

**‘DARK AEMILIA’ A NOVEL
RE-IMAGINING HISTORICAL
CHARACTERS WITHIN A FICTIONAL
STORY; AND A CRITICAL THESIS:
‘INVENTING SHAKESPEARE’: IS THIS
RELEVANT TO 21ST CENTURY
WRITERS? A SHORT HISTORY OF
MADE-UP SHAKESPEARES AND AN
EXAMINATION OF THE CHALLENGE
OF RE-INVENTING ICONIC
HISTORICAL CHARACTERS.’**

Volume I

A thesis submitted
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

by

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September 2012

Abstract

Inventing Shakespeare – is this relevant to 21st century writers? A short history of made-up Shakespeares and an examination of the challenge of re-inventing iconic historical characters.

Motivation

When I set out to write a novel about Shakespeare's Dark Lady, I wanted the focus to be on her, not the Bard. However, as I developed the idea, I realised that his character was an essential component of the narrative. So how should I set about 'inventing' such an iconic character? In addition, how relevant were earlier versions – biographical and fictional – to this project? Though I found a wealth of material about Shakespeare and his plays, I discovered there is a substantial sub-genre of Shakespeare invention. As a writer new to historical fiction, this felt a little like putting Jesus Christ into a story – and it turned out that some writers have given Shakespeare a distinctly Messianic character.

Methods

In order to invent my own version of Shakespeare, I needed to assimilate what had gone before. The line between fact and fiction was blurred, but I clarified what was known and what unknown, and established what was myth. I then researched fourteen fictional versions of Shakespeare, starting with *Kenilworth* (Sir Walter Scott, Constable & Co, 1821) and ending with *Shakespeare's Memory* (Jorge Luis Borges, Penguin, 2001).

Results

My discovery was that the invention of history is a complex imaginative and intellectual process, but each writer solves a succession of challenges in their own way. Identifying these challenges helped me to create a new Shakespeare, and to clarify my own reasons for writing this particular novel.

Conclusions

Far from being a form which is nostalgic, escapist or conservative, historical fiction is continually re-inventing itself in the light of the events and ideas which are contemporary to the writer. The continuing evolution and re-acquisition of the character of William Shakespeare is an illustration of its perennial significance.

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Acknowledgements.

I would like to thank my supervisor Ms Celia Brayfield for her guidance and advice while researching and writing this thesis, and also my second supervisor, Dr Elizabeth Evenden.

Dark Aemilia

A Novel

by

Sally O'Reilly

Never before imprinted

*Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madman's are
At random from the truth, vainly expressed;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

William Shakespeare

Sonnet 147, l. 8 – 14

Dramatis Personae

Aemilia Bassano, later Lanyer, a Lady, Poet and Whore

William Shakespeare, a Poet

Alfonso Lanyer, a Recorder Player, husband to Aemilia

Henry Carey, First Baron Hunsdon, a Lord Chamberlain

Henry Lanyer, a Schoolboy, Aemilia's son

Joan Daunt, a Serving Woman

Inchbald, a Dwarf and Landlord

Kit Marlowe, a Poet and later Shade

Simon Forman, a Cunning Man and Lech

Tom Flood, a Player

Anne Flood, a Widow, mother of Tom

Moll Cut-purse, a Cut Purse and Cross Dresser

Elizabeth Tudor, a Queen

Richard Burbage, a Player and Sharer

Father Dunstan, a Priest

Parson John, a Cleric

Lettice Cooper, a Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen

Cuthbert Tottle, a Bookseller and Printer

Thomas Dekker, a Poet and Pamphlet-writer

Marie Wild, a Servant

Hecate, an Evil Spirit

Ann Shakespeare, wife to William Shakespeare

Various courtiers, players, musicians, street vendors, wives, servants, wherry men,
citizens, browsers, cozeners, plague-victims, apprentice boys and demons.

PROLOGUE

I am a witch for the modern age. I keep my spells small, and price them high. What they ask you for is the same as always. The common spells deal in love, or what love is meant to make, or else hate, and what that might accomplish. I mean the getting of lovers or babies (or the getting rid of them) or a handy hex for business or revenge. When a spell works, they keep you secret, and take the credit. When it fails, of course the fault is yours. So a witch is wise to be cautious, quiet, and hard to find.

That was true even before they started the burnings. Across the sea in Saxony and such places, whole market squares are set alight, the thatch roars up into the night, five score witches burn at once. Most would not even know how to charm a worm out of a hole. Old, and stupid, and too visible, that was their mistake. In England too, blood is let to put a stop to magic. I saw a witch hanged in Wildgoose Alley. They sliced off her hands and tongue, and split her down from neck to crotch, so all her guts spilled out before her eyes. They were like werewolves, mad for gore. I can still hear the voice she made with her wound-mouth, a call to Evil and a plague on all the lot of them. (This was a true witch, five hundred years old.)

But now I want to tell you my story. About Aemilia, the girl who wanted too much. Not seamed and scragged as I am now, but quick and shimmering and short of patience. About my dear son, who I loved too well. About my two husbands, and my one true love. And Dr Forman, that most lustful necromancer. I remember the silk dress I wore, all those years gone by, the first time I went to ask for his predictions. Yellow and gold, with a fine stiff ruff that crumpled in a breath of rain. How my skin was set dark against it, how the people stared when I rushed by.

ACT ONE
PASSION

Scene I

Whitehall, 1592

“The Queen!”

“The Queen comes! Lights, ho!”

It was a midwinter night and a Thames mist had crept over Whitehall, so the great sprawl of the palace was almost hid from sight.

“Bring lights!” came the voices again, and the doors of the great hall were flung open, and a hundred shining lanterns blazed into the foggy night, and serving men rushed out, torches aflame, to show the way.

And here she was, great Gloriana, and a light came off her too, as she progressed towards the wide entrance and its gaggle of waiting gentlemen, and the Master of the Revels puffing on the steps. If you never saw her then you will die the poorer, for there never was a mortal such as she. Behind her was the moving tableau of her ladies, silver and white like the nymphs of Nysa. Beyond them, the spluttering torches and the night sky. She was set among the fire-illuminated faces like a great jewel, so that as I looked at her I blinked to save my sight. Her face was white as bone, her lips the colour of new-spilt blood. Her eyes, dark and darting, took in all before her and gave nothing back. And her hair, the copper hue of turning-leaves, was dressed high in plaits and curlicues and riddled with pearls.

“Is Mr Burbage with us?” she demanded, as she set her small foot on the bottom step. “Is he within? We’ve heard this is a comedy – we want his promise we shall be forced to laugh.” I looked down at the skirts of her farthingale, which was of Genoa velvet, glittering with a multitude of ant-sized gems.

The Master of the Revels made his lowest bow. “He is waiting, Your Majesty. He and the playwright are inside.”

“Is it witty?” she demanded of him. “We are in peevish spirits. This cloaked-up night disquiets us.”

“I laughed until I thought I had the palsy,” said the Master of the Revels. “I trust it will divert Your Majesty.”

“Trust! Hmm. You are amusing us already. What did you say it was called?”

“It is ‘*The Taming of the Shrew*’, Your Majesty.”

“Ha!” said the Queen. Which could have meant anything. I followed her whispering, simpering retinue and we went inside.

At one end of the long banqueting hall was a grand archway, built after the manner of the theatre at Venice. It was surrounded by gold and marble columns, with a central vista which appeared to show a magnificent Roman street, and which had a plaster firmament above. King Henry built the banqueting hall in the years of his great glory, and the ceiling – which swirled with choirs of angels - seemed nearly high enough to reach to heaven itself, while the walls were hung with cloth of gold and tissue like the hazy outskirts of a dream. The most powerful lords and ladies in England were perched upon the stools and benches which were ranged before the stage, and above them all, upon a raised dais, stood the throne. It glittered as the pages bore their lanterns into the hall, dividing into twin processions of golden light. Even this seat itself had its own air of expectancy, as if it shared the Queen’s fine discernment and knew what made the difference between what was merely diverting, and what was worthy of royal acclaim. The Queen processed to her throne and sat upon it with great exactness, and her ladies arranged themselves around her.

When all were assembled and after much bowing and flummery, the play began. After a few moments, I saw that this was a work of the direst cruelty. And I formed the opinion that the playwright – whoever he might be - was nothing better a rat-souled scoundrel who thought that belittling a woman would make him twice the man. He was not content that a woman has no more freedom than a house dog, not he. Nor that she does not even own the chair she sits upon, nor go to school, nor follow a profession (unless she is a widow who must work in her dead husband's place). No. He must make a mock of her, and push her down still further, till her face is squashed into the street-mud. And what grates such fellows most of all is one like me: a woman with a fiery spirit, and a quick tongue.

He made his Katharine bold, only to call her “Kate” and starve her of both food and her right name. “What, did he marry me to famish me?” she asked, and I saw that it was so. A beggar is better treated than a scolding wife. If a woman is wise, she knows when to speak out, and when she must be silent. Even the Queen herself played a careful game, hiding behind paint and posture. Me? You'll soon learn I was never quiet enough.

There was a rustling all around me as the courtiers shifted and made way. The consort divided like the Red Sea, and one of their number, my pretty cousin Alfonso Lanyer, dropped his recorder. He caught my eye and winked at me, and I pretended not to see him. Alfonso was distinguished not by his playing, but by two bad habits: womanising and losing money at dice.

I saw that the cause of the commotion was the arrival of my lover, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, a man whose very tread made all around take notice. Upright and soldierly for this was his profession for many years. He did not suffer fools; he did not suffer anyone. Excepting only the Queen (who was his cousin) and me. He

was forty years older than I was, so you may think we were like May and December in the old stories. But the truth was I felt lustful at the sight of him: we had been love-making that afternoon and it was still sharp in my memory. When we had finished, he washed and clothed me with his own hands in the fine new dress I was wearing now. The farthingale was even wider than I was used to, so it seemed I had a whole chamber swinging round my hips. The skirts were Bruges satin, of popinjay blue, and the sleeves were tinselled silk, stitched with narrow snakes of silver. As a final gift, he had coiled my hair into a caul of sapphires. When I looked in the mirror, my reflection was so perfect that it made me afraid. I, who was not afraid of anything.

I kissed him when he sat beside me.

“God’s blood, this is a rum play, by the looks of it,” he whispered. “What’s it all about? Can’t he find a better jade to please him?”

I put my fingers to my lips. “She won’t obey him, sir,” I muttered into his ear, “He is hooked in, by her haughty ways, and then sets out to punish her.”

“What nonsense,” said Hunsdon, rather loudly. “A man must choose a woman that suits his fancy, not seek to change some baggage that does not. Fellow must be a barking fool.”

“Hush, my lord,” I said. There was laughter and I cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. He seized my hand and held it in both his own.

But then I was caught by Katherine’s voice. She spoke the words of a woman beaten, or pretending to be beaten, which is much the same:

“Such duty as the subject owes the prince,

Even such a woman oweth to her husband,

And when she is forward, peevish, sullen, sour,

*And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel,
And graceless traitor to a loving lord?"*

"I have another gift for you," whispered Hunsdon, pulling me closer. "A waistcoat of quilted silver sarsenet." For a soldier, he had a cunning eye for fashion.

"My Lord! Another present?"

"I will give it to you when you come to my rooms. Tonight?"

"If you like."

He squeezed my hand.

*

After the play had finished and Kate was crushed and made the most obedient of wives, there was much clapping and cheering. The Queen raised her hand. She was smiling, but her eyes were cold.

"We want to see the playwright!" she commanded. "Where is he? Let him step forward!"

He came from behind a pillar, slightly hesitant. "Your Majesty," he said, with an actor's bow. He was tall, lean, and watchful, with deep set eyes. And artful in his dress, with gold earrings and fine gloves.

She regarded him for a moment, her smile in place. "A bawdy tale, more fit for a country inn than for a monarch and her great court, would you not say?"

He bowed again. He looked pale. "I would say there is low life in it, and high flown characters too, such as the person of Bianca."

The Queen's smile disappeared. "A lesson, if anyone is listening, that might teach a lady to beware of being fenced in for a wife. First they trap you, then they

seek to change you. And those of us with a handsome dowry must be wariest of all.” Her ladies giggled at this, shimmering in their silver robes.

“It is a fable, Your Majesty, not taken from the life.”

This was in the nature of a contradiction. The room gasped, silently. All eyes were on the Queen’s face. Her expression was blank, her vermilion mouth a flat line. “We do not need a lesson from you in the antecedents of your little drama. We saw the play *A Knack to Know a Knave* at Nonesuch last summer. There is nothing new under the sun, least of all your plot.”

Then, with a sudden smile her mood seemed to change.

“We are grateful to you for showing us what we already know. Sometimes, in our experience, this is desirable in a drama. Sometimes we want fairyland, and wild diversion spread before us, and sometimes we want to be confirmed in our most sensible opinion. Our opinion being, in this case, that marriage favours men.”

The playwright, looking ill at ease, bowed again.

“Was it not your intention? To show women the dangers of the married state? To have us run from such enslavement, in which our husband will be our lord and master in the eyes of God?”

The playwright cleared his throat. “I intended, Your Majesty, to tell a good tale of an unruly woman, who found her true vocation in the...”

The Queen interrupted him. “Do you have such a wife?”

He blinked. “Such a...?”

“Such a one as this. One ‘peevish, sullen, sour’ who does not know her place.”

“Her place, Your Majesty, is in Stratford, and mine is in London.”

There was a silence for a moment, then the Queen began to laugh, and all around her laughed too. The grinning players looked sideways at the poet. The Queen

flipped her hands, dismissing him, and the audience broke apart in a clamour of excited talk. It was a gay scene. The new play was a success.

Hunsdon swept off to consult with Her Majesty on some urgent matter, and I found myself alone in the great hall, sitting stiffly on a stool. All that I could think of was this Katharine and her plight, and the cruel way that she was brought to heel. I have never had a tearful nature, but it was all I could do to stop myself from crying as I sat there, and I could not have said if it was the Shrew I wanted to weep for, or myself. And yet why should I weep? I had a suite of rooms near St James' Park, and a lusty lord who loved me.

I felt a presence, shadow-like, and turned my head. It was the playwright. He bowed, even more deeply than he had done before the Queen.

I stood up, my bright skirts whirled, and the stool fell over.

"I know you," said he, which was hardly courtly.

I nodded.

"Aemilia Bassano."

I nodded again.

"I've seen you... talking..."

I curtsied, mockingly. Wonders would never cease – a comely woman who could speak!

He took a step nearer. "So... brightly. So... full of erudition. I've heard you quoting Ovid. Like a scholar!"

His incredulity pricked me into speech. "They brought me up at Court," I said. "I'm a musician's orphan."

I looked at him, his dark-rimmed eyes. What was he after? Most men left me alone, fearing the wrath of Hunsdon. But this one had a reckless look to him.

“Why so silent?” he asked.

“I’m silent when I need to be. If it were otherwise, I’d be a fool.”

“Silent with Lord Hunsdon?”

“That’s no business of yours.”

“But you speak with him?”

“Of course I do! I’m not the Sphinx.”

He looked me up and down. “The words you choose must be poetical indeed.

To earn such splendour.”

“I am the Lord Chamberlain’s mistress.”

“And for that great rank you sold your virtue?”

“How dare you speak like that to me!”

He waited, as if expecting me to say more, but I did not oblige him.

“Silent again?”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“And yet, I can see you thinking.”

“O, surely! My thoughts are there for all to look upon, because my head is made of glass.”

“I believe that you say very little, compared to what is in your mind.”

“You have no idea how much I talk, or what I say. You don’t know who I am, or what I know. But, as your play showed us, if she is to prosper, a woman sometimes needs to act the mouse. Wasn’t that your message? Better a pliant mouse than a wicked shrew?”

“Are you such a one? A secret, wicked shrew?”

I breathed deeply, wondering that my heart was beating so loudly, my face burned and yet I shivered with rage. And then the words poured out:

“I wish that you had killed poor Katherine! I’d rather you had abused her in the Roman style, and made her eat her own children baked inside a pie! Why give her fine and dazzling speeches, only to gag her and make her drab?”

He boggled at me in disbelief. “I...*what* do you say?”

“There’s not a scene in your bloody ‘Titus’ that made my heart weep as did this dreadful tale! Shame on you, for humbling that brave soul!”

“*What?*”

“Shame on you. Your play is cruel, and beast-like, sir.”

He smiled, very slowly. Then he turned and strode away. When he reached the door, he called out over his shoulder: “You are the most beautiful woman at the court. But I expect you know that. There’s no one else comes near you.”

My head reeled, my guts were water, but I gathered myself, righted the stool and said: “That poisonous play is what passes for poetry, is it? If you are in the company of Men and strut in hose?”

He stopped, one hand on the door handle and turned to look at me.

I knew I had said too much already, but it seemed I could only carry on. “Some lame tale of witless, vile humiliation? A woman-hater’s boorish jape? I could do better myself, I swear. I’d make such a mockery of Man that nobody would pity him.”

He forced a sort of laugh. It was a strange noise, almost like a sob. Then he came back, took me by the shoulders and kissed my lips. He tasted of river salt. Afterwards, he pushed me gently from him, saying: “I wish you joy of Hunsdon, and your perfumed palace bed.”

“Thank you, sir. In that, I shall oblige you.”

“You’re his mouse, but I would that I could make you my shrew.” Before I could find the words to answer, he was gone.

Scene II

I did not sleep well that night, nor any other for a fortnight after. And Hunsdon was out of sorts himself, complaining of cramps in his calves and pains in his belly. One night, as I lay tossing and turning and trying to find a cool place on the bolster, I rolled over to see him lying still, looking up into the darkness.

“I am growing old, Aemilia,” he said. “I shan’t live much longer.”

I curled myself around him, suddenly overwhelmed with tenderness and fear.

“Harry! What are you saying?”

“It is only the truth. You will outlive me. You will be out in the world, walking in the streets, lusted for by all who see you, and I will be dead and buried, and who knows what will happen? I was selfish to take you for my mistress.”

“No.”

“And ruin you.”

I swallowed. “No one could have loved me better.”

“Another man could have married you,” said Hunsdon. “I was greedy.” He pulled the counterpane around him, and twisted his old body away from me, and after a moment he began to snore, and it was my turn to lie there, staring at the dark.

*

Next morning, I woke late. Hunsdon had gone, but I saw he had bought me yet more gifts: a pair of new sleeves, embroidered with gold angel wings, silk gloves as pale as hoar-frost and a dainty silver knife in a leather sheath. I drew this out and looked at it. Surely it was bad luck to give such a weapon to your love? I turned it this way and that, looking at the sunlight glinting on the silver blade. I touched its sharp

tip with the end of my finger, and it drew a tiny drop of blood, no bigger than a ladybird. I licked the blood, wondering why God had made it taste so sweet.

I tried to distract myself with finery. I put on a yellow silk dress, and the new sleeves, and a wonderful ruff that made me look like the Faerie Queene. I made a mouth at myself in the glass and recited some lines from Spenser's great poem from memory:

"If you have beauty praised, let her sole looks divine

Judge if aught therein be amiss, and mend it by her eyes.

If Chastity want aught, or Temperance her due,

Behold her princely mind aright, and write your Queen anew

Meanwhile she shall perceive how far her virtues soar

Above the reach of all that live, or such as wrote of yore."

Then I leaned forward and kissed myself, blurring my own image with my hot breath. Lord, what was this yearning? Was I going mad? There must be sanity in Latin. In Plato, surely, so I called on him to help me. All of the thirty six dialogues were ranged tidy in my head. But none of them were any use to me now. Instead, another plain and lumpen English phrase came to mock me, some words from Gower: "It hath and shall be evermore, that love is master where he will." Love! My mind was a mess of twisted things, like a squiggling heap of worms.

I went over to the window seat and looked down into the park through the small panes that made neat squares of my view. It was a clear, bright day and the leafless branches of the oak trees were stark against the sky. When I pushed the window open the air was sharp, and I could smell wood smoke and hear the hoarse cry of a stag somewhere in the forest. Yet I must not be distracted. I took up a sheet of

foolscap that lay beside me and the quill that I had newly sharpened. I dipped in my silver inkpot and paused, the shining nib suspended over the white sheet. I was writing a poem for Hunsdon, in the courtly style. Why, you ask? I thought some fine lines might pin my passion to my lord. Besides which, words had the effect of calming me, like a long drink of ale. I loved to read poetry, and yearned to write it, but what was in my head and what came out upon the paper were never even near the same. I had two lines so far:

“My Lord is like a damask rose

He smiles at me where e’re he goes...”

Could a lord be like a rose? In truth, Hunsdon was more like a handsome thistle. But “rose” was easier to rhyme. For “thistle” I had only “gristle”, which would not do. I tried to think of some more martial flower. A plant with dignity and strength - and a straight back. No name came to me. My mind was restless and distracted. Each poet, they say, must suffer for love before he finds his Muse. And I was suffering now.

A harvest mouse was climbing in the ivy growing outside. It was twisting its long tail around the stalks, and looked so dainty and moved so quick that it seemed fairy-like, and as though a breath of wind might send it flying through the air. I thought of my conversation with the playwright. A secret shrew, was I? Or like this creature, a little mouse? I wondered what it would be like, to be its size and scurry into the wainscot, hidden from public sight. But if I went from here, what was there? The city streets were full of fire and noise and pestilence, and beyond them lay the brutal fields. So where was *my* place? I had rather be a female Colossus, naked to the waist, striding all of London with a foot on each side of the Thames. I would look

down upon the sprawl of Whitehall and its chequer board of courts and gardens, then wade across the sea to France and stroll to floating Venice and its brighter sun.

O Lord. It was no use. This was not a day to stay dutifully indoors. What would become of me? I wanted to know. Why did Hunsdon tell me suddenly that I was “ruined”? Could it be true? I had never seen myself in such a way, being given to bold thoughts about my future. Was I not admired and respected at the Court? Hadn’t I shifted well for myself, though a bastard and an orphan, so that I was now ensconced in splendour at the heart of England? Great men pushed and shoved and spent their entire fortunes to be part of the Queen’s circle, and here I was: at its centre. Even she had told me that I was mightily well read, and sometimes spoke to me in Greek as she passed by. I was still young and beautiful and clever. Yet had I thrown away all hope of making my own stamp upon the world? Could this be possible?

There are ways, of course, to throw light upon such questions. If that learned necromancer Dr Dee had been at the Palace, I might have asked him to give me a reading, since his charts were by far the best in London, and he had always been kind to me. He once showed me the magic mirror that he had presented to the Queen, in which she always looked young and handsome. But he was back at Mortlake now, and not so often at the Court. The Queen believed, I think, that she had magical qualities of her own. (Since she had been chosen by Almighty God himself.) Thus, her royal touch could cure diseases, and her powers of perception exceeded those of any low-born man.

What to do? What to *do*? I could not be still. All the while, I seemed to see that playwright looking at me as if he was examining all my thoughts and secrets. What a vile, impertinent and damnable fellow! It was all too much. I called my servant Alice, and made her lend me her oldest cloak and most unbecoming coif, an

ugly linen hood with strange ear-pieces. Tying it under my chin, I paid her a silver sixpence to keep silent, and took up a nosegay of sweet herbs. Then I crept down the back staircase of my apartments, which led to the stable yard, and headed for the river and Whitehall Stairs.

*

Dr Dee was not the only famous necromancer in London. There were plenty of charlatans – like the notorious Edward Kelley - but also some whose fame recommended them. Not as renowned as Paracelsus or Tycho Brahe, perhaps, but we had John Lambe and Martin Crake and of course the crippled Huguenot Pierre Sanguin. And there was one other that I knew of, a most extraordinary character. He lived at Billingsgate, quite near the Tower, and his name was Simon Forman. I'd heard much about him, and read a pamphlet he had wrote, which told how he had summoned the spirit of a murderer in the shape of a black dog. He lived at Stone House, in the re-vestry of St Botolph's church on Thames Street.

I made my way in haste along the narrow streets with my vizard down, picking my way around the spewed filth and avoiding the stinking kennel that gushed along beside my feet. The bright sky seemed further from me now, high and pure and unreachable. I looked up, and saw the clouds banked into linen piles, a pattern of swallows turning first this way, then that. Between us was a veil of hidden spirits, waiting, watching, depending on mortal frailty. I crossed myself, and hurried on.

Dr Forman's door was opened by an odd-looking little man, shorter than I was, with red hair, freckled skin and a yellow beard. He reminded me of a scrawny tabby cat. Yet he was dressed to some effect, in a long purple robe with fur-trimmed sleeves, and had a confident and sprightly manner. There was no doubt that I had come to the right place.

“You are late,” he said.

“No, sir, there must be some confusion. I am not expected.”

He beckoned me inside. “Indeed, you are late, and most assuredly, you are expected.”

“Is this a riddle?”

“No indeed, I am speaking quite plainly. I am not sure of your name yet, but you are entirely the person whose arrival I anticipated.”

“I do not see how you can ‘expect’ a person who is unknown to you,” I said. “Perhaps, more exactly, what you mean is that you were expecting a customer. And here I am.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Dr Forman. “It is most assuredly you yourself. I saw that yellow dress. Though I don’t believe the cap is yours, nor yet your dag-tailed cloak.”

I sat down on the chair he offered, too anxious and confused to argue further, reminding myself that even those of great repute might resort to cozeners’ tricks, and looked around me. It was a lofty, ecclesiastic room, with a chill coming off the walls in spite of the log fire in the hearth. There was not much furniture, and no hangings to make it seem more homely. Indeed, it still had much the feeling of a monk’s cell about it. Two chairs were drawn up by the fireplace, and a little way away was a table set between two benches. What was remarkable about the chamber was that it also contained a number of curious instruments, and there were strange charts and pictures on the walls which would not have been acceptable in any monastery. And there was a globe held on a cedar wood stand; a quadrant, five foot high, used to measure the altitude of the stars; an astrolabe; a compass and a watch clock, with seconds marked around its rim.

“Now, let me see...” He sat down beside me and looked at me intently. “You say you know who I am?”

“You are Simon Forman. A necromancer. And you cured yourself of the plague.”

“Correct, insofar as that is of course my name, correct in that I have a physick for the pestilence, incorrect in this: “necromancer” is not my occupation. I am a physician.”

“There are as many degrees of *that* profession as there are lice upon a doxy’s head.”

He smiled at me. I noticed that his eyes seemed paler at the centre, around his pupil. An odd effect. “I will expect a payment,” he said.

“Which unifies all degrees of men.”

He laughed, put on a pair of spectacles and rummaged around in a wickerwork basket, humming to himself. Taking out a leather bound volume and some papers, he cleared his throat, picked up his quill, dipped it in his ink-pot and said:

“Name?”

“I thought you knew me.”

“No, my dear, I merely said I was expecting you. Your name?”

“Aemilia Bassano.”

He looked at me over his spectacles, his ginger eyebrows raised. “Indeed! Most interesting.” He scribbled, smiling. “This is fortunate, a most auspicious turn indeed...”

After a moment, he put his quill down and cleared his throat again. “Now, what do you know about magic?”

“That it exists. That there are wise men who have spent years learning about it, and wise women, who know what they are about through instinct and old tales.”

“Aha! Yes. I knew that you were clever.”

I flushed in spite of myself. “By looking at me?”

“From your reputation. And your *extra-ordinary* manner. Has the Lord created a separate degree for you? I cannot for the life of me see where you fit.”

“I don’t need to ‘fit’, sir. I will find my own place.”

“You are a scholar, so I have heard?”

“I believe I know as much as any lord, and more than all ladies, excepting only our great Queen.”

“A bold claim! There are great ladies whose knowledge of the ancients is far in excess of mine.”

“I speak of knowledge, sir, which is not the bed-equal of learning. A fool may learn, but what will he know? Teach a jackanapes his Latin, and he can cant out Cicero. I speak of what comes from learning. I speak of understanding.”

“I see. And where has this ‘understanding’ taken you?”

“To the brink of what can be borne. To a certainty that what contains me will always be too small. To a fear that I shall not be happy. To the quest for a twin soul.”

He wrote something down, which looked more like a picture than words. “A freak, are you? A misbegot?”

“I am myself.”

“Ah.” He smiled sadly. “I see. Even worse than I thought.” He wrote again, this time in a tiny, squirly hand. I saw that the page was already filled; the writing coming at all angles.

He sat back in his chair, settled himself more comfortably in his robes, and said: "I can tell you a little of your future if you will tell me a little of your past. I confess, I am curious about you. I see rich widows and court ladies and all manner of womenfolk in their various degrees, but I have never seen one quite like you."

So I told him. I told him that though it is true that I am used to city smoke and the crashing busy-ness of streets and close-houses stuffed with all varieties and versions of the Human Form, I had not always lived like this. After my father's death, and the hidden rivalries which had led to his most bloody taking off, my mother sent me to live in the house of Lady Susan Bertie, where I was truly happy. (And where I had my peculiar education, for Lady Susan and her family were of the rare opinion that it is not possible for a woman to know too much.)

I told him that I did not think of myself as clever, or unusual, or in any manner different from any other girl whose father had been murdered before her eyes, whose mother was an absence, or for whom music and poetry were a daily joy. I saw myself only as myself, and thanked merciful GOD for the chance I had to live in Lady Susan's household.

"Why did your mother send you there?"

"I don't know. She had no money, and no protector. I suppose she was glad to send me anywhere. Lady Susan had seen me with my father at the court, and took a fancy to me, I believe. She was surprised that I knew Latin."

He stroked his beard. I confess, it was annoying me that he wasn't writing more notes, though I supposed he would recall most of what I was telling him, as scholars do.

"Who killed your father?"

“I don’t know that either. Some years before his death there was a first attempt, and one man was hanged for it, and the other banished. It was never spoken of.”

“But why? Why was he murdered?”

I shrugged. “Murder is common enough.” I did not say that I felt it was all bound up with the extraordinary beauty of his music, and with his being a Jew.

(Though, like the rest of the Bassanos, he kept this secret.)

“But your relations lived at Spitalfields.”

“Yes. And I lived there too, till my father’s death.”

I knew that I was happy, that first seven years, and when I wondered why so much of what I remembered was like a giant’s eye view of people far below, I realised it was because Baptiste had been in the habit of walking with me on his shoulders. I remembered tangling my fingers in his black, curling hair, and seeing the panorama of the streets and fields stretching out around me, and the sudden knowledge that this was a busy and various world, and that behind one thing lay another, and then another, and this roof-muddle and chimney-forest and melee of men and carts and horses was all around, on every side. And that oak trees grew in the middle of the city, and the River was wide while shit-gushing kennels were narrow, and kites dined on pigeons and dogs licked offal from scarlet butchers’ steps. The Jesuits say a child is theirs for life if they have him for seven years. You may laugh at the suggestion, but I have often wondered if being carried on my father’s shoulders in this manner made me see the world through his eyes. I have always had such an elevated opinion of myself (so I am told) and so little concern about where others wish to see me. And perhaps it was his tenderness that gave me my reverence for love.

My memory of my father had distracted me. Forman was writing in his book. “So can you advise me?” I asked.

“What I am dealing with is the higher magic,” said he, without looking up. He stopped writing and looked at the nib of his pen. “Which is the study of such sciences as astrology - the prediction of men’s fate by making a study of the stars - and alchemy – in which base metal is turned into gold. Your wise woman, on the other hand, deals in what I like to call household magic, the stuff of life.”

“Of love and sickness and herbal remedies and the like. Simple enough. Any fool might understand the difference.”

“Of course, of course, it is very simple indeed, yet not all of my clients are as *knowledgeable* as you are. Let us say, to put it crudely, that the wise woman deals with magic pertaining to the body, whereas high magic is the magic of the mind.” He tapped his forehead. “In short, it is a wondrous thing. It is *science*.”

“Which leaves aside the simple fact that our enquiring mind is contained within our earthly body. Like all distinctions made within your ‘science’, this is merely conjecture, a chosen supposition.”

“Dear lady, I could indulge my taste for dialectic with you all day, but we must get on.”

So off we went. The doctor asked me a host of questions, and then he set to, armed with the date of my birth (January 27th. Sun sign: Aquarius) and the place (St Botolph’s, Bishopsgate: Nationality: alien.) And parents (Baptiste Bassano, a Jew, of Venice, and Margaret Johnson. Legal status: bastard.) He measured and reckoned and muttered and wrote, and took books down from this bookshelf and put them back again, and considered me from between half closed eyes and wrote down some further observations. And then he measured and muttered at his instruments, and drew some

circles and filled them in, and looked at them and then even came and peered into my eyes as if I was a pike on a market stall. At the end of it I thought he must be able to itemize me, translate me into Latin, Greek and Hebrew, recall my dreams, share my thoughts and take on my shape and lie with Hunsdon, he had made me such a study.

“Well?” I said, starting to feel irritable and seeing the shadows getting longer. “I’d like to get home before they shut the gates and the Watch comes out.”

“Yes, another moment, please!” he said. “I am making sure that this is right. It seems to me that your destiny comprises two lives, not one. Which is unusual, as you may imagine.”

Finally, he looked up and smiled, showing exceptionally black and rotten teeth, and said: “It’s done.”

“So... what is my future?” I asked. “What will happen to me?”

“Ask me a question, and I will tell you.”

“Will Lord Hunsdon die?”

“Yes. But so shall we all.”

“What were all those piffling incantations for, if this the best you have to offer me? On which date will my dear lord meet his Maker?”

“I cannot tell.”

“Then your prognostications are quite useless.”

“But I can say this – you will not be with him when that day comes.”

I felt a jolt of panic. “Where shall I be?”

“Elsewhere.”

“By Our Lady! Can’t you tell me anything? Who shall I be with?”

“Someone you already know.”

“And... what will become of me?”

“Too vague. Ask me a proper question.”

“Shall I be married?”

“Yes.”

“To one I love?”

“No.”

“Then I am doomed.”

“But you will truly love. Your love will be...” He looked down at his notebook. “Your love will be the better part of you.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Will I bear children?”

“Yes.”

“And will they thrive?”

“I cannot say.”

I stood up. “You have sat there, for all that time, looking at me as if you could read every fragment of my existence like one of your queer old books, and you can’t tell me anything that’s any use at all!”

“No use? I thought I was being most informative.”

I tossed a crooked florin at him. “There’s your fee – I’m not parting with a penny more.”

He picked it up. “I wouldn’t want more. It is a pleasure doing business with a lady of such passion. But you, on the other hand, should want a great deal more than this.”

“Of course I want more! Did I not just say so? I want to know... what will become of me.”

“But you aren’t asking nearly enough.” The look he gave me now was not lecherous, but thoughtful, as if what he had seen in my charts had made him warm to me. Or fear for me. I could not tell which.

“What do you mean?”

“It is not simply that you should ask more questions, Aemilia. My meaning is... that you should think more clearly about who you are. And about what you would become.”

“I told you what I am. I am myself. I am Aemilia.”

“And what is this ‘Aemilia’? Is her life defined by love and children?”

“What else is there?”

“What of art? What of that clever mind of yours, all the Plato and the Seneca which furnishes it? There is something trapped behind that siren’s face. You’ve as good as said so.”

“Could learning be my destiny?”

“Do you want it to be?”

I frowned, uncertain. “Could *poetry*?”

He beamed, and dipped his quill once more into the pot. “How your eyes shone when you said that word! Poetry! Why is it that so many of this great city’s good people come to see me, ready to reward me with their silver, but yet afraid to speak of their true desires? Poetry, indeed!”

I felt a pang of hope and recognition. “Then... what is your prediction?”

“You will be remembered.”

“For poetry?”

“Perhaps.”

“Or love?”

“It’s possible.”

“Oh.” I tried to take this in, and peered over his shoulder at the sheet chest in the corner of the room, as if the future might be spread there.

The light was fading. He lit a candle. “There is one more thing you want to ask me.”

My mind said: “Ask him! Ask him, you fool!” But I did not know how to begin. “I don’t have any other questions,” I said.

“Then why did you come?”

“I could not settle.”

“No.” He smiled his irksome smile.

“What do you mean...no?”

“You never will. You said so yourself.” He leaned forward and, to my horror, kissed me gently on the mouth. His breath was hot and sour. “I’d ask you to stay with me...longer. But I fear you’d break my heart.”

I pushed him away. “I’d break your head, sir, before I broke anything.”

He stood up, frowning, and fetched my cloak. As he put it about my shoulders, he said: “His name is Shakespeare. William Shakespeare.”

“Whose name?” But I knew. Of course I knew.

“The playwright you want so badly.”

“What...?”

“He will be your lover. At least I hope so, for if you won’t have him he’ll run as mad as Legion.”

“Possessed by evil spirits?”

“Driven insane by wild desire. Judging from *his* chart, that would be a national deprivation.”

I stared at him, finally astonished by his science.

Forman fixed me with his weird gaze. “Intense sort of fellow. It doesn’t take an astrologer to see that.”

“You know him?”

“He was here this very morning.”

“What?”

He opened the door. “Be careful how you go. Those stairs are slippery.”

Scene III

Two days later Alice rushed into my chamber all fly-brained and affected. She was a silly girl and I could see she had recently been conversing with some man she thought important, or handsome at the very least.

“I have a letter, mistress,” she said, pink in the face.

I flinched. There was not a hair’s breadth between what I most feared and what I wanted more than anything. Anyone who has loved two men at once knows that it’s not an abundant feeling, but mean and sweaty and undignified.

“Give it to me,” I said. It was a long slip of foolscap, the colour of butter cream, folded and sealed with red wax. Alice stood, smiling, at the foot of the bed, as if she was expecting to watch me break the seal. “Get out, you brainless creature!” I said. “And...”

“Yes, mistress?”

“You are free for the rest of the day. Go and see your mother at Islington. The country air will do you good.”

“But... mistress!”

“Go on!” I threw the letter on to the table as if I was not interested in its contents. “My lord is coming soon, and wants to see me alone.”

“But I thought...”

“Alice! Go!”

As soon as I heard the door to my apartment close I grabbed the letter and tore it open. It had to be from *him*. It had to be.

It was.

Dark Aemilia,

I do not know how to address you, meaning, with what form of embellishment, so let there be none. You find me churlish and insulting, you would rather live an easy life than one with me – not that I would ask you to live with me – as you know I have a wife, and as you may not realise, also children. So. I have walked the streets of London these past weeks till the very cobblestones cried out for me to stop. I have seen necromancers in search of the antidote to these violent, obsessive and lunatic cravings, a cure for foolish and forbidden love. I have been drunker than I had thought possible (I am generally given to sober industry and good fellowship.) I have made myself so ill with this that I felt it must be a form of penance for a sin that I have committed only in my heart.

What do I wish to ask you? Not to exist? Never to have existed? To return to my mind and stay there? For I fear I may have conjured you from my febrile imaginings. I thought that you were locked up safely in my mind. I thought that in this actual, tangible world, women were just as women are. Which is to say – loud strumpets in foul taverns; dull ladies in fine houses; vain damsels waiting on the Queen. Or serving wenches, or dairy maids, or worldly widows... the common run of women in their place, with the qualities that place prescribes. But what are you? A scholar or a mistress? A temptress or a wife? An angel or a witch? I cannot say. And as I cannot, I don't know what I want to ask.

But I do. I do know what I want to ask. But I cannot and will not ask it.

There is a fine play on at the Bel Savage Inn, off Ludgate Hill, written by my friend Kit Marlowe. It is a play that I think – from what little I have seen of your character – might interest you. The title is “Dr Faustus”. I will be there this

afternoon. I expect you are engaged in some palatial busyness already. I am certain that this will be the case.

If you come, come alone, and dress plainly. It's not Whitehall Palace. It's not even as respectable as the Rose. I will be outside at half past one. To take the air, you understand. It will be of no matter to me if you are not there, and I do not, indeed, expect you. Nor can I quite believe that I am writing these words at all, nor that I shall seal this note and entrust it to some messenger. No, I will take the thing myself.

I am your most troubled, distracted and unworthy servant

Will Shakespeare

Well. You may be sure that I read this delirious missive in a state of trembling disbelief. Twice. Then a third time, hardly breathing. He had lost his reason, poor fellow. I had heard that this was sometimes the way with poets. Of course I could not go. A royal mistress has a position to maintain, and her reputation to consider. And he was treating me like a common street-whore, truly. There was no question of accepting such a preposterous invitation. (To an inn, no less! To see a play! And “alone” – what could he be thinking of?) If he wasn't mad he was determined to insult me. There is a class of man who would as soon humiliate a woman as lie with her, and again, those of a poetic disposition are often afflicted with this vice.

And more – he was asking me to lower myself to this station, of tavern-doxo, behind the back of my protector, the great Lord Chamberlain himself. The words blurred in front of me when I thought of this. The affront to Hunsdon was even greater than the insult to me. All I had to do was show this little love-note to my Lord and William Shakespeare would be shut out of London's play-world and doubtless

locked up in the Clink as well. The risk he took was out of all proportion to the pleasure he might gain. Oh.

I sat down, there, upon the rush strewn floor, and willed my body not to lust for something so ridiculous, willed my skin to harden and my loins to... well. My mind not to summon up that profane word: "loins". I was fond of Lord Hunsdon, and he had treated me with respect and sweetness for six long years. I had no position, no family. Hunsdon was like a father to me, as well as a loving spouse. This longed-for letter was a vile temptation and a deceiver's snare.

I closed my eyes, and saw William's face again. So I opened them, blinking. Some speak of love as fever – if this was a sort of love, it was a vicious malady indeed. Even the memory of his salt-kiss jolted me. ("And yet, who are you, to think about adultery?" said the devil standing behind me. "You are no one's wife. Hunsdon's marriage bed is cold because of you. There is no virtue in your nature. You are just a whore, what's to stop you now? Let William have you, if he wants you, just as Henry has.") His letter had infected me with his insanity. My life depended on my destroying this unworthy note, and forgetting that I ever saw it. I tore it into a hundred tiny pieces, went to the fireplace and tossed the fragments onto the flames. One tiny piece of paper fluttered down and fell among the ashes. On it was written "Faustus".

*

Eddies of snow flurried from the cold grey clouds. My cloak was too thin, and my horse Frey's hooves slipped and slithered on the hard ground. As he trotted along Fleet Street, I shivered in the icy chill. Yet I was grateful to the slicing wind for it distracted my mind. All I could think was how much I wished to sit before a roaring fire. If there was a poet there, so be it. If he was William Shakespeare, what of it? Or

so I nearly thought, as Frey crossed the bridge over Fleet River. The Bel Savage was, I knew, close by. I had been there to see a new play with my lord. When I had come before, I had been borne upon a barge along the river, then taken in a private carriage from Blackfriars stairs. This time I had only my grey cob to carry me, and when I saw the squat shape of the Inn and the clustering stables around it, I faltered, and pulled him to a walk. Even from this distance, I could hear the sound of an old ballad being belted out in chorus, and shouts and laughter.

I was minded to turn Frey's head, and ride back to Whitehall when I saw a man, walking towards me along the road. Broad-shouldered, and with a countryman's gait, easy and long-limbed. It was strange to see the playwright in the open air. In my mind's eye he was always cooped up with his pages, or cheek-by-jowl with others of his sort, in some crowded city tavern.

He stopped, and held the bridle, and we looked at each other for a moment, then swiftly looked away. "Is it really you, Aemilia?" said William.

"So it would seem."

"The fevered champion of shrews and vixens? I can scarce believe it."

"I am still their champion," said I. "Fevered or otherwise." But then realised I was addressing myself to my horse's yellowed mane. I wriggled my feet free of the stirrups and William helped me down, and I felt the hardness of his arms through his thick sleeves. But I dared not look at him, and sensed that he dared not look at me. We must have seemed like two gaping fools, staring this way and that, as if the white sky and the cold street filled us with astonished wonder. My skin burned and my heart was pounding and I wanted to turn and run.

"I didn't think you'd come," said he, patting Frey's nose.

"Nor did I," said I. "Nor should I have."

“I have a room...”

“Indeed!”

“I mean - to see the play. In private.”

“I have a mask.” I pulled my vizier down, foolishly, so that my blushing face was hidden.

He came forward and took my hand, and kissed the tips of my gloved fingers as if I was the Queen herself. I saw his own hands were long, fine-boned and marked with lamp-black. Our eyes jolted together, and I felt something swoop and fall inside me.

“Come. Come inside... out of the cold.” A groom came and took my horse, and Will led me to the inn, my hand held firm in his, but made no other move to touch me, at which I felt a strange ache, the like of which I had not known before. It was the infection again, that disease of love.

Inside, the blistering February cold was soon forgotten. There was a warm buzz of talk and the glass windows twinkled in the firelight. The press of people inside gave off its own heat. There were young and old, men and women, drunk and sober, sitting in snug wooden booths, or gathered round the fire, house dogs snoring at their feet. All around were piles of cloaks and waistcoats, as the layers of winter were discarded in the warm cheer of the inn. William led me up a narrow staircase, until we came to a small, oak-panelled room.

He closed the door and led me to a table. Next to it was a curtained window. Drawing back the curtain, he nodded to me and I saw it looked out into the inn-yard. Two hay carts had been backed together at one end, to form a makeshift stage. This was shrouded all in black, with a carved wooden chair and oak table at one end. A group of men were hammering nails into a trap door that had been constructed in the

floor of one of the carts, and which seemed not be to working as it should. Another stood apart, dressed in black like the stage hangings, and with a giant cross around his neck.

“Ned Alleyn,” said William, opening the window.

“He is Dr Faust?”

“He is, and most excellent in the part.” He beckoned me over, and I stood a few inches from him, not daring to go nearer. “*Too* excellent, one might almost say. Some of the players believe he wears that cross for good reason.” I saw that Alleyn’s face was drawn and pale in the afternoon light. He looked anxious, and bent down to look at the trap door and consult with the carpenters. A cold draught came from the open window, and the sound of hammering echoed in the frosty air.

“What do you mean?”

“When he summons Mephistopheles, the agent of Satan, he uses true magic. He uses words that good Christians would never utter, for fear of losing their immortal souls. The trap door in the cart looks like a simple piece of stage-work now, but when the play begins, it seems to have a different function, as if it can truly link the men upon the stage with the hidden fires of Hell.”

“Why draw upon such evil?”

“To make a wonder of it. To shock and amaze the crowd, so that they will speak of nothing else. To go beyond what tame and tedious playmaking has gone before.”

“Plays like yours?”

He laughed, his eyes hard. “It’s true. He has gone beyond what passed as good-enough before. Romance, comedy, lowbrow tragedy – only one step beyond a

mystery play – each written with a paucity of pain and passion. We’ve settled for too little.”

There was a tap on the door and a face appeared. A pale, schoolboy face with a pair of round spectacles set upon its long nose. The dark eyes that peered through the glasses were both ardent and timorous.

“Kit,” said Will. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“What?” asked the bespectacled face. “Eavesdropping when and where, precisely?”

“Outside.”

Kit said nothing, but slithered into the chamber and stood before us, fiddling with the cambric sleeves of his shirt with nervous fingers. If this was Christopher Marlowe, I was surprised. I had not realised that I had any expectation of what this notorious poet might look like, yet I had assumed he would be a dashing sort of fellow, like the fine gentlemen who tripped about at the Palace all ruff-trussed and Queen-pleasing. But he looked more like a scholar than a London varlet. His voice was pitched high, and his chest wheezed and rattled.

“Is this she?” asked Kit, peering at me.

“Who is ‘she’?” I asked.

He looked from Will’s face to mine, his face twisted into a childish frown as if he was about to cry.

“Mistress Shakespeare, of course,” said Kit.

I laughed aloud, not out of mirth exactly.

“Miss Bassano is my guest,” said William.

Marlowe stared at me, his eyes popping with horror. Recovering himself, he said: “I am honoured to meet you.” He paused, and looked me up and down, and I had

the feeling that what he saw would soon be made a note of with his quill. “Be assured that if you have said your prayers, and are at one with God, then you have nothing to fear,” he said, crossing himself. “But be mindful, as I am, of eternal damnation if you trifle with Him.”

I laughed again. “God must forgive us every one, since all of us are sinners.”

He extracted a long pipe from the pocket of his jerkin and placed it in his mouth. Then he produced, from within his cloak, a tinder box. After several attempts, he lit the pipe, coughing and wheezing in between deep inhalations. A pungent aroma filled the room, the strange and exotic scent of Virginia tobacco.

“Do you suppose,” he asked, “that God is truly everywhere? Peering into the cracks of every shit-rammed jakes? Observing the encrusted sores of all the beggars in Christendom? Under the skirt of each pox-lipped whore in Seething Lane?” He looked straight ahead of him, like an actor soliloquizing.

“God sees everything, and forgives it all,” said I. “That is what Our Lord taught us.”

Marlowe blew a smoke ring, which looked as pure and solid as a silver bangle, but the effort was almost too much for him, and he collapsed into a coughing fit.

“God sees us, but the Devil takes us,” he said, when he had recovered himself. He took off his spectacles and wiped his streaming eyes with a white kerchief. “I have made a study of it. I see the claws of Satan in every corner. I see them very clear.” He held up his spectacles. “By the miracle of science.”

“Oh *science!*” said I. “When will I hear the last of it! Men stitch this term to all and nothing. If a man invents something he cannot prove, he calls it poetry. If he invents something that requires a diagram, or killing frogs, he calls it science.”

Marlowe opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He looked at Will. "Is she mad?" he asked. "Does she think this is some sort of dialectic? This is not womanly."

Will pulled a chair forward. "Sit down, Kit. Please. Calm yourself. "

Marlowe sat down on the very edge of the chair, as if he feared it was diseased, and puffed his pipe until it flared scarlet in its bowl. I saw his fingernails were bitten down so far that they were no more than narrow wounds. "I see what I see," he said. "And as for death... I have not slept more than ten winks at a stretch since I was a child at Canterbury. The night looms around these little dozings."

"Kit writes all night," said Will to me. "And reads in the daytime."

"My eyes are ruined with it," said Marlowe. "I am a pauper to the tallow." He had not looked at me directly since he had found I wasn't Shakespeare's wife. It was an afternoon, I thought, of non-looking, and my other senses were rioting in response, so I felt as if I could taste the tension in the room.

"I have come to see your play," I said. "It is the talk of Whitehall."

"It's a fine piece of work," said Will. He glanced at me, his eyes bright. "A tale of over-reaching, of a man whose lust for knowledge tempts him into dreadful wrong."

"I know the story," said I. "I've read 'Faustbuch' in the German. He sells his soul to the Devil."

Marlowe blew more smoke rings, of a delicate grey-blue, then wafted them away with his hands. "God forgive me my temerity," he said. "I put the Evil One in paint and hose."

"Are you afraid you will be damned?" I asked.

He ducked his head as if he was ducking the question. "It makes it somewhat challenging to stage."

"My Lord Hunsdon has overseen the putting on of every kind of drama you can name," I said. "I don't think you could write a play he could not deal with."

"There is a thing of darkness at its heart," said Will. "Something of dread and terror. No man has done so much."

Marlowe winced, as if praise pained him. "It's a poor thing, just a botch."

"I'm sure *I* will see nothing to scare me over-much," I said. "These are only words, spoken by boys and men, in an inn-yard, in the afternoon."

Kit Marlowe turned to look at me at last, eyes red in the flickering firelight.

*

"Then fear not, Faustus, but be resolute

And try the uttermost magic can perform.

Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii! Valeat numen triplex

Jehovoe! Ignei, aerii, aquatani spiritus, salvete!

Orientis princeps Belzebub, inferni ardentis monarcha,

et Demogorgon, propitiamus vos, ut appareat et surgat

Mephistophilis. Quid tu moraris? per Jehovam, Gehennam,

et consecratam aquam quam nunc spargo, signumque

crucis quod nunc facio, et per vota nostra, ipse nunc

surgat nobis dictatus Mephistophilis!"

Ned Alleyn's posturing Faust was a fool, but his descent was terrifying enough to grip me. He prowled and leered upon the boards like a staked bear at the pit, growling and griping against his mortal prison, and who but an idiot could not see where that would end? Mephistopheles, summoned by real magic or no, was just a tall player with a head slightly too large for his frame. Will was close beside me as I leaned out into the cold air to get a better view. Then, suddenly, his breath was soft in my ear: "Are you surprised that I set out to ravish you with Marlowe's play?"

I turned and my lips brushed his cheek. His skin was cold beneath the stubble. Something was sticking in my throat, and I had to press my legs close together beneath my skirts to halt their quivering. "Perhaps you're timid."

He twisted his arm tight around my waist. "Perhaps. We'll see."

I was vapour, liquid, longing. "Or cautious."

"Cautious?"

"Postponing passion till another day."

He pulled me round, lifted my vizier and kissed me. "I wanted you to see this. I knew you would understand it."

"What do you mean?" The voice that came out of my stopped throat sounded sane enough, not strange. And this was the strangest thing of all, for I could not have told you what was stage and what was sky, or my whole name, or any part of Plato.

The Seven Deadly Sins were on the stage, each a conjured demon brought forth by Faust. One by one he named and dismissed them. First came Pride, then Covetousness, then Wrath, Envy, Gluttony and Sloth.

Then:

"Who are you, Mistress Minx, the seventh and last?"

"Who, I, sir? I am one that loves an inch of raw

mutton better than an ell of fried stockfish, and the first letter of my name begins with lechery.”

Lechery was the last sin, so why was there another Demon, as yet uncounted? I stared hard, but I could not see it clearly as the other devils were in the way, their bodies shifted and shuffled around it so. I could make out a hooded figure, taller than the others, and motionless. Its face was shadow but from its outline rose up the faintest pall of vapour. The players around it faltered. The Demon lifted its head, and the cowl fell back.

I strained to look, yet could not see it.

I heard a woman scream. “God’s death, the Devil himself is on the stage!”

Cries and shouting spread across the courtyard. “Heaven help us, Judgment Day has come!” There was a terrible roaring and shrieking, and the next thing I saw was an apprentice-boy run on the stage wielding a flaming torch, bellowing more horribly than a bowelled man, and the stage was alight and the players were running this way and that way, and the crowd had erupted and people were banging on the closed doors of the courtyard to get out. Through the smoke I thought I could see the still figure of the Demon, but the shadows flickered and I could not be certain.

“What’s this?” cried Will, and there was Marlowe, rushing across the courtyard, helter-skelter, heading for the burning stage. The cries of terror grew louder, the flames higher - I could not see - I craned forward. The courtyard was in shadow, the stage obscured by smoke. I blinked, sure that my eyes were tricking me, and when I looked again, sure enough the figure had gone. But the awful screams and cries continued, and I saw the apprentice boy convulsing on the ground before the stage, his legs kicking and his arms flailing. He had gone stark mad.

William grabbed my arm. “Aemilia, let us go, let us find a place to...”

I pulled away from him, crossed myself, and ran.

*

I was half-way back down Fleet Street before I stopped, remembering my horse, and then I doubled up, my chest heaving. I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe. The dreadful sound of the prentice boy was trapped inside my head, and I could still see the weird jerking of his limbs. The gloomy, freezing afternoon seemed haunted with floating spectres, even my steaming breath seemed ghost-like.

A hand fell on my shoulder and I screamed.

“Aemilia! Aemilia, it's me.”

Will pulled me towards him and held me tightly, trembling almost as much as I was.

“What *was* that?” I asked. “Did he summon Satan? Is he *mad*?”

William's head was buried in my shoulder. “I don't know. I don't know what he is about. Something has possessed him, some desire he hardly seems to understand. But that is his weird fancy, not ours.” He straightened up and looked down at me. “I want you to come with me,” he said. “I know a place.”

“A place!”

“Somewhere private, where we can go.”

“Still planning to seduce me! After *that*? Jesu, Will, won't even the fires of hell make you stop to think what you are about?”

“It's a place where we can speak, alone.”

My body still shook with cold and terror. He wrapped his cloak around my shoulders. We made our way off the road and up a muddy track. At the end of it, I saw a ruined abbey, surrounded by a coppice of naked winter trees. Some of the

buildings were half-dismantled, the stone purloined to build new homes for wealthy men. But the abbey house was intact. Will led me along an overgrown pathway to a side door, which he opened with a key hanging upon a hook. Inside, he lit a torch, and locked the door behind us. The house reeked of damp, and I could hear water dripping. He took me up a flight of creaking wooden stairs till we came to a solar on the upper floor. It was still furnished, and someone had prepared it for us. I saw that William had been bold enough to hope that he might bring me here, and had laid it out accordingly. There was a bed in one corner, made up freshly with black silk bolsters and a white counterpane. And even logs in the fire place. Will lighted these, and his hands steadied as he held them to the flames.

“It was a stage trick,” he said, as he watched the fire grow higher. He seemed to be returning himself, making a pattern of what seemed unfathomable. “He is ambitious. What better way to make his name?”

“I can’t believe it of him! Such a shy, odd little creature.”

“His daring is in his words, not his demeanour.”

“What about that poor prentice boy? What about the fire?”

“The boy could have conspired with him. What you see is not always the truth.”

“What else can you depend on?”

“It’s not Satan that frightens me,” he said. “It’s Kit.”

He came towards me, and helped me out of the cloak. “I don’t want to talk about this any longer,” he said, softly. “One day, I will write a greater play than that. I wanted you to see it.”

“Why? If you are going to be greater?”

“Because I want you to know me.”

“Why?”

“Because I want *you*.”

I held him at arm’s length. I felt as if I had stepped into another world, as if the secret room was an enchanted place. What I did here was separate and different from every other part of my life. Time, too, seemed twisted out of shape. And as for virtue... well.

“I want you,” he repeated. “If you can forgive me for abusing Katherine.”

He had small, white teeth. There was a blue vein, snaking from his left eye to his hairline. His eyelashes were thick and black and made his eye-whites seem paler. There was a scar at the base of his neck, like a dagger nick, in the same place that I had a black mole. If we lay together, they would fit quite neat, one inside the other. He looked more Spanish than English. He looked more Jewish than Gentile. He looked like me.

“Aemilia,” he said. “Are you listening?”

“Yes. You want me for your whore.”

“I want you for everything.”

“I am whored already. Shall I be doubly sinful? And what about your sin, your soul, your wife?”

“I can’t help it. I can’t... stop. This is not some fuck-led dalliance.”

“Not very poetical, is it? And if not fuck-led, what is it led by? You don’t deny that you want me to be your little strumpet, and then – if you’re minded – I must soothe you with some poesy when we are done? Is that the “everything” you have in mind?”

He held my wrist. His long fingers easily encircled its narrow bones. “I want *you*, Aemilia,” he said again. “Every little part of you. Every thing you say, and every

thing you do. I want to watch you, and hold you, and *have* you... and then listen to you talk. I want to know you. Because there is no one like you.”

“That’s true enough. And I fear that there is nobody like *you*, or else I might be in some warmer chamber, with a man who’s free.”

“Hunsdon isn’t free.”

“But he is powerful. He does what he likes.”

He gripped my wrist more tightly, staring at me till I felt the room recede and could not think. “I will be honest with you. My wife is far away from London, and I have had mistresses enough since we’ve lived apart. It’s an itch, a thrill, a need.”

“Enough? How many?”

“Several. Plenty.”

“More than three?”

“I haven’t counted.”

“More than seven?”

“I don’t know!”

I yanked my hand away. “So, I’m the new diversion, am I?”

He took both my hands. “Please. Aemilia Bassano. My lady. I don’t want you to be my mistress. I want you for my love.”

“Love! What about Hunsdon, and your poor neglected wife?”

“He has abandoned his own lady, so I shall not grieve for him. And my wife, as I’ve confessed, has been deceived already.”

He was clearly untaught in the art of disputation. His arguments were useless. But all I said was: “Where shall we go? What shall we do?”

“This room is ours, and secret. As for what we can do... Will you come to bed with me, Aemilia?”

I stared at him, unblinking.

“Come, let me take these off.” He drew me closer and unpinned one of my sleeves. It was one of Hunsdon’s gifts, patterned with angels. My naked arm gleamed pale in the firelight.

“Are you an angel, too?” asked Will, eyes shining.

I looked at him, solemn as a virgin bride.

He laid the sleeve down on a chair by the bed and began to unpin its fellow. I watched his fingers, my breath coming faster.

Scene IV

From that day on, I went to that secret solar as often as I dared, and our shuttered love flourished. I had been happy with the lovemaking of Hunsdon, but this was of a different order. Sometimes gentle, slow and almost sacred in its intensity. Sometimes raw and ugly, raging, screaming, and obscene. I found that Will loved most what he hated strongly, that what I did to give him the greatest pleasure revolted him even as he came, jerking and crying out my name. I, who had been fucking a man I saw as father-like since I was sixteen, had no shame. I saw bed as a place to try every version of delight that a body could endure, and in Will I found a lover who could do everything to please me. The more we did, the greater his desire, and the greater his desire, the closer I felt to a sort of ecstatic disappearance. I wanted that. I wanted to reach a height of passion of such a degree that I might never return to myself, but remain there, locked inside him, and he in me. I liked it best at the brightest hour of morning, with the shutters open and the sunlight streaming down upon us as we went at it, open eyed. "See this?" I would say. "See this?" He bought a heavy mirror at the Royal Exchange and carried it to our room one night, and it reflected all we did. I hardly slept when I was apart from him, and could not eat. My ribs stuck out and my poor dugs nearly vanished and my Lord worried for me, fearing I had a tumour or some other malady. If it was madness, it was also the most precious and bright-hued time in my life, and I can still remember every touch, every breath, and every inch of William's salt-white flesh.

*

Here is a memory from that golden time. It was summertime, six months after our first meeting. I was lying in on a river bank, looking up into a cloudless sky. Skylarks were singing and the Thames was gurgling at my feet. I closed my eyes and opened them again. The sun warmed my cheek. My chemise tickled my skin. A fly landed on my arm and waved its foremost legs at me. I sat up and looked around me. Will was sitting beside me, clutching a wad of foolscap and reading intently. His shirt was unbuttoned, so that I could see the pale skin of his chest. I wanted to lean across and touch him, but something held me back.

He looked over at me, frowning.

“You haven’t answered me,” he said.

I looked at him, distracted. “What was the question?” I asked, smoothing down the sun-warmed folds of my chemise.

“The question I just asked you.”

“Ask it again.”

“You say you want to be a poet. But what sort of stuff is this? A light-brained lady-in-waiting could pen something like it. Where is your learning? Where is your wit?”

He threw the pages down. I thought of what Simon Forman had said, and picked them up. I could do better. I knew I could do better.

“If I worked on them... so they were improved. What then?”

“I don’t know. You could find a patron, and a publisher.” He came over and began to kiss my neck.

“A bastard concubine could be a published poet?”

“Why not?” He had lifted my hair and was kissing the hidden skin beneath it.

I pushed him away. “You’re making a mockery of me.”

“As you wish. Leave this art to those who understand it.” He was laughing openly at me now. “You are such a wondrous pretty thing, no need to strive for a life of the mind.”

I slapped his face, slightly harder than I intended. “A woman can do anything, if she has a mind to it. The Queen writes verse.”

He clutched his cheek in mock pain. “The Queen, good lady, is a Prince. No, no, you are quite right. Stick to your love ditties, true art is quite beyond you.”

“What about you, the palace playwright? Everything you know, you learned at a country grammar school.”

“Whereas *your* learning...”

“Is of the Ancients, as you would expect.”

“Oh, indeed. A little of Athens, and much of Rome.”

“Much of both, sir. The trivium, of grammar, logic and rhetoric.”

“Ay, like a learned blade at Oxford.”

“Like the learned fellows everywhere. And also the quadrivium...”

“Of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy...” He hesitated, unsure.

“And music.”

“Of course, you are the lady of the virginals.” He seemed to think this was a joke of some kind, so I kept silent. “And this has fitted you for...rutting with an aged soldier, has it?”

I got to my feet and walked to the river edge, hating him suddenly. He came up behind me. “It has fitted me for discontent,” I said.

“You see?” He pulled me close. “We are two of a kind. Would *I* have written plays, if I had known my station? Or would I have stayed in Stratford, making gloves for gentlemen?”

I let him kiss me, but was still preoccupied. “I know enough to be a poet, I have read enough to know how it should be done, but I don’t know how to make my lines sing better!” I said. “I can’t turn thoughts to written words! There is some magician’s trick to it.”

Will led me back to the grassy knoll and smoothed out his cloak so that we could lie down again. “There is no magic,” he said. “Treat words as if they were rubies.” He unhooked the beaded hood from my hair, so that it fell around me, curled by its enclosure. “Choose the right one for each part of every line.” He undid my stomacher and lifted it away. “Write every line as though your life depended on it.” He opened the front of my chemise and regarded my dugs quizzically, as if deciding whether or not to buy them. “As if the executioner was standing by your shoulder, and this was the last chance to speak that you would ever know.” With that, he pushed my chemise back, so my white shoulders were naked in the sun.

I did not smile, nor assist him in his task. “That sounds like a kind of madness, I said. “I fear I am too sane.”

He laughed again. The sun had browned his face. His eyes were full of sky. His lips were swollen red from reckless kissing. “I don’t want to talk,” he said. “Not any longer. Let’s make love, and I’ll teach you poetry that way.”

I shuffled out of my remaining clothes. “Oh very well,” said I.

He undressed quickly, and we knelt together, face to face.

“Am I your mistress, then?” I asked him. “Am I all the things you wanted?”

“You are indeed, and I am your obedient slave.”

I looked at him, eye-to-eye, to see if I could peer inside his head.

“Do you want me?” he asked, very serious.

Oh, I did. I did.

And so we made love in the sunshine and we groaned and kicked and sweated. Till at last Will called my name, over and over, in screams of rapture and my head was filled with light. “Aemilia! Aemilia! Aemilia!”

Afterwards, we lay together, sticky and naked in the long grass. “Be silent with me now, my love,” he whispered.

*

I needed the skills of a player myself, in my dealings with Lord Hunsdon. It tore at me to lie to him, who had been all in all to me for so many years. But I did so all the same, all summer long. And it scared me to think that if he knew how I betrayed him, his anger would know no bounds. I saw him beat a dog that had turned once. He beat the creature till it could not stand, and the ground was running with its blood. And that dog loved him, and had sighed at his feet with its great head upon its paws, watchful of his safety. If he knew how I lay with Shakespeare, and what we did, and how we cried out together in the boundless repetition of our lust, what would he do to me? I did not know. But I tell you now, what I feared was not his power to hurt me, although I knew that he could wield it, but that discovery would put an end to my deception. My true life was lived in those secret times with Will, which made the fakery of my court life fade to nothing.

One day late in August, as I was reading in my chamber, Hunsdon came into the room and said: “Aemilia, are you tired of your life here?”

I put my book down, taking my time about it. “Tired in what way, sir?”

He came and sat beside me. “You know what I have spoken of. I am growing older.”

“Not to me,” I smiled and touched his cheek, trying to read his expression.

“You are my lord in all things, dear Harry.”

He took my hand and replaced it in my lap. “What do you say to this – we go away from here?”

“Go? Where?”

“To Titchfield, where Wriothesley has his seat.”

The fear rose in me – was this a trick? A ruse to get me away from William? I smiled, and leaned across to kiss him. “Why, what shall we do there, my love?”

“The Queen is going on a progress.”

“But is this newly thought of?”

“Her Majesty has been out of sorts, and blames the parched and putrid drains. She wants fresh air, clean rooms, and some diversion. The players have a new piece, and they’re to stage it there for her.”

The fear remained. “Which piece is this?”

“‘Love’s Labours Lost’. Wriothesley has commissioned it, Shakespeare has wrote it, and he assures me it is good. Some comedy or other. He claims it’s better than the Shrew.”

“Mr Shakespeare?” I felt the room swimming around me. “And... Mr Burbage? Will they be there too?”

“Most decidedly they will! Why would they not be? It will be an entertainment for us all. And much needed, as the nights draw in, and the autumn creeps upon us. Place House is handsome, and the country all around is green and pleasant. And it’s not too far – no more than three days’ ride.”

“But... are you sure you want me with you?” Hunsdon usually left me behind if he went with the queen on a progress. It was unspoken but understood between us that it pleased his wife better if I stayed in my Whitehall rooms when he was gone from London, as if my body was a chance adornment of the palace and not a chosen

pleasure. Travelling with his Lordship was too spouse-like. I wasn't sure if this suggestion was a sign of his growing fondness for me, or his burgeoning mistrust.

He leaned forward and kissed my obedient little breasts, pushed up tight and high by whalebone and fashion. "But me no buts, my dearest chuck. We shall have the players to please us by day, and by night we shall have our sport together."

Scene V

There was little sign of the countryside being green and pleasant during our journey, which seemed to take three weeks, not three days. A great storm raged for the whole duration, so fiercely that I could not ride side-saddle, which I preferred, but must leave poor Frey to be ridden by a servant, while I was piled into a coach with a heap of scented, smirking ladies, all of whom seemed party to some private joke. This conveyance bumped and trundled along giving us all great discomfort, and the rain was so heavy that it trickled through the leaking roof, and soaked our cloaks and the ladies declared that they would all die of the sweats, which set them off again in the most hysterical and unpleasant sounding laughter. I stared out of the window, watching the dark clouds flying and wondering at the amount of mud that churned along our way. We should have been better off in an Ark, I thought, than a wobbling coach, for the wrath of God seemed to be upon us and the heavens turned to perpetual water, as if the ocean had risen to the sky and must now fall down upon us, returning to its rightful place beneath the Moon.

At last, the coach shuddered to a halt, and I looked outside. Through the falling rain I could make out a huge edifice, long and many windowed, its lights blurred by the downpour. Stout towers reached up into the stormy sky, and it was neatly turreted, like a child's picture of a castle. Herded inside with my giggling companions, I found myself dazzled by the brilliant splendour of the great hall, so high and spacious as to rival that at Nonesuch, if not Whitehall. There were chandeliers and torches everywhere, casting their flaming light on many-coloured tapestries and golden panelling, so that I felt as if I was walking into a giant's treasure casket. The gallery above our heads was filled with musicians, who sang sweet and

unfamiliar melodies as we came in – though of course these newly-written tunes were not for us, but for Her Majesty, whose entrance followed ours and we must push ourselves against the walls as she swept past, smiling with marble impregnability.

As I made my way up the great staircase, with Hunsdon close behind me, I saw that Will was standing at the top. I never saw him look so handsome. He was dressed in black, which set off his sun-darkened skin. He stared at me solemnly as he bowed before the ascending procession of courtiers and I felt a sudden urge to weep. I had never wanted him so much, nor feared so painfully that I may not have him.

But then Hunsdon stopped, and caught my arm. “Aemilia, have you met our great scribe?”

I turned to look at him, chiefly so that I would not have to look at Will. “What scribe is this, my lord?”

“Young William Shakespeare.” Reaching Will’s side, he grasped him by the shoulder. “This is my sweet mistress, sir. As clever as she is beautiful, and quite as skilful in... every art as any man could wish.”

William bowed, unsmiling.

“Aemilia fancies herself a poet herself, don’t you, my dear?”

I could only incline my head, scarlet with discomfort.

“I am sure that no poetry she could ever write could match the perfect symmetry of her face,” said Will. His voice was cold.

“Symmetry sir! It’s not the length of a lady’s nose that keeps an old man happy. You poets! What a strange set of fellows you are! Do you slake your lust with symmetry, or with sport?”

My composure was not helped by Will's seriousness, which reminded me of the way he would stare down at me when we were going to it, in the still moment before the wild frenzy of his coming.

He bowed again, as if to acknowledge Hunsdon's superior wisdom. "Poets are poor lovers, my lord. We save our deepest passions for the page."

Hunsdon laughed and took my arm. "Come now Melia, forgive us for our idle talk. Let's go to our chamber and read some verse!" He made a final bow to William, the faintest inclination of his head. "She prefers Sidney's 'Astrophil and Stella' to your 'Lover's Complaint' – what d'you say to that?"

I looked over my shoulder, though I knew I should not. William was frowning at me, then looked away.

*

That night, as luck would have it, my lord was in a liverish mood. Despite the fact that he had been a lusty lover for many years, in recent months he had been too tired or ill to fornicate with me, but this night he was keen to get to bed early, and undid my bodice breathing heavily, showing every sign of wanting to have me as he used to. I confess, with Will nearby I could not bear the thought of this, and came up with the stratagem of reading my poetry to him, as a supposed preliminary to our love-making. In fact, as I had hoped, Hunsdon was snoring peacefully after three stanzas.

For a while, I lay next to him, singing a lullaby and stroking his white hair back from his wizened brow. And then I stopped singing, and watched him breathing, steady as a rivertide. I pulled the counterpane over him to keep the night chill from waking him, slipped a shawl over my nightgown, and picked up a candle from our bed-table. As you doubtless cannot think less of me than you do already, let me admit

that I had taken notice of where the players were sleeping, and the fact that William had been given a small chamber to himself, while the other players were directed to a large room in the eaves. He had claimed that he needed such a room to finish some writing, and as he had not looked in my direction at any time, I did not know if this was true, or if he was hoping that I might find a way to go to him, at dead of night. Whether this was the case or not, I was determined that I would do it. The thought of his look as I climbed the stairs with Hunsdon drove me on.

I closed the door of my bedchamber behind me, and tiptoed across the dark landing. The house spread all around me, like a village in the sky, with corridors and staircases leading in every direction. Shielding the flame with my hand, I made my way silently along, counting the doors and noting my way. I hardly dared breathe, and hated my own heart for its fulsome beating. Yet I swear to God, I have never felt more alive than I did at that moment, fearing discovery, astonished at my own foolishness and longing to lie once more with my lover, skin to skin.

Just as I passed a grand, carved door to one of the great bed-chambers at the front of the house, I heard a noise and stopped still, a dribble of sweat trickling down my neck. I could hear voices shouting, and durst not take another step, lest they burst out of the door, and could see nowhere to hide, so I stayed, motionless, like a vole sensing the descending hawk. As I stood there, the voices rose higher and higher, and I recognised one of them: it was that of our boyish host, Henry Wriothesley. The other – a deeper man’s voice - I did not know.

“O my lord,” said this voice. “O my lord! O my lord! O my lord! O my lord!” Each cry followed by a bang, like a board being struck in steady rhythm. I stood, terrified, willing myself to move, but not able to take a step.

There was a pause on the other side of the door, yet not silence. The two voices mingled to make the strangest noise, part scream, part groan. Then the deeper voice made a peculiarly terrible sound, like a wolf being bowelled.

Now came Wriothsesley's light and laughing tone, as if he had had no part in what had gone before: "Say: 'O my lord God.'"

"My lord?"

"Say 'O my Lord God' each time I go up you."

Then they were off again.

"O my lord God!"

Bang.

"O my lord God!"

Bang.

"O my lord God!"

This time it built and built till the scream they ended in was so loud I was sure the whole of the household would come running. A drop of candlewax spilled on my wrist, and seemed to wake me from my trance. I hastened along the passage until I came to the flight of little stairs I had noted earlier. I climbed them, breathless, and there, at the top, was a door, no bigger than the way into a priest hole. I prayed to God that I had remembered right, and tapped at it, three times.

The door opened immediately, as if the occupant had been waiting for me. William was wearing a night shirt, but his bed, which I could see over his shoulder, had not been slept in. Close by was a table, on which a candle burned, cluttered with papers – he had indeed been writing. For a moment, we looked at each other.

"What's this about *Astrophil and Stella* ? Disloyal minx." Then he smiled and pulled me inside.

Scene VI

Having deceived Hunsdon and borne silent witness to Wriothsesley's peculiar sodomy, I was trembling with shock and fear. Yet once I was in Will's bed I forgot all my terror, and what we did that night was like no other love-making that I have ever known, such was its silence and its slow tenderness. As we twisted and rocked together, I felt my mind fill with a profound sweetness, and smiled as I kissed him, locked closer, closer till we finished as one creature, still soundless, deeply bound. There was such joy in me that I was shocked to find that we were soaked with tears. And when we both lay tangled in my loose black hair, William whispered: "We are married now, my love. I have no wife but you."

We lay silent for a long time. William stroked the round mole at my throat. "What's this, my little sorceress?" he said. "If not your third dug, where you give suck to your familiar?"

"Shall you be my familiar then?"

"I would be nothing else, if it were possible."

"Do you ever wonder if the creatures of the night are those that God did not get quite right?" I asked, dreamily.

He was busy kissing the mole upon my neck, but began to shake with silent laughter.

"Such as what, my strange one? Such as yourself?"

"Such as badgers, hedgehogs, moles. Or bats."

"What of the owls, though?" said William. "An Owl is perfect."

“Perhaps he is the King of nocturnal things,” I said. “Unrivalled beneath the Moon.”

His lifted his shadowed face to stare into my eyes with mock puzzlement.

“What *are* you, Bassano?” he asked. “Where did they find you?”

“I found a bat once, fallen from the roof beams,” I whispered.

“Foolish bat, if it could not fly better!” said William, kissing his way from my neck to my breasts.

“It was a baby, hardly bigger than two farthings,” said I, gasping as he began to suck. “I kept it in a little box and fed it with cow’s milk in a thimble, and it grew to full size, though I never would have thought it possible.”

“Your witch’s magic, I have no doubt of it.” His hands was creeping down, over the smooth skin of my belly.

“Afterwards, it made its home in the eaves of my apartment, and I would see it at dusk, spinning around the roof beams with sightless ease. And it would still come down and drink milk from a saucer, like a tiny flying cat.”

“Fortunate bat, to sip from your saucer!” His fingers had found their place, and he began to jerk them in a rhythm that I knew and loved, and for some time neither of us spoke, but went at it bat-like, knowing our way.

