

TREASON

Fiction by James Jackson

Dead Headers

Cold Cut

The Reaper

Blood Rock

Pilgrim

Realm

Perdition

JAMES JACKSON TREASON

ZAFFRE



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For George and Elizabeth Wood



The Key Plotters

Sir Robert 'Robin' Catesby, ringleader

Sir Thomas Percy, coordinator

Tom Wintour, adjutant

Jack Wright, swordsman and enforcer

Guy 'Guido' Fawkes, explosives expert

Robert Keyes, quartermaster

John Grant, acquirer of horses and weapons

Sir Ambrose Rookwood, acquirer of gunpowder and horses

Sir Everard Digby, commander of the mounted kidnap team

Other plotters included Robert Wintour (Tom's older brother and the owner of Huddington Court), Kit Wright (Jack's younger brother), Thomas Bates (Catesby's retainer) and Sir Francis Tresham (Catesby's cousin).



These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to
us . . . in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces,
treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.

King Lear, William Shakespeare







PROLOGUE

New Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, April 1616



Commotion at this hour was unexpected. He would ignore it, the barking of dogs and the whinny and stamp of a horse, and focus on the book before him. Let his servants deal with the matter. He hoped his Anne would not be roused from her slumber, for all their sakes.

He turned another page, adjusted the light cast by an oil lamp and leant to fill again his claret glass. Some fifty years on and a few hundred paces from where he had been born and now he was moneyed and revered and content. What fortune and acclaim his life had brought him, and with what skill he had navigated the treacherous waters of his age. He had served monarchs and yet never lost his head, had played alike to the gallery and groundlings and retained to this day their love. Tonight, William Shakespeare was in a reflective mood.

‘Master?’

At the intrusion, the playwright peered towards the doorway. He had given strict instructions that he was not to be disturbed. Yet affection for his staff and the frown of apology on the face of his manservant were sufficient to permit a lapse.

‘Why such consternation, George?’ Shakespeare smiled at his old retainer. ‘You enter the room of a studious man and not the lair of an ogre.’

‘I had no wish to trouble you, master.’

‘It seems you are the more disturbed.’

‘A horseman came, master. A stranger bid me deliver you a package.’

‘He would not stay? Gave no name? Offered not a single word of explanation?’

‘No, master.’

‘Then let us unravel the mystery of the saddlebag.’ Shakespeare held out his hand and took the proffered bundle. ‘Now get to bed and leave me to the night before our mistress wakes to scold us both.’

Alone once more, he examined the item wrapped in its linen windings. Perhaps it was a manuscript or the letters of an admirer or part of some prank dreamt up by his friend and brother-writer Ben Jonson. He sighed.

Across the years they had caroused and drunk, indulged in trick and escapade of every kind. The ageing should be allowed to reminisce. How he hankered on occasion for the sounds of London, for the urgent energy of its streets and taverns and the excitement of his youth. His past was but a whisper and his present bound by predictability and aching bones.

The small silver crucifix fell onto the open page and his world tilted. With a trembling touch he held the object to the light and turned it in his fingers. In this one tarnished artefact was history, a memory of the old religion and those who in its name would do murder to a king. There was a thick sheaf of papers too, a confession or dossier he freed carefully from its binding. Sleep could wait. As the hearth embers glowed and died and a predawn chill drew in, Shakespeare read. Before him was laid out an intrigue in which many had been ensnared and that had set a deadly trail from the manor houses of Warwickshire to the great Gunpowder Treason Plot of 1605. By the grace of God he was on the side of the victor and through dint of providence once knew the horseman who had ridden here tonight. Faith and passion drove men to heroism or folly. Remember, remember, the fifth of November. He would leave others to judge.

BEGINNING

The Azores, late summer 1591

‘Sail ho! Enemy to windward!’

Spanish masts crowded the horizon. They had the weather gauge and advantage, a vast formation of swollen sail inbound for the fray. These were not the laden nau and caravel transports the English had expected, the annual migration of the treasure convoy from the Americas they lay in wait for. Instead a battle fleet encroached from the east. Almost sixty Spanish galleons bore down on a squadron of six English ships. It was the afternoon of 31 August 1591, and the ambushers had been ambushed.

In the crosstrees of the waiting vessels, the lookouts strained to see and hollered their reports, their calls echoing and forcing the pace. Everywhere was action. The English had believed themselves safe, anchoring in a small bay on the northern tip of this small volcanic island of Flores. Here the sick could be taken ashore and parties sent to forage among the waterfalls and meadows; here decks could be swabbed clean with vinegar, ballast replaced, and the hulls caulked with tow and pitch. Everything had changed, for hell was visiting paradise. As whistles blew and crews scrambled to make ready, skiffs splashed a frantic path back to their mother ships and figures swarmed to man the braces. All were preparing for flight.

