – deliveries over, deliveries under, discounts misapplied, the quietness of the season. Oh, it had been a game alright. Roberson had tried to make him feel like a provincial, ignorant and wormy. 'Do what you like up there. Ninety days' credit for London trade, plus the usual forgiveness,' the man had said. 'Sixty if you want to keep our business,' he'd replied. He'd braced his calves and stiffened his jaw. 'Sixty, as it always has been with our firm.' Then he'd insisted he receive the debt in bank-notes and counted them twice, under Roberson's nose, despite the fact that it was indecorous.

And there they were, plumping out his London frock-coat, which had been cut three monarchs ago and was no longer easily buttoned. It was stupendous, when he thought about it, an act of a truly lavish god, that this humble commercial operation that was keeping him and Isabel afloat should still be without competitors. No, it was too small a word. He should call it a miracle and have done with it.

He halted, the church to one side, the raw yellow ashlar of the National Gallery to the other. Hands cupped over the smooth porcelain knob of his cane, he gazed around. Mongrels fighting, the arguments of barrow-boys, a squadron of cavalry jingling down Whitehall, bugles piping from Horse Guards, the squeal of ungreased wagon axles. Noise, everywhere noise and haste.

'It's you who should be doing this,' he'd said to Lutwylch, 'you're the one who's running the show. You know the language. I'm just an artist.' But Isabel had been looking severely upon him, and Lutwylch, fob-watched and obedient at her elbow, lawyerish in his wealthy spectacles, had said, 'Think of the fees if I have to send the duns in. Besides, you're going to town anyway. A few strong words and he'll settle.' They'd left it until the last minute, when there was no time to argue. The horses had been unrugged and backed into the traces. Blissett, burly and leather-gaitered, had checked the buckles; was climbing onto his box. 'Don't forget my coffee beans,' Isabel cried. The groom stood back and the coach rumbled out of the cobbled yard.

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No point in being a niggard about it, he'd said to himself later. It's for the good of the family. A man who entrusts the exchequer to his wife must accept the obligations that are thereby entered into their arrangements.

'Well, Thomas, did you get the money?' That was what she'd ask him as soon as he got home and the children had gone to their beds. The question would shin up that measured voice of hers and clamber out of her mouth with a cutlass and a brace of pistols at its belt. She might pretend otherwise but within her careful, managing mind that would be the foremost issue. And now, as of twenty minutes ago, he could answer, 'Yes, by God, I did.'

Therefore his character was in credit and he could set about the real purpose of his trip with an unhampered conscience. He removed Isabel from his thoughts and tucked her into a cubbyhole along with Lutwylch and certain aspects of the modern epoch that disquieted him whenever he travelled to London.

His picture, that was the thing, not Roberson or the coffee beans. It wasn't every day of the week that a man had his work hung at the Royal Academy. How would it look? Would he feel it could have been done better? Would anyone pause for more than a second beneath it? He'd imagined some reviewer selecting his pithiest words: 'The work, however, before which everyone halted was that by an unknown artist from Norfolk. His colouring, the texture of paint, the sheer intensity of expression, by these Mr Thomas Gage has elevated his profession to an altogether superior niveau . . .' But now that he was here, a stone's throw away, he felt his confidence ebb. It would look tawdry, a daub, amongst such a wealth of talent. He began to enumerate all the points of composition on which it was open to criticism. Here – such and such; there – the other, ending with the fact that he'd fussed at it and titivated long after he should have left well alone.

He squinnied up at Lord Nelson. A little fellow in his socks, and by no means faultless. But audacious, and with pluck by the gallon.

A button-hole, a crimped red rose-bud laced into a corset of moss, was twirled in front of him.

'Only a ha'penny, sir.' Her wheedling voice took him by surprise and he started.

'I believe I can afford that,' he said, and wishing to diffuse his nervousness, prattled about the fine spell of weather they were having and Nelson also having been a Norfolk man as he stooped to let her grimy fingers pin the flower.

'Luck live in your hat!' she cackled, stepping back to seek fresh custom. He touched his note-case for reassurance. He had a final whittle at his nose. Then he made swiftly across the street to the Academy rooms, his heart bump-bumpering in its socket.

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