“I cannot bear to be without you,” I said at last. “I cannot live like this, divided, like Judas.”

“What else can we do?” said Will. “Where else can we go?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I thought of Hunsdon, pumping away with his old man’s wiry passion, and felt the bile rise in my throat. “I cannot bear to lie with Hunsdon! I am no better than a tavern whore, turning tricks for trinkets.”

“This is our world,” he said, holding me to him. “There is no escape, except when we are lost together, and it’s those times that we must think of, and seek out, and keep safe.”

I kissed his ink-black, cunt-wet fingers. “Why can’t your words save us? Why can’t we set up in some fine house, Lord and Lady Letters? Why must it be like this, so squalid and profane?”

“Aemilia.” He stroked my hair. “Before I knew this, I knew nothing. Nothing of love, and what there was of life was book learned, or filched from other poets, or sketched to please the crowd. My plays were martial, my poetry was a forged confection, like a sugar-swan. No more. No more.”

“What – and you were married? And had little children? And this taught you nothing?”

“Nothing of this,” he whispered into my hair. “Of *eros* and its wondrous madness. I love you, and you are all in all to me, and if that is wrong, so be it.”

We must have slept at last, for I have no memory after that moment till I woke and heard the sweet song of the nightingale and saw a faint light round the curtained window. Jerking upright, I noticed that the candle had burned right down. William was fast asleep, curled into his pillow. I kissed his sleeping mouth, slipped from the bed, pulled on my nightgown and shawl and left with anxious haste. I retraced my steps as quickly as I dared, and as I approached Wriothsesley’s door, I tried to move even more silently.

But it was to no avail. The door opened, and a figure stepped out and stood in my path. It was the young earl, in a splendid purple robe, like some Roman pontiff. In the half-light, I could only see his outline, slim and flimsy as a girl, and the pale aureole of his curling hair, which hung loose about him.

“What’s this?” he said, in a loud voice, suited to the day-time.

I stared at him, in an agony of horror.

“It’s Hunsdon’s pretty mistress, if I’m not mistaken? Pert Aemilia, the bed-wise scholar.”

“It is, my lord.” He could speak as loudly as he wished: I still whispered.

“What are you about, my swarthy little puss? Why are you not with his lordship, in his chamber?”

“I was restless, my lord.”

“Restless! O my sweet lady. You should have come to me – and with me – sweet and stealthy restlessness of woman! I would have given you no rest at all.”

“I have been... walking in the garden,” I said. “My mind was disturbed. I sometimes walk at night.”

He came towards me and knelt down. I saw that the grey light was casting day-shapes on the dark landing – here a carved chair, there a great urn. Hunsdon might be waking up, and wondering where I was. Wriothsesley picked up the hem of my night gown and scrutinized it carefully. He looked up at me, his blue eyes suddenly illuminated in a ray of morning light.

“No dew on your gown, I see.” He stood up and came close, so I could smell the semen on him. “But I daresay you are drenched... in some other place.”

I smiled at him, yet again the desperate Judas. “I am writing poetry, my Lord,” said I. “It is a wakeful business, sometimes, and the night air is all I need. I stayed upon the pathway, and looked up at the Moon.”

“Indeed!” He smirked, looking like a schoolboy, and kissed me lightly on the cheek. “Perhaps one day you’ll write a poem for me.”

*

The next day was the day of the performance, and though it was the cause of great excitement, not least a beautiful Rosalind who made a great impression on our host, I found myself distracted all the way through. William was acting the part of Berowne, and his words made me ache. I could not look at him, I could not look at the stage. After it was over, the Queen announced that she must see the gardens and out we all spilled, out of the dark Play-Room, down the handsome staircase and out into the square of summer light. The storm had soaked the fields and gardens and disappeared without a trace, so that the dripping trees and heavy flowers had the brightness of spring, and yet were deep coloured with August's heavier hues.

The Queen and her ladies processed along the wide garden paths, surveying the knot garden and fanning themselves as they talked and laughed. I fell behind them, so tired that black shards of night were fading in and out of my sight. I felt sick and strange, having only slept for an hour or so when I had been safely back in bed with Hunsdon. I felt deceitful, also, and wished in one part of myself that I could leave all this spoiled and rotten life behind me, and enter some cool nunnery and pray my way slowly back to God. I was sick of Greeks, and Romans, and Learning, sick of fine clothes and smart words and the ways of Court, in which everything was permissible if the Queen wished it, or approved it, or did not deign to notice it.

Indeed, I was so tired that I did not at first notice that William had fallen into step alongside me.

“How are you today, my love?” he asked.

“William!” I turned to look behind me, but saw no one was walking within earshot. “I am well, sir,” I said.

“What do you think of all this?” he asked, indicating the wide garden which had subjugated Nature so with such ruthless symmetry.

“It is very fine.”

“Could you see yourself in such a place? A country lady?”

“Certainly not! The life of a country lady consists mostly of praying, walking, Bible reading and being unwell.”

Will threw his head back and laughed delightedly. “God’s teeth, you have a way with words, Aemilia! What a summary!”

“Shh, do not laugh so loudly. Hunsdon will hear you.” I looked across the knot garden to the far window. Hunsdon and his advisors were in an important huddle, discussing affairs of state. The Queen and her ladies had settled down in a leafy bower. A lute player was hurrying towards them, as if anxious to stave off the spectre of boredom with his sweet songs.

Will was abruptly serious. “At least a country lady has a place. A position.”

“Oh, surely. She is planted in her lord’s estate, like a venerable old oak tree, and she must manage servants and clink with keys to all that must be locked and tidy. For variety, she may admire her fine linen or fish for trout.”

“It sounds a pleasant enough existence.”

“While her Lord parades himself at court, perhaps gaming, perhaps fornicating, and probably amusing himself around the town or at the theatre. Did I miss my vocation, in being too much the bastard whore to make a proper match? I think not.”

“You are a woman, Aemilia. You cannot rise above that.”

“Why not? If Our Lord rules over all the magnificence and violence of creation, then why must his Women be so timid and obedient?”

“Aemilia...”

“All of it is his – the wolves and roaring bears, the wild boar, the proud lion, the swift claws of the eagle and the kite.”

“Madam, if I may only speak...”

But I would have my say. “Think of it all - the secret vastness of the great Leviathan that slides – nameless and unclassified – beneath the mighty ocean. And we placid little Marthas may have the hearth.”

“You are too clever for this old game. You should rule kingdoms, not that dotard Hunsdon.”

“Ay, that would be a fine thing. Except that our Prince is also the keeper of her own prison. She rules her own spirit quite as harshly as she rules any of us.”

We walked on in silence for a while, with a cautious space between us. Only my skirt touched him as it swished along the path.

“What riles me is the littleness of learning,” I said, suddenly.

“The what? Is this more of your philosophy?”

“The facts and factions, the scholars in their ponderousness of robes and competition and self-display and mutual vilification.”

“Ha! Yes. Now this, I like.”

“How can any man know a little and not crave to know much more – the ‘all’ that is the sum of what we have? To go beyond the walls of this fine college or that one, and be God like in his wisdom, so that the map of all learning is stretched before his gaze?”

“They are gentlemen. They have nothing more to prove.”

“I cannot credit it, the narrow, self-regarding focus of the scholar on his portion of Cicero and Seneca, his puffed-upness with it, his satisfaction with the verse

he's stuffed whole into his empty head. For every Bacon there are a hundred lettered dolts."

"Lady, what fuels this rage? You speak like no one else I know."

"O, yes, I should calm myself. I am just a woman, accidentally and freakishly deformed by teaching which took no regard of my station, nor of my sex."

William stopped and turned to face me. "God above, you're like a maze with every twist and turn taking me further from the sober world! Such anger and ..."
(Here he swallowed.) "Such ardour. I never knew anything like the earthly joy you spun with me last night. I keep thinking of your soft tears in the darkness, and how they mixed with mine."

"My love," I whispered. "We must be cool in daylight."

"And of... Jesu. I am sick with love for you, Aemilia. I am ill with it."

"Will, be quiet, don't speak of these things in this place! Be cautious!"

"I cannot be cautious, and love you. I must be reckless, or give you up."

"No sir, you must be cautious and not give me up!"

"How does Rosaline compare to Katherine?" he asked, abruptly.

"How...what?"

"It is the man who is quelled in this tale, don't you see it? Who must cool his ardour and his arrogance to win his love. She is as far removed from that poor Shrew as I could make her. And she is darkly beautiful, like another lady that I know."

I couldn't help laughing in spite of myself. "There is a message in that play for me, is there?"

"It's a love letter to my own fine, clever Rosaline, who makes me think and makes me weep and will not let me have my way."

“Oh sir! Now you are playing with me! How have you been thwarted? Why, there is not a man alive who has got his way with me as you have, or for whom I’ve taken greater risks!”

“Listen. I have a thought for you. You have already taught me more than I thought possible about the pain of love, and the sweet agony of denial. Teach me more! Teach me about your great Greeks. Speak to me in Latin – and in Hebrew. Tell me tales of Italy, and of Venice. I can learn more – I am quick to learn. With your knowledge, I can make my plays shine yet more brightly.”

I was flattered, but determined not to show it. “Why should I give you the benefit of my great learning? How will you reward me, sir?”

His eyes flickered and I saw with him how we had spent the night, that silent rapture. But then he seemed to collect himself. “I can teach you something about poetry. So you may improve yourself, just as I improve myself. We shall be twin souls on a quest for true perfection.”

I smiled at this. “Very well, Will, if you say so. It will help us while away an idle hour.”

“Idle?”

“When we are tired of...”

Suddenly a drop of rain fell heavily on my hand. I looked up, and saw the storm clouds had returned. The knot garden was empty, and we were standing at a stone gate, at the furthest side from the house.

“Tired of what?” asked Will. He was standing closer now, and as the new rain fell he pushed me into the gateway and I saw there was a tiny room within it, with a stone slit for a window and a cracked oak door.

“William, I ...”

But I moved first, kissing him so hard I bit his lip and tasted his blood, and as the storm broke with a clattering roar of thunder, we had fallen together in the garden room, and he had kicked the door shut and somehow my skirts were undone and I was in my under-shift wedged half way up the wall, and Will was tight inside me pushing higher with each shuddering breath, and I was shouting with each thunder clap, as nearly mad as I have ever been, and as close to heaven as I'll ever be. Unless GOD is more forgiving than I dare to hope.

Scene VII

This set the pattern for the fervent time that followed. And O, what a time it was. I wrote some notes on what we did, and how we loved, all of them in Hebrew, which I knew Hunsdon could never read. It is a sad fact of our lives that it is easier to convey pain and sorrow than pleasure and happiness – I trust that in the afterlife we shall find perfection more to our liking. But I have known a passion that transformed me, and a love that made the world glitter. It was nothing like drunkenness, nor like witchcraft neither: it was like being reborn in Eden. And I had him: he was mine and no one else's. And I was his: no other man came close. What happened to us before, and the sadness that came after – they cannot touch that period of our glorious rapture. William belonged to me, and I rejoiced in my dominion, and he was at once my equal and my Lord.

But it could not last. We feared as much. We snatched at time together when we could, not just lustful but curious, and hungry to know each other's mind. We read together and wrote together, and laughed and wept and whispered in that secret room. And yet it's true, our wildest rapture was to fuck together, and each time we counted it a miracle, and wondered if a greater ecstasy could be reached than that which we had known in our last coupling, and each time it turned out that it could. Such is the way with new lovers when their bodies match. The greatest miracle, I must say, was that for many months no child came of all that exultant fornication. But nature will have its way in the end, as nature must. And there is no question keeping two lovers made me careless and distracted, for I had been a watchful, canny mistress for many years. I had kept myself away from Hunsdon at my fertile times, and if my curse was late, I would take a vile cure made from mandrake root. Which worked well, though

each draught nearly killed me. I had proceeded with these treatments with such success that I had come think I must be barren, or that Hunsdon's seed was spent. (Most of his children were older than I was.) That second theory may have had something in it. The first was far from being the case. Rather than being barren, I was like a mossy bank in springtime, ready to burst forth with new life.

So one day, soon after Michaelmas, I realised that my curse-blood was late. Quite unconcerned, and confident that I could soon put this to rights, I said nothing. I took my usual draught of poison, pinching my nose to get it down. Then I waited for the blood to come, calmly enough to start with. But this time nothing happened, excepting only that my belly seemed tighter than a drum. I took another draught, a heftier dose this time, which gave me fearful cramps. This time I was certain the brew had done its work, and waited once again. Again, nothing. Now, with mounting fear, I began to pray for my deliverance, though it is of course against the teachings of Our Lord to ask for an unborn child to die. Night after night, I lay awake, dry-eyed. I knew only too well what happened to a kept mistress who found herself in this predicament. She would be cast off, and sent away. I must free myself. I must get rid of it.

But who would help me? There was no one I could trust, no one who I could turn to. Dr Forman might have a tincture he could give me, but I wasn't certain he would keep a secret. My dugs – so recently the size of winter apples – had swelled up so they seemed ready to burst out of my bodice, and were painful to the touch. And I seemed to have gained a layer of fat, even though everything I ate tasted like pewter. If I was a pig, I would soon be ready for the pot. I was nauseous and dizzy and could barely think. The pregnancy itself seemed like a spell. I slept in dream snatches, and saw Will and Hunsdon fuck together, and woke twisted in the bed sheets and crying out.

At last, my head cleared. Hunsdon had gone away, to execute some Catholics at York. And I held Will off, writing a coded note to say I was too ill to meet him in our little room. Which was no more than the truth. If I was to do something to save myself, the time to act was now. Alice, as luck would have it, was a stupid, unobservant girl, who lived most vividly in the looking glass. Thus, she saw nothing strange in my repeated bouts of puking.

“Dear me, mistress, what have you eaten?” said she, fetching me a cup of small beer after I had emptied my guts into the close stool. “You’ve been ill for days! And yet you’re no thinner – there’s a marvel!”

“A marvel indeed,” I said, sipping from the cup. My mind was sharper after this last horrid spewing-up, as if I had rid myself of some internal confusion along with my breakfast. “We must go out.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough, mistress? You’re very pale.”

“I am well enough to visit an apothecary,” I said. “To seek a cure for this unpleasant malady.”

“Oh, but I could go for you,” said the girl, all eager. I knew why: she would prance past the law students at Middle Temple, showing off her pretty clothes. Though they would like as not be more interested in Aristotle’s Refutations than in her Spanish ruff. “Oh – please let me!”

“No, Alice, we shall both go. Hurry up, and don’t start messing with your cap. I’m well enough now, but may be soon be worse again.”

*

Most of the apothecary’s shops were found in Bucklersbury, a narrow street which wound away from Cheapside. In the swirling city stench this was a place which offered a rare delight to Londoners, for you could smell it half a mile away,

such was the sweet scent of its herbs and spices. But of the hundred apothecaries who traded in the city, I had heard that half were useless and the rest were cozeners. On most occasions, I would send a servant to see Ned Hollybushe, whose father had written an excellent book upon this subject. But today...

“Why here, mistress? Off the beaten way?” asked Alice. “This is not our usual man!” We had arrived in a cramped courtyard, which reeked even more strongly than the busy street. The jutting storeys of the ancient houses made it dusk at midday. An open shop front stood before us, the counter folded out so that – in theory - we could see within. But all that was visible was the shop sign, which was a hanging tortoise. Behind this I could see nothing.

“Wait here,” I said.

“Oh, but mistress...”

“Do what I tell you.”

And with that, I pushed open the door of the shop and went inside. What struck me first was its exotic scent, something between the smell of cumin and sweet basil. But as I looked around me, I saw that the shop was very different to what I had been expecting. Though it was ill-lit, there was a shaft of sunlight coming from a window set high up in the wall, and I saw that it was a larger space than had seemed possible from the street. The walls were painted dull red and lined with shelves, upon which were ranged pots and pitchers and drug-jars made of blue and white porcelain, painted with red and blue flowers and symbols and marked with the name of the herb or spice which they contained. On the counter which had been set up in front of these neat shelves were two blue glass droppers with curving spouts, a leather bound book and a brightly painted chest. On the floor beside the counter was a giant pestle and mortar as big as a bucket. Everything was polished and clean, so that the falling rays

of sunlight were reflected in the shining surfaces. So much precision and order, such neatness – I confess I was surprised.

Behind the counter stood the apothecary, Widow Daunt. She wore a white bonnet, and her face was sallow and deeply lined. She watched me with clear, green eyes, and her expression was somewhat sour, as if a shop like hers might do very well if only she didn't have the bother of serving customers. But there was no shortage of these. Joan Daunt was well known for her foul but cunning remedies.

“How can I help you?” she asked, looking me over. “I see you have plenty of need for cures.” She had a strange accent. Scots, I thought.

“Do you, indeed?” A wave of sickness came over me. “I only need one cure, in fact, and that's for...”

But just as I spoke the door flew open and in came three more customers: a skinny young woman and two loutish men, one thick set with the face of an idiot and the other a veritable giant, who had to bend almost double to get through the door.

“You wicked, evil, hell-hag!” said the woman, screwing up her weasel eyes. “You have cheated me and done me wrong!”

“I told you as you should never should have come to see a woman,” said Thick Set. “Your sex isn't got the brains for it, nor the remembrance of the stuff.”

Widow Daunt folded her arms. “What's your problem, that's got you all so skittish?”

“The love potion you gave me!” said Skinny.

“Did it not work?”

“It worked all right.”

“Then what's wrong?”

Skinny Woman scowled. “You tricked me!”

“Does he not lie with you?” The widow nodded at Thick Set. “There was some trouble with his drooping manhood, if I remember rightly.”

“There was.”

“So aren’t you pleased with his performance?”

“Pleased with it?” said Skinny. “I can’t get the bugger off me! He’s like a stallion, wants it half the night. I’m that sore in my chamber, I hardly know myself. And now, I’ve found, he’s had this one as well!” She pointed at the giant. “Right up the back stairs.” The giant looked down, modestly.

The widow’s face was still. “Hmm. And you, sir, what have you got to say for yourself? Did you take a draught from this woman?”

Thick Set nodded. His face was puce, as if he was concentrating very hard on something. I saw that beneath his rough smock, his prick was bigger than a courtier’s codpiece. “Can’t help myself. I’ve had to sell the milking cow, for her own safety. Swear to God, I can’t be trusted.”

“And before that, you had no desire for man nor woman... nor beast?”

“I was like a slab o’ lard, mistress. Never looked at a woman once, nor even thought about it.”

The widow shrugged, and said to Skinny: “Then I gave you what you wanted, and you got what you deserved.”

All hell came after this. The giant pulled a rope from round his waist. Skinny leaped upon the counter and jumped on Joan’s back, and Thick Set drew a dagger.

“Give us the cure, or we’ll kill you now!” screamed Skinny. “Make him as he was before.”

They had Widow Daunt’s arms behind her back, and yet she made no effort to struggle free, only gave them that green gaze which seemed to irk them even more.

Thick Set raised his dagger to strike her, but I was quicker. I drew out Hunsdon's silver paper knife, and it flashed brightly in the sunlight and they all went quiet, as if froze into a picture.

"You are very ill mannered," I said.

Thick Set's face was twisted with surprise. "What?"

"I was before you in the queue."

"*What...?*"

I drew a line upon his hairy forearm with the blade, leaving a trail of trickling scarlet.

"You jumped in ahead of me."

He was so shocked that he dropped his own knife and I picked it up.

"I am here on Palace business, and unless you make yourselves invisible, by any power that comes to hand, I will have all three of you arrested and flung into the Clink."

Skinny blinked hard, as if forcing herself to assert her will against me. "We'll kill you, too!" she screamed. "No one would know it, down this little alley way. We'd be gone hours before they found you."

"I'd like to see you try, you vicious little trollop."

But the giant put one great hand across her mouth and spoke for the first time.

"I bin there," he said. "Not going back." He tied the rope around his waist, lifted Skinny up and placed her by the shop door.

Thick Set looked at me, and then at Joan. "What shall I do?" he asked.

"Better to marry than to burn," said Joan. "Or so St Paul told us. Here – this'll help." She gave Skinny a tiny pewter pot. "Use this ointment before you go to bed. Apply it thickly, up your fanny. And make him wash his cock once in a while." She

had no wise words for the giant, who went forlornly out into the street. The others followed him.

Joan Daunt waited till the door had banged shut, and then turned to look at me. She seemed neither alarmed by their violent behaviour nor grateful for my help.

“You’ll end up keeping it,” she said.

“Keeping what?”

“The child.”

“I never said...”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Well you are quite wrong. I do want rid of it. And I want something that’s as potent as whatever it was you gave to her.”

“Who?”

“That customer, just gone. I want a brew to end a baby.”

“Yes, but I just told you...”

“Something strong. And I don’t mind what you put in it. A hanged man’s sperm is fine with me. It can burn my womb out, for all I care.”

“So that you could never have a child?”

“Why should I want one? All they do is bind you, and I am bound enough already.”

She stared at me, and I saw something unexpected: kindness. “Sit down,” she said. “I’ll do you something. But only drink it if you’re sure.”

She collected together some jars and bottles, took out a second pestle and mortar – of normal size this time – and dropped into it various leaves and fragments, which she then began to grind. And then she scooped a hideous little fish from a jar and scraped the scales from its wriggling form. These she placed into a clay burner

and a most obnoxious perfume filled the air. What she had made – a sickly, semi-liquid paste, the colour of a dog turd – she squidged into a tiny vial and stopped with wax.

“Your remedy,” she said, handing it to me. “Swallow it in one draft. The babe will come out in three spasms, whole and breathing, but too small for you to see its face. It will be dead within five minutes.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she held up her finger.

“Be careful, mistress. Think before you act. And... when you need me, send word.”

“I have servants, Mistress Daunt. I am well cared for.”

“Nonetheless, I wait upon your word. And when I hear from you, then I will come.”

I looked at the vial and its horrid contents, puzzled. The potion was not still, but heaved and oozed, as if in some low kind of pain. And the stench was such that I could smell it through its coat of glass.

Scene VIII

I thought that I would wait one more day, to see if my curse might start. Another night of prayer might see the unborn child bleed harmlessly away. The potion looked so horrible, and the thought of swallowing it was disgusting to me. But it was hard to wait for anything. I sat at my virginals in my parlour, and tried to play a tune. It was a pretty piece called “Giles Farnaby’s Dream”, which could usually calm my nerves, but today it only vexed me: its brightness seemed too far removed from the world I knew. I looked at the painted wainscot, the Turkey carpet which took pride of place over the fire place, the half finished skirt that lay in a ripple of azure satin across my bed. Nothing seemed real. I was like a child’s toy, which was now faulty, and must be mended. My head ached. My eyes were sore. My velvet bodice dug into my flesh. I slammed the lid down on the virginals, so that the strings let out a plaintive note. Snatching up my cloak, I rushed down the stairwell and into the courtyard. I felt as if there must be a way out of all this trouble, if I only I could clear my head and think. The gateway to St James’ park was open. I slipped through it, and hurried into the darkening trees.

I lifted my skirts and ran headlong, not caring where I went. I stopped, panting, and leaned against a great oak. Heaving sobs retched out of me. My head still ached, my mind seemed too full, as if my thoughts and worries must be bulging outward from my skull. Everything was distorted, so that what had seemed obvious and sensible a few weeks ago seemed strange and ugly now. I turned back towards the lights of Whitehall. The moon lit up the frosted battlements and twisted chimney stacks. Wood-smoke drifted in the moonlight. Someone was singing at an upper window: I heard a girl’s soft voice. I strained to listen, and heard these words:

*There was a lady dwelt in York,
Fal the dal the di do.
She fell in love with her father's clerk,
Down by the green wood side.*

*She laid her hand against a stone,
Fal the dal the di do.
And there she made most bitter moan,
Down by the green wood side.*

*She took a knife both long and sharp,
Fal the dal he di do.
And stabbed her babes unto the heart,
Down by the green wood side.*

*As she was walking home one day,
Fal the dal the di do.
She met those babes all dressed in white,
Down by the green wood side.*

*She said, "Dear children, can you tell,"
Fal eh dal the di do.
"Where shall I go? To heaven or hell?"
Down by the green wood side.*

“O yes! dear mother, we can tell,”

Fal th dal the di do.

“For it’s we to heaven and you to hell.”

Down by the green wood side.

I put my face in my hands and moaned just as the lady had. What to do? What to do? It was Will’s child, I was sure of it, the fruit of all our hidden passion. I wasn’t certain where the souls of unborn, unbaptised children were supposed to go, now the Queen was England’s Pope, but in the old days they dwelt in Limbo. It did not sound like a good place for my unborn babe to be. Yet what else could I do but kill it? There was no way out. I should have kept away from Will. I had not, could not. Now what would become of me?

Just as I was wracked with another bout of sobs, I found that I was not alone. Someone was by me. Someone’s arms were around me.

“Aemilia– my love! What’s wrong? You’re cold – you’re trembling!” Will’s voice was soft and tender.

“Oh, William!” I wept against his shoulder.

“What is it?” He looked down at me, eyes shadowed in the moonlight.

I struggled with myself, not knowing what to say. “Oh... I am so unhappy that I can’t be with you, and must live with Hunsdon, in the Palace...” This was almost the truth. And yet, of course, I wanted to say: “Will, I am pregnant, and I cannot say for sure if it is yours, and yet I believe it is, and I’ve got a draught to get rid of it, and I thought that I could do this, and go on as before, but now I find I’d rather die. Please help me.” Even with his arms around me, I felt alone, and as if I had betrayed him.

He kissed me, and held me tight against him. I could smell the leather of his doublet and the tavern stench of old ale and tobacco. “Come, come, we can’t stay here,” he said. (And how this sweet “we” tore at me.) “We must find somewhere warmer... there is an inn on the other side of the park where we can go. Here – look...” He pulled a stage mask from his sleeve, made of black velvet stiffened with bombast. “You can be the mysterious lady and I will be your humble squire.”

*

When we were settled by the fire in an upstairs room, he said: “You haven’t asked what I was doing, loitering in the park beneath your window.” He poured out a glass of wine and set it down in front of me.

“What *were* you doing, then?” The truth was that I was so distracted that it had not occurred to me.

He took my hands and held them. “Still cold, so cold, my love.”

“I am better now. Tell me, what news do you have?”

William smiled. I realised I had never seen him look so happy. “Kit was supposed to be going to Italy, on business for the Queen, but he has fallen ill. The business is secret, and only those who are trusted by her are eligible to go. Now they are sending me instead!” He was beaming.

“They are? But... isn’t it dangerous?”

“It is secret business, but there is no serious risk. I am seeking information for Her Majesty.”

I stared at him, lulled by the fire and by a mute happiness that he was here, but not knowing what his words meant.

“What will help us...” here he squeezed my hand “...is that no one – save those whose names I can’t even tell you - knows that I am going. So if you came with me, it would be as if we were invisible.”

“I! But what of Hunsdon?”

“I am going to Venice! Where your family comes from. All you need to say to Hunsdon is that you are visiting the Bassanos. No one will know that we are there together.” His eyes were merry. All that I longed for, and all I dreaded, in one invitation.

“He would never hear of it.”

William leaned closer. “Then don’t tell him.”

“What?”

“Leave in secret, flee away with me, and we will be together in Venice, and you can be my mistress.”

“For how long?”

“For eternity!”

“Living how, exactly?”

“I will be your protector.”

“And where shall we live?”

“I... have expectations that these Italian plays of mine will make me rich.”

“Expectations?”

“I am certain of it. How can it be otherwise?” He kissed my hand, and then reached across and touched my icy cheek. “You know that this is what should happen. You know that we can only be happy if we are joined together – think of it – to have each other in the day time, in the open, instead of these furtive fornications and

sneakings round at dead of night! To eat together, or stroll in the Exchange!” He spoke as if he was offering me a chance to live with him in Heaven.

“William, I never heard such foolishness... how can this be possible?”

But he was determined. “Listen, my love. There is a logic in the universe that goes beyond mere common sense – and this is the logic of our two lives, intermingling.”

“Oh, William!”

“Our two selves, undivided. Don’t you agree?”

“Of course, but...”

“Come with me! Come away with me, and who knows what will happen to us? Let’s take our chance.”

“If only it were possible!”

“It is possible, my sweet Aemilia! It is possible. Imagine how it would feel, sailing down the great Thames to the open sea, towards the sunlight and your father’s city! Just think of it...”

I closed my eyes and saw it.

He leaned closer. “Melia. You cannot deny me. You cannot deny yourself.”

I opened them. “Very well. I’ll do it.”

Scene IX

This talk of Venice made me think of my own people, who I had hardly seen since my father's death. The Bassanos were musicians, and came to London to play for old King Henry long before I was born. Six brothers, of whom my father was the youngest. They lived in the same few streets in Spitalfields, along with other foreigners, and others who could sing and play. It was a world within a world, a little Italy in the midst of English folk. It had its own rules and customs, its own stories and delicacies. So my memories of childhood shine as brightly as church windows, and are filled with music and song.

When I thought of going to Venice with William, I thought of all the other Bassanos who still lived there, on the shining water beneath the golden sun. And I thought of that time I had visited when I was a child, and how I sat in the water in a low boat with a high prow. I thought of the damp stench of the place, and how it seeped all around me, and how the laughing beauty of the people had made it seem like fairyland. I wanted to go back. I wanted to see this place once more, and get the measure of its familiarity and its distance from my English self. But more than anything, more than I could bear to think of, I wanted to leave all my lies and falseness behind me, and run away with Will.

*

Venice. For days after, this single word blazed in my head. Venice. A living paradise, a place of safety and escape. In the daytime I plotted and wondered: at night I dreamed of bright and geometric water, of passion that floated in a golden gondola in a mist of angelic perfume. Our love deserved as much. We should not have to serve, like broken hacks, to please those who were less than we were! Venice. All of

my dreams and longings were wrapped in that one word, that one place, as mythical to me as Mount Olympus. We would escape to Venice and live like gods.

Will sent secret notes, and I replied to them, and all our arrangements were in place. The small fact that I had not told him I was pregnant was something I put from me. The vial would fix all that. I would take the poison, and be done with this slight inconvenience and be gone. I had hidden Joan Daunt's brew in a silver casket by my bed. I had unlocked it once or twice and looked at the shifting, shit-hued poison, but I could not bring myself to take it.

There is a hidden power in doing nothing, so that time itself will act for you. And then, it was the eve of the day of our departure, and William and I had made our assigation, and I had promised to meet him at the quayside, near to the Bridge. Hunsdon's absence made this easier to countenance: I felt as if I was living in a sort of limbo, detached from what I knew by both love and fear. The boat was called the *Delight* which pleased Will greatly. It was due to sail at high tide, which would be mid-morning. I found myself shaking at the thought of it, and with the necessity of ending my confinement, the reality of packing my belongings and with the crazed potency of our dream. Separate from all of this was the lonely knowledge that to make this journey, I must take the potion. I prayed for forgiveness, and in the afternoon I opened that dread casket once again, and took out the vial. It was some days since I had looked at the foul thing, and as I gazed upon it now, I saw the shifting, surging contents had expanded and mounted up the sides of the glass, like a semi-liquid fungus. I felt my guts heave: it was most horrible to see. I took the stopper out, and was assaulted by its appalling stench. At that same moment, I heard a peculiar sound and whirled around to see what it could be. It was – I could have sworn it – the sound of a new born baby crying, plaintive, urgent, relentless. I turned full circle, startled.

Outside the sky had turned grey and a heavy rain was falling, and a ceaseless rhythm was beating at the window panes. A white bird flapped by. Of course, the noise I had heard must be a seagull's cry, echoing down the chimney. I raised the vial and tipped it slowly towards my lips.

“A-lah! A-lah!” There it was again, even clearer than before. I lowered the glass, trembling with nausea. I had never heard a seagull make such a sound. I replaced the stopper, opened the window casement and the rainstorm ripped into the room, drenching my dress and hair. Hardly noticing the sudden cold, I peered out into the storm, looking down at the ground and half expecting to see an abandoned infant lying by the palace wall. It was not unknown for women to leave their new born babies there, in the mistaken belief that Royal largesse would ensure that they were well looked after. (Foundlings were passed to the church, who would find some worn-out wet nurse to feed them. Few survived.) On this day, though, there was no baby. There was nothing.

There was something so strangely sad about the empty, lonely gardens, and the fact that there was no crying child that I began to weep. I thought of those poor girls who brought their newborn babes and left them in that place, open to the elements, little, furred, milk-smelling creatures, unshriven, unbegun. And this in a city which pitied no one, in which wealth was everything and penury the norm. Those poor children! Those wretched, abandoned souls! I wept silent, penitent tears. I could not do it. I could not kill this child. Lifting the vial up high, over my shoulder, I hurled it out of the window with all my might. I heard a soft crack as it hit the ground and – in spite of the rain – the sour smell of something burning. I leaned out and let the rain mix with my tears. And I knew that, if I could not kill this unborn infant, I could not flee to Venice, leaving my rich protector behind, furious and betrayed. Because if I

was going to have this child I needed him. No, let me be as honest as I can be here: I needed his money. I did not know who had fathered this child, but I knew who the mother was well enough. A penniless, bastard whore, half Jewish, long orphaned. Nobody. I thought of William, who would be on his way to the *Delight* in the pouring rain, expectant and full of love. If I could have unmade everything so that I could go with him... my thoughts flew to the four corners of the world, and then came back again, defeated.

The rain pelted harder still and seemed to wash some sense into me, and in the end I reached the conclusion that I liked least and which pained me the most, but I could not see another way.

Scene X

Next morning I woke early and lay still. The storm had died down: the *Delight* would sail that day. I opened my eyes and stared at the canopy above me. I had the whole bed to stretch out in, and I did so, pushing my warm feet into its coldest corners as if to punish them. The new day brought no hope, but in its light I knew that I had made a wise decision. I had come up with a stratagem that would save my child, and keep us from the streets. It was not a design of any great cleverness or cunning. It was simply this: if Hunsdon thought the child was his, he would provide for me. If he thought I had betrayed him, he would cast me out with nothing. Therefore, my affair with Will must end, and never be discovered. As a loyal but careless mistress I might be married off to some lowly courtier - one happy to take the dowry Hunsdon settled on me as his bribe for taking on spoiled goods.

I was due at the harbourside at ten. I wondered whether to send a note, but dared not. Hunsdon was due back from York at any time. Better to do nothing, and let my failure to appear convey its own message to Will. I curled myself into a ball, and pulled the eiderdown around me, and waited for the time to pass.

But I did not sleep, of course. I felt as if I would never sleep again. My head ached with grief, and I was filled with bitter anger that this must be my lot. If I was such a faithless whore, why was I disabled by scruples I could not afford? A depraved and desperate woman should be ruthless in the execution of her desires! Not only was there no place for me in the hierarchy of mankind, my own character was wrongly put together. The agony of my mind forced me to puke into the privy with more violence than usual. After a while, spent and white-faced, I got up and dressed and read the Bible with such fierce attention that I feared my eyeballs would drop out. Then I

thought again of the letter that I had not written, and this reminded me of several Will had sent to me, so I pulled them out from beneath the mattress and threw them on the fire. And yet, in spite of all this, and all my determination to do nothing, when I looked at the clock I found that just forty minutes had passed. I thought that Hell would not just be a place of fire and punishment, but of clocks that ticked and tocked in an eternal present, and where nothing ever happened.

I stood up, and paced up and down the chamber saying: "It's Hunsdon's child. It's Hunsdon's child." (As if I were casting a spell.) I could not be still. I could not stop my ceaseless walking, so I continued in this manner until at last, exhausted, I fell down senseless on the bed.

*

When I woke, Hunsdon himself was sitting beside me, his clothes still mud-splattered from the journey. He was looking down at me and stroking my hair, but he was not smiling.

He said: "I have a gift for you."

I struggled up onto my elbows and we kissed each other softly.

I tried to read his expression. "A gift! You are so kind!"

"Not kind, my dear. It is only just that you should have it. I have loved you very well."

A chill came on me. "Why do you say 'have loved'?" I asked. "I'm not dead."

"No, my dear," said he. "Too full of life." He patted my tight belly. His face was heavy.

I felt the world lurch, and looked down at my body. "You know." But I prayed he only guessed the half of it.

“I am building you a house, at Long Ditch. At Westminster, quite close by.”
Hunsdon was a soldier, not a politician. When there were decisions to be made, he made them quickly.

“I...I’m sorry for it,” said I. “So many years without falling pregnant, and then...it was my carelessness. My fault.”

He sighed and began to take off his boots. “You can’t blame yourself, my poor child,” he said. “I put it there.”

I said nothing, at once relieved and quite bereft of hope.

“What shall I do there, all alone?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from rising to a wail. “Like some dowager, pensioned off?” My mind said: do not question your salvation, Aemilia, take the house and keep silent.

He leaned across and kissed me gently.

“You are to marry,” said he. “You won’t be alone.”

My mouth was dry. “Who shall I marry, my Lord?”

“Alfonso Lanyer.”

“Lanyer! Oh, Harry! Whose thought was this?”

“He’s always had his eye on you.”

“But sir...”

“Enough, Aemilia! He is one of your own.”

One of my own! This was a cruel blow indeed. Alfonso Lanyer was a prize fool, a womanizer and a gambler at the tables. Handsome enough, for sure. But as a husband! I wanted to cry out, to explain that this could never be, yet of course I could not, in case my reluctance to marry one man suggested I might have a preference for another.

*

Then followed a dark time. The wedding was set for one week later, and I spent much time alone, reading and praying and seeking peace of mind. Yet all I cared for was William, from whom I had heard nothing, and his silence was like a pure scream of agony. I did not know if he had sailed or not, since his voyage was secret and our association known to no one but ourselves. I tried to imagine him on the *Delight*, sailing off to Italy, but saw nothing, only darkness. I tried to imagine what he must think of me, but there was nothing, nothing in my mind but pain. I wanted to speak to him, more than anything, but I knew I had no words that could placate him. How long did it take to sail to Venice? How dangerous was the voyage? It was possible that I would never see him again. So I walked through my life like my own spectre, my heart and soul torn out of me, sustained only by the love-child that grew steadily inside.

I did have one last shred of hope, one remnant of my former self, the child bred in the palace. I hoped that I might take with me, out into the cold world beyond the life of Court, a little of my learning. I hoped also that I might be allowed to write my poetry and to improve it, sustained by a patron who was willing to be my sponsor. This was a man's business, but I was as well educated as any man, and I thought if any woman might succeed in such a project, it would be me. If the Countess of Pembroke was celebrated for her verse, was it so extraordinary an ambition to hope that I might be celebrated for mine? She had made her country home a supposed "paradise for poets" – could I not make my own small house a place of industry and reflection?

The day before I was to leave Whitehall, I gave Hunsdon a pamphlet of my poems. I had had them published by a printer in Paul's churchyard.

"They are pretty, my dear, thank you so much," said Hunsdon. He sat apart from me, on a cedarwood chair, and seemed preoccupied with something other than my leave-taking. "You know me, I do like a play, and a good ballad that tells a tale, but... I'm not a man for sonnets and such fancification."

"I wrote them all for you."

"Indeed, I know it. And I am touched, very touched indeed. Now, tell me, do you like the house?"

"I like it very much. Thank you my lord. I am grateful – beyond grateful."

"I think you will be very well accommodated. The solar, in particular, I have appointed to the highest specification."

"The specification is quite perfect."

"You will be married next week, as you know."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Very good."

I looked down, so he could not see the expression on my face.

"He is a bloody fool, Alfonso, but they say the ladies like him," said Hunsdon. He lent across and patted my hand.

"They do indeed," I said.

"He's always admired you."

"Yes, sir. You said so."

"So he'll be ... good to you. You know. Shame for it all to go to waste." He nodded to me in a general way which hinted at our gaudy nights.

"Yes sir." I took a breath. "Harry, I should like to have a patron."

“A what, my dear?”

“A patron.”

He stared at me, speechless with astonishment.

“I know it is unusual,” said I.

“Unusual...? What are you talking about?”

“I mean... someone who has position, who might be interested in my...verse.”

“Christ’s blood! These lines you’ve scrawled, you mean?” He waved the pamphlet at me. “These funny little ditties?”

“They are poems, my Lord. I know they need more work.

“Good Lord,” he said. “I fear that your condition has affected your faculties, my poor child. You’re barking mad.”

“No, indeed, my Lord.”

“Whoever would have thought it? You always seemed so sensible.”

“I don’t believe I am going mad at all, sir. I have always wanted to make more of my poetry, to learn how to improve it, and how to... apprentice myself to it.”

He shook his head. “I will tell you this, Aemilia, you’re a strange one. The night-walking is just the half of it.”

This made me want to weep, for it was night walking that had first made Hunsdon notice me, soon after my mother died. In the depths of my slumber, I had left the chamber I had shared with her, close to the servant’s quarters, and walked unknowing into the middle of a feast given in his honour, dressed in nothing but my white gown. He had led me by the hand to his own bed, returned to the celebrations, and then spent the night in his dressing room, leaving me undisturbed. Most honourable. And yet also canny, for from that day on, quite alone and sorely frightened by the constant lechery of the courtiers who wanted to have me for a night

or so, I felt that here was one man I could trust. After that, he wooed me with kind words, small gifts and imported books from Antwerp, and the next time I found myself in his fine bed, he lay with me. He was surprised to find me still a virgin and yet eager in my pleasure, and we did not sleep a wink that night. From that time I was his sole mistress and no other man dared trespass on his territory.

This was all finished. And there was no time to mourn the passing of his gentle but insistent courtship. “Would it be possible to find someone, now that I’m no longer your mistress?” I said. “I mean, there would be no disgrace attached to you, would there?”

He stared at me with his calm grey eyes that only saw what was solid and tangible. “I never heard of such a thing.”

I let my words spout out, madly, in case I hesitated and never got them out at all. “I don’t want to vanish quite away. I’ll cause no trouble, keep from the Court, not bother you or speak out of turn, or do anything that might displease you... but if I had some support, some patronage... as a man would...” I looked at him beseechingly. “Might anyone consider it?”

He stared at me, dumb-founded, then began to chuckle. “My dear girl, how will I do without you? You are quite as entertaining out of bed as in it. Why not? Why not, indeed?” He laughed so merrily that I had to fight to hide my irritation.

“What would you suggest, sir? For someone in my situation? I have some verses – I could send them, if you are happy for me to do this.”

“To whom?”

“Whoever you suggest.”

“Lord above! I’ve no idea. Did you like the inlaid stools I gave you? Did you like the Aldersgate tiles, and the silver tankards? I have thought of everything, have I not?”

“Everything is there. It is perfect.”

He smiled, very pleased with himself. “Of course, I did ask Lady Anne for her advice. I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

I smiled so hard my cheeks ached. It was logical for him to ask his wife’s opinion, though hardly kind to either of us. “Her Ladyship has exquisite taste.”

He got up and warmed his back before the fire for a moment. “I shall not see you again, after this conversation. I am sorry for it, and I shall miss you sorely. But a break has to be made, and I am afraid the time has come.”

I nodded, and kept to my seat. My hands were very still, my heart beat slowly, slowly. I could control myself, no matter how the world heaved and lurched around me.

*

I had always remembered much of what I’d read, but now I made it my first business to remember every line, padding away pain and anger with the poetry of Men.

Sometimes I read so hard and so long that when I closed my eyes I saw a million dancing letters, formed of white light against my own darkness. Sometimes when I looked at my face in the looking glass, my eyes were black rimmed, and blood shot. I sometimes thought to see words falling down my cheeks held within my salt tears.

But when I wiped my face, there was only clear water on my fingertips. These remembered words must arm me, I knew, for what was to come, and for my city prison outside the Court.

My little house was made from seasoned Kentish oak, its heart-wood turned outward to withstand the wind and weather. Thirty trees were felled to make it, sky-shifting branches fallen among wet fern. I first saw it when it was no more than a wooden skeleton, bare timbers sticking out of the mud, each one marked with a Roman numeral. It looked squashed and small, stuck between two older buildings. I could scarce believe that I was supposed to mark my new life out on so little ground. But soon the carpenters had added walls and floors and windows, like the lungs and belly of a man, and it strangely seemed to grow in size. Even so, my courage faltered as I thought of all the trammelled years I was doomed to spend inside it, a placid little Jill-in-a-box.

My space was this: six rooms in all, with the main door opening into a hallway which was like a little version of the great hall in a great house, and was two storeys in height. A wooden staircase came down into its centre. At the back of the hall was a door which led to the kitchen, with its open hearth and cupboards, which Hunsdon filled with the finest Antwerp silver. Around the fire was a fine array of pots, grid-irons, coal rakes and toasting irons, and from the ceiling hung pots, saucepans and frying pans. On one side of the kitchen was a low door, leading to the garden, such as it was, and the privy.

At the top of the hall stairs was a handsome solar, an oak panelled sitting room with a grander fire place than the kitchen hearth, some heavy carved chairs and a long oak dining table. The walls were bright with coloured hangings, and the ceiling mouldings showed sea serpents, and mermaids swimming in waves of sapphire blue. And on the floor above were two bed chambers, also brightly painted and well furnished with curtained beds and solid old chests. All were gifts from Hunsdon.

The gift I valued most was the pair of Flemish virginals which had been placed in the hall. The elegant instrument took up the most part of one wall. Most beautiful, its soundboards painted with flowers, fruit, birds and moths, all within blue scalloped borders. The natural keys were covered in bone, and the sharps were chestnut. The inside of the lid was embellished with a Latin motto: *Sic transit Gloria Mundi*. The notes it made were soft and plangent and took me far away, back into a world of long galleries echoing with music and private laughter, of lush gardens overlooked by mullioned windows, of feasts and opulence and the giddy knowledge that the furled papers on my Lord's table would govern the lives of earls and paupers, scribes and burghers, pimps and haberdashers, all across the realm.

I forget – at the very top of the house was a little garret, with straw-stuffed eaves coming down almost to the wooden floor. This was the servant's room, and had in it just a truckle bed and a three-legged stool. If you stood on this – though it wobbled badly – you could put your head through the window in the thatch, and see as far as the City with its Roman walls and mess of roofs and smoking chimneys and above these the pointing fingers of a dozen churches, and the mighty Ark which was blasted, spireless St Paul's.

Scene XI

God still being in his Heaven, though mightily indifferent to me, the morning before my wedding day I took myself off to the quiet of the Abbey. I sat down on the rush strewn flags and prayed:

“When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul...I acknowledge my transgressions and my sins...”

“Aemilia!”

I opened my eyes. My pregnant state made my mind slow, my view of the world outside my body more hazy with each passing day. Was God speaking to me? But no, it was white-faced William. His eyes were set in dark rings; he was hatless and his hair was pushed behind his ears as if had just risen from bed.

“William! Praise God – is it really you?”

“We must speak – come!”

He dragged me down the damp passage to the high walled abbey garden. At the far side of the quadrangle, an old servant swept up dead leaves with a besom broom.

I stared at Will, shocked and yet for all my woe delighted to have him near.

“Is it true?” he asked. “They say you’re pregnant!”

I covered my face with my hands and turned away.

He pulled me round and prised my hands away. I was forced to look at him, and saw that his eyes were wet with tears.

“Are you having a child?”

I stared into his eyes, not able to reply.

“And are you marrying... *Alfonso Lanyer*?” He seemed barely able to say the name.

I looked down at the muddy ground, licking the salt tears from my lips. It had been a stormy night, and a fat worm was slithering in a puddle. Avoiding his gaze, I said: “I thought that you had gone to Venice.”

“Venice! Holy God! Why would I go without you?”

“Because... because you were angry that I didn’t come.”

“Jesu – do you not love me one jot, not one iota? I could not get on that boat if you weren’t with me! I have been out of my mind since then, desperate to see you and not knowing how to reach you... I came to the Palace and tried to give a message to that silly servant girl of yours, and nearly walked straight into Hunsdon.”

I gasped with fright. “He didn’t see you?”

“No. What of it? What have we to lose, now you are marrying your stupid cousin. Is this what you want? Is this why you have kept indoors like a walled-in nun?”

“I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Oh Aemilia! Look at me!” He seized hold of me and shook me, gently. I didn’t want to look at him. His gaze seemed blacker and darker than it had ever been, as if it was a reflection of my own eyes. “Have pity! I’ve never loved, never known what it was to love, never known such pain and wonder as I have known since I met you.”

I couldn’t help myself. “My love,” I said. “My heart will break!” I took his face between my hands and kissed his eyes, his cheeks, his lips. We embraced as tenderly as we had on that strange and silent night at Titchfield. It seemed as if a thousand years had passed since that sweet time.

He drew back and tucked a strand of my hair inside my bonnet. “Answer me one question.”

I smiled up at him, full of sorrow. “I will answer it, I promise.”

“Are you having a child?”

I swallowed bile. “Yes.”

“Then – come with me! Be *my* mistress, be mine...”

“It isn’t yours.”

His face hardened and his arms dropped to his sides. We stared at each other.

“How do you know?”

It was all I could do to remain standing. I put my arm out and steadied myself against the cold stone wall. “I lay with Hunsdon, just as I lay with you.”

He winced and turned his back. For a moment, I thought he was going to walk away, but then he said: “As you did for years before you met me, and nothing came of it.” There was no tenderness now, each word was hard and separate.

I went over to him, and turned him around to face me. I saw, with a wrench of grief, that his face was contorted with pain. I wanted to embrace him, hold him close, and pretend that things could be as they were before. But I could do nothing. “You can’t protect me,” I whispered.

“He’s marrying you off!” said Will, with a great sob. “To a brainless knave not fit to tie your shoelace! A fine way to ‘protect’ you! Are you grateful to him for that? Are you really such a whore as to be bought so cheap?”

“He has given me a dowry, and a house. He has bought me a place in the world. I will be respectable. With you, I would have nothing. Don’t you see? We had a room, nowhere else. We were like conspirators, not man and wife.”

Now he wept openly, shuddering sobs that seemed to tear out of him. “You would have everything. Everything! What is there, that is greater than our love? What in this whole world? Tell me! Tell me!”

My tears flowed too, but all this weeping made me angry. “A lord may have a wife and keep a mistress,” I cried. The old man had stopped sweeping and was staring over at us. I lowered my voice, but spoke with desperate fury. “A playwright can barely keep himself! Half of your noble profession is in the debtors’ prison! I’m not living with my child, as a poet’s whore, in some filthy ale-house! Or a back street alley, like a pauper – how can you even ask me?”

Will breathed deeply and closed his eyes, as if he was searching for the incantation that would change my mind, and make me his. “I can ask you because I love you. I can ask you because, without you, my life is a just a shabby, ceaseless repetition. I can ask you because I don’t believe there are two other people, in this whole great city, who have loved as we have loved. I can ask you because you are the woman who I will always need, and look for, and revere. That is why I can ask you. And you, you speak of money! My God, has the Court so corrupted you? Is that all you can conceive of, the bald, material world?”

I shook my head. “You cannot keep me, William. You are being a fool.”

“I have my work to keep us.”

“Oh yes! Play making, and poetry! You’re one step up from vagrancy.”

There was silence again. I thought – I cannot go on with this. I cannot keep pretending that I am strong enough to live without you.

William pulled his cloak around him, as if in preparation for departure. “I thought you wanted to be a poet yourself? How can you speak of what I do with such contempt?”

“It’s all words. Words, words, words. What are they? Flimsy, floating, fancy things, not real. You make it sound as if I expect a suite of rooms at Whitehall – that’s not fair! But I do need a house, and bowls, and spoons, and sheets. And food and clothing and a safe haven from the streets. I’ve traded in my virtue, and now I’m trading in my love, so I can look after my child. If Hunsdon is marrying me off – so be it.”

He stared down at me, breathing hard. “You’ll bed that worm Alfonso, instead of lying with me? You’ll let him have you, night after night? You’ll do with him all those sublime and secret things that you have done with me?”

“William, you are not free. Will you keep the baby in a box of feathered hats? Shall it crawl the stage-boards before it speaks? Will you feed this babe before you feed the ones that are already born, at Stratford? In wedlock? Leave me be! Stop torturing me with what you call love, and is a sort of twisted lust!”

He stared at me as if I was at the bottom of an abyss. His face was as white as winding sheet. Even his lips were pale. “How can you say that? You know I love you.”

I closed my eyes. “I know it.”

“And you love me.”

He came back and held me in his arms and I hid my face in his neck. After a moment, I looked up at him and said: “I do love you. William. If love alone could keep us, we would never part.”

“Then...” He hardened his grip around me, but I pulled away.

“But love never kept anyone,” I cried. “Did it? And we are joined to others. And we must survive and so must they. I am to marry Lanyer, and he will be my lord,

and I will be his wife and his word will be my law. I will be tamed, like poor Kate in your play. See – how wise and prescient you were!”

“It’s not possible. My darling, darling Melia. It cannot be. ”

“It is the only way.”

And then, not able to bear another word of this, I turned and ran across the garden. William screamed after me: “It is not finished! I will not let you go! Hear me Aemilia! We are not done!”

I looked over my shoulder, my hands pressed to my mouth. William had disappeared. The old man was staring after me, his broom suspended in mid-air.

Scene XII

I will not speak of my wedding day, or of my husband. You will hear more of him later. For the first few weeks of our union, I tried to pretend that he did not exist, and he pleased me by keeping away. The fact that he was frittering my dowry at the dicing tables did not become known to me for some time. And in any case it was his money, in law, not mine. I spent my days writing, sitting in the solar and looking down at the street, and waiting for my belly to grow. It obliged me in full measure: I soon looked like a plum pudding. Yet, if I thought that my life had taken as unlucky a turn as possible, I was wrong. There was another twist of the knife yet to come.

A letter arrived for me one day. To my surprise, it was from Hunsdon. I tore it open, wondering if he might have changed his mind. Perhaps he wanted me to be his mistress again. Perhaps Lady Anne had driven him mad with boredom. But no. It was a short note:

My dear Aemilia,

I trust you are well. How do you like the set of Antwerp porringers? I had a thought, in answer to that odd question of yours. William Cecil is your man. Old Burghley takes a somewhat utilitarian view of the printed word, but the fellow has more influence with publishers than any one at Court. He will know who – if anyone – might back a woman. (Though I warn you, my sweet lady, your ambition is quite absurd.) Good luck with him, dear girl.

Your loyal servant,

Henry

*

Burghley House was on the north side of the Strand. It was a handsome brick building, three storeys high, built around two courtyards. I was shown into the library, which looked out over the gardens and the fields of Covent Garden which lay beyond. I could see two youths playing tennis on a paved court, and a servant working in the orchard. As I watched the young men, I reflected that I had about as much power as the shuttlecock that bounced between them. It surprised me that Burghley had agreed to see me: he was well known for his uxorious and upstanding marriage, and had never approved of me. "Utilitarian" Hunsdon had said: could it be that Burghley had some use for me? As I stared out of the window, tired and queasy in my bulky state, my mind was blurred and confused by all the splendour I had seen since leaving the street. It all seemed absurdly splendid to me, and dreamlike in its abundance, and I wondered if this was because I had already grown used to my little house in Long Ditch, which was no more than a hutch. I turned away from the window and looked around me. The panelling was carved and painted, the floors were newly strewn with sweet smelling rushes and the air was hushed, as if in mute respect for all the learning in the room. It seemed to me that Cecil owned quite as many books as his monarch. There was *The Courtier* (in French and Latin); *The Compleat Gentleman* by Peachum, and all of Bacon's essays. And there were John Florio's dictionaries, and histories of distant places including Turkey, China and the Indies, and books on language, law, building and grammar. There was Petrarch and Plato, and Lomazzo's treatises on art. On and on the titles rolled before me, displayed on tables and ranged upon shelves. In spite of myself, I was transported by all this, and sniffed in the glorious scent of paper until I found an illustrated copy of Ovid's *Amores*, which I opened.

“I see you are one who appreciates the beauty of learning.” The voice was silk-smooth, like the pages of the book. I looked up, and my heart lurched. Standing in the doorway was not the austere, white-bearded Cecil, but Henry Wriothesley, fair hair curled, dressed in peacock blue. He was regarding me with a knowing half-smile. He was one of Burghley’s circle, and had been his ward since his mother’s death, but even so, the sight of him was an unpleasant shock.

“Mistress Lanyer, how you have blossomed! Really... there is so much more of you as a Lanyer than there was when you were a mere Bassano!”

“I am here to see Lord Burghley, your Lordship,” I said, coldly. “Is he here?”

“Nooo, sadly. No. He told me to inform you that he has been called away on urgent business. But I thought me...” he came closer, smiling at his own affected speech: “I bethought me – why waste this lovely visitor? Given that we have already met, and the lovely visitor is so...lovely.”

He walked around me, daintily, first this way and then that, and I smelled the rich scent of his clothes. He smiled at my fattened face and sprouting breasts, seeming well pleased. He picked a book up from the table beside me. I saw it was *The Rape of Lucrece*, by a Mr WS.

“Dear Will,” he said, flipping it open. “I’ve commissioned him to write a new comedy. Did you know?”

“No sir, I did not. I am not... closely acquainted with Mr Shakespeare.”

He raised his fine brows. “Really? You surprise me.”

“I have come to speak to you of my own work, sir,”

But he didn’t seem to hear me. “*Measure for Measure* – a noble title, don’t you think? He is writing it at this very moment.”

“If I were to have a patron, sir, I might work upon my poems and make them... more than they are now.”

“Quill scratching fast across the page,” said Southampton, apparently talking to himself. He looked up and smiled at me. “Very well, you pretty pregnant thing, let’s hear this verse of yours.”

“I was going to talk about my verses with Burghley, your Lordship”

“So he told me. But I am a greater patron of the arts than he! You see – how fortuitous it is that I am here, instead of him! The stars are smiling on you.”

“I am not sure that I share your favourable opinion,” said I. “Can you tell Lord Burghley that I would be happy to see him on another occasion?”

He smiled, shaking his head. “He will not do it, my bloated chuck. It’s not like you to be obtuse. Look at you! Hunsdon has cast you off, and you’re the size of a cow-shed.”

“Then I must go.”

“Then you won’t have a patron, will you? You will go back into the...outer darkness, whence you came. I hear he built a pretty house for you, which would fit into this library ten times over.”

“He built me a house, for which I am most grateful.”

“And bought you Lanyer, that performing ape, to play with?”

“Good bye, my lord. I am cast off, but my pride has been left quite intact, I do assure you.”

He came closer to me, smiling more sweetly than before. “Forgive me. Forgive me. I would like to hear your verse. I see no reason why a lady like yourself – one well-known for her intelligence and learning – should not be a writer as good as any man!”

“You surprise me sir!”

“I am young, mistress. I am part of the modern age, not an old misery like Cecil. You are ill-served, and misunderstood.”

“That’s true enough!”

“You see? I understand you. I know my reputation may be off-putting, but lay your prejudice aside. Let me hear them. Please.” I hesitated and he took my hand, still smiling. “Come and sit with me, and read your verse and I will see... what I can do.” He led me to the corner of the library and gestured towards a low bed heaped with velvet cushions.

I pulled my hand away. “Isn’t there somewhere else... more public?”

“Come, you’re not afraid of me? A woman of your bearing? It is I who should be afraid! Look at you! God’s blood. Almost too beautiful.” He poured out two glasses of wine and handed one to me. “Almost. But not quite.”

Like Faust, I could hear two voices. But which was the angel, and which the Devil? “Run! Flee! Escape!” said one. “Stay! This could be your salvation! Prove yourself!” said the other. I hesitated, as he held the wine glass out to me. He was smiling, smiling. I could feel the baby quickening inside me. It was the first time I had felt it kick. I wondered if, like me, it was afraid.

When I realised that I was scared of him, I forced myself to step forward and take the glass, and sipped it. For I am afraid of no one, and nothing, except Death itself. I would take this chance, and see where it led. While I read, Wriothsley at first contented himself with listening “raptly”, which is to say, he acted out the role of one who listens with exaggerated astonishment and delight. His mock entrancement had the effect of making the shortcomings of my verse more obvious to me, and I vowed that, if nothing else, I would make my poems better in future, even if I died in the

attempt. And I also noticed, as I read the stumbling, bumbling words, that His Lordship was edging ever closer to me on the divan, so that when I came to the end of the third stanza of the third poem, his breath was on my neck. When I had finished, there was silence for a moment, and then he took my face between his hands and twisted it round so he could scrutinize it. Then he said abruptly: “Your eyes are black, aren’t they? Truly black. I have never seen such a thing.”

I stood up. “The Bassanos are Venetian,” I said. “My father was a Marrano, some say from Africa.”

He stretched out on the bed, with his head propped on his elbows. “Oh, I know that. He was Baptiste Bassano of Venice. I know almost as much about *you*... as you do about *me*.” I was wondering if I should gather my skirts and bolt for the door. I would have been safer in the lion’s cage at the Tower menagerie. But the great lord seemed to have some strange power about him, coming off his skin like natural light. I could not move or speak. I could hardly breathe. He raised himself languorously and came towards me, touched my face with one finely manicured finger, then scratched my rouged cheek, delicately. I felt a prick of pain, and watched as he scrutinised the dots of cerise powder he had trapped under his white nail.

“You know, I have had my eye on you since the night we met,” said he.

“Have you?”

“Do you want to know what I think?” he asked.

“No.”

“No?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“I knew that Hunsdon would never keep you to himself. A lovely, clever, greedy thing like you.”

“I am not in a position to be greedy. I am grateful.”

“Oh, no. Not you. You are greedy for pleasure, my glorious hussy. You are greedy for men.”

“No.”

“Shall I put it more precisely, then? Greedy for *poets*.”

I stared, and he moved even closer and wound his arm around my waist.

“Standing by Will Shakespeare’s stairway, in a dry night gown with a wet cunt. Oh, don’t look at me like that, sweet lady. I could smell it from where I stood.” He bent down, as he had done that night, but this time his hand crept underneath my skirts and I felt his silky fingers stroke the inside of my leg. “He had you good and plenty, didn’t he? Am I not right? I’ll never forget the look upon your face. He fucked you all the way to Heaven, that gentle poet. Pumping like Beelzebub, I’ll wager.” Now his hand was creeping up the soft skin of my thigh. “Luckiest of poets.”

“I...you are wrong, sir.”

“I am right, and so sure of my rightness that I believe that you will fuck me now, upon this most convenient divan, if the price of your depleted virtue is my silence.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

With a sudden motion Wriothesley had somehow forced me down, and I was lying on my back upon the low bed. I felt his weight upon me, heavier than he looked, and I screamed out. “My Lord! My baby – be careful with my baby!”

“Ah, the poet’s bastard is it, lodged inside you?” He began to laugh, a boy’s laugh, hysterical and shrill. With a sudden force of effort I pushed him away with my elbows and he fell to the ground, still laughing.

“I am sorry to have come here,” I cried. “I must go. I should not have come.”

Wriothesley looked up at me, completely unfazed by our exchange.

“I will have you, dear Aemilia, and you will like it.”

“I am a married woman, sir. And pregnant.”

He stood up and shook out his sleeves. “Listen. I know you have been lying with William. I am a witness to it. If you want me to keep this information private – which I suspect you do – then I am determined to extract a fair price from you. If you wish to keep yourself from me – and that is entirely your decision – then I will let Lord Hunsdon know that his dowry missed its mark, and that he may as well have gone down to the Liberties and paid for any shilling strumpet to live like a merchant’s wife.”

“No!”

“But if you want to keep your little house, with your little fluting monkey in it – and he’s been singing your praises as a willing wife to anyone at Court who’ll listen, you are insatiable! – then I suggest that you sin a little and let me lie beside you.”

“No.”

“Think carefully, Aemilia. They say you are a woman possessed of a fine mind. Well, use it.” Before I could speak, he had twisted his hand behind me, and forced his two hands up inside my skirts and tripped me up, so that I sprawled on top of him. He pulled my dugs out and began to suck at them, grunting with effort as he managed to push my skirts out of the way despite the great barrier of my belly, and forced himself into me, using his hands to guide his blind cock.

“No sir!” I screamed. “No I will not do it ...” Then he pushed his tongue into my mouth so I was gagged with it, and then my senses were black.

When I looked up, trembling, the mist clearing from my head, I saw that we were not alone. William was standing at the doorway, holding a book in his hand. His eyes were fixed on me with such an expression of disbelieving horror that I could not speak, nor even think, but only stare back at him, my thighs spread and the shift clutched between my fingers.

Wriothesley had his eyes closed, so did not see William, but lay back, smiling.

“O, foul Jezebel,” he said, at last. “What are you? There is not a whore in London like you. You have killed me, I swear. Come, I demand you kiss me.” He puckered up and pointed to his full red lips.

It seemed that I was frozen: only my gaze could shift its focus. I looked back at William. His face was pale and thinner than when last I saw it, with shadows beneath his cheekbones, and his eyes were black rimmed from stage paint that had not been properly wiped off, and his beard was newly trimmed and his razor must have nipped his skin, for there was a stab of scarlet on his left cheek, and his look was anger and pain and passion and I loved him, forgive me God, I loved him all the better for it and I ached to have him.

For a moment, he said nothing. Then, he bowed with great formality, in the direction of the day bed. Wriothesley had opened his eyes. He was propped on his elbows, regarding William coolly.

“My Lord,” said William. “Forgive the interruption.”

“You are forgiven, dear Will,” said his lordship. “Such scenes as this are hardly to be expected in a library.”

“I...wish to speak to this lady,” said William, nodding in my direction. “If your Lordship will allow me.”

Wriothsley rolled over to reveal his white buttocks, and picked his breeches up off the floor. “Please... we have finished in any case. She is at your disposal. Indeed, I believe she is at anyone’s.”

Will crossed the room, placed his book on a table and picked up my fallen slippers. “We have business, Aemilia,” he said.

“Will, I...” I looked down at my bare feet and my soiled chemise.

“Come.” He held out his hand.

He led me to a little antechamber, which seemed to be his place of work. There was a desk and a chair in there, and a riot of paper. It was hardly bigger than a cupboard. “Sit,” he said.

“I prefer to stand,” said I, but the look upon his face made me sink down onto the chair. For a moment, he stared out of the window at the courtyard of the house, his mouth set hard.

“William ...” I began. “This...thing. The thing you saw...”

He turned to look me, arms rigid by his sides. “This thing? I have seen Hell. I have seen a Beast with two backs. I have seen everything I loved and honoured made vile and evil. That is the thing that I have seen.”

“Listen, I...”

“There are no words, Aemilia. There is no ‘listen’, and then some sentences that you can conjure, which I will take into my mind, so we can be as we were. This is death. This is the end of what I loved, and what I thought I knew, and what made my life bearable, for all its pain and sorrow. This fine woman, this great spirit, this mind beyond compare – a rutting strumpet!”

“I was reading him my poems and...”

“Oh, Christ Jesus!” He turned and threw open the window, as if the room was suffocating him. “Your wretched poems! They are no good, my sweet. They are just doggerel, my lovely one. You may be the equal of all comers in the areas of algebra and astronomy and what you will, but let me tell you, a poet is not a learned man who pens out his learned thoughts, in comfort and complacency! A poet is a madman, who knows nothing, and makes a world of his insanity. And you, my lady, may be a scholar and you are certainly a whore, but you will never be a poet.”

I could not weep. I could not think. I tried to say – he blackmailed me, he was going to tell Hunsdon all about you – but I could not see how to say this without making him even angrier, if that were possible. All I could think of was that I must go, away, and escape his burning eyes, and the hatred and contempt in his voice. I stood up. “Goodbye, William.”

“Goodbye? Jesu, is that it?”

“You said there are no words. And you are right, there are none. I have sinned and we are done.”

“Ay, we are done alright, for you have killed my soul!”

“I love you, Will.”

This seemed to goad him more than anything I had said or done, for suddenly he became wild with rage and began tearing the pages on his desk and throwing them round the room. “Love me! Love me! God’s blood, what do you do to men you hate? You are a witch, a witch, you have ensnared me and you are trying to destroy me!” He ran towards me, brandishing the torn paper. “What can I say? What can I do?”

“If you think I do not love you, this is false, and what I did today was...”

“O – you say this is false?” He was so close now that his spittle wet my face and I could see the blue veins jumping in his forehead. “Look – have a new phrase...”

He ran to the table, took up a quill and scribbled fiercely on one of the torn pages.

“Praise God – I am still a writer! Praise him, praise him, the poet lives! Look...” He ran back to me. “See? See here? What I have wrote – you are still my muse, Mistress Busycunt... see – ‘the bay where all men ride’! You see? I have made you into Art. That, that is poetry. Poetry is pain. Poetry is blood and hatred. D’you see?”

I was like a stone. As he grew angrier, so did my stillness. I was a prisoner in this place, and could only stare, round eyed, at what I had made him. “William. William...” said I. “Please, I beg you...”

“What, will you contradict me? How dare you contradict me? You came into my bed straight from Hunsdon’s...”

“How could I do otherwise, when..”

“I saw the look upon his face when he arrived with you! Jesu, you whipped that old goat to a frenzy even as he edged towards the grave! As for Wriothesley – well, forgive me for my boldness! I just saw you, straddling the fellow, with your great-belly in your mother’s hands as he shafted up inside you! God’s balls, I’d sooner spit my own arse on Satan’s cock than witness such a thing again!”

“I am no Jezebel. If you would only hear me!”

“Jezebel! What did she do to deserve comparison with you? I need new words for sin, for you have torn up decency, and thrown it to the four winds.”

I stood at last, though I did not know how my shuddering legs would carry me. The babe was kicking, and I feared all this torment might force it early into the world.

“Farewell, William,” I said. I went to the doorway, and turned to look at him. “If you will not let me speak, if you will not understand...” But he was sitting at his desk, writing, his body wracked with sobs.

ACT TWO
PROPHECY

Scene I

Ten Years Later

Smithfield, London

Here I was again, with my hectic son, his eyes all over the place, hardly able to breathe with the wonder and wickedness of it all. Bartholomew Fair, the greatest Fair in England. Such a press of people that you could barely work out where you stood. And what people – half the underworld was there: cut-purses from Damnation Alley, tricksters from Devil’s Gap; vagrants from Seething Row. Everything muddled: stalls and side-shows, fops and ladies, apes and peacocks. As big a hotch-potch as the filthy warren of London itself. You could buy anything - oysters, mousetraps, gingerbread men: a hobbyhorse, a songbird or a bale of cloth. Pay to see a cockfight or a puppet show or join a game of dice and thimble. Everywhere was bother, jostle and noise. High fashion and foul breath, all pressed together: children and dotards, dogs and chancers, pigs and prostitutes. And the two of us – Henry leaping at my side, desperate to be off to buy a cheese cake from Holloway or a Pimlico pie. Rattles, drums and fiddles ripped into the air. The smell of roasting pork rose up from the eating houses. One step too quick and you fell on a sweetmeat seller or toppled on the side-rope of a dancing tent.

Here - a great, pockmarked head, ducking out of the crowd and leering at my chest. There - a glimpse of putrefying tumour, sprouting from a beggar’s shoulder, tattered shirt turned down so the passers-by could get an eyeful and toss a halfpenny his way.

“Show! Show! Show” called the crowd, all about us, pushing and shoving, careless of a small boy and a slight woman. We were smack-bang in the middle of it

all: every kind of mountebank and con-man, bawdy and punk. I tried to side-step one way, thinking I saw some open ground to my left, in front of the fish-scale virgin's stand, but a giantess was in my path, stinking like Hounds Ditch and with a back as wide as a cart. So I thought to twist another way, Henry's hand gripped in mine, but up loomed three pissed apprentice-boys, arm in arm, faces running sweat, eyes rolled back in their heads.

Henry was ten. A boy who liked to throw himself to the ground, run, yell, eat. Hell-bent on everything. Big-boned, but pretty, with his flushed cheeks and fuzz of gold hair. Nothing like Alfonso, but we didn't speak of that.

"Mother! Over there – can we see the baby with two heads?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I'll be sick."

"The bearded mermaid?"

"No"

"The pig-trotter man?"

"No."

"The midget unicorn?"

"No."

"Why? Why? All the boys at my school have seen the midget unicorn! Why can't I?"

I didn't know why the thought of standing in a cramped booth, face to face with some freak – man-made or a slip of nature – made me feel so weak and dizzy. I'd seen it all before, and worse. So had Henry, come to that. He liked a good execution, that child, nothing lily-livered about him. Perhaps I was pregnant again.

My pregnancies ebbed and flowed in my body like the river tide. Few lasted more than six weeks. A good thing, as we lived on next to nothing, and Alfonso was an idle dolt, barely able to put his doublet on the right way round.

“Buy my fat chickens!”

“Fresh asparagus!”

“Any baking pears?”

Now Henry’s face was winding up into a baby-sowl. His curiosity almost amounted to a disease. “You *said* I could come to the Fair, and now we can’t *do* anything!”

“Henry!”

“Termagant!”

“Wherever did you...?”

“Whore!”

“Obnoxious brat! How dare you!”

And he was off, hand slipped from mine.

“Henry!”

I looked this way, and that. No idea which way to chase him. He had no money, would not go far. But I felt a sick, still fear. All I could see were the lurid banners: “Giant Blackamoor”; “Child Leprechaun”; “Neptune from the Deep”.

“Henry!”

How would he hear me? My loud cries were lost in a multitude of voices.

“Posset for you, lady?”

A skinny lad with a tray hanging from his neck.

“See the man who swallows fire!”

A blind girl thrust her pouch at me.

“Sugar-pane fancies! Sweetest in Smithfield!”

“Henry!”

Then, the crowd pushed me forward until I ended up jammed hard against a wooden palisade. I could barely see through the spaces between the planks, but just about made out the back view of a fairground caller, dressed in scarlet like an alderman.

“Upwards of ten feet high!” he cried. “His consumption of hay, corn, straw, carrots, water is that of twenty men! The Oliphant, the human race excepted, is the most respectable of animals!

“He has ivory tusks, four feet long, as sharp as swords! His trunk serves him instead of hands and arms! He can lift a man with it, or a mouse!”

The crowd surged forward behind me. Where was Henry? If the mob pushed him as violently as this, he would be suffocated in the crush.

“He remembers favours as long as injuries: in short, if you aid him, he will repay you. If you harm him, he will never forget...”

I had never seen an Oliphant, though I had read of them and seen a drawing. And at Whitehall Palace there had been a monstrous tusk, among the Queen’s objects and treasures, which were brought from all the corners of the world. It was heavier than any sword or musket. I did not believe this mountebank had an Oliphant in his tent – a great bull, perhaps, with an adder for its trunk, and dark hangings to keep the creature in the shadow. This was the Devil’s marketplace, after all.

But Henry? Where was Henry? I turned, and began to force my way out through the mass of people. And then a woman stood in front of me. Barred my way. Her face was almost touching mine. She was motionless; her face a mask. Looking into her cold eyes, I could not have said her age, or type.

“Tell your fortune?”

“No. Go away. I’m looking for my little boy.”

“Oh, *he’s* safe enough. For now, at least.”

“Where is he?”

“Tell your fortune?”

“Where’s my son?” I tried to push past her.

She sidestepped so she still blocked my way. “Cost you nothing.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Not a penny.”

“I don’t want my fortune told! But I’d give you five shillings gladly if you told me where to find my son.”

“For nothing, I’ll tell you this. You’ve a whore’s past, and a poet’s future.”

“Get out of my way!”

I turned, but now faced a much older creature, shrivelled and black.

“Beware of slip-shod words,” she said. She looked into me with unseeing eyes. “Words will make you, and undo you. You will aim too high, and fall too low.”

“What are you – lunatics? Or purse thieves?” I looked behind me. “Are there three of you, a third to pick my pocket?”

“Beware of your own wit,” said the first woman, her voice whispering in my ear. “Your human pride.”

“As for your son...” The crone’s flesh reeked of piss and sweet decay.

“What?”

“The plague is coming.”

“The plague is always coming. No wonder your predictions cost nothing.”

“Not like this.”

And then they'd gone.

I spun round, full circle, hemmed in by the throng of fair-goers, the tricksters and the tricked. Then, stopped. Another face. Smiling at me, all rouged and painted. A face out of place – who?

“Well, how delightful!” it said. “Aemilia Bassano! I would not have known you.” A dramatic and unnecessary curtsy, and I had time to work out who this was.

“Lettice Cooper.” We had been court ladies together, ten years earlier.

“*Lady Lettice*,” she said. “To you.” She raised her eyebrows in disdain so that her manservant smirked to oblige her. (Odious Palace arse-licker.) If I had changed, then so had she. Always careful of her looks, she had plucked and powdered herself out of existence. She had taken Her Majesty for a model, and to no good effect, having made herself a doll-face of false surprise. She handed her purse to her stout serving woman, and held out her hand. I took it. Her fingers were silky, slippery.

“You!” she said. “Who was once so beautiful! I would never have thought it!”

“Thought what? That I would turn out such a hag?”

“Oh! My dear, have you quite lost your mind? Why would I say such a thing? They say the natural look will be in next year. In France, the ladies are letting their hair grow quite low on the forehead. You will be all the rage.”

“Lettice...”

“*Lady Lettice*...”

“I have lost my son...”

“He is dead?”

“Only lost – mislaid...”

“It comes as no surprise. I’ve heard you spoil that bastard boy, and he runs wild.”

“I had forgot the ways of court.”

“Indeed.”

“Common people have better manners.”