On the poop deck of the warship *Revenge*, its captain leant on the rail and surveyed the scene. A veteran of close encounters with the enemy, of tight odds and chances seized and of wresting possession from the King of Spain, Sir Richard Grenville, privateer and vice-admiral, was not inclined to panic. At this spot aboard his ship had once stood Drake, the legend who had chased the Armada to its destruction. Three years on and the Spanish had rebuilt and ventured out with vengeance on their minds. Now it was Grenville’s turn to find glory.

He straightened to acknowledge a young gallant approaching from the main deck to join him at his station. Ceremony was unnecessary.

There was a bond between them, a trust and familiarity born of combat and strengthened by shared loathing for the adversary and love for the melee. At twenty-four, Christian Hardy was no ordinary seafarer. As a soldier and spy he had lived and taken more lives than most, and killed ruthlessly anyone who threatened his Queen. It had cost him much. Yet there remained the steady confidence of ultramarine eyes, and the swagger and latent ferocity of a natural fighter contained within the armour plates of a faded blue velvet brigandine jacket. With sword and pistols to hand, Hardy felt most alive when in proximity to death.

Grenville gestured seaward. 'It seems we set a trap and are ourselves ensnared.'

'Howard signals we should run to sea.'

'Run?' The captain frowned. 'Our Lord Admiral knows us not.'

'You would fight?'

'I will do as my conscience and nature command.'

'It will be some trial, Richard.'

Grenville smiled. 'Are they not the ones we embrace and our people cheer?'

His companion nodded. The breath of wind on his cheek carried his thoughts back to Drake and the Armada and the fire ships he had led into Calais Roads. Ghosts still wandered here, the images of past friends and flying splinters. Another place and a different commander but Hardy was here again.

Grenville regarded him. 'They complain the *Revenge* is an unlucky ship. What do you say?'

'Ill-fortune may be turned.'

'We have some forty cannon and four hundred tons of leaking oak beneath our feet.' Grenville scanned the tops. 'Perhaps it will not.'

'Then we pray and brawl the harder.'

Grenville laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. 'I am a corsair and you are a gentleman adventurer. Well, we shall have adventure enough this day.'

An enemy admiral named Don Alonso de Bazan would ensure it. He had brought his great fleet from the northern Spanish port of El Perro intent on redressing past ignominy and restoring dignity to his homeland.

He carried seven thousand infantry and was accompanied by giant Apostle galleons with which he would close with and crush the pirates of Albion. Pausing off Terceira, two hundred miles to the east, to gather intelligence and arrange his formation, he was ready for quick victory.

But he had been sighted. Christian Hardy had been gathering information of his own, meeting agents, leading raids across the islands and spying on this Spanish hub. He had watched and tracked the fleet and, guessing at its true purpose, had sped aboard the pinnacle *Moonshine* yesterday to deliver his report. A fragment of his soul believed the Spaniards hunted him.

‘We aim for the heart of the beast.’ Grenville pointed and called out to his officers and men. ‘Weigh anchor and make all sail and ready the guns for action. For England!’

The *Revenge* groaned as her tethers loosened and canvas dropped, and cheering eddied from the gun deck to the yards. *For England*. Perhaps they did not yet comprehend their fate, or they did not care.

Hardy glanced back to the slumbering volcanic peak of the Morro Alto, tracing the verdant slopes and black lines of basalt down to the grey sands of the shore. Ponta Delgada they called this protective spur of Flores. It had given only temporary reprieve.

Grenville had followed his gaze. ‘No volcano will match the fury we encounter.’

‘So let us seize the fire.’

Sails tautened, the helm swung, and the little ship turned into the maw of the approaching host. At least she had distracted the foe; at least the rest of her squadron were clawing to sea. As the sun began its evening plunge and puffs of cannon smoke marked the defiant exodus of Lord Howard, the *Revenge* continued alone. Hardy nodded to Grenville and returned to the main deck. At the step of the centre mast and with his schiavona blade drawn, he would make his stand.

Jostling for the kill, the enemy swept close, the *Revenge* becalmed in their midst as her sails bled wind and her decks bucked to raking broadsides. Smoke rolled in and the world diminished to keening noise and glimpsed morion helmets and falling spars and bodies. Roaring soundless in the din, Grenville directed and stood firm.

Hardy stood at the centre of the fray. He felt the impact of the *San Felipe* as she grappled on the starboard side, her masts blocking the light and her infantry rushing to board. To the flash of muskets and with pike and sword they flowed in and were met with a fury that stalled them. The ache of anticipation was over.

'To me! We have them!' Hardy swung an arquebus and discharged a round, the steel ball designed to bring down rigging and instead removing a face. He was among the enemy now, at ease with their ragged oaths and cries, hewing with his sword and selecting from his brace of matchlock pistols. Fire belched from the pan and muzzle and another Spaniard fell away.