A neat, malicious smile. “I see Alfonso, from time to time, of course. In the distance. Quite the merry thing, those tunes from Mr Tallis. *Dear* Alfonso. With his little pipe...”

As she moved away, she seemed to remember something. “Oh – oddly enough, I met a man the other day who was asking after you. That jumped-up fellow who used to be with the Lord Chamberlain’s men. With the awful *accent*, you know?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Face of a clerk, but wears an earring. Arrogant, for a provincial.”

Arrogant was clue enough. And she would know his name in any case. He had been doing very well for himself of late.

“What did he say?”

“Mmm...can’t quite think. Oh well – it can’t have been important...”

“If you see him again, tell him I hope he burns in hell.”

“What, the author of those pretty sonnets? He pleases everyone, they say.”

“Not all his sonnets are pretty, your ladyship, and he certainly does not please me.”

She bowed her head, seeming delighted with our exchange. “Do you know, I believe that his star may continue to ascend, even without your blessing?” She walked on, smirking.

Through a gap in the crowd I could see Henry, staring up at a sugar plum stall. I caught my dress up and struggled through the mob, taking no notice of the shouts of annoyance as I elbowed my way forward.

“Harry, for God’s sake! I have been so worried! What were you thinking of, running off like that?”

He was crying. “I’m sorry. Mother. I said bad words to you. The Devil tempted me.”

I hugged him tight. His body was burly, already hard-muscled. He was growing up a manly man, the equal of anyone, if not their better.

“I don’t deserve a sugar plum, do I?” he said. “Though they are so round and sweet to look at.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Not even one. You must punish me, so that my character will be built up strong.”

“Not even one.” I squeezed him tighter.

“I’m a bad, rude, evil creature.”

“Bad and rude, Henry.” I bent down and kissed his hair. “But never evil.”

The stall was heaped with sweets and fancies made from sugar and marzipan. There were animals, birds and tiny baskets. Wine glasses, dishes, playing cards and little flutes, all made as dainty and perfect as God’s creation. I’d seen such craftsmanship at court, painstakingly fashioned for royal banquets. But never here, at the Fair. Even so, they were not as beautiful as the luscious, lustrous fruit. The sugar plums were piled head high, a rampart of dark pinks and soft purples, frosted with sugar like a fairy shroud. I looked at the stall holder. She was as lovely as her dainty wares, fair-skinned with light hair plaited tightly back from her brow.

“How many do we get for a halfpenny?” I asked.

She smiled, showing white teeth. “Two pocketfuls, mistress.”

“Go on then, Henry,” I said, pushing him forward.

She filled his pockets and I gave her the coin.

“One for you?” said Henry, turning to me with his best smile.

“One for me.” I chose a fat, mauve fruit. The sugar tingled on my lips as I bit into it. But – my attention was distracted – I saw the two witch-women, sitting on the ground just by the stall – I bit down. My tooth cracked on the plum stone. There was a sudden pain, a knife jab in my gums.

I grabbed my jaw. “See – there!” I shouted.

Henry turned to look, mouth full. “What? Where?”

They had disappeared. A trumpet band started up. A troop of acrobats were turning cartwheels. A bear began to dance, its moaning growl like human words.

I peered distractedly. “Nothing. Just... nothing.”

“Did you hurt your mouth?” said Henry.

“I think so.” I took the mush of plum, sugar and gore out of my mouth and looked at it in my palm. There was a shard of tooth there. More than that. Half a molar.

“So much blood, Mother!” said Henry. He seemed well satisfied. “Would you like another one?”

Scene II

At first the pain was a hot, tender spot in my mouth, nothing more. My tongue kept searching for it, poking into the fiery hole which had once been filled with tooth. All about it, my gum was raw and swollen. At breakfast time, I would soak my bread in weak ale and suck down the brownish porridge like an infant. In the evenings, even though it was summertime, I sat on a stool near the fire, warming my naked feet as if soothing one part of my body would bring relief to another.

It did nothing of the kind, of course. So I forced myself to think about something else. There was no shortage of subjects to think about, after all. Money, motherhood, the uncertain future, and the business of being married to a flimsy and improvident musician. And that wasn't all. As well as the throbbing hole in my mouth, my day at the Fair had left me with a feeling of unease and dread, like a drunk's dawn gloom.

So I tried to distract myself with reading. I had once known the great libraries of England, and I don't speak of this to seek out sympathy, for it is from these places that I have furnished the small library in my own head. And some few books have survived with me, and I had these still. And yet others were in my London house in those days, and I can still smell them and feel their pages beneath my fingers. I had placed my favourite books in different parts of the house, so they came easily to hand when I had a moment to spare. I read with almost so much intensity that my head reeled, for learning was there, and facts and a treasure chest of oddments of the world, trapped in ink. In the solar there was Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, of course, and in the kitchen I kept Job Hortop's *Travels* next to the simples cupboard, being the tale of an old man who was press-ganged and sent on the Guinea voyage of 1567 and saw

two of his company slain and eaten by sea horses (the sea horse having all the appearance of a land horse, excepting that its legs are short and its teeth are long and twisted like the horns of a wild boar). His ship captured a most monstrous Alligator, which had a hog's head, and a serpent's body but was scaled in every part, but each scale was the size of a saucer, and with a long and knotted tail and they baited it with a dog and caught it with their ropes. It was four and twenty feet long with a carpenter's rule and they flayed the beast and stuffed its skin with straw but then the boat was lost and the Alligator's flayed skin was lost with it.

So as I stirred the pot in the kitchen I would feast my mind upon Hortop's wild tales, of how he and his companions fell among the Indians and were cruelly treated, but then discovered good Christian Indians (for such a thing is possible, it seems), and later found a sea creature who was half-man, half-fish, and his upper body brown as a mulatto. Then he went from there to Spain, where he was put to torture by the Inquisition (for good Christian Spaniards conduct themselves like savages) and two of his ship mates were burned, but he was sent to the galleys, which he rowed for ten years.

What it seems to me is that such a rollicking life of colour and calamity is the only kind a man should have, this life being a brief slit between two measureless eternities, and by man I mean man and woman, sir, for there would be no man alive today without the fairer sex and men are not half as clever as they think themselves and we are more than twice as strong as we let them think.

Oh, and in my bedroom, to distract me from Alfonso's curtain-lectures about his great importance at the court, I kept Harrington's translation of the (improper) story of Giacomo in the twenty-eighth book of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Which fellow, finding his wife to be false, ranged over the whole of Europe looking for a

good woman and found not one. This story so annoyed the Queen that she called Harrington – who was her godson – to her Presence chamber and gave him her harsh opinion. Of course, I agreed with her Majesty that such stories are vile bawdy and not for court ladies, yet being no longer one of their number, I could both laugh at these naughty women and share a little of their quick lust, remembering my own misdoings and those little secret come cries that we fist-muffle when we must. Such memories I will take as close to the graveside as I dare, and offer them up in exchange for Eternal Redemption at the moment of my last breath.

Some of my books have been wrote by women, too. I wish I could say this was the best of them, but this is not so. Compared to Hortop's terrifying journeys, reading the Countess of Pembroke's *Ivychurch* and *Emmanuel* (translations from Mr Tasso) is like walking with a prelate in a country garden. Though her hexameters are handsome and there is no such thing as a book which is worthless. I have read her works with close attention, schoolboylike, and they are all excellently rhymed.

I picked up the *Martyrs*, and then Hortop, but could not lose myself in them as was my usual custom. I was on the outside and the worlds inside their covers were locked in. And I could not evict the memory of Lettice Cooper from my mind. Her talk of Will and his sonnets disturbed me. My old lover remade the form – some months after our final meeting – and made me a generous present of his work. He had sent a bundle of some twenty or more verses to me, written out in his own hand, full of bile and hatred for me and everything that we'd done. My only comfort was that they had not been printed. I had sent him no reply, and preferred to think him dead. For me, he lived on only in his son. I should have burned them, but could not, and in any case, each one had lodged itself in my mind, which kept each poem stored neatly and for all time. I was the victim of my fine memory. All of them retained the power

to hurt me, but there was one which was stuck fast, and went round and round my head, day after day.

*“Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action lust
Is perjured, murdr’ous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude , cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner, but despised straight,
Past reason hunted and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and proved , a very woe,
Before a joy proposed, behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heav’n that leads men to this hell.”*

*

Two days after my accident with the sugarplum, Alfonso was standing in the downstairs hall, practising his monotonous tunes. His lips were pursed and his childish pipe trilled out its familiar fluting patterns. The highest notes seemed to bore inside my jawbone.

“Alfonso?” Against my cheek I held a linen bag, filled with burned and powdered rosemary wood. It had been prepared with great care by Joan, our old serving woman.

My husband lowered the recorder, a patient expression on his face.

“What, dear Aemilia?”

“When are you going to give some money?”

“Quite soon, my love.” Off he went again.

“How soon?”

An even more forgiving expression, worthy of St Peter.

“I’m a musician, not an alchemist, sweet chuck...”

“I don’t expect you to make gold from base metal, I expect you to earn it.”

“When the concert is over.”

“Which concert?”

“The concert for the Queen’s birthday. We get five shillings extra, apiece.”

“Till then we starve, then.”

Off he went again, the notes in beautiful order, his life a mess of debt and deceit.

Joan was making her slow way down the staircase with a pail of rainwater. She was a narrow scrawn of a woman, and as she grew older it seemed the years were scraping the flesh from her bones. Now, Joan is a common name in London, but this was the very same Joan Daunt that you will remember from the apothecary’s shop. It was burned down by the mob the night that I summoned her to help at Henry’s birth. (And all its precious contents went up with it: the jars and vials and herbs and potions, the tinctures and the spices and rare ingredients from Turkey, China and beyond.) Henry was a breech-baby. Born backwards, and would have died if it had not been for

Joan. There was no talk of her leaving my service after that: she had nowhere to go, and I had no intention of letting her leave.

“It’s a bad do,” she said, throwing the water out of the door and into the street. The cat, Greymalkin, who had been sunning himself on the threshold, yowled and ran away. “You can see blue sky through two holes now, each as big as a man’s fist. We’ll soon have the floor rotten, and that’ll be the next expense.”

Alfonso had the recorder to his lips. He closed his eyes and blew, but no sound came. He blew again. Nothing. He lowered his instrument once more, flushed with anger. “I am the head of this household, and I demand silence!” he shouted. “I must have... your wifely respect, Aemilia! And Joan’s – servantly obedience.”

Pain’s hot-poker twisted in my gum. “There is silence, husband,” I said. (A London silence, at least, which is to say that through the open front door swooped the city sounds of dogs barking, hammers beating, babies crying, couples fornicating, pigs snorting, cartwheels clattering and all the other Babel noise of people and creatures and buildings and shops and stews all piled together pell-mell.) “At least, the only noise I hear is you. As for obedience...” Joan lowered her eyes and coughed as she made her way back up the stairs with the empty pail.

Alfonso looked at me, as if he was still trying – after ten years – to work out what he had taken on and whether he could survive it. He was a pretty man, I’ll say that for him, with his dark skin and black coiled hair. The Lanyers have French blood, and this showed in the way he had of dressing himself. Even in his plain cambric shirt he cut an elegant figure, and his dainty fingers held the pipe as if it was a living thing.

“Why do you stare, Alfonso?”

“Why do you question me, wife?”

In bed, it was easy to feel lust for Alfonso, with his hard, lean body and his soft kisses. But in this house, it was my word that carried weight, not his. This was in part because he had spent all my dowry in a twelve-month, gaming and dicing and showing off. Also because his musician's "duties" – piping, gossiping and the wearing of a short mandillion - kept him at court for long hours, overnight if there was a feast or a celebration. He came and went at odd times, like Greymalkin. Yet there was more to it than that. Each time Joan read my Tarot cards, a different pattern of cards would tell the same story – we were out of balance, my husband and me. If Henry was spoiled, it was all my doing, because I decided when he was praised, and when he was punished. Joan, too, would listen to me, and not her master.

"Your face is swelling up, still," Alfonso said, as if deciding to withdraw from battle. "You need to see the barber surgeon and have that tooth pulled, what's left of it. He should bleed you, too. There may be poison."

Without replying, I got to my feet, and went out into the bright morning bustle of Long Ditch, with its clustered wooden buildings. It was a street that did not know its place. Although it was close to the rambling sprawl of Whitehall, it was itself of no account. The dwellings were thrown up hastily, without forethought or symmetry. Some were no wider than their own front door, with four storeys piled above, seeming likely to over-balance and tumble down into the street. Others were hovel-high and no bigger than a cow barn. And yet we were overlooked by Camm Row, and the calm and solid homes of great men like Sir Edward Hoby and the Earls of Hertford, Derby and Lincoln. Such great, commanding houses! Their casement windows were bright with candles long after dark, and every house had a walled garden behind. Our mean dwellings were like birds' nests in comparison. All of us cheek-by-jowl, breathing the

same smoke-filled air. The red kites, wheeling above, would see us coming in and out like little dolls, shaking our linen or stepping out in our fine gowns.

I looked around me, thinking how much easier it would be to know my place if my position in the world had a little more sense to it. We know that God presides at the top, followed by the Angels, with Man below. And then Woman lower yet - above the animals, but a lesser mortal than her bedfellow. By Our Lord's ordinance we are the weaker, lesser sex. It is a system, certainly. But where was my place in this ordered universe? I was first a bastard, then a lady (educated in Greek and Latin if you please) then a courtesan - on account of being a comely orphan. And now, a drudge. What few skills were called for to fill this station, I did not possess. Where was the divine plan there? If I had had less learning, it might have been easier to bear, but I was sure that few court ladies knew their Ovid as I did, could recite the Psalms in Latin or had the tales of Holinshed off by heart. In short, I had been tutored like a young lord which was worse than useless to me now. If the aim of learning is a fitting-out to modern purpose, I say it falls far short, both for the young lords and for me. What has modern man learned from the Greeks - I mean in relation to his behaviour? Not enough, in my opinion. For we fight and tyrannize each other, and are given to extremes in blood and anguish; revelry and ribaldry. Great learning should lead to great lives - ha! Like the learned counsel at the Inns of Law, I rest my case.

So you see how I was ill suited to being a city housewife, married to a pile of wood and wattle-and-daub. It wasn't even my house now, for Alfonso had gambled it away with the rest of my dowry. My mind raged, but here I stood in my drab dress, a creature half-mad with the toothache. Wood smoke drifted upwards from the close-crowded chimneys of the houses opposite. The cat was still shaking his tail in angry jerks, ears flat to his head. He lifted one paw and shook it singly, and little shining

droplets of water caught the sunlight as they fell. Widow Flood, my neighbour, came out of her door with a full pot, and poured the foul-nosed contents into the reeking kennel that ran down the centre of the street. She was a plump woman, with a pleasant, open face, but she had an irksome weakness: knowingness. On all subjects, she believed herself the expert. And she was an over-dresser, too, as befitted this good opinion of her status. Even in the house, she would wear a white lawn ruff, and today was no exception. Her face poked out from the wired cloth like a pig's head on a platter, and she took care to hold the pot well away from the wide bulk of her farthingale. So grand, and yet the ferry-man of her own filth. You could not tell a baronet from a bee-keeper in the streets of London.

“Tooth still bad, Mistress Lanyer?” She put the pot on the ground next to her and stood back, hands on her padded hips, as if ready to enjoy the sun. Noticing a dead rat lying near, she kicked it on to the dung-pile that banked against her house. Beneath her fine skirt she was wearing wooden pattens.

“Still bad, mistress.”

“The barber surgeon should pull it for you.”

“Indeed.”

“Should bleed you, too, for safety's sake.”

“You should join my husband's recorder band, since you pipe the same tune.”

She laughed. “Pain can make you surly, Aemilia. It's good advice.” Mistress Flood was well named. Good advice flowed from her, and good fortune to her. Even her husband's death had been a sort of blessing, since he was a wintry old skinflint, a haberdasher by trade, who was more than twice her age when they married. Her son Tom had just been apprenticed to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and he would soon be prancing on the boards at the Globe.

But here was Joan with a bolster to shake out. “There is devilment behind this, Mistress Flood,” she said, flapping it fiercely. “I don’t like it. The air is full of spirits and the streets are full of demons, preying on the unwary.” She folded the bedding against her chest and held it tight against her.

“Spell-making?” Anne Flood’s eyes glinted. She was curious about my clever servant, whose knowledge of witchcraft far outstripped that of the other women in the street.

“Something wicked. And no village art, neither. Devil’s magic. It was not by chance they met her. They were waiting.”

“Shush, Joan, don’t speak of it,” I said. But the witches’ words were stuck in my head. “*The plague is coming.*” And not as I had known it. “*Not like this.*” I felt the wisdom of Joan’s words – there was some design behind our meeting, something I didn’t yet understand.

Anne nodded. “Speak of the devil, and he will appear. We should praise the good Lord, and pray for our immortal souls.”

“Amen to that,” said Joan, crossing herself. “God have mercy. Let each of us know our place. That magic which can ease our suffering and help us along our way is well enough. That which seeks to harness Evil will always do us harm.”

I put my arm about her shoulders. “It is a toothache, my good Joan, that’s all. I broke my tooth on a plum-stone, there was no fiendishness.” I pushed her gently towards the house. “It’s nearly twelve – go and prepare something for us to eat. Something soft that will swallow down easy. I could eat rabbit stew, on the left side. Or a little scraped cheese, with sage and sugar...” She went muttering into the house.

Mistress Flood was still pressing her case. “All that is needed is a trip to the barber. I know of a man in the Shambles who is most excellent,” she said. “Pulls teeth

like eels from mud – you hardly feel a thing. See?” She grinned, showing off her graveyard gaps with pride. “He broke my jaw once, trying to gouge up a buried wisdom tooth. Almost too much even for him. But it soon mended.”

*

That night, my face felt swollen fit to fill the bedchamber. Sleep twisted pain into trumpets, drumbeats, the drone of an afternoon recorder. The dreams I had were dense and dazzling, my head ached with the colour and busyness of them. I saw the Queen again, not as she must be now, but as I had known her, ten years before. She was herself, and yet not herself: a tapestry in gold and green thread, a painted face on a wood panel, a straight-backed monarch sitting on a jewelled throne. Satan might send us pain; God soothes us with insanity to make a picture of it.

The rose garden at Whitehall, enclosed on four sides by the high, crenellated walls. The heads of traitors all around, dripping fat-rot on to the pathways. Rose-heads rising ever higher. The Queen appeared from the privet maze, fanning herself in the summer heat, face white in spite of the sun.

“Aye,” she said. “Dark Aemilia, inspirer of our cousin’s lust. We two - freakish black, and freakish red, would you not say?”

“Your majesty?”

“Both of us midnight weird.”

I curtsied as low as I could, as if my legs were liquid.

“For God’s sake! Is this how you behave in the presence of other mortal beings? Stand up!”

She pulled me to my feet. She was smaller than I was, face withered under the layer of white powder. Her fierce blue eyes were hungry for information, but flat, with nothing behind. Like a kite, looking sideways as it scooped its offal. The Queen took my arm and swept me along the path beside her.

“You,” she said, “Plaything of my Lord Hunsdon, yes?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I looked down and saw Henry was still curled inside me, unborn, though a hefty boy of ten.

“Plaything, or his tormenter?”

“I – his tormenter, ma’am. Or, both, by turns, ma’am.”

“He in charge? Or you, by any chance?” She waved a courtier away. He was carrying a galleon in full sail, ocean waves drenching the padded sleeves of his doublet.

“He is always in charge, ma’am. I am but a weak and feeble woman.”

I turned. Her face was rigid with amusement. Her ladies came tittering towards us, carrying baskets filled with fiery sugarplums, hitching their skirts so their beaded hems swept clear of the wet grass.

Scene III

Had I woken? Or was this still sleep? Nighttime, or day? I could see only darkness, but fancied there was sunlight too, coming at me from around Alfonso's head.

"Aemilia! You are awake! What a fever you have run – we have barely slept."

Joan's face came in front of me, and a great wooden spoon, fit for a giant, which she forced into my mouth. There was some treacly, heavy substance on it, tasting of wine and hartshorn. Splinters of pain sent more sunlight into my head, the morning rays seemed to be breaking my skull apart. The scream which came from the walls might be my own noise, I supposed, listening to the sound with mild surprise. What toothache was this?

"She must see the physician," said Alfonso.

"Physician! What skill will he have, to cure such a condition?" asked Joan.

"This is more than toothache. I said so before. More like the dropsy or the sweats."

"The sweats! Don't say it! Unless we do something, she will die! I never saw such a thing – all from an ailing tooth." His voice was breaking. "I shall send for him now..."

"There is no physician on this earth that can give her the help she needs, master." Joan spoke so firmly to her supposed "master" that if I had not been so ill I would have smiled.

"Then the barber surgeon can pull it out. She would hear none of that, of course. If she only would have listened to me..."

"It's too far gone."

Had I been able to speak, I would have told them that some vileness was eating me from within, and the cracked tooth had been an entry point for some evil poison, just as a viper's bite looks like a pinprick and yet may kill a calf. I tried to speak – but my whole body was frozen, although my mind was conscious. My body, my limbs, my aching head – all were rigid and inert. I was like living marble, fixed upon my bed.

“Why can't you cure her of this, woman?” shouted Alfonso, sounding close to tears. “She swears by you and all your tricks. Much use your cures and treatments are to her now!”

“I told you, sir, there is something far beyond my remedies here. I have the skill to know that, and the wit to let another cure her who has more knowledge than I do. If you ask me, someone has put a spell on her.”

“A spell! God's blood, who'd do such a thing? That's nothing more than fancy.”

I felt a wet cloth soothe my head. “It could be belladonna,” said Joan's voice, as cool liquid seeped into my hair. “But...I can't be sure. The antidote to that is worse than the poison...” Her thin hands smoothed my cheek. “I need advice, that's what I'm saying. You can see the state she's in – look, try and move her arm. It's like a rock.”

“Very well, go to the apothecary.”

“I *am* an apothecary. I need a cunning man for this.”

“Jesu!” Alfonso's voice faded away as if he had walked to the window. “I'm not paying for some mountebank to come prancing in here, mutter some incantations and then go on his way.”

“Then she will die.”

“No!” I was surprised to hear the fear in his voice. Had the fool grown to love me? But men are simple, even the clever ones. He had me where he wanted and even now he’d spent the dowry, he still had a roof over his head and a woman in his bed.

“Forman,” said Joan, firmly.

“Who?”

“Forman,” she repeated. “The man we need is Simon Forman. I’ve heard her speak of him.”

“That turd-faced lech! Most foul and Satan-bothering necromancer! Over my dead body will she see this man!”

Joan was implacable. “It’s her dead body we’ll have to worry about, not yours, unless we find some cure. Forman may be a lech, and he may be a necromancer, but he is wise. They say he cured himself of plague – who else do you know who has done such a thing?”

“You speak out of turn.”

“Forgive me, but I am all on edge.” Her voice was soft, but furious.

I wanted to thrash my head about, or wave my hand to say “Not that filthy little chance-man, with his tricky hands and his ready cock, God save us!” But I could not move, nor even blink my eye. And it occurred to me that if was a choice between being entombed by my own flesh and bone, or being groped by a ginger goat, I had better choose the latter. And with that wise thought, my mind slipped into darkness.

*

“Now, my dear, you can open your eyes.”

I opened them, expecting pain and calamity, but nothing happened. The ceiling above my head was a familiar criss-cross of wood panelling. If this was

Heaven or Hell, it looked remarkably like my own house. “See if you can get up,” said a quiet voice. “It’s all done now.”

I struggled up so that I was propped on my elbows. My mind felt clear and sharp, more so than it had for many months. A bearded, elderly man was sitting next to the bed where I lay. Dr Forman was smiling sweetly, but there was also something complacent in his attitude, as if he had won a wager. And behind his chair stood Joan, all twisted with anxiety.

“Oh, Aemilia, praise God!” she cried. “You are better. ”

I put my hand up to my cheek, aware of a mild soreness, but nothing like the agony and madness of the last few days. “My tooth?”

Dr Forman smiled and held up a glass vial. Inside it was something bloody and rotted, tiny as a baby’s finger. “I don’t know what magic these crones put on you, but really,” he said. “I have never seen such vileness. I am afraid your poor husband has had to go to a tavern. He did not have the stomach for it.”

“And my son?”

“He is downstairs. He’s asked for the tooth, but I’m not sure it’s safe to give it to him.”

I rubbed my face, and stretched out my arms, which were stiff and painful. “Never saw such vileness, you say? I find that that hard to believe. A man with your wide experience of all things unspeakable and horrid.”

“I know you have a sharp tongue, Mistress Lanyer, but within a few days you would have been dead from this infection, and lying in your grave. I won’t take the conventional remuneration from such an old friend as you, but a little gratitude would be an appropriate payment, I feel.”

Joan looked at him, quizzical. “Gratitude? Isn’t her money good enough for you?”

“Mistress Lanyer is well known to me,” said the doctor. “I would rather have her friendship than her gold.”

She took a leather moneybag from her basket and held it out to him. “Take this, and let us keep it strictly business. Gratitude smacks of debts that stay unpaid.”

“Joan, let it be,” said I.

She looked at me, her green eyes cold. “There is some magic which is better measured by a pile of coin. Or else the scent of it will linger, like a sick dog’s stench.”

“Joan!”

“It was a simple request for thanks,” said Doctor Forman, bowing stiffly. He stared at me. I had forgotten how strange his gaze was, withdrawn and mesmerizing at once. Last time I saw him, he was as ginger as a squirrel. Now his beard and hair were grey. He wore both long, as if styling himself a magus or a necromancer. And his robes were both mystical and splendid – his coat and breeches were purple velvet. Magic and medicine had made him a rich man.

I sat up and swung my legs down to the floor. “Thank you. I am sorry for my manners.”

“And so you should be, mistress,” said Joan. “We’d given you up for dead.”

“You have some skill in healing?” the doctor asked her.

Joan folded her arms across her chest, proud as a duchess. “More than skill, sir. It’s in my blood.”

The doctor bowed again, and gave her his sweetest smile. “Then you have the better of me, most assuredly. What I know is merely the stuff of book-learning and weary application.”

“Will you like something to eat?” I asked.

“Thank you, you are kind. It is so many years since we have spoken. I have often thought of you, wondering how my predictions served you.”

Joan went to prepare some food.

Forman settled himself back in his chair, looking pleased with himself. “Well, well, Aemilia! If I were not a student of the constellations, I would call this a stroke of luck. As it is, I can see that the stars were in a most propitious alignment today. Which, if I may say so, makes a change where you are concerned.”

“I have not been blessed with great luck, except that I have my dear son Harry.”

He took my hand and spread out my palm. “Dear, oh dear. Hmm. What? You know full well the stars are not windows to the future, but perform a similar function to that which they fulfil on a dark night.”

“They shine, and they are mysterious.”

“Quite so, quite so.” He looked at my palm again, frowning. “Still scribbling at your verse, I see.”

“I have little time for it these days. In the early morning, sometimes, or at the very dead of night.”

“Make time for those scrawled words, Aemilia. Make time for your mind.”

“I will.”

He stroked his fingers across mine. “I was hoping you might visit me for a friendly halek, dear lady, a little knee-trembler for old times’ sake.”

I pulled my hand away. “Even though I had never fucked you in the past?” Forman was the only man I ever knew who had his own word for fornication: a clear sign of his dedication to that craft.

“Did you not? Ah then, it is just that dreams and memories can intertwine in the most confusing manner. In honour of many a merry skirmish, then, shall we say.”

“The answer is no.”

He sighed. “You are cruel. But now...”

“Now, what?”

“Now, I feel that our time would be better spent looking, as far as we may with such feeble instruments as I possess, into the future. The possible, probable, potential future, as we astrologists like to say.”

He produced a pack of Tarot cards from a pocket inside his cloak. They were of a more ancient and arcane design than any I had seen before. The pictures showed men with the heads of eagles, and strange nymphs with gold faces and serpents for hair.

“Shuffle these,” he said, and I did so. He laid them out before me, face down and with their edges overlapping. “Choose three,” he said. “Not in haste, but without too much thinking. Let your instinct lead you.”

I chose them, and he turned them over, one by one. In the centre was the glorious figure of an Empress, clothed in scarlet. On her left side were two Lovers, arms and legs entwined. And on her right hand was the mounted figure of grim Death.

“What does this mean?” I asked him.

But he was silent again. Then he picked up the card which showed the Lovers, and laid it down in front of me.

“This is a most auspicious card. When you came to see me... before... there was a certain poet in your stars.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“He loves you still.”

“Now I know there are limits to your magic. He does not love me in the least.”

“We are speaking of the same man, I take it?”

“We are speaking of one who wrote me the most vicious, evil lines that I ever saw.”

“That cannot be!”

“Some poets write pretty love sonnets to their lady-loves. Not he. If there is such a thing as a hate sonnet, then I have been presented with that very thing.”

“A passing mood, perhaps? He feared he couldn’t have you.”

“A very sheaf of loathing. I am, in his eyes, such a Muse as you might encounter in the fires of Hell.”

He stared at the cards, eyes half closed.

“So you are wrong,” I said.

“No. There is no mistake.” He patted my shoulder. “Oh, my dear Aemilia. What travails you have had. I wish that I could tell you that they are now over.”

I looked at the Death card, and shivered. “So, what does it mean?”

“You must be brave, and resourceful, and bold, to cope with what is yet to come. Yet I have faith in you. And there is brightness, too, if you will only see it. There is love.”

From the same pocket which had held the pack of cards he drew out a pamphlet. The title read: “*Malleus Maleficarum, Maleficas, & earum haeresim, ut phramea potentissima conterens*”

“*The Hammer of Witches,*” I translated. “*Which destroyeth witches and their heresy as with a two edged sword.* This has nothing to do with me! Why are you giving me this book, of all books?”

“Not a particularly romantic gift, I fear, but you may find it instructive. And...well. There is something that you must do – of an urgent and peculiar nature.”

I looked at the pamphlet, puzzled.

“What is done cannot be undone, but what has come in consequence.... Well. I can say no more. There is no time now to do a proper reading. Let me just say that there is much to know in this field, much you do not understand, and that there is something evil here. Something beyond ill wishing. Come and talk to me again.”

“I’m not a fool, Dr Forman. And I have had my fill of aged lovers.”

“My dear! You quite mistake my meaning. I would like to help you.”

“Very handsome of you.”

He bent closer, and I saw a glint of something like fear in his eyes. And yet what was there to be afraid of? “Aemilia, you have a good mind, and more than enough curiosity. I asked you once what you knew of magic. Do you know more now?”

“A little.”

“From that servant of yours?”

“She’s taught me a few cures, and remedies and I can make a potion or a poultice for most of the common ailments.”

“Yes, yes. That is useful enough - but what you need is something which goes beyond the household skills of women. Something to help you in the most severe and terrible adversity.”

“What sort of ‘something’?”

“There is no time to tell you now. But be sure of this: there are dark days ahead of you.”

Scene IV

In the days after Dr Forman's visit, I thought about the strange things that he had said. It had jolted me to hear William spoken of again, and so soon after Lettice Cooper had mentioned him. Although he must be walking and talking and living his life just a few miles from where I lived, our paths had not crossed since the day I saw him weeping over his verse. And I had not heard from him since taking delivery of the bundle of cruel sonnets that pierced me with their pain and loathing. I'd grown used to the idea that his disappearance from my life made him somehow less real, like a character in one of his plays. But still I felt the lure of lost things, and the past. Don't mistake me: this was not my usual way of thinking. I counted myself lucky, for I had a fine (though wilful) boy who was his father's copy, and I loved him to distraction. My husband was a wastrel, but kind enough, and I had long since become accustomed to his profligacy. And it wasn't only my love for Henry which had sustained me: in spite of what Will had said (or perhaps because of it) I had continued with my poetry. Now, taking heed of Dr Forman, I read and wrote each day, rising early and making it a daily habit. I spent what little extra money I had on chapbooks and pamphlets, and read and re-read the few books I had brought with me from the Palace.

There was no doubt that Forman knew what he was about. Not only had he cured the infection, and not only was there barely a scar to show where the cursed tooth had been, all my other little aches and torments had also disappeared. Those besetting symptoms that all of us in London must put up with: soot-wheeze; ale-runs; head-gripe; backache; lassitude and dread-belly. Not to mention sundry scabs, carbuncles, and lesions of the skin. All such ailments seemed to have vanished, so that when I woke each morning, I lay for a moment, letting my mind's attention dwell on

every inch of my warm body as I stretched out, silent and careful, so as not to wake my snoring husband, lately back from some nocturnal escapade. Every inch was free of pain. What was this magic that Dr Forman knew?

Had his art also restored some of my lost beauty? It seemed to me it had. I saw that I was not as Lettice Cooper had claimed, a woman old before her time, but something of what I once had been. My hair was still black, without a single streak of white, my skin unlined. My eyes, so much admired in the past, were the same as ever. Black, watchful, unblinking. When I looked into them, I could not even tell what I was thinking myself. And, for all you may think I was a fool, these twin facts – that I had no pain, and that I saw myself once again as beautiful, made me believe I might triumph over other matters. I hid his witchcraft pamphlet under the bolster and resolved to think of solid, quotidian matters.

The plague? We had always lived with its comings and its goings. Fogs and dunghill odours were said to bear contagion. Some said the contagion was trapped in rugs and featherbeds, and would cover their faces when they passed a woollen draper's shop. Alfonso believed sweet smells gave protection, and stuffed his dainty nose with herb-grace. Joan, with her store of soothing cures and potions, would greet each new outbreak by hanging the house with rue. God sent the plague to punish us for all our evil ways, so I set myself to praying for forgiveness for my sins. After all, there were a thousand ways for Death to cut you down.

Let God's will be done, I thought, as I gnawed at chicken legs, biting hard down on my bad tooth's side, delighting in the taste and texture of the meat, the greasiness of the bone. The sun had forgotten us, the skies were dark and the streets and lanes were torrents of rainwater. But what did I care if the sun shone, or the rain fell? I went about my daily business: to the baker's, and the chandler's, to the

cobbler's and tailor's, with my basket over my arm. And the mud and drizzle made me smile, even though my skirts were daggled with pavement mire and I had to barter for my cheat bread. Did I think of William? I will confess to you I did, for I saw him every time I looked at Henry, and even the touch of my own face reminded me of William's skin. The Greeks knew far more of emotion than we do, and there is no English word for the feeling that I carried with me, shamed and rejected by the only man I ever loved. The Greek word is *pathos*, milder than wild *eros* but longer lasting: a longing for someone unobtainable or far away. The nearest word we have is *yearning*. I yearned for the Will I had lost, the Will who had loved me, and who would never come again.

One day, about a fortnight after I had seen the doctor, Mistress Flood came to my door, dressed in her usual absurd splendour, head trussed in a new style of starched ruff – French, I dare say – which seemed fit to throttle her. I was marking out a piecrust, pressing my right thumb around its edge.

“Aemilia!” she said. “I have an invitation for you.”

“An invitation to what, Mistress Flood?” I had a feeling it was going to be an event I would rather not attend.

“Oh, it's Tom's first big performance! He is in a new play at the Globe. We are off tomorrow afternoon, and should be so delighted if you would come.”

My thumb jerked and ripped the pastry, but I did not look up. “Alfonso is at court.”

“Come yourself! Bring Henry. And Joan, too. You should be there, not only because you are my good neighbour and have known him since he was an infant, but because of the very part he is playing.” Greymalkin, as if curious to hear more,

unfurled himself from his position next to the smouldering fire, and came grandly over, blinking and stretching.

“The very part? He is the leading lady?”

“Oh, no, he is too green yet for that. Only fourteen, you know, for all he is so tall! No, he is a second-ranking character, but one essential to the plot. Or so he tells me. I have only seen the pages with his lines.”

“I fear I am...”

“But wait, wait till you hear! His character is you!”

A coldness in the air, a north-breeze. I put the pie in the oven and slammed the door. “*How* is it me?”

“Aemilia!” Anne looked triumphant. “He is a serving lady called Aemilia! It must be you. A friend of Mr Shakespeare, as you were. And I doubt he knows many Venetians, and the play is set in Venice. It’s about a Moor.”

“Anne, I’m not a Venetian, I was born at Bishopsgate...”

“Yes, but your father was. And he named you. And this ‘Aemilia’ is sharp and worldly, and has a speech making little of men! You! To the very life!” She seemed to think that I should share in her delight.

“I...” But before I could think up my excuse, Henry was there, all bounce and frenzy. He fell over the cat, who ran away furious to lay waste to some rats.

“Mother! You are in a play! How good! Can we be at the front? Can we be groundlings? Please. I want to be a groundling. John Feather and John Dokes have both been groundlings, and they saw a whore suck a...”

“We are busy, Henry, we must...”

“We are *not* busy, Mother, because you said you were going to make me swot my Latin.”

“It is most historical,” said Anne, seeing how to play it. “Based on the Decameron, says Tom. Mr WS translated it himself, he’s quite the linguist. Though not as handsome as Mr Burbage, I have to say.”

“Please, mother.” Henry gripped my arm and squeezed it tight. “One night of Latin is not going to make me an Oxford man. And Tom is my very best friend. I shall be heartbroken if you say no.”

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I counted it a small victory that I had not set foot in the Globe for ten long years. Nor had I been to the Rose, nor the Curtain, nor the Swan, nor the Fortune. All London might be in thrall to the theatre, but not me. And yet. I can’t lie, as we came up to the great entrance gate to the playhouse, part of a dense London throng, I was as curious as Henry, who was leaping and dancing and singing like a Bedlam boy. Joan had him by the arm, a grim set to her smile. (She had no love for a play.) I, meanwhile, was borne along by Anne Flood, who I swear was twenty times as giddy and talkative as my cavorting son.

“You see there, Mistress?” She gestured at a portly nymph ahead of us in the line, with tight-curved hair and a tavern laugh. “Breasts quite out, it’s all the thing, they say, at court. And yet, look, she’s straight off to the pit, for all her gown is of silk taffeta.”

“A whore, Anne, as any fool can see.”

“Whore? Where, Mother?” came from behind.

“Never mind that Henry, you are here to see the play,” said Joan.

“What great big nipples has she, though! Half the size of her dugs! Mine are tiny beside hers.” Anne Flood was frowning at the sight.

“Oh yes, I see them now!” said Henry. “Big as conkers!”

“Enough of this, in front of the child, Anne!”

“I quite forgot myself, forgive me.” But her expert eye distracted her again.

“Is that Mr Burbage? Over there, with the gold and silver girdle? I am sure it is must be him! Look at his actor’s bearing – a true player, wouldn’t you say?”

“That isn’t Burbage. He will be in the tiring house, waiting to go on.”

“It’s him. Mr Burbage! Over here!”

“Not if he is the lead, which it says he is, on the playbill.” I fluttered the bill before her face. “Why would he be out here, gawping at the crowd?”

But Anne looked vague. She did not like me to draw attention to the fact that I could read.

Through the gate ahead of us I could see the afternoon sun tilting down onto the pit, gilding the motley crowd that was gathering there. Eight-sided, the great Globe, like a Roman amphitheatre for our own day, the centre open to the air, the surrounding walls and galleries thatched. I had my pennies ready, to pay for a gallery bench, but Anne would have none of it: she paid for each of us. We pushed our way along, past the doorkeeper and into the bright “O” beyond. Henry bouncing up and down, no matter what Joan did to try and quiet him. The crowd was the usual unruly mix, with only beggars and the drunkest fools kept out.

While all of London, and of England, may be divided in rank and importance with attention to each man’s smallest difference in wealth or status or the opinion of his peers, here was a place where no one quite knew where he stood – excepting only that he should have a good view of the stage. Court folk and well-bred dandies might dance around each other, puffing pipes and opining on the latest works of Dekker, Middleton and the rest; but they were perilous close to all who sought to fleece them; the knaves and tricksters, cozeners and coney-catching foists. And there were also

plenty of the middling folk among them, cheery shoemakers, solid burghers and apprentice boys, daft with youth. The finery of the rich was half-hidden in the crush of sallow kersey, dun coats and rough-sewn jerkins, so that here you would see a flash of bright velvet, there a yellow ruff which blocked the view of those behind, and there again an azure ostrich feather, nodding prettily above the rollicking crowd.

At last, we climbed the stairs and reached our place, and I could look around me in peace. I had forgotten how grand the inside of a theatre can be. It was like entering a great cathedral before they stripped out the gold and daubed lime over the frescos, but better, for there was no homily to endure. The main stage, set at the far end of the pit, had vast pillars on each side, painted in a swirling pattern to resemble marble. Above the stage was a canopy held up by two smaller pillars: the Heavens, decorated with the sun and moon and celestial bodies. Gold and scarlet hangings covered the back of the stage, hiding the tiring house, and green rushes were strewn on the stage itself. Running out into the pit was a long, narrow walkway, so the actors could almost dance upon the groundlings.

The musicians were already assembling on the balcony, blowing and strumming quietly. A few young blades were already positioning themselves on the edge of the stage, perched on their three-legged stools, as eager to be part of the spectacle themselves as they were to get a good view.

“Well,” said Anne. “This *is* pleasant. I do so love a play.” She offered me a Seville orange, and I shook my head, nausea beginning to rise up in my throat. “I don’t for the life of me know what ails you,” she said. “Why are you all on edge?”

“I am not well,” I said.

She peeled her orange with her squat white fingers. “What is the matter?”

“I finished off a mutton pottage last night, perhaps it disagreed with me.”

Just then, I felt something dig into my back. I turned, thinking it would be Henry.

“Keep still, child, can’t you..?”

But it was not Henry. It was a hunchback dwarf, bent over nearly double, so his head looked as if it was growing out of his chest. He was dressed well, like a prosperous guildsman. And yet this man was of no guild. This was my landlord, Anthony Inchbald.

“Mr Inchbald,” I said. “Good day to you, I am sure.”

“A pleasure to see you, as always, Mistress Lanyer. I suppose your husband told you I had called?”

“Sadly, no.”

“His mind seemed...occupied elsewhere.”

“I trust your visit was successful?”

He had wormed his way forward, and now settled himself next to me on the bench, legs dangling. He looked straight ahead, very calm

“This will be a fine production,” he said. “Love, and blood, and tragic death. What more can you ask for from a play?”

“What indeed?” said I.

“Though it’s hard enough for a poet to keep pace with nature. I went to the bear garden yesterday. Saw the great beast Harry Hunks kill off four greyhounds, with a few claw-punches and much assurance!”

“O, sir!” said Henry, staring at Inchbald, wide-eyed. “What joy!”

Inchbald looked pleased with himself. “One landed in the lap of the lady next two me, with two legs missing.”

“By Our Lady! There could be nothing finer,” said Henry. “Would that I could go. Mother keeps me from everything, I may as well live in a dog kennel for all the sport I see.”

“And there were rockets and fireworks, and hungry vagrants fighting for some bread and apples, and it all ended with an ape on horseback.”

“What are words compared to that?” I said, avoiding his gaze and staring into the crowd below, where I could see two cutpurses jostling their prey. One stuffed a purse into his doublet even as I watched.

Inchbald squinted round at me. “There was no success to be had.”

“At the bear pit?”

“At your house in Long Ditch.”

“I am sorry for that.”

He smiled. His two teeth were like twin pegs on a line. “Nothing, in short, to be had at all. The cupboard, in a phrase, was bare. And yet – and I admire this, for I share your passion - you have the money for the Globe! A woman who would sooner be homeless than miss the latest offering from the Lord Chamberlain’s men. This I must applaud, even as I call the bailiffs to your door.”

“She is my guest, Mr Inchbald,” said Anne Flood, leaning over me in a flurry of importance. Her house, too, belonged to him. “We are all good friends here, this afternoon. Your business can wait for another day.” She patted him playfully on the wrist. I was surprised she could even bear to touch him.

“We have no business,” I said.

“Oh, I think we have,” said Inchbald. “As long as I have your house, then we have business.”

“Ask my husband, he will pay you.”

“Your husband has air for brains. And his promises are worth less than a strumpet’s virtue.”

“If he pays you, then who cares about his useless promises?”

“He has paid me nothing but promises all year.”

I looked away, my face hot. Where had the money gone to? Alfonso did not earn much, but it was enough to pay our rent. As long as he didn’t spend it first. But he could be trusted with nothing. I was like a widow with two sons, not a wife with one child.

“What can I give you? I have no money of my own. All I have is the idea for a pamphlet.”

“Words pay no debts. Give me deeds, Mistress Lanyer, give me money.”

“It’s about the subjugation of Eve.”

“Hardly a subject to keep a roof over your head!”

“I also have a poem, a ballad, in the voice of Mary Magdalene.”

“Who will buy a ballad by a woman? I am as likely to purchase the tale of a hierophant, or the confessions of a crow.”

“Hush!” said Anne. “The play is starting!”

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Just as the trumpets and hautboys called us to order, there was a commotion in the pit.

A fight seemed to have broken out, somewhere near the stage.

I peered down, trying to get a better look. “What’s going on?”

“Some kind of disorder,” said Anne Flood, standing up and shading her eyes with her hand.

“It’s that freak Moll Cut-purse,” said Inchbald. “They should lock her up for lewdness.”

There was a loud shriek, laughter, and then a figure seemed to surge up out of the assembled mass of people, like a homunculus emerging from the mud. I saw that the figure of a young man was being lifted towards the stage.

“Moll? A Molly-boy, from the stews?”

“A woman, if you can call it that,” said Inchbald. “A blot on nature.”

Now the figure was sitting crookedly upon the boards, flat upon its arse with its legs splayed wide, face hidden by a wide brimmed hat.

“A song, Moll Cut-purse!” someone shouted from the crowd. “Give us one of your sweet songs!”

“An air, a dainty air to set the scene!” yelled someone else. One of the law students on the stage got up and gave her something. I saw it was a lute. At the back of the stage I saw a new Fool, arms folded, laughing.

“Who’s that?” I whispered to Joan.

“Robert Armin,” she said. “Saucy fellow!”

Moll Cutpurse set the lute down with deliberation, then struggled, with great difficulty, to her feet. Then she threw down her hat and picked up the lute. She had a round, peasant face, and a huge red mouth, so that she was clown-like without paint. Her hair was cut short like a boy’s. In spite of this, and in spite of her doublet and breeches, there was something in the set of her shoulders and her way of strumming the lute which was pleasing and lady-like.

She bowed, very low, as if she had already concluded a great performance. The audience clapped and cheered. Some oranges were thrown on to the stage. She picked a couple up, and put them in her shirt.

“You are most kindly, ladies, boys and men,” she shouted, bowing again. “I shall repay this richness with some little ditty which I have made, adapted from thin

air and the drunkish songs of bawds. If you are of a fribbling, foul-faced disposition, then close your ears. If not, kindly open them.”

“What else will you have us open, Moll?” shouted someone.

“Your purses, sir,” she called back. “Pull ‘em back widely, at the lip.”

“Have you a sword, to entertain us?”

“No, sir, but poke me with yours and you’ll get a shock.”

“I’ll poke you any time!”

“Then you are in for fine sport. For I’m more wit-worm than wanton.”

Lots of screeching and guffawing at this.

“A wanton worm!”

“A worming wanton!”

“Wriggle-me-ree, Moll!”

“Wriggle with me!”

Then the shout went up: “A song, a song! Let’s hear the bashful lady’s song!”

Another bow, and she began to play the lute, not badly, though the notes did have a habit of sliddering around the tune. And then she sang this pretty little ditty:

“There were three drunken maidens

Come from the Isle of Whyte

They drank from Sunday morning

Didn't stop till Saturday night

When Saturday night did come me boys,

They wouldn't then go out

These three drunken maidens

They pushed the jug about

There's forty quarts of beer me boys

They fairly drunk them out

These four drunken maidens

They fetched their sweet dugs out

Oh, where are your feathered hats

Your mantles rich and fine?

They've all been swallowed up

In tankards of good wine

And where are your maidenheads

You maidens brisk and gay?

We left them in the ale house

We drank them clean away."

Many people in the audience seemed to know the words quite well, for there was much singing along and waving of caps. When the song ended, there was more wild laughing and hooting, and a shower of coins fell on the stage as well as oranges. Moll scooped these up quick: I saw that she was not too drunk to forget her business. And now, here was Armin, strutting his way along the walkway, smiling this way and that, his feet beating like drumsticks on the boards. He whirled Moll round, arm in arm, faster and faster till finally she flew off the stage and fell back into the crowd, roaring as she went. (Though whether this was in sport or anger I could not tell.) So many

arms were raised to catch her that she fell upon featherbed of groundlings. Much laughter followed as she marched away, still singing. I watched her go, thinking: is that the first free woman I have seen in my whole life?

Armin danced on, jumping round the stage like a shittle-cock. But truly, this merry jig was the only happy moment in the show. Did you ever see *Othello, the Moor of Venice*? It is the worst and most lamentable tale, which makes you want to climb up on the stage and bang the players' heads together to set them straight. Othello, all talk and no sense, has the music of the language but no understanding of its hidden meanings. He chooses his wife wisely, a good and virtuous woman – though not sharp enough to keep her man in order. His deputy, Iago, is recruited from the gates of Hell, being more or less a devil. Othello seems proud, but does not love himself well enough to trust his wife, and so he kills her. Murders her flat out, in her nightgown. The thing he loves above all else, more than himself.

Well! There is no need. He is a Blackamoor, so it's a play to set the talk going, mad in love with his fair wife. Could such a man exist? He is not half-beast, but demi-god. And his words have more tune in them than the oboes, lutes and viols that play between the acts.

I knew it was only Burbage who marched upon the stage, his face blacked, his voice mellifluous. But I believed he was the Moor. Yet for all the wonder of this drama, his downfall is not what will live me to this day.

Rather, it is this:

On to the stage comes bold Aemilia, serving maid to Desdemona, wife to Iago. Anne clutches my hand. "Oh, the saucy baggage!" she says.

Tom is front of the stage, in a vivid scarlet dress (There is one of exactly that colour, hid away in my chamber in a cedar chest). His wig is black as a raven's

wing, corkscrew curled like Medusa. (I touch my own black hair, as if to check it is not stolen.) He turns to Iago, hands on hips, saucy with indignation. I knew enough of myself to know this is my own manner. He is an actor all right, this pretty boy! No wonder the company was so eager to take him on.

“He’s good,” I hiss to Anne. But her hand is clutched over her mouth in disbelief.

Now Tom speaks, in his soft girl’s voice:

*“But jealous souls shall not be answered so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they art jealous; ’tis a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.”*

My skin goes cold. O William, what treachery, that you would not believe me when I told you what was true! Your fine Earl forced me, your jealousy was the making of your mind. “Begot upon itself, born on itself.” I had not put it quite so well, but the scene burned in my head. Wriothesley kissing me, seeking my screaming mouth and kissing me again, wet and slippy as a prentice boy. How he grunted as he pushed his fat cock up inside me, and shrieked in ecstasy as he bounced and grafted. And how he giggled as he bit and slobbered on my shoulders and pushed up still harder and still further in me, and then pulsingly, pulsingly, pulsingly, he came!

The play holds us all, we are in its time and place, Othello is a grand fool, his fear will be the finish of him. Aemilia, for all her spirit, will not save her mistress. And these words, too, are taken from the life:

*“Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?
What place? What time? What form? What likelihood?”*

In this play, it is the honour of the virtuous Desdemona which these lines defend. In reality, it was my own honour I sought to protect against the spite and jealousy of the poet himself, using if not these very words then something very like them. William has retold another tale, it seems, as well as some old story by Cinthio.

*

The play was over. Desdemona, dead upon her bed, now paraded before us in her white robes again, the boy-actor who played her hand in hand with Tom/Aemilia. We stood to shout and cheer. Anne wept. Joan grinned (a rare sight, this). Inchbald dangled over the rail, waving his playbill, so fiercely that I thought he'd fall. I resisted the temptation to push him over. And Henry whooped and yelled, as if he was at the bear pit, dancing on the spot. Love, and blood, and tragic death. There was nothing like it.

"Oh Mother," he cried. "What a miserable end! Can we see it again?"

"Once is enough," I said. "Wait till a new play comes, it won't be long."

"And shall you bring me then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Alfonso will come with you next time."

"And shall we go to the tiring house, now, and see Tom?"

"It's no place for women," said Anne.

"Or children," said Joan. "Unless they are players."

"It's time to go," I said, and, true to form, he'd gone.

"Henry!" cried our three voices, but he was off, down the wooden stairs, nearly tripping an eel-man in his flight. Inchbald, still leaning dangerously far over the balcony, said: "There he goes, the young demon. Straight for the stage. Do you never think to beat him, Mistress Lanyer?"

I took no notice, but hurried down the stairs after him, and rushed across the pit, weaving in and out of the boisterous crowd, till I came to the ladder at the foot of the stage.

“Henry!”

I hesitated. I could not, for form’s sake, take another step. And yet, I could not leave my naughty son to come home on his own, or at nightfall, with giddy Tom, fresh from his first success. I began to climb, ignoring the catcalls of the apprentice boys who stood behind me, and the shouts of disbelief from other, more respectable members of the crowd. At the top of the ladder, I looked around. The people, down below, seemed like one mass of watching faces. The pillars rose up on each side of me, like the gateway to Old Rome. In front of me, just a short distance across the stage, was the gold and crimson curtain of the tiring room. A small foot – that of my unruly son – was disappearing behind it.

“Henry, I shall whip you for this!”

More cheering. I could not go back. I must go on. I ran across the stage, to get away from those watching eyes as quick as I could. I held my breath, screwed up my courage, opened the curtain and stepped inside.

*

Such a whirl of legs and arms and spinning bodies you never saw. All the cast were still in costume, and wearing the black masks of court ladies, making all the figures mysterious. They were leaping and laughing, cloaks flying, skirts lifting, so I could not say how many there were, or who was who, except for Burbage, with his smudged and blackened face, and Desdemona, now wigless, in his gown. I stepped forward, hoping for a sight of Henry or Tom Flood. Cast my eye around at the properties: banners and pikes propped against one wall, before them, baskets and a coffin,

beyond these, a table laden with books and platters and severed heads. But then my arm was caught and I was pulled in, crying out and twisting as I might, so I was part of the spinning dance.

“Ho, mistress, step lively,” said one player, taking me by the waist.

“Fine ladies find themselves in strange places,” said another, spinning me round and passing me to his neighbour.

“No lady this, she’s nearly as dark as the Moor,” said another, turning me on my heels so I faced yet another dancer. This was Burbage, the Moor himself.

“Aemilia, forgive us!” But he was laughing too, with an ale pottle in on hand.

“Nothing more sweetly comical than what’s appalling, cruel and tragical. Oh, that poor, misbegotten Moor!”

“My son is here, hiding among...”

Then he was gone, too, so I hardly had time to feel surprise that he knew me so quick, not having seen me for all this time. And I was at the centre of a blurring circle, like the pole in May. I was grasped once more, pulled through the crowd, the room dark and fast all round me, all men and boys, disguise and chaos - and suddenly, a voice in my ear, a breath on my neck.

“God’s blood, I thought it must be you! Mistress Alfonso Lanyer, I can scarce believe it. What do you mean by coming here? I thought you loathed us players.”

I closed my eyes. The sound of the players dimmed, seemed to come from faraway. *He* was here. I had known he would be, but still felt sick to hear his voice again.

I swallowed, my eyes still shut. If I did not look upon him, then perhaps I would be safe. “I am not here to see the players, sir.”

“Not the playwright, surely?”

Opening my eyes, I turned to face him. For an instant, he was a stranger to me, and I saw him as I would have done if we had never met. A pale fellow, no longer young, but with an air of urgency about him. The instant passed, and I knew him, as I knew no one else except myself. Deep, shadowed eyes, searching my face with an expression that was caught between laughter and rage. A twist to his lips that made me wonder who still kissed them. The years had broadened him and lined his face, but he was proud and handsome, more so than he had been in his youth. His wealth and fame brought something new to his bearing, a dignity and power that I did not remember. I had hoped to find him shiny-bald and run to fat. But he was William, the William I had loved, and more himself than ever.

I swallowed. “Mr Shakespeare.”

He bowed.

“I’m – I have no wish to be here.”

“And I have no wish to see you here.” He smiled with stately cordiality.

“My boy is hiding here, with your Desdemona.”

His mouth tightened. “Oh...*your* son is he? I saw a silly knave with Tom.”

“He *is* a silly knave, but I love him dearly.”

“Your son,” he said. “I often...”

“What?”

“My own boy is dead.” He looked away, frowning. “Hamnett.”

“I am sorry.”

“Yes.” Now he was examining his wrist, as if he had some lines wrote on it.

“My wife... They sent a letter, but he was buried by the time I got to Stratford. There was heavy rain and... the way was hard.”

“Oh! I didn’t know...” I saw the grey hair at his temple. “God bless his soul.”

“He was eleven.”

“Henry is ten. I mean...I would die if anything...”

“Of course,” he said. Then: “Henry. Ha!”

Our eyes met, then jerked away.

Will reached out, and touched my shoulder with his finger. It was the strangest gesture, as if he was making sure I was solid flesh. I felt a breath of longing, as if a ghost had stroked the skin between my thighs.

I brushed his hand away. “Do not dare to touch me. I am sorry for your loss, but do not imagine that I will ever forget your foul words and accusations.”

“I didn’t intend you to.” He withdrew his hand. “Do not imagine that your kind words about my son absolve you of your guilt.”

“My guilt?”

“Of being a faithless whore.”

“There’s not gold enough in all of Cheapside to make me your whore for a single night.”

He laughed. “Who said I’d pay a farthing? You’re not such a tasty morsel now, mistress. I can feast nightly on a prettier dish.”

I thought: He loathes me. I am repulsive to him. So be it, so be it, I shall not set eyes on him again. Standing straighter, I looked him in the eye. “O, surely. The anointed sovereign of sighs and groans. What fortunate young women, to be sweated over by a lewd old versifier like yourself.”

“Fortunate indeed. I see your mind is still sharp, even if your eyes are growing dull.”

Over his shoulder, I could see the actors parading about the tiring room, doing a mock pavan. I must find Henry, and be gone.

“You are too arrogant, sir. Putting yourself above me with your cruel words. You think that honest folk are like players, running to and fro at the command of your invention? No. We are living beings, closer to angels than your shouting, painted shams.”

“Honest? A bawd like you is honest? Most entertaining! Now you are after Armin’s job, you aim to be a clown...”

“Yes, sir. Honest now, and honest since you have known me. A woman may not be a jester, but a poet may be a fool.”

“I saw what I saw. You were false to me!”

“You *saw* me with Southampton. But you are all eyes and no sight. No matter – it’s nothing to me now. And you have more than paid me back sir, with your wicked, poisonous lines. You turned your pain to wormwood poetry, and set every fibre of your genius to the task of breaking my heart!”

A shout went up as John Heminge came in through the door with flagons of ale, followed by two boy players carrying trenchers loaded with fried collops, scented with frizzled fat, together with rabbit, guinea fowl, humble pie, flat round manchets and other nunchions and snacks.

“Let us celebrate!” cried Burbage. He turned, and there was Tom, in his scarlet, and next to him I saw my own son at last, who had slyly hid himself in the middle of the dancing men. Burbage waited while everyone gathered around him, and quietened, and filled their cups. I stood quite still, hoping that if I did not look at William, he would vanish into the crowd.

“This is a proud day for all of us, we merry Lord Chamberlain’s men, for we have two new triumphs to celebrate.” The whites of Burbage’s eyes flashed in his black face, which was streaked now with dancing-sweat. “We are, being players, part

of one greater whole, with no leader, no prince to quell us, nor cunning man to muddle us. We are brothers, and the success of one is the success of all.” I saw that he was close to tears with the beauty of it.

Another speaker, smooth and cocksure. “We are all as wise and foolish as each other, and in that lies our infinite wisdom. Till we reach the end of it.” This was Robert Armin. There was laughter, then silence. Everyone waiting to hear what Burbage, the leader who would not be leader, would say next.

“First, we must celebrate our dear friend, Will, and his new play, which is as sad and stately as we could wish. And which cannot fail.”

Hoots and laughter. “Put money in thy purse!” called someone.

“Most poetical and bloody,” cried Armin. “The Blackamoor will get us gold.”

“And second – we have a new man among us, a beardless boy, but one who gave us a performance today that shows he is surely one of us. Tom Flood, you were a fine Aemilia!” There were more cheers now, and someone made Tom stand up upon a stool. He took off his wig, and twisted it in his hands, and bowed in mock-ceremony. His face was pink, his dark curls fell into his eyes.

“Speech!” called Will, beside me, and I turned and caught his eye, and I was stabbed right through. The strangest feeling. I knew him from my own mirror. Each time my face had looked out, it had been Will I saw there. And now I looked at him, it was my own face in the glass.

I had to leave. I turned and made my way through the laughter and shouting, and Tom beginning to say something, and being drowned out by his fellow players. I found Henry, and clenched my hand firmly around his arm.

“We are off,” I said. “And for once, you will be beaten raw for this.”

But William stood before me when we reached the door. His eyes went from me, then to Henry, and back again.

“An entrance is an entrance, and so a turn must follow,” he said. “You have a part to play, now you have returned.” His shirt was undone beneath his doublet, the dark hairs of his chest were twisted in a thick gold chain. He had not had this chain, when last I touched that hidden skin. Who touched him now? The Stratford housewife? A pert mistress, peachier than me? I heard a voice: *You are mine, mine. You are me. We are joined, for good or ill.* Did someone speak? I felt sick and giddy.

“Goodbye, Will. This is your world, your ‘stage’. These are your people. Make your riddles, strut your words - none of this can interest me.” I had my arm round Henry, who was squirming like a half-killed rat.

“It is not finished,” Will said. The same words he’d uttered in the abbey garden, all those years before. His eyes seemed to deepen. “You know that, just as I do.”

“What is not?” asked Henry.

“The ale,” I said. “They have not yet drunk the ale.”

Scene V

Inchbald had done for me what the witches and Dr Forman could not. He had made me fear the future. If I had had the leisure for it, I might have spent time brooding over my memories of Will. But I had no leisure for anything, since we might shortly find ourselves living in the street. When we got home, Alfonso was out. I waited till Henry was asleep, went into our chamber and locked the door.

There was little furniture in it apart from the bed, with its heavy curtains, and a chair and table. The casement window had a high view of Long Ditch, and Camm Row beyond. To the east, you could see the towers of Whitehall Palace, beyond that was Charing Cross where Cockspur Street met the Strand. To the north were the fields of Haymarket and St Martin's, to the west, open country. You could not see the river, but if you stuck your head out of the window, you could hear the shouts of the wherry men touting for business at the water's edge.

I pushed the bed aside, then scabbled back the rushes that lay beneath it. There was a loose board beneath. I lifted it up, and thrust my hand into the dusty floor space. Ah, there it was! A bulging leather pouch. I pulled it out. This was where I kept the gold coins left over from my dowry. Hidden from my spouse, of course, who could not be trusted with a farthing. Spreading my skirts, I tipped the contents into my lap.

What was this? The flat shapes that tumbled out were a heavy weight upon my legs. But they were grey stones, pebbles from the river shore. Where was my cherished hoard of gold and silver? Where was my money? I felt inside the bag again. Empty. I shook out my skirt, letting the stones roll among the rushes, and plunged my

arm inside the hole once more. All I found was a dried-up spider, in a winding sheet of its own legs, and a tiny, shrivelled mouse.

Then I thought – perhaps the coins have fallen out? They are hidden in the dust and scrimmage. I went downstairs, and fetched a fish-hammer and a candle. I prised up another floorboard, panting as I worked at the rusty iron nails. Then another, ripping it with my hands, tearing my fingers on the splintered wood. Blood dripped on to my good skirt. I smeared the sweat off my face, lit the candle and lowered it into the space. The flickering light showed only dirt and floor beams. The space was empty. But no! There, in the far corner. A small shape... I groped to the full length of my arm, and felt something with the tips of my fingers. I reached further, another inch – and pulled it out.

It was a tiny pewter box, round and smooth. I prised open the lid and tipped it up. Nine little dice fell into the palm of my hand. There must be a good reason why they were hidden away so carefully. I examined them one by one. As I suspected, they were cheats' dice. Three were marked only with low numbers; three with high numbers and three were weighted so that they would fall the same way every time. They must belong to my husband. He had found my stash of money, and gambled it away. But Alfonso was not just a fool, he was a trickster too. Not only had he lost my money, he had tried to swindle others out of theirs. Of course he was too stupid to succeed in such an enterprise. If he was any use as a cozener, he would have more than a bag of river-stones to show for his dishonesty.

I sat hunched on the floor, not caring for my spoiled dress, thinking. I stared at the feeble candle flame, the little light it threw on my little life. I saw myself, as I once was, listening as Lord Hunsdon talked, and, as the years went by, I saw myself talking as he listened. He told me only the Queen had a better head for the affairs of

state. And that my Latin was a match for hers. He said I could have been an Oxford man, if I had been a man at all. And then he bought me a set of Antwerp porringers and set me up with a brainless idiot for a spouse.

It was true that Alfonso had been pleased to have me, even though I was pregnant with another man's child. He saw that he was getting a handsome bargain. I was beautiful, would not have been kept so long by Hunsdon if I did not have a whore's skill in the bedchamber, and I came with a good dowry. He saw in me a lifetime of good fucking, and at least a year of good spending. And truth to tell, this is exactly what he got. To his credit, there was not an ounce of malice in the man, and he loved Henry as if he was his own child. In fact, such was his ability to see only what did not cause him pain, I believe he came to think that Henry was his natural son. So he was happy.

Only my poetry made him angry. Property does not write poems. Property sits at home and puts her skill to churning butter. He seemed to think my writing not only unwomanly, but also sacrilegious. "What monstrous thing is this!" he would cry. "Play your virginals, if you want to show us how clever you are! Leave the words to the wits. God preserve us, get some food before me!" I took to hiding my pages in the straw mattress, to stop him throwing them on the fire.

This was my lot. Wrong sex, wrong lovers, wrong place. The universe was neat as an egg, the layers held like white and yolk within its shell. I was neither white nor yolk, fish nor fowl. And now. What was my line of business now? If I could have crawled into that hole, wrapped myself in a death-caul like the shrunken spider, and never been thought of again, I would have done so.

But then I heard a cry from Henry's room. I put the figure in my pocket, unlocked my door and rushed to his bedside.

He hugged me, as if he was still an infant. “Mother!” he said. “I dreamed that you were dead!”

I smoothed his hair. He smelled of smoke and sugar.

“My little one.” I kissed his cheek. “Never fear. I’m not dead yet.”

“Nor me,” said Henry. He pulled away, wiped his eyes and looked at me.

“We shan’t die for a while longer, either, shall we? God doesn’t need us yet.”

“No, He doesn’t.”

“And I am very sorry.”

“For what?” I had almost forgotten his flight to the tiring room.

“For – all my bad ways.”

“You are just a boy, Henry.” I touched his cheek.

“I will stop all my running away.”

“Yes.”

“God would like that,” he said, sagely.

“Yes. You would make God very happy.”

I drew the counterpane tight around him before I closed the curtains, making him a little tent, all snug.

*

By the time Alfonso came home, it was midnight, and the trumpets had long since sounded the curfew at the city walls. The crescent moon was an arc of silver, brighter than my missing coin. I was sitting outside, wrapped in a woollen cloak, sleepless. I saw him long before he saw me. He was tottering and singing to himself, his recorder slung over his shoulders in its carrying case. I knew the tune, it had been composed by my uncle, Robert Johnson. The tune was *The Witch’s Dance*, a favourite at court.

My husband came slowly, slowly, weaving this way and that, whistling and humming and laughing, at one point almost falling in the town-ditch, at another sitting on the ground for several moments, tracing his own palm-lines in the moonlight.

When he saw me, he seemed to be delighted, and not in the least surprised to find me waiting in the street.

“Aemilia!” he called. “Lady Aemilia! I am blessed in my work, yet even more so in my spouse.” He came towards me and pulled me to my feet. “O wife! Houses and riches are the inheritance of the fathers, but a prudent wife is of the Lord.” Alfonso was not devout by nature, and loved God most when he was in his cups.

“You have been at the Malmsy again, I see.”

“Let thy fountain be blessed and rejoice with the wife of thy youth!” he declaimed, squeezing me tightly.

“Leave me be, husband.”

“Let her breasts satisfy thee at all times and be thou ravisht always with her love.” He tried to land a kiss upon my lips, but I twisted my head away and he slobbered on the doorpost instead. “And why wilt thou, my son, be ravisht with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger. O woe is me!” He stared up adoringly at the door lintel.

“What have you done with it?” I asked, pushing him away.

“With what?” He turned, unsteadily, and put one hand out to balance himself against the wall. “Always questions, questions. Such a liveliness of mind. It doesn’t augur well, my chuck. You should do more knitting.”

“My *money*, Alfonso. Where is my money? Did you lose it at the tables?”

“You have money?”

“Not any more.”

“Then, how am I to blame for taking it?”

I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him hard. “Are you really so dull and brainsickly? I *had* money, and now it is gone. Now all that remains is a pewter pot of trickster’s dice!”

“What are you saying?”

“That you are the cozener of your own wife and child, you worthless piece of scum!”

“Worthless... what? I know nothing of it.”

Disgusted, I began pacing to and fro, too angry to keep still. “What’s more, I saw Inchbald today – or yesterday, I should rather say.”

“Oh! How is the dainty little fellow? Did you wish him well from me?”

“He told me we’ve paid no rent this year.”

“God’s blood! The thieving scoundrel...”

“He’ll be round tomorrow to collect what’s his. Or else he’ll take the house back.”

He closed his eyes as if he was making a difficult calculation. “Hmm. Now, what *was* the problem with friend Inchbald...? Perhaps there was a misunderstanding in our transaction. A tenacious fellow, we must give him that.”

I thrust my face close to his, ignoring his filthy tavern stench.

“Husband.”

“Yes?”

“Are you not ashamed?”

“Ashamed?”

“Are you not a *man*?”

“I do all a man can do! Who would do more is none!”

“More? Who could do *less*?” I tore at my hair. “Lord God! Help me! I am like an anchorite, walled in to pray and meet my doom!”

“Mistress Lanyer, you are raving!”

“Raving? The madness is that I walk about quite calmly, knowing I am done for! I will be a pauper, thrust upon the parish! I will end my days in public view, a starving creature locked into a Cage!”

Alfonso, pale already from strong drink, took himself a shade whiter. “Calm yourself, wife. Show some respect.”

“Respect! I may have to kill you.”

“You forget, I went off to the Azores with Raleigh and poor Essex.”

“And so did many others. You are meant to be a courtier, after all. The task was to make a name for yourself and seek preferment. Though in your case, hope was set too high.”

“I almost drowned. Your vaunting ambition will be the death of me.”

“But you *lived*. More’s the pity. When I think of all the honest, proper men who go to their graves each day, while you continue with your doltish prancing.”

“I was shot through the shirt - and scared out of my wits.”

“The Queen should never have agreed to send you with them, you brought such evil luck. When they went the first time, without you, their ships came back loaded down with gold. But all *your* great expedition brought back was half a chest of bullion. And the Spanish all but landed at Penzance.”

His shoulders sagged. “I tried. Strived.” He frowned at the word, seemingly drunk enough to wonder if this was French. “I *strove*. Wanted to be made a knight, but only four were chosen.”

“You are a worm, Alfonso. A liar, a boil, a plague sore and a turd.”

“I am a *musician*. It’s my vocation...” His eyes swivelled. “My art, heart... A musician can’t be called to order...”

“To order? What are you talking about? All you had to do was pay the rent.”

“Which is what I wanted. What they said they could do. They said I would win a crock of gold worth twenty times your little hoard...”

“Who said?”

“The women.”

“*Women?*”

“The three women with the magic dice.”

“Save us! You think those dice have magic in them? You can buy them anywhere. They surely took you for the stupidest gull they ever saw.”

“It seemed likely enough to me. They are from Persia. I thought, since I had lost some gold, I had better win it back for you.”

I rolled my eyes. Then a thought struck me. “Three women? What manner of women?”

“Just – women. Of the common sort.”

“Old or young?”

“Both – a mixture.”

My heart beat harder. “But one was young and fair. Was she not? With yellow hair and white skin?” I saw her, clear as I saw Alfonso, standing behind her rampart of evil sugarplums.

He frowned again, pulled his recorder out, and made to put it to his lips.

I snatched it from him. “Think, Alfonso! What did she look like?”

“I can’t recall.”

“Where did you see them?”

His eyes were closing, and I shook his shoulder. “Alfonso! Where did you see them?”

He thought for a moment. “Tyburn. Yes, most delightful spot. They told me they had business there.” He closed his eyes, and declaimed: “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.” Then he tipped gently sideways, and fell asleep at an angle, like the fallen stone of a Roman archway. I took the recorder inside for safekeeping and left him there, locking the door behind me. If the Lord was willing, my sotted spouse would roll into the ditch and drown in piss and offal before dawn.

*

I did not sleep myself, but sat at the kitchen table, still wrapped in my cloak. The night deepened, the shadows filled the house and my cheap candle guttered as the tallow trickled down the candle shaft. But the darker it became, the brighter and wilder grew my thoughts and hopes. There was witchcraft behind all this. Something wicked stalked me. What was I to do? I needed money, true enough, but I needed more than that. I needed guidance. Dr Forman had said as much. But I would only go to *him* as a last resort. I must be careful who I spoke to. I resolved to ask Joan for her advice. As for the money, what did I have to sell? Some women in my sorry state might sell their bodies. You might think that my life with Hunsdon was a hair’s breadth away from that, but there is a world between having a royal protector and being humped by stinking tavern scum. I would see if there were any takers for a woman’s words.

Scene VI

When I came down next morning, Joan was mending an old smock of Henry's, head bent over her stitching. The needle flashed in and out of the dark fabric as she worked, so fast that I could hardly see it.

She did not look up, but said: "He lost it, didn't he?"

"Lost what?"

"Your money."

I broke off some bread. I was used enough to Joan's strange way of knowing more than she should. Sometimes it annoyed me, sometimes it alarmed me. Today, I just felt tired. "Is *all* my business your business?" I asked, sitting down next to her. "Are *all* my affairs of your concern?"

"I live here, don't I, mistress? Those that have eyes to see know what is all around them."

"Yes." I chewed in silence for a while. "But some of us see more than others."

"Sure enough," said Joan, biting off the thread.

"Joan..."

"Mistress?"

"I need your help."

"You have had my help these last ten years. And I don't begrudge it."

"I know. I could not ask for a better servant." I swallowed the last bit of crust and shook the crumbs from my skirt. "This art of yours... this knowledge. Of herbs and remedies and... spells. How did you come by it?"

She looked at me, her green eyes bright in her lined face. “I learned it. From my mother, and she learned it from hers. It’s a trade, of sorts, the business of an apothecary.”

“And yet you know more than most, don’t you?”

“Most what?” Her glance was cold.

“Apothecaries.”

“How can I tell what’s in their minds? I only know what’s in my own.” She returned to her stitching, and I looked at her bent head, hidden in its cap.

“Could you teach it to me?”

She continued sewing, smiling as she worked. “Teach! As if it was the cross stitch?”

“Could I *learn* this skill?”

Joan was silent for a moment, and her needle stopped in mid-air. “What for?”

“I am afraid. We have no money – as you guessed – and Inchbald owns this house. Alfonso wastes most of his wages at the tables – we are all but on the street. And...”

“And?” She looked at me again.

“The women at the Fair – there was something wrong. You said so yourself. Something evil in them.”

“And then they sold master the trickster’s dice.”

I started. “Were you listening to us?”

She gazed, unblinking. “Only in my sleep.” Putting her sewing to one side, she shrugged. “What I can teach you, mistress, is knowledge of herbs and simples and suchlike. Some cures and some small ways to help yourself, and others. So you can ward off harm.”

“What about a small hex, here and there?”

She smiled. “Who would you hex?”

“I don’t know. Someone who deserved it.”

“I’ll try my best for you, mistress. But you know I would do all of this for you. There’s no need to trouble yourself with it.”

“But I want to know myself. I want to understand.”

“I know you do, mistress. I know you do.” She touched my arm. “Be wary. And be patient. Do what I tell you, and no more. In this, I am the mistress, and you are my apprentice. You are asking a great deal from me, more than you know.” She gave me one of her narrow looks. “That pamphlet Forman gave you – did you read it?”

“The Hammer of Witches?” There was no purpose in asking how she knew of this, for she seemed to know more of my business than I did myself.

“You should read it. There are degrees in witchcraft, as in all things. First there is the wise woman, who knows of old lore that the Old Religion used to its own ends. Now that’s all gone, and as the new faith takes hold more of us will suffer, I’ve no doubt of it. The next degree is occupied by your Doctor Forman, who thinks that experiments will help him throw light on mystery, and who’s to say, maybe they will? Though half the time the cunning men are bigger fools than we are. But the highest – and the lowest – form of witchcraft lies in wait for wise women and cunning men alike. And it’s that fatal knowledge that is possessed only by Satan, and his familiars. Which challenges God, and which will cost each man or woman who professes it their soul. The spell they put on you was of that order, in my opinion. And the doctor doubtless thinks the same way, which is why he gave you this.” She drew the pamphlet from her sleeve and passed it to me. “Read it, mistress.”

*

There are only four places in the whole of Europe that have become great cities. Venice, city of water and wonders. Constantinople, the gateway to the Orient. Paris, pride of France. And London. In my own lifetime, the city has grown, with tall new houses springing up, old ones split into different dwellings so as many as a dozen families can live in a place designed for one. Outside the walls, and beyond the powers of aldermen, builders and carpenters are free to do as they please. New buildings go up in unplanned confusion with no thought to how they fit in with what was there before. Haphazard houses block old thoroughfares, so there is no longer a way through. And side-streets shrink to rat-runs, too narrow for a full-grown man to pass. There are Roman ruins and pagan pillars; ruined nunneries open to the sky; great mansions converted to spewing tenements, and newer, wooden houses, sprouting overnight. It is as if someone once planted the seed of a timber frame: a miller's son, let's say, in a fireside tale. The seed sprouted first a house, and then a street, all neat and handsome, with windows well-set. But then, as trees sprout fungus, these streets gave forth their progeny. New rooms and chambers burgeoned forth. Little alley-ways and cat-creeps were burrowed open; and dormer rooms grew upon the rooftops, like the sluttish baskets wove by nesting storks. (I knew a man who lived for six years in the belfry at St Margaret Lothbury. He was cast out only when they had to use the room for storing coal.) All is chaos, madness and clutter. Shouts and whistles, songs and ballads. French and Spanish, German, Russian. The accents of the Midlands, Wales, of Cornwall, York, the Norfolk flats. They are all here, filling the air. Babel is come to Albion.

How, then, shall a “man” be heard? If the sound of words is drowned out, then let the people read them. If you want to see your written words made actual, then finding a printing press, where each letter is placed with neat exactness in a frame, and your lines are blacked down on plain pages, like the Word of God. And if you want to see your thoughts made into books, and sold to Londoners, here, in the centre of the world, go to Paul’s Churchyard. There, the dead lie close, in their eternal silence, freshly dug or grinning in the charnel house. And we shall make as much noise as we can before we go.

I went alone, the very next day. The sky was pale and piled with cloud. Kites turned and dipped, and woodpigeons perched on the rooftops. I took a wherry as far as Paul’s Wharf, holding a clove-stuffed orange to my nose to cloak the river’s usual stench of fish and sewage and pitch. At the wharf, just by Burleigh House, the scene of my undoing, I paid the ferryman and went north between the Doctor’s Commons and the College of Arms. It had rained heavily in the night, and the streets were muddy and foul. My pattens slithered on the scree of shit from the overflowing ditch.

I crossed Carter Lane, a yelling thoroughfare of rattling coaches, lowing cows and quarrelling apprentice boys, and finally reached the churchyard of the great Cathedral, a towering Ark above the clustering streets. Yet do not imagine that here at last was a refuge from the city’s din. Our Lord may have thrown the moneylenders from the Temple, but he did not evict the ale-sellers, baker’s boys, rooting pigs, pecking chickens, the football games, the beggars or the travelling players. On the left side was a row of houses: laundry fluttered above the graves. And to the right, nestling close to the walls of St Paul’s were the open-fronted bookstalls, the object of my pilgrimage.

I was known to all the booksellers. They had all turned down my wares. Some called out as I passed.

“Good day to you, Mistress Lanyer. What is it this time, a pamphlet says that housework is a man’s domain?”

“Mistress Lanyer, you are looking well. What do you have there, the secret of immortality?”

“Aemilia, over here! Let’s see your fine words. I need a laugh this grey morning!”

“Get you gone!” I shouted, over my shoulder. “If men are so much to be admired and so high regarded in their dominion, how come crops fail, infants die, widows starve and the mad are shouting in the streets?” At that very moment, my eye fell on a Tom O’Bedlam, begging with his little kinchin mort, a child of five or six years old. Her arms were withered like those of a sickly crone.

The very last stall belonged to Mister Cuthbert Tottle, who specialised in the rare and fancy. You might say he put himself at the freak show end of the market. The printing press itself is adapted from the wine press, among other such machines, and his folios and quartos were wine-soaked in their weird vagaries, written in the tradition of the ranting drunk. His religious tracts had the most gruesome woodcuts, such as a Jesuit hanging upside down, with two men sawing him in half between his buttocks. His polemical pamphlets had the rudest words about the Pope. And his pornography was most salacious, with poses backwards, upside-down and sideways. And his bestiaries told tales of beasts I daresay never lived – the wild boar with a Cyclops head, the Tyger that suckled Dolphins, the mermaid that begat the Queen of Carthage and the Narwhal that swims the frozen oceans of the north, using its magic horn to cut a watery pathway through the ice. I liked him for this, and he liked me for

my quick tongue, and the fact that I was part Venetian, as his shop was always full of émigrés and refugees, and foreign words and noisy laughter.

I took a breath and walked in. The shop was crowded, as ever, and as ever I was the only woman. (Save for his wife, who sat silent at the back of the shop, working on a gold-leaf illumination.) Tottle himself was a big fellow, jovial and red-cheeked, fond of the ale house. And yet he drove as hard a bargain as anyone. Even in the throes of boisterous laughter, his eyes were watchful.

A group of Frenchmen were haggling with him over a barrel of new books. Two law students, one tall and dark, the other squat and ginger, were perusing a pornographic pamphlet with great interest. Tottle was pouring wine for the students, while refusing to give the Frenchmen a better price for their book-barrel. But when he saw me he set the bottle down and came over.

“Aemilia!” He glanced at his wife. “The lady poet! Is this good news? Do you have new words for me? Something I can sell this time?”

“I hope so,” I said, taking his offered hand. “I need to keep a roof over my head.”

He laughed as though this were a very good joke. “Oh, you ladies! All the same! If you can’t get stuff for the latest Parisian ruff, you think yourself paupers.”

“You mistake my station, Mr Tottle. I wish that you were right.”

“Let us see, then, what you have.” He brought a seat for me, and poured a glass of wine. I gave him my pages, and he read them, smiling all the while. Occasionally, he gave a little chuckle, as if especially pleased by some particular word or phrase. When he had finished, he was still smiling. “Well, well, Aemilia. You have a way about you.” He looked down at my writing, and laughed at again. “Let us see what this assembly makes of this.”

“The Frenchmen?”

“They speak English as well as you or I when they are not affecting Gallic ignorance of Anglo Saxon prices.” He called his customers over. “Gentlemen, pay attention, I have a pamphlet here that you might like to hear. Wife, put your work aside. Listen to this.”

They all turned to hear, and Tottle began to read.

“The title is: *The Subjugation of Eve.*” He looked up and every one nodded.

“A fair title?”

The lawyers shrugged. The Frenchmen raised their eyebrows. His wife’s eyes were downcast. “A fair title, then. Well, here is the text: *‘Fie on you, false slanderers, evil and unholy liars! Man fell, Eden was lost, innocence clothed, all our woes started – and you lay the fault at my door. Beelzebub came slithering over the grass towards me, Satan in Serpent’s form, eyes sly with promise.*

“*‘The tree was snow white, blossom heavy, fruit and flowers ripe and fresh at once, and all year.’* A pleasing image there, you see? The tree stands there before us, decked with its eternal blooms.”

“Quite so,” said one of the young lawyers. “Almost like Boccacio.”

“*‘He spiralled himself upright so he sat upon his tail, and fixed me with his amber stare.’* Woman, shall you sit forever naked, sated, lazy on the wild grass?”

(“Ah, Aemilia. You know your own sex too well.” Now Tottle began to laugh to himself, which laughter grew louder, till at last he had to turn his back on us to recover himself before beginning again.)

He cleared his throat. “*‘Naked?’ I did not know this word. ‘Sated?’ Because I loved my lord? ‘Bovine?’ So why should I not be contented like the gentle cow?*

‘You know Nothing,’ said the Serpent.

'Therein lies my strength.'

'Then you are no better than a Beast.'

'I am happy as I am.'

'How can you know happiness if you know Nothing? A little lower than the Angels, or a little higher than a slug?'" (Tottle wiped his eyes. "Ah, me. This I like very much. You are touched with genius, Aemilia.)

"I looked up and saw the Apple, round as the Moon, green as emeralds, smooth as my own skin.

'What harm can there be,' said the Serpent, '...in a little knowledge?'

I stood up so I could smell the fruit, sweeter and sharper than the air of Eden.

'Do you want to be more than a plaything, fashioned from one discarded rib?'

My hands reached up to the Apple and it fell.

'Eat,' said the Serpent.

'I am not hungry.'

'Bite.'

'I have no need.'

'Taste.'

The cool skin touched my lips. I bit the tart fruit.

Who among you would have turned your back? Woman is a little lower than the Angels. But Man is lesser still than she. For it was woman who tasted; Man who followed. She who dared and he who came after. What can man do, but play at war, toy with power, clown with kingship, all to fool us that he is the stronger sex? Man is more useless than a mewling babe."

Tottle lowered the pages and smiled at me. “Oh most fine, most fine, Mistress Aemilia! You have an ear for the drama. Have you not thought of trying your fortune on the stage?”

“Is this a joke?” said one of the Frenchmen.

“Is it permitted?” asked one of the lawyers.

“There is more,” I said, snatching the pages from Tottle. “This is not the best of it.”

Tottle took me to one side. “Indeed, it is not the best of anything. This is not what the public is looking for. Look around you, see what sells! Leave Eve in peace, let her be.”

I hated him then, with his round, soft smile.

“You are making a fool of me.”

“I’m trying to make you more than the author of the unpublishable.”

“I will try another seller, Mr Tottle. I don’t need you.”

He bent towards me, frowning. “You are a woman, we don’t expect you to do this well, the wonder is that you do it at all.”

“Go and piss in a puddle.”

“No, look, madam. I am trying to help you. Consider the market. Religion is good, but you need to *entertain* us. Readers like martyrs. Blood. Decapitation. A breaking of the body on the wheel, or a long drawn out crushing with stones. This can never fail – what we call a crowd-pleaser. Who dies in your story? Who is disembowelled? Or if God is not your fancy, histories will always sell. But don’t shilly-shally. Skewer the reader with your sword! Find me a gentill knight whose story is untold, a fierce dragon, a brave battle on a field of gore.”

“Boy’s twaddle.”

“Oh, come now.”

“This is fine work. Only a man could fail to see it..”

“You have a fanciful nature. This can work in your favour. So give me a tale from far away. A minaret, a monster. A traveller’s tale will always catch the eye.”

“A story for a merchant to relate, or some loquacious seaman.”

“Or fashion. Have you an eye for fashion?” He looked at me uncertainly. As usual, I had on my old grey dress, embellished only with a ruff that Anne had loaned me. My hair was scraped back from my face, and my cheeks were ruddy from the sun.

I thought for a moment, thinking of Anne and her like, and some of the strange outfits that Alfonso insisted on wearing when he was off to play for the Queen.

“Cunning ways with cross gartering?” I asked.

Tottle clasped my arm. “Oh, most excellent notion! Can you do a thousand lines on this? New ideas, Venetian styles, the courtly colours? I could pay you two shillings. One shilling now, one shilling when you bring it in.”

On the one hand was poor Eve, downtrodden since the dawn of time. On the other was a month’s security, which could be purchased for this sum.

“Done,” I said, holding out my hand.

*

The dwarf had spies, no doubt, or the gift of second sight. No matter: there he was, as I came out. Sitting outside the charnel house, scoffing an apple cake.

“Mistress Lanyer. You have my money?”

“One shilling,” I said. “A down payment.”

He chuckled. “I like a woman with wit. But this is not the bargain.”

I glared at him.

“You are still a fine woman, Mistress Lanyer.”

“And this means – what?”

“It’s common knowledge that once you used your face to your advantage. Not to mention your other parts, which I’m sure are quite as sweet. Of course, no courtier would look at you now. But a humble landlord, like myself, might take a sup.”

“What do you want?”

“Some time with you might settle half the debt.”

“Some *time*?”

“These are the terms I have agreed with Mistress Flood: I visit once a month, and she pays me in kind. And very kind she is too, if I may say so.” He beckoned me over, and I went, unwilling, nearer. He clasped my hand in his dry little paw. “Yet nobody would call her fair. Her breasts are like winter apples, shriveled small. Yours, I can see through your shift, are still sweetly rounded. Just the shape for sucking.”

I pulled my hand away, not sure whether to box his ears or smack his arse.

“You aren’t even tall enough to reach them, you lecherous little toad.”

“Two fucks a month would do me nicely. I should look forward to it, which, between ourselves, is more than I do with some of my ladies. With some it’s a case of skirts up, cock out, and let’s go about our business. But with your good self...” The little turd was ogling me as if he thought we might get at it right away.

I had to laugh, even though the thought of Anne Flood giving herself to this manikin sickened me. “Oh, Mr Inchbald! Most lascivious of insects! I would rather die, sir.”

He brushed the pie crumbs from his beard, and made to go. “You take a foolish risk, in speaking so to me. Remember who I am, and who you are. Your grand ways edge you ever closer to the gutter. You are nothing but an ageing whore.”

“A plague on you, Inchbald!” I called after him, as he went hobbling on his way.

The plague. I wished I could unsay it. Like the Devil’s name, it’s better not to mention this curse upon our times. As I made my way home, the wind picked up, the sky darkened. I felt the first sharp tang of autumn, and pulled my cloak tighter around me. I looked up, at the chasing clouds, and knew that what seemed bleak now would soon look like Paradise.

“The Plague is coming,” whispered a voice, and I turned to see who spoke. But there was no one there. And down on the riverbanks, the busy ships were disgorging men and cargo from the furthest limits of the fevered globe. I stopped in my tracks: the voice was that of the old crone from the Fair. What did these creatures want, who stalked me with their threats and foul predictions?

When I returned home, I sought out the “Malleus Maleficarum” and opened it. I read until the candle had burned down, and the words were scorched into my mind. We women, it seemed, had penchant for Devilment, being so lascivious and lustful. A lecherous woman might lie with the Devil and become a witch in consequence. I thought of my forced copulation with Wriothesley and Will’s foul verse: this was how he saw me. “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust” declaimed the pamphlet. “Which in women is insatiable.” And their device for recruiting new witches to their number was to make something go wrong in the life of a respectable matron or young virgin, so that they would then consult them, and be tempted into witchcraft in their turn. I thought about this for a long time, seeing that those three fairground furies might have just such a scheme in mind. But I wasn’t like the other matrons, whose skill lay in the churning of butter and the fattening of geese. There was one way to find out more. I would seek them out at Tyburn, where they had tricked Alfonso.

Scene VII

Now, unlike most Londoners, natives and incomers alike, I have no love for an execution. It is my opinion that if we are made in God's image, it is God that we see dangling from the gibbet, and it is God's work to end a human life, not Man's. I know I am alone in this thought, as in so many others, and I do not expect you to share it. But this scruple of mine about the executioner's craft has made any gallows-place a place of horror to me. And there is no gallows-place more horrible than Tyburn Cross. The Cross is at the meeting point of two straight roads, one from the city and the other cutting across it. It is a lonely, God-forsaken place, and the winds seem to sweep in from in all directions to chill the bones of the living and the dead. The Triple Tree is a large, triangular structure that stands upon that north-west road, in the way of passing traffic, so that the carters and horsemen can see what will befall those who break the English law. The ingenuity of its construction is that as many as twenty-four felons may be hanged at once, which is an expedient measure as there is no shortage of murderers and cut-purses to keep the hangman busy. Beyond the Tree is an open field where soldiers are shot for their misdemeanours: I suppose this is advantageous to them, as they die with their guts inside them, more or less. I saw as few hangings as I could, as they made me bilious, but I did see them execute poor Robert Southwell, not long after I was married. He was a devout Jesuit, and tried to make the sign of the Cross with his pinioned arms, before quoting Romans: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for all that believeth." They wanted to bowel him alive, as they do all traitors (unless they are female – we are privileged to be burned alive) but Charles Blount and some of the other nobles jumped up and hugged

Southwell's legs until his neck broke, to save him that final agony. He died so bravely that after his corpse was bowelled and quartered, and his blood flooded across the highway, the assembled crowd was silent. There were no cheers or catcalls, and no one shouted "Traitor!" in the customary way. And that silence filled me with a fragile hope for all of us, that we could recognise true goodness and respect it, even as the hangman acted out his ritual butchery in the name of Law.

I remembered that day as I walked out to Tyburn. It was fitting that Southwell had been a Jesuit, for they are often accused of idolatry and witchcraft. Healing relics and icons are part of the Old Religion, but they have no place in the new one, and its priests are sometimes accused of "devil conjuring" among their many other crimes. Heavy carts clattered along the centre of the pitted roadway, and parties of horsemen overtook them, trotting briskly. Here and there a woman could be seen, riding pillion or behind her husband. The one position is ungainly, the other undignified, as if riding a horse is the business of a man. (Did Diana the Huntress ride side-saddle? I think not.) And for the most part it was men who were riding in and out of town; and women who trailed along the roadside, with nothing better than Shanks' pony to carry them.

It was a pale, sickly sort of morning, with a foul wind, the sort of day which is no respecter of the seasons but can come upon us at any time of year. I walked slowly, not because of the pleasantness of the journey, but because I was unwilling to arrive. Tyburn has an evil reputation, and it is an evil place – they say that Satan walks there, and I can well believe it. As I drew nearer, I saw a row of corpses hanging from the Tree – just six this day. I did not look close, but saw that one was a woman's form, one breast showing through her torn dress. A kite was perched above them, proud and puff-chested, as if displaying its wealth. I walked closer, and

stopped, looking first one way down the high road, and then the other. A black cloud loomed overhead and heavy rain began to fall. It was late afternoon and though the light was dim it would not be dark for some time. I took shelter under an elm tree and watched the travellers passing by. I thought of the ships landing at the quayside, and the rats scurrying behind the wainscot, and the stench of the dunghills that banked against each common house, and the Wrath of God and a thousand things besides, and wondered which of these was to blame for the plague. Perhaps all of them have a part to play. God surely has a gift for punishment. We are accustomed to horror and fear, and so Hell is easier to summon in a fresco or imagination than sweet Heaven, a place of obscure cloud and inaction. Job has many brothers (and sisters) in his suffering and pain. When I came to myself and looked up and down the road again, I saw that it had emptied, night had snuffed out the feeble sun, and all I could hear was the swish of the falling rain. There were no stars, but the half-moon shone a bleak light through the clouds. I could see well enough, but the silvery light gave the world a shifting luminescence, and most objects were dark silhouettes, devoid of detail. A solitary carriage clattered by me, pennants fluttering. It rounded the corner, heading for Oxford, and disappeared from sight. The road was now deserted except for a troop of muddy dogs, sniffing and snapping at each other. Then I saw the leader of the pack – a barrel-bodied mastiff – raise its head, listening. Then it howled, long and piercing, and began to run back along the London road. The rest of his fellows followed him, barking fiercely. Swallowing, I turned my gaze back towards the Tyburn Tree. Five of the corpses still dangled against the wet sky. But the sixth – the woman - was lying on the ground, beneath the severed hanging-rope. Three figures were crouched over her. One of them was sawing at her neck with a long knife. I crossed myself and with a supreme effort of will, began to walk towards them.

As I came nearer, I felt the air thicken around me, and the sounds of voices came through the rain's hiss, as if conjured from its pattering repetition.

"Bassano."

"Bassano."

"Aemilia Bassano."

"No, she's Lanyer now, they tied her to the fool."

"But it's Bassano that we know, my dears."

"Aemilia Bassano."

"Bassano."

The rain fell in sheets, half-blinding me, and I couldn't see my way clearly until I was right upon the Tree, and the three figures. I saw they were standing round a black cauldron that bubbled and steamed upon a fire of blue flame, which leapt and crackled despite the downpour. One of them was scraping the eyeballs out of the dead woman's head, and dropping the scarlet mess into the pot. Another held a severed arm, and was busy prising out its fingernails. The third – an aged, decrepit crone – watched me with black holes for eyes.

"She comes, see, sisters. Bassano comes."

I felt a wind rise, which seemed to come from the ground below me, so I was enveloped in a screaming cloud. My cloak was torn from me, and the bonnet ripped from my head, so my hair streamed out behind me and I was staring at the three women, looking like one of their own.

"What do you want with me?" I shouted. "What do you mean by creeping round me and whispering of dread things, and the plague?"

At first they were silent, and I could only hear the rain.

I gathered all my courage and tried again: “You have tricked my husband, and stolen all my money. What is the meaning of this? Tell me! I demand to know.”

“She challenges us,” said one of them.

“You don’t challenge us,” said another.

“But you may seek our counsel.”

“I don’t want your counsel!” I cried. “I want you to leave me be!”

The three figures separated and walked slowly around the Tree, so that their slow footsteps marked out a circle. A spume of dark flame flew up from the cauldron, and the earth around it heaved, like boiling porridge.

“Hail, Bassano, bastard of Bishopsgate!” cried the First Witch.

“Hail Bassano, strumpet of Stratford!” said the Second.

“Hail Aemilia, spawn of the Equivocator!” said the Third.

“What do you mean? What are you saying?” I stood shaking, my hands twisted together. Sky and earth seemed to have merged into one.

“He tricked us.”

“He tried us, sorely.”

“We gave him what he asked for, and he gave us nothing back.”

I pushed my wet hair out of my eyes. “Who did? Who tricked you?”

Then the air seeped sound again, all around me:

“Bassano!”

“Bassano!”

“Baptiste Bassano!”

A spectre started to form in the dark flames spewing from the pot. I saw with horror that the face of my father was forming in the vapour. He was bloody and screaming, as I had seen him in his final moments.

“What do you want from my poor father? He is dead, let him rest!”

“He wouldst be great.”

“Was not without ambition.”

“But too full o’ the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way.”

“What do you *mean*?”

“Ah, yes,” said three voices. “He is dead, but his soul escaped us. We are owed a soul.”

“A soul was promised.”

“The plague is coming,” whispered the air around me.

“The plague is coming.”

Another image began to take shape in the flames. I saw a bed with the curtains closed. As I peered at it, the curtains were slowly drawn back by invisible fingers, and I saw a figure lying there, in that final stillness that is waiting for us all. It was a child, a boy, his eyes staring upward, Heavenward, at nothing.

“Henry!” I screamed. “No – never! You shall not have him!”

And then I came to myself, and found that I was lying beneath the gibbet, and there were five bodies staring down at me, and the witches had vanished. I stood up, shivering, my limbs stiff with cold. The rain had stopped and the clouds had blown away and the half-moon was reflected by the puddled ground.

ACT III
PESTILENCE

Scene I

The first sign was a giant comet in the sky, soon after All Souls' Day. Like a wounded star, spewing its own brightness, it streaked across the heavens. The streets were full of staring citizens, squinting upwards. Children perched on window-sills. The boldest scrambled up to the roof-thatch and clung there while the flaming star lit up the firmament, so that night was day and the city was ablaze with heavenly light. Then the rumours started. People had seen angels and coffins far above their heads. The graves at St Bride's church cracked open and the dead screamed warnings from below. A phantom appeared each night at Fetter Lane, bowing when the clocks struck twelve. The madmen at Bedlam broke out and ran into the streets, rending their hair and telling all who saw them they must flee. "Death is coming!" they shouted. "Death will come upon us!"

Then winter set in, and the sense of foreboding grew, even though some said that cold weather dulled the power of the plague vapour. One evening as I was coming home at dusk, I saw him. It was a clear, frosty night, with a full moon. There was a figure up ahead, a tall man in a grey coat. At first, I did not mind him, there were others passing to and fro, and he did not strike me as strange or fearful. But as I walked, I drew nearer: though I was proceeding at a normal pace, his steps were faltering, slow. I thought it was the slushy ground that held him up – it had rained heavily before the freeze set in. And as I came still closer, I thought I knew him, but could not say where from. He was broad shouldered and well dressed, and his fur-trimmed cloak trailed behind him on the ground. Then he staggered forward, and gave a terrible cry, falling to his knees. There was a note of despair in that cry that chilled

my blood. I stood for a second, not knowing if I should flee, but something pulled me forward and I went to him.

“Sir?” I said. “Can I...” And then he turned his head. It was my father, as I had seen him last. His eye-sockets were sightless holes; his mouth was choking forth a torrent of blood, his hands clutched at his belly, clasping his spilling entrails. I reached out towards him, but my hands were those of a little child.

“What did you do, dear father?” I called out. “What did you promise? Tell me sir, I beg you?”

Then I was alone. The shade had vanished. Above me, the moon shone, and all was silver, silent. When I got home, I prayed till dawn.

*

It was a long, cold winter. The Thames froze over but was not strong enough to walk on. A group of children thought to test this out, and danced merrily upon the ice, downriver from the Bridge. They fell through into the freezing black water, and all were drowned. A few days later, one of them was washed ashore at Deptford. A little girl, no more than three years old, in a transparent coffin of Thames-ice. She still wore her little bonnet and leather shoes. Her eyes were wide open.

And then, in the darkest days of winter, there came the greatest portent of all. The Queen was dying.

“What do you mean, *dying*?” I asked Alfonso, as he shook out his snow-covered doublet and hung it near the fire.

He held out his hands to the flames. “What I say. She took ill, a fever, then kept to her rooms. Now she is removed to Richmond.”

“With the court?”

“Her ladies, favourites, a few physicians. She has no need of music now.”

Snow was falling against the window panes. Outside, it settled on the sewer ditch, making dead dogs ecclesiastic marble.

“Dear Lord!”

“She is old. She is not as you remember her. She has been low in spirits since poor Essex was executed. She weeps all day, they say.”

“I can’t believe she’s dying.”

“You thought that she would live forever?”

“Perhaps I did.”

The thought of the Queen’s death made me feel giddy, as if her presence in the world was a talisman against the Evil Eye and the worst that could befall us. This was a foolish fancy, of course. The Queen was a just a woman, now fallen into the sour humour of the aged. What’s more, her reign had been beset with adversity. We had suffered bad harvests, lean winters, persecution, defeats abroad and the fear of invasion. Even the plague itself afflicted us many times. But though the sickness was foul, and many died, it never compared to the old stories about the Black Death, when the quick became the dead without warning, the Reaper took the living as they sat at cards, whole villages died and the streets were piled with corpses. Worse could come than we had known. Before her time there was blood and madness. After she went – who could tell?

Alfonso was at home, listless and charmless, not wanted by the dying monarch. Nor by me, the hale subject. He played his neat tunes, or went off all curled and oiled to the gaming house, to gamble with money he did not have. While he went about his business, Joan taught me her craft. She took me out walking in the fields and among the hedgerows, and told me tales of faeries and hobgoblins, of the ways of spirits and the living demons who inhabited the air around us, and who watch us as

we go about our daily round. Though I say it myself, I was a ready pupil. It reminded me of being a child again, when I was taken in hand by Lady Susan Bertie and taught my Greek and Latin.

Winter was not the time to gather herbs and flowers, but we walked by the water meadows and Joan told me all about them: how no two meadows are alike, how farmers will give each of them a name, just as they name their cows; and how pits and ponds have their own spirits. And how everything in nature has a name, a place and a purpose. She talked of beard grass, cat's tail and cock's foot, of crowflowers and salt marsh grass, which can grow under water for many months. What I had seen as a barren place was full of life. And while I saw London as a place of wonders, to her the city was a brute invasion of the ancient land.

She taught me about her apothecary's art, where each plant grows, the time to harvest it according to its governing planet, and when it can be pressed and stored. Nightshade grows under Mercury, and is an antidote to the power of witchcraft in men and beasts alike; cottonweed cures headaches and infestations while fleabane is the remedy for snake bites and for gnats and fleas. Indeed, there is not a plant or simple growing in a single meadow in any corner of our land which is not a cure for some ailment, canker or distemper. (If only you know where to find it and how it must be applied.) I marvelled that everything Joan knew was carried in her head, for she could read a little, but not easily, and preferred to store her knowledge in her memory. I did not tell her about the witches: I feared to tell anyone what they had said about my father. The meeting had the strange quality of nightmare, and the queer dreams I had when I walked in my sleep.

Joan's remedies meant that a trickle of money came into the house, and we lived frugally, sustained most days with black bread soaked in salt-beef stock. Each

morning, when the chores were done, I worked on my cross gartering pamphlet. (This was proving an arduous task, as I had no interest in it.) I wrote some poetry too, but guiltily, knowing it would earn us nothing.

One night, long after curfew, when the streets were dark and only the watchmen and the grave robbers were about, there came a fearsome knocking. I sat up in bed, alert and listening. Was it our door, or the next one? Could it be carousing players, come for Tom? Alfonso, at home for once, was whiffling next to me, too drunk to snore wholesomely. There was the knocking once again. I kicked him in the balls.

“Husband, stir yourself!”

He yelped like a drowning pup and rolled away from me.

I kicked his naked arse this time. “See who wants us down below!”

Waking with a grunt, he looked around him, oiled hair perpendicular.

“Whassis?”

Bang, bang, bang. The whole house echoed with the sound. “Who’s within? I have a message from the Queen.”

Alfonso leapt up then, all right, lit a candle and went running down the stairs half in his doublet, naked from the waist. “Yes, yes, yes! I come, I come.”

I followed him, shivering in my chemise, wondering who could want a drunken pipe player at this hour. He pulled back the stiff locks and opened the door. A pale youth stood there, thin faced and blue-eyed with tiredness, wearing the Queen’s livery and carrying a flaming torch.

“Her Majesty demands your presence,” said the youth, bowing. “There is a boat on the river, ready to bring you to Richmond.” His rasping breath clouded the frosty night.

Alfonso stood erect, proud as a soldier. “I will come now. Let me dress myself.” He turned to me in triumph. “Aemilia, where is my best wool caster? And my mended doublet, and my....”

The messenger bowed again, and began to cough. Recovering himself, he said: “Forgive me, sir, but it’s *Mistress* Lanyer who is wanted by Her Majesty. Commanded to wait upon her, this very night.”

*

Richmond was the Queen’s favourite palace. While it lacked nothing of Whitehall’s grandeur, it was removed from the hurly burly of the town, and its magnificence seemed all the greater amid the surrounding woods and fields. It was the greatest palace in the kingdom, high walled and turreted, with a thousand chimneys and as many onion-aping minarets. There, the Queen would receive foreign guests, flirt and fool us all, and then sweep off to the hunt. I remembered how I used to watch the cavalcade departing. Elizabeth was always controlled, always cunning. She laughed hard, rode fast, and would return blooded and wet. What memories! They seemed more actual than the icy wind that froze my face as I sat huddled in the cushioned barge; clearer than the sound of an ale-house brawl that came drifting across the water. In the boat, all was darkness. The sky was black and starless beyond the torch that flickered on the prow. In my mind, it was bright day, and I was at Richmond in a fine silk gown, looking down from the battlements across a landscape that was like a vista of the afterlife. The pale heavens were infinite, and clouds trailed and shifted above the distant oak forests.

As the oars dipped into the freezing water and the barge slipped quietly along the Thames, I felt as if it was taking me back to my youth. The messenger was silent,

snuffling into his handkerchief. In front of us, a boatman rowed, impassive. They seemed no more inclined to talk to each other than they did to speak to me.

“How does Her Majesty?” I asked, at last.

The messenger sneezed again. “Badly,” he said, seeming to do badly enough himself, since I hardly thought this was a fit way to discuss the illness of the monarch. He blew his nose. His face was ghastly in the torchlight. “She is like to die within the week. She has seen no one, but Robert Carey, and a few favourites. She has asked for the Archbishop.”

“Does she fear that she is dying?”

“So it seems. Richmond is a house of rumour. Some said she died weeks ago, we had seen so little of her. She kept to her chamber, and would do nothing but walk and walk, never sitting, as if she could outpace Death himself. She will not go to her bed even now, but rests on cushions, on the floor.”

“I cannot imagine her so.”

“She cannot imagine herself so, I believe.” There was silence for a moment. Then, in a sudden passionate rush, the messenger said: “Just a few weeks since, she gave an audience to the Venetian ambassador. She was dressed in a taffeta dress of silver and gold, and a thousand gemstones. She was witty, spry, easily a match for him. Every one said so. He came out of the throne room saying she had kept her beauty yet.” He sneezed again. I looked at his sickly face in the flickering torchlight. Then, he pointed. “Look, there – you see? They are waiting for you.”

And there was Richmond, a beacon in the darkness. I could see the windows of the state rooms dazzling bright, an earthly copy of the stars. Even the doors stood open, and I could see light inside, a gilded stairway, and darkly silhouetted soldiers, standing guard.

Scene II

What struck me when I went inside was the incandescent blaze of light. Torches were racked on every wall, lamps flamed all around, and glittering candelabra burned above my head. Once I had taken this moon-dimming brightness for granted, and the world beyond it had seemed a place of shadow. Now I had returned, blinking and stumbling, from the outer darkness.

I was still blinking when we reached the presence chamber and Lettice Cooper set down her sewing and came over to me. She was done up in black velvet and seed pearls, hard-faced in the midst of this abundance.

“Her Majesty is not well,” she said, somewhat needlessly.

I curtsayed, in the court style, to remind her I was not some common housewife.

“Which circumstance requires that we do her bidding, even whilst we fear that her requests may not reflect her wishes when in her right mind.” (Lettice always had been pompous.)

I curtsayed again. After all, I could not spit in her eye.

“So I would ask that you do not take up more of her time than is needed.” She handed me a little silver bell. “And you ring this when you are done.” Then she pointed to its companion, a larger bell, of solid gold, it looked like. “Likewise, we will ring this if we fear that you outstay your term. Is that understood?”

“Of course,” I said, tinkling the bell, to try it out.

She frowned. “Hush. All our nerves are a-jangle.”

Another lady looked up. I saw it was young Lady Guildford, who had been a little girl last time I saw her. “They are jangled indeed,” she said. “The world is upside down. The dead speak, and the living haunt us.”

“Hush, my dear,” said Lettice. “We will not speak of this.”

But Lady Guildford came over, and took my arm. She was a wisp of a woman, with a child’s high voice. “Her Majesty has been lying in her withdrawing room these ten days,” she said, staring intensely into my eyes as if to make sure I understood the full import of her words. “She is much afraid. She will not get into her bed, not even at the dead of night. She said to me: ‘If you were in the habit of seeing such things in your bed that I do, you would not ask me to go there.’”

“What does she see?”

“She did not say. But there is witchcraft afoot.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Yesterday, I sat with her so long, praying and thinking, that my legs were stiff and cramping, and I went out to take a little air. I came out, through this chamber, and the throne room, and the next room, and came out half way down the Long Gallery. You know it?” Her eyes were full of terror.

“I remember it.”

“Well. I walked along there, all distracted, thinking of the poor queen and all her sufferings, when I heard a noise behind me, in the passage-way, and I turned to see if someone called me back...”

She hesitated.

“And – did they?”

“At first, I could not see clearly. The candles were guttering, and the place was half in darkness. Then, I saw it was her Majesty. I thought she had got up, feeling

more herself. I thought she must have followed me. You can imagine my joy to see her so much improved. I came towards her, but then she vanished.”

“What do you mean?”

“In terror, for I knew something was strange, I ran back to her room. The ladies were all as I had left them. And the Queen lay in that same motionless slumber that I had seen before leaving her. I had seen an apparition, a spectre. Her spirit had left its place.”

Lettice frowned. “That is more than sufficient,” she said. “We are all sorely tired. There is likely nothing in it. These are heavy, dangerous times. Let’s keep our wits about us.”

“My wits have not deserted me,” said I. “Much else has been taken from me, but my common sense remains.”

She frowned, went towards the grand door to Elizabeth’s withdrawing room, the inner sanctum of her suite of private chambers, and beckoned me to follow her. Her hand resting on the door, she spoke to me with quiet disdain.

“You are to enter her room alone, Aemilia.”

“Good.”

“You are to speak calmly to her, and take care that she does not become alarmed.”

“I shall do as you say.”

“You will find her changed.”

“Of course.”

“Remember, she is still the Queen, and in one thing she is as she always was. She will not submit. She will not die until she chooses to. She commands; she does not obey.”

*

The Queen was propped up with velvet cushions, half upright like a wooden doll. Her eyes were cast down, and she sucked one finger. Her face was a mask of white ceruse, with a clown-mark of vermilion on each cheek. Below her chin hung a great wattle of loose flesh, and this too was daubed with white. And she was wearing a splendid gown, a stiff and glistering carapace, encrusted with a multitude of gem-stones.

I stood just inside the door to her bed chamber – a room I had never entered before - not sure what to do next. It was hard to believe that we were quite alone. Every time that I had seen her, in all my years at Whitehall, there had been others present. Hunsdon, Cecil, Dudley, a clutch of ladies, a couple of ambassadors. She had moved around in a throng of obsequious advisors and hopeful acolytes. Now, there was no one. Breathless, I looked around the cavernous room, lit by silver scones. After my little house I felt I was truly in the land of giants. A fire - big enough to roast an ox - crackled in the stone fire place. The high bed, carved and gilded and hung with cloth of gold and silver, loomed high in the centre of the room. It was as big as a stage; its closely patterned curtains reminded me of the heavy drapes before the tiring room. The valance was cloth of silver, heavily fringed with gold, silver and silken threads, and decorated with the shapes of beasts. The canopy was set off with feathered plumes. Beyond it was a painted mural, showing Our Lord as a child talking to the elders, then a grown man preaching to the crowd, and finally kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane. And above all this was the carved ceiling, vari-coloured in the flame-light, embellished with the likenesses of deer and boar, pursued by leggy hounds among the twisting trees and leaves. It was as if all the Queen's old joys and pastimes were there to taunt her.

Only Christ was left to her. But she was not looking at Him. She was looking at the floor, as if she made a study of the finely patterned Turkey carpet on which she lay. I stood for so long that in the end I thought I must withdraw. What if these were her final moments? Or if she was already dead? I was not the right person to be present. But just as I was about to leave the room, she spoke, though hoarsely and not in her familiar voice. “Is that really you, Aemilia Bassano?”

“It is, Your Majesty. Except...”

I was never good at speaking with enough care for the Court.

“Except?” She took her finger from her mouth, and looked at me.

“I am Aemilia Lanyer now. Your Majesty.”

“Oh, indeed. Married off for colour, with your misbegot.” She coughed and shifted her body. “Come close, come closer. I want to look at you properly.”

I went closer. Her eyes, once shrewd and mocking, were faded and tired. She had a rank, rotting smell about her. Her shimmering dress with its armour of jewels seemed to imprison her where she sat, in her awkward position. She was quite still. Only her eyes moved, studying me. “Aemilia,” she said, finally. Her hand came out, fingers swollen now, no longer elegant, the cracked nails vermilion like her cheeks. “You are the most welcome sight, most welcome. And still beautiful, for all you are dressed like some village drab.”

I bowed my head. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She sighed, and pushed my arm away. “Not ‘Majesty’, please, not now. Be sparing in your language. My own words tire me, but so do those of other people. There is so little time.” She stretched out her left hand, and showed me her wedding finger. “Look. I am bone-thin, but my hands are swelled! They had to cut my

coronation ring right off me – see? My wedding band is gone. I am divorced from Albion. I am lost.”

I couldn't think what to say, so I knelt down beside her on the floor.

We sat in silence for a moment, staring at the fire.

“I see myself in there,” she said. “My little person, burned by flames, but never consumed. I see myself burning in Hell.”

“No! It cannot be so. They are waiting for you in Heaven. They will have prepared a throne right next to God Himself.”

“I shan't get into that great bed,” she said. “Death is in there, you know. I saw him, staring round the drapes at me.”

“A trick of the light, madam.”

“Don't humour me. For you, a trick of the light. For me, no. My time is near. I should know. I chose it. I have a heat inside my breasts which will not go. And around my throat, an iron claw. I cannot swallow. The appetites of life are past.”

“But...”

“But? But what? Do you question your Prince?”

“We still need you.”

“Hah! Carey waits on my death so he can ride off to Scotland. Even though I have yet to let them know whether my studious Scottish cousin shall succeed me.”

“The people love you.”

Now she did laugh, an odd sound, like tearing paper. “They are tired of me, as I am tired of life.” Then she stopped, very sudden, and stared at something past me. I looked over my shoulder at the empty room, flickering and glimmering in the light of flames. “Do you know why I am here?” she asked. “At Richmond?”

“Because Whitehall is too cold?”

“No. This is my warm, winter box, but I would have kept at Whitehall longer, had I dared. No. John Dee told me to come here. Or rather, he told me to go from there. So off we all came, all the boatloads of us, but much difference it made.” She glanced towards the closed door as if to make sure that we were not overheard. “I want to die, you see, I want to be gone. Whether Heaven or Hell will receive my soul, I know I am all but done with this life. But the journey out is full of pain.”

“I am sorry for that.”

“Don’t spend your sorrow on me. Your turn will come, and I doubt you will be lying on a Turkey rug, as I am, with a blazing fire to warm you.”

“I doubt it too.”

“My mind is not still, it keeps flitting hither and thither, the past is before me. And as it flitted, it saw *you*. For all your learning, a restless spirit. Is that not so?”

“It is so.”

“Like me. I always saw it in you.”

“Like you! I would not presume to think so.”

“A bastard, like myself.”

“A bastard, yes.”

“And mother to a bastard child.”

“Better a bastard than the child of Captain Lanyer.”

She shook her head, very slowly. “Ah, we are more like each other than you know. And you are not mellowed with the years?”

“I am not mellowed.”

“Good. Hunsdon would have been proud of you. And how does the boy?” I saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

“He is well. I love him dearly, too much. He is his father’s son.”

“And who would that be, Dark Aemilia?”

I looked down.

“I always wondered if Hunsdon could really keep you to himself. And you were a wild one, mistress. Don’t imagine that it went unnoticed.”

I said nothing.

“Nothing about *you* could go unnoticed.” She paused. “And now... wife to a recorder player.”

“Yes, madam.”

“Is he a proper husband to you?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“You hoped for more.”

“Wedlock is a narrow business.”

She laughed her tearing laugh again. “Oh, Mistress Lanyer! You can still amuse me. Narrow, too narrow, you have it right. The bastards have the best of it.”

I hesitated again, not certain what to say. The Queen smiled, very thinly. “It is an odd thing, but as I sit here, trapped in my own crock of bones, and as the world shrinks, as it must, something else happens. Do you know what that is?”

I nodded. “The world is far from you, so you see the pattern. I sometimes think of London, the way a kite must see it. From above.”

“Sharp Aemilia. I should have made you Chancellor. Yes. I see the world from far off, so though I am lodged here in my tiny room, propped next to my great bed of death, I see my life all clear, like the most wonderful tapestry of nonsense and pity.”

I watched her clown’s face, lined with sadness.

“My esteemed brother-in-law, Philip, King of all Spain, of the Americas, the high seas, ended in a tiny room. No different, when he died in the Escorial, than the

humblest of his servants. The world stretched from that palace, a great and grand dominion. But in the end, it was no longer his. He had to leave it.”

“And yet, it is a great thing, to rule. You are not like other people.”

She flapped her hand, as if batting away the foolishness of this thought. She looked again into the corner of the room, and again I turned, wondering what she saw. As she spoke, her eyes were steady on this unseen presence. “They cut her head off while she prayed. Did you know that?”

“I did not know that.” I did not even know who she spoke of, but I dared to guess.

“The executioner, hot from Calais, got his man to catch my mother’s eye, and slashed his blade right through her neck, in that moment. Cut right through the muscle and bone. He did his job well. Her lips were moving even as her head fell down into the straw.”

Now, I truly could not speak. I could not breathe.

The Queen pressed on, curiously still, as if all her living was in her head. “Was that mercy? Do you think? To smite her before she knew, but also before she had finished her prayers? Did she die in grace?”

“I cannot tell. I pray to God she did.”

“They said she was a witch. Will God forgive a witch? Is it a mortal sin? There is a place for every creature, for every leaf and blossom of the Lord’s creation. Even beggars. A wild rogue has his position, and an Abraham man, who rants and preaches in his rags. So witches, too, they must have a portion of their own.”

“That must be so, madam.”

“I thought to learn the craft, from Dr Dee, but it is harder than Greek or Latin.” She sucked her finger again, childish. “I can read the Tarot. Such pretty cards.”

“Evil’s in them, madam, if you ask me. I always draw the Devil.”

“One day, Dr Dee prepared a chart for me. In my Privy Chamber, just outside this door, I will never forget. And then he refused to let me see. Later, I found out why. He saw it coming, this terrible duty. That I would be forced to kill my own kind. First Mary Stuart. God forgive me. I meted out to her what my father meted out to my poor mother.”

“No Prince would have done otherwise.”

“And yet. That is not it...I killed my son. Robin Devereux, my dearest, bastard son. Not one clean blow for him, no! Three strikes of the axe. Mangled and bloodied, in an agony that *I* inflicted on him!”

“Madam, I...”

“Dreadful, most dreadful pain and suffering, that but for me, he need never have endured! My little one, a traitor at my breast. Oh, I shall go straight to Hell! I am burning now!”

I feared she was out of her wits. “Your Majesty – madam – you should rest now.”

She looked around her, as if she was unsure of her safety. “They say I rule England like a King. But my duty is a prison. Would that I had the other power, that hideous, demonic gift!”

“What gift?”

“The greater one. That which makes castles into air, and air to castles. I would have done some mischief then. Sunk the Armada with the foul gale of my hag’s

breath. Torn down the Tower walls, and thrown the scaffold to the winds so he could go free, my naughty, upstart boy! Opened up the seven gates of London so he could gallop forth, go anywhere, in peace and freedom.”

“Oh madam...”

“I dream it is so, I still dream it is so.” She started. “Are we alone? Is Hecate here? She is a greater Queen than I.”

“We are alone. But madam...”

“And did I summon you, or did you come by chance?”

“You summoned me.”

“Ah, yes. You live at Long Ditch. You are married to that arse Alfonso.” She paused, and squeezed my hand again. “I have a warning for you. That is why I have called you here. It concerns this thing, this matter of witchcraft. Dr Dee has told me something which concerns you...”

A bell tinkled. The Queen started. “Tell them to go away. I am still their monarch, and I demand to be left alone.”

I opened the door a crack, and saw Lettice Cooper’s frowning face.

“Please leave us,” I said. “Her Majesty wishes it.”

“Isn’t Her Majesty done with you?” she asked.

“Done with me?”

“Address me as My Lady.”

“I have told you. My Lady. She is not ready.”

“Would she not care for a drop of rose water?” Her words were solicitous, but her tone was ice cold. Before I could speak, there was an odd sound from the Queen behind me. I turned, and she was trying to rouse herself from her place, but was weighted down by the jewelled robe. One hand was raised, but instead of words, all

that came this time was a strange cry, like the call of a gull. Lettice Cooper pushed past me, in a rustle of damask and velvet, and I stood back as she soothed the Queen, and offered her rose water, which Elizabeth declined, turning her head away and pursing her lips tight shut. Then she pointed to me. Somewhat unwilling, Lettice nodded, calling me over. She sat encircled by her glistening skirts, her white hands folded. The Queen seemed unable to summon her former strength, and stared at me for a moment, her eyes seeking mine as if I could explain a mystery that was puzzling her. She raised her hand again, beckoning me near. I stooped before her, obliged to lean over Her Ladyship, who did not shift an inch.

“Ca ...” She stopped.

I leaned closer.

“Sa....”

“Your Majesty?”

She pulled me forward so till our cheeks touched. Her stench was overwhelming. Then she whispered: “Save the boy. By fair means or foul. I could not save mine. Save yours. Guard him.”

Scene III

News of the Queen's illness spread in the days after my visit, and London fell silent, waiting. The ports were closed by government decree, and the dockyards stood empty. Silence spread, along the alleyways and cat-creeps, among the mean hovels in the east, and the grand courtiers' houses at the river's edge. The streets were still, the sound of hammering ceased, the church bells were muffled and even the dogs stopped fighting. Only the sound of birds remained, the soft song of the woodpigeon, the peewits' cry, seagulls calling and squawking, sometimes with the screams of dying babes, sometimes the chatter of Tower monkeys. And then the weather changed. The snow melted, and unseasonable sunlight flooded the empty streets. Wild flowers opened their petals, fooled by the early heat. West of the city, the bluebell fields of Charing Cross became an azure wasteland. But these fields too were silent – there were no leap-frogging schoolboys, nor housewives spreading linen out to dry.

It was a freakish spring, and these were strange days. Though no one spoke the words, I knew we were willing Elizabeth to die. The golden time was over, and now we knew that something else must follow. The old Queen seemed as ancient as London Bridge itself, as relentless as the river tide, as long-winded as a Sunday sermon. Now her life, like everything on earth, must end.

Which thought came to me, you may like to know, in the middle of such a sermon, delivered by Father Dunstan. He was a miserable, choleric old man. He had taken the occasion of her illness, and the convenient death of several children of Long Ditch parish, as an excuse to ruminate upon the similarity of Flesh to Grass, and, by his religious logic, the need to obey the Word of God. He had chosen as his text, as was his usual habit, one of the Homilies most thoughtfully provided by poor

Archbishop Cramner, who later plunged the very hand that wrote these words into the fire. The subject was “Against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion” and the method, again one our good priest was wont to use, the brute punishment of boring us to death. Father Dunstan’s borrowed sermons, read out from his weighty book, were often two hours long.

So the droning progressed thus: “...and as GOD would have man to be his obedient subject, so did he make all earthly creatures subject unto man, who kept their due obedience unto man, so long as man remained in his obedience unto GOD... in the which obedience, if man had continued still, there had been no poverty, no diseases, no sickness, no death, nor other miseries wherewith mankind is now infinitely and most miserably afflicted...”

He boomed the words over the pulpit at us, daring us to day-dream at the white limed walls. I looked down at Henry, who was scuffing his leather shoe round, making a circle in the strewing herbs. I frowned and gently cuffed the top of his head, and he squinted up at me, half-smiling.

“...He not only ordained that in families and households, the wife should be obedient unto her husband, the children unto their parents, the servants unto their masters: but also”

Alfonso, who had been at the gaming tables the night before, had his head bowed, his hands clasped before him, as if in prayerful thought.

“...the root of all vices, and mother of all mischief’s, was Lucifer, first GOD’S most excellent creature, and most bounden subject, who by rebelling against the Majesty of GOD, of the brightest and most glorious Angel, is become the blackest and most foulest fiend and...”

Joan stood a little apart from the three of us. She was staring at the priest, her green eyes giving nothing away. As I watched, I saw that she was rocking to and fro, to and fro, slowly, as if a gentle song was lulling her to sleep.

But then, as if he saw that we dozed through his tedious words, Father suddenly slammed the book shut, and raked the congregation with a furious gaze. “When Death comes for us, we must make our reckoning. We cannot tarry, we cannot bargain, we cannot name the day we are ready to meet our Maker. We must go when we are called, and there is no way back from the gates of Hell.” He seemed to stare at me, though I knew this is how each person feels in a great crowd, confronted by a lone orator. The priest did not address me, any more than Burbage aimed his monologues at one particular groundling in the crowded Globe.

“...which of us will live to see Midsummer? Which of us will light a flame for Candlemas? Who will see another winter? Hmm? I ask you? Who can say this?”

Mouths gaped. Eyes snapped open. A lapdog growled. “Death is coming – for you, just as surely as for the Great and Good. Do not feel your Prince is nearer to the grave than Thou. There is not one of us that knows that we will live to see another dawn...”

Oh Lord, I thought, preserve us. Help us. I hate this worship of the dead. “They say the plague ships are come from distant places, the Indies, and the Azores. They are docked now, at the quayside, by East India House. None can know what causes us to die when the sickness comes. The barrels are rolled into the taverns. The sailors are gone among us. It is God who sends the pestilence, and only God can save us. Fear him.”

At that moment I noticed the man who stood on Joan’s left side, at the end of our pew. He was a brown skinned, wrinkled peasant, a stranger in the parish. He

regarded the priest with an air of confusion and unease, blinking as if he could not quite see. He took a dirty napkin from his leather doublet and mopped at his face, which dribbled sweat, I noticed, and was mottled purple. Joan caught my glance, and looked around at her neighbour. Even as she turned, I saw the bubo on his neck, yellow as a head of corn. And even as I saw it, he dropped down on his knees.

“Lord have mercy!” he shouted. “Lord have mercy!” It was the plague cry, the words the doomed daubed on their houses. And he vomited a bellyful of bile right out upon the herbs and rue.

Maybe the old peasant had the sweating sickness or the clap. Maybe he'd ate a plate of mouldy mutton. It made no odds to me. I saw that horrid image, conjured by the witches, and my skin went cold. I took Henry's hand, pushed past Alfonso and ran to the other end of the pew.

The priest saw me. “Do not run from Death!” he shouted.

“I run towards Life, Father,” I called over my shoulder. With Henry's hand clasped firm in mine, I ran towards the back of the church.

“Jezebel!” he shouted. “How dare you speak to your priest in this manner! Remember your place, and be silent.”

It was almost enough to make you laugh. What fools does God take us for? But I had no breath for that, I was busy turning the great iron catch on the church door. I pushed it open. Outside, it was a bright spring day. I looked back and saw all the rows of faces, turned towards me, and the priest, pale with anger, leaning over the pulpit.

*

She died that night. I woke, at three, and I don't know what it was I heard. A cry? A scream? A fired musket? Or perhaps it was a deepening of the silence. But

something disturbed the blackest hour. I pushed back the eiderdown, and went to the window in my night gown. Opening it quietly, I looked both ways, up and down our street. The cold night air smoked my breath. But there was nothing to be seen. All was silent beneath the stars. The only living creature was a house-cow, tethered opposite. She dozed by the water conduit, sleeping on her feet. Behind me, Alfonso rolled onto his back to and set to snoring louder. I craned my head to look westward, towards Richmond, but I was hemmed in with brick smoke-stacks and tight-sewn thatch.

*

The good news about the death of the Queen was that Alfonso was employed again. All the court recorder players were summoned to Whitehall, to rehearse some new tunes for the funeral. They brought her corpse from Richmond in a lead coffin, and she lay in state at Westminster Hall to await the orders of King James of Scotland, soon to be King of England. The bad news was that we were still in a state of anxious waiting. The Queen was dead, but where was this new Prince? Alfonso said he was processing down from Scotland in grand style, meeting with his northern subjects along the way. So we were suspended in a nowhere place between two monarchs. And just as spirits walk between Christmas and Twelfth Night, so idle and malicious talk filled up this space. For evil is about us and among us, evil acts are more common than saintly deeds, wicked men prosper and the good starve: angels are frailer in our world than night's black agents, and in this dark and shifting place of nightmare, we must seek protection where we may.

Rumours sprang up and ran along the streets. They said Elizabeth had never seen her own face in her dotage, that her cheating courtiers had given her a magic mirror that reflected only what she had been in her youth. When at last she saw her

true self, aged, unadorned and ugly, she had died of grief. (This was false, I knew. It was a twisted version of the truth, which was that John Dee gave her an obsidian mirror, and that she knew most precisely what its powers were, and valued it most highly.) And they said that her body had been so racked with vile disease that it swelled monstrously and exploded, bursting forth from the coffin in which she lay. I thought this must be falsehood too, but remembered her swelling fingers and the missing coronation ring.

My husband had plenty of time to learn his new tunes. Indeed, he had to wait more than a month for the funeral, and his triumphal moment. It was late April when at last it was time for Elizabeth's final parading through the London streets.

"Wife, bring me my tasselled stockings!"

"They are on the bed, Alfonso."

"Wife, my trunk hose! Be quick about it!"

"You are wearing your trunk hose. Arse-brain."

"Wife..."

"Silence, husband! Put your clothes on, which are spread before you. You may be the master of your music, but you do not command your spouse."

Of course, he went off in a sulky humour. I watched him go, his pretty steps all dainty down the filthy street. Henry came up behind me.

"Mother, shall we go and get a good place now? Tom says he will stand in King Street, to get a proper view."

"I may go to King Street, young man, but you will stay inside the house with Joan."

"But mother..."

“But nothing. In this, for once, you will obey me. You know what I have said about the plague. Two dead in this street already. In the parish, seventeen. You must stay at home, and learn your lessons from your hornbook, and behave.”

“But...”

I raised my hand to him. “Henry, if you do not do as I say, I will beat you. I will.”

“But you are going...”

I slapped him hard across his cheek and his eyes came hard and angry.

“I hate you.”

“Good. I am your mother. This is as it should be.”

Outside, the streets were turned from places of quiet waiting to a fairground throng of watchers and mourners. The way was blocked with every manner of person, old and young, men and women, ale-wives and aldermen, cozeners and cripples, all herded together, head to head and cheek to cheek. Had I not wanted to see her for one last time, I would have kept indoors myself, for I could see that whatever miasma or mist was bringing the plague, we were all piling together in a manner most favourable to its passing on.

Anne Flood came bustling up, all done out like a Venetian courtesan.

“Come, mistress, come quickly,” she said. “We shall miss the best of it if we don’t make haste.”

I had been avoiding her since Inchbald had made his revelation. Now I could no longer hold my peace.

“What’s this I hear, about how you pay your rent? No wonder you can afford such dainty ruffs.”

She rolled her eyes. “Will you judge me, for wishing to survive? Since Mr Flood passed on, I have lived on my wits, and what little he left me.”

“But lying with Inchbald! Anne! Does he not make you retch?”

“Certainly.” She gave me a piercing look. “I consider you my good friend, Aemilia. And you told me once that you think of another man when Alfonso fucks you, though you are too close to tell me who it is. If you had to suck a dwarf’s tiny cock to keep yourself respectable, you’d have my pity, not my contempt.”

I shrugged, and we walked in silence for a while. Then, overcome with curiosity, I asked: “How tiny?”

She laughed. “I’ve seen bigger on a newborn hedge-pig. Here, take this.” She passed me half an orange for a mask, which I pressed up to my nose to mask the street-stink as we hurried along.

We had barely come to the bottom of King Street and sight of the palace gates and the procession was upon us. First came the black-robed bell ringers and marshall’s men, calling: “Make way, make way!” and clearing a passage through the crowds.

They were followed by a procession of poor women – and just a few poor men – marching four abreast, all in black, eyes cast down. Then came artisans, messengers and servants from the Queen’s woodland and stable. Empty carts driven by stable boys. Two of her horses, riderless, one covered in a black cloth, the other in black velvet. And this was but the start of it. Trumpeters blasted their horns at us, to keep us back, and sergeants at arms paced along the line.

Now came the standard bearers, with the great symbols of the Tudor house: the Dragon, the Greyhound, the Lion, and the Portcullis. Then the fifty nine musicians (and there was my sweet husband, quite the prettiest of them all). Then came the

apothecaries, physicians and minstrels of the court. Parliament, the Privy Seal, the gentlemen and children of the Chapel Royal, all singing a mournful tune. Here was Lord Zouche carrying the banner of Cheshire, Lord Herbert with the banner of Cornwall. Next came the Mayor and aldermen of London, and the gentlemen pensioners, with their axes carried downward. On and on they went. Here was the Welsh banner, there was Ireland, here was the French ambassador. His train was carried by a retinue of page-boys, being six yards long.

Anne was weeping at my shoulder. "I shall never forget this!" she said. "The poor queen! God rest her!"

I saw a weeping widow cut a purse, and pretended not to. I saw a wet-nurse slap a baby to keep it quiet.

And now came the hearse itself, a chariot pulled by four horses in trappings of black velvet. As if this was one of her great triumphal processions, the Queen was there in person, a life-size wax-work, as magnificent in death as she ever was in life. The painted effigy reclined upon her coffin, dressed in her Parliament robes, with a crown upon its head, and a sceptre in its hands. Over the hearse was a canopy, carried by six earls, with a dozen lesser nobles carrying six banners alongside.

"I never saw such a thing!" said Anne. "I never did!"

"It's a shame her waxen self can't rule us," I said. "Rather than some Scottish prince who knows as much of England as I do of France."

"Oh, what will become of us?" Anne cried out. "The pity of it! The pity of it!"

I watched the chief mourner pass, Lady Northampton, her black train carried by two countesses. It looked like a procession from the Underworld itself. In my memory, I saw the Queen laughing, striding, picking up her skirts to make more speed. I saw her drinking a glass of watered wine, accusing Blanche Parry of making

it too strong. I saw her straighten the gold circlet on her curled red hair, when her beauty could still be faked for a grand occasion. And I saw her face, that last time, fallen into a death-mask beneath the clown's paint. The crowd remembered too. As the hearse rumbled past, there was a general sighing, groaning and weeping.

“God rest Your Majesty! God rest your Soul!”

“Lord save you, for all eternity!”

“Lord Jesu, save us all!”

Suddenly, there was a terrible scream and the plague cry: “Lord have mercy upon us!”

“Back, back,” came another voice. “See who comes, a plague-mort! Mind yourselves...”

A young maiden came pushing to the front of the crowd. The people fell back, more anxious to avoid her than to see the coffin of our departed queen. Once, this girl must have looked a little like Elizabeth. She had the same bright red hair, crinkled and shot with gold, and the same fair skin. But her beauty had been blasted. Her eyes were sunken and bloodshot. Her face was swollen and purple with plague spots. The skin of her naked arms and legs was covered in dark blotches and weeping lesions. She was half naked, and wore nothing but a linen undershift, torn and bloodied and hanging from her shoulders. She cried out, like a dying pit-bear, and ran at the procession, but was pushed back by a sergeant at arms.

“Leave off – away!” he shouted, shoving her with his ceremonial lance.

The distracted creature put her head back and screamed again, such a soul-sick sound I had never heard. She tore at her smock, grunting and laughing, so it hung down in front of her, revealing her naked breasts and her rack of chest bones. I could see the evil sores, putrid and stinking. There was barely an inch of her that wasn't

riven and bleeding, as if she had been flayed with a whip. She turned to face the crowd and spoke for the first time. Her voice was soft and childish.

“You should kill me!” she called out. She caught the arm of an old man, standing next to me. He shook it off, blanched with fear.

“Who will kill me? Who will cut my throat?”

No one spoke. The procession moved on. Now the Queen’s ladies passed by, in orderly completeness, as if they could neither see us, nor hear us.

“You would slay me if I was a dog!”

“By Jesu, what are you all? Will no one help her?” Father Dunstan forced his way to the front. He pulled the maiden to her feet, and wrapped her in a cloak.

“Shame on you!” he shouted. The girl was chattering again. The cloak hid everything but her bright hair.

“Will you slay me, Father? Will you throw me to the dogs at Bankside? Or shall I poison them? Shall I poison them, Father?” But then she began to convulse like a hanging man, and her mouth foamed. The last I saw, Father Dunstan was dragging her through the parting crowd.

Scene IV

They said the queen died “mildly, like a lamb, easy like a ripe apple from the tree. Cum leve quadam fibre, absque gemitu. With a slight shiver, without a groan.” O fortunate Queen! O dissembling courtiers! That must not let us hear the Royal death rattle, nor see the final spasm of the regal hands. Grasping at what? I have watched at many a death-bed. I have seen that sudden clawing out at nothing. I think the dying see the world’s light fading, and they snatch at it. Not yet! Not yet! Because, whatever takes us off will be a bad end.

But death from pestilence is a back-to-front leave-taking, with Hades come out from inside its own gates, and the Devil pushing Death into the corner place. He seizes the living, shriven or not, and makes our last days and hours a purgatory. Pray to God that your own death is merely terrible, that the watchers will survive you, and bury you, and weep. The hanged man cries out to die before they bowel him, but he is not the only one. Little children beg for Death too, but are suffered by God to drown in their own bile before he is done with them. I am a good Christian – praise the LORD in all his works! Let me enter Heaven, let me contemplate all earthly frailty with the wisdom of an angel. But I can only write of what I see.

London is my home. A horde of bloody apprentice boys shouting “Clubs!” can make me smile. I love the filthy bustle, would as soon hear the shout of the night watch as the song of a nightingale. But we breathe yellow, corrupted air that chars our throats. Even our snot is black as soot. The petty pains of daily life are cruel enough. So it’s not always plain what is plague, and what is not. And you may imagine that the fear that every ague and pustule is the harbinger of certain death can haunt the best of us.

So. There is first a fever, but the sun is hot, the day is long, we may need no more to cure it than a draft of small-beer. Then there is the vomiting – but who in London does not throw up his guts from time to time? We are careful never to eat raw fruit from the tree, but still the lurgy gets us. Every time we puke up in the chamber pot, we think we are victims of a poisoner’s craft. But there are signs, Lord help us, and when these come, we know the end is near. God preserve us from the swelling, for that is a portent of the end indeed. And though there are those who live, they are few, and strong. It starts like a strain, a pain that stretches down an arm, or around the groin, but then focuses its evil into one place. Which place is fixed to be a bubo, a sac of heavy poison that will kill in moments if it bursts within your body. The ones who live are those whose buboes split outside their skin, so the fluid may be drained off. For whatever humour you may have – phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, melancholic – none blends happily with this vile contaminant.

*

One day, just a few weeks after the Queen’s funeral, I was sitting at my hearth place, reading *Orlando Furioso*. Joan was standing at the doorway, looking out into the street, with that look of sour enjoyment with which she liked to greet disaster.

“It’s a merry do,” she said. “The dead outnumber the living all over the city. Heaven and Hell are bulging at the gate. St Bride’s yard is full, and St Olave’s. If it takes us off now, we shall be buried in the ditch.”

“Thank you for those cheering words, Joan. If you can’t say anything more uplifting, go upstairs and tell your beads.” Rosaries were forbidden by the law, but I knew she had one hid beneath her bedstead in a casket.

She took no notice of me. “The City pageant has been cancelled.”

“I know it.”

“Jack Mellor, that ran amok yesterday with his sores all out, was put to death this morning.”

“I know.”

“Cruel, I call it.”

“He would have died anyway,” said I.

“I was talking to the dog catcher at St Margaret’s, and he has killed more than five hundred hounds. Five hundred!”

“No wonder the streets are quiet.”

“Seventy two parishes infected, Mistress Flood told me. And there are nine houses boarded up in Westminster, and eleven souls are newly dead. It stalks us close.”

I put my sewing down. “For pity’s sake, Joan! What do you want of me? Henry is kept from school. The house is full of onions and garlic. We have sweet herbs in every room: the physick garden is bare. And we pray.”

“I know it, mistress. We are taking every care we can.”

“What more can I do? Shall I lie down and weep in the fire place? Shall I fill my hair with ashes? We are not dead yet. We shall sit it out.”

“Says who? Has the Almighty sent you word?”

“Don’t be insolent. You are my servant, not my keeper.”

“Oh, and are the two so very far apart? Who would keep you, if not old Joan? Not your popinjay husband, that’s for sure.”

This was quite enough. I would have to box her ears. I tossed the ruff onto the floor and marched across the room. But as I raised my hand, she caught it.

“Mistress, you know I would do everything in my power to help you.”

I let my hand fall. “Yes.”

“But what I can offer...my skills and remedies... they won't save us.”

“No.”

“There is something evil here.”

I thought once more of the witches. “Joan – there is something that I want to ask you...”

Alfonso rushed in at this worst of moments. Back from the Palace, and breathless with his own importance.

“What's my ruff doing on the dirty floor? I will need it. The new King has called for the consort.”

“But the King is not yet here – not yet crowned...”

“Precisely. We are leaving London.”

“Praise be to God!” said Joan.

“Praise indeed!” I said. Was it possible that for once Alfonso had been useful? But – of course – there was a guilty look upon his face. I saw how it would be without the need to ask. I spoke merely to make him squirm. “This is good news. All the family will be saved. When do we go, husband?”

He looked down at his feet – fine shod in French boots, elaborately pointed.

“I... it is the musicians who are needed. At Cambridge, at the pleasure of his Majesty.”

“So be it,” said Joan. “I will see to our preparations.”

“Preparations for what?” he asked, uneasily.

“Why, for the journey sir.”

“To *mine*. To my... preparations. Not to yours, Joan, or my wife's.”

“Nor to Henry’s either?” My voice was flat, even though this came as no surprise. “You will leave us, then. To live or die. And see what remains of us when you return.”

“This cannot be so, Master,” said Joan. “More people die each day. The pest house is full. They are digging graves out at Tothill Fields...Graves as big as caverns....They lime the dead when their bodies are still warm...You could not leave your little son to that.”

Alfonso twisted his hands together, his long, perfect fingers. “It is not my choice, Joan. I am the master here, but merely a servant to the King.”

“Then you can pay for us to follow.” Her voice was quiet, but I had never known her so outspoken. “You have gold, don’t you? Or, if it is gambled, you have your fine court friends, who will lend you a ducat or two to save your wife and child.”

“Get out!” said Alfonso. “This is not a matter for you.”

Joan climbed the stairs, silent with rage. I stared into the fire. I could see that this unmanned him more than the tirade he had been expecting. I watched the flames, thinking that each lick of heat was like a human life, flaring up for an instant, and then gone for good. My calm was aided by my knowledge of my husband – expecting nothing is an excellent preparation for receiving it.

After a while he cleared his throat.

“I am sure you will be safe.”

“Surely.”

“It will die out soon. Everyone says so.”

“Indeed. ‘Everyone’ has such confidence that they are packing up their goods and chattels, boarding up their houses and heading for the hills of Kent.”

“The doomsayers.”

“The wealthy. And the wise.”

“We have seen the plague before. Every year, it comes and goes.”

“Not like this,” I said. “Not for years. If you insist on being a snivelling coward, then kindly have the grace to be an honest snivelling coward.”

“I shall soon be back. With money. And preferment. A certain position, with the new King. I am doing this for all of us – for our future.”

“Alfonso?”

“Yes, my chuck?” He smiled, uneasy.

“Just go.”

And off he went, with some clean linen in a bundle, and Joan’s last impudent accusations following him down the street.

*

I didn’t sleep that night. I had Henry with me in the bed, so I could will the plague away from him, and his habit was to throw himself at an angle across the mattress, muttering and kicking, so the eiderdown came off me, and there was no way I could lie straight.

Much as I despised my husband, there was no doubt we were worse off without him. We had been stuck before, with little hope of help, but now no escape was possible. We could not flee the city like the wealthy and well-born. Money wasn’t all you needed. The rich could not only afford to hire a carriage and remove their goods, they also had country estates to move to, with vast gardens, set in the distant wholesome land. More than this, they had the legal right to run away. Each had a certificate of health, a pledge that they were clean of plague and not exporting the pestilence out of town. Without this, if you tried to flee you could be hanged for your pains. When I lived at court, we removed to Windsor castle during one outbreak.

The Queen had a gibbet put up on the village green. Poor souls who escaped from the city and made it as far as that place were put to death at her command. Horses supped water from the trough as these innocent citizens kicked their last.

When I did finally fall asleep, I was prey to such dreams and nightmares. I saw them kill my father again, the circle of dark figures. I walked up behind him, and at first his steps were light and hurried, then slow and burdened, then stopped and he fell. Again, he turned, I saw his silent scream. Again I reached out and my child's hands were in front of me. But this time they were botched with gore. I screamed myself, but my screams were still silent.

There was a voice.

“Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?”

Then I saw Lord Hunsdon, as he was the very last time I set eyes on him, in the promenading crowd at the Royal Exchange. Old, and frail, and half turning in the square, as if he wanted to speak to me, but then pulled away by his companion. It was Lettice, all got up like a Globe whore, touting for a groundling fuck, breasts like twin peaches. But then I saw, it was not my Lord Hunsdon that was old and frail at all, it was Will. And we were not in the Royal Exchange but on the stage, and the audience buzzed below us, angry and unhappy with our show.

Then I saw Death, peering out of the Queen's bed at me, and laughing. The Queen was with him, and laughing merrily herself, quite back to her old form. Her forehead was blooded, as it was on the days she came back from hunting. For all I know, the stag was in there too, in a state of equal high spirits, but I woke. Or did I? It took a moment, for the old condition had returned, which had not afflicted me since childhood. Sleep-walking.

It was night, but I was not in my warm bed with my son. I was outside, in the plague-ridden street, barefoot in my night gown. At first, I thought it was a waking-dream, in which you believe the nightmare is over, but have just woke into another one. So I slapped my wrist and pinched my skin to see if I was still sleeping, and the pinches hurt, and my feet were cold, and I could smell the stench of putrefying flesh from the plague house that was boarded up in our street. I was awake, that was for sure, and abroad. I turned, too quick, to get back to my house, but for a second my head was dizzy and I feared that I would fall. I stopped for a moment, and put my hand upon the wall of the plague house, which I realised now was right beside me. From inside, I suddenly heard a dread cry, like the shriek of the damned.

“God help us! Help us! Give us water, show us pity! I have children! I have a baby! Help me!”

Two sotted apprentice boys loomed up out of nowhere. Staggering along the road, laughing and doing a little dance. They were tossing a flat cap between them, and tussling to reach it when it fell to the ground. When they saw me, with my hand upon the plague house, in my night gown and with my muddy feet, they took me for one of the unfortunates who lived there.

“What’s this, you have escaped to spread your pestilence?” said the first, a great big lad with a mass of black hair. “Get back inside!”

“You disobedient witch!” said the other, smaller, with a scuff of blonde beard “Go indoors, and stay there till the Devil takes you.” They grabbed my arms and began to push me towards the door, though how they intended to get me through it I don’t know, as the boards were nailed down sound, and there was no way in any more than there was any way out. Then my dizzy head began to spin, and a nauseous dark descended.

*

I dreamed of young Kit Marlowe, that black, strange night. We were on the stage at the Rose, yet it was not the stage as it is in life. For the boards stretched away in all directions, to the four corners of the earth, and in my dream the earth did indeed have corners, trimmed about with heavy wainscots. To the east, these were carved with Chinamen and pearl fishers; to the West with natives with feathered heads; to the South with Moors and minarets; to the North with wolves and mountains. In the centre was Kit, sitting crosslegged, with a book. He was dressed in his usual fashion, and his spectacles were sitting squarely upon his nose, and there was a dagger sticking out of his forehead. He seemed to give no heed to this, but made a careful study of his book.

I sat down beside him, on the boards. "Kit," I said. "You are not dead."

He looked up. "Why should I be dead?"

"You were killed at Deptford."

He laughed at this, stood up and drew a circle round him with a silver chalk. It glittered like moonshine. "I never died," he said. "I was too sharp for that knife."

"Too sharp for us all."

"Death is for the dullard," said Kit. "There is wisdom in the Word, Aemilia."

"The Word of God?"

He laughed. "The ancients knew far more than we do, stumbling in our vanity and sloth."

Then I looked up and saw that he was not alone. A demon was standing next to him. Its skull was a thousand charnel-skulls, all grinning rottenly, its eyes were empty graves. It wore a magician's gown of cloth of gold. I screamed out and Kit looked round, but the demon was a handsome scholar, smiling as it looked over his shoulder

at his book. Kit produced a vial of scarlet liquid and threw it upward. And the air was filled with a celestial gauze of angels, ascending and descending their star-dust ladders.

“Kit!” I cried. “Kit, what happened to you?”

But he had climbed into the pages of the book, which was a tomb, and was clambering down into the void.

“Nothing,” said the demon, with Kit’s face.

“Nothing at all,” said Kit, with his rotten grin.

Scene V

“What is...?”

“Hush. Keep your foot still – Lord knows what you have stood in. Fox shit, most likely. It’s the worst of all, unless you ever step in the leavings of a wild boar.”

I was in the kitchen. My feet were in a bowl of warm washing water, scented with rosemary and orange peel, and Joan was squatting down before me, rubbing at my muddy toes with a piece of cloth.

“Sleep walking again! I thought you were all done with that.”

“So did I. It’s been years... not since...”

“Henry was born, God bless him.”

I had only the vaguest memories of that dreadful time. Left on my own with Alfonso, who was rarely in the house, I had at first been content to watch my belly grow bigger and bigger, waiting to be delivered of my baby. I ate well, and had a good serving girl who baked me apple cakes and brewed small beer. But as the birth-date drew nearer, I began to sicken. Gall rose in my throat and would not clear, so I had to sit upright every night. Then my whole body swelled up to match my distended belly. My face and hands were so round and tight they might have been pregnant with their own progeny, and about to spill forth little newborn limbs. After a few days of this, I was struck down with a blinding headache, and I had a violent fit. Praise God, I remembered Joan the apothecary, and what she had said to me when she gave me the vicious potion. Her words were so clear in my head that it seemed as if she was standing in the room. “I wait upon your word. And when I hear from you, then I will come.” And she had come, hot-foot, and saved me. All through the howling horror of the birth I was blind with pain and my head seemed to be stuck inside a dark box.

What kept me sane was the sound of Joan's calm voice, urging me on. And at the end of it, she gave my perfect son to me, with his blunt and folded face and his curled hands with their long fingers, and he opened his mouth and began to suck, and I would not have him taken from me, and I would not have a wet nurse, but fed him from my own breast and everybody marvelled at the way he thrived. When at last I emerged from my chamber, ready for churching, it turned out that Joan was now my servant, and my old one had vanished away. I never questioned this, being so pleased to have her there. Joan said little enough about it, only that I had saved her from the giant and his friends, and that in any case, her shop had been burned down by another mob of miscreants, who had robbed her of all her herbs and simples before they torched the thatch.

She looked at me now, her eyes bright. "You're a good pupil, mistress. You have the makings of a wise woman, if not a sensible one."

"Thank you."

"So maybe you would like to help with a new concoction."

"What is it?"

"An ugly brew."

"What is it *for*?"

"It is a plague juice."

"An elixir? A cure?"

"No. For some, not all, it may work as a preventive."

"How do you know it works?"

"I don't. But I made it once, long, long ago, and it saved my village."

"From the plague?"

“We called it the Black Death back then. Only a few of the people caught it, but those that did all died.”