A second galleon, the *San Bernabé*, collided and took hold, her troops racing to seize the prize. Next it was the turn of the *San Cristobal* to ram the English ship, shattering the aftcastle and disgorging a fresh wave of boarders. Hardy moved with murderous fluency through a flickering landscape of bloodspill and wraiths. He was killing as profession and in revenge, for his mother burnt at the stake in a Lisbon square and his wife butchered by an assassin sent to kill the Queen, for his mentors and patrons Sir Francis Drake and the late spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham. In their name he slashed off a head and prised wide a ribcage and thrust through a groin with the point of his sword. The tactics of the alley were not for the squeamish or refined.

Yet they could not stem the onrush. Where one Spaniard vanished to the firefly strike of musketry, others took his place; where resistance ebbed, the enemy pressed in and forced retreat.

Grenville emerged, scrambling low beneath the whine of lead, his face scorched and his doublet torn. 'They bait us as dogs put to a bull.' The words faded in the storm.

'We hold them yet.'

'Though our stern is lost.' Grenville crouched and peered aft. 'I vouch they do not like us, Christian.'

Hardy grinned. 'We hate them more.'

Again the enemy surged and was repelled across the tangled wreckage of men and timber and rigging.

Rudderless and dismasted and with her upper works shot away, the *Revenge* had ceased to be a warship. Yet as daylight leached to dusk, the contest was far from over.

‘Now, Christian!’ commanded Grenville.

In a clearing framed by debris, Hardy loosed the contents of a fowler cannon into the encroaching ranks of Spaniards. Grey mist turned pink as the cartridge shot plumed wide. The enemy might have seized the colours, but the English counter-attack had begun. Yelling their rage, the crew chased over lost ground, their momentum for a while reversing the flow. Grenville led the pursuit.

More ships clustered around the dying hulk, the *Asuncion* and a flyboat gripping fast to accelerate its demise. It was near midnight when Grenville took a shot to the chest and was ferried to a dressing station beside a top-pled gun. Hardy knelt close, his own face lacerated and etched with red.

‘What a pretty sight we are, Christian.’ Grenville panted shallowly while the surgeon applied a linen compress. ‘God is merciful: this is only a scratch.’

‘Be still and let the surgeon tend you,’ Hardy urged his commander.

‘How goes the battle?’

‘We endure and shall fight on.’

Satisfaction ghosted through the pain. ‘Then we will kill any in our reach.’

‘An English victualler probes near to draw their fire, and others seek to aid us.’

‘Keep them distant, Christian. I would not have them squander men or effort on our plight.’

With a sigh the surgeon slumped, an entry wound to his temple. Grenville grabbed a rapier and rolled away beneath the cover of the culverin. There were new enemies to greet.

The early hours brightened to the salvoes played into the hull. A relay of Spanish galleons paraded by, brushing point-blank or drifting to leeward, inflicting constant punishment. Below her shroud of smoke, *Revenge* wallowed and replied.

Daylight brought a terrible scene. Ringed by blackened and stricken vessels, the *Revenge* continued to fight. Her firing was desultory, her crew largely dead or injured, her commander now mortally wounded. Propped against a wood block and attended by his diminished band, Grenville lingered between consciousness and death, the old tenacity burnt strong.

‘What news?’ He stared up at his men.

A lieutenant answered. 'Two of their galleons are sinking and the sea around us is littered with their dead.'

'So there is merit in what we do.'

'They wait on us, sir.'

'Then they must wait longer.' Grenville closed his eyes. 'What are their demands?'

'Their admiral asks that we yield.'

Anger flamed in the captain's face and his voice strengthened. 'We submit to none but God. We throw ourselves on His mercy and not at the feet of a Catholic dog.'

'Our powder is almost gone.'

'You have your teeth and fists. You have your pride. You have the honour of England to defend.' Exhausted, he lapsed to silence. Occasionally a cannon discharged, marking time and magnifying futility, the ball travelling to splash harmlessly in the water.

Grenville roused himself. 'Where is my master gunner?'

'I am here, sir.'

'Gather what powder you can and put a match to it. We have fought too long to go meekly into bondage.'

The men exchanged glances and another officer spoke. 'Have we not been true and steadfast and earned our right to live?'

'And you, Christian? Will you join this mutiny?' Grenville turned his head slowly, his eyes seeking out his friend.

Hardy knelt beside him. 'They have been brave and done more than Queen or country might expect.'

'To surrender the *Revenge* is to commit treason.'

'And to waste these gallant men would be a greater crime.' Hardy took his captain's hand. 'Our ship is spent and no real prize. She will sink and we shall live to tell the valour of this action.'

'Perhaps you speak the truth.'

'I always do.'

'Then pray for me, for it is all I have left.'

In the dismal aftermath of battle and surrender, Spanish longboats shuttled to transport the living and dispose of the dead. The defeated English were worthy of respect. Their *Revenge*, so unequal in size and so ruined, remained afloat only by a miracle. Spaniards gazed in wonder.

Removing his scarred brigandine and abandoning his sword, Hardy sat on the deck among his fellows. Fatigue and desolation weighed on them all. He had survived when others had not; there was little point in questioning the mystery. Instinctively he felt for the silver crucifix at his throat, a talisman from his past once worn by his warrior father. Its contours were as familiar as the grip of his sword.

‘What fates we enemies weave.’

The measured words were delivered with a sword tip pressed against Hardy’s chest, a hand reaching to snatch away the cross. Hardy stayed motionless, gazing at the face he loathed above all others, recalling the wounds inflicted on the body of his slain wife. He had learnt to understand the darkness in this man’s heart. Realm, the Englishman turned traitor, the agent codenamed Reino by his Spanish masters, had returned.

Hardy stared into the pale eyes. ‘I believed you dead.’

‘I am alive and the Inquisition kind.’

‘So again you venture out on a lost cause.’

‘But I have a rapier and you are my prisoner.’ Realm picked at a thread on Hardy’s coat with the blade point. ‘Like the *Revenge* itself you are driftwood and flotsam.’

‘You failed to kill our Queen.’

‘Our religion is patient and all may change.’

‘What here is changed? What is altered when it takes a fleet to crush a single English vessel?’

‘You alone are consolation.’ Steel stroked Hardy’s cheek. ‘An eternal game is made of many steps.’

‘And I will shadow your every one.’

The sword pricked his flesh and Hardy got to his feet. He might be destined for execution or imprisonment, for whatever torture or inhumanity his captors had prepared, but acceptance was part of his calling. There were plantations to work and the rowing benches of oared galleys to fill; there were transports on the Spanish Main to crew and the deep mines of the Americas to dig. Escorted by guards, he was taken to a skiff and transferred to a galleon. Realm was right. An eternal game was formed of many stages.



CHAPTER 1

London, May 1604

‘Another stone will suffice.’

In the grim pressing-room of Newgate Prison, a man was being crushed to death. It was a prolonged affair and the audience was small, and yet throughout each groan and permutation there were formalities to observe. Five days had passed already and the stench was as bad as the suffering. *Peine forte et dure*, strong and hard punishment, could be a blunt and heavy means of execution.

‘Why bear such pain?’ The interrogator leant forward on his stool. ‘Why endure so much when reason cries out that you should speak?’

Pinioned beneath the plank, the prisoner whimpered breathlessly at the force bearing down. It seemed the entire English state was squeezing life from his body. He should have known that the dark arts of Protestant subterfuge would ensnare him and drag him here. It was the fate of many Catholics. And he had been willing to accept the risk, to join the English regiment with other believers and fight for Spain in the Low Countries against the heretic uprising there. With fire and sword he had helped cleanse the land. Until the day a trusted brother-volunteer had taken him down to greet a ship of new recruits; until the moment he found himself bound and lying helpless in its hold. That erstwhile friend with his sly patience and charm and searing blue eyes had been in the employ of the chief English spymaster.

Again the voice. ‘Some struggle for ten days or more. It ends the same.’

‘You want a confession?’ The words fluttered out, near inaudible.

‘We ask for names before you die. We demand to know the identities of those who would do us harm.’

The prisoner’s chest strained, a thousand agonies melding into one. May God forgive him. Confusion infested his mind, stirring false memory.

All the while the voice spoke, reasoned and insistent. ‘Speed your journey and give us what we seek.’

'I . . . must . . . have . . . air . . .'

'One name and you shall have relief.'

He heard as if from afar his own thin, high-pitched moan. Perhaps it mattered little now. The plot was already afoot. King James and his satanic coterie would rue their overconfidence.

'Speak louder.' The interrogator tried to interpret the sounds. 'Summon your thoughts.'

A drawn-out, ragged silence and then reply: 'Guido . . . Fawkes . . .'

'Once more.'

'Guido Fawkes.'

The man was dead by the time the messenger rode from the prison and crossed the Fleet Ditch on his way to the Strand. It was a short journey, which saw him pass the taverns and bawdy houses and Inns of Court and continue on through Temple Bar. Not even the screaming inmates of Bridewell or the crowd gathered to view the occupant of a gibbet near Fetter Lane delayed him. His master waited.

On the north side of the Strand, Robert Cecil's large brick mansion was undergoing modification and enlargement. Turrets were being added and a grander entrance installed. It befitted a man ennobled as the first Earl of Salisbury by a grateful King, and marked with stone the shift in power to this diminutive and diligent minister of the Crown. Others had faded and he was ascendant, the spy chief and Secretary of State on whom the monarch relied. No seditious remark would be spoken without his hearing; no conspiracy would develop without his eventual uncovering of the truth. England could sleep soundly and opponents should beware. A constant guardian watched over all.

'A *pressing* matter brings you.'

Cecil delivered the jest without humour or a smile as he took the sealed letter and with a nod dismissed its bearer. He had noted the fear in the man's eyes. People had underestimated him, had thought him nothing more than a short and twisted hunchback worthy only of mockery. Now they flattered and grovelled or begged for mercy. He peered through the leaded panes and glimpsed the apartments of Durham House once occupied by Sir Walter Raleigh, and the tower cupola from which the

vainglorious courtier had surveyed his domain before his sudden fall from grace. Another triumph arranged by Cecil.