“Shame it’s not a remedy.”

“Once you have the contagion, mistress, it is time to pray.”

“Pray! I do that every night. Dr Forman must know more than you do.”

Joan was quiet for a while. “If he has cured himself of plague, then he has bargained with the Devil himself. I told you – the Devil tempts the scholar just as he does the crone.”

“Perhaps he found a means through science and knowledge.”

“Maybe so. But all science comes from somewhere, and all knowledge has its price. Take your feet out.” I lifted them, and she wrapped them in a linen cloth. “You aren’t as strong as you think you are,” she said, drying them gently. “The spirit is willing, I’ll say that for you, but flesh is just flesh.”

“It’s not my fault the plague has come.”

“No. But you are pitting yourself against it.”

I shrugged. “Who else can help me? Almighty God? I don’t see much hope for this life coming from Him. All *His* promises are to be fulfilled when we are dead souls in Heaven. Then I shall be grateful. Now I am afraid.”

Joan was the only person who allowed me to speak so disrespectfully of our Maker. “That pamphlet for Mr Tottle,” she said. “What will you get for that?”

“Two shillings. I’ve given half to Inchbald, anyway.”

“Should you want another way to make a penny or two, you could always give him the recipe for my plague- juice.”

“There is a *recipe*?” I found myself close to laughter. I thought of plum pies and stuffed swans, of simnel cake and peacocks poached in wine.

“You need the brain of a plague corpse to make the paste, for one thing. The fallen fat of a hanged man, for another. A palmful of that. And a mandrake root. And various other – items.”

“What sort of items?”

“Gibbon blood can be hard to come by, unless you know the right apothecary. Not so difficult for someone with my history, of course.”

I watched her as she dried my feet, patting them gently with the towel. Joan could make a poultice of ointment flowers, read a urinal of piss, and brew up the most powerful of purgations. When Henry was teething, she soothed his sore gums with the brain of a hare, and knew a cure for shingles made from earthworms and pigeon dung. Once, when Alfonso had been poisoned by a rival at the gaming house, she cured him with a potion of rue, figs, walnuts and the powdered horn of a unicorn. No more and no less than you would expect from a good apothecary. Yet there was something truly sinister about this plague-brew. She was a wise woman, and a faithful servant. What else did I know of her? And what did I not know?

Her hair was loose and hung around her shrivelled face. Her skin was dun, her hands withered like the talons of a bird of prey. As she worked she sang to herself. I did not recognise the tune, or understand the words.

“How old are you, Joan?” I asked.

She was drying the skin around the great toe of my left foot. Her grasp was firm, the cloth was rough and ticklish. She did not look up. “Five hundred years,” she said. “Or thereabouts.”

“*What?*”

Now she folded the towel, and straightened up, using a stool to lever herself on to her feet. “Five hundred years,” she repeated. “Time enough to learn all I needed.”

I was not sure Methuselah had lived so long. “Joan, are you a witch?”

“What does it matter what I am?”

“I want to know. I believe I have a right to, being both your mistress and your friend.”

“I am a cunning woman, who knows more than most.”

“A woman? Just as I am? Of such an age?”

“Remember, mistress, you are still learning. You know less than little, even now.”

“Look Joan, I have something to tell you. I should have told you this before, no doubt, but I thought you would take it for one of my night-fancies. If I tell you about this thing, will you tell me, in return, what you really know of witchcraft?”

She shrugged, her face shrewd. “I might say a little more, but not enough to put you in the way of harm. Tell me your story, mistress. Does it concern the witches? I can see them standing by the Tyburn Tree.”

So I told her the story of the meeting, and what they said about Baptiste and the plague, and how they showed me the bed with Henry dead upon it.

At the end she said: “We must pray.”

“Pray! Will God help us, who helps no one when the pestilence comes?”

Joan hung the towel over a chair to dry. “God bless you, mistress and give you strength.”

“God bless us all,” I said, testily. “Now, Joan, what is this you say about being five hundred years upon this earth? Did God play a part in that?”

She crossed herself. “Do not speak lightly of Our Lord, Aemilia. I was a witch once, and I did many things that I cannot bear to think of, and I lived for many years beyond my span through the use of my craft. But I have repented of it now. They shut me in a nunnery, and I escaped it, and resolved to do my penance in this world, not in some stone prison. And so I am here. I have come to you. So you must believe me when I tell you that some matters are the will of God, and His will only. I have some experience in these matters.”

“Five hundred years!” I said. “That is not possible.” I’d heard the prentice boys in the road saying that Joan was mad, and had always thought this to be a foolish piece of gossip. She was strange, assuredly, and possessed of far greater knowledge than most wise women – but perhaps she was out of her wits after all.

I was thinking of the prentice boys as I pulled on the woollen stockings that she handed me. I remembered the two young ruffians who had threatened me the night before. “What happened to those boys?” I asked.

“What boys?”

“Outside. They were tormenting me. They thought I had escaped from the boarded house.”

“You were dreaming. I saw no boys.”

I went to the door. It was a dank, drizzly day, with a dull grey sky. A cart had stopped outside the plague house. The carter was adding two fresh occupants to his load. But they were not boys. They were street-hounds. Their grey tongues were lolling from their open mouths. One was black with shaggy fur, the other brown, a collie-dog.

*

Even St Paul's Chuchyard was quiet in this time of plague. The usual bustle of shoppers and sellers, browsers and braggards was gone. The shops stood empty, their open fronts showing here a solitary printer proof-reading a chap-book, there a determined play-buyer, scrutinizing a bill. When I came to Cuthbert Tottle's shop and looked inside, at first I thought it was deserted. All I could see was the monstrous printing press, filling the room almost to the ceiling. Then I saw Cuthbert sitting alone by the press, head bowed, hands folded as if he was praying. He was dressed in black.

"Mistress Lanyer," he said. "I bid you a good day."

"And the same to you."

I stood, waiting for him to demand a cheerful pamphlet, or one with two-headed monsters or demon births. But after smiling at me vaguely, he returned to the contemplation of his hands.

"I have the cross-gartering pamphlet that you asked for." I had little confidence in this. I had rarely seen a thing so dull.

I handed him my pages, and he perused them, pushing his little spectacles up his nose. I saw that it was wet with tears, which set his glasses sliding down again, and what looked like prayer was grief.

"How is Mistress Tottle?" I asked, as he read. "I don't see her in the shop today. I hope she is well?" Of course, I feared the worst.

"She died on Sunday."

"Oh, God rest her!"

"It took her off in two days. I was away at Cambridge, or else I would be boarded in our house, to await the Maker with her. On Friday she sat over there..." He indicated her habitual place. "...setting a Psalter. She was as perfect... as perfect as... Well. I can't bear to see the half-done words."

I frowned. “Mr Tottle, the pamphlet I have brought in is a very poor thing. I don’t think I should trouble you with it any further.”

Grief had not affected his head for business. He took it from me and examined it carefully. “I can’t find fault with your description. It took you months to write, and it’s not worth sixpence,” he said. “Nor even a farthing. At least *The Subjugation of Eve* had some amusing passages, I seem to recall. I mean to say, they seemed amusing then...”

“I am sorry for your loss...” I hesitated, seeing that he was close to tears. “I do have something else. Something useful for these dreadful times.”

He rose from his seat and stood awkwardly, dwarfed by the great printing machine. “Hmm,” he said. “If you can help us to survive the plague...I think I can vouch that there is an audience for that.”

“There is this,” I said, and handed him a sheet of paper. It was Joan’s recipe for plague juice.

He read it, front and back. Then he turned it over, and read it once again. His face brightened. “Very interesting. I like this. I like it very much. It needs a little background – where you found this cure, why it works, why this is the best protection known to Man. That sort of thing.”

“I can do this.”

“When can you bring it to me?”

“Give me some paper and I will write it now.”

“Would that all the pamphleteers and poets could match your industry.”

“Would that I could match their sex.”

It took me two hours, sitting in the seat where his wife had done her work. When I had finished, Tottle took it to the window and read it, head bent. Finally, he said: “This is worth three shillings of anybody’s money.”

He handed me the silver coins and I looked down at them, not sure if I had been rewarded for words or witchcraft.

Scene VI

There was a rat on the kitchen table, bold as you please, eating cheese off Henry's trencher.

"Be off with you!" scolded Joan, thwacking it on the head with a fire poker. The creature barely seemed to notice, but jumped off the table, a large chunk of cheese bulging out of one cheek. Its great earthworm of a tail flopped into a bowl of small beer as it lolloped on its way, finally disappearing into a hole in the wainscot.

"What's ailing Greymalkin?" I asked. "Are we over-feeding him? Or has he lost his taste for ratflesh? There are more than ever this summer, I swear."

"On account of the weather being so warm," said Joan. "It's not natural. I pray for rain, and a wholesome north breeze." She fanned herself with a pamphlet I had been reading to distract myself. (The title was: *Jane Anger: Her Protection for Women to defend them against the scandalous reports of a late surfeiting Lover, and all other like Venerians that complain so to be overjoyed with women's kindness.* Nothing about cross gartering there, you will observe.) "Flaming June indeed. We are burning up."

"It's the sort of weather that makes a boy want to run out and play!" Henry was sitting up to the table, grinding a knife into the side. "No one else but me is stuck inside, with their old serving-maid, and nothing better than rats for playmates!"

"You stay here, where it's safe," said Joan. "There's another plague house in this street, Lord save them. We must do all we can to stay away from the sick, Henry. It's a terrible illness, and a cruel end."

"I don't care," said Henry. "If I did get the plague, I wouldn't notice any difference, seeing I am a prisoner already."

Joan crossed herself.

“The difference would be that you would be purple-limbed, racked with pain and burning up with fever,” I said. “Instead of missing the open fields, you would have a most sincere wish for death. And stop sawing the table.”

“Well, I wish for death now, if I can’t go out,” said Henry, sawing harder. “I want to watch the dead carts! I want to see a plague pit! I want to see them pour the lime! It’s not fair!”

I smacked his hand, and the knife fell on the floor. Joan crossed herself again. “Dear Lord,” she said. “There is no reasoning with the child. Say your prayers, Henry. You are tempting Providence.”

“I care nothing for Providence,” said Henry. “I care for running and fighting and... falling over in the mud. And tree climbing, and throwing stones at ducks and mallards, and making footballs out of dead frogs. And stealing eggs and blinding cats. All the normal things that boys must do.”

Joan shook her head at him. “These are not normal times. People are dying in hedges and on the highway. They say half the prisoners in Newgate died in one night, still chained to the walls. In any case, the bells of St Sepulchre’s never stop their tolling. No wonder the new King is shut up at Greenwich and keeps out of the city.”

“Joan is right,” I said. “And it’s not just an illness, it’s a madness too.” Sometimes the sick would run mad through the streets, driven by witless spite to try to infect their fellows. They would cast down their ruffs and cuffs and handkerchiefs as they went, wishing to spread contagion.

“I care for none of that. I am not a coward.”

“It is not a matter of cowardice, but of wisdom.”

“Then let me help you with the plague potion. I am wise enough for that.”

“No, Henry,” I said, picking up the knife. “It’s as disgusting as anything you could get up to with those urchin friends of yours. We are using the brain of a plague corpse...”

“How good! Wait till I tell Tom!”

“Which is too much of a risk for a young boy. And tell no one. We came by it by means that not everyone would approve of, least of all Father Dunstan. So don’t go blabbing on to Tom. Now, be off with you, and we will get on.”

“Stay in, but be off with me? Be off where?”

“Go in to the vegetable garden. Or up the stairs.”

“You are a wicked jailor. I shall go up to the attic and look out at the sky, and watch the kites and learn to fly.”

“So be it. Go away, you cheeky little hound.”

He ran up the stairs, in a great commotion of clumping feet.

Joan smiled wryly. “You’ve made a rod for your own back,” she said. “The child does as he pleases.”

“Yes, well. It’s too late now. He is what he is, and I must take the consequences.”

We set to with the potion, and Lord above, it was a filthy business. When we had done, we scoured our hands clean to rid us of the deed. Then we sat at the table, drinking ale. The plague brew was simmering on the hearth, belching out its foul odours.

“Fetch Henry down for something to eat,” I said to Joan.

But she came back shaking her head. “He’s hid himself somewhere,” she said. “There’s always something with that boy.”

“What’s he up to now?” I said. “I’ll soon find him.” But the bedchambers were empty, and he wasn’t in the wardrobe on the landing, or in the space under the eaves, or hiding on the balcony over the street. I climbed the ladder to the attic. There was no sign of him there either. All I could hear was the rustling of rats in their nests, and the sound of their babies squeaking. Could he have climbed out upon the housetop, to look at the sky as he had promised? I opened the window and saw that he had flung a rope across to the open window opposite, which was just a little distance across the narrow street, and made himself a bridge. The house belonged to Anne Flood.

“Henry! I called. I half expected his head to appear at their window, but no. It occurred to me that there was no reason for him to stay at Tom’s, once he had made his escape. He could be anywhere.

And so it proved. We searched both houses, from top to bottom, with Anne exclaiming over Henry’s bad behaviour, and assuring me that Tom could have nothing to do with it, as the players had been summoned to a meeting at the Globe, which was closed due to the plague.

Henry had disappeared.

“The Lord has taken him,” said Joan. “I knew he should not have spoken in that way!”

“That’s enough, Joan. He has run away, off to play somewhere. He will be back by dusk.”

But dusk fell, and still he did not return. Fear took hold of my body with an uncanny coldness. My limbs were heavy with dread. Yet at the same time it was impossible to stay still for one second, and I paced the house, up and down, ceaselessly, endlessly mounting the stairs, searching each chamber, looking under the

beds, climbing up into the attic and sticking my head out of the window. I even went to the outside privy several times, as if he might have found himself some cranny to hide inside that malodorous place. At last, I could bear it no longer. As darkness fell, I set out, torch in hand, leaving Joan to wait for his possible return.

In the city, bells tolled, marking not the hour but the passing of the dead. The evening was close and airless. A raven flew over my head, giving out its strange, throaty call. *Prruk-prruk-prruk*. An ill omen, as if I needed one. Where could I go? Where might he have gone? If Tom had been at the Globe all day, there was no reason to think that Henry was with him. And in any case the Globe was on the other side of the river. Going by London Bridge was too far round, and he didn't have money for the wherry man. He would be more likely to head for the fields and woods. But then, he also liked to frisk along the outer walls of Whitehall Palace, fencing with himself and shrieking out in mock agony when the invisible blade struck home.

I could almost hear his fluting voice. "Oogh ! Aaggh! Have at thee, knave! I bowel you – dead man!" My little Henry, wandering alone in the plague-ridden city.

Oh Lord! Curse the boy! Or rather, bless him, protect him, deliver him from harm! I walked, as fast as I could, along Long Ditch and towards Camm Row, my breath heaving in my chest. If this was God's way of punishing me as an unfit mother, then it was roughly in proportion to his other punishments – an eternity of hellfire for a life which mixed sin with sorrow. From time to time I called Henry's name, in an agony of rage and pain.

Having hardly set foot outside our house for the past few weeks myself, I had not seen the spreading horror that was turning the city of Westminster into a charnel house. I held my crackling torch high against the dark sky, and what I beheld looked for all the world like one of the old church wall paintings of the Dance of Death. It

was a blasted, empty place. Everywhere I looked were deserted houses, blind and shuttered. The only people on the streets were mad or diseased, so I was afraid to approach them. An old woman, on her hands and knees, puking into the stinking kennel in the middle of the street. A skinny boy, carrying a limp baby. And yet, who else could I ask? I would have questioned a constable if I could find one. Here was a dead cart rattling by me, loaded with corpses. Some were bundled in sheets, others quite naked, mouths gaping open like landed fish.

Thinking that he at least must have his wits about him, I called out to the carter: “You haven’t seen a little boy, have you sir? A boy of ten or so. Yellow headed and skittish.” My voice sounded unreal in that weird place. I meant “haired” not “headed” and in my mind I saw Henry-as-monster, skull gold-painted.

“Not if he’s alive,” said the friendly fellow, hunched and faceless. “I deal in death. I don’t see the living.”

“You might have seen him running along somewhere. You can’t miss him. He’s – bold and bonny. Noisy. You’d be sure to remember.” I found I was smiling at him, as if this would encourage him to recall my child.

“Take a look in the cart if you’ve a mind,” he said. “I’ve got all sizes in there. Might be one of about that age, if you’re lucky.”

I turned away, too brimful of horror to answer back in my normal way. The house before me was boarded – not a plague house, but a grand merchant’s home, left in a hurry. There was even a sack of flour, spilled across the doorway, evidence of the hasty departure of the occupants. Against one of the wood-shuttered windows, a pamphlet had been posted. It was a warning from the city fathers, recounting a litany of causes of the plague. The fault lay with “runnygate Jews, thrasonical and unlettered chemists, shifting and outcast pettifoggers, dull pated and base mechanics, stage

players, peddlers, prittle- prattling bawds, toothless and tattling old wives, ” and many more. I stopped to read the words, in a trance-state close to despair. I could not stop looking until I knew for certain that Henry was dead. But how *could* I know? The very ground hungered for corpses and sucked them in, nameless and unshriven. I said a prayer, a wordless, secret prayer, for my mind was blank of proper thoughts.

Then, I remembered Henry’s words – he had wanted to see a dead cart, and a plague pit. Of course he did. Though the streets were empty and the populace lived in terror of this cruel distemper, gawpers crowded round the rims of the mass graves to wonder at the twisted faces of the dead. So, as I had no idea where to find him, I would follow the dead cart to its destination.

I walked some distance from the cart, but kept it in view as I walked along the road. From time to time the driver called out: “Cast out your dead! Any dead bodies to bury? Cast out your dead!” But the houses were silent.

Then, behind me, another shout went up. “Have you any more Londoners to bury, hey down a down dery, have you any more Londoners to bury, good morrow and good day?” I turned to look, and saw that two fellows were following me. The first was shabbily dressed and with a beard somewhat wild and untrimmed. The other was thicker set, and looked more prosperous. His face was shadowed by his feathered hat. I quickened my pace, even though all there was to protect me was a cart loaded with corpses.

“Madam,” a voice called out. “A fine night for barn owls, and cut-throats. Not so fine for the likes of you.”

I looked over my shoulder without slowing down. “A fine night for finding my son, I hope.”

“You look to find him in a grave? You will be lucky.”

“I look to find him above ground. He is not ill, he is merely disobedient.”

“Ah, the disobedient, roaring boys! London would not be the same without them. Myself, I pray they live forever. For if London’s underworld is the map of merry hell, then they are the dancing devils sent to please us.”

“Shush, Tom, shush!” said the other man, grasping his arm. “It is she.”

I knew that voice only too well. The cart had lumbered to a halt, and the driver had gone into a house. I stopped and waited until the two men caught up with me, knowing now that I had nothing to fear from them. No danger to my life, in any case. And I realised, as they came closer and our three torches made a bright space in the night, that I knew both of them. The first was Thomas Dekker, a boy actor with the Chamberlain’s men when I had been Hunsdon’s mistress, but who had now turned his hand to writing. He was Dutch by birth, an eager, lively fellow, who was smiling now even in this earthly hell. I knew the other fellow better, even when he hid behind his cloak and kept his head bowed in the guttering torchlight.

“This is a strange time to be out,” said I. “Did you come to take the air?”

“Aemilia,” said William. “Forgive me, but Tom Flood told me your son was lost, and I wanted to. . . . It seemed fitting to come to see where he might be.”

“I assure you sir, I have no need of help from anyone,” I said.

“You are white as alabaster,” said Will. “The poor child! God bless him.”

“Indeed madam, you do not look well,” said Dekker. “We will escort you, and I am sure we shall find this naughty son of yours. Why, the whole city is running mad, but there is no need to fear for one quick boy who can outrun the pestilence.”

I knew this was untrue, but was grateful for his cheerful tone.

“We will search with you, whether you like it or not,” said William.

The flames illuminated his dark eyes and I saw his fear, and I remembered how he had stared at Henry at the Globe. There was no mistaking the similarity between them.

Dekker's spirits seemed unaffected by our two drawn faces. "It's a pretty place, indeed!" he said. He gestured around him, as if to include the silent houses, the red crosses daubed on the doors and the weeds that grew on each side of the kennel. "I am tired of being a poet to whores and strumpets. So I am writing a pamphlet on the plague."

"A gloomy subject, as I am sure Mistress Lanyer will testify," said William. We walked on together. My mind was so fixed on finding Henry, and the fear of not finding him that I accepted Will's presence as part of the nightmare chaos that surrounded me.

"Never was a vile contagion so badly run," said Dekker. "The Corporation hires women to keep their eye upon the sick and dying, and insists they are all sober and ancient. But instead they are a bunch of blear-eyed, drunken night-crows." He lowered his voice. "As for the likes of that one up ahead – I swear they hire these carters from Satan's own stable yard. Nasty, foul-mouthed breed. Too brute and slovenly to make recruits for hangmen."

"How long has...Henry been gone?" asked William.

"Hours past. Hours and hours," said I. "I thought he was in the house – he might have been running amok since midday."

"He might have been among the plague pits these last ten hours," said Dekker. "Boys do love these places."

My voice cracked. "Dear God!"

“Show some sympathy for this poor lady, will you?” said Will. “For pity’s sake, she’s at her wits’ end. Her son is gone!”

“Not gone,” I said, quickly. “He is mislaid, merely.”

Dekker smiled. “There is no one in London who doesn’t run the risk of catching this disease,” he said. “And most of us will live to tell the tale. I certainly hope I shall, for there is money in it. I plan to call my pamphlet *A Wonderful Year. Satire*,” he said quickly, catching Will’s eye and clearly wanting to avoid another reproof.

“Look, Tom, go up ahead and see where that cart is heading,” said William. Whistling cheerily, the playwright obliged. We watched his torch move forward in a jaunty fashion through the darkness.

Then Will said: “Aemilia, the boy...”

“He will be near, and we will find him,” I said. “Have no fear of that.”

“He has such a look of Hamnett.”

“It makes no odds to us now, does it? We are estranged.”

“Look ... how should I say this?” He hesitated.

“Say what you like in any manner that you wish. Why should it concern me?”

“I know he is my son.”

We walked in silence for a moment.

“You have eyes to see: so be it. But he calls Alfonso ‘Father’.”

He turned to look down at me, and held the torch higher so that he could examine my face. “Do you wish to punish me?”

“Who has punished whom?” I said. “What am I – a foul-breathed Lilith? A demon succubus, come to corrupt you? I still have those poems you wrote – some

strange respect for Art prevents me from burning them to Ash. If there is a distinction in inspiring a poetry of hate, then I can claim it.”

“Aemilia– those poems – the words I used against you...”

But then Dekker was upon us, breathless. “I have found the pit,” he said, all levity gone. “There’s no mistaking it. God save us all.”

Peering through the pressing darkness, I saw that we had reached the end of the lanes of Westminster, and reached open fields. Up ahead of us, on the brow of a hill, a bonfire burned, illuminating the shapes of a crowd of people. There were smaller figures - children - among them. The cart had stopped at the bonfire, and the carter climbed down. William pulled my arm and we stepped back into the shadow of a hay barn.

“What a terrible place,” said Dekker. “Jesu. I have seen nothing like it.”

“Let Tom and I go up ahead and see if he is there,” said Will. “You will be safe here.”

“It’s not fit for a woman,” said Dekker. “Truly, madam.”

“I would not think of staying behind,” I said. “I would go into Hell to save my son. A plague pit is nothing to me.”

Scene VII

The two men walked ahead of me and I followed, silently. I still carried my torch, and was at once grateful for the glare it cast on the rough and tussocky ground, and fearful that we would catch the attention of the watchers ahead. But no one noticed us, or cared if we were there. And when I reached the edge of the pit, I saw why.

The carter had backed his cart close to the open gash in the earth, so that it was hard up against the drop. Now, he stood beside it, like a showman at a fair. All around the edge, illuminated by the flames of the crackling bonfire, stood a motley group of citizens such as I never wish to see again. They were like the walking dead themselves, battered and bedraggled beyond humanity.

“Show us your wares!” shouted one, an old man with bullfrog eyeballs bulging from his skull.

“Yes, do you worst. Let’s see what ingredients we can put into our pot!” shouted a young bawd, pale and hollow-cheeked, with a baby at her breast and a small child clutching at her skirts with its skinny arms. The bawd was swaying, and shaking, and I saw it would not be long before she would tumble down herself. I looked into the grave, and at first could see nothing, for the pit was twenty or thirty feet deep, and the fire cast little light into its depth. But when I looked closer, I saw that what at first seemed like gravel and stones in the shadows was a muddle of hands and feet and faces, piled and confused and tangled. The bawd was right: the grave was a cauldron and this was human stew.

“Now then, now then, ladies and gentlemen, babes and children, all,” said the carter, clapping his filthy hands to win the attention of the crowd. “This is a good night, and good business. Sixpence I get for each of these deadmen, which you are

about to see before you. The more of them, the better my breakfast. The Lord God is truly shining his light upon me.”

“Praise God in his wisdom,” shouted some ague-addled fool.

The carter went to his plague-carriage and fetched the first corpse. It was the body of a big, wide-set man, of maybe twenty years or so. (This was hard to tell as its face was grey and twisted and corrupted with sores.)

“Here’s a fine fellow,” said the carter. “Wave at your attendants, good sir!” He flopped the hand of the deadman at the watchers. “We all know that worms need no apparel, saving only winding sheets. So – let us take off what needs to be taken off.” He dropped the corpse down, removed the doublet, and felt inside the pocket. “Oh indeed, my Maker blesses me once more!” He waved a leather bag before us, and dropped the contents into his palm. “Seven pieces of silver! I am near as rich as Judas! Thank you, sir!” And with that, he kicked the poor fellow into the grave.

Next, he produced a naked baby. “Nothing to speak of this small fry,” he said, holding it up by one leg. “And I can see it has no pockets.” He tossed it in to the pit, smiling as he did so.

I glanced at William. His face was clenched, as if he was willing himself to stay silent. I thought this wise. The dead were dead, I reasoned, and God himself would deal with this man when he met his end.

But here was something different, and which seemed to interest the fellow more than either of the first two bodies. He lifted up a young girl from the cart, aged sixteen or seventeen years. She was a veritable Juliet with long, pale hair, as dainty and beautiful a young virgin as you could wish for. And she was still dressed in a fine gown, the ruff standing half off, like a torn petal.

“Oh-ho,” said the carter. “Oh-ho, again the Lord has showed me favour! What form of patient goddess have we here? Death is greedy. He takes this plump peach for his own and ravishes it like any hungry lover.” And with this he turned the girl round, so her head and shoulders flopped down and she was bent double before him, then lifted her skirts and pretended to hump her from behind. There were calls and cheers from the crowd.

But he had not finished yet. “Let’s have a look at her fine titties,” said the carter, dropping the body down. “Would she had been so pliant in the life. Would that I could have tiptoed into her bedchamber, and shagged her while she breathed. Never mind, I’ll have her now.” With this he began to unlace her bodice, but finding it stiff, he tore at the fabric, muttering to himself. After a moment, he hauled her to her feet, facing us, with her small breasts revealed. “Who wants a lick of these fine dugs?” he called. “Come on, I’ll make my price on this excellent bitch. Sixpence for one lick, a shilling for two. Or...”

We never heard what else he had in mind. Out of the night, out of nowhere, a figure came rushing towards him, running so fast that at first I could not see if it was man, woman or child. But I could see a dagger, flashing in the firelight.

“Aaggh – you shall die, you stinking Devil!” screamed a voice, and there was a mighty roar from the carter, the dead virgin dropped into the pit, and blood splurged to the ground. For a second, in the darkness, I did not recognise the small figure that tussled with the bloody carter, who had fallen to his knees. But only for a second.

“Henry!” I shrieked. “Henry, in the name of God!” I rushed round the edge of the pit, wielding my torch like a pikestaff and pushing the watching ghouls out of my way. But William ran faster, wielding his sword, and pulled the sobbing Henry away.

“Henry! Henry! Stop this at once!”

“Henry!” I screamed, and caught him in my arms.

“Now fly – go!” shouted William, and he and Dekker faced the carter, with drawn swords and torches in hand. But the rabble, deprived of their sport, were shouting and coming closer. The carter lunged at Will, and he thrust the burning torch at his beard. It caught light and flames leaped up around his blackening face. The crowd began to run at us, and we turned and fled towards the cart. I was clutching Henry’s hand as we ran. Dekker got there first, and then we threw ourselves upon it and he whipped up the old mare and she lurched forward. Before the crowd could reach us she had lumbered to a canter over the uneven grass. The cart rocked and swayed and the plague-dead flopped around behind us.

Dekker laughed wildly and said: “My God, we’ve escaped Hell, my friends! We’ve seen Death, plain as a pikestaff, and we have got away!”

But Will said nothing. His eyes were fixed on Henry.

When I dared I looked behind me, the bonfire was growing smaller in the distance, and the cries of the crowd were fading, and I held my son so tightly in my arms that they began to ache.

Scene VIII

Henry slept till noon the next day, ate some bread and drank some ale, then slept again till evening. When I went up to see him, he was lying in our bed, eyes open, looking thoughtfully at the embroidered hangings.

“I shall be good from now on,” he said.

“Wise boy.”

“I shall fit myself for Heaven.”

I shivered, and went over to close the window. “You have plenty of time for that,” I said. “You will be an old man, all bent, with a white beard down to your knees.”

Further along the street, they were closing up another plague house. The carpenters were smoking tobacco pipes and leaning planks of wood against the house front. A topless cross of St Anthony (like so: “T”) was painted in red on the wall to the right of the front door. The carpenters worked calmly and slowly, as if taking pride in their craft.

“I shall fit myself in any case.” Henry smiled at me, so sweetly. “I would have killed the plague man if I could, so it’s good I wasn’t able to, or I would be a murderer.”

“It was very good we stopped you. Now, would you like a gingerbread man? Joan has been baking.”

“I’m not hungry.”

A spasm of fear in my guts. Henry was always hungry.

“Just a little?” I said. “Just a tiny bit? I could break you off an arm or a leg?”

“No, I will sleep again now.”

“Good.” There were tears behind my eyes. “Good boy.” I smoothed his brow, and he closed his eyes.

*

When I went back, half an hour later, with a cup of small beer, I touched his forehead, the little scar above his eyebrow where he had fallen from the window when trying to skewer a raven on his sword. He was slightly warm. Perhaps he would be well by morning, running into the kitchen demanding bake-meats and a farthing.

I stroked his face, and kissed his closed eyelids. Not a single lash would be harmed; not a grubby toenail. I would stand between him and all that could threaten his safety. I would turn the plague from my door. I would face down the spectre of the Reaper, and cast it out, and it would limp away down the road, dark robe flapping, until it vanished. My head was aching, and when I shut my eyes, I could see the Reaper’s crow-form, black on red. I got into bed beside him and began to pray, mouthing the words silently so that only God would hear them. But something was wrong, my mind was blanked with dead walls, and the ache of my head beat against them. The prayer I wanted would not come, only the litany:

“O God the Father of Heaven: have mercy on us miserable sinners.” And then the response from the congregation. A thousand whisperers in my head, beneath the bed, behind the wainscot like black rats: *“O God the Father of Heaven: have mercy on us miserable sinners.”*

I tried again, seeking the prayer against the pestilence. But only said: “O God the Son, Redeemer of the world: have mercy on us miserable sinners.” And there they were the voices again, but this time it was the rats alone I heard: *“O God the Son, Redeemer of the world: have mercy on us miserable sinners.”*

The tears ran down my cheeks. Where was God? How could He hear me, down among the carrion and filth? “O God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son: have mercy on us miserable sinners.” The rats were ready for me: *“Have mercy on us miserable sinners.”*

I raised my head, and listened. Silence, all around me, save for the rasp of Henry’s breath. There was another verse, what was the verse? I closed my eyes tight, tight, so there was no space for the Reaper, and bunched my hands together so the nails dug into the backs of my hands. *“Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers; neither take thou vengeance of our sins: spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou has redeemed with thy most precious blood, and be not angry with us for ever.”*

And then came the rats: *“Spare us, good Lord.”*

Then I slept, and in my dreams I felt the flames of Hellfire, rising up from the plague pit and licking the feet of the watchers. They flocked like patterned starlings against the roaring sky. When I woke, with a start, the flame still burned me, and I shrank away from it. My hand touched Henry’s arm – flung out on the top of the covers - and I gasped, for his skin was burning hot. I bent to look at him. His eyes were half open, and his breathing shallow. I pushed back his hair, and it was soaking wet, as if he had been out in the storm with me.

“Mother,” he said. His voice was clear but small.

“What, my little one?” I touched his cheek with trembling fingers.

“Take my head away.”

“How can I, silly boy, when it’s stuck fast to your neck?” There were tears on my face, and a raging pain behind my eyes. Was it his pain, or mine? I could not be sure.

“It aches me. It’s grown too big. You could tear it off and take it to the Bridge, and spike it up high, and the wind and air would cool me.”

“Don’t speak of such...”

“I could see all the orchards of Kent, and the village ponds, and the hop fields and the apple trees going on and on till they reached the sea.”

“Henry! My love, my little love...”

“And then I could see the wild waves, and mermaids, and then France, and Venice after that, and then Constantinople and Ethiopia, where the dragons are ten fathoms long. My head is no good here.” He looked at me, and started. “But you’re not my mother.”

“Yes, I *am*, dearest chuck. For good or ill, you have no other.” I gathered him to me, and held his quivering form against my chest.

“But you are old,” he whispered. “My mother is young, and beautiful.”

“My sweet boy, I am still your mother!” I wondered where my light tone came from, when I was brim-full of fear. I talked as if the fairyland he described was real, and the open grave of London just a dream.

“No.” His eyes closed. I rocked him, as I had when he was a baby. For this child, I had lost everything: Will’s love, Hunsdon’s protection and my place at court. I had sacrificed wealth and position and the only life I knew. And I had never wished it otherwise, not for one second, no matter what befell me. He was my son, my only child. There is no transaction to be made with such a love. I wished now I could pass all the goodness and strength in my own body through to him. Save him, Lord! Save him! I searched again for the right prayer, and this time came upon the words “*Deus, Deus meus,*” then the Latin faded to English and I cried out:

“My God, my God, look upon me; why has thou forsaken me: and art so far from my health, and the words of my complaint? O my God, I cry in the daytime, and in the night season also, I take no rest...”

There was a blank, then I tried again:

“All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out their lips, and shake their heads, saying, She trusted in God, that would deliver her, let Him deliver her, if he will have her... O go not from me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help me!”

But my voice rose to a monstrous wail, a she-wolf howling at the moon. This was not the prayer I needed. Where was the prayer I was looking for, the spell that would summon the LORD? I stared up at the carved roof of the four-posted bed, and the brightly coloured waves and fishes heaved and shifted.

Then I saw that Henry’s eyes were fixed on me again. “I’ve learned my lessons, Mother, don’t beat me!”

“My son, what are you saying? *Who* beats you?”

His eyes were blank and staring. “I’ve learned it well, the lesson. That all things have their situation, and must remain in that place. All things in creation, fixed, like stars.”

“Rest, sweet baby, it doesn’t mean a jot.”

“Of fish: carp, cod, dace, dog-fish, shark, eel, gudgeon, herring. And then the porpoise.”

“Henry...”

“Of creeping things – worm, serpent, adder, blindworm, slug and snail. And then the lizard and the gilded newt.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but could make no sound.

“Of flies... house fly, blue-bottle, flesh-fly, louse and sheep tick. And then the... merry flea.” He closed his eyes and I kissed the fluttering lids.

“That is enough, now. The schoolmaster will be pleased with you. All God’s creation. In its place.”

He sat upright. “But mother, I have not done the dogs! The dogs must take their places! Let me do the dogs!”

“Do the dogs, my child. Yes, please do the dogs.”

He lay down again, and spoke precisely, checking the words off on his damp fingers. “First the three ranks: Game dog. House dog. Toy dog.”

“Well said.”

“Of game dogs: spaniels and hounds. Of hounds, eight kinds: harriers, temurs, bloodhounds, gazehounds, greyhounds, lymnes, tumblers and thieves. Of spaniels, the water spaniel and the land spaniel, for falconry.”

Joan was standing at the doorway, like a spectre in her dun gown.

“It has come,” she said. “You should have called me.”

I scrambled out of the bed and ran to her, tripping and staggering as I went. I put my hand on her thin shoulder to steady myself. “He has a fever. That’s all. A touch of fever. We must give him something from your physick store. A draught - to take away the heat.”

Henry was not done yet. “Dogs of the homelier kind. Are either shepherd’s curs, or mastiffs, which can be...” He seemed to drift, then came back, his voice louder. “Barn-dogs. Tie-dogs. And watch dogs.”

Joan stared at him, her eyes wide with sorrow.

“And then... the toy dogs. Of the sort which lick a lady’s lips...”

His voice faded, until I heard the faintest sound of growling. “The mastiff is a proud dog. Three can match a bear, and four can eat a lion.”

Joan stared at my torn gown and tangled hair. “Lord save us,” said Joan. “Prepare yourself for the worst, mistress. God help the little fellow.” Her tone was kind, but I hated her hopeless words.

I got out of bed and replaited my untidy hair. “We must help him,” I said. “We must soothe the fever. Come now, you are the one with all the knowledge.”

She came close, and said in a low voice: “Mistress, I will help you all I can. But we must be brave. We must be ready. Half the people in this street have buried babes and children.”

I closed my eyes, to will her voice away.

She grasped my hands. “The Capulets - four doors down - had fourteen girls and buried nine. You know this as well as I do. The plague is not even the worst of it. Sweating sickness, drowning, hunting dogs, the pox. Five infants died in the baker’s fire just one week past. You can’t guard Henry against every danger, for all your care. But - God willing – he may yet live for threescore years and ten. Put your trust in the Lord.”

I pulled away. “Bring me what you have to cure him!”

“Willow tea might soothe him a little. But for the pestilence itself, there is no physick.”

“God’s blood, Joan, I thought you are a wise woman! What wisdom is this?”

“Only God in his mercy knows how to cure the pestilence.” And – so suddenly that I thought she had fallen - she sank down upon the rushes. Her hands were folded together, ready to pray. I ran barefoot from the chamber and down into the kitchen. The stillroom was next to the cupboard on which I kept what remained of my pewter.

(Alfonso had sold the rest of it.) It was lined with shelves, and barely big enough for a single person to stand up in. There she stored not only her potions and libations, but clear cakes of gooseberry, rose hip conserves, syrups of green quince and melon, pickled nasturtium buds, ashen keys, radish pods and broom buds - all stored in pots and capped with leather. Every manner of thing, in short, which Henry loved. I searched the shelves, my breath coming in queer sobs. Each pot had been labelled in his best italic hand: he and Joan would work together, she declaiming the name, and Henry the master of its writing down. There was feverfew for headaches and horehound for throats and coughs. Comfrey, spider web, foxglove, consoling lavender and poppy seed for pain. I grabbed at the pots and bottles, and flung them onto the trestle table. A jar of moss powder rolled over the edge of the table, and smashed to pieces on the stone-flagged floor.

“Calm yourself, mistress, you’ll do him no good that way,” said Joan’s voice.

I turned quickly, my head full of aches and murmurs. “I thought you had given him up for dead.”

She took down a jar of hemlock. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“There is always the hope of a miracle.”

Perhaps it was that solitary word that decided me: “miracle”. Joan’s powers were limited – she could not cure the plague. And if she could not, then I did not know what powers to call on to help my son: it was likely enough that none of them would help me. God did not love him as I loved him. The three witches could call on the power of the Devil, and the Devil loved no one. If the witches were using black magic, I would call on a Demon who I could control. I knew which demon controlled witchcraft, and the crossroads, where these witches dwelt. The ancient Greeks call her

Hekatos, others Hecate, a moon goddess, seen only as a glimpse of light. There was one man who might help me in this enterprise, and if the price of his power was a so-called “halek”, I would fuck him for his knowledge just as Anne Flood fucked Inchbald to keep a roof over her head.

“I am going out,” I said, putting on my cloak.

Joan looked up, startled. “What, and leave Henry at such a time? And where to, in Heaven’s name?”

“I will find a cure for him. You will nurse him well, I know.”

“You’re going alone?”

“Of course. Mind Henry, and if he asks for me, say I will be back before he knows it.”

She looked out of the window. “I pray to God you are true to your word. Be careful, mistress, and be quick.”

ACT IV

PHILOSOPHY

Scene I

As I hurried on my way, I saw the sky was lowering and pulled my cloak closer round me in the chilly air. The silent streets were grey and cold. As I passed Foul Lane, I saw a kite, pecking at the breast of a dead turtledove. The kite's beak was crimson with blood. When I approached, it rose up, squealing, and flapped its giant wings, and I shielded my eyes as it flew over my head.

Dr Forman had moved from his premises at London Bridge to Lambeth, so I had heard. I knew the place – a handsome new house on the outskirts of the village. Fortunately for me, it was on the southern shore almost directly opposite to Westminster. Unfortunately, both the weather and the plague might be against me. At the riverbank, I stopped, looking up and down at the silent boatyards. The quays were usually a riot of noise and activity, with boatmen and eel-men, shoutmen and shipwrights, tinkers and mariners, all working on the harbour side or on the water. But now the quays were silent, and the only noise I could hear was the wind rattling in the rigging of the empty ships. And all I could see was a solitary fellow casting a line out into the silver water. I hurried along to the stairs, where the wherry men were usually for hire. There was a single boat moored there, and a figure humped in the bows, hood pulled down low. The rain was lashing down now. I stumbled along to the stairs, and made my slippery way down.

As I approached, the hooded figure looked up. I saw it was a young woman, with a white face, perfectly beautiful except for her cheeks, which were hideously holed and pitted with smallpox scars.

“I am looking for a wherryman,” I said, unsure what she was doing there.

“Then you have found one.”

“Is your husband...?”

“Dead, and my children will follow him unless I earn some coins. Let me help you in.” She stood up with the sureness of any boatman, and handed me into the craft.

We set out for Lambeth steps, and as we went, I wondered about this woman, sensing that her desperation matched my own. “How many children do you have?”

She rowed strongly with her thin arms. “Six. The eldest cares for the younger ones. They are good children.”

“And did your husband die of the plague?”

The current was faster now, and she pulled for few strokes before replying.

“No, mistress. He was murdered.”

“Lord above! I am sorry to hear it.”

“Not I.”

I thought I had misheard her.

“Not who?”

“Not I. It would be a false sorrow, and I am not a false woman.” She rowed in silence for a while. She was not one for the wherry-man’s patter.

As the southern shore grew near, my curiosity got the better of me. “Do you know who killed him?”

She laughed, and looked me in the face for the first time. “I should say so.”

At the steps, I paid her fivepence. She gave me another curious look and said: “False, he called me. False, and I bore his children, and baked his bread and worked my life away for him. That great sotted oaf. If I’d lain with half the men he said I had, I’d be the biggest whore in Whitehall.”

“They see their own faults in us,” said I.

She stared, and I saw a shimmer of insanity in her face. “When I washed my hands, I knew it was all finished. It was just a little deed, and quickly done. It’s only when I sleep they are all dripping scarlet again, and I wash them and wash them – and the Thames runs red. I see the carp and salmon choking in his blood.” She smiled. “So I stay awake. I watch the moon go from one side of the sky to the other. Then the dawn comes, and blinds me with its light.”

The plague was driving us all mad. I scrambled up the steps. I could barely see my way, and went slipping and sliding over the stones of the path. My rain-heavy cloak pulled at my shoulders, and my hands were frozen. I looked around me, wishing I had a guide to show me the way. And then, I saw it. A dark building loomed out of the rain. It was surrounded by trees which waved and crashed in the wind. I waded through the mire and beat upon the door. The sound was unnaturally loud. A shock of lightning lit the sky.

No one answered. I stared up at the black windows, hoping to see a light. Dr Forman always stayed in London, even when most wealthy people fled the plague - he had told me so himself. He stayed to care for his patients. He must be there. I knocked again, hammering louder this time. Perhaps the pestilence had reached Lambeth? Perhaps the doctor and his family were all dead? No, no. I knocked a third time, then stopped and listened for the sound of footsteps on the other side. Silence. I took a step back. There must be another entrance. I went round the side of the house, half blinded by the wet strands of my hair. There was a door in a high wall. I opened it and stepped inside.

I was in an orchard. The high walls gave some protection from the wind, but none from the rain: the neat pathways between the apple and apricock trees were flooded like Venetian canals. I squelched across the grass, mud sucking at my feet,

until I reached one of the latticed windows. There was no light inside. I picked up a heavy stone from the path, and hurled it against the window. It crashed through the glass, shattering the stillness. A moment later, I saw a glow of candlelight in the window above. The window opened and Dr Forman's voice called out: "Who's there?"

"It's me. Aemilia Lanyer."

But the storm drowned out my words.

"What? Who? Be off with you!"

I shouted louder. "It's Aemilia! I have come to see you! I need your help – please let me in!"

Now he put on a quavering tone. "If it's Simon Forman you are after, he is gone to Cambridge. Go away, or I will call the Watch."

"Then call them, you poisonous toad! If they come as far as Lambeth. Tell them a bastard whore is smashing up his house."

With that, I picked up a second stone, as big as a fist, and threw it at another window. The leaded glass crashed into tiny pieces, and inside the room something fell. I prayed it was the heart of a unicorn preserved in a pot, or some other precious item.

"Stop that! Stop it!" Now he stuck his head out, and his beard blew sideways in the wind. "Come to the side door – see it? Down there, in the corner. Unseemly baggage! And come *quietly*."

"Quietly? Satan himself can't hear me in this storm."

"Shush! Shush! Lord help me! Aemilia, there is a price upon my head."

*

Simon Forman looked thinner and yellower than he had when I saw him last, and he had exchanged his flowing necromancer's gown for a stout doublet and plain hose. And instead of exuding serene understanding, he looked angry and ill at ease. For a moment he watched the servant who had appeared and was clearing up the broken glass. Then he righted the fallen object, which was nothing more magical than a lute.

Finally, he turned to me and said: "Really! House breaking and wanton destruction! Whatever would my Lord Hunsdon have said?"

There was rain running down my neck, and my shoes were full of water, but I barely noticed. Nothing seemed real but Henry's plight. "I believe he would have applauded it. He was a soldier, after all."

"God's teeth! I shall send you the bill! Whatever is the matter?"

"You told me to come to see you."

"So I recall. But couldn't you have made an appointment?"

"I'm not here to ask how my stars speak for romance. Henry has the plague. They say you cured yourself of it once, many years ago. Is that true?"

"Indeed it is."

"How did you do it?"

"Ah, well. Let us only say I have strong nerves, and much knowledge."

"Through necromancy? Through conjuration?"

"That is information which I will never share."

"I need to cure my child, and I don't mind how I do it, or what I do to find the knowledge."

The doctor appeared to have no sense of urgency. "No one knows how it is spread, though I, for one, do not believe it is the vapours," he said. "I put my money on 'rattus rattus', the common rat."

“Dr Forman, I don’t care if it’s spread by Gabriel and all the ministering angels. Please help me.”

He shut the consulting door behind the servant, and closed the wooden shutters over the broken windows before drawing the heavy curtains.

“Did you come alone?”

“Yes.”

“Were you followed?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You told no one your destination.”

“No one. Why?”

He poked at the embers of seacoal until they sparked into life. “The College of Physicians is trying to murder me. They’ve hired assassins. They nearly had me – twice. I’ve sent my family out of London. I am leaving myself in the morning.”

In spite of everything, this struck me as ridiculous. The august body of good doctors, paying murderers to finish off this poor old goat! All the world was upside down.

“I am sorry about your windows,” I said. “But I had to see you.”

“Well. You certainly know how to put yourself in harm’s way.” He drew up two chairs, and we sat down by the fire. “As to the power to stop the plague, did you read the pamphlet I gave you?”

“Every word. It is an account of the degrees of witchcraft. I understand what it is saying. And I know what I want to do. I need something more tangible – a spell for conjuration.”

“For the conjuring of what, precisely?”

“Of a demon which can help me – what else would it be?”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Are you really prepared to dabble in that art?” he asked. “To conjure evil?”

“Yes, I am,” I cried. “If God won’t help me, then I will settle for the other side.”

He thought for a moment. “Hmm. It is true that it may be an efficacious way of dealing with the curse.”

“What curse?” I thought of the witches, and the foul visions that they had called up.

“That is what I saw in your hand and in your stars when you came to see me. I believe there is some old score to settle. An unpaid debt, something owed by your father.”

“Such as his soul – can you owe such a thing?”

Forman poked the fire and watched the spark flare up the chimney. “I have discovered something. You are not the first person in your family to visit me, Aemilia.”

“No? Who else have you seen?”

“Your mother, Margaret Johnson. A clever, but unlearned woman, and not anything like as beautiful as you.”

“She came for your predictions?”

“She wanted my advice. She told me all about your father, and his mysterious death. She said that when he came from Venice, he was a good musician, but not a brilliant one, and there were others in his family who had more virtuosity. He was the youngest of six brothers, and always felt that he was in their shadow. Then, he was lost in a storm one Twelfth Night, up Tyburn way. He claimed to have no memory of what had happened when he came home the next day, with his clothes torn and his

eyes starting from his head. But after that, he played the most extraordinary tunes, composed, sang, arranged – his talents seemed God-given. And then after one year – exactly one year, mind - he refused to play again.”

“He stopped playing? But... why did I never hear of this?”

“She told no one.”

“But...I remember him playing all the time! So well! So wonderfully!”

“That may be because he was murdered just one full moon after he’d ceased playing. Murdered in cold blood, by assailants that vanished like moonshine, and were never seen again.”

“O Jesu!” I said. “I saw it happen. So he broke his bargain with the witches.”

“We shall never know,” said Forman. “Murderers are skilled at disappearance, such is their modesty about their craft. They may have been as corporeal as you or me.”

“But my mother didn’t think so?”

“She was afraid. She had him buried quietly, and told no one of his violent end. No one but myself. It’s a strange tale, certainly.”

“What I do know is that these witches have some grudge against me, and have sought me out.”

“Perhaps they believe the debt has yet to be settled.”

“And now my child has the plague.”

“God protect him,” said Forman.

“Supposing God has other business?”

He watched the firelight. “Summoning a demon. Hmm. I’ve heard of men driven insane by such an enterprise. One student ran stark mad in the streets, and when they went to his room they found a demon as big as an oak tree wedged inside,

with its wings pressing against the ceiling and its tail up the chimney. Amateur necromancy is dangerous.”

“I’d die for Henry, a thousand times.”

“God willing, you won’t even have to die once. But might I suggest that next time you require a special favour, you refrain from destroying the property of those whose good will you seek?”

Shivering, I stretched my wet feet out towards the fire. The wind howled down the chimney and beat against the shutters. “Just tell me what I need to do. I’ll halek with you, if that’s what you want.”

He laughed, weakly. “Oh Aemilia! How many times I have dreamed you would say that! And then you choose a time when fear has sapped all my manhood.”

“Then tell me anyway.”

He sighed and went over to his writing table, which was piled with books. “Cornelius Agrippa – now, there is an interesting fellow,” he said, taking up a volume. “You have heard of him?”

“No.”

“He believes the woman to be – in *some* respects – the superior to the male. He cites a great list of those favoured by God, from Eve to Mary Magdalene. Strange, strange views.”

“He sounds like a sensible man to me.”

“I’m sure he does. Now, were I to share such opinions, I could pass on what I know to you. All my knowledge, all my secrets. The wisdom of Paracelsus, the learning of Dr Dee. All over Europe, great men are lost in alchemical research, and I would appraise you of it, just as I tell a new maid how to lay the fire.”

“But you do not share his view.”

“I do not.”

“Why? Because a woman is for haleking, and nothing more?”

“Now you are insulting me. You know I have always respected your intelligence. However, a woman can no more become a cunning man than she can become a priest. It is not my doing, it is the natural order of things.”

“But supposing the natural order of things is wrong?” I asked. “Supposing – with our God-given minds – we can see where nature can be improved upon? If we were to accept what ‘is’, without question, why cure disease? Why seek to better anything?”

The doctor looked irritable. “It is a matter of degree.”

“Good. Because I don’t want to be a necromancer. I only want to save my child – as natural a desire as anyone could wish.”

“I do not see how I can help you.”

“If you can’t, then who can? You are my last hope!” I stood up. “What am I to do? I loved a man, who damned me for a whore. Where am I to go? I am not allowed to be a lady, nor a poet, nor free, nor safe from the plague. How shall I go on? I am not allowed to do anything, in this stinking city of ours. Where does that leave me? My sole treasure is my beloved son. I will go now, since you are minded to find my sufferings amusing...”

Simon shook his head. “You always did get the better of me. So be it.” He poured out some ale from a leather flagon on the table. “Have a drink, will you, and sit down. Let me tell you about the plague, so you will better understand your enemy.”

He unfurled some papers and documents that were lying on his table, and showed me the finely scripted writing of a monk summoned by his stricken brethren, and the scrawl of a wealthy merchant, returning from a plague town.

“You see all this,” he said. “Whole towns were emptied, from Medina to Avignon, from Rome to Bruges. No one can tell how many died, for those who kept the parish records perished too. They thought the world was ending. We may think so again. But the world will continue on its way.”

“I don’t care.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What, if the world ends?”

“If Henry dies, there is no world for me.”

The doctor did not reply. He rolled up his documents and placed them neatly in a wicker basket which he stowed beneath his writing table.

“Dr Forman? Are you listening?”

He shook his head. “Aemilia! Aemilia! I have a great, tall son of my own, a fine lad, Joshua. I would die for him, as you would die for Henry. But we do not have the right.”

“So will you help me? Or won’t you?”

He gave me a wily look, as if he had made a decision. “Come... come... follow me...” he said. “I will do you the honour of showing you my cellar. Even my own wife has not had been so fortunate. Indeed, she is the last person in on earth to whom I would expose to the sights that I will show you now.”

He took a bunch of iron keys from a hook by the door, and led the way out of the consulting room and across the stone-flagged hall. Taking a rush lamp from the wall he said: “Carry this, and light our way. No matter what you see, do not drop this

lantern. Otherwise we will never get out. It's dark as the pit of Hades down there. And to my knowledge, there is nothing to match my discovery west of Constantinople."

He unlocked the cellar door with the largest key. The heavy door swung into blackness and revealed a flight of stone steps, descending into the void.

Scene II

I followed him down the stairs, my bare feet chilled by the damp stone. The torch lighted the scuffs and stains on his old doublet, and the looped cobwebs on the dusty ceiling which was close above us. My mind was fixed on Henry at Long Ditch, watching my sleeping boy, desperate to know how he was. If only I could be two women, in two places! That would be a trick worth knowing. These thoughts were leaping in my head, just as the flames leaped and flared against the walls.

At the bottom of the stairs, the cellar opened out, there was space around us on all sides, and a deathly cold. The doctor set his own candle down on a rough wood table, and turned to face me.

"Well, my dear, here we are." His smiled, but his tone was curt. I suspected that he was afraid.

I looked around. The torchlight showed a vast chamber, so great that I could not see where it ended. We were standing in a pool of light, edged with what seemed like boundless dark. There were no instruments or mysterious artefacts to be seen, only a stack of dusty wine bottles, half-seen in the shadows.

"Is this your secret?" I looked around me, my nostrils full of smoke fumes. "That your cellar is the size of a bear pit?"

He turned his head to admire the darkness. “I needed space, you see, and room for... room for...” He tailed off, as if his thoughts had got the better of him.

“For what?”

“*Experiments.*”

“Save your riddles, Dr Forman. I want to see what you are hiding in this place.”

He picked up the candle again. I saw that what I had taken for a table was a large wooden chest, big enough for an ogre to keep his sheets in. He placed the candle on the ground, and opened the chest. I peered inside. To my surprise, it contained yet another flight of steps, hewn out of the earth. There was a soft, cool scent: the smell of turned soil.

“What! Do you plan to bury me down here!”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he said. He took up the candle, climbed over the side of the chest, and began to descend. “Whatever do you take me for? Come along! Follow me.”

I scrambled down quickly, slithering on the earth steps. When I reached the bottom, I found myself in a narrow chamber, barely big enough for the two of us to fit inside. It was cramped and filled with so many glass jars and parchment rolls and brass instruments and all manner of weird objects that I was forced to keep my arms close to my sides. Unlike Doctor Forman’s public consulting room, which was neatly furnished and handsomely appointed, this was slipshod and disordered, as if this was where he let his mind to run free, pursuing various queer lines of enquiry. And it was furnished with a most outlandish range of objects, some of which I could barely name. There were all manner of cups and vessels, made of metal, stone or glass; a round oven, topped with a brass alchemist’s kettle; and next to it, suspended from the ceiling

like a great globe, a cow's swollen bladder, smelling sickly sweet. Now he was here, the doctor seemed scarcely aware of my presence. Mumbling to himself, he went over to a desk crammed against one wall and spread out some parchments, pushing sundry oddments out of the way. These included the shrivelled corpse of a half-grown mouldiwarp and what looked like the beak of a little duck (a mallard?) There was also a mirror, of polished black obsidian; a jar of loose teeth; a crystal ball, big as a smith's fist and a dismembered thumb resting in a glass. (Quite pink, as if newly severed.) I held the torch up and tried to see what he was reading.

"There is much evil in this world, he said, trailing his finger down some strange hieroglyphic signs. "But I tell you what excites me."

"That you can use sorcery to gain mastery."

He shot me a quick look. "No, my dear, what excites me is that our minds might be the means of our escape."

"More riddles."

"Magicians are earth bound, human, lumps of clay. Ordinary beings, for all our talk of necromancy, all our books. Diseases – like the plague – can carry us off, just as easily as any other mortal. We might as well be stool-boys or dairymen. Yet... we can call on some higher state – call upon the planets and the stars – whose sublime powers might influence our sublunary world."

"They could cure the plague?"

"If one were to find the philosopher's stone, it could cure all diseases, as well as transmute base metal into gold."

"But you have not found it."

"Not *quite*, no."

"But a demon might do the same task? Don't they say so?"

“You wish to learn how to summon a demon. I am reluctant to give you the means to accomplish such an end.”

“I wish to save my son,” I said, again, dogged and determined.

“For a price, a demon might do anything you ask. But this is dangerous and difficult. You know what happened to Faustus. Eternal damnation is a high price to pay for parlour games.”

“Faustus was foolish.” I looked down at the mass of signs and symbols.

“Show me.”

He covered the numbers with his hands, though he need not have been so cautious, as none of it made any sense to me. “It is perilous. There is devilment here. This knowledge is not like some simple tincture, applied to a seeping wound. Remember, we are going above our station. Entangle your spirit with an angel in the heavens, and you will be consumed in fire by their burning righteousness. Tamper with the power of demons and God help you. Or rather, He will not. Such a direct contact would destroy your fragile body, and imperil your immortal soul.”

“So – all your studies have led to this conclusion? That it’s dangerous to take a single step?”

“Quite the reverse.” He shook his head, fiercely, as if my dullness was too much to bear. He closed his eyes and began again. “A man’s learning is the distillation of the thinking of a great institution, the riches of the libraries of Oxford or Cambridge or Tubingen.”

“A man! So be it. Perhaps a woman may be more whole-hearted.”

“Will you *listen* to me, Aemilia? Will you *hear* me?”

“My son might die this night for all I know. I have no time for lectures on philosophy.”

“This is no lecture, mistress. This is the stuff of wisdom. Agrippa, that great genius, used the natural elements to tell the future. Earth, fire, water, air. The manufacture of objects – talismans, potions, and rings. The summoning of angels and demons to work miracles on his behalf...”

“So summon me one! Quick! And I will bear it home to serve me.”

He sighed. “There you are, you see? Your impatience is proof of your weakness. You grabble after small things, won’t wait to be wise. A woman cannot think as a man can think. She is of her nature ruttish, light-minded, and with one eye on her looking glass.” He pointed to the obsidian mirror, and there I was, staring out at myself, wild and woebegone.

My hand twitched: I would have liked to strike him. But I kept silent, watching as he rifled inside a wicker basket before producing another clutch of parchment rolls. He unfurled one, flattened it out on top of the other documents on his desk, and proceeded to examine column after column of tiny black calculations, intricate numbers piled one on top of the other, till they sprouted more numbers and still more, like lampblack frogspawn.

“What I am trying to say is that a witch can summon a demon blindly, hocus pocus, with no understanding of her art. A magician may do the same thing with the knowledge to control this power. A demon is no more magical, perhaps, than a volcano or a lightning-storm. We simply know less about it.”

“We know very little about lightning-storms, come to that,” said I.

“Copernicus knew the Earth revolves around the Sun, but he did not tell us why the sky is rent with light before a thunder clap.”

“Here, you see...” He nodded me closer. “Here is the equation required merely to ascertain the first letter of the first name of the lowliest demon in all of Hell.”

I studied the loops and curlicues, wishing I could commit them to memory as they said Kit Marlowe used to.

Dr Forman touched the numbers lightly, as if they might sting. “Theophilus and Cyprian gambled with their immortal souls in the quest for knowledge of this kind. As you will know, being a woman of education and much reading. Death is not the worst we have to fear.”

“Don’t lecture me as if I was an infidel! I know Cyprian cast angels down from the heavens, and only Our Lady could save Theophilus from his wickedness and pride. Hell is as real to me as a garden gate.”

He pulled out another page, and bent close to look at it. “The ignorant seek miracles. Priests, in their expedient wisdom, seemed to bestow as much. There’s many a country church with an ass-bone on the altar, said to be the lost rib of a broken saint. Before Good King Henry swept away such falsehood, this land was steeped in lies and incense.”

He seemed to have found what he was looking for. He stared at a long calculation, took two vials of liquid and poured them into a long glass retort, thin as a reed at one end and spherical at the other. Did my eyes trick me, or did the two substances hold back, one from the other, till they mingled with a sullen hiss? “Scarcely a town in the realm that could not offer its good burghers a blood-weeping Virgin or a sweetly nodding martyr. No surprise to anyone that the little fish swam shorewards to hear the preaching of St Anthony, or that the Virgin at Sargossa could make half a leg grow whole again.” He broke off and looked at me. “Magic, you see.

Magic. Whereas what I'm about is *science*. If I show you what I have hidden here, you must swear that you will never tell another soul."

"I swear."

"Good. Because nobody would believe you anyway. This is the last night my discovery will remain here."

"Why?"

"You are asking me to help you summon a demon. The demon in question is Hecate, who is the superior demon what you might call that discipline – the school of witchcraft."

"Indeed, I am more than asking you! I am begging you!"

He pulled a stout chest out from underneath the desk and unlocked it. Very carefully, he lifted out a long, narrow object, shrouded in a black velvet cloth, embroidered with a pattern of silver stars. "The point is, my dear, that the giving of life is a heavy responsibility. Just as any mother knows."

"What's this?" I whispered. Something prickled my neck, as if a spirit walked. I glanced at his little alchemy oven. "Have you turned base metal into gold?"

"Almost," said Forman. "Or, you might even say that this achievement is the greater, since there is one thing in this world more precious even than gold." He rested his trembling hands on the draped velvet.

"Diamonds? Rubies?"

"Life itself." He pulled the cloth aside.

My hands flew to my face and all the breath went out of me. The shape was that of a tube of glass, about foot in length, and no wider than my wrist. There, lying peacefully inside, was a little man. Not an infant, but an adult, full-formed male, well-made and (for his scale) well-hung. For he was naked as Adam in the Garden of Eden.

His limbs were pale as the moon, the little muscles of his body all most perfectly aligned. He was sound asleep, his head resting on the crook of one arm for a pillow, his yellow beard shifting gently as he snored, silent in the glass. My belly cold, I looked at the doctor, and back at the manikin.

“What foul sorcery is this?” I whispered.

“Not sorcery, though fools will think it so. It is the higher magic - the crown of an alchemist’s craft.”

“You *made* him?”

“Indeed.”

“But...I don’t understand how this is possible. You are either God himself, or you are...the father of this little fellow.”

“As you say, I made him.”

I looked again at the baby-man in his transparent cradle. “It’s monstrous – terrible. He is quite alone in his glass prison. Who will rear him? Who will suckle him? How can this be the crown of *anything*?”

“This required great study, let me assure you.” He was studying the newly mixed liquid as it shivered and shifted at the swollen end of the retort. “He is the fruit of a mandrake root and the semen of a hanged man’s last ejaculation.”

I could hardly breathe for the horror of it. “So that’s what you are: Satan’s midwife!”

“The root was picked before dawn on a Friday, by a black dog bred for the purpose. I washed it and kept it in a pot of milk and honey. Each day I dripped in the blood of a stillborn. And he grew and grew - to this.”

“God above! Can he speak, think, pray? Is he a man?”

“He is a homunculus.” He lowered the retort, and regarded the sleeping form.
“I feed him on earthworms and lavender seeds.”

“May heaven forgive you! This is your science?”

“I have my natural children, through the pleasures of the flesh, and now I have him, through the power of my thinking.”

I rolled my eyes. All I could think of was my little Henry, when I first saw him, his tiny wrinkled face and elvish hands, and how I feared that being so new he might go back from this earth to wherever he had come from, and stay there for another eternity. And now...now that eternity was looming at his feet.

“Oh, most noble and erudite scholar! Most respectable philosopher! The Devil himself could not concoct a more vile experiment than this.” Scrutinizing the face of the sleeping creature, I looked for a clue to the working of his mind. Did he dream, I wondered? If he opened his eyes, would he see the two of us, our giant’s faces with pores the size of leper’s sores, boggling at him from the sky?

“He is my brain-child.” The doctor frowned, drawing down his ginger brows.
“My invention.” I saw that he was distancing himself from his creation with cold words.

I pressed my hands to my mouth, feeling bile rising in my throat. “Dear Lord, what are you saying? This is wicked, wicked blasphemy!” My raised voice must have woken the creature, for his eyes opened suddenly, and he raised his head to look at me. He frowned, and shook his head, as if he was puzzled by the sight. And then he looked down at his naked dangling parts, and covered them with his two hands, as I’d seen Henry do when he was taking a bath and fancied Joan could see him.

“He is sensible!” I said. “He can hear me, and understand!”

Forman's face was set into a mask of disapproval. "Do not upset yourself, Aemilia, please. He is merely an experiment in knowledge."

"An experiment, you say?" I turned to him, shaking. "You call him your 'brain-child'. So you are his father, and his mother, too."

"Only in principle."

"But he is your own son! Look at him – he is quite perfect. He is a marvel! He is a *man*."

The homunculus smiled at me, so sweet, in his tiny cell. I wanted to snatch him up and take him home, this sweet Tom Thumb. I would have two boys then, to care for.

"Who is it, Mistress Lanyer, that wishes to summon demons to do her will? Ah, I forget myself. It is you! You cannot affect such squeamishness as this."

I swallowed acid-tasting puke. "I want to call up some power that could aid me, so that I can save a life!"

"Very modest."

"No sir, not modest. But rooted in my maternal love."

"There is no link between 'maternal love' and my vial-grown manikin," said the doctor. "You see – your female logic is askew."

"Jesu sir! If you made him, then you must take care of him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I am neither mother, nor father, to this manikin. I am its Creator."

"Dr Forman! Hear yourself. Do you put yourself so high? You'll bring damnation on your head."

He tore his gaze from the little man and looked at me. His eyes glittered with determination. “No. I will not be damned. Your theology is even weaker than your logic. What I have made is mine to destroy.”

“Isn’t our Lord the God of Love? ‘*Amor vincit omnia*’ – isn’t that what we were taught? Love conquers all. *Love*, not philosophy. Not science.”

There was a little sound, like a wren coughing. The manikin was pointing at me, still smiling. “*Amor vincit omnia*,” came a tiny voice. And he bowed his head.

Forman frowned, his face set into stern lines. “It’s all very well to speak of love. Latin can be quoted in any cause. I might just as well say – ‘*Vita incerta, mors certissima*’. Which has the virtue of being beyond dispute.”

“O, brave philosopher! ‘*There is nothing certain in life but death*’ What thoughts of genius are these! I believe my cat knows as much.”

“We do not inhabit some sprightly piece of verse, Aemilia, but the brute world. In which men die each day upon the street, faces black with plague. Or wriggle on the gibbet. And infants die in childbed, before they learn to speak their mother’s name.”

“Yes – but you can save him from such uncertainty! You can be a merciful God, not a cruel one!”

“And risk my own safety, and that of my family? No. Don’t you see? Those who accuse me of necromancy might find this little fellow interesting indeed. Now I know that I can create such a thing, I have no need to preserve it. My work is done.”

“You truly mean to kill him? Is this why you have brought me here, to watch him die?”

“I wanted to show you that tampering with life has consequences. And they are immense and terrible.”

“If you kill him, you do so because you choose to. You are sick in your soul, sir. Why do such a thing?”

“Because giving him life could be the death of me!” he cried.

I clutched my head, which ached with fury. Where were the words I needed? How could I persuade him? “If the Physicians find this little fellow, then share your knowledge with them, so they can learn from you and celebrate with you,” I said. “It is the birth of truly wondrous knowledge – this is a revelation!”

“You are too emotional. Like all women. It must not exist.”

“No! God forbid! You can’t mean it! Repent this evil now!”

“If the physicians discover him, they will have their proof that I am not a respectable practitioner of medicine, but a cozener, a conjurer of spirits.” His face twisted to a smile. “In short, no better than a witch.”

“Then hide him! Put him out of their reach.”

“There is no such place. What more secret place is there than this? They could be here at any time. And who knows they may find this chamber. Nowhere is safe.”

“Dr Forman...”

“You and I will never speak of it again.”

“But... what do you mean?”

He lifted up the manikin’s tube. “Like Drake, and Raleigh, I am sailing to the furthest reaches of what is known. But I have no craft to bear me; my craft is my cunning. Those brave explorers must contend with pirates, ice-flows, sea monsters and the raging oceans. I must fight with vain physicians, caught in their staircase world of weasel tricks and pompous place-men.”

“What torments do beset you, sir! This is all vanity, nothing but self-seeking vanity!”

“They will kill me if they can, don’t doubt it.”

My head was turning with all this. The little man filled everything, the wonder of him, and his dire conception. “You wouldn’t murder your own child! Listen, Dr Forman – Simon – I implore you! Look at his hands! He could pluck a caterpillar’s eyebrows, or groom a butterfly wing! Look at his tiny nose! How delicate might his senses be? You should feed him buttermilk and sweetmeats, see where his tastes lie! What does he hear? He might make music the like of which has never been heard in all of time, not even in the court of Solomon... You discoveries are only just beginning...”

“Silence!”

He came closer. I could see the blood-threads in his eyeballs. I took a step backwards, and pressed my body against the cold wall.

“Calm yourself,” I cried. “I’m only saying what anyone would. Man or woman, we are all part of Creation. And you have added to it! He is one of God’s creatures himself, now that you have made him. Surely you fear the wrath of God more than you fear the College of Physicians?”

“Aemilia Lanyer, you come here, breaking my windows, assaulting my privacy, when I am in fear of my life. This is my warning to you. Tamper with the natural order if you will, but expect to bear the consequences.”

“What consequences?”

The liquid in the retort shimmered against the glass. It was the colour of a cat’s eye, yellow flecked with topaz. “The high magic has its own logic. I gave him life...” He picked up the glass which held the homunculus and tilted it, then emptied the liquid out of the retort and into the open top till the homunculus was swimming in a yellow sea. Eventually, the glass tube brimmed with the golden liquid... “And I will

take it away.” He thrust a cork into place, sealing the tiny man into his translucent prison.

The little Adam coughed and heaved, his eyes wide open. He caught at his throat, convulsing. I saw his mouth scream open, and retch out scarlet as the poisoned liquid choked him.

“Simon!” I screamed. “For pity’s sake! Spare him!” I lunged toward the jar, but he knocked me to the ground. I was forced to watch as the homunculus squirmed and banged against the glass. Crouching like a dog, I spewed up on the ground.

“Let him go!” I cried, wiping my chin. “Let him live! Foul devil, Satan would be proud to call you his!”

“And yet you count yourself among the learned?”

“I count myself among the human!”

“What about Medea, and all her children? Or Lady Macbeth, who nagged her spouse to kill the king? Don’t you know your Holinshed? We are all murderers.”

The homunculus beat against the glass with his bird-fists. Was there a God, even for him? Or was the doctor all he had in the way of a Deity? There were no Bible words for this. I shut my eyes. Such a little thing, a child’s wooden doll was sturdier. The doctor uncorked the tube, picked up another glass jar, and tipped in the contents. This time the brew was a dark porridge, noxious as the shit in a ditch. It had an odour of incense mixed with the visceral stink of humankind. As the sick brew swirled into the amber liquid, it gurgled and bubbled, churning into black vapour which clouded the poor creature from my sight.

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I stared at the doctor, hardly able to believe what he had done. “Sweet Jesus,” I said. “You have crossed a threshold now that will lead you down to Hell! How could you do such a wicked thing?”

He paused while he shrouded the glass in the velvet cloth once more. “Be grateful for the warning, mistress,” he said finally. “If you were to make a study of this art for a thousand years, you would not know half what you have learned today. Be grateful, and be silent. Remember what you are.”

“Do not dare to give me orders!”

“Advice, mistress. Advice much needed by your gentle gender.”

I hardly knew where to put myself, such was my rage and disgust. “Listen, sir, my son is dying. There is no doubt of that, I am here for one reason only, and that is to save his life. But you have made me a witness to foul murder – to infanticide no less! That tiny creature was as helpless as a newborn babe.”

“How dare you speak to me like that, you jade!”

“If you were to study a woman’s heart till the world ended, you could not learn her wisdom. A drunken wet-nurse, supping ale, knows more than you.”

Forman closed his eyes. I saw how white his skin was, as if he spent long hours in this underground cell. “Don’t you understand? I would not have killed it if I had a choice! Don’t you see *anything*? I am trying to warn you! High magic is dangerous. The greater the potency, the more terrible the risk. They want that too, our gracious rulers. They don’t want rogue magicians undermining the proper order of things. The Queen asked Dr Dee to teach her his “tricks” – praise God she never managed to learn them, or he was too canny to tell her what he knew. James is fearful – he knows what witches are. Cunning men and country sorcerers, necromancers and wise women – all of us are playing a perilous game.”

“*Ergo*, you could not have kept the little man alive? Is this logic? Is this the wondrous working of the male mind? All your philosophy is worth not a hen’s peck of human kindness. I want nothing more to do with you, sir, nothing!”

And I snatched up a candlestick and ran back up the first flight of steps - into the looming cellar - and then the second, stumbling over my wet skirts. When I reached the hall again, I blinked in the light of the dancing lantern-flames, and was surprised by the sound of the fierce gale that raged outside, screaming down the chimney and into the fire place, and puffing out soot like clouds of black flour. I ran into Forman’s study. There was no time to lose – I could hear his footsteps coming up the stairway. I looked around me. There was no time to think, only act. What could I take? What could I use? I saw Cornelius Agrippa’s grimoire, snatched it up and hurried through the hall. Then I unbolted the great door and ran into the stormy night.

Scene III

Joan was sitting at the kitchen table when I returned, still as a cat watching a trout pond. She hurried to me and helped me out of my sopping cloak.

“Henry?” I cried.

“He lives,” she said. “He lives.”

“Oh, praise God!” I saw the look on her face. “But...?”

“He’s worse.” She saw the Agrippa book that I had clutched to my chest and I gave it to her. When she opened it, I saw that the words, which had been plain as day at Forman’s, had now formed themselves into indecipherable squirls and curlicues. The book was useless to me. I groaned out loud.

Joan stared at the writing. “I heard of such a book, but never thought to see it.”

“As you can’t read, how do you know if you’ve heard of it!”

She set it down upon the table. Her eyes were very still, as if she was judging the height of a wall before leaping over it. “I can tell you what it’s called because I don’t need eye-reading for this.”

“*Eye-reading?* What other kind is there?”

She touched the words on the cover. “It’s called *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*. A Bible of the purest evil. Is this what you have brought to cure him?”

“Mother! Help me! I’m burning. I’m freezing...” And there was Henry, at my side, flushed dark, foul breathed, eyes rolling backwards before he fell into my arms.

“Henry!” I cried. “Henry! My darling boy!” I held him to me. The whites of his eyes shimmered under his lashes.

Joan pulled his nightshirt back. She shook her head and showed me.

“There, see, top of his leg. Tucked in the crease.”

A boil, blood red.

“Plague sore,” said Joan. She crossed herself.

I kissed his hair and rocked him. “God *must* spare him!” I said.

“Why should he be spared, and not all the other poor souls? Lord bless the little fellow.” Her eyes searched mine. “We can only pray. Some *do* survive.”

The room was swaying, the walls shimmering with fever. Sweat was running down my back and Henry’s body throbbed against mine.

“Death is here! Death is in the house!” Henry was staring at something behind me, as the Queen had done.

I turned to look, half believing that the grinning spectre might indeed be gazing down at me. There was nothing, except a wall hanging showing good Susanna and the elders. The two old lechers leered at her over a garden wall. She was draped, white and naked, against the steps down to the blue water. I tried to say, “It’s just a fever, my love. You will soon be well.” But I was drowned by the sound of a woman sobbing. I realised the sobs were mine.

“He’s come for me! He’s come for us all!” And with that he vomited up all down his skinny chest and over my wet chemise, and such a stench I never knew. We washed him clean, and laid him down on the bench against the wall. I went upstairs

and changed into a clean nightgown, and I couldn't remember a single prayer, not one, beyond "Our Father" and then silence.

*

All night he raged and puked, and soon there was nothing left inside him, only bile. I feared that if he heaved once more he would be as empty as an embalmed carcass. I lay next to him, my eyes wide and dry now, watching, watching. I hardly knew if I lived or died, only that he was beside me, and I must guard him, hold him close to the earth with my eyes. Joan scattered rose leaves and bathed his body in sweet waters, and applied a poultice to his brow. She might as well have sung him nursery rhymes and done a hop, skip and a jump for all the good it did. He writhed and tossed and jabbered wicked-sounding words. I held his hand tightly in mine, in case he ran mad and naked into the windy street. After many hours, he fell into a twitchy stupor, talking to himself while he tossed and turned.

At the very darkest hour of the night, Joan gave me a cup of ale. I propped myself on one elbow and lugged it down, wondering at its strange and bitter taste. She rested on a stool by the bedside and drained her own cup to the dregs. The blackness of the night seemed to press against the candle flame. I heard a mournful howling outside. Each long drawn note seemed more doleful than the last, and grew ever louder, till at last I said to Joan:

"Go and throw something at that hound, I cannot bear it."

Joan gave me one of her looks. "Don't you know what that is?"

"A dog, Joan, howling in the night."

"There are no dogs left. They've all been hanged and skinned for purses. The creature outside is not a thing of flesh and bone."

“Haven’t we troubles enough, without these old tales?”

There was the howl again, most dreadful. It seemed to echo inside my aching head. I ran to the window and threw it open. There was a bright half moon, and enough light to see the street by. It was calm and silent, with weeds and grasses growing high among the stones. There was not a soul in sight: man, woman or child. And no dog, either.

“It’s a portent of death,” said Joan, as I closed the casement again. She was pouring herself another cup of ale.

“Oh, surely. With you, my bold and cheerful servant, everything is the portent of a death. The humming of a bee, a blossom-laden tree, the scent of green apples. Death, death, death, every time.” But my sharp words tired me, and I lay down next to Henry once more.

Joan stood up. “I’m going out,” she said. “Since your errand brought us nothing useful.”

“What?”

“I am going to fetch Father Dunstan.”

“That dithering old papist! What for?”

“He knows the old religion. The old magic, that some would like to strangle with the law. He’ll call St Roth to help us.”

*

I must have slept, curled round my son. When a great rapping came on the front door, I rushed to answer it, half falling as I ran. But it wasn’t Joan. It was a man, broad shouldered, his face hidden in a black mask. He was dressed for a journey in stout

boots, a leather doublet and a velvet cap, trimmed with fox-fur. I knew him straight away, even before he lifted the mask to look at me.

“Aemilia- Mistress Lanyer - you are safe,” said William.

“I am alive.”

“Thank God! Thank God!”

“What do you want?” I said.

He was staring at me so intensely that he seemed surprised to hear me speak.

“Can I come in?” he said, glancing over his shoulder, as if fearing he had been followed.

“What do you *want*?”

“To speak to you.”

“Then speak.”

He sighed. “Come, let me pass.” And somehow he was in the hall-place, standing much too close, and I had the sensation of the world falling backwards behind me. He glanced around, with his familiar quickness, and more than his usual air of impatience. Taking in my face, my nightgown, the pot of plague-juice on the table, and the cat, gnawing at the hind legs of a coney by the smoking fire. I took a step, and stumbled. He caught me, and I looked down at the lampblack on his fingers, shocked by their familiarity.

“I hoped not to find you here. I hoped to see your house empty, and your family gone to the country for safekeeping.” He spoke quickly, yet almost unwillingly.

“Henry is ill,” I said.

“The King’s men are off to the country,” he said. His voice was rough and throat-sore. I had the feeling that he had rehearsed these words and was determined to

say them to me, no matter what I said to him. “To Coventry, Bridgenorth and then - as we hope - to Bath. We’re touring the country till the pestilence is over.”

“My son has the fever.” Our son, I thought. O, Lord.

“You can’t stay here. You must come too.”

“*What?*”

He cleared his throat and gave a slight bow, as if he was speaking from the stage. “Aemilia – I beg you. I am afraid for you. I don’t mean to... Our association has...I know what’s gone before. But you would be safe with me. Come, quickly, out of London.”

If I had not been so anxious I would have laughed at his confusion.

“We can rent you rooms, apart from the players, in each town that we visit. You’ll be away from the infected air. And filthy streets.”

“Henry is ill.”

“Henry must come too.”

“I hardly think so.”

There was a pause.

“You will be safe with us,” he said. “You cannot remain in London.”

“It’s too late, William.”

“Too late?”

“He is too ill. And much as your fellow players care for you, they won’t allow you to bring a plague-victim with you, will they? What is the point of leaving London to escape the contagion if you are carrying it with you?”

He stared at me sadly. “Lord have mercy,” he said. “Lord have mercy.” He reached into his bag, and handed me a heavy purse. “If you won’t come, then take this. You might still find a carrying coach and a man to drive it.”

I gave it back to him. “Don’t insult me, sir. Henry has the plague”

“What?”

“If you would only listen to me.”

“When did he fall ill?”

I found I could barely remember. I thought of the little homunculus in the glass, choking out its life. William frowned, and pushed past me. Before I could stop him he was upstairs and in my bedchamber. I followed him, dizzy and confused. Henry was breathing painfully, propped half upright on his pillows. William sat beside him and touched his cheek.

“He has such a look of Hamnett! My God...” He stroked Henry’s hair, smoothing back his sweat-soaked locks. “When he died, he was just...” William stopped. He was staring at Henry with an expression of intense sadness. “He was eleven, so he might have been... taller than I remember. I hadn’t seen him for a year. Such a merry little soul.”

Then he leaned over and kissed Henry on the forehead, crossed himself and rose to his feet. His eyes were full of tears. “God protect and save that child,” he said. “I always knew he wasn’t Hunsdon’s.”

I couldn’t speak. (I couldn’t say: “I would have told you as much, if you had not said all those poisonous and vile things to me, and sent me a score of pages full of hateful wickedness.”) I just stared at him.

“Those sonnets were written from my heart,” he said. “With love and hatred entwined within them. To one who changed my life, and then destroyed it.”

“What’s done is done,” I said. “We are older now, and it’s all long past.”

He stared down at Henry. “For pity’s sake Aemilia, take the money.”

“No.”

“I want to help you. More... Or, that is, I should rather say...” He wiped his eyes with his sleeve like a child.

He held the money out to me again. “Aemilia...”

“Please - go.”

Then, another thought seemed to strike him and he unhooked a bunch of keys from his belt. “Take these - the keys to my lodgings in Silver Street. The house is empty – my landlord is a costume maker called Mountjoy and he has taken his family out of London. A friend of mine would be a welcome guest while we are away. You can go there. You will be safer.”

“I live *here*! Is this house not solid enough for you? Goodbye, William.”

“The poor child has the plague,” he said, flatly. “If the city councillors hear of it, you will be boarded in for forty days. But you must know that.”

“Goodbye.”

“I will pray for him,” said William. He hesitated. “And for his mother, too.” And then he had gone, leaving the keys upon the bed-table.

Henry made a strange sound, half way between a moan and speaking, and I crouched down beside him and my tears poured out at last.

Scene IV

It was the hour before dawn when the door crashed open and footsteps came skittering up the stairs.

“The *parson* is here,” said Joan, in a warning voice.

I did not look at her, but at Henry’s matted hair. The word “parson” struck me as odd, but not odd enough to jolt me from my misery and fear. “Then let him pray for my son. He is a good boy and will soon be well. He’ll be at church on Sunday.”

“Then repent now of your pride,” said a strange voice.

I saw this was a new man, a young fellow, not Father Dunstan. I realised too late that I had put some faith in the old priest’s Catholic magic, and had been looking forward to touching the beads of Joan’s forbidden rosary and the smelling incense. It brought me thoughts of Venice.

“Where is Father?” I asked.

“Dead,” said the young man. He had a hard, high voice, which made simple words sound like sermonizing. “The plague took him off two nights ago. I have come to oversee his parish.” I saw that he was no more than a youth, thin-faced and vinegar-skinned. His eyes seemed hollowed into his skull, there was no flesh on his bones and his robes hung on him like dying sheets.

“And who might you be?” I asked, holding Henry tighter.

“I am Parson John,” he said. “A Cambridge man, of Sidney Sussex college. I abhor Papism in all its incarnations and I bring the Word of God to the common man.”

I took against him straightaway. So much so that a glimmer of life returned to me. It was not hope that renewed my spirit, but anger.

“The Word of God was here before you.”

“The Word can be misunderstood.”

“By some, Parson John, but not by me, you will find. I can read it in the Latin.”

“Then be fearful of the sin of pride.”

“Say a blessing for this child, if you will. But we need neither priest nor parson. Go back to your flock. Some of them might yet be grateful for your sour-faced sermonizing.”

But then Henry’s eyes flickered open. “Mother!” he screeched. “Don’t let him take me! Death is here! Death is in the room!” And he let out the most terrible cry, worse than a murderer crushed under a pile of stones.

“Hush child! Hush!” I said.

The parson glared. “There speaks Satan’s voice!” he cried. “You see? This pestilence is God’s punishment, and evil-doers suffer. That child will go straight to Hell if he is not blessed before he dies.”

Henry freed himself from my grasp. In doing so, he wriggled right out of his nightshirt, and stood by the bed, naked and dribbling with sweat. Parson John raised his hands above his head. I was not sure if this was because he was calling on his Maker, or because he feared to touch the fever-ridden boy.

“Pray for him, for pity’s sake!” I cried. “Speak to God, and ask him to spare my child. It is not his time! Tell the Lord this boy is innocent.”

With his arms suspended in mid air, the parson looked like Christ upon the cross. “There are many mothers who could make the same plea. I see them by the score, Mistress Lanyer. You must accept the will of God. Do you forget that he sent forty plagues down on the people of Egypt? And one of these *alone* killed every first born son?”

“Mistress, you must save his soul,” said Joan. I looked at Henry, and saw that his limbs were covered with a nobbled rash of purple spots, dark as blackberries.

“No!” I screamed. “No! It cannot be.”

“It’s God’s will,” said the parson. “Say your prayers.”

“By God, I swear I will not give up my child!” I screamed. “Get out of my house, you prating fiend!”

The parson’s eyes widened, and he pressed his hands together as if in prayer. “Woman! How dare you speak in this manner to the servant of the Lord? Do you *defy* me?”

But I could no longer stop myself. “I defy you, sir, yes I do.”

“Then you are evil.”

“I defy you, and all who deny us hope.”

“Mind your words, mistress. For this, you will burn in Hell, for all eternity, with your son beside you.”

“I said, get out of my house.”

“In mortal agony, blistered and contorted in the flames, but never consumed. Your throat will cry out for water, but will be cracked like a desert till time stops, and

at Judgement Day the Lord will cast you out once more, into the emptiness that lies beyond our understanding. Is that your wish?"

"If you call my son a sinner, who must be punished by this dreadful death, then I stand by every word I say, Parson John of Sidney Sussex College. I defy God himself, and all his angels. My son will live."

"Oh-ho, mistress! You are not in your right mind. Remember who and what you are. A slip-shake pike, sliding through the twisting Thames, is only slightly less than you. A lowing heifer, chewing her cud on Chelsea Green, is your dull sister. By Heaven! I never heard an honest woman speak so!"

I took Henry by the hand. "Then honest women are fools."

"Do *you* determine who will live or die? Are *you* the architect of your earthly fate? Fie on you for a witch and a most unnatural whore! There is something evil in you, I swear, and your kind, and the LORD will only forgive you if you bow down now and seek humble and profound forgiveness for this vile rebellion, this pustulating canker of the soul."

I bent close to Parson John, so I got an unholy whiff of boiled onion on his breath.

"Leave this house," I said. "Get out, you scripture-spouting, fish-cold arse wart. Or I'll call down a curse which'll curdle the guts in your belly."

"Witch!" he hissed back at me. "Evil succubus! Hear the Word of our LORD – 'There shall be none found among you any that burns his son or his daughter as an offering...'"

"Splindle-shanked God-botherer!," I shouted. "I want to save my son, not burn him - "

"...anyone who practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur..."

“Would you like to know what I predict?” I cried. “That you will die in mortal agony, grabbling the air in your final madness, and Almighty God won’t give a fardel...”

“...or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer...”

“Such a one as me? The fair and feeble sex? A wizard *woman*? Whoever would believe it?” I shoved him hard, towards the door. “I’ll broil your brain in its shallow skull! Mangle your preachifying words into Bedlam babble, and corrupt your skin into a thousand worm-infested sores! I’ll make you pray for Hades as a respite from your pain! And I’ll twist your mind to such distraction that you’ll tear off all your limbs to find relief and sanity! Do you hear me, you pox-groined, foul-nosed turd stain?” The parson took a step backwards, eyes round with horror.

And then Henry, who had been staring at the parson all this time, stepped between us. “Cure me, if you are a man of God,” he said.

The parson turned his startled gaze to the boy.

“Cure me, I command you.”

“Hell’s progeny!” cried Parson John. “Vicious, misbegotten whelp! Thou shalt not command a priest!”

And Henry spat a great gob of phlegm right at the holy man, and it landed on his yellow cheek and slid down slowly, leaving a shining trail behind.

Scene V

Now you must bear with me, for I forget what followed. The fierce insanity which had loosened my tongue departed, and all I can see is blackest pandemonium, till at last I was crouching down on the floor, in the hall downstairs, with Henry shaking and spewing all down my chemise. It was night time, and all was dark. I looked up, and there was the figure of Joan, towering above us, wrapped in her black cloak. She seemed taller and straighter than before, and her face, shadowed by the folds of cloth, strangely ageless. Her eyes, fixed on me, were sorrowful.

“I hope I have served you well, mistress,” she said.

I stared up at her distant face wondering, in my feverish state, why she stood upon such high ground. It seemed to me that I must be in an open grave, and that she was standing on turned soil above. But I saw that I was lying on the stone flags of the hall place. And in the place of grass were only strewing herbs. I was in my own house, after all. “Until today you looked after me well enough,” I said.

“The parson could have helped you, if you’d let him. For all he is a Puritan, he serves the same God.”

“Serve! Serve! Why use this word so often!” I shifted Henry’s weight, and wiped his face. “I am finished with service. Catholic, puritan, parson, priest. I don’t give a pigwidgeon for any of them. I will *not* serve.” I picked up a strand of dried marjoram, and smelled it, thinking of quiet herb gardens and meadow daisies.

“Beware of this ungodly pride, my mistress. For I must leave you now, and next time I see you, I hope it’s in a better place than this.”

I tossed the marjoram on to the floor. “Abandon me now, in this house, with my sick son and the beadle doubtless on his way to board us in? A loyal and faithful servant indeed! Shame on you.”

She bent down and gave me something that was cold and jangled. I clutched it – William’s bunch of keys.

“You will need these,” she said. “Listen to me, my mistress. In all my life, you are the finest woman that I ever knew, and the boldest, but you are not the wisest. I have loved you dearly, as I have loved your son. ” Her voice was softer now, yet there was nothing of the servant in it.

Outside, I could hear the distant sound of shouting. Unusual now, in streets which were usually so silent. The beadle of course, with his merry men, summoned by the good parson. The boarding up of houses would often lure a crowd.

“Now, go,” she said.

“Go? What do you mean? Where shall I go?”

There was a knock on the door, and she opened it. Tom Flood stood there, blushing in his finest velvet.

“Joan – Mistress Lanyer – I...”

“Hurry,” said Joan. “Tom has a cart, at the end of the lane. Full of costumes for the tour. John Heminge is holding the horses but he grows impatient.”

Tom stared at her.

“Take my mistress to the Mountjoy house, and be on your way,” said Joan.

“But be careful. The boy has the plague. There is a handcart by the door.”

Mysteriously, there was.

Tom looked from her to the two of us. “Mistress Lanyer...?”

“Help me,” I said, getting to my feet. Between us we wrapped Henry in a bed sheet and laid him gently on the cart. He was sleeping uneasily, and his eyelashes fluttered as if disturbed by nightmares.

Joan followed us out. “This is a brave deed, child,” she said, touching Tom’s arm.

Then she turned to me and hugged me tightly, and when we broke apart I saw she had a book in her hand. She gave it to me, and I saw it was Forman’s grimoire.

“You’ll have need of this,” she said.

“But I don’t...”

“But you will. God bless you, Aemilia. Now, hurry.”

We trundled the cart slowly forward till we got half way down the street, and the shouting of the crowd grew louder and louder behind us. I felt a gathering fear as it came closer. There were yells and chants and the noise of pipes and drums. I looked back towards the house, wondering again how Joan could leave us at such a time. She was standing with her back towards us, facing the oncoming noise. Why was she waiting? Why did she not come with us?

“Come,” said Tom, face set with fear. “We must get on.”

“Why did you come for us?” I asked, as we set to pushing the cart again. “You could be half way to Coventry by now! Such kindness, Tom!”

Tom was more flushed than ever.

“Henry is my dear friend,” he said. “How could I leave him?”

“Pray God you are rewarded for your good heart.”

The end of the street was in sight, and there was the carriage and John Heminge, just as Joan had said. He stood, frowning, next to a great bay gelding who was feeding from a nose bag.

“Thank God,” said Heminge. “How does the boy?”

I said nothing, for I found I couldn't lie. We lifted Henry from the handcart and settled him in the carriage among the masks and head pieces. The sound behind us had reached such a pitch of fury that I was sick with fear for Joan, and felt as if I was being torn in two. Then there was a hideous scream, long and piercing, from the centre of the crowd behind us. It was followed by wild cheering. “Wait,” I said. “I will only be a moment.” And before Heminge could say a word, I was running back along the street, towards the shouting mob.

*

The mob, absorbed in some new spectacle, had formed a wall of backs some twenty feet from my front door, forming a neat circle. I pushed my way forward, but my view was still obscured by the stubborn backs of those who had fought for a good viewing place. Even so, I could see that dark-robed figure stood in the centre, its face obscured by its black hood. The ring-leaders were cat-calling and shouting filthy names. There were fifty or sixty people in the rabble, a motley assortment of plague-followers, apprentices, vagrants, beggars and idiots. All of them were ill-dressed and all seemed ill-favoured. Some had the dazed stare of passers-by who had got sucked into the fray. Others - with their shrivelled faces and tattered clothes - looked as if they spent their life on the road. I scanned the contorted, shouting faces, wondering at their rage and hatred. A thin boy with a drum was beating out a gallows tattoo. An old crone with a twisted mouth wielded a pitch fork. A young girl with a fair white face and filthy, tangled hair held a fire brand above her head.

A clod of earth fell on the ground followed by a rain of stones and pebbles. Most fell short, but some found their mark and the figure winced and trembled at each blow. There was nothing unusual in that, of course. A stoning was as common as a hanging. But then a heftier stone hit home, the hood fell back and the face of the victim was revealed.

“Joan!” I shouted. “Joan!” But no one heard me.

“What – would you hex a holy man?” screamed one worthy, a wide and burly fellow twice Joan’s size.

“Would you curse a parson?” came another voice.

“Unruly, venomous bitch!”

The young girl thrust the brand towards Joan. “You stinking witch, we’ll peel your skin from your body while you still live, and pin it up on the church door! The wrath of God is upon you! We’ll be doing His Will.”

Cursing the parson? What could this mean? Were they torturing her for *my* crime? “Joan!” I called again. “Save yourself! Fly away! Shape yourself into a...” I saw frogs and voles in my mind, but could not think of the names. “JOAN!” I screamed. “For pity’s sake, why don’t you tell them? Tell them who cursed the parson! Tell them it was me!” I turned first one way, and then the other, to see the profile view of a fat matron screaming gutter curses and a young lawyer squealing with rage. “It’s me you want!” I screamed. “It’s me!” But mine was just one voice among many, and the thunder of their joined cries was deafening. No one heard me.

The mob shifted, and I had a clearer view. Joan was already almost unrecognisable as the upright figure in the hall. Her cloak had gone, and her dress was torn and bloody, half ripped away from one shoulder so you could see where her flesh was ripped. Her hair was loose and her arms were scratched and bleeding.

“Witch’s blood,” called the crowd. “Witch’s blood! Bleed the witch and save yourself from her sin!” A boy ran forward - he was no older than Henry - and slashed at her face with a knife. She made no sound, just looked from face to face without hope or fear. A stone hurtled towards her, smashing her on the temple. Another followed, then another, and suddenly the sky was filled with missiles and the crowd roared with blood lust and bestial glee. Joan grunted as she fell to the ground. The crowd closed in.

“Joan!” I screamed again. I forced my way forward. The crowd was dancing now, in a fashion, stamping in unison, first with the left foot and then with the right, and clapping out a slow rhythm. It had become one creature, one deliberate, remorseless behemoth. “My God! Help me! Joan!”

The mob yelled with one voice: “Kill the witch! Kill the witch!”

Another boy threw a rope over the oak tree that grew half way up the street. Turtle doves flapped up from it, and he made a noose and put it round Joan’s neck. Her eyes met mine, and although I longed to, I could neither move nor speak. I opened my mouth to call her name, but something was holding me. And a voice spoke, right inside my head. *“Mistress. I told you. Go now, in God’s name.”*

The noose around her neck was pulled tight, and she grasped at it, her eyes bulging. They dragged her towards the tree. With a “heave ho” and shrieks of laughter they lugged her upwards, so she stood on tiptoe. A heavy stone was flung towards her, smashing her mouth into a bloody hole of broken teeth. Then the burly man ran forward, and slashed her across the belly with his knife, and she grunted again, like a calf at the butcher’s block, and all her guts spilled out of her. Still, she made no sound. But inside my head, I heard such a scream as the damned must scream, and I prayed hard, hard, asking God to take her. I thought how Charles Blount and his men

had pulled at Southall's legs and broke his neck and saved him from his final torture and I longed to do the same, but was still spellbound. A long scream, like the sound of a banshee or a hag of the mist. And then the voice came again, from inside the dreadful sound. "*Go Aemilia! Go from here! God speed. My service is finished.*" Joan's voice was stern and powerful, as if she was the mistress and I was the maid.

The crowd laughed and whooped to see the blood, and the pale girl held her nose, making fun of the stench of Joan's snaking innards. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing her to die. They pulled her up higher, and her arms flailed and her bare feet kicked thin air as she danced her life out. I thought of those clever hands, that saved my son, of her good sense and acid tongue, that had preserved my sanity a thousand times. I thought of the first time I saw her, standing at the ware-bench in her little shop, jars and remedies lining the azure walls. *God help her*, I prayed. *God help us all.*

Then suddenly, everything stopped. All was silence, and Joan was still. The crowd fell back, as if for one brief moment they all realised the horror of what they had done. I could not bear to look at her dead face. Her cloak was lying on the ground. I picked it up, then turned and ran.

*

Silver Street was a good road, wide and well-kept, off Cheapside, in sight of St Paul's and west of the low arch of Cripple gate in the city walls. Like the rest of London, it was filled with a strange quiet, a plague-quiet. The house itself was fair and handsome, with a work-shop and fitting room on the ground floor and several broad and fine-built storeys. As we made our way inside, the silence rang in my ears after the noise of the crowd. I kept my gaze fixed on my son's face, and did not weep

for Joan's sacrifice but determined to make it worthwhile. Heminge carried Henry to an upper chamber, and gently laid him on a great four poster bed.

"This is Will's room," he said. "He is praying for you, Aemilia. So are we all."

I didn't like the way he looked at Henry, as if all hope had gone.

"Thanks, Mr Heminge, for all your pains, and your great patience. Now you can be on your way," I said. My calm voice sounded false to my own ears.

He took my hand and bowed, very grave. "I wish you luck, Mistress Lanyer, and God's blessing." Tom stood in the doorway, watching, tears on his face.

I locked the street door behind them, and tended to Henry as best as I could. All his skin was raised and black with plague sores now, and they smelled most horrible. It was the scent, I supposed, of poisoned blood. The nails of his hands and feet were of the same colour, as if he had rubbed them with dark river mud. Each breath sounded like a knife scraping on a skillet, and his chest trembled with the effort. Though sweat rolled from his body, his limbs were freezing to the touch.

And then I prayed – some words at last came to me - hoping God might yet turn his face in the child's direction, even though I was hell-bound myself: *"O God, the Father of heaven, have mercy on us miserable sinners. Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers; neither take thou vengeance of our sins: spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and be not angry with us..."*

I turned to look at him, weary and empty. Henry's eyes were half open. But I knew he could see nothing, not the carved bed-roof, which was decorated with bright, leaping porpoises, nor my face as I bent over him.

"Henry?" I put my hand against his cheek. "Can you hear me, little one?"

His breath came in a rasping sigh. I knew that sound. Oh, I knew it right enough. When Death is near, the watchers wait in the eternity between each breath. In the end, they witness the final rattle as the soul departs. The waiting is over, and the grief begins. That rasping sound had the rattle of death in it. *My little boy, my precious one. Henry Lanyer, my only child. All my world, in this small frame. What will I be without you? How shall I live? What shall I do?*

But no. He was not ready. I was not ready. His life still lay before him. I would not serve. I crossed myself, from habit not from piety. God had deserted us. It was time. Time to set myself apart from wise women and cunning men. Time to see how far magic would take me. If a witch must call on demons, then so be it. If demons were in the service of Beelzebub, then I was ready.

Scene VI

I picked up the spell book. My hands were stiff and trembling. What good would it do me? The twisting signs and figures would keep their secrets. Yet I recalled Joan's words: "*But you will.*" Somehow I would come to understand them. I fumbled with the pages, not certain what I was looking for. A sign? A clue? There were demons hidden here, in these queer hieroglyphics and tables, figures like amulets instead of letters, pictures of chariots and scrotums, serpents and priestesses, the sage hierophant and inverted Hanged Man. How could I unlock a spirit from these strange inscriptions?

I closed my eyes and thought of Joan, hanging from the tree. I saw her eyes, fixed on mine. When I opened my eyes, the room was writhing and spinning. I could see Henry, but he seemed far away, on a shore I could not reach. Black mists drifted between us. I reached out my hand to touch him, and saw that pustules like blueberries covered my arm from wrist to elbow. *Holy God. Holy God. He has the plague and now I have it too.* I closed my eyes again, but this time I saw Joan's face close to, angry and accusing.

I grabbed hold of the bed post, and hauled myself upright. Nausea and pain flooded my body. I staggered backwards, and almost fell. As I stumbled, I saw a tumble of darkness on the floor. My hands went to it – rough wool, coarse to the touch. But there was something else, the slightest tremor like a living creature. An

animal would have been warm – but this fabric cooled my hot fingers as I touched it. It was Joan’s black cloak. I put it on, and it fell around me in deep, whispering folds. I pulled the hood over my head and the whispering continued, like the wind in the bulrushes, like the beating of a raven’s wing.

I heard a voice say: *“Draw a Circle”*.

I hesitated, not knowing if I had the strength.

Then the voice came again: *“Draw a Circle.”*

I found a lump of white chalk in the pocket of my cloak and pulled it out. Falling to my knees, I scabbled on the floor, pushing back the rushes with feverish hands. Then, breathing hard, I drew a great circle, nine feet across. I managed to find the spell book, in spite of the black mist inside my head, and stepped into the centre of the circle I had made. *“That is good”, said the voice. “The space you have made is outside creation. Demons and spirits may enter it.”*

I waited, unsure what to do, swaying on my feet. My head was so hot and heavy that I wished to lay it down, to lie upon the frozen Thames in winter and become as one with that white cold.

“Open the book,” said the voice.

Was it Joan? Who was it? But I was set on my path now. I could not turn away. I did as the voice told me, and the mist slowly parted so that I could see what was written there.

First, I saw only:

*Τηεψ σαψ τηατ τηε ποωερ οφ ενχηαντμεντσ ανδ περσεσ ισ σο γρεατ, τηατ ιτ ι
σ βελιεπεδ τηεψ αρε αβλε το συβπερτ αλμοστ αλλ Νατυρε. Απυλειουσ σαιτη τ*

ηατ ωιτη α μαγιχαλ ωηισπερινη, σωιφτ ριπερσ αρε τυρνεδ βαχκ, τηε σλωω σε
α ισ βουνδ, τηε ωινδσ αρε βρεατηεδ ουτ οφ ονε αχχορδ, τηε Συν ισ στοππεδ, τ
ηε Μοον ισ χλαριφιεδ, τηε Σταρσ αρε πυλλεδ ουτ, τηε δαψ ισ κεπτ βαχκ, τηε ν
ιγητ ισ προλονγεδ.□

But then the signs began to wriggle and squirm, and I saw that they were turning into words, the very words I needed to find:

“They say that the power of enchantments and verses is so great, that it is believed they are able to subvert almost all Nature. Apuleius saith that with a magical whispering, swift rivers are turned back, the slow sea is bound, the winds are breathed out of one accord, the Sun is stopped, the Moon is clarified, the Stars are pulled out, the day is kept back, the night is prolonged.”

This, then, was what I was after! What verse, though, what simple verse could unmake plague? I searched back and forth through the incense scented pages. Then I read these words aloud:

*“Her with Charms drawing Stars from Heaven, I
And turning the course of rivers did espy;
She parts the earth, and Ghosts from Sepulchres
Draws up and fetcheth bones away from th’ fires,
And at her pleasure scatters clouds i’ th’ Air,
And makes it Snow in Summer hot and fair.”*

Was it Snowing, or Summer now? My head was hot, but now I realised my hands were cold. I looked down at them, they seemed far away from me. I pulled the cloak tighter around me, and felt a sick languor overwhelm me as I read the second verse:

*“At will, I make swift streams retire
To their fountains, whilst their Banks admire;
Sea toss and smooth; clear Clouds with Clouds deform.
With Spells and Charms I break the Viper’s jaw,
Cleave solid Rocks, Oakes from their seizures draw,
Whole Woods remove, the lofty Mountains shake,
Earth for to groan, and Ghosts from graves awake
And thee, O Moon, I draw -”*

The words tumbled into nothingness.

*

Thunder and lightning. The light shrieks over a blasted heath. Rocks piled like plague skulls; ground running with rain and stones. A figure, bent double against the gale, walks towards me, a blacker shape against the dark sky. I turn to run, but my feet are broken tree stumps, rooted in the frozen earth. The shape comes closer and I open my mouth to scream, my cry is noiseless and the creature grabs my hand. Its hood falls back.

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” speaks a bloody hole of broken teeth. Two horsemen are galloping towards us, two soldiers, bloodied with the battle.

“All Hail to thee Macbeth” shouts a young virgin selling sugar plums. “Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis””

“All Hail, Thane of Cawdor,” says the beak of a raven.

“All Hail, Macbeth, Hail to thee that shall be King hereafter,” I cry.

The men are fallen to the ground, their faces look up at us, the faces of children.

Knock Knock! Simon Forman shuffles to the door, a great gate the size of St Paul’s. He shudders and shakes, aping frailty. “Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were Porter of Hell-Gate, he should have Old Nick turning the key. Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there, in the name of Beelzebub? O, come in, equivocator! Knock, knock, knock, never at quiet... What are you? This place is too cold for Hell. I’ll devil-porter it no longer: I had thought to let in some of the professions, that take the primrose way to th’everlasting bonfire...Anon, anon!”

*

Over the battlements, the wind rips my hair from my shoulders. The castle is stone and sky. I watch and wait for my Lord. I have the spells and potions set around me. Poisoned entrails, toad venom, dog tongue and blind-worm’s sting. The finger of a birth-strangled babe, ditch delivered by a drab. A charm of fell-gruel, hell broth - wolf tooth and hemlock digged in the dark.

“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be what thou art promised.”

For I can conjure what God will not; if Fate is tardy, I am always to the clock. The child lies in the dark room, the curtains are drawn around him, I tear them back. His face is black, they are calling him. The merry devils dancing in the fire and snow. The sepulchre is opening by his bed, all it needs is a little tumble – so – and there he

goes! Down, down, to the place we all must end. Heaven and Hell are pulpit words, our station is in the ground, where the worms are, where the Bee sucks.

“Hail to thee, Macbeth! Thou wouldst be great, art not without ambition, but without the illness that should attend it. Wouldst not play false, and yet would wrongly win.”

Here are the daggers. I would have killed the King myself, if he had not resembled sweet Bassano as he slept. His hand was warm in mine. He towered above me. The tunes were angel-voices, curling and rising in the air. His tales opened out the seas and skies, so I floated over the Grand Canal and saw high-tailed boats, decked out with cloth of gold, and the masked princesses, their pale hands trailing in the water. Blood curdled the still reflections, their scarlet fingernails made the green one red. They came behind us, silent. I heard nothing, only felt the wind of their bodies as they rushed us, falling, falling. His hand was torn from mine, his scream was pig-like. Fly from here! His dear body, riven with blood, the stench of it, on my hands, my face. Here’s the smell of the blood still. Father! I could not save him. If I could call him back – would I? He would be a dead thing, then, the bloody and disfigured spectre of himself. If charnel houses and our graves must send those that we bury back, our monument must be the belly of a crow. Dare I? Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be what thou art promised. Then screw thy courage to the sticking point, and we’ll not fail.

I run along the battlements. London is on one side, the plague carts rattle, the ale houses are singing, there are flames on the horizon and there, far off, I can see the King and all his courtiers, watching “Twelfth Night”. See the boys upon the stage! Graceful Viola, with Tom’s fine leg. Safe from me, from my contagion. But this is

Scotland, see how the Viking sea rolls and storms, see the mountains and the mist and there is Scone, where they will crown you, my Lord. Far away.

Why, how now, Hecate, you look angrily. Hecate has three faces, her red hair reaches to the ground. Her skin has the blue tinge of a winter corpse. She is angry because Joan died for me. They strung her up, I could not save her. I held my hand out to her. I called her name, but no one heard me. She died for us. I will smirch their faces with the king's blood, if it helps this cause. There is no stopping place for me, for there can be no punishment that is worse than this. Look – my hands are your colour, but I would scorn to wear a heart so white. What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?

The wind blew harder, and lifted me up, and I saw it all below me, and it was a perfect pattern, I understood everything. I was GOD.

*

She is sitting at the end of the bed, watching me. A woman with red hair reaching to the ground. Her skin is whiter than parchment, her green eyes slanted upwards like Greymalkin's. Beneath her hair, she is naked, and her body shines like moonlight. On her head is a gold band, and there were gold bracelets on each arm. She is facing me, but on each side of her head I see the same face, in perfect profile. Still, serene, remote.

"Who are you?"

"Hecate. Three-faced goddess of witchcraft and the cross-roads."

"A demon?"

"I am a servant of the Lord."

"Which Lord?"

“He is Below.”

“Assist me.”

“For a price.”

“What is the price?”

“You may not wish to pay it.”

“I will pay anything you ask.”

“Then you are foolhardy.”

“Help me, Hecate.”

She stands up, and spreads Joan’s cloak upon the ground. From it, she brings out a cauldron, and from the air she filled it with smoke-vapour and a vial of ruby liquid. She catches the light from the room in her fingers, and presses it into her palms, forming it into a tiny orb, so the room is dark and the orb its candle. Till she drops it into the pot, and all is black.

“Will you follow me?” she says, in the darkness.

And I say: *“I will follow you.”* And she leads me out of the house, and along the streets till we come to a plague pit.

“Go into that pit,” she says, *“And bring me the head of a child.”*

And she gives me a stinking knife, that is smirched with gout of blood. And I climb down – for there was a flight of steps carved out of the earth, smelling of soil and the ends of roots – and I find the homunculus lying in his glass, but he is a little boy. I carve his head off, the blade cracks through bone and sinew, and his eyes open to stare at me.

*

Across the rooftops I run, over the blasted spire of St Pauls, here I come, to Cripple gate, to my little one. Ah, my pretty boy! I have given suck, and know what it

is to love the babe that milked me. And I am he, the dying child, and through my closed lids I can see infinity. I will lay my hand on my own forehead, so. I will call my own spirit back into itself. I am all things, and all people, all deaths and all life. Henry Lanyer, return to this place. Lord God, it is not his time. Restore him, Lord, restore him!

*

I opened my eyes. I could not tell if it was morning, or evening, but the room was in half darkness. I looked around me. My head still ached, but I no longer felt confused – the fever had left me. How long had I been here? I was lying in a fine room with bright embroidered hangings on the wall. The Mountjoy's craft of costume making was reflected in their design, for the tapestries were covered in every manner of lord and lady, parading in the latest fashion. Here were scarlet surcoats, gaudy head dresses, split hose and splendid under-sleeves, puffed out with jewel-box colours. And French slashings and lacings, prettifying and complicating. High collars, fanned out like Peacock tails. Short breeches, fat trunks, plumed caps, stiff bodices and monstrous wheeled farthingales. I lay and looked at these for a while, not knowing who or what I was.

Then I remembered. "Henry?" I cried out. "Henry?"

And I struggled up onto my elbows, and looked, and there he was, lying close to me. He was quite still. His gold hair was matted to his face, and he was half turned away from me, so all I could see was one pale cheek.

"My love!" I screamed. "My little one!" I grabbed his body and held him, squeezing his body as tightly as I could. "Do not go away from me! Stay with me, my baby! Stay with me! God help us! Help us!" And I sobbed and sobbed, drenching his tangled hair with my tears.

“I *am* with you,” said a muffled voice.

I held him still closer, stunned and confused.

“Mother,” said the muffled voice again. “You are squeezing me to death. Why are you crying?”

*

If I live as long as Joan I will never know such joy again. Henry wriggled out of my grasp. He looked up at me, pale but smiling. He was Henry, exactly and completely Henry, my merry son.

“Look!” he cried, lifting his nightshirt. I saw that the vile plague boils had shrivelled up. Some were half-healed scabs, others nothing more than faint bruises. “I am cured!” he said, eyes bright. “I am immortal, mother. You can let me do anything now, for God will protect me, have no doubt of it.”

“A clever thought, Henry, but we will dispute this later,” said I, kissing him on his cheek and hugging him to me again. “My angel boy! Oh, Henry! Praise God! O, praise the Lord in Heaven!”

I looked at my own arms, and saw that they too were clear of the inflammation. Miracle or magic, some wonder had surely taken place.

*

That night, Henry slept, a deep, rosy sleep, like the first settled repose of a newborn. I lay next to him, looking at him, still dazed with shock and disbelief. Finally, I began to drowse, but was jolted awake by Hecate’s voice: “*You forgot about the price,*” she said. “*I told you there was a price.*” I sat bolt upright, eyes wide open, and looked around me. But the chamber was empty. Then I noticed there was a

door on the far side of the room, which I had not noticed before. It was standing ajar. I lit a candle, and went over to it.

The door opened to another room, smaller and quite plain. There was no furniture in it but an oak table and a chair. The floor was covered with piles of books and pamphlets. I did not need to look at these to know where I was. William's little space. On the table was a pile of clean foolscap, a quill and a glass of lampblack, as if he was just about to sit down and start work on his next play. I looked outside. The street was empty, and the sky was starless. I could hear the branches of the trees in the churchyard, creaking and crashing in the rising wind.

Who can say which stories will last, and which will fade away? Old women crouch together round the fire, their figures humped against the flaming logs of oak and apple wood. They tell tales. Anyone can stop and listen. The servant girl carrying an empty flagon; the hunter sweating from his reckless ride; a young boy leaning against a sleeping wolf hound. Beyond the listening circle, the dark night shrouds troll caves in the mountains and forest creatures half-seen among the clustering trees. Wolves, spirits, urchins, centaurs, satyrs, changelings and hell-waines.

I sat down at the table. My mind was both disturbed and clear, filled with images and memories, and quite empty. I picked up the quill, and dipped it into the ink. I thought of the wild castle and the strange creature who lived in it, and the blood seeping across the stone floor. I wrote the words: "*The Tragedie of Ladie Macbeth*". And below it I wrote out: "*By Aemilia Bassano Lanyer.*"

And then my fingers closed more tightly around the quill, and I dipped it and began to scratch across the parchment. My hands moved quick, as if I had written all this before. My queer dreams filled my head, the poems I had struggled to form made new and easy patterns and the words of Holinshed whirled around me:

“The raven himself is hoarse, that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements. Come, you Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe, top full of direst cruelty! make thick my blood, stop up the access and passage to remorse that no compunction visiting of Nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between th’effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts and take my milk for gall you murdering ministers wherever in your sightless substances you wait on Nature’s mischief! Come thick Night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell that my knife see not the wound it makes, nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry “Hold! Hold!!”

I wrote all that night, with the wind beating against the windows, till the sun came up over the city walls and its rose-light lit up the room, making the fallen pages look like dropped petals. And my head dropped down upon the table.

ACT V
PUNISHMENT

Scene I

The two of us – my little son and me – stayed in the Mountjoys' house for many weeks, while the plague raged through London. The street noise was dulled, so that if the sound of children calling or a shouting vendor reached us, Henry would run to the window and lean out to see what was causing the commotion. (He was not allowed out himself till he was fully recovered, and for some time his frame was thin and his eyes still had the hollow, hungry look of a plague-mort.) I would go out and find food where I could – leeks and cabbages from the Mountjoys' vegetable garden, or that which I could buy from a pieman or fishwife who still plied their wares. I found a London not quite deserted, but certainly subdued, with many boarded houses and people hurrying, head down, about their business, with no desire to speak to passers-by. (For friends and strangers alike may have been infected by the contagion.) But apart from these forays, it was just the two of us, and I was happy, sublimely happy, that it was so.

Each day Henry grew stronger and rosier – and noisier – and each day I felt more certain that he would be just as he had been. I barely thought of my own health, and though I was sometimes dizzy and had little appetite, I was well enough. It may have been less of a delight for Henry, youth being careless of death and illness, and

also because I took this chance to see that his Latin and Greek were not neglected, so each day I made him take out his horn book and we would study together. We would start the day formally, and I would call his name and he would reply “Adsum” to say he was present, and we would work together six or seven hours, studying Lilly’s Latin grammar and parts of the plays of Plautus. In later weeks we would follow the advice of Erasmus, and work through a complete play of Terence. And in the afternoons I would reward him with a jousting class (in which we would run the length of the downstairs workshop, dressed as knights on horseback) or we would perform a play in English, which Henry approved of greatly.

I found that Will had a good supply of his own plays in his study, and read each one, rapt and astonished, but in a kind of pain. I adapted *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, dividing the parts between us. I thought *Hamlet* too painful to perform, but read it over several time, weeping in some places, and marvelling at the words. Such was its power that it seemed that William stood before me, and when I had read it over sufficient to have lodged it in my mind, I went back to my own poor pages and improved them, taking out dead words and putting in live ones. And the more I looked at this story, and the more I scratched at it, adding and improving and wondering, the more I felt that there was a secret lurking there: a story that was more than itself. Ever since I was a child, I had been composing and revising my poetry. In Latin, Greek and English, line upon line upon line. Now, here was stronger meat: something I could be proud of.

I thought of Will’s advice to me, all those years ago. “Treat words as if they were rubies. Choose the right one for each part of every line. Write every line as though your life depended on it. As if the executioner was standing by your shoulder, and this was the last chance to speak that you would ever know.” And after many

revisions and changes, I saw that I had indeed written something that might be called a play.

This halcyon time all ended abruptly one fine day, when Henry was bursting with energy and desperate to be released into the outer world again. Each day more people would return to the city, and the sound of London was gradually increasing, like the first calls of the dawn chorus.

“Oh Lord above,” he said, leaning out of the window. “How I abhor foul Terence and this ugly Latin! I am English, mother, not some Roman corpse.”

I looked up from my reading – *The Merchant of Venice* and the words of Portia – and called out: “An Englishman must know Latin, my chuck. An Englishman should know everything.”

“Only in your...oh, look, what a sight is this?” he cried. “Two horsemen, at full gallop!” I could hear the sound of hoof beats hammering on the road outside and horses whinnying as they clattered to a standstill. There were voices, I could not quite make out. “One has a feathered hat and leather doublet,” reported Henry. “His cloak is scarlet – Lord above! The other is his servant. Oh! Who is it? He is at the door, Mother. He has a key! Who can it be?”

I put my playbook down, wondering if the Mountjoys had returned already. I had almost forgotten this was not my home, and was reluctant to leave, even if the plague had died down. It was our secret haven, and the place where Henry had been cured. The thought of our own house filled me with dread, doubtless boarded up, and a horrible reminder of Joan’s murder. I heard the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs. The door flew open and William stood there. He looked at me, and then raced across the room and embraced Henry.

“You are well, little man! You are recovered!” he cried.

“Who is this fellow?” demanded Henry, struggling out of William’s grasp.
“Do I know him?”

*

I decided that this was a good day for Henry to take the outside air, and William’s servant took him out for a ride on his fine destrier. After they had gone on their way, we were left in the upper room. William was sitting by the fire, pulling at the feather on his hat. I realised with a jolt of some emotion that is still nameless that he looked just like his son. I was used to seeing the resemblance the other way, but not to observing a grown-up Henry, fidgeting.

“You will ruin that feather,” I said.

“What if I do?” said Will. “It is a feather, merely. It represents ‘nothingness’ with such neatness that one might almost put it in a play to fill that function.”

“What function?”

“The representation of nothingness. Only its very neatness would preclude it. Surprise is all.” He paused. “Or... almost all. Audiences can be obtuse.”

“What are you *talking* about?”

He looked up at me, and his gaze was so intense that I sat down suddenly on the window seat. “I have rode two days and two nights to get here,” he said. “The rest of the party are some way behind me – as far as I could put them, making speed and almost killing my poor horse.”

“Why did you...?”

But he had crossed the room and come to sit beside me. “We don’t have long,” he said.

“We?”

“That fool Alfonso joined the players! His consort accompanied our plays... He was carousing late into the night, not knowing if you lived or died! What kind of man is that? How can he be so ignorant of his great fortune?”

“Alfonso has no fortune I am aware of. Unless he has been lucky at the tables for once in his life.”

“I mean, his great fortune in having such a wife.”

I stared at him, perplexed. “You have a wayward memory, William Shakespeare. I have your written words, and those in here...” I tapped my forehead. “The words you spat at me the day you found me with Southampton.”

“Yes, I want to speak of this...”

“Love is not immutable. It can be stifled at birth, or slowly suffocated, or killed, stone dead.”

“No! I...”

“And you killed my love, in that dreadful diatribe, which I did not deserve, and I will not forget, even if *you* have put it from your mind. Perhaps it was of no account to you, but it was *everything* to me.”

He took my two hands in his and looked down at them. Without looking up, he said: “It was this matter – this matter of Southampton that I wanted to speak to you about.”

“I cannot think what you have left unsaid.”

“I wanted to... I have meant to speak of this before.”

I was silent.

“He asked to see me before the old Queen died.”

“Oh?”

“He said he had something to tell me.”

I nodded, biting my lip.

“So I went to see him in the Tower.”

“Where he was held for plotting against Her Majesty,” said I. “He is a trickster and a liar.”

“I believe he thought he would die on Tower Green, like poor Essex.”

“And so he should have done.”

“He wanted to speak of certain...commerce,” said Will, almost writhing with the effort of speaking. “That I had once seen between the two of you.”

I felt my face flush scarlet. “I have no wish to speak of things long past and done.”

“Certain assumptions that I made, based upon what I thought was the evidence of my own eyes.”

“You saw what you saw, William. As you have said quite plainly. I have no wish to talk of this.”

“He said he had forced himself upon you. That what I saw... that what I saw was not what it appeared to be.”

He searched my face, his eyes dark with feeling. “Do you have nothing to say about this? Nothing at all?”

“Only that I tried to tell you, and you gave me no chance. And now it turns out you believe this cock-sure braggart, when you would not listen to me! Is it because you think men are more honest than women, or that Lords are more truthful than cast-off whores?”

“Aemilia, please listen to me. I see – perhaps because I am older now – I see I was mistaken.”

“Handsome of you, who damned my name to Hell.”

“I see that you were trapped.”

“Wise poet! Do you want a prize for such an insight? It was ever thus.”

“My prize would be your forgiveness, the greatest prize I can imagine.”

“I have lived my life trammelled in by circumstances. This is a woman’s fate.”

“Forgive me, dear Aemilia. Forgive me for those sonnets, or that part of them which was bilious and vile. Forgive me for the things I said, when all the world seemed blackened and obscene because of what I thought you had done to me.”

“Blackened and obscene, good words. You should put them in a poem.”

“Please, my lady. I am sorry.”

“You wrote as if our love itself disgusted you. Our great love!”

“I wrote what I felt then. It’s not what I feel now.”

I pulled my hands from his. “God will forgive you, I expect.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Aemilia! Please!”

“Come a little closer,” I said. “This is what you think of women, sir.” Then I whispered these lines to him, from his own *Hamlet*: “*But to the girdles do the goils inherit/The rest is all the funds:/There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulphurous pit,/Burning, scalding, stench, consumption./Our earth is a bawdy place, and physic for it there is none.*”

“No physic,” said William, twisting his arms around me at last. “Madam, there is no cure for our affliction! Not in this life or the next.”

“What is this ‘affliction’, William?” said a familiar voice. “Do you and my wife share some secret malady? If so, I think I can find a cure for it. Lascivious boils

can be lanced, quite simply.” Alfonso was standing in the doorway. One arm rested on his sword. Henry, goggle-eyed, was beside him.

“Mother?” said Henry. “What are you doing?”

William and I sprang apart, quite as guilty as if we had been fornicating among the rushes.

“Don’t mistake us,” I said. “William and I do not share a malady. We don’t...” I almost said “share anything”, but couldn’t, in front of Henry. So I finished: “If William is suffering from some illness, it is no concern of mine. I have nothing more to say to him. Not on this day, nor on any other.”

Alfonso smiled, rather coldly, but came over and kissed me on the lips as if he had just bought me at a fair.

“Come, Aemilia,” he said. “You must quit this place. The plague is over.”

Scene II

And so I returned with my legal husband and our illegal son, and life continued, as it will. The new King ruled well enough, though he was most remarkable for being ugly, bibulous and bookish – and nearly blown to pieces by Popish conspirators. At one royal masque, even Faith and Hope were so wine-sotted that they puked outside. Her Majesty would never have permitted such contempt for Allegory. But for those in London's muddy streets and lanes, there was little change. Instead of a monarch who processed like a Church icon, they had one who kept himself indoors. What impressed Henry most was that James was given an Oliphant by the King of Spain, a creature straight from legend tearing oak leaves at St James's park. It was a marvellous beast with a long nose like a withered eel. No need now to pay to see it at the Fair. And what upset my vain Alfonso was that no one really listened to his tunes. The recorder consort would nightly serenade a chamber full of snores.

Summer came with its long, busy evenings. Thrustles sang at the Inns of Court, and bees hummed in the lush gardens along the Strand. And winter followed, bringing night down early and freezing sighs into ghosts.

What had most decidedly not altered was that Alfonso was improvident and could not keep himself from the tables. Almost all he earned, he lost at dice. My scarlet taffeta, the last gown left of all those given to me by Hunsdon, was sold. We lived on the edge of penury, sustained by notes in music. (And some little spells and

smells I made from Joan's old recipes – gout-cures, remedies for cock-droop and the like.) My potions seemed to smell more foul than hers, but no one had yet complained. So it was, and so I thought it might remain. Till everything was changed once more, and the reckoning came.

*

At Christmastide, the snow lay thick upon the ground. The Thames had frozen over as it had for several winters, but this time the ice was so thick and solid that people crowded onto it, making all kinds of sport. From Southwark to the Temple there were stalls, side-shows, merry-go-rounds, puppet plays and even donkey rides. (The miserable creatures trundled up and down the ice with straw slippers tied to their hooves to stop them slipping over.) Fire-eaters and clownish acrobats slid this way and that, tumbling from their stilts. The city fathers had no jurisdiction over any of these frolics, as the river lies beyond old London's walls, and they viewed it all with much begrudgery. The festivities were dubbed a "Frost Fair" by the apprentice boys, who were quick to fill their snowballs with sharp stones and all manner of disagreeable items. Pigs and swans were roasted over crackling bonfires and songs and laughter rang sharp against the aching air.

On Holy Innocents Day, the fourth day of Christmas, I was sitting at home with my family. From my stool by the fireside, I could see through the diamond-mullioned window, left unshuttered so we could look out for our guests. The stars were points of ice over the frosted roofs and twisted chimneys. Cold crept through the walls of cob and timber, freezing my back even as I warmed my feet.

Alfonso sat in his coffer-chair, his shapely legs stuck out in front of him, his recorder resting across his knees. He was tired from his wood gathering in Tothill Fields, and contemplated the glowing Yule log from beneath his drooping lashes.

Henry sat at his feet, quiet for once, stroking Greymalkin. The aged cat purred as he stared at the roast goose on the table. What a sight it was, lying in state, surrounded by sugar-plate collops of walnuts and bacon; cubes of sweet leech arranged as a chequer board; gilded gingerbread and dainty crystallised fruits. By the hearth was a pitcher of winter toddy, bubbling pleasantly to a woolly white top. Our new servant, Marie Wilde, laced ivy into the idle spokes of her spinning wheel. She was a foolish girl, seventeen years old, brimming with crazy laughter and tall tales. We had taken her on as she was the child of French Huguenots who Alfonso knew from the Strangers' Church. For all her silliness, she was a quick worker, and between us we had put together a table that would not have shamed Whitehall Palace itself – though we could not match the quantity laid out for courtly gluttons.

A tap on the window. Henry jumped up and yelled: "Tom Flood! Tom Flood! All hail, Tom Flood!" And off he raced. I followed him, brushing cat-hair from my skirts, and when we got to the hallplace Henry put his hand up and stopped me, and we both listened.

Outside, we could hear a clear voice singing:

"Lully, lullay, Thou little tiny Child,

Bye, bye, lully, lullay.

Lullay, thou little tiny Child,

Bye, bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do,

For to preserve this day

This poor youngling for whom we do sing

Bye, bye, lully, lullay."

“It is Tom! What a voice he has, finer than any fey chorister!” said Henry, flinging open the door.

And Tom it was, and Anne Flood too, and a blast of Christmas wind and snow. Tom carried on singing while his mother shivered in her fur-edged tippet, her eyes popping with pride.

*“Herod, the king, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day
His men of might, in his own sight,
All children young to slay.
That woe is me, poor Child for Thee!
And ever mourn and sigh,
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
Bye, bye, lully, lullay.”*

“Isn’t it pretty?” said Anne. “Robert Armin taught it to him. The mummers sing it at Coventry.” (I must say, it did not strike me as a pretty carol, or a merry one.)

I pointed to Anne’s lavish ermine trim. “Surely they can put you in the stocks for wearing that?” I fingered the mottled fur, and she slapped me cheerfully.

“It’s just a bit of Yule-tide flummery,” she said. “But it suits me, do you not think? Besides, an ermine is no more than a winter stoat.”

“I’m sure you have royal blood in you somewhere.” I wondered how many times she’d sucked off Inchbald to earn enough to buy such an extravagant gewgaw. Or perhaps he gave it to her in fair exchange, for services rendered. Oh Lord, now I could see her lips, pulsing away at his groin! And the white crumbs of her face powder, dusting his curly pubes.

She gleamed with gratitude. “And you can see it in Tom. He’s more of a gentleman than any of those preening clowns at the Inns of Court.”

“Most decidedly,” said I, though this was scarcely saying much. Cross-dressing Moll Cut-purse herself was more gentlemanly than most young men of the law. “Come along inside, and let’s eat.”

“Indeed, I am hungry as a winter wolf!” said Tom. “Ravenous, Mistress Lanyer, and sorely ravaged by thirst.” Spending time with the players had certainly improved his feeling for the drama when he was off-stage.

“Really, Tom!” said Anne. “Have you forgot your manners?”

“I agree with Tom,” said Henry. “I am dead with hunger. Let’s stuff ourselves with greasy goose and Christmas pudding till we burst like rotting gibbet-men!”

So we sat round the table and fell to with a vengeance, finishing off the meal with coffin-shaped mince pies, stuffed with currants, cloves and saffron – thirteen ingredients in all, in honour of Our Lord and His Apostles. We only finished when our bellies stuck out roundly, though I am pleased to say that not one of us burst open.

The drink made Anne maudlin. “This day always makes me nervous,” she said, making moon-eyes at her empty cup.

“Oh, Anne, be more cheerful!” said I. “Don’t just sit there maundering on. You can be miserable for Lent.”

“Those poor Holy Innocents! I cannot bear it, the thought of losing a child.”

“Poor indeed,” said Tom. “The young are not always lucky.”

“Indeed not,” said his mother, dabbing off a tear.

Tom flushed deeper, anxious to be understood. “Not everyone is as fortunate as Nathan Field.”

“Why is he so fortunate?” I asked.

“Only because everyone says he is the new Burbage!”

“Is that so terrible?”

“First he is the Queen of France! O, ladies, sirs, bow down before him!

Then mad Ophelia, then love-sick Juliet – all in a fortnight!”

“You are doing well enough,” I said. “Dressed like a jackpudding every afternoon.”

“They don’t take enough note of his talent,” said Anne. “It galls me, but of course I am the last one who should speak up for him.”

“Don’t even think of it!” said Tom. “I must make my own way. Even if I *am* an underfellow, with nothing but messenger parts, which Ned Alleyn himself could not enliven. Two words, and then you’re off the stage again!”

“There is skill in that. You must be patient,” I said, sipping from my cup.

“The skill is that of tip-toeing out of sight, unnoticed...”

“Well, you are luckier than I am,” said Henry. “My life is a vale of suffering, I swear! We are whipped and tortured and forced to speak dog-Latin. There is no mercy for a schoolboy. I would rather be at the theatre, even if I were playing a joint stool or half a slug.”

“Henry, don’t be such a clodpate,” I said. “Without Latin you will get nowhere in this life.”

“Our hands freeze as we scrape out letters on a horn book. What is the point of that, if I am off to sea?”

“The sea will have to do without you,” I said, ruffling his hair till he pulled away. “You are staying on dry land, with your mother, and you will be a great musician at the court.”

“Just like your father,” slurred Alfonso.

“Just like your *grandfather*, Baptiste Bassano,” I said. “The greatest recorder player in London.” A wave of cold air chilled my back. I turned to see if the window had come open. But it was locked and the shutters had now been closed. I huddled nearer to the fire.

Anne’s thoughts were still on Herod and his dead-doing soldiers. “Such little children slaughtered so cruelly,” she said, as we gathered close around the fire and Alfonso filled her cup. “To think of it! The screaming and the grief. You would run mad, would you not?”

I patted her knee. “Let’s not speak of such things now,” I said. “We are together, warm and well and safe from harm.”

Alfonso took another slurp of his Marsala wine. He raised his cup to me, eyes glittering with feeling. “Dear Aemilia, we are well indeed, and everything is your doing. Your presence is our good fortune.”

These were unusually warm sentiments from Alfonso. I could see how it was turning out; he was growing lecherous. Since he had come back from his plague jaunt, there had been a general coolness between us. I didn’t know if this was caused by some escapade of his own, a pliant lady in a country house somewhere, or because he was still suspicious about William. And I didn’t care enough to find out. I looked at his handsome, wine-flushed face. “My doing? Don’t let Parson John hear you say that. It is God’s will.”

“Amen to that,” said Anne.

“Amen, amen!” said Henry, sagely. His voice had not yet broken, though sometimes it wavered on a word. And he was even more impudent and wayward than he had been before. He had a habit of blurting out memories that I had thought long

buried, as if he had brooded on them till he was ready to unleash them on the world.

“At plague time, my mother sent the parson packing, and conjured a demon.”

The others looked at me, curious.

“What’s this?” asked Anne.

I shrugged, and made a face at Henry. “The boy raves,” said I. “He was half mad with fever.”

“I saw you making spells,” said Henry. “Sitting in a giant circle.”

“I prayed, certainly,” I said. “But you mended and came back to health without any angel coming down from Heaven.”

“Really? I thought I saw one.”

“You had a fever, child. That night you may have seen anything: the Four Horses of the Apocalypse or the lost tribes of Israel. You can’t hold me to account for sickbed-visions.”

Anne looked at me, head tilted to one side. “Is that so, Aemilia? A magic circle! You’re a wily one. Never a word of this before.”

“Henry was in a raging fever. And fever dreams are back-to-front insanity, as any fool will tell you.”

“I quite agree, Mistress Lanyer!” said Tom, in his most actorly tones.

“Upside-down lunacy and moon-struck tomfoolery! When I had the sweating sickness, I dreamed the costume trunks had melted into goose fat, and turned inside-out. And the costumes were formed from clouds of perfume, a many-hued miasma in the breeze. My own self, a cap of lucent feathers, turned to purest, most divine and wholesome cloud...”

“Good heavens, boy, how you do prattle,” said Anne.

“I *soliloquise*, mother.”

“We have enough of the priest sermonising in the pulpit, without you soliloquising when we’re trying to enjoy ourselves.”

“I am practising so they will be forced to give me better parts in future. You shall be proud.”

She reached out and touched his cheek. “I *am* proud, Tom. But why must you go on like a flock of chattering starlings? Every day you spout more play-words, till I hardly understand a thing you say!”

Henry picked at a mince pie with his fingers. “And Mother wrote a play,” he said. His voice was sly. “Then she hid it.”

Tom eyes shone. “What’s it about?”

“Witches,” said Henry. “Witches and kings.”

“Henry, what do you mean by this? Prying and spying! How dare you read my pages!”

He popped the piece of meat into his mouth. “It’s good,” he said. “A most excellent piece of work. For a woman.”

“The King has written a book on witchcraft,” said Tom. “I have heard them speak about it at the Globe.”

“Then he will find my story of blood and sorcery very foolish,” I said.

“Besides, Henry is wrong. It is not a tale of kings, but of queens.”

Alfonso began to polish his recorder with his sleeve. “Queens! God preserve us!”

“It concerns the tragedy of Lady Macbeth.”

“Lord, wife, will you never learn?”

“Don’t ‘wife’ me, sir! Did we not have the best prince who ever lived, in the guise of our departed Sovereign? Is her Scots cousin even half the man she was? Drunk all day, and dull all night?”

Alfonso frowned. “Hush, Aemilia! Mind that tongue of yours. They’d hang you, just like Guido Fawkes, for saying so much!”

“Oh, dear Alfonso!” shrieked Anne. “How can you say so? They wouldn’t *dare!*”

He ignored her and stared at me thoughtfully. “But witches, now, that might...” He blew some notes, making them sound like the whistling wind.

“A little magic always pleases, on the stage,” said Anne, looking down at her ermine trim as if she saw Titania’s gown. “Does it not, Tom?”

“I heard tell that one Agnes Sampson, a witch in Scotland, told His Majesty of matters which only he could know of.” Alfonso’s tone was light, but I could tell that he was pleased to be so well informed.

I looked up in surprise. “What ‘matters?’”

“Secret words of love which he whispered to Queen Anne on their wedding night, when they were newly come from Denmark. Which he swore all the devils in Hell could not have discovered.”

Now I laughed in good earnest. “My dear husband! I had no idea you were such an authority. Is this what His Majesty confides in you, when you’ve done amusing him with jigs and ditties? He acquaints you of his pillow-talk and curtain-whispers, and describes his horror of the instruments of Satan? Why, soon you will be Duke of Long Ditch and we shall all be dressed in cloth of gold!”

“It is *said*, Aemilia, it is *said*. Of course I have not heard it from the King directly.”

“They say His Majesty is very wise,” said Anne, sipping her toddy. “He should be a doctor in a university, not a king.”

Alfonso shifted irritably in his chair. “From this awful meeting sprang his interest in daemonology.”

I poked the fire. “What nonsense,” I said. But as I stared at the flames, all I could think of was three-faced Hecate, with her white skin and bright hair.

Scene III

It was true – I had hidden my play away, for what was I supposed to do with it? It could not be staged, being woman's words, so I could only put it from me, and continue with my verse. But all this talk of witches and witchcraft brought it clearly back into my mind. That night, when everyone was asleep, I pulled it from its hiding place (under the floorboards, with my other treasures) and read it by candlelight, safe in the knowledge that it would take all the fires of Hell to rouse Alfonso once he had had a bellyful of wine. I was surprised, if I am honest, that the words chilled me to the marrow.

*

A few days later, a serving boy came knocking with a letter. My name was wrote upon the folded parchment, and I knew I recognised the hand, so I thought at first it must be a reply from William. But as soon as I opened it, I saw the curly "R" and bulbous "B". Richard Burbage. Trembling with anticipation, I read on:

"My dear Mistress Lanyer,

We have heard from young Tom Flood that you have written some lines.

There being a Hiatus in our Programme pertaining to some particular items that are likely to be pleasing to his Majesty, in brief, a thing which has some Occult infusion; some Conjunction in its design, and, further, which conceals about its person some reference to the union of the Scots and English, to make our Good King feel that the Scots and English are bed-fellows. To cut it short, we are in need of some new Words.

This being so, and knowing that you are a Woman of sound phrasing and a pithy way with Fools, we thought to ask you if we may see these Lines. In short, if you

*might give the bearer some notion of when you can fix to meet with us at this Theatre,
we might arrange some Business to the benefit of all.*

Your most respectful,

Richard Burbage”

*

Now, this put me in a dilemma. If a woman’s words couldn’t be put on the public stage, then how were they use my play? And yet... they could still perform this play before the King. I had not seen William since the day he came to see me after the plague, and had heard little of him, saving only that he prospered, which was bad enough. After all he had said, and written, he thought a swift return and a brief explanation about Southampton’s deception was all it took to make amends. Perhaps, it seemed, even sow the seeds for renewed passion. What riled me most was his readiness to believe everything spoken by a slippery Lord, and his reluctance to believe me – or even give me a proper hearing. And if he had truly cared, he would have tried to speak to me again. I knew William well enough: that which he wanted, he would strive for. He had forgotten me, as his star rose at Court and the King gave his name to the players, and nothing seemed beyond them. Why would he want me, in any case, ageing, penniless, stuck in my little house? I was no longer the Dark Aemilia of his poetry, or his memory.

It was this thought, truly, that drove me on. The thought of Will and his growing fame and the scant respect he showed me. Must I be humble? Must I be obedient and obscure? Was I just a housewife now, a hidden work-drab? No. No one would ever say that of me. If Burbage had seen fit to invite me to the Globe, then I would go, and see what came of it.

So off I went, alone, disguised in that old cloak of Joan's, which made me look twice the hag I was, and so get half the looks from passersby. Its strange scents had faded, perhaps because Marie kept it in the scullery, next to the hanging game, which gave off a pungent blood-scent as it ripened for the pot.

It was still freezing, the hardest, whitest winter I had ever known. That morning, at dawn, the streets had been full of cries of bewilderment and fright. The neat tracks of a cloven hoofed creature lay deep embedded in the glistening snow, crossing streets and gardens, but also roofs and haybarns, as if the beast had marched right over all things standing in its way. No cow nor goat this, either, since the tracks showed something striding manlike on two legs, not four. All the talk was of the Devil, come to spy on us and seize those souls who had fallen into sin this deep, bleak wintertide. The footprints were gone now, trampled over on the ground, and swept off the snow-laden rooftops by frightened householders. I shuddered to imagine some black and folded hell-wraith, perched upon a roofstack, seeing all. They say that Hades burns bright red, the city of eternal flame, but supposing it is froze blue-white, like winter? I say Hell is cold, the furthest distance from the Sun.

There was no need to hire a boatman: I walked across the frozen Thames, which was as black and smooth as an obsidian mirror and so clear that you could see a vast pike, frozen solid several fathoms down. (There was no danger of children falling through that year.) The booths of the Frost Fair stood in a disorderly muddle, not yet open at this early hour. Dogs ran hither and thither, cocking their legs and sniffing at the littered bones, while sea eagles skidded slush as their talons hit the ice. An apothecary sorted bottles inside the first booth I passed, and further along I saw a man dressed as a porpoise, shivering by a driftwood fire. His bloodshot eyes peered out between the two sets of little teeth. Close by, a cobbler was selling leather shoes from

a basket. "Stout shoes for the frost!" he shouted, waving a pair before me. But I pressed on.

Even though it was morning, the sky grew darker as I went, and snowflakes fell silent all about me, blurring my sight and melting as they touched my skin. Yet there was a strange light, as if the sun was shining from the river edge. For a moment I felt confused and unsure of my way. I thought of the pages that I carried with me. What was I doing, stepping out alone to visit a theatre in the Liberties? This was madness. (What indeed? Like Aristotle, I dare say you think that Woman is some error in creation.)

I straightened my back, and walked more boldly. There it was, ahead, set back from the south shore: the Globe. I studied it as I reached Blackfriars Stairs, rising like the castle of an enchantress above the surrounding trees. Mid-way up the walls was an encircling row of windows, no bigger than the arrow slits of the Tower prison. To the west of the building was the gabled roof of the stage and tiring house, and pointing just above this a little cupola. It reminded me of the minarets of Richmond and Nonesuch: an Eastern oddity among the common homes and stews. This fake opulence was of a piece with the gilt and foolery within, since every inch of this great palace was made from wood, not stone, and it had been carried, post by post, from its old home at Shoreditch. There was no more permanence to this temple of varieties than there was to a widow's shack. Yet it thought itself well above its own station. Over the entrance was a crest displaying Hercules bearing the globe upon his shoulders, and the dubious motto: *Totus mundus agit histrionem*: the whole world is a playhouse.

I got no answer when I knocked on the door, so I banged harder but there was only silence. So I pushed it open, forcing it with all my weight. It groaned as it

yielded, opening just a crack, and I wriggled inside. I was standing in the dark passage-way between the lowest tier of seats, facing the stage itself. There was no sound, save only the cry of the kites, flapping on the roof thatch high above me. I looked about me, bemused by the emptiness of the place, having only been there as part of a boisterous crowd. The pit, open to the grey, snow-burdened sky, stretched before me. The great stage was deserted. I walked over to it, looking around me uneasily.

But then, there was a laugh, a loud one, from somewhere above me. I climbed up on to the boards.

“Hallo?” I looked up. “Mr Burbage?” I called out.

There was another laugh, very merry.

“Who is there?” I called. I narrowed my eyes, scouring the entrances to the tiring rooms, and the musicians’ gallery which was just above them.

“She can’t see us,” said a familiar voice.

“Aemilia!” This was a louder, richer accent. “Aemilia, look higher!”

I looked around me, flushing with anger. “I can’t see you,” I cried. “Come out, and stop fooling with me.”

“Higher!” called the rich voice. “Even higher!” Finally, I spied them. Two heads, peering down at me, from the topmost point of the Heavens, half hidden behind a painted wooden cloud.

Scene IV

The cloud-space proved to be a narrow platform, like a hidden stage, just below the copula. It was reached by a series of steep flights of steps. Richard Burbage and William were bending over a chart on a small table. They presented an odd contrast: Burbage short and stout, with his walrus nose and doleful eyes; and Will, taller, well-made, tapping his foot in time with some rhythm that beat in his own head. Both were dressed in heavy coats with black coney collars, and wore fine kid gloves, with long patterned cuffs. They could have been two wealthy merchants, discussing a consignment of new kerseys from Halifax or a cargo of pepper from the Levant.

Burbage kissed my hand, bringing off his trick of being mocking and gentlemanly at once. “Mistress Lanyer, we are honoured. And you are looking so *well*.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I hope the climb did not tire you?”

“I am not in my dotage yet.”

“Indeed *not*. You have not changed one jot since the first day I saw you. Still as comely as a maid.”

I bowed. “I am sorry to see that you are busy with Mr Shakespeare. I thought we had arranged to meet at this hour.”

“Oh, no matter, we will be done with this in no time,” said Burbage. “It’s just some hare-brained scheme of Will’s.”

“It is *business*, Dick, I wish you’d give it your proper attention,” said Will, not looking at me.

“Business, man? Our business is the play, upon the stage.”

“Indeed,” said Will. “I am aware of it.”

Burbage straightened his back, pushed out his chest and seemed to grow a foot taller. Stepping back from the table, he declaimed:

*“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulph’rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head; and thou all-shaking thunder.
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ th’world,
Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once
That makes ungrateful man.”*

It was a splendid speech: he seemed both aged and magnificent in the making of it.

“You see?” said Burbage. “The words are all. Not dandling players like new-born babes”

“I agree that they are *most* significant, since I wrote them,” said Will. He had not looked up from his study once.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What ‘dandling’?”

“Will sets out to make men fly,” said Burbage, extending his arm with regal generosity. “As if he was Icarus.”

“Daedalus, if I may correct you,” said I.

William looked at me for the first time, almost as if he was about to laugh.

“They’ve done it at the Fortune,” he said. “Our competitors.”

Burbage made another expansive gesture, as if dismissing Greek legends in their entirety. “Ah, yes, Daedalus is the inventor. Of course, of course. Icarus is the son, who fell. As did two men at the Fortune, and broke their backs.”

William appeared to be making some sort of calculation on a piece of foolscap.

“Do you not think of that?” I asked him.

“I think of divinities and angels, descending from above,” said Will, after a moment. He seemed to consider the empty air in front of him. “I think of the heavens, riven by the radiance of a suspended goddess. Strapped safely in a chair.” Quite suddenly, he turned and flashed a glance at me. “Come, Mistress Lanyer, look...”

I went over, lips pursed. The diagram showed a strange construction consisting of a pivot, a long arm and a chair. It reminded me of the Wheel of Fortune, that most double of the Tarot cards which can foretell great luck or dire calamity.

“You see, this is the stage we stand upon.” He indicated the outline of the diagram. “We have enough space for windlass, drum and strong cordage. And – here – for the player to be readied for his flying seat.” He was looking down again, pointing to the next diagram. “And here – with some little refinement to the plan, the whole business will be done in one sweeping movement – just a slight upward thrust so the chair can clear the edge of the platform - and then forward and downward. On to the stage. You see?”

I made as close a study of the diagram as I would have if I had been the carpenter myself. I dared not look up. At last I said. “Why do you want my play?”

William sighed and folded up the chart. “Oh, you must discuss all that with Dick. It is nothing to do with me.” He disappeared down the stairs, his dark cape flying out behind him.

Burbage, on the other hand, was smiling, all avuncular. “Come, mistress, sit down,” he said, coming over to the table. “Don’t mind Will. He has a sore head. He has been doing the accounts again – it’s best left to Heminge.”

“I don’t mind him at all. I don’t think of him.”

He smiled in a manner which annoyed me. “Please – sit down, Aemilia. I have a proposition to make, which I think will interest you.”

I sat.

“Have you brought the play with you?” he asked. “I should like to read it, if I may.”

I pulled it from my leather bag, but withheld it when he tried to take it from me. “Sir, I should like to know *why* you wish to read it? Since a lady’s work cannot be played upon a public stage.”

Burbage beckoned me closer, lowering his voice and rounding his shoulders in a stage approximation of ardent secrecy. “Can we speak in confidence? Up here, where none can hear us? Might I depend on your discretion?”

“I would not be alive today if I did not know how to be discreet.”

“Quite.” He shifted his chair closer, so I could see the smallpox pits on his great nose. “To be frank with you, we are looking for something new. Fresh ideas, to please and reassure the King. He is distracted, sees an assassin in every corner and fears the Catholics will try again. He is not a happy man.”

“He can’t be blamed for that.”

“Of course not. Daggers, poison, even curses might undo him. Or like his own father, he might yet be ripped to pieces by a conspirator’s bomb.”

“So why can’t... Mr Shakespeare turn his hand to this?”

“Will is busy. His daughter is to marry, his wife wants more money to spend on her fine house, and he insists his next piece will be set in Ancient Egypt. I cannot for the life of me see a Scottish theme emerging there. We’ve looked at other plays – including three from Dekker - but none of them would do.”

I had to swallow hard at the mention of William’s greedy wife. “No, I can see that would be difficult.”

“The King is... well, he is a scholar one day, and a sot the next. In his books, he is the wisest man I ever met. In his cups, the most foolish. I don’t know what to make of him.”

“You are the leader of the King’s Men. The Royal company, in his pay. What’s there to worry you?”

“We are his appointed company now, but, in time to come - who knows? We must work hard to keep his favour.”

“Doesn’t he like what you have done for him so far?”

“Well enough, I’m told. Though he’s not as fulsome as the late Queen. Scots, you see. Uncivilized.”

“So what did you do last?”

“Madam! How can you ask such a thing? It was my greatest part so far. My King Lear!”

“The foolish dotard prince? I saw it done at Court, years ago. I never understood it.”

He frowned, offended. “What, a woman of your superior understanding?”

“Must kings be told to keep hold of their kingdoms? I should not have thought so.”

“You must see the new play! We are staging it again in spring. No one remembers that hoary elder version now – Will’s telling is quite new, and vastly better.”

“But you haven’t changed the story?”

“No. Why should we?”

“The king divides his kingdom between his three daughters, and suffers the consequences.”

“That is the sum of it.”

“What king ever lived, who acted in such a way?”

“In Will’s hands, how could it be otherwise than great? An instructive, yet crowd-pleasing fable.”

“Crowds are not always right.”

“He always does so well with the *words*.”

“I’ve no doubt of it.”

“Also, there are some scenes of excellent torture, his best since “Titus”.”

“Now, torture *is* a crowd pleaser, that I certainly recall.”

“But... I don’t know. The King seemed distracted, low in spirits when he was watching it. *Tired*. At least he woke up for my great speech, on the blasted heath. Which I just gave a flavour of.”