Guido Fawkes. He read the name again and muttered it aloud. Sometimes the condemned revealed much; sometimes merely senseless babble. Instinct persuaded him there was more to this name. He would set his hounds on the scent. He would send for Christian Hardy.

Gaols tended to unsettle him. At the Tower of London, Christian Hardy surrendered his sword and crossed the drawbridge to the Lion Gate, then continued to the Byward entrance by way of a middle tower and further bridge. Walls within walls and moats encircled by moats. Only kings and traitors took a different route, and only fools came by choice. The Tower was where ambition could end and a head roll for the simple crime of displeasing the monarch. Great men and women had whiled away their years in its stone embrace or been paraded out to Tower Hill to kneel before the block.

He reached the green and its site of execution and headed for the walled garden beside the Bloody Tower. Guards patrolled the perimeter. It was far from the bustle of the streets, further still from his enslavement in the silver mines of Potosì as a prisoner of the Spanish. For three years he had laboured in the viceroyalty of Peru, hacking at the silver ore, burrowing deep beneath the Cerro Rico, the rich mountain, to feed the coffers of the Spanish mint. Though he suffered and many died, he had endured to the day of his escape. There had been a trek with natives and a silver train of two thousand llamas to the port of Arica, passage in disguise aboard ship to El Callao and Panama, the crossing of the isthmus and emergence in the Orinoco delta. Murder and bullion theft had accompanied his ordeal, each step tortuous and fraught with danger. His fluency in Spanish and Italian and the Mediterranean looks inherited from his noble Maltese mother had provided his salvation when on the run. It was the year 1595 when Hardy crawled to the edge of the Atlantic shoreline at the same moment that Sir Walter Raleigh dropped anchor at the river mouth in search of the gold of El Dorado.

Now, over nine years later, Hardy bowed his head to enter Raleigh's open cell door. Raleigh strode to embrace him. 'You came, Christian. Would that you were here to rescue me as I did you on that distant shore.'

'It is not in my power,' Hardy said ruefully.

'A shame.' The ageing courtier pulled a wry expression. 'Thus am I condemned to languish in my tower and to dream of better things.'

'Perhaps better things only inhabit dreams.'

Raleigh gave a melancholy laugh. 'I belong to the past and a dead Queen. It is Cecil and his kind who own the present.'

'To bide awhile here is then your wisest course.' Hardy sensed his friend's brooding restlessness. 'Fortune and tide may shift.'

'Or my head might end placed upon a spike.'

'Risk is part of our calling.'

'I prefer a fair fight.' Raleigh gazed about him, his pride and vitality flaring. 'Though my world is small and I am stripped of everything, I should not complain. I have at hand my wife and children and books, and when they tire of me, my chickens give me welcome.'

He looked back at the younger man. In Hardy he recognised a distillation of himself, another soldier tested and scarred in conflict. 'Let us walk, Christian.'

They climbed the steps to the narrow terrace of the curtain wall, a promenade of fifty paces that marked the bounds of Raleigh's existence. Before them lay the river and its widening vista of wharves and ships to London Bridge beyond. Somehow the bustling scene increased the sense of isolation.

Raleigh waved his hand. 'Do you think they ever speak my name? Do you believe they remember I am here?'

'No one can steal your renown.'

'Yet King James sees fit to take from me my liberty and Cecil my discovery of Virginia.' Raleigh glanced back to his prison home. 'Where once the Bloody Tower was a water gate, those waters are receded. It seems, like the tower, I too am beached.'

'Savour the respite from the storm.'

'The tempest will come soon enough.'

'You write your history of England.'

'In a chamber in which two young princes were once murdered. It reminds us that none are safe from plot and intrigue.'

For several minutes they watched the lighters and wherries meandering between the larger boats and listened to the calls and whistles. In his

richly braided doublet and silk-trimmed boots, Hardy was far removed from the gaunt man who had emerged on the banks of the Orinoco nine years before. Seed pearls and a hoard of silver could do much to banish the pain of enslavement.

‘What of your son, Christian?’ Raleigh asked at last.

‘We are estranged.’ It was safer for Adam that way.

‘He is a young man and will find his path.’

‘I pray he does not follow mine.’

The older man’s hand rested on Hardy’s arm. ‘You cannot preserve him from all harm, Christian.’

‘I can seek to keep him from my own.’

‘Fate contrives to trip us in the end.’ Raleigh spoke with the authority of his years and of marriage to a Throckmorton. In a climate of suspicion, any connection to the Catholic faith and a leading recusant family could invite a suggestion of treason. He lowered his voice and continued with more urgency. ‘Be watchful and alive to danger, Christian. Chained though I am, I see and hear things. Oppression builds and the Catholics will not forever lie quiet.’

‘Are you predicting or warning me?’

‘I’m rambling. I’m a seafarer and I’m giving counsel to a friend.’

‘You forget I labour for the Crown.’