“So now you think... a Scottish play, with hags?”

“Indeed!” said Burbage. “Blood and hags! We need a play to please the king, and to please the king, it must have murder in it, as he was nearly murdered, and that murderer must be most direly punished.”

“I see, but...”

“We must include the intended destruction of a kingdom...”

“Which I have...”

“The undermining of the good by the diligent deception of the Evil.

As our king was undermined – d’you see it? – by the traitor Fawkes and all the rest.”

Burbage spread his hands. “And we need plots – which can be woven in, don’t fear this. And equivocation, but we can do that in one speech.”

“Assuredly.”

“But most of all”, said Burbage, taking my hand in his “... most of all we must have witches.”

“Why?”

“Marston has them in his “Sophosha”, and Barnes has his ‘Devil’s Charter’. And Dekker’s done one, which comes as no surprise, since he works like a thousand demons.”

William had returned, with more rolls of paper, which he spread out upon the table, using pewter mugs to flatten the corners.

“And what is Dekker’s play called?” I asked.

“The Whore of Babylon,” said Will, his back still turned. He spoke with peculiar vehemence.

“So you see,” said Burbage. “What you have wrote is well-nigh perfect.”

“But what’s my reward for this?”

Burbage crossed his legs as if to make himself more comfortable in his seat, then recrossed them. “Well... it would partly be this much: knowing these were your lines, of course, performed before the King of England. Few men can claim so much.”

“Few men. And no women. I should like my name to be heard.”

“Heard?”

“If my play was done before the king, this might be possible. As if it was a noble lady’s closet play, put on at some great house.”

Burbage raised his eyebrows. He looked at me as he might have done if black rat had addressed him from the wainscot. “Give me the play, my dear, and we will talk about the terms – if it is good enough,” he said.

I considered this. “I suppose it would be foolish to say no,” I said.

Burbage smiled, and looked down at the first page, on which I had written “*The Tragedie of Ladie Macbeth, A Scottish Queen.*”

“An excellent title, certainly. A most promising appellation. Leave it in my hands, and I will see what shall be done.”

Scene V

I was much distracted in the weeks that followed, so I had little time to wonder why it was taking Burbage so long to decide what he thought about my play.

Firstly, there was trouble with Marie. Never the most sensible of serving girls, she appeared to have turned quite mad since Christmas, and at first I could not think what could be the matter. She forgot to do the linen on washday, so that Alfonso had to wear a soiled shirt to the Palace when he was called to discuss a new trip to the Indies with Sir Robert Unwin. (Alfonso was my other worry, of course.) Then she moaned so much over the drying of ruffs on wood sticks that I was forced to beat her about the head, giving her a thick blobberlip. Which I regretted, as I am too tender-hearted. After that, she was in such a state of woeful discontent that she spoiled the soap, burned the bread, spilled the milk, dulled the pewter and cried when I asked her to comb out my hair.

Today was the latest of her blunders. She had failed to brush my best wool dress, so a great moth fluttered up into the air when I shook it out to wear to church. The blind insect had feasted till the cloth was full of holes, and it was only fit for wearing in the house. When I told her of this, she was half crying, half laughing, and so distracted that I feared I might lose her to Bedlam. In fact, I had ceased being angry, and was going in fear of what she might do next: set the house on fire or jump into the river.

“What’s the matter with that simpleton Marie” I asked Anne as we crossed the fields towards the distant spire of St Mary’s church. Marie was ahead of us,

walking along with Henry. I frowned as she fell over a running pig, which everyone else who passed by had the sense to side-step.

“Can’t you guess?” Anne looked at me queerly.

“If I could, I would have said so.”

She smiled, hard-eyed. “It’s love, mistress. She feels the pangs of *love*.”

“But who does she love?”

Anne looked at me as if it was I who was the half-wit, and not my silly servant. “Why it’s Tom!” she said.

I gave a scream of laughter. “But he is just...”

She laid her hand on my arm and I saw that Marie had turned to look at us. “Just a babe in arms, I know,” she whispered. “No more than a child in his ways. And besides, when he is of an age, he will most likely marry into the Theatre, not waste himself on some little drudge.”

“To think of it!” I said. “Of course, he cannot love her in return. Such a useless dizzard of a girl.”

“Of course not,” said Anne, sticking her chin out. And I saw from the jut of it that he was utterly enslaved.

“Oh, Lord above!” I cried. “Whatever shall we do with our misbehaving children?”

Anne stopped and looked at the calm steeple of the church, cutting into the sky. I saw that she was weeping. All around I could hear the bleating of sheep in the winter sunshine.

“Marie is going to have a child,” she said.

“Dear God,” I said. “So that is what it’s all about!”

Anne wiped her eyes. “He doesn’t even know who else she’s been with. Why should he marry the little slattern? She threw herself at him the minute she set eyes on him.”

“It was ever thus.”

“He could be great, Aemilia. He has a talent, you know. Now he wants to tie himself to that shameless trollop, and her unborn child.”

“Let us go to church,” I said. “And pray. You have your son’s foolishness to burden you. I have my idiot spouse.”

Inside St Mary’s, we lowered our heads and prayed, most devout. “Please God,” I said silently, deciding not to trouble with the Scriptures. “Let Marie’s womb-blood flow tomorrow, and let Sir Robert Unwin take Alfonso on his next sea voyage. Let him go to the Americas, and preserve our fortunes. And my virtue, what is left of it.”

I stood, head bowed, for some time.

“I do not want to fornicate with Inchbald, Lord, and I trust this is not your will.”

I stood longer, before my Maker.

“Forgive me, Lord, for being so bold.”

God answered one of these prayers, but not both. Alfonso was given a commission by Sir Robert that very day. Of Marie’s womb blood, I knew nothing, but she burned the bread again that afternoon.

*

The letter I had been waiting for arrived close to Shrovetide. What came was not – as I had expected – a slender folded document, but a bundle of messy pages. My pages, I saw at once. And yet the note itself was brief enough:

Madam,

We regret that these words, though Admirable in one of your Sex, are not of the Quality or Kind which will make a Show upon the Stage. For this reason, they did not inspire that Passion in us which we must feel in order to transform you Thoughts into Theatricals.

Might we thank you for your Interest and wish you every Success with your future Experiments in Fabrication.

Your most humble

Richard Burbage

I did not breathe – I thought I might not breathe again – but scabbled through the pages as if looking for reassurance, desperate to soothe the fizz and fury in my head. A speech sprang out at me: Lady Macbeth, at full height.

*“Was the hope drunk in which you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since,
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At which it did so freely?”*

I closed my eyes, not needing to see the rest, as I could hear it clear. A voice that echoed between Hecate and my own.

“Art thou afeared to be the same in thine own act and valour as thou art in desire?”

I spoke aloud, my eyes still shut: *“Would thou have that which thou esteemed the ornament of life, and live a coward in thine own esteem, letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’?”*

Cruel, duplicitous Burbage! To trip off this shoddy letter, when he had seen what I had put. I sank down to the ground, and the pages fluttered around me, and I

buried my head in my hands and I sobbed. You might say – for a play? For fame? But I cried because I knew then they would never hear me. This was it, and this was all of it, this house of thirty oaks, this board with its crooked stools, this fireside, the ham, the pots, the dirty skillet. I was hemmed in by walls of wattle, and by hours of life. There would be no breaking out, no second chance, no late reward. I was a spent whore, and that was the top and bottom of it. The best I could hope was to keep the roof above us by licking Inchbald's little cock.

I cried till my throat ached, and after that there seemed little purpose to it. For I had my son to think of. So I wiped my eyes, and looked around me, and thought. "I can't sit sobbing here for ever more. What shall we eat? Who will do the shirts?" And I picked up the pages and sorted them into a tidy pile, in the order they were written, and took them upstairs and hid them in the hole under the bedroom floor.

That done, I began to sweep the kitchen. I remembered, looking at the uncleared table and the dirty wooden trenchers, that Marie had been gone from the house for the whole day. Since Anne had told me that my servant girl was pregnant, I had realised that I'd been foolish not to notice. She'd fattened up like a cooped goose, week after week, so that even her little wrists were now thickened, and her swollen breasts rested on the table when she leaned forward to sop up her pottage with her bread. What's more, her belly stuck out plainly now. And she and Tom were always whispering, and conniving in the street between our two front doors. Anne could do nothing with Tom, and I could get no sense from Marie. Old sows, lumbering about our business, as youth frittered and skittered around us.

But here she was! And it was not I who lumbered, but she. Had she grown bigger in a single day? She came in from the street, sweating and with her dress loosened, even though the wind was still so bitter. Looking at her, I wondered how

many months she was gone. More than seven? If so she must have been with child at Yuletide, the little minx. Her belly was bigger than mine had ever been, and Henry was a porker of a baby, the biggest Joan had ever seen.

“Whatever are you thinking?” I said, straightening from my work. “Are you turning vagabond and stalking the highway? Do you shun your mistress, and run out among the common doxies?”

“What is that you say?” She wiped her forehead with her kerchief. I may as well have spoken Latin.

“Street scum, that’s what they are, with no home to go to and faces brown as privy slop.”

“I can’t run anywhere,” said Marie. This was true, given she could barely walk. She lowered herself slowly onto a stool, using the table for support.

I frowned. “Shall your babe be born under a hedge? Or at Tothill Fields?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Her face was white and set with tiredness. I felt a stab of pity for her, in spite of myself, this silly girl whose lustfulness had led her to the child-bed so soon. What fools we women are. I poured her some ale, and passed it over.

“Thank you, mistress. You are kind.”

“Kind!” I had to laugh.

“You are to me. I have been a bad servant.”

“I fear you have.”

“But I will pay for it.”

“You will have a child. *Then* you will pay. But you will also have your reward.”

Henry came in from school, as if summoned, and threw his bag onto the floor. I drew him in and hugged him, then pushed him from me. “Begone, Henry, our talk is not for you.”

“Nor would I want to listen,” said he. “Women’s idle chatter. Of dull babies and fine dresses and...stupid slimy *kisses*.” He made a face, picked up his catapult and ran outside again.

I sat down opposite Marie, and poured myself a drink. “You will still be my servant,” I said. “The child – it won’t prevent you sweeping, I hope, or stirring the stew.”

She looked at me, her eyes great with tears. “No, mistress.”

I set down my cup. “Then why are you so miserable?”

She rested her head on her arms and began to sob.

I stared at her. “Marie? What is it?” I cried. “Is it Thomas? He’s no worse than any other lad! Marie, tell me. What is wrong?”

At first she said nothing, just cried and cried, till I thought I must get on and turn the mattresses. Then she stopped, quite suddenly, and was very still.

“Marie? What *is* the matter with you?”

“There is something terrible,” she said, her face still hidden.

“What do you mean?”

“Something is wrong.”

“*What* is wrong?”

She raised her head. “Something is wrong with the baby.”

“Oh, for shame! You are young! It will pop out like a plum from a pie. You’ll have another dozen before you’re done.”

She rubbed her bloodshot eyes with her wet fingers. “I have dreams.”

“Dreams.”

“Dreams such as... such as I have never known.”

I sighed and piled up some dirty trenchers. “And what do you dream of?”

Her gaze fixed on me, her eyes grew wider and wider as if she saw her nightmares in my face. “I dream of monsters. Horrid midnight creatures. Demons, misbegot, that stalk us when the sun has gone.”

“Nursery fears, which you must soon grown out of.”

“I dream there is a monster growing inside me. My mother used to tell me an old French tale, about this very thing!”

This child was too fanciful for her own good. “Marie, you are trying my patience. There are a thousand tales like that one.”

“But why?” she said. “Surely it’s because such things are common? When monsters are born, I mean *really*, the midwives keep it quiet.”

I said nothing. The girl wasn’t quite as foolish as she looked. Many years before, I had attended a birth with Joan. It was a hard delivery, which lasted for two days and two nights. And after all her travail, the poor woman had little enough to show for it. The babe – a boy - was born with one great eye in the middle of his forehead. A living Cyclops. Joan swaddled him, and sprinkled him with holy water. But when the father saw his child, he swore, grabbed it by the feet and bashed it against the wall till he had beaten out all its brains. The infant’s screams were the worst I ever heard, no witch, nor gibbet rogue, nor half-bowelled recusant could make such a sound. Unshriven, that malformed babe went straight to Hell.

It was true, we kept it quiet, saying only that the child had died.

*

And of course, now that Alfonso was off cavorting on a ship somewhere, my landlord soon got wind of it, and here he was. I was busy cleaning out the jakes and he popped up behind me, quiet as a river rat.

“Mistress Lanyer.” He took off his hat with a flourish. It was a new one, by the look of it. Bright scarlet, with a yellow ostrich feather: colours which were all the rage at Court.

“Mr Inchbald, shorter than ever. Good day to you sir.”

“Your servant let me in, I hope I am not intruding.”

I made a lot of business of pouring a pot of piss into the maw of the privy. “I fear I am somewhat busy. Hard at my chores, as you can see.”

“Such a lady as yourself should not be mired in... these matters.” He was looking at his feet. A turd had dropped onto one of them. I pretended not to notice.

“I am not fit at all for entertaining. Can’t you come another time?”

He kicked the turd into the air with surprising skill. “The rent is due, sweet lady.”

“Ah, the sweet rent.”

“I’ll wait while you wash your hands, and perhaps we can share a glass of something from your larder.”

“Very well.” My mind was working quickly. I had one last item of some value, which might buy him off.

*

“Very nice. The workmanship is most careful. Quality, Mistress Lanyer, most admirable quality.”

The dwarf was examining a little silver pomander, shaped like a galleon. I was offering it to him in lieu of rent - and fornication. We were standing by the

walnut cupboard in the kitchen in which I kept the few things of value that I had left. Alfonso did not have a key: there was only one, which I kept on a long chain attached to my waist. Not that he would have known what to do with most of the contents: most of the gold and silver was now gone and all that was left was piles of rolled up pages, tied with string. William's poems lay among them, furred and all but forgotten. I had tied them in a small bundle with red ribbon, and attached a stout label marked simply: "William Shakespeare: poems."

"It's made in Nuremburg. See the mark?" I said. I pointed with a long arm, keeping my distance. "The figures there are meant to be my dear husband, God bless him, and my good self."

"Though they could be anyone," said Inchbald.

"You can keep condiments and salt cellars beneath the deck."

"Most... elegant." His eyes had not left my bosoms once.

I decided my attention should most usefully remain on the pomander. "Fill it with rosewater, and you can use it to ward off foul vapours and disease."

"Why, it's almost a shame to take it from you."

"Almost, yes. But think on this – if you were a just a fraction shorter you could ride on it yourself."

"Your wit is well known, mistress, but it can sometimes mar your perfect beauty."

"Shame. Stop staring at my dugs, please, Mr Inchbald."

He put his hands behind his back, as if this was the only way he could stop them wandering towards my breasts. "I'd still sooner have a suck, for all it is a handsome piece of work."

"Take it, or take your leave."

Disgruntled, Inchbald wrapped the pomander up in a linen cloth and stored it in his leather satchel. He looked at the cupboard. “Half a library in there, mistress – what’s all this paper?” He picked up a ribbon-girdled scroll and I took it from him.

“Nothing to do with you,” said I, returning it to its place.

“Can’t all be correspondence – are these plays by any chance?”

“Mind your own business.”

“By anyone I know?”

“I doubt it.”

He bowed gracelessly, and I turned away and set about cleaning a candlestick, hoping he would leave. There was silence for a moment, then he said: “It is a shame that you are so ill-disposed towards me madam,” he said. “I was intending to invite you to the theatre, as my most honoured guest.”

“Well, you do surprise me.” This was true. None of Inchbald’s other ladies were taken out to town. It struck me that Anne would think it most annoying if I was rewarded for my virtue with such a treat.

“There is a lot of talk about the latest work the King’s players are staging at the Globe. They say they put it on at Whitehall, and the Queen fainted right away.”

I had been standing with my back to him, scraping at a goblet of dried porridge on the kitchen table with a carving knife, but something made me stop and look at him.

“The Queen fainted?”

“Indeed. Quite the horridest play that she had seen in all her life. So I have been told. She thought there was black magic in it. Just like Faust.”

I dropped the knife. “What’s it called?”

He tapped his forehead, tutting with irritation. “Oh, do you know? I quite forget. Something odd sounding. Something of the North.”

“Scottish?”

“Scottish! Yes! I have it now. It’s *The Tragedie of Macbeth*.”

*

What’s in a name? What indeed. Macbeth was a good one. Perhaps it was just the title they had filched. It was not feasible, not likely, that these seasoned players had stole my work. And yet I could not sleep for thinking of it. The sun sank, the night blackened, the sun rose again, and I did not so much as blink. For three days, and three nights, this was my rest. Would they do this much, and say not a word about it? I could not face going to the theatre to see it for myself. No. I would ask Tom Flood, who knew when to be honest, and when sly. Would he really marry Marie? I suspected that he feared his mother more than he loved his sweetheart. No matter: he feared me too, certainly well enough to be honest with me now.

I asked Anne where I could find him, and after some complaining about my bad manners, she sent me to the Anchor at Southwark. It was a good spot for actors, for when the talk ran flat they could amuse themselves by watching the pirates hang at Execution Dock, and learn from this example how to make their stage-deaths true to life.

This low place was charged to overflowing with pimps, coney-catchers and foists as well as players. (Every form of human flotsam, you might say.) A gaggle of apprentice boys were standing outside, laughing together and drinking ale from their leather black-jackets. They called out when I passed, cocky as you please. I stared back stony-eyed, and all three of them looked nervously away.

Inside, darkness and a roar of talking. Narrow booths contained half-seen groups of drinkers and bawds. Here was a man kissing a white-armed girl. Here an old doxy, sitting astride a red-headed sailor-boy. Here, a group of law students, opining in the Latin. A thin man with a twisted lip came hobbling towards me.

“Mistress, can I be of help?” He spoke with false gentility.

“I don’t think so, thank you.” I looked around the crowded inn.

“We don’t see many married ladies here. Who do you seek?”

“Tom Flood, a player.”

“Ah, well. He is engaged. Occupied, or *occupying*, if I am to be precise.”

“I see. We are speaking, if I am right, of fornication?”

“She’s not the youngest, nor the comeliest, but she is the... well. She *accommodates*.”

“A gamesome old jade, I am sure.”

“Else he’d be throwing away a good sixpence.”

“Indeed. Take me to him, will you?”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to wait? We have the finest apple cider, the old Queen’s favourite tipple.”

“Drank in this doghole often, did she?”

“Slept here mistress, on each progress.”

Of course she did, and feasted on broken hog meat. “Then by all means, bring me some cider.”

When he’d gone, I hastened up the stairs. I knocked on the first door I came to. “Tom Flood?” There were little panting shrieks from within. Yelping, rapid, rhythmic. It reminded me of a time I heard the old rogue Raleigh at his game of forest hide-and-fuck, a sport he was most fond of. Once, I heard him having Bess

Throckmorton against a tree. At first she was all coy decorum: “Sweet Sir Walter, will you undo me? Nay, sweet Sir Walter!” But as her pleasure and excitement grew all she could squeal was: “Swisser Swatter Swisser Swatter.” And the branches shook as if brave Sir W. was pleasuring the trunk itself.

This was a seamier setting by far. I beat on the door once more. “Tom?” I tried again. But the bullish roar which ripped out next sounded more like the come-cry of the Beast himself than any sound that Tom was capable of making. I tried the next door. A Blackamoor opened it a crack, and peered out at me, suspicious. “Is Tom within?” I said.

The Blackamoor disappeared. “Are you called Tom?” I heard him say. He returned. “No Toms here.”

I turned and bumped into the broad chest of a young blade, a stout fellow in a scarlet doublet and baggy breeches. “Forgive me, sir,” I said, stepping to one side.

“Can I be of service to you?” asked the blade. He had a boyish voice, higher than I would have expected for his bulk and height.

“No, thank you, sir. I have no need of anything.”

“But you are after something. I can see it, else you wouldn’t look so grum.”

He was certainly an odd fellow. His voice was a like a woman’s, not a boy’s. I looked harder, and saw that beneath the brim of his hat he had a wide, clown’s face and was juicy-lipped, as if he had just been sucking strawberries. I had seen that face somewhere before.

“What I am after is my business. Now, I ask you, please step aside so I may get on.”

“No ‘sir’ this time?”

“Should I ‘sir’ you when I don’t know if you’re a Molly-boy or some other unsavoury type of tavern bawd? Men will buy their pleasure habnab in these places. It’s nothing more than groats for groans.”

“What do you say I am?”

I looked again, and, blow me, but I was sure this was a woman. “You are a cross-dresser,” said I.

“What?”

“I say you are a girl, parading as a boy.”

“And is that a sin?” she asked.

“It is ridiculous.”

“Mazy-brained is what it is, you have me there. If men are milksops, and maids are knaves, then where are we? In nothing but confusion, I say.”

“Can you talk straight, even if you don’t dress that way?”

“Certainly, mistress. Wearing a man’s dress means a maiden can have the freedom of the city.”

“Does it, indeed? Is life so simple?”

“I walk the town like any blade, which I dare say is more than you do.”

The saucy trull. “I walk where I want,” said I. “And I speak as I find.”

“Is that a riddle, mistress? It sounds like one.”

“No it’s not. Now, get out of my way, I am in a hurry.”

“What of the boys in the playhouse? Cross-dressed as women till the poet makes them ‘dress up’ as a man so they’re back inside their breeches. Is that disguise, or fancy-dress, or some double-triple joke? Now tell me!”

“I know nothing of all that,” I said. “I do not like the theatre.”

“Do not *like* it? Mistress, do you have a *choice*?” She danced forwards and backwards in a little stage jig. “How could you live without it? Why, without the stage, I would do nothing but measure out the hours with a bent Apostle spoon. I would rather be a humble bee and live just one summer than a huswife who could not see the magic of the Fortune or the Rose.”

“You speak as if you were a player yourself.”

“In a way I am. I have played, in any case. My right name is Mary Frith, though Mr Dekker calls me ‘Moll Cut-purse’.”

Now I knew where I had seen her before: she was the freakish clown who played the lute and danced with Robert Armin the day I saw *Othello*. “I might have known you were a friend of Dekker’s,” said I.

“I wouldn’t call him ‘friend’, nor ‘foe’ neither,” she said. “More like... fence. Receiver of stolen goods and lines. Now, who do you seek?”

“A player – Tom Flood.”

“I know him. Pretty fellow.” She knocked on another door and looked inside. “No, forgive me,” she said to the unseen occupants. “In there, you see, two students from the Inns of Court, who don’t know *what* they’re up to. I think their wish is that both of them be maids. But that does not explain the pig.”

“The pig?”

“Never you mind.” She knocked on another door, talking all the while. “I am a woman, but not lady-like. I am a mistress, but not a whore.” She put her head round the door, closed it, and moved on to the next.

“I am a thief, surely, but thieves are free to be what sex they please. I like men, but mainly to lie side-by-side with, both with some baccy in our pipe.” She

knocked again. “And I mean that as I say it, don’t look for a French meaning in my words.”

“I detest French meanings.”

She knocked on a third door, opened it, then closed it quickly. “Now that,” she said, “ain’t *natural*.”

At last we came to a door at the end of the passage. “If he’s not in here, your young man has upped and gone to sea,” she said, banging on it with the flat of her hand. “Or else he’s dead in a ditch with a dagger up his arse.”

At first there was no answer. But I could hear the gentle rattle of a snore. Pushing it open, I saw Tom, sleeping softly. Next to him sat a raddled whore of at least my age, with dangling naked dugs. She was eating from a little dish, and red wine streaked her chin. I waved my companion away.

“What’s this, no more need of me?” she asked.

“No. But thanks for your pains.”

“Don’t thank me, mistress. Remember me, instead.”

“Remember you for what?”

“For good sense, and for breeches.”

“What?”

But she had gone. I slipped inside and stood against the door.

“Who might you be?” asked the whore, mouth full. “Not his mother, are you?”

“What’s it to you if I’m his wife? Get out, you filthy drab!”

After she had gone, I sat down on the bed and looked at Tom, with his white skin and his curling, matted hair. His breath rose and fell sweetly with each snore. The stench of ale came off him like a river fog.

“Tom,” I said. I touched his hand. “Wake up.”

He made a noise like a puppy nosing for his mother’s tit, a hungry little whimper. Then he opened his eyes. With a cry, he sat upright, clutching the covers to his groin. “Aemilia! Mistress Lanyer – Lord above! What is the matter?”

I folded my arms. “I have a question for you.”

“God’s blood!” said Tom. “Has my mother put you up to this?”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“A little, madam.”

“And whoring too, it seems.”

“Well...”

“No way for a leading lady to go on. But that’s not the worst of it.”

“What?” Now there was panic in his eyes. “Marie! Is she ill? Has it come? I must go to her...” He leapt out of bed, naked as an earth-worm, and began to dress himself.

“Tom – stop. Marie is not ill. And I doubt the baby’s ready – though it’s twice the size it should be.”

He stopped, half in his shirt, and looked at me. “What, then? Why do you pester me?”

“Pester? *Pester*? And your mother thinks it’s *Henry* who is spoiled! I’ve come here for some information. Some facts. No *equivocation*, please. I know you have the answer.”

He started buttoning up his shirt. “I don’t know what I know which is of any use to you, but ask me what you like.”

I stood up and walked to the other side of the room, trying to set my mind straight. “What’s this about a Scottish play? The next one you’re doing at the Globe?”

He frowned, as if trying to remember lines. "It's a secret. They've told us to keep it quiet. This play will startle all the town."

"Why so secret?"

"I don't know."

"So who do *you* play?"

His fiddled with his shirt.

"Your *part*, Tom, what is it?"

"Lady Macbeth," he said, looking at me with a sudden glint of pleasure. "Later the Scottish queen."

"I know who Lady Macbeth is, you buffoon."

He smiled, uneasy. "Nathan Field is only Lady Macduff, and then a serving woman with hardly any lines. He was most put out when Burbage told us."

"Is yours a little part, or long?"

"Littler than I would have liked. But the greatest boy's part, by some way."

"How long?"

"Long enough."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"What do you mean?"

"What is her nature?"

"In some scenes, she's a better man than her lord."

"She leads him into wickedness?"

"She eggs him on, to kill the king. Then falls into a most excellent madness, walking in her nightgown like an unquiet spirit. This part is worth a thousand Juliets."

"So." The story may be written down by Holinshed, but some of this was mine. I breathed very deeply. I was imagining William's head, and that of Burbage,

high above the Bridge, upon a spike. Par-boiled with cumin seeds, and dipped in tar.

“Do you happen to have your pages with you, by any chance?”

Tom took a wad of paper from his doublet and handed it to me. “They are brutal lines,” he said. “But bold.”

I read them, and the blood beat in my brain when I saw how they had cheated me. “Who wrote these?” I asked, as if even now all might be somehow mended.

“Why, Will Shakespeare, of course,” said Tom. He was dressed now, and looked around him before picking up his hat. “Who else would it be?”

Just as he had finished speaking the door opened and who should walk in but Will himself, neat as a character in a play. He too was buttoning his shirt front. I wondered if it was his voice I’d heard, roaring out his seed moments before? The room swayed as if we were all at sea, and I recalled how he would look at me when it was me he rode, and loved, and rejoiced in.

He was saying: “Tom, we must go, for it’s...” Then he saw me and went pale.

“Aemilia!”

I bowed my head.

“What are you...?”

“A woman, sir, more’s the pity.”

“I mean – what are you doing in this place?”

“Business.” I looked him up and down. “And you? Pleasure, if I heard you right.”

O God! It is a summer’s day again. I’m in his arms and he is fucking me in bright sun. When he comes he throws his head back and calls my name: “Aemilia! Aemilia! Aemilia!” We are born again, one flesh, one love.

“Business?” He was staring back, then looked down at himself in dismay. “I am on business myself, though I expect you will think otherwise.”

“It is no business of mine where you go a-whoring,” I said. “I have other things to think of. I heard word about a play,” I nodded towards Tom. “From my young neighbour.”

“Of course. The play.”

“What is it called?” I asked, keeping my voice innocent.

Will smoothed his hands over his hair. “It’s – well. The title is *The Tragedie of Macbeth*.”

“The King’s story, rather than the Queen’s?”

“Quite so.”

“And therefore, different from the play I left with Burbage, which fell sadly short and which he returned to me. As you will recall.”

“Oh - very different! Utterly different! An India to your Kent, as it were. A chasm of difference between your... musings and this finished work. Yes.” He looked unhappier still. “That is the way of it. Plays are adapted, from many, many sources.”

“And yet – here are Tom’s pages, and nearly all the words are mine.”

“Yours? Surely not.”

“I wrote them, and I know I’m not mistaken. And what about the witches? And the murder of Macduff’s wife and her little ones? All thrown out – or some of this included?”

“All are there, aren’t they?” said Tom. “It’s a fine, dark thing, and will set an audience trembling on a winter afternoon.”

“These things are there,” said Will, blinking. “And more besides. I mean – new things, beside these... others. Come Tom, let us go.”

I stepped into the doorway, so they could not pass. “I hear it is highly thought of, this great, new, secret production.”

“There is no secret – we waited till it had been approved of by the king,” said Will. “And now he has seen it, and admires it, and all is well.”

I looked from Will’s face to Tom’s and back again.

“It’s a poor business,” I said. “Is this greatness, or littleness, I wonder? Is this genius, or common theft? Tell me, sir, you are a man of many words.”

“We call it poetry,” said Will. “We call it art.”

“Oh, shame on you,” said I. “You and your kind.”

“What ‘kind’ is that?”

“Filthy players, sir, and twisted poets and your frilly little helpmeets in their skirts.” Tom looked behind him when I cast a look in his direction, as if I could not possibly be referring to him.

“Aemilia, listen to reason will you...”

“Reason? Heaven help us! Reason? Is this the best that you can do? You... men? Cock-heavy, brain-light, and brimful of your own importance? The apex of Creation? God aimed too low!”

I turned and hurried down the stairs, through the crowded tavern and out into the street. The sun was low over the roofs and chimneys, and it would soon be nightfall. My head ached, my heart beat fast. What hope did I have of getting anything, in this city? I would end up starving in the Cage with the other drabs and vagrants. But I had not gone far when someone seized my shoulder. It was Will.

“Aemilia - there is something I need to say to you.”

I kept on walking, and shook his hand away. “What is there to say? Unless you will admit that you have robbed me.”

He half ran, half walked to keep up with me. “I will *not* say so, because it isn’t true.”

I looked along the street and crossed over, heading for the Bridge. “You have played me false. You and your conniving tribe.”

“Not false, Aemilia, this is how it is done. No play is made by one man alone. You don’t understand this world. You mistake your place in it. Look, mistress, slow down, please...”

“My place? Would that I had one!”

“No, you are mistaken...”

I tried to outpace him but he matched me step for step. I skipped over a dog turd, and turned to face him. “Don’t you see it? If a man had written that play, and it was put on with some changes, and he was one of your company or a tavern friend, like Dekker, all would be well.”

“So...what is the difference?”

“Lord save us, Will! I am a woman! I will get nothing if you don’t acknowledge what I have done. Nothing. I’m not Mary Sidney, or some other clever lady of the manor, who writes her hobby-lines and is feted by her little retinue. I am alone. I am that turd – (I pointed at it). I am nothing.”

He took a purse from his belt and held it towards me. “Here is gold, if it will help you,” he said. “Once, you said that you could not be with me because of my lowly station. But now I am a gentleman. I have a coat of arms... and houses.”

“Always trying to pay me off! I don’t want your cursed coin. I want to be a poet.”

“The world is not run according to my wishes, any more than it is to yours! You are confusing me with Almighty God!”

“Oh, go and play bare arses with the rest of them! Every one a cozener, and a cheat.” I pushed past him and walked on.

“Aemilia!” I kept walking.

“Aemilia!” I quickened my pace.

“Aemilia!” *O Lord, there was that scene again: pale flesh, bright sun; his rapt face; the white light in my head.*

“My love...” His voice broke upon the word, and stopped.

I looked back. “Your... *what?*”

“I must see you! I need to see you!”

“Well here I am. Solid as a dead sow.”

“What I mean is...I must talk to you! We must... God! Where are all the words, the *words*, when I need them most?”

“They cheat you, sir, as you have cheated me. Perhaps there is some justice in Creation after all. Your words came easy enough when you wanted to strumpet me, and whore me and harlot me, and falsely accuse me of fornicating with all and sundry. The bay where all men ride! God’s blood, what a phrase! From your so-called love to those foul insults. How great was the distance? – you made the change quicker than a viper slips its skin.”

“Jesu! I wrote those poems ten years ago! Can’t you see? I could barely think, scarcely knew myself - all from the agony of loving you. I thought I would die from the disease of my devotion. I was running mad, could not tell night from day! The sight of you – that hideous sight of you... with him...”

“The great earl.”

“I am sorry – I said I was sorry – I thought I saw you...” He closed his eyes.
“Doing with him what you had done to me. And now I wish...” He kicked a piglet,
which went snorting back down the street.

“What?”

“I thought that I could exorcize you, if my lines were cruel enough. But...”

“But...what?”

We stared at each other across the muddy street.

“I wanted to believe the worst of you. If you wouldn’t have me, then, in my
madness, it was easiest to call you ‘whore’.”

“Ah,” I said. “Now we have it. Now I believe you.”

“But even in the midst of writing those lines, I never could destroy the passion
that tormented me. That is the essence of them. They are love sonnets, from my
heart.”

“Oh William,” I said. “You are a fool.”

He smiled, a strange, sweet smile, and said: “And now... now I fear it is too
late.”

I looked at the setting sun. “I fear so. Henry will wonder where I am.”

“What are you doing tomorrow morning?” he asked, abruptly. “There is
something... I must tell you something.”

“I’m praying at the tomb of my Lord Hunsdon,” I said, flushing.

“You still pine for that old place-man?”

“He was kind to me. None kinder.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

I laughed. “What a fitting arrangement! Perhaps his Lordship will rise up
from his grave and beat you round the head for leading me such a dance.”

“I cannot bear this...”

He looked so woebegone that I almost pitied him. “I’m going early,” I said.

“Six of the clock, when it’s still quiet.”

“I’ll be there.”

I was startled by his burning eyes. “I must go,” I said, like some awkward, untried maid. “My son...”

“Say that you will meet with me tomorrow.”

I stared.

“Say it, Aemilia, I beg you.”

“I...”

“Please, sweet lady.”

“If you want.”

“I do want. I want to see you more than anything.”

“Then I will meet you.”

Scene VI

For the rest of the day I was hither and thither like the silliest virgin to stop myself from thinking. I swear, the house was never half so clean, before or after. Marie and I fetched water, scrubbed floors, aired counterpanes, scoured knives and cleaned the plates with shave-grass – what would normally have taken me three days took me three hours. She complained at first, but she soon got to it, and while I did the hardest tasks - such as sweeping out all the green rushes from the floors and casting down new ones – she toiled away with a good grace. Too good a grace, as it turned out.

At dusk, she came into the hall, where I was folding linen and placing it neatly in the great oak chest. My mind would not say “Will” and I would not let my memory summon up his face. Instead, each task took up my full attention. Never was a fold so neatly creased, nor a posy of herbs placed so exactly. I was a proper housewife, respectable, industrious, particular. I wished I could make the rest of my life so, and put it all in good order.

I looked up, and noticed Marie’s drawn face. “For Heaven’s sake, sit down, girl. You have done enough today.” She sat down on a hall stool, and rested her head against the wall, eyes closed.

“Truly, I am dog tired,” she said. “And the babe is jumping.”

“A good sign,” said I. “It is when they’re still that there is cause for worry.”

But when I looked up to see why she did not reply, I saw her face contort with pain. “Marie – what is it?”

“A feeling like the curse but stronger,” she said. She twisted her hands together. “Oh, mistress, it is like a knife! I couldn’t stand it worse than this! I am not ready! I am not strong!”

“It is likely just a false alarm,” I said. “Go and rest, and it will ease.”

But I had to help her up the stairs and into bed, for she was heavy with fatigue.

As I turned to go, she grabbed at me. “Did you see him?” she asked.

“See who?”

“Tom. When you went to the Anchor.”

I hesitated. “Were you eavesdropping on my conversation with Anne Flood, you wayward girl?”

“Did you, mistress?”

“Yes, I saw him,” I thought of telling her about the whore, but found I could not. “He was snoring and in his cups. You are better off without him, child. Don’t put your trust in players.”

“He loves me. He says he loves me.”

“I am sure he does, my poor Marie.”

*

I woke at the dead of night. I had heard a scream. I opened my eyes and stared up into the thick dark, listening with all my body. Silence loaded my ears, blackness pressed upon my eyes. A dream, a night fear. My mind at its old tricks again, and now no Joan to guard me. I was lucky to find myself safe and warm under my eiderdown, instead of out in the cold streets in nothing but my smock.

Then it came again, a scream that ripped into the night, tearing the silence, louder, louder, then collapsing into agonised sobs. I pushed back the bed clothes, lit a candle and wrapped myself in a woollen shawl. I climbed up to the garret. Shivering, I pushed the door open.

“Marie?”

I held the candle up high to see as well as I could. She was naked, kneeling on her bed, with her head hanging down. All I could see was her loose hair, which hid her face. It was swung to and fro as she rocked in pain. Then I noticed, in the shifting orange of the flame, that her bed sheets were smeared with blood.

I set down the candle. “Dear Lord! How long have you been like this?”

But she only grunted.

“Marie?”

“Umbstone. Umbstone.”

I threw off the shawl and knelt beside her. “What? What is it?”

“Umbstone.” She lifted her head and pointed to the necklace which hung around her neck. I saw it was an eagle stone, a talisman to ward off miscarriage. The baby would not come till she took this off. I unfastened it and set it down on the straw mattress where she could see it.

“I must fetch the midwife,” said I. “I won’t be long.”

But then she gripped my hand. There was a look of terror in her eyes. “Don’t leave me, mistress. Stay!”

“Marie... I have no skill in this!”

“*You* will birth my child. *You* will save me.” Her grip tightened. “Please.”

“What foolishness – you need someone who knows how to aid you in your travail...” But then I saw myself, as Marie was now, as clear as if a mirror had been

held up in which I could view the past. The night Henry was born and Joan had saved us both. I saw myself, crying out and clutching the birthing stool, and I saw Joan, gentle, patient, always calm. I had been with her when she was called to the birth of several children in the parish. Not one of them had died, though two had come close. I tried to remember everything she did; how she rubbed the women's flanks with oil of roses, fed them with vinegar and sugar, and eased the pain with powdered ivory or eagle's dung.

"If you want me, I'll stay, but don't forget I am not a midwife, nor do I have anything to recommend me." The nightwatch called outside – one of the clock. "Do not lie down when the throes come, walk gently about the chamber. Keep warm, but don't take to your bed."

I banked up the fire, so it gave out a good heat.

"I don't have child-bed linen or anything else for my poor baby!" she wailed through her fallen hair. "I thought it would be weeks from now!"

"Hush, calm yourself, I will see what I can fetch. I have a store of linen downstairs. Don't fret yourself. There is not a man or woman in this world who hasn't come into the world this way. Think on that, and breathe easy."

I ran down the stairs, and rushed into my room. Sure enough, I had a neat pile of forehead cloths, caps and belly-bands. And I had some open fronted shifts which Marie could use for breast feeding when it was time. I remembered now where I had put the birthing stool, and went to find it in the kitchen. (While I was at it, I also fetched a pound of butter, a bowl of lavender water, some juice of dittany and my sharpest knife: I remembered all these from Joan's pack.) Returning to the garret, I helped the whimpering Marie on to the low seat, so that she was leaning against the back, legs wide. Then I stopped up the cracks in the chamber walls with rags and blew

out the candles, so that the roaring fire was our only light. (Too much brightness can drive a mother mad.)

“Here, eat a knob of butter,” said I, cutting her a slice.

She groaned and dribbled, but most of it went down.

“I cannot bear it, mistress! I cannot cope! I swear there is an Oliphant inside me.”

I gave her a drink of dittany juice, and then peered closely at her hole, and saw that she had begun to open. Pressing against the widening space I could see a round shape, covered in a shining layer of vernix. Pray God it was the top of her baby’s head and not some other part of its anatomy, for I could not recall what I was meant to do if it had twisted round, or done some other mischief.

“I can’t do it, mistress!” shouted Marie. “I can’t do it! I don’t dare to, and I’m not strong enough! It will tear me in two. I can feel it. O God, help me!”

“You’ll do very well, a big, fine girl like you,” I said. I soaked a cloth in the lavender water and wiped her brow. “Keep cheerful! Don’t waste your strength by calling on your Lord, when He has better things to do than mind a child-bed. Do you hear a mare in the field, lamenting and crying as she pushes a gangling foal into the world? Save yourself for what must be done.”

“Lord help me! Our Lady, save me!” screamed Marie, and her hands clenched around the arms of the birthing chair as another spasm took hold of her. She was not an apt pupil. Poor creature, I was beyond my own knowledge and experience, but not so much as she. I could not see how such a flimsy thing as she was had borne the great protuberance that went before. I rubbed the tight barrel of her belly with butter, speaking soothing nonsense to her all the while.

“I will help you all I can,” I said. “But you must also strive to help yourself.”

But now another seizure was upon her, and she screamed and writhed in the chair, and it was all I could do to stop her falling to the ground and thrashing in the rushes in a fit like Legion. When she had done, there was a great pool of blood all around her, so the chair was an island in a scarlet lake, but there was no sign of the baby. The limits of my scant knowledge being already reached, I mopped up the blood with the bedclothes - they being ruined already - and said my own prayers to God.

“Mistress,” whispered the child. Her eyes were tight shut, and her breath came shallowly. “Will my baby come?”

“In its own time.”

“So it could not stick inside for ever?”

“Of course not.”

The watch called out again. Two of the clock. Time enough, time enough.

But then time contorted into nightmare, and it was as if some demon came down and took possession of Marie. The throes came faster and stronger – as they will – but her fear was greater with each contraction and soon it wasn’t God and Mary that she called for, but the Devil and his minions instead. I found myself shouting back at her, afraid that this would do no good, yet shout she would. To my horror, she leapt up from the chair and ran against the walls, tearing at the bloody shreds of her night gown, roaring and yelling all the while. And the words she said – I swear she sounded more like a damned soul than a simple serving girl.

“By Satan! By the Devil in all his names! By Apollyon, Beelzebub, Diabolus, Lucifer, the King of Hell! Did I ask for this?”

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “Marie! Marie! Stop it!”

“The walking spirits of the Earth do not feel pain as I do!”

“Come back to yourself....”

But it was as if she was in another world. She put her head back and howled, then spouted out the vilest gibberish, which sounded like the language of lost souls.

“Marie!” I cried. “Stop this terrible noise! Do not speak of Satan at such a time! Say your prayers!” Still she raged on, scratching her own flesh with her nails. I crossed myself and prayed for her, hoping to limit the power of her wicked thoughts. She grabbed my arm, and using me for purchase, pushed and screamed, legs half bent, eyes rolled back into her head. Then she fell down on the ground, and a torrent of blood came belching from between her legs and the most fearful stench, and I was afraid that she had died. When I felt her the pulse in her neck, the blood was still beating fast, so I took some more old sheets and laid them between her legs, and mopped up all I could of the blood and matter, and saw then that a baby’s face was sticking out.

“Marie!” I said. “Your prayers are answered! The child is coming.”

Marie only groaned, and spoke more of her strange language.

“Be quiet now, and don’t push out for a little while. Let it come gently.” I cradled the little head in my hands and gradually a tiny shoulder followed. Then came the other, and then the top part of its body. I felt in its mouth, scraped out the dark gunge that was in there, and it coughed and spluttered and began to cry. “It is good Marie, it’s good, you have a child....”

I bent closer, wanting to release its legs, but they were stuck fast. I tried to ease the infant out, but could not. So I greased my hands with more butter, and felt inside her, to see what ailed it. I felt a rounded shape, a blockage. But then, with a terrible wail, Marie began to push once more. Blood oozed out around the half-born baby.

“Don’t push too hard, now, let the child take its time,” I said, though I didn’t know if she could understand a word I said. There was another contraction and out slipped the baby’s legs. Yet, there was still something wrong. The baby seemed stuck to its mother’s body by some hidden protuberance, and I could not free it. Its cries grew faster, and I looked around me, wondering what I should do next. I saw the sharp knife lying on a stool. I had thought to use this to cut the chord, but knew that sometimes Joan had used this to cut the woman’s skin to ease the progress of a birth. (It is part of Eve’s punishment that babies are born with large heads, so that the agony of birthing is more severe.) I grasped the knife, and screwed up my courage. Then I slashed at her taut skin, so that her hole was ripped wider. She screamed louder and writhed in pain. Thick gore gushed forth around the baby’s protruding head. It seemed Marie was indeed being torn in two. And then a second pair of legs came kicking out, a mirror copy of the first. Then slithered forth another child, a perfect twin. But then I screamed myself, and staggered, hardly able to take in what I saw. The two infants were melded into one flesh. It was a double child, a hellish freak, joined at the hip. I shrank back from it, trembling, and the creature wriggled and mewled, crying out with its two mouths and flailing its four legs and four arms in the air. I shouted out in fear and ran to the door, my hands clutched to my head. Turning back, I saw the malformed creature wriggling and crying in its sea of blood. A hellish punishment indeed. A blot on nature, hideous and misbegotten. I thought of the man who had smashed his one-eyed child against the walls, and looking down, I saw that I still had a knife clenched in my hand. A knife can end a life, but it can also preserve one.

I walked slowly back to the birth-bed. Marie was lying still, eyes closed. The baby was mewling with double force. What to do? Praying all the while, I cut the

chord and tied it, then washed the creature with milk and water and swaddled it tight. Then I put a biggin-bonnet on each of the two heads, with a compress under each to protect their soft spots. Then I swaddled the strange being on to a board. And there it lay, in an unbreakable embrace, arms locked around itself. The two heads matched exactly: black haired and fairy-faced. Indeed, a sweeter, prettier monster you could not imagine. (It was a girl, two-cunted. What a prospect.) Forgive me, but I hoped that it would quietly die, and blessed it, wishing I had holy water instead of just my scented bowl.

Of its child-mother, I had little hope. Her breaths were shallow and uneven and she was deathly white. I feared that she might not last till daybreak. The linen cloths that I used were turned bright red, and my hands and dress were of the same colour: I felt like a murderer not a midwife. I stripped the bed and changed the sheets, then began to sweep the scarlet rushes from the floor.

Outside, someone called out the time. But I could make no sense of it.

*

Marie was stronger than she looked. Some time later, she awoke. I had washed her and sewn her wound as best I could. Her eyes blinked open, and I saw the madness had left her.

“Where is my baby?” she asked, looking round the room. “Does it live? Is it a boy or a girl?”

I hesitated.

“Mistress, is my baby well?”

“You have two babies, Marie,” I said. I lifted the swaddled creature from its cot, and placed it in her arms.

“Two babies?” She smiled down at the two faces, which were pressed tight together. “Twins!”

“Twin girls.” Well, after a fashion they were girls.

“What a wondrous thing.” She stared down at them.

“Every birth is wondrous,” said I. (This was lying, plain and simple.)

“But why are they swaddled to each other? Don’t they need their own bands?”

I wanted to find a way to tell her why they were bound together, but couldn’t.

She saw it in my face.

“What is wrong, mistress?”

I turned away.

“There is something terrible! Please tell me. What has happened?”

I shook my head sorrowfully.

Her voice rose up to a wail. “Tell me what it is that ails them! I beg you!”

“I cannot say it. I am sorry, but I cannot say.”

With shaking hands she undid the linens so that the little monster was revealed. Four legged, four armed, two headed, two bodies linked by flesh and bone. She screamed and flung it down upon the bed, and the sleeping thing awoke, waved its freed limbs in the cold air and wailed with her. “Alair! Alair!” Such a sorrowful sound that it tore at me; the sound that Henry made when he was tiny, and Joan put him in my arms for the first time. And I began to see that it might be human. I thought of Dr Forman’s little man. “*Amor vincit omnia*”, and the way he fought to live, and the foul horror of his death.

I picked up the double-infant, and wrapped it tight once more. Its cries quietened. Marie’s did not. She screamed and screamed and screamed, half in English, half in French. (Sadly, I understood both languages: her words were more

evil in her mother tongue than in our own.) Wilder and madder and louder she shouted, calling for the lynching of Our Lady, an end to Time, the emptying of Hell and sundry other changes to the proper order of things. Until at last she spewed green bile upon the floor – a dreadful stench. (I cleaned it up, starting to tire of skivvying for my own maid.) After that – silence. The rage had passed. It was as if Marie had puked out some evil in herself. She sat hunched up in the bed, a shawl pulled round her shoulders, staring ahead of her, contemplating nothing.

After a while, she wiped her mouth with her long hair and said: “I have committed a mortal sin. God has sent this to me.”

“We are all sinners,” I said. I laid the creature in the cot again, and sat down beside her. “What you did with Tom is no more than a thousand girls have done before you. A thousand thousand! You fell into bed before you made a marriage vow. You are more fool than sinner.” I took one of her hands in mine. “I will fetch a wet nurse.”

“What wet nurse will suckle *that*?” she said. She nodded in the direction of the cradle. “She’ll run from the very sight of it.”

“Yours is not the first freak born in Westminster, nor will it be the last. They must be fed. Just like other children.”

“But they are not like other children,” she said. “They are joined! They are doomed!”

“We don’t know what their fate will be. There’s an old tale of twins joined like these two, who lived in Kent, in Biddenham, and were born to a good family. They lived for more than thirty years.”

She wasn’t listening. “What shall I tell Tom?”

I shook my head, picked up the infants and started to feed them with a horn of watery gruel.

*

After this I must have slept. I woke to find that I was curled beside her on the bed. I rubbed my eyes and looked out of the window. The sun was high in the sky. The hour to meet with William was long gone. I stood up, unsteadily, and saw that Marie was watching me. Her eyes were calm. The joined twins were fast asleep, snuffling in their cot.

“Give them to me,” she said.

“What?”

“My babies.”

I gazed at her, confused. “I was going to fetch a wet nurse.”

“I don’t need one. Give them to me.”

I stumbled to the cot and picked up the joined twins. She took them from me. And she stuck her little finger into the mouth of one of them, waking it, then gently probed her teat into its mouth. I have seen many women struggle with this first suckling, and their babies fall away from the offered breast. But this child knew well what it needed and drank greedily, eyes creased closed, one hand clasped around the white orb of her dug. The second infant rested its cheek upon it.

The door opened to a crack. Henry’s face came round it, bright and curious. I hurried over to block his sight.

“Is she alive?” he asked. “I heard such screams I thought she must be dead.”

“Of course she is alive, you dolt!”

“And is the baby born?” He craned round me to get a better look.

“Her baby is born, yes.”

“In that case all is well,” said Henry.

“Indeed.” (Not “yes”, you will notice, for I am not a willing liar.)

“Then hurrah!” came a loud voice, and in burst Tom before I could stop him.

For a moment, he stared at the frozen scene: the pile of blood-soaked rushes, the disordered bed, Marie, clasping the tiny freaks. One head feeding from her breast; the other waiting, round eyes fixed upon her face. Though they were swaddled again, it was clear that something was strange. But Tom, young and inexperienced as he was, seemed at first puzzled rather than afraid.

“Marie – you have your – children!”

“Oh Tom – go away!”

“Don’t you want to see me?”

“I do – but not now. Get out please, Tom, my dearest love.”

“But – *I* want to see *you*!”

“Not now Tom, no, you must go.”

Henry, with his skill of slipping where he wasn’t wanted, had made his way to the bedside.

“Why don’t you put one of them in the cradle?” he asked. “While the other feeds? Doesn’t it get tired of watching?”

“Is it – twins? Our children?” Tom’s voice was uncertain.

“You heard what Marie said to you – get out,” I said. “This is no place for you, and beyond your understanding. And Henry, come away from there.” I grabbed his arm and pulled him roughly towards the door.

Tom looked at me, suddenly afraid. “What is there to understand? She is my love, and we will marry - and these are my children! There is nothing strange in that.”

“Marry? What’s this? No one is marrying without my consent.” Anne bustled in, bare-headed and wearing her shabbiest dress and oldest ruff, which drooped down at one side.

Tom wheeled round. “Mother, you cannot forbid me to wed Marie. We are promised to each other already. Burbage oversaw the hand-fasting.”

She glanced at the bed, seeming to notice the twins for the first time.

“Hand-fasting? Hand-fasting? How dare you even use such a word to dignify your sport? And with such a common little bitch as this? Hand-farting, more like. She is a servant girl, nothing but a silly strumpet. There is no reason to believe these...twins are yours than that they are the spawn of any other Tom Fool who came knocking.”

“Mistress Flood,” said Marie. “Please stop.”

“Stop? Why should I take note of you, that’s laid a trap for my dear son?”

“Forgive me, but I think I can put him straight. These aren’t your babies, Tom. I had a strange dream one night, and I believe I was ravished by some demon.”

Tom laughed. “What? Marie, you are mad.”

“She’s lain with another man, is the truth of it,” said Anne. “More than one, I’m sure. Half the ‘prentice boys in the City have been up those skirts. She’s a skittish, shameless doxy.”

“Marie, is that true? Have you been with another man? If so, tell me now.”

She looked up at him. Then she unwrapped the twins. Anne screamed and prayed to Our Lady. Tom stared, as if the demon she had spoken of was sitting right in front of him.

Anne was still praying, eyes tight shut. “Lead me from this place of sin,” she said. “Lead me on from it, and do not ask me to return.

“Anne,” said I. “This is cruel! Such things do happen, in the normal way of things. No demon needs to creep into a virgin’s bed. God’s creatures aren’t all perfect – you can see that every time you walk down the street. Have pity on the girl.”

“Take me from here, Tom,” commanded Anne, blindly holding out her hands. But Tom was still looking at his lover, as she quietly fastened one of her babies to her breast. Her movements were small and neat, and she had never looked so pretty. He crossed himself, and kneeled down.

“Tom?” said his mother. “Tom?”

“It is my fault,” said Tom. “Get down on your knees, mother, and pray to God to be merciful.”

“What?”

“May God forgive me, I have lain with whores. I have not been true to Marie as I should have been. This is my punishment. Pray for her, and pray for me. For we are man and wife, and nothing will divide us.”

*

I closed the door and ran, my head bare, hair flying. All I could see was that last look I had from Will. The sonnets, those cursed sonnets, that bitter parting – suddenly it seemed as if we might find a way beyond this, a way to love each other as we once had. Might it be possible? Might we still be lovers? My memories swirled, my thoughts were frantic, I could not tell truth from dreams. I ran full tilt, heading for the Church of St Peter, my breath hurting and tearing in my chest. When I saw the great stone structure looming ahead of me, I stopped and held my side and wept, because I knew there was no reason for this hurry. Too late! The bells were ringing. Twelve tolls. Twelve knells. I walked up to the church door and pushed it open.

This was the great church where I had worshipped with Lord Hunsdon every Sunday. (Unless the Lady Anne was visiting, which was seldom.) This was a royal church, and royally magnificent as befitted the rulers of England. They had dissolved, destroyed and cruelly disfigured much of what had been, yet this great building seemed as permanent and vast as any fortress. In the lofty nave, the air was cold and still. Sunlight shifted in through the jewel-coloured window panes, illuminating the flat glass faces of the saints. Unsteady, and still breathing hard, I made my way down the passage way towards the chapel of St John the Baptist, where Hunsdon had been laid to rest. I looked around me, filled with wonder in spite of everything. I was excluded from the majesty of Whitehall and the other palaces, but not from the splendour of this house of God. The gold and silver working of the high altar and the rich embroidery of the altar cloths were illuminated by the gentle light. Behind the altar at the far end of the nave, a polished brazen screen glowed brightly. Above my head, the stone was carved with such skill that it seemed to hang in the air, as light as cobwebs.

The chapel of St John the Baptist opened off the north transept. It was a little enough space, fenced off from the main church with a high grille. Anyone entering was confronted with the vast tomb that had been built for my Lord Hunsdon, which took up most of the space on the wall opposite. I stopped at the doorway and looked at it now. Such a monstrous and ungainly lump of marble-work you never saw. No sleeping statue of my Lord Hunsdon here: no; it was as if he had been a guild rather than a man. His sarcophagus was decorated with black-and-white cheque point, surmounted by what looked like a colonnaded fireplace. His memorial towered above the simpler tombs which held the remains of kings and queens and princes, marble faced with praying hands. I felt as if the man he had once been was trapped inside,

behind a prison wall of weapons, armour and prancing bulls. It was his proud wife who had built this hideous monument in his name, with money given to her by the Queen. No woman who loved her husband truly would erect a tomb that looked like Nero's privy.

My lord had died in debt. Some said his taste in mistresses had added to his woes. They used to say that I had put up with his aged passion for the sake of my fine gowns and the suite of rooms I had in Whitehall. There was a joke that I would make him hump me three times nightly in the hope that I would see him off. They did not know what we were to each other. He was a tender lover and a true friend, and I had been happy with him till I fell in love with Will.

I sat down and rested my head in my hands. Twelve of the clock. There was no reason to expect that he would wait so long. I tried to pray, to calm myself, dizzy with images of two-headed infants and splurting womb blood. Like a Puritan, I addressed myself directly to God, as if he was sitting next to me on the chapel step.

"Oh Lord, please show me what should be done and give the strength to see it will be..." My mind trailed off again, seeing the knife slashing at poor Marie's pudenda and a face peering out from within.

"Oh Lord," I started again. "I am sorry for wishing that Will would come, and I thank you for giving me the chance to help Marie and her baby. Her babies..." Now a vision of Will as I had last seen him came to me, and I stopped again. It wasn't a prayer I remembered now, but a verse of Marlowe's:

Come live with me and be my Love

And we will all the pleasures prove

That Hills and Valleys, dale and field

And all the craggy mountains yield.

There will be sit upon the rocks

And see the shepherds feed their flocks

By Shallow rivers, to whose falls

Melodious birds sing madrigals.

He was not remembered for his tenderness, and yet how beautiful these lines were. Why had I never lived straightforwardly? Why had my life always been such an unseemly muddle? I was blighted, like Eurydice, who died from a snake bite on her wedding day, and was followed by faithful Orpheus into Hades. But there was no Orpheus for me.

“Oh Lord....” But this time could think of nothing to come after, excepting only: “Why?”

I opened my eyes and looked around me. The silence in the high church with its sun-lit windows and its soaring stone work was complete. If my passion could have found its true expression, I would have conjured Will now, so he was there before me. Solid flesh. Ink-stained fingers. Leather doublet. And his questioning, relentless gaze. To see him, to feel the weight of him, to sense his fingers touching mine. My hand flinched, as if he had reached out from my mind.

The pews gaped. Empty, empty, empty. I felt my feebleness and littleness as I never had before. “You are old, Aemilia,” I thought.

And then I thought: “Will. Come.” I summoned all my will, all my woman’s power and wished him, wished him to come before me. I closed my eyes and pleaded

with him, so hard that my head ached. He had slandered me, and dishonoured me, but that was long ago. Could I forgive him? I didn't know. But what I did know was that I yearned to hear his voice.

When I opened my eyes, someone was standing in front of me. I looked up.
“Will?”

But it was Inchbald, puffing, and somewhat out of breath.

“Mistress Lanyer,” he said. “My goodness, you can run! One would never think you are a woman slightly past your prime.”

“God's blood, Inchbald,” I said, forgetting where I was. “What in heaven's name do you mean by creeping up on me?”

He sat down beside me on the stone step, his little chest heaving. “Phew. Ooh. Quite a stretch from Long Ditch, is it not? I saw you coming out of your front door, and followed you all the way! How touching, that you still come to pray for Hunsdon. A woman of such loyal affections is wasted on Alfonso, but you know where I am, if you want to trade him in for someone better.”

“Mr Inchbald, if you have followed me into the house of God for either money or some other form of payment, then you have erred severely.”

The dwarf took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead with it, then blew his nose. After this, he seemed more composed, and took a deep breath. I had the feeling that he was preparing to enjoy himself. “My dear lady,” he said. “You should know by now that I am a gentleman of refined tastes, and superior manners. A lover of the theatre, and of women of distinction, like yourself.” He smiled his two-pronged smile.

“What I know about you is that you are my landlord and that you are not quite a yard in height,” I said. “And that you have made an arrangement with my neighbour which makes me ill to think of.”

“And what I know about you, dearest madam, is that you were once the mistress of two men. Or is it three? I can never quite remember. One of them, I believe, was a Mr WS.” He took a pamphlet out of the pocket from which he had just produced the handkerchief. “*This* Mr WS,” he said, handing me the book.

I looked at it. It was a collection of sonnets. Imprinted by a Mr Anthony Inchbald. “You have a print shop?” I asked, bemused.

“Just opened it. This is my very first book. Go on. Look at the title.”

I looked at it. The title read: “*Sonnets to Dark Aemilia.*” So this was why William had suddenly been so eager to talk to me. He knew of the existence of this vile thing.

“These were private poems,” said I, opening it almost against my will. “They have never been printed! How did you come by them?”

Inchbald looked shifty. “You are a careless housewife, Mistress Lanyer. Be more cautious in future. Otherwise your creditors may take advantage of you.”

My head was hot, my belly cold. “What do you mean?” I asked.

But I could see it now – the open chest, the silver pomander, and Inchbald’s greedy little face. It would have taken him no time at all to seize the sonnets from among the bundles of furled paper. I had even marked them with William’s name.

“I have printed three hundred of these, and do you know, near two hundred are already sold? You will be the talk of the city, you faithless little doxy.”

I wasn’t listening. I was reading one of the verses, one I already had by heart, and which was now all over London.

*My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly express'd;
For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night*

*

There was a message waiting for me when I returned home. A folded parchment, lying on the kitchen table. I picked it up, and saw my name was written on it. I unfolded the single sheet, and read these words:

Aemilia—

You did not come. I told you that I could not bear this, which is the truth. I will not be tortured by your lies, and double-ways, and cunning. My desire, my dreams, my waking thoughts have been distorted by your image for too long. I have a life, a wife, a place, a future, and no space for you within it.

I tried to apologise to you, seeing that Southampton was lying when he bragged about his conquest of you, and that the sight I had – which still haunts me – was not all that it seemed. But you would not forgive me. You are too proud. Perhaps your pride is all you have. That and the care of our sweet son, which I envy. You won't take money from me, but he will be remembered in my will.

I wanted to warn you about the sonnet book but no matter. I did not give that runt Inchbald permission to imprint them. But they are out in the city now, and our deformed love is there for all to gawp at. A fitting end, perhaps.

Do me one last service, if you will, madam. Do not come to me, or tempt me, or beguile me with your look. Do not bewitch me with your words. Do not think of me again, and I will not think of you.

Will

I folded up the paper, this way, that way. And again. Till it was shaped into a point as sharp as any dagger. As black as hell, was I? As dark as night? Well, I would take him at his word.

Scene VII

What is love's purpose? The love of a man for a woman, I mean, or a woman for a man. We must love our children so that they will be protected, but all that is needed in the way of commerce between the sexes is a little fornication and much forbearance. What was "love" to Will, or me? I was happier with that fop Alfonso, at least I had the better of him. And also with Hunsdon, who had wealth and power, and knew his way around the bed. But I loved neither of them. Not even for a second. William, though. William I will love until I am dead.

For the next week, I was caught up with Marie and her babies. Tom came often – without his mother's knowledge - and Marie was calmer with each passing day. It was a strangely wonderful thing to see, the way she fed and nurtured the joined babes, the look of pride upon her face. I was still servant to my servant, as she lay in her childbed, away from the world. I cleaned the privy, baked the bread, washed the linen, and all the while I thought of William and the play, and the foul sonnet book, and how he had abused me, and yet made me the villain. I seldom left the house, but when I did, I heard the laughter, and saw the hard looks that followed me down the street. And I thought of Lady Macbeth, that grand, mad queen, and I wondered how I could reach back into the place where I had found her. For I needed something of her crazed, demonic strength.

*

It seemed this *Tragedie of Macbeth* had struck a chord with the London playgoers. There was much talk of it, in the streets and taverns, and Tom was near bursting with excitement. His eyes were fixed with the thrill of it: what with the play and his joined babes he was like a mad dog chasing its tail, fearing to stop lest it fell over.

Apprentice boys roared along the street, affecting to be Macbeth in pursuit of Duncan. A chapbook was printed, which aped the play and put the King in Macbeth's garb. A quick-thinking pie-man starting baking Macbeth pies, pricked with an "M" for Macbeth and for Murder. The streets seemed transformed into the Globe's dominions, so that every street-corner rang out "I come, Greymalkin!" and at every window the shout went out "Out, damn spot, Out I say!" and each day I felt myself wizen and shrivel further into myself. The worst of it was that Henry's head was quite turned with it, and far from thinking that this had anything to do with the play I had written, he was entranced by the Globe and the players and the genius of Mr Shakespeare. I thought – I must do something. I must do something to make this stop.

It was some time before I came up with a plan. It was a simple thought in its conception, but not in its execution. Being simply this: Hecate had helped me write this thing; her visitation had prompted my strange visions. I still had Forman's grimoire, and I had succeeded in conjuring her once. So - it followed - I should be able to call another demon who could help me unmake this weird drama. I asked no more than that – that Macbeth should have an ending, like so many other plays, and be forgotten, the last copy lost, its occult pages twisting and crackling into wood smoke, mingling with the night cloud. Gone.

So this is what I did. You may ask if every word of this is true: I say it is as true as I can make it. And yet, I do not blame you for putting the question to me. Why, I doubt my own words, sometimes, when I see what I have wrote! And think about the mood that was upon me, or that my belly was sore, or the sky was black and sunless on that day. What is true is no more substantial than a thrice-told ghost story, nor a blackbird's sweet dawn melody.

One balmy day, at Whitsuntide, I set out across the River. The water lapped and gleamed in the fitful sunshine. Flimsy clouds hastened across the sky. The waterman set me down just by Deptford Creek, and I climbed the steep steps to the harbour-side. When I reached the top I looked around me. I was standing between two worlds. Down the river were the flags and cupolas of Greenwich Palace. And across the water was the Isle of Dogs, where thieves and cut-throats lurked among great banks of mud and stranded river-filth. Deptford was a crowded, hectic place, a little London, full of incomers and chancers, boisterous sailors, shanty-drunk by noontime, as well as chandlers, clerks and caulkers and the like, all come to sell an honest skill. Yet, once you had left the shipyards behind, there was a pleasant green, a parish church and a handsome, gabled manor house.

After asking the way, I walked away from the riverside and along a dirt road passing through Deptford Strand. Much of the land was taken up with sheds and storerooms, but open fields still stretched away to one side. At last I came to the place I was looking for. It was a sturdy, stone-made building, most unlike the top-heavy wooden houses that lined the London streets. Sheep grazed on the sward of smooth grass before its front door, and next to it was a pretty garden, dense with medlar and white flowering apple and bordered with sweet william. Beneath the trees there was a row of straw beehives, sheltered by a stout roof. But I was not interested in the gentle order of the garden. My eyes went straight to the upstairs windows, and I shuddered. For this was the house where Marlowe had met his end.

*

“How long did you say you were staying for?”

Mistress Fulton was a fat, breathless widow, who seemed astonished by her own bulk. She had wheezed up the stairs in front of me with an air of being most mightily put out.

“One night.”

“One night! And to think it’s all been cleaned out freshly.” She opened the door onto the upper chamber I had come to see. It was a little room, with a painted wainscot and a bed in one corner. Mistress Fulton regarded the room sourly. “Not the best of all the chambers, this one. It never seems to get the sun. Still, I suppose it will suit a lady such as you, travelling alone to wherever it may be. There’s no one to disturb you.” She nodded me in, and closed the door.

I set my bag down, and looked at it, wondering if I had the courage to go on. I could scarcely recall my summoning of Hecate: I had been half-mad with fever and fear for Henry. Now, in my right mind, my plan seemed both dangerous and absurd. For a moment, I longed to say my prayers, read the Scriptures and then go softly home again. But then I thought again of Will’s contempt for me. I opened the bag.

There was my Geneva Bible. I took it out, noting its holy weight. Heavy to carry, but I dare not be without it. Next came an equally weighty book, Cornelius Agrippa’s grimoire. Then a small thing, the recent printing of a play. And a piece of chalk, taken from Henry’s toy box. Last of all, a vial of holy water. I ranged them on the long oak table, in a tidy row. My heart was jumping in my chest, and my hands were shaking.

I crossed to the window and looked out. Just below me was the garden. Snowy apple blossom drifted past the window in the quickening breeze. The sun lit up the patchwork view of roofs and fields, paths and docksides, stores and timber yards. Shaking even more violently, I lay down upon the bed. After a while I dozed, and

dreamed of Simon Forman. He was following me down a steep stairway into Hell. I woke with a jump, as if I had missed my footing on the stair. I saw that the room was growing dark, so I lit a candle and opened up the slender volume that contained a certain play. It was Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*.

There is no doubt that Kit Marlowe had woven something wicked into this entertainment. Most particularly, in relation to my scheme, he had used actual words of diabolic conjuration in the scenes in which Faustus summons Mephistopheles. It seemed to me now that if one person could aid me in my attempt to get the better of Mr WS, it was his rival Kit.

I opened the playbook and read the words:

“FAUSTUS

Where are you damned?

MEPHISTOPHELES

In hell.

FAUSTUS

How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

MEPHISTOPHELES

Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.

I turned the page back and read the cover piece: “*The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, Written by Ch. Marlow*”. I opened it to another page, one I had marked already, and laid it down. But I had no need to read the words; for I had committed them to memory as I had every word of William's plays. Then I made a clear space in the middle of the floor. I took the chalk and drew a circle upon the floorboards. This was the circle that made a space outside God's creation: one in

which Evil and the dead might walk. It was not quite big enough – the room was cramped and there was only space to draw a circle two yards wide. But that would have to do; it was big enough for me to stand inside it. Shadows crept up the walls. The window darkened. Soon, the sun had gone.

It is strange, it being of such importance in the daily round, that there is no record of Degrees of Darkness, ranking them in order of their density, or danger, or even their intensity of Black, since there is such distance between dank cloud shadow, starry eventide and the deepest dark of thick ill-wishing Night. Which last cloaks all of Creation, making invisible all the works of God, crafting a space in which Evil can see its way to do what Evil must, and hiding the hand of villainy and devilish intent - just as foul words and obscenities are pleasing to the ears of those wicked spirits which lurk within the cracks of our frail piety, forcing their way into our feebly virtuous thoughts. And – as luck or Fate or the Devil himself would have it – it so happened that on that night a darkness such as I have never known fell on this place.

My intent – which seemed almost foolish in the daytime – took on a stronger flavour as this night descended, and my thoughts, like the blackness, closed in upon me. I placed the holy water in the centre of the circle, and the Bible. Then closed my eyes the better to see what was in my mind and began to slowly repeat these words of Marlowe's:

*“Fear not, Faustus, but be resolute
And try the uttermost magic can perform.
Sint mihi dei Achertontis propitii! Valeat numen triplex
Jehovae! Ignei, aerii, aquaatiki, terreni, spiritus, salvete!
Orientis princeps Lucifer, Beelzebub, inferni ardentis...”*

I stopped. Listened. Two dogs were fighting outside the house. Somewhere, a voice was singing, rough in drink. More voices joined it. I sighed – this was a fool’s ambition. But began again...

*“...monarcha, et Demagorgon, propitiamus vos, ut appareat
Et surgat Mephistopheles! Quid tu moraris? Per Jehovam,
Gehennam, et consecratam quam quam nunc spargo,
Signumque crucis quod nunc facio, et per vota nostra,
Ipse nunc surgat nobis dicatus Mephistopheles!”*

Sweat was sliding down my neck as I sprinkled holy water and made a sign of the cross before me. I swear to God it was so dark I could not even see my own hands.

I waited. There was more noise outside, men shouting at the dogs. A woman’s gurgling laugh. A cart rattled past, wheels squeaking unevenly. I licked my lips, wondering how long to leave it before I gave it up, read some good words from the Bible and tumbled into bed.

The night was growing colder. Though I would not have thought it possible, the darkness deepened, and with it came a growing silence, muffled with a thickness that was neither mist nor solid. Then it shifted in its density, so that the circle that I stood in was a cone of relative light – a grey absence of complete dark, I should rather say - and I saw that around the chalk line there had risen a roofless wall of black, so that I was hedged in to a narrow cylinder of my own making. The night cold enshrouded me, colder than midwinter. I hugged myself, trying to quell my ague of trembling.

I shut my eyes and summoned all my courage. “Christopher Marlowe,” I cried. “Christopher Marlowe, I call on you!”

There was silence, but I felt it listening.

“Kit Marlow, I call on you to do my bidding.” I tried to recall the other words that Agrippa recommended: those that told the spirit to go once its work was done. But they did not come back to me.

A rustling now, fainter than my own breathing. A change in the layers of the air. Someone laughed, far, far away.

Then I heard a voice, cold and distant, like the memory of ice. “Quod me . . .”

I clenched my sweating hands.

It spoke again. “Quod me nutrit . . .”

The blackness was forming into something, a deeper shape.

“Quod me nutrit me destruit.”

I made myself speak. “That which feeds me will destroy me.”

“So much more elegant in Latin.” The voice was soft, with the faintest, coolest lisp. And yet, I could not say I heard it, but rather felt it.

There formed in front of me a narrow figure, dressed in a bloodstained doublet. A long face, still and wary. With shadowed eyes half-hidden by a thick trail of glistening blood. It was standing just inside my circle, an arm’s length from me.

“Aemilia Bassano,” said the quiet voice. “What do *you* know of the art of necromancy? How *dare* you summon me?”

There was a long silence. I tried to collect my thoughts, but terror dulled my mind. When I was a child, I used to banish imaginary demons from within my eyelids by forcing myself to look at them full-square. Every time I did so, the monster would melt away, as if my honest stare was like the first rays of a breaking dawn, and the nightmare creature some nocturnal shade. Yet here was a thing, not horrible to look on, but sickening to behold. Now that I had summoned him in the darkness, what

should I do? I thought of Burbage, the players, and their casual contempt; of Inchbald and Alfonso, seekers after flesh; of Hunsdon, who dismissed me, of Tottle and his customers who had laughed in my face. And I thought of William. And his cruel verses which whored me once more, so I was fallen, disgraced and ashamed to walk the street. "My love!" he had said, and then... What? He could not wait? He could not trust me? What cruel passion ruled the two of us, so finely placed between loving and hating? He had stolen my play and with it all my hopes and my ambitions. He had cheated me, for all his talk of love, of what he knew was mine.

Then the demon spoke.

"For Tamburlaine, six pounds from Ned Alleyn. A fair price, I say so even now. For Faustus? I paid for that, and I paid too highly."

I could feel his cold breath, like a crack in a winter door.

The spirit's image shifted. "You do not ask what this payment was."

"I do not dare." My feet were deadening with cold. But I could not move them. I felt as if the very batting of my eyelid might send this thing away.

"Yet you guess. I see it in you."

"I guess it was not gold."

"No."

"Was it - the highest price of all?"

"Say what you mean. The dead do not feel shame, no matter what other torments we endure."

"You sold your soul, like Faustus."

"Exactly. I paid with my immortal soul. And so you see me now."

"An atheist no longer? Now you have seen that Hell is real?"

Another shifting in the air. “I was a Master of Divinity, a scholar at St Johns! Those who called me atheist and heretic knew nothing - they did not even understand what heresy they spoke of. My “heresies” are points of law, not vicious devilment. I was not Faust. Yet... I could not have known the Truth of GOD, nor His terrible Power. And nor can any living man, be he Pope or Puritan.”

The darkness pressed upon me, and I was mortally afraid. But I managed to say: “What power?”

“Of Jesus, and yet of Satan, too. No intellect can formulate, construct, define, describe... a world which lies beyond its capacity for thought. Our minds, our science, philosophy... all are but puffs of passing air. Here is the reality...” He made a circle in the air. “Here. In our death. How can we hope to understand our mayfly life, if we cannot comprehend our eternal state, which is nothingness?”

“Oh, Spirit...”

“I thought I gave a fair account of mortal suffering in Faustus. Suffering such as we might endure, if God turned against us.”

“And it is a hideous play indeed.”

“I tell you, I did not know one jot of it,” said Faust. “My ignorance was all-consuming.”

“Being dead – you know the truth of what is written in the Bible?”

He moved a breath closer. “Death is not certainty. That which edges our little, living minds – the answers to such flimsy questions are not found in the place which I have come to!”

“Then – what have you found?”

“Death is thickness, darkness, a suffocating absence. Not fire, nor air, nor solid earth.”

“So what have you learned?”

“I am no wiser dead than living. The mystery remains.”

Was this madness? Could I be dead myself, and lying senseless in this upper room? I could not go back, but only further in. “Help me,” I said.

“How can I?”

“I wish to be avenged.”

“Avenged for what?”

“For something stolen from me.”

“Which was?”

“My honour.”

The spirit seemed to ripple. “Honour? I thought you sold *that* for a mess of pottage while I lived.”

“I want revenge on William Shakespeare.”

“Poor fellow, have you not tormented him enough? I am not a score-settler, I am an unquiet soul.”

“He has taken *my* soul.”

“How could that be? Or has he risen further than any man alive, to God-head, since my demise?”