‘It will not spare you from the furnace.’

As Christian Hardy left the Tower, another man crossed the City, striding purposefully towards the Royal Exchange. His mind too dwelt on the plight of English Catholics, although his countenance betrayed no sign of his concern. He had learnt to hide both his feelings and his identity, for his flock depended on his succour. Survival came down to luck and nerve, to crouching in priest holes, outrunning pursuit and outsmarting Cecil’s priest-catchers, the pursuivants. Father Henry Garnet, chief Jesuit in England and defender of the Catholic faith, fully understood the risks he ran. The heads of his friends adorning London Bridge bore witness. If caught, he would be shown no mercy.

His calling drove him and he hastened on, thanking the Lord for the anonymity and protection afforded by the crowd. He prayed for their souls and for his country, and that their King should be drawn to the

light. The tyranny had grown under James. Elizabeth had been an enemy of Rome and yet was not a monster. James was proving different. He railed against what he deemed a superstitious practice and exhorted his bishops to root it out, had encouraged legislation to outlaw the evil and brought thousands before the assizes. Families faced ruin through recusant fines and men and women were cast into prison. It was the harshest of times to be a Catholic and the most dangerous of moments to be a Jesuit.

Close by the churchyard of St Paul's, he had seen a Catholic pamphleteer in the pillory, his hands bound and ears nailed to a board and his face a mask of suffering. What a pitiless place the country had become. There were rumours of future insurrection, of hotheads mounting an armed challenge to the King. Garnet hoped fervently it was a harmless venting of rage, and that it was a stage that would pass. Surely James would discover reason and humanity and a kinder age would dawn. He was certain of it.

'Pins to buy! Pins to buy!'

'What do you want? What do you need?'

'Come this way for lawn and cambric.'

The cries of sellers echoed about him. Any one of these people might be an informant for the state. Spies abounded, trawling the inns, ale-houses and theatres and reporting back to Cecil. Father Garnet felt his belly tighten in anticipation of a challenge.

He saw his fellow Jesuit on the far side of the street, a face emerging for an instant in the frenetic flow of people. Their eyes met briefly, and in that moment Garnet detected the hidden warning. A second later he spotted the two young men dressed as apprentices trailing the Jesuit at a distance. His contact was compromised and as good as on the scaffold.

'Halt where you are!'

Garnet's speeding heart ordered him to run, while his cooler head instructed that he stay. With a neutral face and readied excuse, he did as the rest and turned in the direction of the command. But his martyrdom would have to keep: it was his brother Jesuit stumbling to flee, who had diverted leading on the pack in its clumsy stampede. Garnet had no doubt it was an act of self-sacrifice intended to distract them from the greater prize.

‘In the name of the King, hold him!’

The shouts of the mob drowned out the cries of the inconvenienced. The promise of violence and summary justice was the finest of spectator sports. Baskets tumbled and stalls gave way as the pressure wave swept by.

May the Blessed Virgin protect and bring stillness in the midst of terror. The hunted priest wept in his exertion, his lungs straining and his limbs aching as he scampered frantically for any alleyway or opening. The tenements rose high around him, and their jetties seemed to close in overhead and channel him to the dark. At least he had lured the enemy away from Father Garnet. He fumbled for his rosary and worked it in his fingers, but dropped it as he sprawled forward.

‘You are captured, priest.’

A foot had tripped him and brought him hard to earth. He lay winded, dirt and gravel embedded in his skin and blood starting to flow. These injuries would pale against what he faced. He could do nothing but lie prone and sob in quiet anguish, cleanse himself of hope and commit to future torment. Everyone had their Calvary.

‘It seems I have acquired a trophy.’ A rapier tip lifted the rosary to slide it on the blade.

The priest angled his head to look up. ‘What is a mere trinket to you is precious to me.’

‘Therefore you prove yourself a traitor.’

‘Not to God.’ The priest’s voice strengthened with fearful certainty.

‘It is to King James you shall answer.’

Isaiah Payne, lead pursuivant, regarded his latest find with satisfaction. Effort and diligence had once more brought results. There were few higher rewards than to ensnare the enemies of the Crown and guard the Protestant body of England from the cancer of Catholicism. Long ago Payne had eschewed the flamboyant attire of a previous age in favour of more sombre and puritanical dress. And like his master Cecil, the priest-catcher found pleasure in his trade.

His voice was scratched and high as he gloated. ‘How many of your kind have I cornered in our city?’

‘There will be others that escape.’

‘Each in turn betrays himself and is discovered.’ Payne licked his lips. ‘As the swamp is drained, so more criminals are revealed.’

‘You revel in your certainty and yet are the one damned.’ The priest spoke with contempt. ‘One day there shall be judgement.’

Payne leered. ‘What should matter more to you is the hour your courage flees and you are drawn and quartered on the block.’

The prisoner was led away through the jeering and shouting throng. Grieving and troubled, a man with a learned face and kindly eyes offered up a silent plea of intercession and hurried from the scene. Father Henry Garnet would not falter in his ministry.