“First he stole my love.”

“That is not even worthy of a mention.”

“And then he made love poems into words of hate.”

“Most ungentlemanly.”

“And after that he took my play, and claimed that it was his.”

The spirit was silent. At length, he said: “Are you making a mockery of me?”
A woman’s verse is of no consequence to anyone. I may as well have stayed in Hell.”

“He is the talk of London,” I said. “The servant of the King, and wears the livery of Court. His name is vaunted over yours. It’s a shame that memories are short. Help me, Marlowe.”

I waited.

This time Marlowe’s voice was quieter still. “How long have I been dead?”

“For thirteen years. Almost to the hour. The thirtieth of May.”

“I was killed in this same place, on this same day. I see it.” The dark spaces of his eyes glimmered, as if he was looking inward. “Thirteen years! And... William has prospered, has he, since Frizer stuck a dagger in my head?”

“He moved the Theatre to the south bank of the river, and he has written a dozen plays – or more – to great acclaim. He and Dick Burbage are rich men. With scarlet coats and fur tippets, strutting merchants of the word.”

“Oh happy Shakespeare! It is a pretty toy to be a poet.”

“He lives, and you are dead. His words rise up, and float over the housetops. His plays are seen by hundreds of people, every week. Think of it! Since you died there are more theatres, more playgoers. There is true fame. He has a coat of arms, and has bought himself fine houses. His poetry is transformed to solid brick. Stronger magic than mere alchemy.”

“And he is not even a Cambridge man.”

“Master of thin air,” said I.

“Not even that. He has a magpie mind, and hoards up pretty facts. Knows just enough to hint at greater stocks of learning.”

I nodded. “He is a player, not a scholar.”

“All that he has should have been mine. Do they mark that I invented character, at least?”

“Character? What do you mean?”

“Before I began, kings, vices and rustics marched across the stage, declaiming wooden words. They were no more human than a mummer’s show.”

“I am afraid this change is not remarked on. Though *Faustus* is on all over London.”

“Reworked?”

“I believe so, yes.”

I waited. I saw that the demon’s face had faded, and for a moment I thought that he had gone. “Marlowe?”

I turned, and saw that there was a folded shadow sitting in a chair by the hearthside. “They murdered me, Aemilia,” said the shadow.

“Who – Ingram Frizer?”

“And Robert Poley and Nick Skeres. I was foully slaughtered in the course of giving service to the Queen.”

“So it wasn’t a brawl? Here, in this room?”

“No. That is a vile and wicked fabrication. It is false! False! I am piteously slandered.”

The room was colder than ever. I folded my arms, shivering, waiting for him to go on. For I knew that Marlowe would not be one to leave a tale unfinished.

He spoke quickly now, with raging urgency. “Poley and Skeres were disputing with me, over a matter which concerned the Queen. Then that plague sore Frizer came behind me and stabbed me in the eye. Viciously, with devilish power. It is hard to kill a man with a single stab wound. Which is why assassins will often choose the eye – a point of weakness in the skull.”

“Lord above, Kit,” I said. “What a foul business.”

“I saw my own brains sliding down the dagger’s blade, like vermillion porridge. Do you know, I thought of Faustus when I observed this oozing matter? And all the Latin and the Greek contained with my head, now to spill upon the floor. The oddest reflection, for a man facing his imminent damnation.”

The shadow was still for a long while. My eyes were growing sore with tiredness. I said: “I am sorry, Marlowe. I don’t suppose the truth of it will ever come to light. Return, then, to the place you came from. I should not have called you.”

But the spirit remained in its chair, as if it was waiting for something. “What is this play, that Shakespeare stole from you?”

“It is about a Scottish king, who over-reaches.”

“Like Faustus.”

“Indeed. He is aided by the forces of evil and black magic.”

“As Faustus was.”

“Yes. In the end, they get the better of him.”

“Of course they do. And he goes straight to Hell.”

“Heaven would not admit him. He is steeped in blood.”

“William stole this play from both of us! He is seeking to out-Faust the master, now that I am gone.”

“He is seeking to out-do us all,” said I. “He is warped and corrupted by his own ambition. Help me to undo him, Kit!”

“What do you mean – ‘undo’?”

“I want to stop ‘Macbeth’.”

“Your words are slipshod. What do you mean by ‘stop’?”

“I mean, to end it, or to hex it.”

“To hex it! Do you take me for a country witch?”

“I mean – so it cannot go on.”

“Ah, how interesting. A bawd’s little remedy for pain. That is one way of making yourself the equal of a man. By cutting us down.”

The creature began to laugh – a silent sound I would not wish to hear again. Looking down, I saw that the holy water was red and bubbling in its vial.

Scene VIII

When I woke next morning, the sun was shining brightly outside, and a light breeze drifted into the room. The sounds of the river and of passers-by came to me, sharp and clear. I was lying on the bed, fully clothed, and my leather bag lay beside me on the floor. There was no sign of the chalk circle, but there was a rough space in the floor-rushes, as if someone had been lying among them and pushed them to one side. I sat up, pushing my hair out of my eyes. The room looked perfectly ordinary: table, chairs, fire place, brightly painted wooden wainscot. So solid and unremarkable that it was difficult to believe that Marlowe had been murdered there, let alone that his shade might still haunt the place. I realised there was a dull pain in my side – I had been lying on a book. I pulled it out – it was Marlowe’s play.

I got up, rubbing my eyes. What had been decided? What had been agreed? And where was Marlowe now? Was he unleashed, stalking the streets of London? Or locked in this room, somehow, its unquiet spectre? My own ignorance of these matters made me more afraid. I did not know, once summoned, what I had done, or what the consequences might be. Like Lady Macbeth, I had rushed to action, and must now deal with the consequences.

There was a pitcher of water on the table. I splashed my face and looked at my reflection on the wall. I had been avoiding this – avoiding my own eye – for some time. Now the woman who stared back at me looked frightened and defiant.

“I want the play to stop,” I told myself.

“I want the play to stop,” said my reflection, looking shifty.

“It is no great thing to ask,” I said.

“It is no great thing to ask,” said my reflection. This time, its eyes slid from mine, as if it was lying.

“What’s done is done, and can’t be undone,” said I, wondering where I had heard this line before.

“What’s done is done, and can’t be undone,” said my reflection, and a great tear trickled slowly down its cheek. I wiped the tear away, and so did my reflection, with a dry and bony hand.

*

When I got home, I had an urge to wash myself, and did so, fetching a pail of cold water up to my chamber. As I splashed my arms and dugs, I thought of John the Baptist, who came before OUR LORD to prepare the way and wished that I had been there, before OUR LORD, to be drenched to purity by Saint John. In the solar, Henry was playing chess with Tom by the fireside, their faces drawn and intense. Tom’s joined child slept beside them in its cradle. I smiled, then saw that they were not alone. For an instant, I saw Marlowe watching, sitting in the shadows, hugging his knees in a pose I remembered from the life.

“Out – spectre!” I cried, and the two boys looked at me in wonder.

“Mother?” said Henry. “Whatever is the matter?”

“There – see him?” I said, pointing. But there was nothing there. What I had mistaken for Marlowe was Tom’s cast-off jerkin and plumed cap.

“You will wake them,” warned Tom, pushing the cradle to a gentle rhythm with his foot. “Hush now, Mistress Lanyer.”

“Hush now. Hush now,” said another voice, inside my head. Marlowe’s voice.
*“I will do your bidding. Never fear it. I am to Silver Street, this night, to fix that
upstart crow for good.”*

*

What could I do? What evil had I unbound? All that day I agonised. Should I tell William? Warn him? Advise him? Would he believe me? Accuse me? Forgive me? Only at nightfall did my way seem clear – if Marlowe’s shade walked the streets of London, and wished William harm, then I should tell him so. I slipped through the Wall at Cripplegate just before the trumpets sounded the curfew. As darkness fell, I made my way along Silver Street and towards St Olave’s church – a neglected, lichen-covered building - which was on the opposite side to the Mountjoys’ corner house, and directly faced the splendid walled garden belonging to Lord Windsor. What to do now? I still had a set of keys to the house, but now I shrank from either knocking at the door, or letting myself in. Was William there? If so, he may not be alone. Entertaining the players or his new mistress, whoever she might be. I sat on a stone bench, my mind chasing round in circles. I could hear the calls of children playing in the grandee’s garden, and the shouting of the watch as they began their patrol of the city streets. A fox slunk between the gravestones, with a chicken clutched in its black muzzle. The stone bench chilled me through my skirts and the grass beneath my feet began to dampen with night-dew.

At last, I stood up stiffly, and made my way across the street, taking a key from the pocket inside my skirts. As I approached, I saw that the windows were dark, and not a chink of light showed anywhere. The shutters were all closed. I knocked on the door, but the sound echoed so horribly that I quickly stopped. There was nobody within. I would go in and wait for him. I opened the door and stepped inside.

I found myself in the Mountjoys' workshop. It was a large, square room, the full size of the house, with a staircase ascending from its centre to the floor above, and the family's quarters. I lit a wick-lamp and stared around me, distracted, in spite of myself, by the bales of satin, taffeta and gauzy lawn, each glowing with bright colour, the piles of silvered silk, the twisting wheel for making thread, and the skeins of Venice gold which sparkled in the flickering light. When I had been here, during the plague, it had been stripped bare, for the Mountjoys had fled the city. Lifting my candle higher, I could see the baskets of seed-pearls, glimmering on the shelves around the room, and a dark mass of human hair spilling across the workbench, as if Rapunzel had been imprisoned there. I gasped with fright as I looked beyond this, for I thought I saw Marlowe once again, but it was only a high-built headpiece, set upon a workbench, made of coloured beads and pitch-black feathers.

Protecting the lamp flame with my hand, I tiptoed up the staircase, and crossed the solar to William's room, opening the door silently and closing it gently behind me. I looked around his chamber, breathing sharply. Here it was exactly as I remembered it. Here was the great curtained bed, with the heavy velvet hangings drawn shut. I set down the lamp. Piles of books sat on the desk, and on the floor around it. Looking closer, I read some of the titles: here was Ovid's "*Metamorphosis*" and the "*Chronicles*" of Holinshed. And here was a copy of Chaucer's "*Good Women*" – most interesting. It fell open at the description of passionate Cleopatra, who loved Mark Antony so well. There was a walnut chest by the fireplace. I raised the lid, wincing as it creaked. It was filled with neatly folded shirts, and two doublets, arms crossed.

Just then, I stiffened. Something had fallen, downstairs, in the empty house. I picked up the lamp, and went to the door, listening. I heard a soft voice: "*Et surgat Mephistopheles! Quid tu moraris?*" Marlowe! O Heavenly Father! My hand flew to

my mouth, and perhaps the gust of air this made extinguished the candle, and I stood for a moment in darkness. Then, almost without knowing what I did, I drew back the bed curtain and climbed inside.

*

I listened, as hard as I could, from inside the curtain, and it seemed to me that I could still hear footsteps, heavy and deliberate. It was a moment before I noticed how warm it was within the drawn curtains. Then I realised that I could hear the gentle sound of breathing. I stared into the dark for a moment, my own breath still. I noticed a familiar body scent, both sharp and musk. One that once would have me reeling with desire. Then, sightless, I reached out my hand, and something grabbed it.

“Aemilia?” The familiar voice was taut.

“William.” What else? What else to say? Here I was, within his own bedcurtains. I wondered he did not strike me. To say “Marlowe is here,” seemed a strange beginning.

“What in God’s name is going on? Am I dreaming?”

“I fear you are awake.”

“And you are in my bed? In plain fact? What *is* this?”

“It is I. It is Aemilia.”

“Christ’s blood.” His tone was as harsh as any blow. “What kind of witch are you? First, you haunt me in the whore house.”

“I was looking for Tom Flood.” My lips were blunt with shock.

“Then I wait all day for you, and you don’t come...”

“My servant was in labour.”

“Your servant? You think more of her than you think of me?”

“She nearly died.”

“And when I give you up, you come!”

“I am...I wanted to see you,” said I. For what else can a woman say who has crawled into an old lover’s bed? And it was true.

“You have maimed me, woman. I told you to stay away.”

“Maimed you! What have *you* done to *me*? Have I written slanderous verses? Have I damned you with false accusations, lies and abominations? Have I stolen your words, and claimed them for my own? Have I done any of these things, to you? Or have you done them all to me?”

“I have loved you,” he groaned. “Loved you to madness and beyond.”

“Ay, madness is the word!” I cried.

“I wanted to make amends. I see now that it can’t be done.”

I felt the night’s cold at my back, and began to shiver. “William – there is something that I need to tell you...”

He squeezed my arm. “You have bewitched me, Mistress Lanyer. So much so that I can’t untangle what is actual from imaginary ghosts and nightmares.” The black night seemed to bind us like a spell.

“Will – it’s that matter of a ghost that I...” He held both my hands now, so tightly that they hurt. As I looked into the blackness I heard the bedroom door creak open. “Who’s there? Who is at the door?” I cried.

“There is no one. Have you never done?” His breath was on my face. “Your scent, lady, what is it? I remember it so well, like the musk of old Egypt.”

“Will...”

“Are you corporeal, or spirit?”

“I’m Aemilia, real and breathing...”

“Then let me have you once again - and again and again - as I have each night in my dreams and nightmares! Oh my lady! Let us stay together, in the darkness, and have done with words forever. Let us be flesh, flesh, and nothing but.”

He let go of my hands, and I felt his fingers unlacing my bodice. A wave of horror and delight washed over me.

“Oh,” I whispered, trying to control myself. “William – you must stop...”

He had pulled the laces apart, and I could feel my under-smock coming loose about my breasts. Now our bodies were pressed together in the fug of warm air within the curtain. My breath shuddered, and my legs were running sweat.

“I have done something evil,” I said. “I fear it cannot be undone.” But even as I spoke, I ran my hands over his unseen form. With joy and nausea I felt his naked shoulders. I tore my shift down further, and took hold of him in my bare arms. Sightless, I had found his hard belly, his soft neck, his salt-lips. “I summoned a spirit,” I whispered. “I drew a circle.”

“Then draw another,” said he, winding his arms tightly around me. “And let’s go to it for an eternal night.”

There was a tearing sound as I ripped myself free from my skirts and wrapped my legs around him.

“You are a mystery,” he said, as the bed began to heave beneath us. “You are my witch.”

“I am not a witch, Will. I am a woman,” said I, as the night writhed. But I am not sure if he heard me, or if I expressed myself so clearly.

The night reared up, within us and around us, and we seemed to leave the chamber and fly high above the roofs of London and dive deep below the city to the Underworld beneath. There was no sweetness, but there was ecstasy and pain so pure

that it seemed close to GOD. And there were no words, just flesh and lips and hair and panting, and wetness and darkness and a desperate pounding in my head and everywhere, until I heard him scream: “Aemilia! Aemilia! Aemilia!” and there was a great violence inside me like a dam breaking and my mind filled with white light.

*

Afterwards, I thought I heard something. Marlowe. Was it the sound of the door closing? And were those heavy footsteps, pacing down the stairs, just as they had climbed them in the darkness? I raised my head, listening and wondering what I had done, and whether Marlowe had intended it.

“What is it?” he asked. He turned to me and put his naked leg across me.

“What was the evil that you did?”

“It was, indeed, a sort of witchcraft.”

“To punish me?”

“To put an end to that Macbeth.”

His leg quivered. He was laughing at me.

“Don’t you believe me?” I asked him.

“I believe that you believe it, but I don’t believe the Devil walks among us.

There is evil enough in what men do.”

“What did I see then?”

“That I cannot tell, my love.” His hand was stroking my face. “I should have married you,” he said.

My breath stopped, my throat caught. “Marry?”

“If only I’d been free.”

“If! If!” I twisted away from him. “Don’t even say such cruel things! You have a wife, and I have a husband, and the Lord sees everything, our every uncommitted, half-considered sin!”

“Even so. I should have married you.”

“Don’t say it.”

“It should have happened. Fate did me wrong.”

“It was not God’s will, so there’s an end to it.”

“And yet we are twin souls, lady. There is no woman on this earth, not anywhere, who is a match for me, as you are. There is only you. A freak of beauty, and mind, and learning.”

“A freak! A fine compliment! Only the old Queen was allowed to call me that.”

He caught hold of me and we began again, rocking in the bed in our rage to have each other and make darkness bright.

Scene IX

When I got home, my mind was plagued with doubt and fear. There seemed to be no words for what we had done, or what we were to one another. I could not fathom it, and I could not forget it. And yet, if this was a reunion, it was a tarnished one. I had called up something unspeakable, something that should have been left in the ground. Where was Marlowe now? Still walking? Were those his footsteps in the bedroom? I was haunted by the dead sound that they made. I must act. I had summoned his shade to injure William. Now I must try to send this thing away.

I went up to my room and fetched down Forman's grimoire. I paged through it, breathless, looking for guidance. Was there a spell, a form of words, which could undo a summoning? I had a nagging, sickened feeling. I was not sure what anything meant, including a night of lovemaking so various and violent that my legs still trembled.

I hardly knew myself. I poked the fire, seeing Marlowe in the Bel Savage inn all those years ago. Did I really summon him? Was it possible to imagine such a thing? With the hot fire reddening my face, and the cat sitting hump-backed by the scuttle, reality seemed too solid for such wild fancies. I had not been in my right mind. I had always sleepwalked, and my febrile nature had always been at odds with my strong mind. The night with Will was thrumming in my head, each touch, each cry. Perhaps my passion for him had broken some dark spell? I tipped sea-coal from the scuttle, and felt my spirits lift. I would have him. I would have my lover, every inch of him, night after night. Why should I not? Henry would not suffer from my lying with his natural father.

Just then Henry came rushing in, bouncing a ball.

“Where have you been?” I asked, hiding the book in my skirts. “Just because I am out on business, and Marie is resting does not mean you are free to run amok.”

“I have been playing football all around the town. You never saw such sport!” said Henry, sawing off a hunk of bread. “We made the length of Long Ditch our pitch, and took on a score of ‘prentice boys, and beat them soundly, though they bragged they’d trash us! What weakly, flap eared knaves!” He stuffed the bread into his mouth all in one go.

“Those prentice boys will stab you as soon as look as you, some of them. They’re vile, rough creatures, who can’t even spell their names,” said I. “You should be safe at home, with Ovid and your horn book.”

“Ovid!” said Henry, or something like it, through the bread. He pulled a goblin face. “Mind you, Kit speaks only Latin. He says it is for sport, but it’s hard to follow what he says.”

“Kit?”

“The poet.”

“What *poet*?”

“He is extremely clever. The cleverest man in England, though those are his own words, not mine. He went to Corpus-Christi-Cambridge. He knows all the words to Faustus. He walked home with me, but he said he wasn’t hungry.”

“Dear God! Did he tell you his surname?”

“No. What is the matter, mother? You are looking queer.”

I stood up, my head reeling. “I am much put out and barely know which way to turn.”

He swallowed the bread and poured out a glass of small-beer. "Because of Marie and her joined up twins? Shall they always be such monsters? They are loathsome as all Hell!" He glugged back his drink with relish.

"No - because of...other matters. Things which do not concern you." In truth, of course it did concern him. "I have just come from your father's bed, in which we fucked like werewolves." How would that seem? Or "I summoned the demon who oversaw your football game. Do not go out at night."

Henry took the ball deftly from me and began to bounce it once again. "Anyway, you need have no fear for me this afternoon. I am off to see a play."

"What play?"

"Why, 'Macbeth' of course. If I miss it now, it won't be on for another month, and everyone else at school has seen it, and it's steeped in blood. And Tom says he will tell the door keeper to let me in for nothing."

"*NO!*" I said, startling even myself, such was the violence of my tone. "No. You shall not go. I forbid it."

"But why? It is a most amazing play – everybody says so. And it's got fighting in it, and even some history, too."

"I don't care. You must stay here and help Marie and her poor children."

I pounced on him, caught his ear between my right thumb and finger, and twisted it till he cried out. In this manner, I dragged him into Marie's chamber, where she was sleeping, cradling her nuzzling twins. The spring sun was warm and heavy in the shuttered room, and a bee was buzzing drunkenly around her ale-jug.

"Mistress!" She jerked awake. Her face was drawn and tired. The babies began to cry. "What is it?"

"Henry will help you," I said. "Do you have need of anything?"

“No. Thank you.”

“Then will you lock the door when I am gone, and sit upon the key? And make sure he stays with you till five?”

“Till five?”

“Until the play is done,” said Henry, sulking. “Mother, why do you persecute me so? I am not a child.”

“Is Tom playing today?” asked Marie. She picked up the twins and settled them into the cradle. “Did he tell you, we are to marry next week?”

“Yes, he did,” I said.

“Don’t tell Mistress Flood, lest she runs mad in the street.”

It was hard to believe that I lived in the same world as weddings and celebrations. How I wished that Will and I could begin again, stow away on some great ship and cross the ocean to a new world, far away. I would take Henry with me, but no other mortal, and we could be happy, somewhere, in a forest of tobacco trees. There would be no playhouses, or print shops and no demons or deceived wives. “Here is the key.” I gave it to Henry, and waited outside till I heard it turn in the lock.

Why did my belly twist at the mere mention of the name “Macbeth”? I could not have told you clearly, but I suspected that Marlowe was indeed walking the streets of London, and that his bitterness might do us all most dreadful harm. I could see his bleeding shade so vividly, and though I prayed to God to let him sleep once more, I had no other power to rid myself of him. I feared that God had other matters to attend to than righting misbegotten spells. And another memory had come to me, from that far off night in the Bel Savage. Will’s words: “It’s not Satan that frightens me. It’s Kit.”

*

Just as I was about to leave, who should appear but Anne herself? All done up as usual like the Queen of the May. She had a new ruff, all silvery like a fairy wing, and her eyebrows were plucked to nothing. Tom's misalliance had not distracted her from Fashion.

"My dear Aemelia," said she. "Come, come, you are late for the theatre! We must hurry if we are to catch a boatman! All of London will be there."

"Will be where?" I asked, in the faint hope that it was something playing at the Rose that she was off to.

"To see 'Macbeth'! You are my guest, are you not? Had you forgotten? I would not miss this for all the world."

"I thought you were angry with me."

"I can't blame you for Tom's cock-brained foolishness! I am sure he will forget that girl in time. Now, come, quickly! It's a shame you look so poorly, but you will have to do."

And so I consented to be dragged towards the river on her arm. The spring sunshine was bright and warm when we set out. But then the sun went in and by the time we had climbed aboard a wherry, aided by an aged boatman, rain was falling. I threw my cloak over the two of us, for fear that Anne's finery would be washed away.

When we reached the Globe, the storm had gathered strength. The wind crashed in the trees and rain fell like a tipped bath. We sat in the second gallery, but it provided little shelter. Water streamed between our feet, and fell on to the heads of the groundlings below, who tried to huddle together, but were slipping and falling in the mire. The covered stage, too, was awash with rain, blown inwards by the furious wind. I looked up at the black sky and heard the first roar of thunder. No need for

stage musicians for this performance – Nature was providing her own malevolent effects.

“They must call it off!” I shouted to Anne.

“No, no,” she insisted. “If it is on the playbill, you can be sure that they will put it on. They have the public to consider.”

A dagger of white lightning split the sky. Three figures came on to the stage, and the trumpets blasted out, calling for our attention. They gathered around the trap door in the stage, and up came a black cauldron.

I looked hard at these three players – where had I seen them before? They were gifted boys indeed. One looked like an aged crone, another like a middle-aged matron and the third was a beautiful young girl with a plait of yellow hair wrapped around her head. I narrowed my eyes, certain that I recognised them.

“When shall we three meet again?”

In Thunder, Lightning or in Rain?

When the hurly burly’s done,

When the battle’s lost

And won...”

The voices of the witches changed, so that what had sounded like the newly broken tones of boy actors was first a keening, banshee-cry, and then a heavy-throated growl.

“Who *are* the witches?” I asked Anne. But she only gripped my hand.

A heavy fog had rolled in from the river, and torches had been lit and set upon the stage where they hissed and spluttered in the rain. The crowd, subdued by the downpour, was silent. In place of heckles and catcalls there was watchful quiet. In

contrast, the voices of the three witches words carried with a clear echo like voices shouted into a courtyard well. Slowly, I became aware of a peculiar cold.

Lord Macbeth appeared upon the back of a mighty black destrier. The storm had upset the beast, and it was clattering round in circles, tail lashing, showing the whites of its eyes. Its hooves slipped waywardly on the wet boards. Macbeth (who was Dick Burbage) seemed about to speak, but there was a lightning flash, a livid fork above us, and the stallion screamed in fear. It reared up, pawing the air, and Burbage came crashing down on to the ground. Dropping its head, the beast galloped headlong from the stage, sending players scattering. But none of this daunted Burbage. Not for one moment did his performance falter, and he even got back to his feet in a regal manner, and regarded the crowd imperiously, hand on his great sword.

And here was Lady Macbeth! You would never have guessed that she was only Tom. Declaiming such evil words in her robe of gold and scarlet, crow-black hair hanging round her narrow face. Tom spoke his words with passion, and their meaning chilled me more now than when they first spilled from my pen.

“I do not like this,” whispered Anne. “It is unnatural.”

“That is the point of it,” I hissed back. “Macbeth should know his place.” But as I spoke, I felt a tightness in my head, as if the dead-cold of the theatre clenched my skull. It seemed to me that, whether through William’s alterations, or because of this storm which made night out of day, my play now had a surfeit of evil in it. But I knew that I *had* to watch it, for there was some rhythm in the story that drew me further and further in.

I will try to tell you exactly what I saw. The scenes were rapid and the drama bloody – Duncan the King was killed, Macbeth took his place, then murdered Banquo and (as he hoped) his young son Fleance. Now the stage was set out for a banquet,

with a trestle table, joint-stools and long benches. King Macbeth (as he now was) began to speak of “Noble Banquo” and to express the dissembling regret that his friend could not be present at the feast. (Though he knew full well he was dead, having paid two murderers to slay him.) I knew what was coming next, of course, as perhaps many of the audience did not. The ghost of Banquo would appear, and Macbeth’s posturing as King would be sorely tested.

It would have been simple enough to have had the ghost walk out from behind one of the pillars. But Will knew how to create fear and wonder in a crowd. From above the Heavens, in the uppermost corner of the space above the stage, I heard the groan of the new contraption. Now was the moment for the flying chair to prove its worth. It cranked out into the audience’s view, a suspended cradle with a seated figure strapped in place.

“Will Shakespeare himself is playing the Ghost,” said Anne, still gripping my hand. “He will do it fearsomely, you can be sure.”

Now the creaking arm swivelled slowly round. The figure wore a black cloak, and its face was hidden.

“He always does the Ghosts,” said Anne. “There is almost nothing to it. He never had enough voice for a major part.” Her voice was tight with terror. Slowly, slowly, dangling in its seat, the chair creaked down towards the smoky stage. Macbeth’s courtiers revelled on, carousing among the flaring lights as the cloaked form gradually descended.

“What?” I said, narrowing my eyes to see more plainly. “*What?*” And I stood up, in spite of the hisses and the cries of annoyance from behind me, and began to push my way along the row. The shifting light and the draped hood obscured the player from my sight.

Burbage sprang up, mouth wide open. Next to him, his Queen held him by the arm. I caught sight of Tom's white face, and my belly lurched with fear. I stumbled, amid a rage of protestation, and struggled to get up. The crowd roared. Everyone was standing. Something had happened. From behind me came a terrible scream – I turned – my way was blocked. What was wrong? What was it? I hurried down and ran squelching through the wet mire, shoving my way through the mass of people. A child cried, an old woman fell. I kept on pushing till I reached the front, then forced my way to the steps that led on to the stage. I scrambled up, panting, and set foot on the magic boards where the lights flared and the fog drifted. I was half-expecting Heminge or another player to bar my way. But everyone seemed frozen, spellbound. A dozen courtiers, faces mask-like in their paint, stood motionless. Burbage was bending over a figure in a scarlet dress, lying stretched out on the ground. Tom. His wig had fallen off and his curly hair was sprayed out all around him on the boards. His eyes were wide open, staring at the flying chair with eternal horror. The chair was empty.

Will appeared, dressed in spectral black, his face daubed with stage blood, and knelt beside him.

“Help him, in God's name! What is going on?”

“He is still, he is still!” cried Burbage.

“Fetch him wine!” cried William, and a Scots lord hurried off.

But who was that, standing by the empty chair? A cloaked figure, immobile, head bowed. I looked closer. Who was it? Nathan Field? Henry Condell? I took a step towards it, and then it lifted up its head. The face was cloud-white, and translucent, fading in and out of my vision. There was no skill with stage paint that could ape such

an effect. This was the creature I had summoned, cloaked in fog and falling rain. This was Kit Marlowe. He stared at me, coolly, mouth twisted in a smile.

“Thou, Demon!” I shouted. “By God, why don’t you go back to the place where you belong?”

The demon shifted, still looking straight at me, but did not speak.

“I did not want this! I didn’t say that anyone should *die!*”

There was a noise in my head.

“Revenge, wasn’t it? That’s what you asked for. And that is what you got.”

“Go down to Hell, and leave us,” I screamed. “You have done your evil now.”

The spirit started to move slowly towards Tom and I ran between them, hands outspread. “Leave him alone! Fiend! Leave the boy alone, and get thee to Hell!”

Dick Burbage was sitting on the ground, with Tom’s resting head on his lap. He was weeping and stroking the boy’s hair. Field was shouting, Heminge was running into the tiring room. And Will was staring at me, eyes livid through the streaks of painted gore.

“What – Aemilia? What is this? Why are you shouting at thin air?”

The spectre moved slowly across the stage. I saw that it did not walk, but shifted like sea mist. It stopped by the dead boy, and stared down at him.

I pushed Will away. The spectre turned to look at me.

“Marlowe!” I roared, so fiercely that my throat was raw. “Thou foul Devil! Thou Lucifer, vile tempter! How dare you make me into Faust? Quit this place, quit it, I command you!”

“Tom? My Thomas?” There was another figure now, stumbling across the stage, her fine clothes soaked and torn. “Oh my child!” she screamed, as she ran towards him. “Holy Mother! Mary! Spare him! Spare him!” She collapsed on top of

him, sobbing out half-lucid prayers. There was a crack of thunder and a shard of lightning and I was suddenly aware of the shouts of the audience.

“What evil has been done?” cried one voice.

“The Devil is in this place!” called another voice. “Who called on Satan?”

I looked at Marlowe, and saw that he was smiling. “He did!” I cried. I looked at Anne, weeping, prostrate, and at the dark crowd that heaved below me. I pointed, wildly, at the shadowed figure. “Him – Marlowe! Look! He called Lucifer! He has brought this curse upon the play!”

“*Marlowe?*” said Will. “Poor, slaughtered Kit? Are you *mad?*”

“*Marlowe?*” Anne’s head swivelled till she saw me. “Why do you speak of that twisted sinner, over the body of my son?”

“She saw him!” shouted one of the voices from the crowd.

“She spoke to him! She sees him still!”

“She conjured him!” came a louder voice.

“Conjured Marlowe, with her black magic.”

“Conjured the Devil, more like. Foul, unnatural Witch.”

“I did not call the Devil!” I turned to face them, but could see only darkness and rain.

Anne left Tom’s side and came unsteadily towards me. Her soaking ruff had come askew and flapped around face. “What evil have you done, Aemilia? You saw it – you knew something was wrong! You saw it before Tom fell!”

I stared at her. “I saw Marlowe.”

She came so close that I could see the broken veins in her eyeballs.

“Saw a *dead* man? With my son?”

“Saw him descending. In the chair.”

“What *spell* is this? What *witchcraft*? Are you God himself, now, that can take a life at whim?”

“I meant no harm!” I cried out, but Marlowe was moving steadily towards me. “Get thee behind me! Get thee behind me!” I shouted, and I grabbed a flaming torch and lunged at him, but it was only Will, who snatched it away.

Anne ran towards me, her face riven with grief and rage. “You killed him! With your wickedness and witchery and pride! You called on Satan and it was my son who took the punishment.”

“Anne! Listen to me...Anne! I beg you...”

“I’ll kill you for this, you demon-loving bitch...” With that, she threw herself against me.

There was an almighty roar: thunder or the crowd: I couldn’t tell. And I fell backwards, down into the dark.

Scene IX

As I fell, there was another flash of lightning. All was white light for an instant, and I crawled on all-fours into the crowd, scrabbling through the filthy mud. Above me I could hear voices shouting. The very air seemed to be raging, and I saw that the mob had all rushed forward, lured by the scent of death.

“Where is she?”

“Where is the witch?”

“She has turned herself into a bat!”

“She has made herself invisible!”

As soon as I dared, I scrambled to my feet, drenched and slimed with mud.

Out. Out. I must get out. Blindly, I made my way away from the noise.

“Seek her!”

“Find her!”

“Burn her!”

For a few moments, it seemed that this very fury would work in my favour, for the crowd was shouting at the stage, as if expecting me to re-appear at any moment. But just as I reached the doorway, the gatherer looked up from his pot of entrance coin.

“She’s here – the one who called the demon!” he cried, lunging towards me.

“I see her!” shouted someone else, but somehow I slipped past them, and pulled the catch back on the heavy door. I felt a hand upon my shoulder, and I turned and bit hard till I tasted blood. There was a scream of pain, the door was open. I saw rain and lightning and I kicked my pattens off and ran.

Helter-skelter I went, slipping in the mud, wading through deep rutted puddles, my skirts clutched to my chest.

“She has called the Devil!” came the shouts that followed me.

“She is a witch! Catch the witch!”

And so my feet moved faster, and I ran as I had never done in all my life. But how could I outrun a horde of burly men? I thought of Henry and Marie, waiting for me. Oh Lord God! What had I done? What had I done to Tom? Someone caught my skirt and it tore off; I ran on in nothing but my soaking undershift. My feet and hands were bleeding, sharp stones and brambles snared me as I ran. But I would *not* die. I would *not*. The ground grew firmer when I reached the harbour side, and the street that bordered the river’s edge. There were houses here, of the common sort, and candles burning in the windows. I could smell the river-stench, and the wind was keener than before. I ran down an alley way and beat as loudly as I could upon the first door that I came to, screaming and wailing for no words would come.

A head appeared from an upstairs window. “Who’s there?”

I found my voice at last. “Aemilia Lanyer, a poor housewife! The mob are after me, please let me in!” I looked back and saw flaring torch-light at the far end of the alley way. I ran on, and beat upon another door.

“Away, witch!” shouted somebody inside. “I hope they bowel you and feed your entrails to the crows.”

I knocked again. But there was no answer, just the rain. I ran till I reached the end of the alleyway – the voices were louder, I could even smell the torch pitch as they gathered in a crowd behind me. Then my hands met a rough wall, and I felt upwards and sideways and realised that it blocked the way. I turned, and saw the faces, shadowed and leaping in the spluttering firelight. My breath came in

shuddering sobs. This is it, I thought. This is Death. For a moment the mob was silent. I saw that the people were afraid. Then a man as tall as a birch tree marched forward and said –

“Witch! You killed that boy! You called that demon!”

And the shout was repeated by the crowd behind him, and the next thing I knew was that a rain of disgusting objects were being pelted at me – rotted carrots, rat skulls and heavy stones. I would die like Joan, with a cave mouth for a face. I covered my head with my arms and turned my back, and heard my own scream as the missiles found their mark. The slippery rope they slung around my neck came next, pulled ruff-tight but no tighter as they led me back along the alley. I walked silently along the rutted path, stunned and terrified, deserted by thought and speech.

“Find a tree!”

“A Judas tree, and string her from it.”

I was pulled and shoved from all sides. Someone punched me in the belly, and when I looked down I was startled to see that I wore nothing but torn rags, and that blood was pouring from my wounds. I felt nothing, I did not know what I was. The earth? The sky? Looking up, I saw the bright upper windows, and the heads of the watchers set black against the glow. There were little children calling questions and a babe in arms, dancing.

*

I saw my father's face, bending towards me, his black eyes and his curled beard. I heard the sweet order of his recorder, making patterns in the air. I saw my mother, laughing, in Lady Susan's garden. I saw a swan, retreating from the green bank, creasing the silver image of the sky. I saw Will, turning from a knot of players,

smiling at the sight of me. I saw Henry, bouncing his ball along Long Ditch in the sun-shine. And I saw Tom Flood, lying dead upon the stage.

I cried out: "Lord forgive me! Lord forgive me! I have sinned and I repent of it! Mea culpa! Mea culpa!"

*

There was a sound. Deep in the earth, far above in the heavens, inside my head. Where was it? What was it? I grabbed the noose with my hands, and tried to loosen the rope around my neck. What was that sound? I knew I had heard it before. Louder now, louder, like drum beats.

"Here is the tree!" shouted one voice.

"Here is the place. Hang her here."

The rope pulled again, and I gagged as it tightened around my throat. The sound was not drums, I realised, but hoof-beats. There was some small place in my mind that said – *Those hooves are coming for you.* Whether it was a rescuer, or the Black Huntsman and his storm-dogs, sent from Hell, I did not know. But I wanted to find out. Somehow, I managed to prise my fingers between the wet rope and my neck. And there were words. My words.

"Why are you doing this?" The voice was a dry croak.

The giant spoke. "To punish you for murder."

Someone else chimed in: "To punish you for witchcraft."

"For conjuring and evil."

"Then take me to the King, and let him try me." I coughed and heaved, my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth. "He has studied witchcraft.... Let him try me."

“The King won’t want to be bothered with the likes of you,” said the giant. “A common witch.”

I could hear the hoof beats more clearly now. Not of the air, or in my head, but on the ground. Yet between me and this sound there was a wall of bodies, pressed together like dough in a basin. And in the leaping light of flares and shadows, I could see faces of every kind, some comely, some deformed, some riven with wrinkles, others smooth. Each was distorted with the same murderous intent, so that they seemed more hobgoblin than human. Reason would not work with such a mob.

“If you kill me, what good will that do?” I said, coughing and retching again.

“The good will be your death, no more is needed,” the giant shouted. “String her up, there! String her up!”

But the rope stayed slack. I saw that they were watching me, caught by what I said in spite of themselves. Words swam into my head, and without another thought I closed my eyes and shouted them out.

“Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!”

My voice came out like a raven-croak, sounding strange and terrible even to myself, but I was frightened to stop in case this broke the spell.

“Make thick my blood, stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature, shake my fell purpose, or keep peace between the effect and it!” Then I noticed a curious thing. The words seemed to warm me, and with each syllable, my strength grew.

“String her up!” shouted the giant again.

And from somewhere another voice. “I dare not!”

I felt myself grow taller and bolder as I spoke. *“Come to my woman's breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief!”*

“Slash her! Slit her open!” came another cry. “Use her guts to gag her!”

And yet another. “We are afraid!”

I threw my head back, and screamed at the sky, as I had heard a wolf howling at the moon. *“Come, thick night and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes - nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry 'HOLD! HOLD!’”*

The crowd fell back, and I heard sobbing. “God protect us!” came a voice. “God save us, this is Beelzebub himself.”

With a roar of rage the giant leapt forward. The rope jerked and someone pulled my hands away. A spasm of pain jolted my throat. “Let it be quick, Lord,” I thought. “Let me go quickly!”

“Ready, ho! Haul her up!” shouted the voices, and my feet were lifted from the ground and all was agony and blackness. But the hoof beats still came. There was a clap of thunder and screaming all around me. A horse squealed, men shouted, I felt myself swinging and the noise begin to fade.

Then what? Darkness, nothingness. A gust of air above my head, and I was falling. I was on the ground pulling at the noose around my neck and coughing back my life. I looked up and saw the slashed rope, dangling from the tree, and the black destrier from the Globe, and a hooded figure on it.

Marlowe had come to take me down to Hell. He lifted me from the ground and set me on the saddle before him, then held me tightly as the snorting horse galloped

headlong through the mob. There were shouts and screams, hands pulling at me. The beast's back rocked beneath me as we charged into the storm.

Scene X

The wind had fallen, and the rain had stopped. The black horse splashed through the city streets, tossing its head, still fractious. Where was I? Was this the road to Hades? Looking around, I saw the familiar houses of Camm Row looming into view, and then the muddled rooftops of Long Ditch. I looked down, at the black-clad arm of the horseman who had saved me. Not an undead corpse, this, but a living man. We reached my little house, and horseman halted his mount and jumped down. He reached up his arms and helped me to the ground.

Will looked down at me. His face was still daubed with stage blood, and his eyes were rimmed with black.

“By God, Aemilia, what have you done?”

“I summoned Marlowe,” I said. “His spirit, from the grave.”

He wiped his hand across his eyes. “Why, in Christ’s name? Why dabble in such nonsense?”

“To stop the play! To end it! But I didn’t want to harm anyone.”

“What lunacy was this? What manner of falling off from what you were, and what you could be?”

“May God forgive me.”

There was a silence. We watched the destrier as it nibbled sedge.

“Did you hate me so much?” he asked.

“It wasn’t hatred that drove me to it.”

“Well, it wasn’t love, you poor, misguided creature!”

“How do you know?”

“God in Heaven,” he said. “If this is love, then we must leave it. Once and for all, and till we die.”

“Will...”

“You have driven yourself mad,” he said. “You see what is not there, and are blind to plain truth.”

“No!” I cried. “Marlowe was there – upon the stage. He killed Tom. I swear it.”

“God rest that dear boy’s soul!” said Will. “He was the very merriest, sweetest fellow I ever knew.” I began to weep, hopeless, tearless, grating sobs that hurt my chest and brought me no respite from sorrow. He put his arms around me and held me close to him for a long while. Then, very gently, he pushed me away. “Let me say only this...” he began.

“Don’t twist the knife! I couldn’t bear it!”

“Aemilia. Calm yourself.”

“I cannot!”

“Every evening, every morning, every moment – my love, my sweet girl. Aemilia, I think of you.”

“William, no...”

“You have read my plays.”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you see how it was? That all my heroines are versions of my Dark Aemilia? Black-eyed Rosalind, clever Portia, the Egyptian Queen who drove poor Antony to madness – all you! All you. Each one.”

“Don’t, don’t say this.”

“I never was so happy, never so much myself, as I was when I was with you.
When I loved you.”

“Will.”

“And you loved me.”

I hung my head, and looked down at the floods of water that swirled around
our feet.

“Henry,” said Will. “The darling boy – he is the two of us. I live in him, with
you. It’s only this that has sustained me. Only this, and writing. The recreation of my
sweet lost lady in my words.”

“There is no...future for us, is there?” I said, my tears flowing from the sky.
“Only your words are left.”

William said nothing. Then we embraced for the last time in the morning rain.

ACT VI
POETRY

Scene I

Aldgate, 1612

After this, there was a long silence in my life. We went from Long Ditch, where I was no longer welcome, and made our home at Aldgate in my old parish of St Botolph. And I turned my mind to contemplating my Pride, and to the matter of redemption. My son lived, and Anne's son was dead and every way I looked at this, it seemed that I had been the cause, even though I did not wield a knife, nor poison him. Anne would not see me, although I begged for her forgiveness. I even sent her a letter, hoping some kind friend would read it to her. But no word came back. Marie disappeared the night Tom died, taking the joined twins with her, and I could not find out where she had gone. Alfonso returned from his latest voyage, and apart from earning him the title "Captain", his journey did not improve our fortunes. Henry was my only consolation, but my very joy in him now brought me pain. I had faced down Death and saved his life; but now Tom had been taken in his place.

I could not sleep. I did not rest. The night's shadows seeped Marlowe: I saw his form behind every half-closed door. The stillness of the night reminded me of Tom's immobile form, more beautiful in death even than he had been in his life. The brightness of dawn was a reminder that I could have no new beginning: I was stuck forever with the truth of what I'd done. I walked at night, the ghost of my own sin. When I saw that Will's foul sonnets had come out once again, imprinted by another publisher, I scarcely noticed. Heminge came to see me, and told me it had been done without Will's knowledge, but it seemed to me that my sin far exceeded any of his past misdeeds. My chief comfort was in prayer and contemplation. Perhaps I would have lost myself to that, had I not stumbled upon an enemy from my past.

It was my habit to go to St Botolph's church at Aldgate every morning for the matin service. It was a simple building, despite its gold-tipped spire. Inside there was a plain wooden altar, and only two dismembered angels clinging to the roof above to show where the grand rood screen had once stood.

On the day in question, I felt ill and restless, and believed that the end of all this might truly be the madhouse. I had passed the most evil night. The house echoed and stirred with malevolent spirits, and the very air I breathed seemed odorous and distempered, infected by the demons which dwell among us. I could hear them whispering and gibbering in my ears, so I wrapped my head in the bed-sheet. (Alfonso slept peacefully through all of this.)

In the end, I crept up to the garret and sat upon a joint-stool by the window, waiting for the first rays of sunlight to drive the evil spirits away. Only when the rooftops and chimneystacks were gilded with the dawn did I dare to drowse a little, head sagging.

When I got to church, I felt as if I was in a dark mist, and the voices of my fellow worshippers seemed far off. I took my place among the other women, head bowed, ignoring their chatter, waiting for the service to begin. Now, our usual prelate was a feeble fellow of no particular colour. He read his homilies as if he had no interest in them, but merely imparted them to do us good. I had the feeling that his sights were more firmly set on preferment than on the Holy Trinity, and he was not remarkable for that. But this day, he was tending to his sick wife who was lying in with their new son, and he had summoned in a neighbouring churchman to do this early task. I did not see the new man when he entered, as my head was bowed in silent prayer. Yet something in his voice and manner niggled at me straight away.

“It has come to my notice,” said he, “That this city is as full of Sin as Sodom, and as riven with Bawds and Strumpets as Gomorrah. There is a not a homily that addresses this Disease of London, so this morning I have written you my own, in plain words. May the Devil in you hear this, so you can cast him out.

“And you may ask yourselves – how did we come to this pass? And you may ask yourselves – how did we come to be cast out of the Garden of Eden, we who GOD made in his own image, to have mastery over creation and over all the beasts of the field, and all the birds in the air, and all the fishes in the sea?”

I shifted my position. My knees were growing stiff. Where had I heard that rasping tone before? I clasped my hands tighter, and tried to pray harder. But the voice was insistent.

“I can tell you how. I can tell you why. I have studied in the greatest universities in all of Europe, and I have looked most carefully at the cause. I have found our culprit, with GOD’s help. It is Woman who has ruined us. First in the person of that weakest of vessels, Eve, and since then in the frail form of every woman born.”

I bowed my head. “Lord, forgive me. Jesu, have pity. Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa.”

But it was hard to concentrate on my own sin when there was so much of it about. And most of it the fault of my ignoble gender.

“Saint Thomas Aquinas has warned us of this wanton, wayward sex. ‘A male is the beginning and end of woman, as God is the beginning and end of every creature.’ Man is made in God’s image; women is a thing distorted from Man’s rib. Her Latin name is ‘softness of the mind’, but Man is called ‘vir’ which we translate as ‘strength or virtue of the soul’. Compared to Man, the Woman is an imbecile.”

It was no good. I opened my eyes and looked up. The man standing at the wooden table in the centre of the church was my old adversary, Parson John. I stared at him, blinking, forgetting my own misdoing for the first time for many months.

The prelate was warming to his theme. “What is lighter than smoke? A breeze. What is lighter than a breeze? The wind. What is lighter than the wind? A Woman. What is lighter than a Woman? Nothing. And yet even in this lightness, she gushes most detestably, sullyng all she touches with her womb blood. Fruits do not produce, wine turns sour, plants die, trees lack fruit. The very air about her darkens. If a dog should eat her vile blood, it will run mad.”

Lord above! Was this the Word of GOD? I glanced around me, at the bowed and reverent heads of all the women.

“A woman is the cause of all our ill. Adam was deceived by Eve, and not Eve by Adam. The Woman summoned him to Sin. She lied and tricked him, and the whole of Creation was overthrown. So the female must pay. She must yield to the man as a reed bends in the wind.”

His words worked a curious magic on me. They roused me from my torpid, grief-stricken state. Dismissing Eve as being both weak and wicked had always seemed foolish and unfair to me, which was why I had written my unprinted pamphlet all those years before. But I saw now that I had not gone far enough. In order to protect Eve, it was necessary to think beyond the version of the Fall that Parson John presented here. Must all women bear this burden of limitless guilt? Must we spend all our lives accusing ourselves of sin, and despising ourselves as second best?

I sat upright. I was thinking of the Cornelius Agrippa book that I had stolen from Simon Forman, and the thoughts that this wise philosopher expressed. He was a good Christian – just as much so as our revered parson – and yet he saw women in a

very different way. Supposing that the Old Testament God of rage and plagues was not the God of Jesus and his Disciples? Supposing Eden had been not a paradise, but a prison from which humankind had to escape in order to fulfill our destiny? I blinked hard.

Afterwards, the Parson stood outside the church, addressing the congregation with an air of chilly discontent. I walked past him, with no desire to speak to the man, but could not resist giving him a sharp look I passed.

“I see we have a Jezebel among us, a very copy of that wilful Eve,” he said.

“Do you remember me, then?”

“Indeed I do. You are the termagant whose pestilent son was possessed by demons.”

The other churchgoers looked at me askance. I must admit, I had not made it my business to be neighbourly, and they were already suspicious of me.

“I trust he died soon after,” said the pleasant parson.

The fear and self-loathing fell away from me. “He lived, sir,” I said. “And, praise GOD, he is living still.”

“Then a miracle took place. God is good, he will save all sinners, even your diabolic son.”

“Yes. A miracle. I would just like to tell you that your view of women is quite mistaken. Eve is not the mother of our undoing. She has been much maligned.”

There was a suppressed cry of astonishment from my fellow parishioners.

“It is not my *view*, mistress,” said the parson. “I do not invent the Word of God. I am the mouthpiece of the Church.” He bent forward slightly, as if to direct his spleen more exactly. “Ask forgiveness, and it may be that Our Lord will spare your soul.”

“I will not. The Church is wrong. ”

“Heaven protect us!” cried an old man.

“May the good Lord strike you down!” said his companion.

Parson John looked at me, a pillar of furious contempt. “If you wish me to refer you to the City fathers for sedition, then I would be happy to oblige you. I will leave it to our Maker to offer a more long-lasting punishment, and broil your flesh for an eternity in Hell.”

“Punish me when I am printed, sir,” I said. “Punish me when I set down the true story of Eve and Eden in a chap-book. Punish me when I have made a poem of it. Then I will be quite content.”

Scene II

From that moment, my night fears receded. My wakefulness gave me time to write, and to think, and the shadows kept to themselves. I wrote and wrote, referring to the books upon my desk, and using the thoughts inside my head. I looked upon the guilt and grief of other women, and I saw that we have been the cursed receptacle for all of mankind's ills. In failing to be the Virgin Mary, we are Serpents every one. It came to me, as I wrote by candle light and stared out at the darkness, that it was possible that poor Eve had not sinned at all. She was not wicked. She was curious. I scratched out the words, and this time they came clearer and sharper than before. I saw not just Eden; I saw the truth.

*“Our Mother Eve, who tasted of the Tree,
Giving to Adam what she held most dear
Was simply good, and had no power to see
The after-coming harm did not appear
The subtle Serpent that our Sex betrayed
Before our fall so sure a plot had laid.”*

And if Eve was free of blame, then Adam must take the consequence. Now the words flowed. I broke a goose quill in my haste to get them down, and dipped a new pen greedily into the ink.

*“If Eve did err, it was for knowledge's sake,
The fruit being faire persuaded him to fall
No subtle Serpent's falsehood did betray him,*

If he would eat it, who had power to stay him?

Not Eve, whose fault was only too much love.”

From the suffering of Eve came the suffering of the rest of us. Of guilty women, who must pay eternally for the Fall of Man. I remembered the lines that had haunted me when Tom sang his sad song at Childermass: of Rachel, crying for her children “because they were not”. What is “not”? The empty cradle. The folded nightshirts, put away for other babes. Tom’s laughing face, his joy and foolery. So I wrote of that too, the love of all mothers, of which the love and grief of Our Lady is the highest expression.

“Yet these poor women, by their piteous cries

Did move their Lord, their Lover and their King,

To take compassion, turne about and speake,

To them whose hearts were ready now to break.”

I wrote at night. I wrote in the daytime. I wrote when the pottage burned. I wrote while the soap congealed. I wrote while the house-mice nibbled the fallen cake-crumbs at my feet. When Henry came home from school, I threw his football at him and told him to go out and make his mayhem in the street. I wrote.

It took me many months. To and fro I went, over and over, till I had made a poem which praised the Bible women and put their case, as if I was a Lawyer at the Inns of Court. And when I had done, I sat down and thought of all the women of influence who I could dedicate it to, and who might now give me patronage, and I wrote them all my thanks. I started with Queen Anne, and ended with virtuous ladies

in general. (Of which there are, as you will know, a substantial number.) Redemption was sweet. I found a printer and a seller. I did not go to Cuthbert Tottle, who had died of dropsy, nor (of course) to Mr Inchbald, but made a contract with Mr Valentine Simms, a most enlightened fellow who saw no harm in my writing verse and great merit in the case for Eve. It was sold in the bookshop of Richard Bonian in Paul's Churchyard.

If you think that I had forgotten my love, in the course of this, then you can know nothing of such things. I sent a copy to Will, with my good wishes, but he did not reply. I heard that the King's Men fared well, and business was good. The Globe burned down but all were saved. Fire is a constant hazard in a city build from wattle and thatch and there was money to build a new and better theatre, made from brick. Then I heard that Will had returned to the country, to live the life of a fat gentlemen after the frenzy of the stage. The Stratford wife had him in her thrall, and I would never set eyes on him again. This gave me much sorrow but could not be undone. This, I thought, would be the end of it.

Then, one day, I received a curious summons. It was not the longed-for note from William, but a curt message from his wife.

Scene III

Stratford was a busy, noisy place. Outside the inn, there was a bustle of carts, livestock and crowding townsfolk, blocking the thoroughfare completely. There were plenty of beggar-folk as well, just as vile to look upon as their city cousins: doxies, vagabonds and all manner of hard-eyed beggars, displaying their deformities to tempt money from passers-by. And yet it was but a village compared to London's great smoking tumult. All around us was a rolling landscape of green hills and pleasant pastureland. The trees that lined the market square were beginning to put forth new leaves, and their branches waved and rustled in the breeze. Stratford's most pungent odours were of the shippon, not the jakes.

I stared at the shop fronts and at the cheery, bartering housewives, trying to imagine Will buying a joint of lamb or a bolt of cloth. The houses were modest, built cheek-by-jowl together, so that each shop counter, which stuck out into the street, butted onto the next. Here a master tailor could be seen, sewing a shirt; there a barber was smoothing a linen cloth over his customer's chest, preparing him for a shave. At the grocer's, rows of spice jars glittered in the sunlight, and the shopkeeper flapped her hands at the flies that buzzed around the sugar loaves.

"Somewhat small," I said to John Heminge, who had come with me from London. "Too small for *him*."

But Heminge wasn't listening: he was paying the horse-boy.

"Is New Place in this street?" I asked.

He frowned, looking at his change. "Close by," he said. "You'll have to wait, Aemilia. We don't know when he will see you yet."

"Did *she* not ask for me to come?"

"Be patient. He is not the man he was. And speak fairly of Mistress Shakespeare. It was good of her to ask you here."

*

That night sleep deserted me again. I sat in my room, watching shadows, and lit one candle from the next to stop them from haunting me. I thought of all my past, and wished that I could be some better sort of person. I thought of my poems and wished that I could have made those better too. And when I finally slept, bolt upright, I was a child in Bishopsgate again, walking with my father. The air was full of music, and we were walking past the walls of Bedlam, listening to the madmen singing their angel songs.

*

New Place. Here it was, my old lover's home, of solid brick and sturdy timber. It was a long building, which stretched all along one side of Chapel Street, edged by a high brick wall. Above the wall I could see that the house had three storeys and five gables. Much of it was raw-coloured, where new bricks or wood had been used to patch and mend it. A gateway separated the front door from the street, leading to a grassy courtyard. I came to the gate with Heminge, and was touched by his kindness towards me. But when we arrived he stepped away from me and seemed to stiffen. He left me in the courtyard and went towards the house. I noticed the great deerhound that lounged in the doorway welcomed him as an old friend, wagging its tail and gently butting him with its head.

While he was gone, I shielded my eyes and looked up at the plain glass windows, set in lead, wondering if Will was behind one of these, and whether he might be secretly studying me just as I was trying to catch a glimpse of him. I felt sick with nerves. What would we say to each other? How would I even meet his eye?

After a while, Heminge returned. He looked unhappy.

“Will is worse,” he said.

I frowned. “Worse than what?”

“He is very ill, Aemilia. I hope you understand that. It was no one’s wish but his that you came all this way. Ann only tries to please him.”

“Then I must see him.”

“I don’t know if he is well enough to see you today.”

“I am not going away till I have spoken to him,” I said. “Even if it’s only for five minutes.”

“She had better enter,” said a voice from the doorway.

I turned to see a woman standing there. I was not sure what I had expected in a neglected country wife, but it was certainly not this. A tall, upright woman, much older than me but with skin still fine and pale. Her eyes were grey, with long black lashes, like those of a young girl. She was dressed in a green velvet gown. She looked at me for a long moment, as if she had been fearing the worst, but I had exceeded it.

“I am Ann Shakespeare,” she said. “The wife.”

“I am Aemilia Lanyer,” said I.

“The mistress,” said Ann.

I nodded.

“Come inside,” she said. “I have been meaning to speak to you for some time.” I followed her to the foot of a wide oak staircase. It led up to a long gallery,

hung with bright tapestries. Behind her, an open door gave on to a garden. I could see a physick garden, and hear children laughing.

We stood for a moment.

“We are alike,” she said, at last. “I have heard that that is often the way.”

“Yes, Mistress Shakespeare.”

“With some differences, of course.”

“I would expect as much.”

“Such as scruples, with which, I imagine, I have been better endowed than you have.”

“I have scruples enough.”

“I dare say even a murderer has his limits.” What had she heard? What had he told her?

“I won’t stay long, Mistress Shakespeare, and I want to say how grateful I am that you have been kind enough to let me come. Ever since I heard about the fire at the Globe I have been anxious...”

“It was not your place to be anxious. He has people here who are anxious enough.”

“Of course. And then, I heard that he had left for good...”

“Not left. *Returned.*”

“After which, I heard that he was ill...”

“He *is* ill.”

“And then...then you invited me to Stratford.”

“He has become much concerned with giving things away. His books, for the most part, though I would like to read them myself. But, never mind – he had too many of them. I believe that he has something of this sort to give to you.”

A servant came, and she turned to them to speak at length of drying malt, as if I was not there at all. Then the girl disappeared and Ann looked at me. “You were beautiful,” she said, finally. “I suppose there is at least some dignity in that.”

She took me up the stairs, and led me to a closed door. “Here you are,” she said. “When I open it, go inside and sit in the chair by the window. Keep your eyes down till I close the door again. Don’t move from the chair till he has finished speaking to you. Do not go near him, and do not open the shutters. You will get used to the dark when you have been sitting there a while.”

*

I went obediently to the chair by the shuttered window in the light of the open door. When it closed, I could see nothing. The room smelled of wood smoke and peppermint. But after a while, I realised that I could hear the sound of unsteady, rattling breathing coming from the far side of the room. I thought of the last time we had lain together and our hot night in that other darkness.

I kept my eyes on the shutters and their cracks of daylight.

“Your wife told me that you asked to see me,” I said.

There was a break in the shuddering breathing and then it began again. It pained me to hear it, and I found I was taking deeper, slower breaths as if this might help him. I wanted to touch him again so badly that I grasped the arms of the chair to stop myself from flying across the room.

“I have come to pay you my respects, sir.”

There was still silence.

“I am very sorry that you are unwell.”

The breathing became faster, accompanied by the creaking of a chair. At length, a rasping voice said: "Not unwell, Aemilia. Not unwell."

"Then I am glad."

"Dead, rather."

"No! Do not speak so."

"Yes, for I am stuck here, away from the world, and I am not of it any longer. That is death to me."

"The fire..."

"Ah, yes. The fire."

I waited for him to say more, hardly daring to breathe myself as each word seemed to cost him so much.

"Did you hear what caused it?" he asked, then wheezed and coughed.

"No."

"The effects! We launched a stage cannon outside, to create a battle scene in Henry VIII, and the thatch caught fire."

"You over-reached yourselves."

Now there was another wheeze, so painful and prolonged that I thought I must call his wife, but then he stopped and said: "God bless you, Aemilia! I haven't laughed for months. Is it only months? For years, possibly. Yes, we over-reached ourselves. Indeed we did."

There was another pause. "I wanted to ask you about Henry," he said, very quietly.

"He is well, sir. Clever and handsome. Twenty years old."

"And...what I want to ask is...does he know me?"

"What do you mean?"

“That he’s my son.”

I closed my eyes. “Yes, I have told him.”

“And...”

“He is glad. He is proud to have such a father.”

“Does he... what does he do?”

“He plays in the King’s consort.”

“Ah.” He breathed heavily. “My wife has a doublet and sword downstairs for him. I have told her that he was a player at the Globe. I mean... she has no idea of our connection. It is a fine doublet – I hope it fits him. She doesn’t know the value of the sword, nor that it is solid silver.”

Silence once more. I waited, listening so hard that my ears began to ache. “I am sorry William,” I said at last, able to bear it no longer. “I am sorry for all the pain and suffering I caused you. I am sorry if I was ever faithless, and I am sorry for doubting your love. But I am sorriest of all for summoning the shade of Marlowe, all because of my jealousy and spite, and my rage about the play.”

“No, no,” he said.

“Yes, it was my fault! I wanted to put a stop to it. I wanted to be avenged on you, and Burbage, and all the others. All the poets and players who are men, and look me up and down, and either see a strumpet or nothing at all. And then Tom died for it – for my revenge! I can never forgive myself. I am damned for it, damned for all eternity, no matter how much I pray for redemption. And so I should be, for I deserve nothing less.”

“Ah, my Aemilia,” he said, his voice faint. “You are troubled by thick-coming fancies.”

“Are they fancies?”

“Are they not?”

I waited.

“I read your poem,” he said. “Or I should say, Susanna read it to me. For I am ... weak.”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes. She did not approve of it. I think she thought it was seditious.”

“And you?”

“I thought it excellent. Most...polemical. You are right about the mistreatment of poor Eve. I saw... I saw how it might be. The other side of it. To be shut out because of your sex, by men and boys. And – de facto – by all the world. Not all maids can storm the Inns of Court by aping Portia.”

“No.” I was so happy to hear his words that I could think of nothing else to say.

“I once said – among many other cruel and angry things – that you would never be a poet.”

“You did, sir.”

“Well, you have proved me wrong. You are a poet, Aemilia Lanyer, and you are a good one, too. And you taught me much, remember that!”

“About Italy, and the ancients.”

“Ay, and about love.” Will was breathing heavily again. “You must go soon,” he said.

“I am so thankful to you. You are so...gracious.” These words were so feeble that I said: “No one else’s opinion is *anything* to me. No one else’s words *exist*.”

“Think nothing of it. You have worked hard at your art, and deserve much more than this. But...”

“But what?”

“Let me tell you something about the fire.”

“Only if you have the strength.”

There was silence again. Then Will spoke, and the rattle in his breathing faded and it seemed almost as if he was talking to himself. “It was a hot, bright day. Cruelly hot, so even the shadows sweated, and dogs lolled panting in open doorways. I was not at the Globe for the performance: I had business in the City. So the first I knew of the fire was black smoke, drifting over the house-tops as I hurried from St Paul’s.” He paused, and coughed again.

“As I reached Blackfriars steps, a cry went up. ‘The Globe is burning!’ And I raised my head – for I was thinking of a verse that I was writing, and staring at the ground – and then I looked across the water and saw the flames, leaping into the summer sky. I paid the boatman a half a crown to row quickly, and I ran from the south bank to the theatre door. What a sight it was! Like the Inferno itself! The sun had crisped the thatch and dried out the walls, and the sound was terrible – the roaring of fire, and the crashing of timber. The heat smote me as I stood there, and I saw that the trees nearby were catching too.”

“Yet all were saved!”

“So Burbage told me. He came running up, with his shirt all soot-stained and his face as red as the flames. ‘We are all safe, praise God!’ he shouted, tears pouring down his cheeks. ‘All safe Will, every man!’ But as I looked at him, a thought came to me. I had been working on a play.”

“Was that so strange?”

He coughed again, and I could hear the struggle that he had to find a clear way for his breath. “That morning, I had brought it with me, to the tiring room, because I

wanted to get it done. Then I went off to see a printer at Paul's churchyard, and I had left it behind, upon my table."

He hesitated, and I waited. "I have told no one of this but you. This play was to be the masterwork that all my other verses led to – the play to end all plays. Such a piece that would always be remembered. Five hundred years – a thousand years from now. The others might fade from memory, but this play... this one would last."

"And so you ran into the fire."

"Ah, you are the only one who understands insanity. Yes, I ran, shaking Dick off as I went. I hurtled through the entrance, into the pit. The lintel was burning red – I could see that it would fall at any moment. The pit itself was clear of fire, though the rushes were black and shriveled and glowed beneath my feet. I ran over them, and up onto the stage. The canopy was flame, the Heavens were Hell. I felt my clothes begin to char and burn my skin. But still I went – into the tiring room – where all the costumes burned like Catholics – and there was my table. And – lo! – the pages were still there. I praised God – then, as I ran forward, I looked up and the flaming roof timbers were falling down. I snatched the pages, and fled the room as it roared and crackled around me. Ran back across the pit, and into the open air. My clothes, my hair, my skin itself – all of this was flame. By some miracle, I got outside, and it was Dick who saved me. He wrapped a cloak around me and quenched the fire. I fell to the ground, clutching my papers, my breath coming like sword-shafts."

"Dear God! But you saved your pages?"

The chair creaked as Will shifted.

"What of your pages? What of your great play?"

“All dust,” he said. “All charred to nothing.” He was making a strange sound, and I thought he must be weeping. But I realised he was laughing again, after a wheezy fashion.

“Nothing left at all?”

“All that was left was one charred scrap of paper, with the title wrote upon it.”

“And...what was the title?”

“It was *Dark Aemilia*.”

“Oh.”

“It was set in Ancient Rome – but the events would be... familiar to you. It was a fable, concerning love, and poetry and fame. But mostly love.”

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hands. “This was to be your great work?”

“I wanted to summon the spirit of our time together. Its passion and its madness and its joy.”

“Oh my lord,” said I. “My sweet, beloved William.”

“My love,” he said, his voice weak and indistinct. “We shall remember, shan’t we? We have it still.”

After a moment, he said. “Listen, I cannot speak for very much longer. I have three gifts for you. The first, most people might think was next to worthless, but I believe that you will see its value. As you are a poet.”

“I am overcome.”

I could hear him smile again. “Wait till you hear what it is: you may think it a strange present. My foul pages. With all my crossings out and alterations.”

“Heminge said your pages are never blurred or blotted.”

“That is because I keep my first draft to myself. Until now, that is. Now they are yours. You will be heartened by my shortcomings, and perhaps you can learn from my mistakes.”

“William... I... how can I thank you...”

“And also... also my bed.”

“Your *bed*?”

“Not the bed I sleep in now, which is of little value. No, the one where we last... went at it. Lord, what a night that was. At Mountjoy’s house. It’s still there – I could not bear to bring it back to Stratford, nor did I want to pay the fee the carrier wanted.”

I remembered it well, the fug of love inside its curtains and its roof patterned with leaping porpoises.

“Aemilia?”

“Yes?”

“Still there, good.”

“Still here? I cannot bear to leave!”

“There is one final gift.”

“I don’t need anything more. You have been kind enough.”

“I will put your name upon the play. Upon *Macbeth*. For as sure as anything, the meat of that strange piece is yours.”

“Thank you. But – no. It would be wrong.”

He sighed. A long, rattling sigh.

“Aemilia, you are many things. You are a troublesome, noisy, cock-teasing, cock-tiring, wild-tongued termagant...” He stopped, as if to gather his strength. “But you are not evil.”

“I *am* evil. Tom died because of me.”

“How do you know?”

“He saw Marlowe, and Marlowe struck him dead. You were there! You saw it! He fell down upon the stage. The spirit cursed him.”

“Tom *died*. Young men die every day, all over London, without the benefit of vengeful shades. Their hearts give out, or some hidden malady fells them. We don’t know why the poor lad died, and we never shall.”

“What?”

“You are no more guilty of his death than I am. Nor are you the evil strumpet of those sonnets. You are Aemilia. And I loved you better than myself.”

“Loved?”

“Love.”

The tears poured out of me.

“Shall we forgive each other?” he asked. His voice was weaker still.

“Oh Will!” I sobbed. “If we forgive each other, then we are all done.”

“My love, we *are* all done,” said William. “Open the shutters.”

*

His face was dark from the sun. His eyes were full of sky. His lips were swollen red from reckless kissing. “Let’s not quarrel,” he said. “Let’s make love, and I’ll teach you poetry that way.”

I smoothed the hair back from his forehead.

“Am I your mistress, then? Am I all the things you wanted?”

“You are indeed, and I am your obedient slave.”

I looked at him, eye-to-eye, to see if I could peer inside his head.

“Do you want me?” he asked, very serious.

Oh, I did. I did.

And so we made love in the sunshine and we groaned and kicked and sweated. Till at last Will called my name, over and over, in screams of rapture and my head was filled with light. "Aemilia! Aemilia! Aemilia!"

Afterwards, we lay together, sticky and naked in the long grass. "Be silent with me now, my love," he whispered.

*

She sat me in the hall downstairs, beside a smouldering log fire, and handed me a cup of wine. Quite kindly, compared to what had gone before.

"I am sorry that you had to see him so," she said.

"I didn't know."

"No one is allowed to speak of it."

"I understand."

"He ran back into the Globe. When it was burning. They tried to stop him, but he struggled free."

"A brave act."

"Brave indeed. He wanted to be sure that no one had been left inside."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Why else would he have entered an inferno? If not to save a human life? He is a good man."

I could not say that he was more than good, and less. I sipped my tear-thinned wine in silence.

"Poor William! What an ending!" I said at last.

“The doublet and sword are beside you,” she said, nodding to an ironbound box. “And his foul papers with them. Take care of those in particular. They are the workings of his mind.”

“I’ll put them in safe keeping.”

“Safe! Where in London’s pit of malice and foul-doing do you call ‘safe’?”

“I have a little house at Aldgate, though I am soon to move to Pudding Lane.”

Mistress Shakespeare looked at me blankly. I realised that London names meant nothing to her. “I make a habit of reading the Scriptures when I can,” she said. “I put my trust in God and his Angels now.” She picked up the Bible that was lying next to her on the oak settle.

“So must we all.”

Opening the book, she read for a moment, but I saw that she was crying. “I wanted him to come back so much. I prayed for it,” she said, without looking up. “And now these prayers have been most cruelly answered.”

I shook my head sadly.

“It won’t be long before Will is with God,” she said. “I try to see that. I try to bear it.”

The past was twisting in my mind, the greedy and illiterate country wife transformed into Patient Griselda. I tried to think of words to comfort her – and me. But everything was muddled.

“I would like to ask one thing of you,” she said. “Do not remember him as you just saw him. Remember him as he was.” She swallowed and looked at me sharply. “When you knew him. When he was young.”

“I shall.”

“He is a poet,” she said. “And a magician. He is also my husband, but that is of less importance. I have learned to understand that, though I don’t expect others to see it as I do.” Then, she closed her eyes. I thought she was about to pray, but instead she quoted these lines:

*“I have bedimm'd
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
Have I made shake and by the spurs pluck'd up
The pine and cedar: graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure, and, when I have required
Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.”*

The words were so clear and bright that I felt my neck prick at their sound, and I sat there with my box of foul papers and stared at the sorcerer’s wife in frank amazement. I wanted to speak, of Prospero and love and endings. I wanted to say –

our love was insubstantial, but magical. Like Ariel. But I could not. So what I said was: “You had the best of him. A family, and a life here, and a home together.”

She stared at me.

“The best of him?”

“Yes.”

She placed a marker in her Bible and set it down. “What can you know of that? How can you presume to look into the minds or lives of others?”

“I don’t presume to know anything, Mistress Shakespeare, you quite mistake me.”

“No, Mistress Lanyer, *you* mistake *me*. Of your own life, you may be the witness, though no one knows when you are true and when you play false.”

“I am indeed the witness to it, mistress.”

“Of the rest of us, you can know next to nothing. Don’t load us with your study, or your supposition. Do you *hear* me? Do you *understand*?”

We sat in silence. I watched a log glow red then fade and silver. After a while, it fell to pieces in a rain of crackling stars.

The Jig

May Day, and the azure sky is streaked with fragile cloud. The meadows are white with lady smock and tender violets peer out from the hedgerow shade. Larks sing, cuckoos call and a soft wind shakes the oaks which stand hard by the new-built Globe. The theatre is a splendid copy of its former self. But its roof is made from slate instead of thatch. God willing this theatre will last longer than the old one.

“It’s a fine thing,” says Henry, squeezing my arm. “His work is born again.” I cannot speak, but squeeze his arm in return. I have not set foot in the theatre since the day that Tom Flood died. Yesterday Ann Shakespeare sent me word that Will is dead too. He breathed his last a week ago, while he was sleeping.

I am dressed in black. For William would have his way, and this is his third present to me – a fine dress of ebony coloured velvet. It was sent to me after I had left Stratford, together with a caul of seed pearls. A single piece of paper was pinned to it, burned and charred so that at first the writing on it seemed illegible. Then I managed to make out two words “Dark Aemilia”. Now, I am wearing it on a bright spring day in a world in which he does not exist. Henry persuaded me to come, full of pride for his dead father. He is wearing the Spanish doublet and the sword is at his side. He is tall, and well-made, with thoughtful, shadowed eyes and a musician’s ear for poetry.

I could not bear a tragedy, or a Roman rant, but the players are putting on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which I have never seen. A comedy for springtime, and for love, so Henry tells me, and the white flag that flutters over the theatre’s cupola confirms that there will be no blood today.

We pass under the entrance, painted in myriad colours like the gateway to an ancient palace. Every detail of the old gate has been reproduced, even the likeness of

Hercules with the world upon his shoulders. The world beyond the walls of the theatre is mutable and beyond our grasp. The world within is shaped and patterned for our understanding and diversion.

We sit down in the gallery and Henry takes my hand. I look around at the pageant which surrounds me. The new pit is full to overflowing, and every seat on every tier of the gallery is taken. Those in the pit will find it hard to follow all the action, there is such a crowd of gallants sat upon the stage. The courtiers are rosetted and bombasted to the death, flaunting their warlike beards and girlish love-locks. The lesser folk are just as vivid in their cheaper finery, swarming together in a brawl of colour and vulgar show: yellow farthingales crushed by apple-women, stack-heels sinking in the mud. I wonder if the play-goers are wearing their finest clothing in William's honour, just as I have put on my widow's weeds.

The seething crowd is chatting, munching, singing, dicing, gaming, smoking, and swigging small beer. There are law students, strumpets, apprentices and oyster sellers. Choirboys, pick-pockets, servant girls and foists. I see a blur of movement; but also a multitude of London faces, looming and vanishing in the mob. A pretty boy and his pale girl, arms twined together. A handsome Moor and his whispering, rat-faced lackey. A stout and jocular fellow, drinking from an ale-pot, while a young blade is laughing at his side. A student, in a black cloak, frowning as he reads his book. The sun shimmers on every button and scarlet pustule, every scar and cross-stitched cod-piece, every tooth-stump and curling smile. So that the scene is as vibrant as a palace portrait, preserved in oils and distemper.

Here is Thomas Dekker, writing in his little book, head cocked to one side as if listening to the throng. Here is Moll Cutpurse, strumming her lute and singing out,

full-throated. And here: Anthony Inchbald, propped high on one of the best seats, dressed in scarlet.

Dogs run between the legs of the playgoers, snatching up the fallen chicken bones. The scent of tobacco smoke wafts into the balmy air. On the balcony above the stage, the musicians are playing. A nut-seller shouts for custom; a baby squeals; a drunk's song rages and stops. And then I see them. A white-haired woman, overdressed in a tawny gown with a lace ruff. There is a younger woman next to her, with two little girls. They have black hair, wild and curly. The children are sitting side-by-side, so tight that they might be made of one flesh. I look closer. They *are* one flesh. It is Anne Flood, and Marie, and Anne's grandchildren, the joined twins. Anne leans close to Marie and whispers something to her, and Marie throws her head back and laughs. I spring up, wanting to call to them, but Henry pulls me back into my seat.

“Mother! Sit down, sit down...”

Three trumpet calls blast out, to summon any late comers. The musicians strike up a stately tune. Out comes the Prologue. He is head-to-toe in black: the only mortal here dressed as funereally as I am. His velvet cloak wafts out behind him in the breeze. Behind him come two players. A great prince, dressed in purple and cloth-of-gold, and his fair lady, in a gown of taffeta and toile d'atour. Their faces are painted white, their lips are scarlet and the ostrich feathers in their jewelled crowns waft gently above their heads.

The audience is silent. Kites wheel to and fro in the blue sky, wing beats rapid, then still as they soar upon the breeze. A bear screams from the pit next door, and the sound of cheering follows. Henry is staring at the players, smiling with tears upon his cheeks. The Prologue steps forward.