For its part, the English state would not waver in its fight to crush subversion and all that Garnet preached. To that end, among the transports and trading barques moored in the Pool of London, customs men and teams of searchers pursued their endless quest. Everything was suspect: a barrel might contain a false compartment and a length of rope conceal a message. The enemy were skilled in smuggling. Beneath dyed leathers from the Barbary Coast or timber from the Baltics could lie recusant texts. Paper trails that began in the hold of a ship often led to a provincial manor in the dead of night and the arrest of an entire household. There was a cold zeal to the madness.

In the hold of a merchantman, a searcher swung his lantern and followed the arc of its illumination. He was a patient soul, a committed bloodhound and veteran of countless discoveries once congratulated in person by Robert Cecil himself. He tapped a bulkhead with the edge of a chisel and worked his way along. A laborious task, but one he did not resent. He crouched to inspect a cluster of barrels and take his sounding. Salted fish were best left undisturbed. Yet something pricked his interest, a slight variation in the tone of the return, a difference in weight as he tried to tilt the barrels. Complacency had vanished.

‘You tread too close.’

The voice hissed behind him as a wire garrotte dropped down to loop fast about his throat. The searcher resisted but was quickly subdued. Deft hands applied pressure, forcing him face down on the ground, relieving him of his dagger.

‘Struggle and you will compound your woes.’ A knee pressed into his back and leather bindings were threaded around his wrists. ‘You were foolhardy to trespass.’

‘I do not trespass. It is my duty.’ Gasping against the wooden boards, the searcher summoned defiance. ‘There are others close, a score of men ready at my call.’

‘None will hear your cry.’ The ligature tightened.

‘There is gold and silver, gems that I keep safe.’

‘Still part of your duty?’

‘We find things, precious things,’ the searcher wheezed from his constricted throat.

‘And I find you.’ The assailant leant to kiss the top of the man’s head. ‘You have a name, hoarder?’

‘William Birch.’

‘So, William Birch. Assist and inform me and I shall let you live.’

Realm smiled to himself as he heard the searcher catch his breath, a subtle sign of relief. Realm had travelled far and for many reasons, for the purposes of revenge and self-enrichment and to aid the benighted Catholics of his homeland. Before his return, he had met those who intended to inflict cataclysm, and he admired the sheer scale of their enterprise. Their ambition was laudable and worthy of support, and Jesuits too constrained and passive in their aims. Where once he had planned to assassinate Queen Elizabeth, he could redirect his artistry to the murder of King James.

The interrogation was systematic and unhurried, Realm keeping a relaxed but purposeful grip on the garrotte. By the end he had gleaned many things and learnt of the corrupt and thieving ways of his victim. Realm felt no pity for him. The man was a dullard whose demise would serve as a waypoint to further acts. He slipped off the noose and rolled the captive onto his back.

‘You discover more aboard than you imagined, William Birch.’

‘I gave all that you demanded.’

‘For which you find me grateful.’ Realm gazed down upon the searcher’s strained and mottled features. ‘In truth, I engage in higher things and you impede my progress.’

Realisation dawned slowly. 'I have a wife and children, sir,' Birch spluttered.

'No doubt they will grieve.'

'We had an agreement!'

'Hush and be courageous.' Realm reached into the pouch at his belt. 'I believe our compact void.'

The stiletto blade was thin and sharp and fashioned from obsidian, the black volcanic glass punching through an eye direct into the brain. Death occurred before shock had even registered. Realm released his grip and studied the result, letting the corpse tremble and settle beneath him. Such a privilege to be present at a departure. He did not withdraw the blade, a weapon last favoured by the Aztecs: he was leaving a message and announcing his presence. Christian Hardy was not alone in having endured years of exile in the Americas.

Carefully, Realm laid a small silver crucifix across the remaining eye of the cadaver. Every Englishman would soon see the truth, arise and embrace the old religion or be cast into the pit, of that he was sure. With his encouragement and the flaming sword of Saint Michael as their guide, the chosen few would begin a process that would lead to the overthrow of government and the downfall of oppression. Any means were justified.

Within minutes, a new William Birch had emerged onto the main deck and crossed to the wharveside, where he mingled with a group of sailors thirsting for the taverns and heading to the City hinterland. Realm had started his mission.

"Lo, there was a great earthquake and the sun became black as sackcloth."

Five men were gathered at the table in an upstairs room of an inn off the Strand named the Duck and Drake. There was little remarkable in such a meeting and nothing to draw the eye, for in this fashionable quarter of London the wealthy and connected often convened in private to smoke and drink and play cards. The assembled gentlemen were eager to convey the impression that this was what they were doing, and yet such idle pastimes were far from their aim. Linked by blood or marriage or childhood acquaintance, they were drawn together by common cause

and Catholic faith and were intent on doing high treason. It was Sunday, 20 May 1604. Cecil had every reason to fear.

At the head of the table sat Robin Catesby, a tall, vibrant figure. Strong, handsome and charming, he was a natural leader. To his right was Tom Wintour, his cousin and adjutant, clearly in thrall to his command; to his left, Thomas Percy, an older man, grey-haired and slightly stooped, his manner impatient and ill-tempered. Beside Percy sat his brother by marriage, Jack Wright, a noted swordsman, the group's sentinel and enforcer. And across from him was the soldier Guido Fawkes; quiet and saturnine, he sat observing the rest, brought in to effect their wishes. Catesby, Wintour, Percy, Wright and Fawkes. Companions in doublets and high-crowned hats who had tired of waiting and were now committed irrevocably to the course of violence.

Catesby regarded them. 'Already the fifth seal of the Apocalypse is opened and the cries of the martyrs ring out. It is left to us to open the sixth and unleash a righteous cataclysm.'

'Amen to it,' Percy nodded. 'There is none but ourselves to slay the tyrant.'

Wintour poured claret into his goblet from a leather jack. 'You are right, brother. See how the Spanish offer soothing words and deliver nothing.'

'There is much to divert them.'

'I have heard every excuse from the Constable of Castile himself.' Wintour drank deep. 'Now he prepares to visit London and declare a treaty of peace.'

'Thus do English Catholics stand alone.'

Jack Wright spoke up. 'Scarce do they stand. They are bowed beneath the Protestant yoke, tormented and imprisoned, treated no better than dogs.'

'These dogs may bite.'

Cups slammed down in accord on the plank surface. Catesby leant back and listened to the men speak. He was glad for their fury and passion, for their loyalty to him and their support for decisive action. It would be a monstrous gamble. Yet disease required a cure and their people's desperate plight demanded a radical answer. All at the meeting would need to hold their nerve.

Finally, he sat forward. 'From this moment, there is no retreat. Here, the fuse is lit.'

'It is a wonder we will find the King.' Percy had gained possession of the flagon. 'He runs so scared of pestilence and regicide, he spends his days hunting in the country.'

'I could lead a mounted group and bring him down with sword and pistol,' suggested Wright.

Percy frowned. 'He is well defended and too much would be left to chance.'

'Chance will favour those that seize it.'

Catesby interrupted. 'Both of you are right and in your words are hid the answer.'

'Where then do we strike?' asked Fawkes.

'Parliament House.' Catesby let the silence hang for a moment, his eyes on the soldier. 'Gunpowder is your skill and Westminster our target.'

'You have great faith in me.'

'I have high expectations for us all. With one blow we shall transform the world and rid it of the Beast and his infernal government.'

'What of the aftermath?' asked Percy.

The leader looked at Percy. Mild shock still registered in the chamber, the audacity of Catesby's plan filtering slowly into the others' minds. He knew they would accept his reasoning. Outside, the usual rhythms and murmur of daily life continued unhindered by the words spoken here. One day it would be different; a pall of smoke would spread and his countrymen would notice. Catesby shut his eyes as though imagining the moment. 'Through ash and wreckage we will arise, our brother Catholics join us, our council act swiftly to decide the royal succession.'

'With whom do we replace the tyrant?'

'Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James, survivor of our inferno.' Catesby smiled and reopened his eyes. 'I offer you Queen Elizabeth the Second of England.'

'She is only seven years old,' Wright said doubtfully.

'The easier to be tutored in religion and guided in our ways. The better to be snatched from Coombe Abbey, where she holds court.'

Murder and kidnap were such plausible notions when discussed among friends. They had hoped and prayed that King James might

relent and lessen his grasp on the throat of their faith. But his grip became only tighter. There was no alternative to the route they pursued. On his own stubborn head would the small Scots interloper bring down the wrath of his opponents and, Catesby was resolved, the timbered roof of Parliament.

Fawkes was consuming a meat pasty, a soldier attuned to the practicalities of the scheme. 'And what if we should fail and the King live? If retribution is visited upon our fellow Catholics?'

'God wills it we succeed.' Catesby removed from his finger a gold ring and held it up before them. 'Marked here inside are the five wounds of Christ, a symbol of His sacrifice. We act in His name and will see it to the close.'

As it was a Sunday, they took communion from a Jesuit priest brought clandestinely to an adjoining room. Life and death had no value against the power of the sacrament. There were arrangements to make and gunpowder to acquire and men and materiel to gather. Five conspirators received the Host and pledged themselves to holy war and to deliverance.

Unaware of adult machinations or the proximity of her Coombe Abbey home in Warwickshire to the country manor of Robin Catesby, a young princess with fair hair and quick brown eyes sat to dutifully pick out notes on her virginal. She was a diligent and willing pupil. Yet on occasion her thoughts would stray to the things she missed, and in particular her beloved elder brother Henry. The most cosseted and privileged of lives could also be impoverished. Elizabeth paused at the instrument and stared awhile through the window to the moat and beyond to the herds of deer grazing peacefully in the parkland. Unlike her, they had freedom to roam.

